Beyond Folklore: The Identity of the Sephardic Jew

Abraham B. Yehoshua. Writer, Israel

Sephardic Jews, after their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula, were condemned to exile and developed a collective nostalgia for the absent Other that would persist for generations and give way to a highly respectable tolerance of difference. Today, several centuries after that exodus, in examining the identity of the Sephardic Jew we can ask the following questions: what is Sephardic Jewishness? Is it a matter of origin and roots? Is it an historical identity, or also a political and cultural one, which a person may adopt as his or her own? How does Sephardic identity fit into the larger matrix of Mediterranean identity in an age of globalization?

My father was born in 1905, in Jerusalem. Also his father and grandfather and great-grandfather, which made him a fourth-generation native of the Land of Israel. His forebears came to Israel from the city of Salonika, at the beginning of the 19th century. At that time, Salonika was under Ottoman rule, though most of its residents were Greek Christians. Although my father was in no palpable way connected with Spain – which in Hebrew we call *Sepharad* – he defined himself as a Sephardic Jew. During the last third of his life, he explored this identity by writing twelve books about the Sephardic Jewish community of Jerusalem.

His identity as a Sephardic Jew was not meant merely to signify his difference from Ashkenazic Jews, but was also bound up with Spain itself, which he regarded as the original source of that identity. Within his extended family, he spoke the Judeo-Spanish language called Ladino, which gave him a sense of carrying living genes of the true Spanish language. Everything that happened in Spain was of interest to him. During the Civil War, he would meet with the Republican Spanish consul in Jerusalem to commiserate with him over the defeat of democracy in Spain. Sometimes, to amuse his children and grandchildren, my father would dance a few flamenco steps, waving a handkerchief. And when he was sixty, he overcame his natural reluctance to travel, and left his homeland for the very first time to go to Spain, a visit he enjoyed immensely.

I cite my father as only one example of the virtual Spanish identity adopted by many Jews, including those whose families lived for centuries in Islamic lands – North Africa, the Middle East, and the Ottoman Empire – as well as those who lived in such Christian countries as Italy, Holland, England, Germany, and Bulgaria.

And the question is this: how can the memory of Spain be retained as if it were a cherished memory of Jerusalem? How can it be that Jews, whose ancestors were cruelly banished from Spain in the late Middle Ages and lived in exile in Muslim or Christian countries, have insisted on preserving a Spanish identity of sorts for more than four hundred years? It is as if they had said to those who drove them out: you succeeded in expelling us physically from

Spain, but you will never succeed in expelling Spain from inside of us.

More amazing still: of the perhaps 200,000 Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, the great majority went to Portugal. Only one-third or so were scattered throughout the Mediterranean basin and beyond – and yet they transferred their Sephardic identity to the Jewish communities that absorbed them. Jews who throughout their history had no contact at all with Spain adopted the identity of the refugees who came to live among them – a complete reversal of the usual situation, in which refugees adopt the identity of those who take them in. So we must ask – what was so valuable and important in this Sephardic identity that not only those who had been expelled from Spain refused to give it up and handed it down to their descendants for many generations, but that Jews utterly removed from Spain desired it so strongly, and converted their own local Jewish identity into a virtual Sephardic one.

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After all, one would think that Spanish Jews would have shed their identification with a country that had presented them with the two painful alternatives of conversion or expulsion. Why on earth would they cling to the name *Sepharad* as a precious stone, sewn into the fabric of their identity?

This leads us to another serious question, this one having to do not only with the Jews but with the Muslims, who in 1502, ten years after the expulsion of the Jews, were given the same choice: convert, or leave Spain. Muslim exiles would never call themselves Spanish Arabs, but they do passionately maintain, centuries after the *Reconquista,* the sweet memory of *Al-Andalus,* accompanied by a quasi-political fantasy of returning to that lost paradise, which was unjustly stolen from them.

Recently, I read Antonio Muñoz Molina's marvelous book, *Sepharad*, which employs the Hebrew name for Spain as a metaphor for loss and longing. In this book, I was amazed to discover another strange layer in the idea of *Sepharad* that is not limited to the exiles, Jewish and Muslims, but extends to Spanish Christians themselves – as though they too, according to Muñoz Molina, retain a gene of sorts within their Spanish national identity, an echo, cultural or existential, of what the expelled Jews and Muslims left behind half a millennium ago.

How can we explain this phenomenon? Why is it that a man like me, a thoroughly secular Israeli steeped in Western culture, whose principal identity is fifth-generation Israeli, a man with no particular connection with the Spanish language or culture, defines himself deep down as a Sephardic Jew? In my many novels, there appear from time to time, in crucial roles, characters who may be identified as Sephardic Jews. These include the five generations of central characters in my novel *Mr. Mani,* who stand at five critical crossroads in the history of the last two hundred years, each time another Mani who offers an historical or political option that is not, in the end, realized. Or an elderly grandmother in Jerusalem named Veducha who wakes up from a coma after the Yom Kippur War, in my first novel, *The Lover.* I wrote a novel called *Molkho,* about another Sephardic Jew in Jerusalem, who after the death of his wife, an immigrant from Germany, experiences a year of strange adventures as he searches for a new wife. And most obviously there is my novel of the Middle Ages, *Journey to the End of the Millennium,* which takes place in the year

Abraham B. Yehoshua (L'Altrange).

1000, and describes a debate in Paris between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews as to whether polygamy is compatible with Jewish law.

I shall attempt to decipher the elements of this identity – which we call Sephardic, even though those who carry it today are Jews who live in a wide variety of countries, as well as those whose families have lived in Israel for generations. All of these are people who never had a genetic or familial connection with Spain itself. Even the basic folkloric ingredients of what we consider Sephardic identity, for example, the Ladino language, or certain foods, or a style of music and song, are hazy in these people's identity, if not absent entirely.

