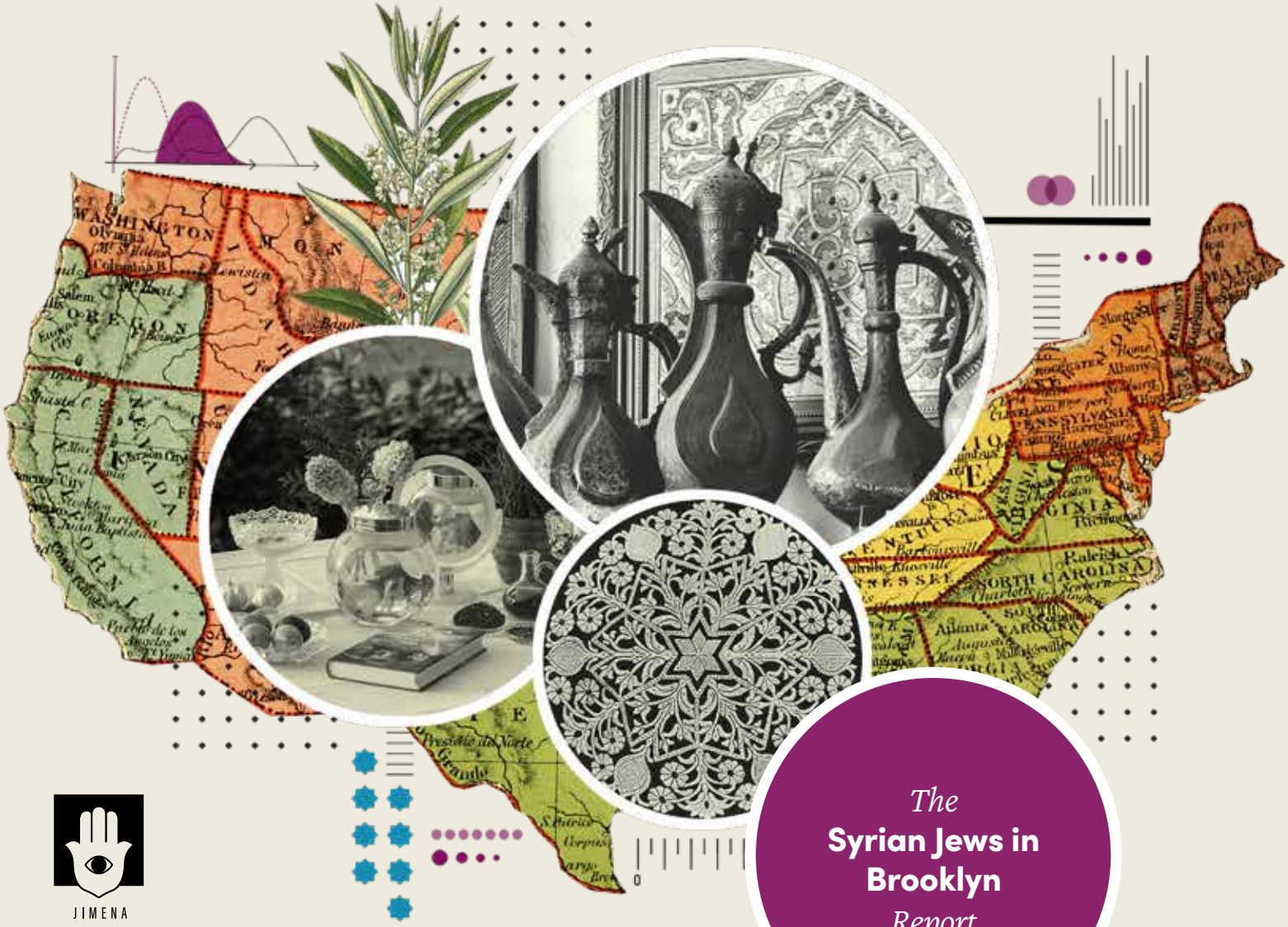
# Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

## IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES



*The*
**Syrian Jews in Brooklyn**
*Report*

JIMENA

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

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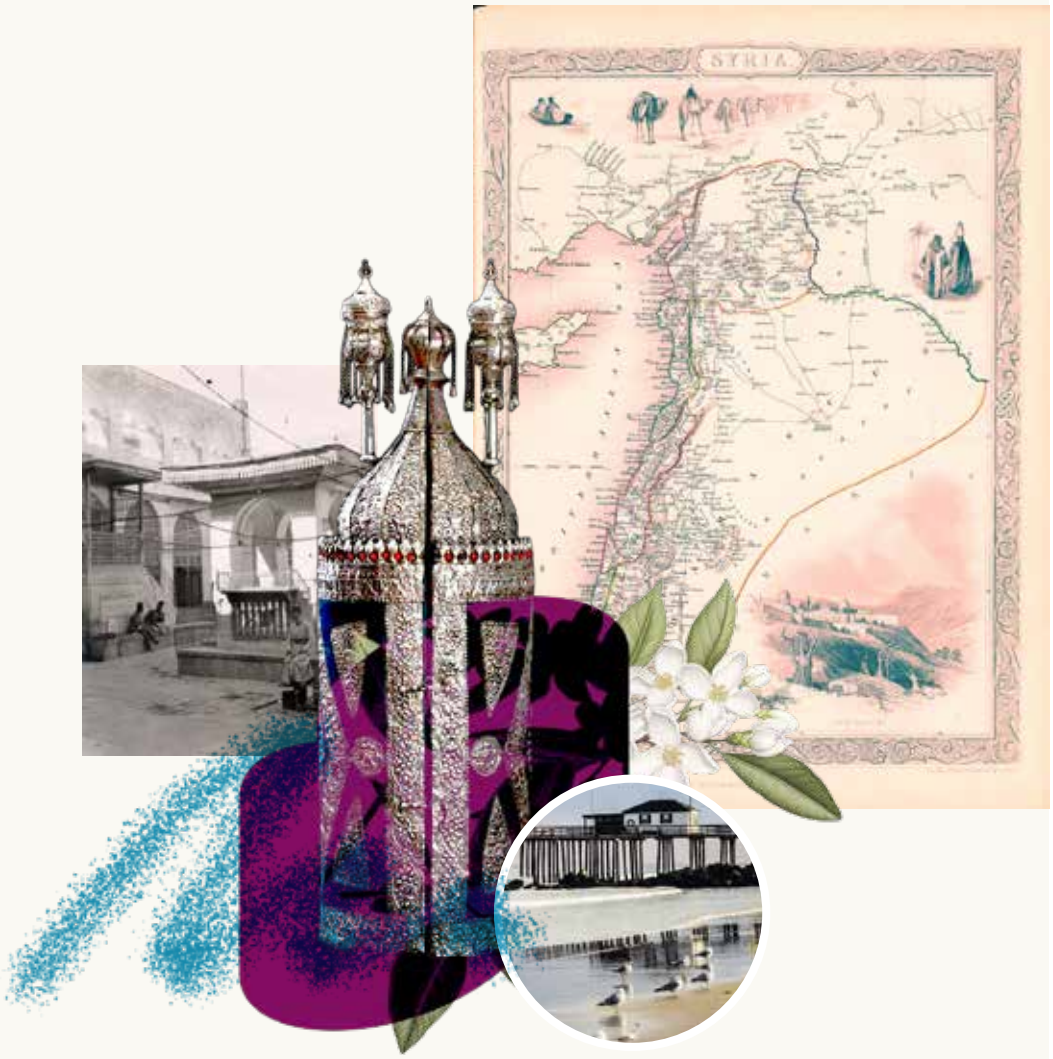



