

Learning from *La Vara*:
Shaping Sephardic Identity in New York City
after the Second Diaspora

By Kristen M. Minno

Global Studies and Hispanic Studies, Religious Studies

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Primary advisor: Dr. Richard Maddox

Also advised by: Michal Friedman

Abstract:

In New York City, the Sephardic immigrant community had established a strong foothold by the 1930s. However, the children of these immigrants were not learning traditions of their old homelands, or of centuries-old aspects of Sephardic culture. In response to this situation, Albert Levy, editor of the Sephardic newspaper *La Vara*, recognized that he and his paper could help to build bridges between the first generation immigrants from the Second Diaspora and their American children. Thus, on August 31, 1934, Levy published the first English section page in *La Vara*, which had previously been printed exclusively in the Ladino language in Hebrew characters. The main goal of this page was to reach out to Sephardic youth who were increasingly primary English speakers. This strategic move to English succeeded in creating an open arena for Sephardic youth to gain access to Jewish, and more importantly Sephardic, issues. These issues led to the ultimate formation of their unique identity, which centered on access to education; the lack of unity among Jews in New York; concerns about anti-Semitism; concerns about nationalism; an interest in strong historical ties to other world Jewish communities; and cultivating Jewish-American identity as well as connections to the Hispanic community in the metropolitan region. This paper explores the complicated question of the identity of Sephardic American Jews based on the issues raised by *La Vara*, and discusses how and why Sephardic identity changed over time.

Introduction

The United States is home to generations of immigrants from all around the world, each group seeking a new life in a new place. The Jewish people have often been forcibly displaced from their homes in one country and have sought refuge elsewhere many times in their long history. Sephardic Jews are simultaneously the descendents of a Diaspora from the Middle East and the descendents of a golden age of Jewry in modern Spain and Portugal. Their first Diaspora occurred in 1492, and the second Diaspora from the Eastern Mediterranean after World War I sent thousands of Jews to the United States. These issues led to the ultimate formation of their unique identity, which centered on access to education; the lack of unity among Jews in New York; concerns about anti-Semitism; concerns about nationalism; an interest in strong historical ties to other world Jewish communities; and in cultivating Jewish-American identity as well as connections to the Hispanic community in the metropolitan region. This paper explores the complicated question of the identity of Sephardic American Jews based on the issues raised by *La Vara*, and discusses how and why Sephardic identity changed over time.

In New York City, the Sephardic immigrant community had established a strong foothold by the 1930s. The unfortunate truth was, however, that their children were not learning the traditions of their European and Levantine homelands, or of the Iberian Sephardic traditions from centuries before. Albert Levy, editor of the Sephardic newspaper *La Vara*, recognized that he and his paper could build a bridge between the first generation immigrants from the Second Diaspora and their American children. On August 31, 1934, Levy published the first English section page in *La Vara*, which had previously been printed exclusively in Ladino in Hebrew characters. The main goal of this page was to establish a source of Sephardic news in the English language, in deference to Sephardic youths who were hearing English or were primary

English speakers. This strategic move to English succeeded in creating an open area for Sephardic youth to gain access to Jewish, and more importantly Sephardic, issues. This paper explores the complicated question of the identity of Sephardic American Jews based on the issues raised by *La Vara*.

A Brief History of the Sephardic Jews

The Jewish people are identified as one of the three monotheistic faiths of Abraham, a descendent of Noah's son, Sem. Sephardic Jews can be called a subcategory of Jews with a distinct ethnicity. There are three major ethnic Jewish groups: Ashkenazi Jews from northern Europe; Mizrahi Jews from the Middle East and Eastern Europe; and Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal. Sephardic Jews are the descendents of the Jews who lived in the Iberian Peninsula before the 15th Century expulsions. The name "Sephardic" comes from "Sepharad," the name that the Jews gave to the Iberian Peninsula from their arrival in the early centuries C.E. "Sepharad" comes more specifically from the Torah, Obadiah 1:20, while "Ashkenaz" in Jeremiah 51:27 refers to the Germanic lands (Sarna 2004:5). "Sepharad" means Spain in Modern Hebrew, a living link to this golden age of Jewry. Today, Sephardic Jews live in many different nations after centuries of Diaspora. "The question of who is a Sephardi seems to be almost as controversial" as who is a Jew: "Perhaps, to Ashkenazim, a Sephardi is simply one who is not Ashkenazi. But among Sephardim themselves, each group claims exclusive authenticity, and there are many such groups" (Toledano 2010:9).