In my opinion, this Sephardic identity contains – overtly or covertly – three components: Christian, Muslim, and Jewish. These three elements are blended in the memory of a wondrous and powerful cultural symbiosis, real or mythic, during a Spanish Golden Age in the first centuries of the second millennium. The three-way dialogue during that period also produced highly significant and influential texts. Therefore, even after the Christians took absolute control over Spain and made it into a strictly Catholic country, there remained within Spanish identity a recollection of that strong symbiosis, which even after the expulsion of the Jews and the Muslims continued to murmur beneath the surface in Christian Spain. Perhaps this helps explain the ferocity with which the Inquisition sought to purge heretical or non-Christian elements from Spanish identity.

When the Jews left Spain and moved, for example, to Muslim countries in North Africa, the Christian element, the Christian memory,

remained in their identity despite the absence of Christianity in their immediate surroundings. Similarly, Jews who moved to such Christian lands as Italy, Southern France, or even Holland, retained a whisper of Arabic culture and Islam in their identities even when there were no Muslims or Arabs in the vicinity.

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One might say that the special quality that is preserved in Sephardic identity is its ability to include the Other even when he is gone and forgotten. The consciousness of the Other became a structural element that enriched and fertilized Sephardic identity, even as the reality of the Other became foggy and ultimately vanished altogether. This internal element developed into a kind of cultural gene, strengthening its carriers' capacity for tolerance and pluralism. The wistfulness or nostalgia for the vanished Other was handed down from generation to generation, for hundreds of years after the expulsion. This sad, nostalgic mood permeates folk songs in Ladino, the language whose very existence nourished Sephardic identity even when the languages actually spoken by Sephardic Jews in various countries were different languages entirely.

The subconscious existence of the absent Other in Sephardic identity – whether that of the Muslim as fellow exile, or of the forced Jewish and Muslim converts who stayed behind in Spain – made the Sephardic Jew heavier of heart, but also more tolerant. One thing may be said for certain – religious fanatics are hard to find among Sephardic Jews. Such zealotry did develop among Ashkenazic European Jews, who had to struggle against doctrinal Christian animosities, both Catholic and Protestant, and also against Jewish secularization, which became a threat in the modern period. Such ideological secularization, by and large, was not a factor in traditional Sephardic societies.

Which brings me to the Mediterranean. We Israelis are continually called upon to answer the question, what is your country – an Eastern one or a Western one? The basic argument of the Arabs against Israel, apart from territorial disputes, has to do with the identity of the Jewish state. "In essence, you are strangers to the region," is their charge against us. You came here like the Crusaders in their day, sent by Western imperialists in order to ruin our lives and take control of our identity. All in all, you came here not out of love for what you call "the ancient homeland," but only because you were thrown out of Europe. You continue to turn your faces westward, to Europe and the United States, which are the true models of your identity, which is why you will never fit into the Middle East. You are foreigners, and you will continue to be foreigners until we kick you out or you will get sick of this place and leave of your own accord, and again be scattered throughout the world, just as you were for the last two thousand years.

The response to these accusations – which sometimes contain a grain or two of truth – is the claim of Mediterranean identity, which is the appropriate and correct identity not only for Israel, but for the entire region. This identity stands in opposition to the steamroller of American-style globalization (and, soon enough, Chinese-style), whose flaws and economic failures we see at this very moment.

Israel is not a Western, European state, nor a Middle Eastern one, but rather a pure example of a Mediterranean state. This is certainly so from a geographical perspective: the distance between Israel and Cyprus or Greece is less than the distance to Iraq or Yemen. Israel's true neighbors are Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, Greece and Southern Italy, North

Africa, and Spain, which guards the western entrance to the Mediterranean Sea. Here is the heart of her identity; here, in the cradle of the great civilizations – Greek and Roman, Jewish and Christian and Muslim – Israel is a member in full standing. Indeed, half the population of the State of Israel is made up of Jews who came from Mediterranean countries.

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What are the characteristics of Mediterranean identity? First of all, since the Mediterranean Sea is a closed circle, it incorporates into one group all the countries and peoples living on its shores. As an inland sea, it is quite homogenous, in that its gulfs and coastlines are all quite similar. And therefore, despite the cultural pluralism, the ethnic, religious, and historical differences among the peoples living here, there is a unifying geographic matrix. The traveler from Beirut, or Antalya in Turkey, to the beaches of Greece or Sicily will not feel a great dissimilarity, despite wide differences in the religion, ethnicity, and history of the populations. Despite the enormous difference, for example, between Jewish religious civilization and the pagan civilization of Greece and Rome, they share a unifying physical landscape.

Archaeology is part of the Mediterranean framework as well. The vestiges of ancient Rome may be found in Lebanon, in Israel, in Italy, Turkey, and Tunisia. They make the citizen of the Mediterranean feel at home in many different countries.

Mediterranean-style pluralism, rooted in a real and not an artificial unity, is not to be found in many other regions of the world. Surely, we may therefore speak of a Mediterranean identity, one of whose unifying components is the Sephardic Jew, who carries in his soul the vanished Other, the Christian and the Muslim. This is his role, his mission. Not merely Ladino love songs or folkloric foods or Sephardic melodies and modes of prayer in the synagogue, but a political and cultural mission. A mission of peace and tolerance, addressed first and foremost to the Arabs of the Mediterranean – a mission with which Israelis who are not Sephardic are also likely to identify. Here again, I return to the wonderful book by Antonio Muñoz Molina, in which the name *Sepharad* means not only roots, but an option of identity for the people of the Mediterranean.


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