THE

# Syrian Jews in Brooklyn

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.

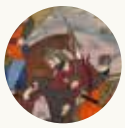
# List of Reports:

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**

# Syrian Jewish Community Portrait (Brooklyn)

SECTION 1.

# Background

## IMMIGRATION

Contemporary Syrian Jews trace Jewish presence in Syria back to biblical times, a claim that reflects their deep pride in their identity and their view of Syria as a sacred center of Jewish life. The exact origins of Jewish settlement in the region remain unclear, though it likely began in the post-biblical Hellenistic and Roman periods. From the Roman period onward, Jewish presence in Syria is well attested. Waves of migration—and out-migration—over centuries shaped the Jewish population, with different groups joining and leaving at various times.

By the 19th century, before large-scale migration out of the region reshaped their communities, Syrian Jews were primarily concentrated in Aleppo and Damascus, with smaller populations in towns like Qamishli. This population encompassed three distinct groups that had gradually merged into a cohesive whole: the Musta'arabim, local Jews with ancient roots; Jews fleeing the expulsion and later the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal; and European Jews, such as the Francos, Italian Jews who arrived for business purposes.

Under Ottoman rule, Jews in Syria lived as dhimmis (second-class citizens), maintaining a legally mandated lower social status but generally experiencing tolerance. However, this tolerance was contingent on the whims of the ruling authorities, and events like the infamous 1840 Damascus Blood Libel underscored the precariousness of their position. The libel—when Jewish leaders were falsely accused of murdering a Christian monk and his Muslim servant for ritual purposes, imprisoned, and brutally tortured, as the accusations fueled anti-Jewish violence and at least one leader died from torture—demonstrated the fragility of Jewish security.

Syrian society was structured around religious communities, including Jews, Christians, and the Muslim

**HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS**

Syrian Jews believe that Jews arrived in what is now Syria during Biblical times. Historical evidence confirms a Jewish presence in the region from the **Roman period** onward

**Pre-19th Century:**

**The Jewish population of Syria included diverse groups such as the Musta'arabim (Jews who had lived in the region for centuries), Sephardic exiles, and the Francos (Western Jews of European origin)**

By the 19th century Syrian Jews were primarily concentrated in **Aleppo** and **Damascus**, with smaller populations in towns like **Qamishli**

**Mid-19th Century:**

**As the Ottoman Empire began to decline, economic hardship led many Jews to begin emigrating from Syria—marking the start of a long process of Jewish migration out of the region.**

**Mid– to Late 20th Century:**

**Jews expelled from Egypt, and others fleeing anti-Jewish persecution and instability in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, found refuge in the growing Syrian Jewish community in New York.**

majority, who largely lived separately—marrying within their own groups and maintaining distinct social spheres—yet Jews remained economically and culturally integrated into broader society.

In the mid to late-1800s, economic pressures throughout the Ottoman Empire and exposure to Western ideas—partly through international ties with other Jews and the educational efforts of the Alliance Israélite Universelle—accelerated the processes that would lead to Jewish migration out of Syria. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 further shifted trade patterns, weakening inland commercial hubs like Aleppo and contributing to economic shifts that encouraged migration. Young, entrepreneurial men led the way, seeking economic opportunity mainly in England, South America, and the United States.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Syrian Jewish community in New York became a refuge for Jews fleeing state-sponsored persecution and political instability across the Middle East, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel. New waves of migration included Jews expelled from or fleeing Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, those escaping Lebanon's civil war in the 1970s and 1980s, and Jews who escaped Syria's restrictive regime during the same period. In the 1990s, thousands of more Jews were finally allowed to emigrate freely from Syria after the Assad regime, under mounting US diplomatic pressure, lifted decades of state-sanctioned discrimination, including severe restrictions on emigration.

The close migration ties among Jewish communities in the former Ottoman Empire meant that many families could trace their histories through multiple migrations. For example, some Iraqi Jews who resettled in Lebanon in the 1950s later joined the New York Syrian community in the 1980s. Many Egyptian and Lebanese Jews who became part of the Syrian community in New York had deep-rooted family or cultural connections to it, as their families had previously lived in Syria before settling in Egypt or Lebanon. Shaped and replenished by migration over more than a century, the Syrian Jewish community in New York has defied typical patterns of assimilation. Today, it is home to fifth- and sixth-generation descendants of those original immigrants in addition to home to first-generation Americans and their children and remains a vibrant and cohesive community.

## PLACES OF SETTLEMENT

Memoirs written by Syrian Jews about their early experiences in the United States reveal a story of both isolation and community. *Aleppo Chronicles* (1988), a collection of transcribed interviews compiled by Joseph Sutton, captures how many early Syrian immigrants first settled in Manhattan's Lower East Side, where they felt different from—and were often treated differently (and pejoratively) by—the much larger population of Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews.

As more Syrian men began to join from abroad, a pattern emerged: Syrian Jews worked together (often as peddlers), lived near one another, prayed together in Aleppan and Damascene synagogues, and gathered to eat in Syrian Jewish restaurants, such as a restaurant affectionately known as Rosie's in Allen and Grand Streets the Lower East Side.