One cannot appreciate the complexity of Sephardic American Identity without discovering how and where the Jews of Spain and Portugal have lived for the past five hundred years. In 1492, the Catholic Kings of Spain, Isabel and Ferdinand, expelled the Jews from Spain. Many Spanish Jews moved to Portugal, while others fled to the North of Africa, Eastern Europe,

and the Middle East. In 1497, the Princess Isabel of Castile, daughter of the Catholic Kings, married the King of Portugal, Manuel I. This new influence of the Catholic Kings through the Princess pressured King Manuel I to forcibly baptize en masse the Jews of Portugal. Many Jews fled the country, marking the end of the public practice of Judaism in Iberia (Diaz-Mas:1992). This exodus from the Iberian Peninsula marks what is known as the First Diaspora.

While these historical facts are widely accepted, the greater issue of self-identity came later as these now dispersed groups became aware of one another. Each believed that they were the true Sephardic culture, while in reality, all were equally entitled because "...Sephardic culture and tradition began not in Spain but in Baghdad and North Africa and, following the expulsions of 1391, 1492, and 1497, continued to thrive to a greater and lesser extent in all parts of the Sephardic Diaspora" (Toledano 2010:9). This great repeated upheaval, in combination with distance between cultural centers, resulted in several different but equally strong strains of Sephardism throughout the world. "Therefore, Sephardism can't be defined geographically, ethnically, or linguistically. The only valid definition is a cultural one...[those] who share and cherish the Sephardic tradition and heritage as it was transmitted from one generation to another" (Toledano 2010:9).

The Ladino Language

La Vara was first printed in Ladino in order to unite the Sephardic Jews of New York City, a diverse and English-dominated society. The importance of Ladino to that immigrant community can be better understood through its history of defining Sephardic Jews throughout their Diaspora. Ladino is the language of the Sephardic Jews, written with Hebrew letters but when read aloud, sounds like medieval Spanish. The Sephardim carried their language into the Ottoman lands, and it remained as an archaic form of modern Spanish, adopting words and

phrases from the new local tongues (Scheidlin 1998:126). Ladino forms part of the group of what has come to be known as the calque hagiolanguages (holy languages), used to “translate” religious texts in holy languages into the vernacular (Diaz-Mas 1992:75). “Ladino or calque Judeo-Spanish is faithful to the Hebrew source text in a completely literal fashion, as shown by...syntax, morphology, lexicological derivation, semantics, and the selection of Spanish words that sound like the Hebrew words they are translating” (Diaz-Mas 1992:76). This language is unique because it adapted over time to accommodate speakers’ changing geographic locations, and it retained its role as a Sephardic language over five hundred years later in New York City.

Many languages were spoken in New York City and shaped the changing identity of Sephardic Jews, but older generations from the first Diaspora directly associated speaking Ladino with being Jewish, as described in this amusing anecdote:

“A Spaniard living in Constantinople had sought the hand of a young Sephardic girl with whom he was in love. The girl’s father, who was a religious man, opposed the marriage because the young man was Catholic. But the girl’s grandmother could not understand, and she kept saying, ‘How can James be a Christian? He speaks Spanish!’ A few years later, when the girl married an Ashkenazi, her grandmother was indignant. Throwing over a Spaniard and marrying a German. What an embarrassment! It was a dishonor to the family.” (Diaz-Mas 1992:75).

This story reflects the great cultural boundary that existed between those New York Jews who lived together and practiced the same religion but who could not necessarily understand each other. Sephardic Jews, however, could still identify with Ladino as a marker of their own definition of Jewish.

The dialect of Ladino spoken in New York City varied greatly due to the varied geographical origins of its Sephardic population. Max A. Luria, a philologist and professor at the City College of New York, conducted “a study on New York Judeo-Spanish dialects in 1929

in which he identified no less than twenty-two distinct variants of the language” (Ben-Ur 2009: 40). Linguistic diversity could lead to unfortunate misunderstandings. Some words no longer held the same Spanish meaning, but had been adapted to more closely resemble words from the host country of the first Diaspora (Ben-Ur 2009: 40). This difference in language served to divide, rather than unite, some of the Sephardic Jews of New York who had so much else in common to share. Later, these differences would fade as the importance of being Sephardic superseded that of identity with an individual dialectic group.

The ability for access to Ladino and the demand for it waned in New York as the early twentieth century saw an attrition of language speakers. “... Ladino-speaking Jews remain[ed] the majority of the Levantine Jewish population in both New York and the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In 1910 over 1 million Jews lived in New York City, which made Jews 23% of the city’s total population. In this context, “The first sizable neighborhood of the country’s Ladino-speaking Jews developed on New York’s lower East Side. (Ben-Ur 2009: 36). However, as immigration decreased, so did the number of people retaining the Sephardic language in the New World. In 1923, *La Vara* estimated the Ladino-speaking population of New York and the United States at thirty-five thousand and fifty thousand, respectively. In 1934 the American Sephardic population was estimated at seventy-five thousand” (Ben-Ur 2009: 35). This noted decline in speakers, and in the community at large marked a turning point and recognition of the great loss of Ladino-speaking in the United States. The move by Albert Levy to include English in his newspaper both acknowledged the need for English as a language to reach more Sephardim and the diminishing identification of Sephardic Jews with Ladino. *La Vara* was the only Sephardic newspaper by 1948 when its presses stopped. It served the noble role of a link between the mother tongue speakers and their new

home in the United States for almost twenty-five years, but ultimately it could not keep up with the pressures to adopt English as the language of everyday life and it slowly faded away.

Weak Ethnicization

Eastern Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews underwent a process of ethnicization, a term coined by Jonathan D. Sarna. “This sociological phenomenon may be defined as the amalgamation of petty identities into an overarching identity. In the Old Country, Ladino-, Arabic-, and Greek-speaking Jews had identified according to religion and according to language, city, or region” (Ben-Ur 2009:42). Upon immigrating to the United States, these individual groups tried to retain their inter-ethnic tensions and identities. But this tended to conflict with their efforts to form an identity as Eastern Sephardim (Ben-Ur 2009: 42).

In general, When immigrants came to the United States, identities based on local regions, dialects, or and customs tended to be absorbed into an encompassing national or ethnic identity. For example, people began to identify as Italian as opposed to Sicilian or Roman or Chinese as opposed to Cantonese or Mandarin. But for Jews from the former Ottoman Empire, this process was especially difficult due to their three language groups in conjunction with the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi. A few organizations such as the Oriental Progressive Society in 1904 and the Sephardic Brotherhood of America in 1921 tried to unite together groups that would normally have been separated. “But twenty years later many other societies had not followed suit. In response to this lingering atomization the editors of the Ladino weekly *La Vara* adopted a new masthead in 1935 featuring two hands clasped in a handshake, communicating the newspaper’s advocacy of solidarity and the ‘Centralization of the small groups of Sephardim in America’” (Ben-Ur 2009: 43). Nevertheless the very limited success in creating pan-Sephardic

associations no doubt contributed to the decline of usage of Ladino and perhaps even to the eventual decline of Sephardic culture more broadly.

By the 1930s, the three major ethnic groups of Sephardic Jews remained unorganized and continued to marry Jews of different ethnicity and gentiles. These actions contributed to the weakening of the Sephardic influence on New York City. Combined too with the ending of immigration from Europe, the status of Ladino as the community's primary spoken language fell dramatically. This is one of the primary reasons why *La Vara* tried to pick up the mantle of responsibility for the continuation of tradition and education about cultural issues (Ben-Ur 2009: 171).

New York City as a Jewish Melting Pot

The first community of Jews in the United States was the Sephardic congregation of Shearith Israel, founded in 1654. The founders were twenty-three Jews that were mostly of Spanish and Portuguese descent who had emigrated from Recife, Brazil. They were not welcomed at first by Governor Peter Stuyvesant, who did not want Jews to settle in New York City. After fighting for their right to practice their religion openly, they were allowed to make a home in Manhattan. Until 1825, Shearith Israel was the only Jewish community in New York. Its members are key figures in the history of Manhattan. Three were founders of the New York Stock Exchange, and many fought for freedom in the American Revolution (Shearith 2012:1).