As soon as they could afford to, Syrian men brought over the rest of their families from Syria. Slowly, these individuals began cohering into a group of families and individuals—a Syrian Jewish community on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Over time, as the community grew, its members moved from neighborhood to neighborhood,

**VACATION PATTERNS**

**Flatbush/ Midwood**

A large portion of the Syrian Brooklyn community relocates there for the summer to Deal, NJ

**DSN Community Center in Deal, NJ**

first from the Lower East Side to Williamsburg, then to Bensonhurst, and finally to Flatbush/Midwood in Brooklyn, where it is primarily located today. Additionally, Syrian-led synagogues can be found in Manhattan and neighboring towns such as Great Neck.[1]

By the 1950s and 1960s, community members began vacationing in New Jersey—first in Bradley Beach, then in Deal. A large portion (perhaps the majority) of the Brooklyn community relocates there for the summer. Over time, a year-round satellite community also developed in Deal, which came to refer not just to the town itself but to the surrounding areas as well.

Over more than a century in the United States, the Syrian Jewish community has maintained strong ethnic elements—from food and social life to often working together and establishing their own schools. This cohesive identity helps explain why it became such a particularly attractive for other MENA Jews seeking to immigrate to the United States. As Elias, a 66 year-old man who escaped Syria in 1981 and was later joined by his family in 1990 after the Assad regime allowed them to leave, described it: "It's like they moved everybody from [Syria] as is and they planted here [in Brooklyn] the same food, the same social life." Elias felt at home: "You feel you are still there… You feel like we're still in Syria."

The size of this community is difficult to determine. According to the UJA 2023 Community Study, an estimated 38,200 people—based on the upper range of their combined adult and child estimates—identify with Syrian, Egyptian, or Lebanese Jewish traditions or ancestry.[2] However, school and community leaders—who are closely embedded in the community and have offered access to enrollment data—estimate the population to be at least 50,000, based on the number of children enrolled in Sephardic day schools and supplementary programs.

## LANGUAGES

People in the Syrian Jewish community primarily speak English. Those who immigrated more recently speak Arabic fluently, though its use is gradually declining as generations become further removed from immigration."

Even late-generation descendants of immigrants in the Syrian Jewish community continues to use a rich mix of Arabic and Jewish slang words that remain popular. Additionally, the community maintains a deeply rooted tradition of Syrian Jewish liturgy, characterized by careful pronunciation in liturgical Hebrew, unique Shabbat songs, the use of *maqamat*—the Arabic system of musical modes for chanting prayers—and distinct Torah readings. Syrian men, in particular, take great pride in preserving these liturgical traditions and are known for maintaining the integrity of Syrian prayer spaces.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Most of the Syrian Jewish community is middle and upper middle class, though there are many who are working class, many who require financial assistance, and also a small but prominent group of community

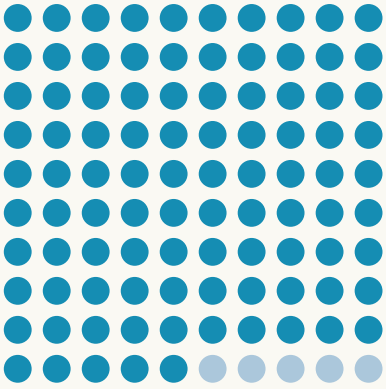
> **"It's like they moved everybody from [Syria] as is and they planted here [in Brooklyn] the same food, the same social life."**

individuals who have accumulated significant wealth. Notably, the overwhelming majority of community members who experience upward economic mobility have not chosen to move away from the community; instead, they remain geographically rooted in the community's neighborhoods, reinforcing their strong ties. Often, they will strengthen their roots by purchasing homes for their children and grandchildren in the same neighborhood, thus generating a new form of upward mobility characterized not by moving to a better neighborhood but by reinvesting in the community's neighborhood.

Occupationally, Syrian men have concentrated in various industries over the decades. Historically, they have preferred to work in business, often for themselves. For many years, Syrian men played a significant role as middlemen, connecting factories in China and other Asian countries with large retail chains in the United States. In recent decades, members of the community can be found working in many different fields including in professional white-collar industries such as medicine and law.

Family businesses remain common, with relatives often hiring among themselves and working together, relying on the trust and loyalty that characterizes family ties. While an increasing number of community members attend college, it is still common to meet individuals who have not. Education is viewed pragmatically—as a means to an end. If attending college helps build a business or make a good living, it is encouraged, but it is by no means considered an assumed expectation. Over time, an increasing number of Syrian women have entered the

**JEWISH DAY SCHOOL PARTICIPATION RATES**



95% **of children from this Syrian community attend Orthodox Jewish day schools, according to community leaders' estimates**

workforce. This shift is due in part to expanded notions of a woman's role but also to growing financial pressures on families, particularly the burden of day school tuition. While more women are working, it remains common for men to be the primary earners.

## RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

The community is characterized by a traditionalism that blends deep respect for religion and religious authorities—especially in public spaces—with significant flexibility in private practice, particularly at home or outside the community. Many use the word "traditional" to describe their way of life. In the words of Elias, to be traditional means to have a certain moderation and push against religious extremes.

> *"Traditional means, like, you know, you keep all the tradition without [the] fanatics' way. It's kind of like you are religious and secular at the same time. With other communities, either you are religious or you're not. We don't do that… because we want to stay together in that kind of tradition, which is religious and secular combined."*

**Additionally, the community maintains a deeply rooted tradition of Syrian Jewish liturgy, characterized by careful pronunciation in liturgical Hebrew, unique Shabbat songs, the use of maqamat—the Arabic system of musical modes for chanting prayers—and distinct Torah readings.**

Practically, this means that in this community Shabbat and major Jewish holidays are nearly universally observed, and virtually all families keep kosher at home, though specific practices vary between households as to the extent and nature of Shabbat and kosher observance. There is also broad commitment to sending children to Jewish day schools. Community leaders estimate that 95% of children from this Syrian community attend Orthodox Jewish day schools. As will be explained later, in this community there is a strong respect for tradition and alignment with Orthodoxy, which is the denomination that most closely reflects Syrian Jewish communal life and observance.

In the past few decades, the community has experienced rapid growth in Orthodox and especially Haredi influence. Internally, community members often use the term "black hat" to refer to Syrian Haredi Jews, a term that emerged in opposition to more traditional "white hats" seen as ideologically less traditional and more open to innovation. The growing Orthodox and specifically Haredi influence has led to increased religious observance overall, particularly due to the rising number and popularity of Haredi rabbis who serve both Haredi and non-Haredi Syrian Jews. But Haredi influence has also introduced tensions within the community, with concerns growing whether the community's broad spectrum of observance, while still maintaining cohesion, will endure amidst the growing Haredi black hat clout. This tension highlights the delicate balance between the community's traditional flexibility and the rising impact of stricter religious practices. Ezra, a 42-year-old born in the Mexican Aleppan Jewish community and raised in the United States, explained that as someone who is not Haredi, he feels looked down upon.