The new Shearith Israel continued to provide for its congregants the traditional institutional support from the old world. Communal worship, dietary laws, life-cycle events, education, philanthropy, ties to Jews around the world, oversight of the cemetery and ritual bath, even the baking of matzah and the distribution of Passover haroset (a mixture of ground nuts, fruits, spices, and wine used for the seder ritual (Sarna 2004:13). "The congregation...provided

education in both religious and general subjects, provided kosher meat and Passover provisions, and performed a wide variety of other functions for the Jewish community” (“Our History” 2).

The synagogue community remained the source of traditional preservation and deference. Portuguese and Spanish were used as the main languages of worship, though most congregants spoke fluent English as well. They believed that “ritual could unite those whom life had dispersed” (Sarna 2004:13). “They wanted any member of their [Portuguese Jewish] nation to feel at home in any Sephardic synagogue anywhere in the world: the same liturgy, the same customs, even the same tunes (Sarna 2004:13). New York City nourished the unique traditions of the Sephardic Jews, but they still faced the difficulty of blending into the melting pot as they fought to maintain their customs.

Aside from their original geographic difference, Sephardic Jews developed many cultural and religious traditions that separated them from other Jews in the United States. *La Vara* made it a point to speak not only about issues facing the Jewish community at large, but also to highlight what exactly was unique and important about maintaining Sephardic identity. A few of the most distinct Sephardic characteristics involve family traditions, festival practices, and even some physical markers. Rituals such as birth, marriage, and mourning highlight certain differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi. Ashkenazim name their child after deceased relatives, where Sephardim name their sons after living fathers and grandfathers (Zimmels 1958:165). H. J. Zimmels also emphasizes the stereotypes of supposed Sephardic leniency and Ashkenazi strictness in terms of ritual observance. The persecution of German Jews and adherence to more German Hasidim doctrines made Ashkenazi Jews stand out. More Ashkenazi also imposed a stricter set of rules and behavior beyond the Law (Zimmels 1958:189).

The ritual of Passover exemplifies how this minority group maintains its distinctive practices that have their roots in Diaspora and Spanish and Portuguese traditions. One of the major elements of the festival is to forgo the consumption of leavened grains. The interpretation of this practice is divided clearly between the actions of the Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews. “Where matza in whatever state has been in contact with water, or other liquids, some communities (of Ashkenazim) has the minhag (or, custom) of not eating that matza the first seven days of Pesach (Passover). We know that matza baked one time cannot convert into jametz, or taboo to eat. What is then the reason for this Ashkenazi custom?” asks José Estrugo (Estrugo 1980:15). These variations on a few customs made quite a difference to those who practiced them; they were the cause for much of the segregation and misidentification that occurred between Jews during the early twentieth century.

Several challenges already threatened the once strong culture of Sephardic Jews in New York. The division and waning importance of Ladino as an identity marker, the internal fragmentation of the Sephardic community, and the danger of being absorbed into the Hispanic community all contributed to the plan of *La Vara* to use English to reach a wider audience. The dedication of *La Vara* to educating the youth of their community never seemed more important than when Sephardic Jews became supplanted as the majority of Jews in New York by the Ashkenazi.

Change in power from majority to minority

Despite the strength of Sephardic traditions, their situation in New York was drastically altered, as more and more Ashkenazi poured into the city from the eighteenth century onward. Ashkenazi Jews, instead of immediately forming their own congregations, joined in Shearith Israel from the time of their arrival in the late eighteenth century. The blended worship of

Ashkenazi and Sephardic under one congregation of Shearith Israel represented an entirely unique situation in the practice of Judaism. The Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities in Europe and the West Indies formed distinct communities, married among themselves, and worshipped apart. “North American Jews, by contrast, worshipped together...with the Sephardim exercising religious and cultural hegemony” (Sarna 2004:19). Their unified worship continued until even after the Ashkenazi made up the majority of New York around the 1720s. This custom can be explained not only by the fact the Sephardic Jews settled in New York first and enjoyed more power, but also by the threat of the foreign Sephardic community of Curacao to withdraw support if the Sephardic Jews did not maintain an authoritative control over their Ashkenazi congregation members (Sarna 2004:18).