> *"Some are getting more religious, more towards the Haredi movement. And it's causing a little bit of division. I hope that ends. I mean, everybody should be able to do what they believe without being looked down upon. But I don't know. That's what I feel like from the more religious side. They always look down at us."*

This dynamic highlights the tension between maintaining a flexible, traditional identity and the increasing influence of stricter religious observance in a growing and decentralized community. While the community retains many practices and institutions that tie diverse

> **The Syrian Jewish community has long prioritized self-sufficiency, establishing and sustaining a vast network of communal institutions that serve its members across generations.**

Syrian Jews to each other in multiple ways, these shifting dynamics challenge its long standing self-perception as a "united" community.

The community also broadly holds socially conservative positions on the role of women in religious life, with restrictions on their ability to hold religious leadership positions in the community similar to Haredi Jewish communities.

## FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

Syrian Jewish families typically have an average of four children, although Haredi Syrian Jewish families tend to have even more. It is common for individuals to live at home until marriage, and both men and women tend to marry young, often in their early 20s.

Family is the most important social unit in the community, with extended multi-generational families maintaining exceptionally close ties. This is reflected in the way families prioritize spending holidays and summers together. Living near parents and siblings is considered essential to Syrian Jewish life, and children often grow up with their cousins as their closest playmates. Extended families frequently vacation together, celebrate holidays together, and even go into business together. In the Syrian Jewish community, there is nothing more important than family.

## COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS

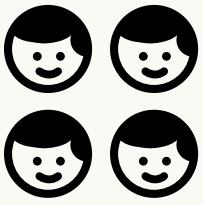
The Syrian Jewish community has long prioritized self-sufficiency, establishing and sustaining a vast network of communal institutions that serve its members across generations. These institutions, supported by a strong culture of charity, volunteerism, and lay leadership across gender, form the backbone of the community's social, religious, and educational life.

From synagogues and schools to social welfare agencies and cultural centers, the breadth of institutions is extensive and deeply ingrained in communal life. Many of these institutions are driven by a strong volunteer culture, and an increasingly professionalized staff. The community's volunteer and philanthropic culture has a unique flavor, including philanthropy driven through informal networks as opposed to the philanthropic foundations that are common in other Jewish communities.

One defining objective of the community's institutions is their ability to create continuity across generations. The establishment of community-run day schools and summer camps in the mid-20th century—particularly in Brooklyn and later in Deal—ensured that education remained aligned with the values and traditions practiced at home. This emphasis on independent institutions allowed the Syrian Jewish community to maintain a distinct identity, separate from both broader American Jewish life and other Sephardic groups in the US.

Over time, the community has also developed specialized institutions to address evolving needs, such as social services for the elderly, vocational training programs, and advocacy organizations. These efforts have enabled Syrian Jews to maintain a tight-knit, well-organized communal structure that continues to thrive today.

**AVERAGE FAMILY SIZE**



**Syrian Jewish families tend to have 4 or more children, according to community leaders' estimates**

SECTION 2.

# Identities

## SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI

Community members identify as Sephardic, name their institutions Sephardic, and take great pride in this identity. While an examination of community documents suggest that the term only began to be widely used as a social identifier in the 1960s, it has since become ingrained and largely unexamined. Community members do not typically interrogate the term's meaning, but when asked, some explain that it is used because they follow Sephardic law or because Sephardic émigrés lived in Syria before the community immigrated to the United States. Others note that the term Sephardic is especially useful for inclusivity, as the Syrian community has incorporated Lebanese and Egyptian Jews and "Sephardic" provides greater breadth than just Syrian. Additionally, some see it as a way to situate their identity in relation to Ashkenazi Jewry, as a label that is more easily understood.

The term Sephardic coexists comfortably with more localized identities, which are often used depending on context. For instance, individuals may highlight their Syrian, Egyptian, or Sephardic identity depending on the audience or situation. Notably, the term Mizrahi is not used within this community, a fact that aligns with the community's immigration history and the historical development of the term itself.

Despite using the term Sephardic, community members often do not feel a strong connection to other Sephardic communities outside Brooklyn. As Joanna, a 43-year-old third generation Syrian American explained:

> *"We'll use the word Sephardic [but we mean Syrian]. It's almost like Lebanese is a subset of the Syrian community, not necessarily of the Sephardic community. I think [by us] 'Syrian' almost became a replacement word for a Sephardic community. [We say Sephardic but we mean] really Syrian. …*
>
> *[Our community] is almost like a sect of the Sephardic community. Like, there's a Sephardic community in Long Island, let's say, that feels Sephardic, but not Syrian."*

**Community members identify as Sephardic, name their institutions Sephardic, and take great pride in this identity.**

For this interviewee, as for many others, "Sephardic" is often used as a shorthand for "Syrian"—a community that has comfortably expanded to include Egyptian and Lebanese Jews within its fold—while still maintaining clear distinctions between their community and other Sephardic Jews outside Brooklyn. It is common for community members to differentiate between "the Syrian community" and "the Sephardic community" in conversation, reflecting a layered identity that shifts depending on the context.

## COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Syrian Jews maintain a deep connection to their Jewish heritage in Syria but overwhelmingly have no allegiance to, or relationship with, the contemporary Syrian people, the Assad regime, or the new government that replaced it following Assad's fall as this report was being finalized. This disconnect stems from several historical and social factors.

Early Syrian Jewish immigrants to the United States arrived when Syria was still part of the Ottoman Empire, long before it became a modern nation-state. As a result, they never developed a sense of nationalistic attachment to Syria as a country. For those who emigrated after Syria's establishment as a nation-state, memories of their homeland are deeply intertwined with state-sponsored and societal discrimination, both before and after the founding of Israel in 1948.

Following Israel's declaration of independence, the newly formed nationalist Arab regime in Syria viewed Jews as potential Zionists and imposed severe restrictions on their daily lives. These included limitations on emigration, constraints on commercial transactions, and prohibitions on owning a car or obtaining a telephone—all of which varied by year and decade. Syrian Military Intelligence, known as the Muhabarat, closely monitored the Jewish community to ensure compliance with state regulations.

David, an 85-year-old man, who left Damascus in the 1990s, displayed his government-issued identification during an interview, pointing out a red stamp marked "Mussawi"—a term the regime used for Jews, derived from "Mosaic" (i.e., related to Moses and following Mosaic law). The government mandated that Jews include this designation in their official documents.

**SYRIAN JEWS FACED SEVERE STATE RESTRICTIONS AFTER 1948:**

**(with variation across decades)**

**1** **Systemic discrimination and social exclusion**

**2** **Strict limits on emigration**

**3** **Surveillance by Syrian military intelligence (Mukhabarat)**

Jewish movement was restricted, and those caught attempting to escape Syria without government permission faced severe punishment; their family members were often tortured for information.

Eddy, a 45-year-old man who immigrated to the US at age 14 in the 1980s, described his childhood in Syria under these complex and often contradictory conditions. On one hand, he felt a natural affinity for Syria, saying,

> *"Whenever Syria played in a soccer match, of course, I rooted for them—it was my country, right?"*

Yet at the same time, he often concealed his Jewish identity in his neighborhood and non-Jewish school for protection. He experienced bullying and even violence whenever people discovered he was Jewish.

Eddy recalled that at his non-Jewish school in Syria, students were required to recite ideological slogans every morning.

> *"As we saluted the Syrian flag, we chanted: 'Our goals are unity, freedom, and socialism. Our enemies are Zionism, Imperialism, and Apartheid.'"*

### NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- Most of our interviewees mark "white" or "other" when asked about race or ethnicity on forms or in interviews.
- Many express a desire to self-identify as Middle Eastern or simply as Jewish.
- Interviewees are generally unfamiliar with—or do not personally identify with—the term "Jews of color."

The government promoted a dual narrative: Zionism was cast as a European colonial project that sought to displace Arabs, while Jews in Syria were told they were loyal citizens whose Judaism was solely a religious identity, disconnected from Zionism.

This contradictory stance—simultaneously vilifying Zionism while insisting that Syria was tolerant of its Jewish citizens, despite barring their emigration and severely discriminating against them—defined the oppression that shaped Jewish life in Syria. For many Syrian Jews, these experiences severed any connection to the modern Syrian state. While they take great pride in their Jewish heritage in Syria, they primarily view the country as one that mistreated them and has been perpetually at war with the Jewish state, Israel.

For Isaac, an 87-year-old man, who came to the US as a refugee from Egypt, this disconnection extended beyond his experiences in Egypt to a broader sense of alienation from Arab identity. When asked if he identified as an "Arab Jew," he strongly rejected the label, responding, *"The Arabs hate the Jews."*

For Syrian Jews, the few remaining ties to their ancestral land are linked to the graves of their ancestors, old synagogues, and historical remnants of their once-thriving community. In America, they honor Syria's Jewish past but largely reject its present-day Muslim-majority population and nation-state.

Thus, Syrian Jewish identity is layered: a deep pride in their Jewish past in Syria yet no affiliation with its current government or society. They hold on to elements of Arabic language but not an Arab identity. Their connection is to the Jewish Syria of the past—not to the Syria of today.

## RACE AND ETHNICITY

Syrian Jews in this community typically report selecting "white" or "other" when presented with racial or ethnic classification options. Many express dissatisfaction with these choices, wishing for the option to select "Middle Eastern" to better reflect their heritage. Others say they would prefer to write "Jewish," as it feels truer to their identity than any external racial label.

The category "Jews of color" is not used within the Syrian Jewish community. When asked, most were unfamiliar with it as a term that might apply to them. Some reacted by dismissing it as a political identity that doesn't align with their views or represent their interests. When Maurice, a 42-year-old man and great-grandson of immigrants who self-identifies as "black hat," was

> **"Eddy recalled that at his non-Jewish school in Syria, students were required to recite ideological slogans every morning. "As we saluted the Syrian flag, we chanted: 'Our goals are unity, freedom, and socialism. Our enemies are Zionism, Imperialism, and Apartheid.'"**

asked how he would respond if someone referred to him as a JOC because he is Syrian, he replied,

> *"I would think that they're one of those crazy pronoun people."*[3]

When asked about terms like "diversity, equity, and inclusion," the same interviewee expressed discomfort, saying:

> *"I get very nervous from that. Those are all liberal words that were created in the modern world, and I don't like them."*

These responses reflect the ways in which Syrian Jews see their identity as distinct from broader racial and political frameworks, especially those they view as originating in progressive political frameworks and milieus. They prefer to maintain their unique heritage without adopting labels they perceive as inauthentic, externally imposed, or reflective of political positions at odds with their values.

## DENOMINATIONS

Historically, the Syrian Jewish community did not organize itself within the denominational frameworks commonly used in American Ashkenazi broader Jewish world. As Daniel, a 47-year-old man, explained:

> *"We don't use the terms like in the general broader Jewish world… 'Oh, I'm Orthodox, I'm Conservative, I'm [Reform], I'm Modern Orthodox'... Religion-wise, we've always said, yeah, we're Sephardic. That's what we are. That's our religion. We're Sephardic. Now, we don't really do the denomination thing of religion. Religion is, do we believe in God? You're religious… The details, that's between you and God and you figure that out, but you're religious right now."*

Community members take pride in their "traditional" wide spectrum of religious practice, which allows for diversity of practice within a traditional framework. For example, some Syrians keep Shabbat rigorously, while others attend synagogue but might also watch TV afterward. They also value their integration into broader American society while maintaining social cohesiveness and tradition. It is not uncommon to meet Syrian women, for example, who observe the religious laws of family purity but, when they're out in Manhattan, are indistinguishable in dress from the American majority.

In practice, however, the community's observances increasingly align with Ashkenazi Orthodoxy and the label of Orthodoxy is increasingly normalized to self-identify. Some of the commonalities with Orthodoxy include non-egalitarian religious practices, adherence to kosher guidelines, and generally viewing Jewish law as obligatory. Over time, Ashkenazi Orthodox influence has grown, partly because the community initially lacked its own infrastructure to train rabbis, often sending young men to study in Ashkenazi yeshivot. While cultural and ritual differences persist, and some remain uncomfortable with the label Orthodox, there is broad comfort with Ashkenazi Orthodoxy as the closest denominational (and increasingly political) fit.

Institutionally, the community often aligns with Ashkenazi Orthodox organizations when engaging with the broader Jewish world. For instance, the Haredi part of the community is heavily involved with Agudath Israel, many institutions partner with the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), and a growing number of Syrian Jews attend Yeshiva University.