However, within the New York Jewish population overall, there was a growing number of children of mixed Sephardic and Ashkenazi heritage. This made efforts to keep Sephardic control of traditions and practices in the synagogue even more crucial as “Iberian blood ties carried less and less significance. Religion and Jewish peoplehood were becoming the dominant bonds among the Jews of diverse origins who worshipped together in New York, and power was slowly shifting to the Ashkenazim” (Sarna 2004:19). Even as early as 1790, “The Sephardic form of Judaism predominated, as it always had in North America, but the preponderance of colonial Jews were actually Ashkenazim or of mixed background; ‘pure’ Sephardim represented a vanishing breed. As a result, the synagogue-community functioned as something of a melting pot, its diversity echoing that of many a colonial city” (Sarna 2004:29).

Because the Sephardic Jewish community in the mid-eighteenth century remained diverse and accepting of new Sephardim and Ashkenazim from many different places, this made finding a permanent religious leader extremely difficult (Sarna 2004:15). Rabbis were not permanently

installed at any congregation in the US until 1840, and therefore sermons were frequently offered by laity or visitors. “Ashkenazim did come to exercise considerable authority within Shearith Israel’s new synagogue, serving as officers slightly more often, according to one calculation, than the Sephardim” (Sarna 2004:19). Even so, the New York community was unique in its lack of a haham (sage) because the community did not exceed more than 300 (sixty families).

By the 1820s, there was something of a cultural revolution occurring in American Judaism, partly due to the influence of the Second Great Awakening of the Protestant Christians. In New York, some young mostly Ashkenazi Jews wanted to hold their own service at Shearith Israel on summer mornings. This started a string of internal debates between the young and old, evolution and tradition, in addition to the influence of recent immigrants who also threatened the character of the community. The Ashkenazi were no longer satisfied to share space and compromise tradition within the still Sephardic-practice dominated congregation. On November 15, 1825, a new congregation applied for incorporation as B’nai Jeshurun, New York’s first Ashkenazic congregation. They gave a few reasons for the split, the most revealing being that “the mode of worship in the established synagogue...is not in accordance with the rites and customs of the said German and Polish Jews” (Sarna 2004:55-56).

This split might not have effected the Sephardic population much, had it not been for the new wave of Ashkenazi immigrants on the horizon. Sephardic Jews could have regained and then maintained their footing as the predominant thread of Judaism in New York, and *La Vara* would have seen no threat to combat. However, the 1830s brought with it enough immigrants primarily from Germany that America’s Jewish population nearly doubled, and the wave continued through the 1850s. The clinching factor that led to the eventual dominance of Ashkenazim was that among the immigrants, many were qualified to take on rabbinical positions

in the new Ashkenazi congregations. The Sephardic Jews, who still did not rely on one strong leader to take charge, could not compete with the surge of leadership now in place of the American Jewish Reform movement, which was characterized by the fracturing of Ashkenazi Judaism (Blau 1966:50).

In the early 20th century, linguistic, social, and cultural barriers now separated the Sephardic and Ashkenazi new arrivals to the United States. The new Sephardic immigrants also found themselves to be very different from the middle class “indigenous” Sephardim. They were also divided linguistically between Judeo-Spanish-, Greek-, and Arabic-speakers, as well as others. More than 30,000 of these immigrants to the New World settled in New York City, changing not only their identities, but also the ethnic and social makeup of an already diverse city.

The Sephardim, so proud of their rich heritage, realized that the American Jewish world, now dominated so rapidly and effectively by the Ashkenazi, would not accept them readily. Jose Estrugo could not convince the Ashkenazi Jews he met in New York that he was a Spanish speaking Jew from Turkey by way of Cairo. He did not speak Turkish nor Yiddish, and he did not have a German surname. Their coreligionists did not recognize the term Sephardim that Sephardic Jews used to clarify their origin. As a result, many Sephardics told people that they were Spaniards from the Levant (Diaz-Mas 1992:65). This eclipse of the Sephardic community by the newly immigrated Ashkenazi forever altered the role of the Sephardic Jew in American Jewish discourses.