Denominational labels are occasionally invoked within the community, though terms like "Reform" are often used as cautionary examples, symbolizing the risks of assimilation and departure from tradition. This reflects the community's desire to preserve its distinct Sephardic identity while navigating its place in the broader Jewish world.

SECTION 3.

# Community

## MAJOR COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

The Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn is supported by an impressive array of institutions and organizations that serve as the backbone of its tight-knit network. Among the most prominent is the Sephardic Community Center, which functions much like a JCC, providing a wide range of community services and programs. Similarly, the DSN Center (Deal Sephardic Network) in Deal serves as the JCC for the nearby satellite community.

The community's spiritual life is anchored by flagship synagogues such as Shaare Zion, though the sheer number of important synagogues across Brooklyn makes it impossible to list them all. Education is another pillar, with a robust network of schools including day schools like Magen David Yeshivah, Yeshivah of Flatbush, Barkai Yeshivah, and others. Haredi day schools such as Ateret Torah schools, YDE, Yeshivat Shaare Torah, and others are expanding at a significant rate to meet growing demand.

Even beyond its vibrant religious and educational institutions, the community provides critical support systems. Cemeteries, such as the main one at the old Magen David synagogue on 67th Street, serve as enduring links to the past. Social welfare organizations play a vital role, with the Sephardic Bikkur Holim standing out as an essential institution offering cradle-to-grave support. Its services include everything from senior services, financial support, mental health, to fertility assistance and postpartum care. The Morris I. Franco Cancer Center is a state of the art center providing support for anyone who has cancer - wigs for cancer patients, family counseling, and doctor referrals. There are many other institutions ranging from support for drug addiction, to mental health counseling, to career coaching, to schools for special need children.

The community also extends its influence into political and vocational spheres. The Sephardic Community Federation serves as its political arm, while programs

### COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE & INSTITUTIONS

#### SELECT CORE INSTITUTIONS

- **Sephardic Community Center in Brooklyn, NY & DSN Center in Deal, NJ**
- **Synagogues: Dozens of synagogues, including the historic Shaare Zion**
- **Robust School Network:**
  - **Day Schools: Ateret Torah, Barkai Yeshiva, Magen David Yeshivah, Shaare Torah, YDE, Yeshiva of Flatbush, and others.**

#### SELECT SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

- **Sephardic Bikkur Holim: A comprehensive social services organization providing mental health counseling, senior services, fertility support, abuse prevention, and more.**
- **Morris I. Franco Community Cancer Center: A state-of-the-art support center offering resources and care for cancer patients and their families.**

#### ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

- **Sephardic Community Federation: An organization seeking to represent and further the political interests of this community**

**THE TAKEAWAY:** **The community's infrastructure is vast, deeply resourced, and interconnected across all facets of Jewish life**

like Propel help train women in vocational work. Furthermore, the Sephardic Community Alliance acts as an umbrella organization for "white hat" and centrist institutions, coordinating efforts across the community.

These are just a few highlights of the vast network of resources and institutions that make the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn one of the most well-organized and well-resourced in the Jewish world.

**DEEP HISTORICAL ROOTS**

**91**

**GENERATIONS**

**One interviewee, Daniel, shared that his family has traced its lineage back 91 generations—reflecting the deep pride in ancestry and tradition felt by many in the community.**

## MORAL FRAMEWORKS

### Community and family

Morality in the Syrian Jewish community is deeply collectivist, characterized by a strong sense of self-sufficiency and cohesion. Family and communal ties shape nearly every aspect of life, with a preference for marriage within the community and strong participation in communal institutions. High expectations are placed on maintaining a lifestyle that includes religious engagement, social connectivity, and seasonal migration to Deal, a hallmark of Syrian Jewish life.

For many, this structure fosters a deep sense of security and belonging. Natalie, a 33-year-old Brooklyn native, described how growing up in the community provided her with a built-in support system:

> *"It's incredible. It's the best. I feel so lucky that I grew up in this community. We have all the support that we need. Thank God we feel safe. As a Jew, I feel like I have a very strong identity and I'm very empowered. I have a support system, I have family around."*

Being part of the community also means feeling a connection to any Syrian Jew she might meet, even if they are strangers.

> *"Even if I don't really know the person [from the community] so well, but I run into them in the street, I still feel that warmth emanating wherever I go."*

This collectivist ethos also shapes how the community navigates change. Mel, a 60-year-old man, explained that while Syrian Jews are not resistant to progress, they are cautious about rapid societal changes, often prioritizing the preservation of their traditions and values over immediate adaptation:

> *"The Syrian community is a lower C conservative. They move slowly, and they're not necessarily looking to shake things up. There's this idea of protecting and keeping the community together by fending off outside societal forces."*

For Mel, this conservatism is not just a feature of the Haredi or "right-wing" segments of the community but a broader mindset shared by mainstream Syrian families who are fully integrated into professional and social spheres.

> *"It's an ethic among a lot of mainstream Syrian families who [are widely integrated in] the business world, socially, and traveling." He is careful to clarify that these families are not "backward," but rather, they seek to "hedge against rushing headlong into modernity."*

At the core of this gradual approach to change is the primacy of family. While some communities may sever ties over ideological or religious differences, Mel emphasized that in the Syrian Jewish world, family remains the anchor:

> *"That's how we've been able to tolerate—and even thrive—despite the contradictions in place. Because if you view your family as family, then you don't just throw them out because they cross a line."*

**The Syrian community is a lower C conservative. They move slowly, and they're not necessarily looking to shake things up.**

This commitment to continuity is also evident in residential patterns. While many Jewish communities experience migration due to religious or professional reasons—and there is often no expectation that people will remain in the neighborhoods where they were raised—the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn continues to idealize residential continuity. One interviewee contrasted this with Ashkenazi trends, noting the stability within Syrian neighborhoods:

> *"In the Ashkenazi world, everybody's children live somewhere else. Every house that goes up for sale in the Jewish communities has some other Ashkenazi person moving to Lakewood, to the Five Towns, to here, to there, because, 'My children moved away. Why do I want to be here?' And you see that the Brooklyn community just keeps growing. Nobody's moving, everybody's staying. And I love that."*

Institutions also play a critical role in reinforcing these values, embedding religious, social, and educational structures into daily life. Joanna described how communal institutions reinforce and seamlessly integrate different aspects of life:

> *"Our lifestyle is ingrained. It's a communally ingrained lifestyle. It's centered around the yeshiva, around the shul, around our friends and family."*