In response to these challenges, in 1924, the Spanish-speaking Societies united to form the Sephardic Jewish Community of New York. The hub of its activities was in the center of Harlem. With the decline of Sephardim in the area and depression in 1929, the “Community”

fell apart in 1933. This collapse of an institution that sought to desperately unite and fight for a Sephardic voice in New York City must have contributed to the decision by the editors of *La Vara* to rethink how their messages could be heard. The newspaper, already a success among those who could still read Hebraic Ladino, emerged as the best and primary vehicle to communicate with English speakers and lobby for the advancement of the New York Sephardic community.

Issues of Identity

Periodicals similar to *La Vara* had created a link between Sephardic Jews and the global communities of Jews, and the Ladino Press was a mark of the thriving Sephardic community in the first decades of the 20th Century. But the eclipse of much of the Sephardic press after 1920 signaled a great loss to the Sephardim. For example, *La America* was a New York newspaper that circulated from 1910-1923, and it was the voice of the Sephardic Jewish community in Ladino. Partly due to replace *La America*, *La Vara* began circulation in 1922, and as has already been demonstrated, its inclusion of an English section helped to continue its relevance and importance to the New York community until 1948. Until 1935 it was the only Sephardic paper in the United States. From 1934 on, the uniqueness of *La Vara* was emphasized by its editors, especially in light of the decline of a Sephardic press in Salonika, Greece and throughout Europe (Levy 1935j:1). Salonika had been considered the Jerusalem of the Balkans and, as home to a community of 56,000 Sephardic Jews in a city of 300,000, represented a strong cultural presence of Sephardic Judaism. Yet pressures from anti-Semitic movements in Europe threatened even this bastion of the Sephardim. The New York community recognized that with declines in communities abroad, language loss and their waning cultural influence, action had to be taken in order to prevent the total loss of Sephardic culture. We can understand the importance of the

English section of *La Vara* through examination of challenges that faced the New York Sephardim in the early twentieth century: the internal diversity and division of the community, the struggle to unite with the Ashkenazi Jews, and the community's connections to the Spanish-speaking groups in the New York area.

Sephardic and Ashkenazi Relations in the early 20th Century

One might assume that due to the fact that Jews in 20th century New York City were still a minority group that Jewish immigrants would be likely to live in the same communities and even intermarry regardless of whether they identified as Sephardic or Ashkenazi. However, the Yiddish-speaking and Ladino-speaking communities had segregated themselves in the nineteenth century. Beginning in the 1830s, the large number of German-speaking Jews that hailed from places such as Bavaria, Bohemia, Moravia, and Hungary settled away from the Sephardic Jews. Very different from their fellow Jews in America, they were less cultured and far more traditional in their beliefs and practices. The German Jewish street vendors lived sequestered together in the Lower East Side of New York, and continued to speak German or Yiddish. This practice did not lend itself to easy integration with the English or Ladino-speaking Sephardic community (Scheidlin 1998:188).

The pronunciation of Hebrew also made one group immediately distinguishable from the other (Zimmels 1958:308). In many documented cases in New York City, Ashkenazi Jews continued to deny the Jewishness of their Sephardic neighbors. Hank Halio recalls that when he and his Sephardic friends started to date Ashkenazi girls their Yiddish-speaking parents and family did not believe that they were indeed Jewish. Trying to prove their true identity, they recited Hebrew prayers, “...but we pronounced the words differently than they did, and they didn't believe us.” Another way that Halio and his friends had thought to identify themselves as

true Jews would be to prove that they had been circumcised. Although none of them ever demonstrated this to skeptics, this would have successfully distinguished themselves from the small local population of Muslim Arab immigrants (Ben-Ur 2009: 114).

Aviva Ben-Ur describes the “phenomenon of co-ethnic recognition failure” as a central experience to new groups of immigrants that defied conventional categorization. “The phenomenon raised new questions not only about Jewish ethnicity but also about the ethnic identity of the non-Jewish immigrants for whom Levantine were often mistaken.” One instance of co-ethnic recognition failure occurred in the early nineteenth-hundreds when a number of Ashkenazi Jews from the Lower East Side petitioned mayor William Jay Gaynor to remove what they called the “Turks in our midst.” The problem with these complaints was that the so-called Turks were actually fellow Jews. “Upon learning of their mistake, the Ashkenazim- primarily Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern European origin- withdrew their petition, deciding to settle the matter ‘among themselves.’” (Ben-Ur 2009: 108).