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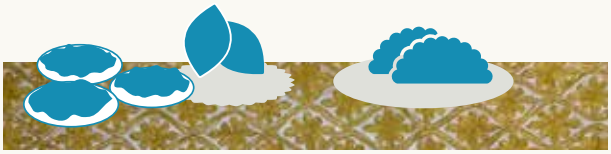
**FOODS POPULAR IN THE SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY**



Lahmajin & Kibbeh:
**meat appetizers**
Lahmajin is a thin flatbread topped with spiced ground meat, while kibbeh is a bulgur-and-meat dumpling, often fried or baked

Sambousak:
**cheese appetizer**
Sambousak is a flaky pastry filled with salty cheese, typically shaped into half-moons and baked or fried until golden

As Daniel explained,

> *"Okay, so the Syrian community has a very powerful history. I like to use the term the golden chain…We have things like this family tree which traces 91 generations… And that golden chain, to me, is a very... For me, very powerful. I'm into my roots, I'm into the tribe, I'm into the tribe, I'm into the tribe of Israel….I love and have great gratitude for the fact that I was born, that my Neshama [soul] was like, selected and opted into this body, into this physical world that connects on this chain back to the origin story of our people who have this future story as well. The Syrian community has been quite effective historically at maintaining that chain very strong without a terrible amount of attrition."*

## Home and Hospitality

Individuals in the Syrian Jewish community speak with pride about their strong culture of investing in the home—creating a warm, welcoming space that exudes beauty, abundance, and a sense of comfort for both family and guests.

Daniel describes this with a word that is very popular: *suffeh*. He translated suffeh as

> *"a way of holding the home, a way of presenting. … warmth, dignity, and grace." When a home has suffeh it means it is welcoming and warm. It is so not just for its family but for guests who will experience hospitality that is "gracious" and "welcoming."*

This emphasis on creating a welcoming and presentable home reflects the community's deeply ingrained values of warmth and graciousness. Many view the suffeh of a home as integral to what binds the community together. As one mother Vivien, 54-year-old woman, explained, she strives to make her home the most comfortable, happy, and customized space for her children and grandchildren because she wants them to keep coming back.

Community rabbis have even remarked that the secret to the community's continuity lies in traditions like the preparation of Kibbeh Hamed—a beloved dish often served on Shabbat—is a tangy, stew-like soup featuring meat-filled kibbeh balls made from rice flour and gently simmered in broth. This iconic dish embodies the

nurturing and inviting culture that defines the Syrian Jewish home, serving as a symbol of the community's commitment to preserving family bonds and traditions.

## POLITICS

Generally, this Syrian Jewish community is politically and socially conservative. Community members are primarily motivated by support for Israel, economic concerns, the desire for safer neighborhoods, and opposition to progressive cultural shifts, which they view as threats to their traditional way of life.

The community is overwhelmingly Zionist, with unwavering loyalty to Israel, even within Haredi circles where support for the IDF remains robust. However, making aliyah [i.e., moving to Israel] is not a significant priority for all but a few families.

Members have hosted fundraisers for Donald Trump and generally support right-wing political causes. However, in New York's local elections, they often back Democrats aligned with their community's values, and many support AIPAC and its bipartisan approach to Israel advocacy.

The community's social conservatism extends beyond US politics. On social and culture war issues—such as gender ideology—there is generally broad consensus with positions on the political right, though conversations and differing perspectives continue to emerge.

The community also broadly holds socially conservative positions on the role of women in religious life, with restrictions on their ability to hold religious leadership positions in the community similar to Haredi Jewish communities.

Historically, there has been hesitancy around political participation, shaped by the community's experiences in Arab countries where political involvement was often prohibited or dangerous. This dynamic is shifting rapidly. Institutions like the Sephardic Community Federation are actively fostering political awareness and activism. The community has increased its involvement with AIPAC and regularly hosts fundraisers for political leaders. In Deal, Syrian individuals have even run for local office to shape neighborhoods conducive to communal life. In the November 2024 election, the first Syrian Jewish man, Joey Saban, ran for state assembly. Although he narrowly lost, his campaign energized the community and marked a new chapter in its political engagement. Propel, an organization that provides career support for women who did not follow traditional college paths, recently launched a new program to train community members for careers in public service and advocacy.

## BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

This Syrian Jewish community has established a unique boundary mechanism known as the *Takkana,* an edict introduced by community rabbis in 1936, during a time of increasing interaction with American society, to forbid marriage to converts. Enacted as a safeguard against intermarriage with non-Jews, the *Takhana* goes beyond the parameters of accepted *Halakha* [Jewish law]. Reaffirmed multiple times over the decades, the *Takkana* carries significant social consequences for those who violate it.

While the *Takkana* has drawn criticism from outside the community for contradicting Jewish law, which emphasizes the full acceptance of converts, it enjoys

widespread support within the community. Many see it as essential for preserving their distinct way of life, which they argue no other non-Haredi Jewish community has maintained to the same degree. Community members insist that the *Takkana* functions as a "local ordinance" governing marriage within their community, rather than a rejection of converts more broadly. They maintain that converts are fully accepted in other religious contexts, such as male converts being counted in a minyan (prayer quorum), and that outside their community, they support full integration and inclusion of converts—including those married to Syrian Jews who have chosen to live beyond the community's boundaries.

While the Brooklyn-based community has thick norms and boundaries, some individuals describe themselves as being "half in and half out," meaning that they choose when to function inside the community and its norms and when to opt out of it. Some individuals distance themselves by stepping away from formal institutions or formal networks or by moving away, such as to Manhattan, while engaging with the community especially through informal networks of family and friends. Self-selection out of the community is more common among individuals who do not align with the community's conservative norms, views or lifestyles.

Individuals not born into the community can typically join it through marriage. Some of those who marry in successfully assimilate into its tight-knit social fabric, while others struggle to fully integrate and learn all the communal norms. It is very rare for someone who didn't marry in and does not have some ethnic or family connection—say an Ashkenazi Jew—to join the community and become embedded in its social life.

## COMMUNAL CHALLENGES

To begin, many view the growing division between the "black hats" (Haredi-leaning members) and "white hats" (more traditional but less strict members) as a sign of disunity that follows dangerous patterns seen in the Ashkenazi community. At the same time, some community members express concern about a small but noticeable segment becoming more secular.

Others note the tremendous financial pressures that come with living well in the community. Real estate in Brooklyn, day school tuitions, camp fees, vacations in Deal, expectations around homes, hosting, ceremonies, and fashion all create significant financial strain. Ezra, a 42-year-old with multiple children attending a local Yeshiva, described the burden as "financially very hard." The combination of day school tuition and camp fees become prohibitive because these are very expensive norms that are part of "keeping up with the Joneses," in his words, within this community. The financial pressure is exacerbated by how tight-knit the community is, with constant comparisons possible due to this proximity. For example, Ezra described feeling the pressure to throw a wedding as nice "that last guy that did it."

Young Syrians raised in a fully immersive Syrian community sometimes struggle with the culture shock of being in Ashkenazi-majority spaces, such as on college campuses or study programs in Israel, where, for the first time, they are a minority among Jews. Similarly, Syrians who live outside the community's Flatbush hub—whether in Manhattan, Great Neck, or Teaneck—must learn to navigate life in places where Ashkenazi Jews are the majority.

SECTION 4.

# Interactions

## ASHKENAZI INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

In the early decades of the Syrian Jewish community, there was little integration or collaboration within formal Ashkenazi institutions. This began to shift in the 1960s and 1970s, especially as young Syrian men attended Ashkenazi religious institutions for their education and then returned to the Syrian community. Today, while the community collaborates with Ashkenazi institutions, they do so in ways that preserve their distinct identity. Syrians are active, for instance, in UJA Federation of New York,[4] the Orthodox Union, Agudath Israel, and pro-Israel organizations like AIPAC.

Some community members feel that the Ashkenazi population misunderstands them and, at times, looks down on them—something that feels intolerable to this proud community. This often comes up when describing interactions in Ashkenazi-majority spaces. Joanna, for example, shared her daughter's experience in her year-abroad studying at a religious all-girls seminary where Sephardic girls were a minority: "On the first week, she felt a lot of stigma toward Syrians. She told me the girls kept saying, 'Why are you even here? All your parents care about is you getting married.'"

Stories of this kind—Ashkenazim looking down on Syrians—are rare now but still trigger for some memories dating back to the Lower East Side, where Syrian Jews were seen as wholly different and "other" because they didn't speak Yiddish and looked different than Jews from Eastern Europe. This history might help explain the community's emphasis on self-reliance, building their own communal institutions, neighborhoods, and infrastructure where they are the majority. It reflects a desire to maintain their independence and cohesion while engaging with the broader Jewish world on their own terms.

## OTHER SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI COMMUNITIES

As noted, there is generally very little connection or relationship between the Syrian community and other Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, with two notable exceptions. First, there is significant philanthropic support for Sephardic Jews in Israel, particularly for Haredi Sephardic yeshivot. Second, in Ashkenazi-majority neighborhoods—such as Manhattan's Upper East side—Syrians tend to form bonds with other Sephardic Jews. At the Edmond J. Safra Synagogue, for instance, the liturgy and practices follow Syrian customs, but the congregation includes a much more diverse Sephardic crowd than in Syrian-majority spaces.

## NON-JEWISH SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS

The Syrian community feels at ease engaging with non-Jewish culture, fashion, and mass media, and many interact regularly with non-Jewish society for business purposes. However, their social lives are overwhelmingly centered within the Syrian community.

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**Some community members feel that the Ashkenazi population misunderstands them and, at times, looks down on them—something that feels intolerable to this proud community.**

SECTION 5.

# Distinctions

## What is distinctive about this community compared to the other three?

The Syrian Jewish community stands out in several distinctive ways, each rooted in its unique history and cultural practices.

1. **Ethnic Replenishment Across Generations**
   One of the most striking features of the Syrian Jewish community is how it absorbed a steady flow of newcomers from the Middle East over the course of a century. Unlike other Middle Eastern Jewish communities, which often settled in America during a specific time period, the Syrian community has experienced continuous replenishment, with waves of migration reinforcing its cultural and ethnic ties.

2. **Independence and Strong Institutions**
   The community's longevity is deeply tied to its strong sense of independence. Syrian Jews have a pronounced drive to build their own institutions and not depend on other groups.

3. **Longevity in America**
   Among Middle Eastern Jewish communities, the Syrians have one of the longest histories in America. Despite this longevity, they have retained a strong ethnic identity, defying the expectations of assimilation typically associated with immigrant groups.

## Customs

1. **Unique Wedding Traditions**
   Weddings in the Syrian Jewish community are particularly noteworthy for their lack of assigned seating and their reliance on buffets. This allows for large guest lists and shorter events, reflecting a cultural preference for socializing and movement over long, formal meals. These traditions enable families to host frequent, inclusive celebrations while staying true to their communal values. Weddings are also paid for by the bride's family.

2. **Naming Traditions**
   When it comes to naming children, Syrian Jews adhere faithfully to tradition, naming their children after parents. They preserve not only the names themselves but also the specific spelling.

**POPULAR WORDS/ EXPRESSIONS**

**Mabrouk:**
An Arabic expression used to offer congratulations on joyous occasions

**SY:**
One of the terms Syrian Jews use to describe themselves

**Suffeh:**
A term that reflects the ideal of homemaking and hospitality. As cookbook author Poopa Dweck writes: "a high degree of poise, an appreciation of etiquette, and an ability to create a feeling of domestic warmth that even exceeds the effusive, open-armed hospitality of Middle Eastern lore" [5]

**Note:**
While Syrian Jews do not use some words common among Ashkenazi Jews—such as *mazal tov*—other terms, like *shul* or *bris,* have been adopted and are now part of the community's everyday language.

## NOTES

1 The New York Syrian Jewish community is one of several Syrian Jewish communities around the world, all known for their cohesive nature and strong institutional networks. Other major communities exist in Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Panama City, and Mexico City. Each has developed its own unique elements and, over time, has come to function more independently, though familial and business networks continue to connect them.

2 This calculation is based on 95% confidence intervals for this population provided by UJA-Federation of New York.

3 Maurice is referring here to individuals who use pronouns beyond the heteronormative binary of he/she, as well as the broader political and activist movement to normalize these identities. At the time of his interview, pronouns were a contentious issue in the cultural and political landscape, prominently featured in national elections as a dividing line between Republicans and Democrats. Maurice reflects a more socially conservative stance, viewing the expansion of pronouns negatively and as something to be actively opposed.

4 UJA Federation of New York contributed to funding for this study.

5 From Poopa Dweck's 2007, *Aromas of Aleppo: The Legendary Cuisine of Syrian Jews.* p. 8.