According to Ben-Ur (Ben-Ur 2009: 109), “In the United States, and perhaps also in Latin America, co-ethnic recognition failure betrays the parochial self-awareness of Jews who assumed that only ‘Yiddish and its associated cultural symbols defined Jewish identity.’ The denial by Ashkenazim of shared ethnicity with Eastern Sephardim reflects the racialist idea, which intensified in the nineteenth century, that one defining marker of Jewishness is phenotype.” Sephardic Jews in New York struggled against the idea that all Jews looked and sounded like Ashkenazi Jews. Yiddish had been brought over to America on a large scale by the wave of Eastern European immigrants between 1880 and 1924, and since 1940 it has been studied and preserved by YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research, in New York (Scheindlin

1998:179-180). But Sephardic Jews spoke variants of Ladino, a language easily discernible from Yiddish as it is of romantic origin.

Yet as Louis M. Hacker has described it, the separation between Eastern Sephardim and Ashkenazim in the United States, was not just a matter of linguistic accident, but it was also self-imposed. According to him, “The Sephardim consider themselves a people apart; they are ‘Spanish Jews,’ with a distinct historical consciousness and often, an inordinate pride” (Ben-Ur 2009:114). This type of “social snobbery” is also evidenced by Mizrahi and Sephardic accounts that show that marriages between them and Ashkenazi first generation immigrants were rare during the early twentieth century unlike in the past (Ben-Ur 2009:113). Through even the late 1910s, marriages between Syrian Jews and Ashkenazim were still considered to be intermarriage, and almost as bad as marrying a gentile (Ben-Ur 2009:114). This trend changed only gradually over time.

Yet even in the early 20th century, Sephardic Jews had looked toward cooperating more with the increasingly dominant Ashkenazi. Joint Jewish institutions would aid the mutual effort of forwarding Judaism in the United States. The formation of the Federation for the Support of Jewish Philanthropic Societies marked a new step for all those involved. The New York Jewish community would now have one voice with which to more effectively advocate; the Federation represented the first time all New York City Jews acted together in one body for philanthropic goals; and together, the communities could share the responsibilities for a more efficient and productive Federation (Levy 1935d:1). Not only were alliances made on a professional level, but personal connections between Sephardim and Ashkenazim increased exponentially as well with great implications for the future. “Nearly all Sephardim who immigrated in the early twentieth century married fellow Sephardim; [but] by the third generation, intramarriage ‘had become the

rule rather than the exception.’ Hayyim Cohen found in the early 1970s that seventy-two percent of second-generation Sephardim had married non-Sephardic women; that figure jumped to ninety percent in the third and fourth generations” (Ben-Ur 2009:143).

Hispanic Encounters

Sephardic Jews were distinguishable from other Jews because of their language, but they also found a common ground with another group because of the same language: Latinos. Ladino was not only important to the historic identity of the New York Sephardic Jews, but also pivotal to their integration and interactions with the Latino community of the city. A Jewish woman from New York City said, in 1935, that her Catholic friend who was fluent in Spanish could understand the Ladino from *La Vara* when the Jewish woman read the Hebrew-scripted articles aloud (Ben-Ur 2009: 151). Additionally, “Many Sephardic eating establishments probably displayed their signs in Latin letters as well as Hebrew Letters. . . .[they] nominally capitalized on the Hispanic aspects of Ottoman-Sephardic heritage” (Ben-Ur 2009: 153).

It was also not uncommon to find a Sephardic establishment that brought together different types of Sephardic ethnicities, as well as attracted Latinos. La Luz, a restaurant in NYC “was one of dozens of Lower and Upper East Side establishments launched by Sephardic immigrants from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire.” These people could trace their ancestry to Spain in 1492, but their immediate ancestors had lived in Turkey and the Balkans for over four hundred years. Their language of communication was the “oft-romanticized Ladino, a fusion language based on early modern Castilian, with admixtures of Hebrew, Aramaic, Portuguese, Italian, Greek, French, and Arabic, and traditionally written in Hebraic letters” (Ben-Ur 2009: 152). As Ben-Ur (2009:153) observed, “The ethnic landscape of Harlem remained both Spanish-

Caribbean and Eastern Sephardic until the 1930s, by which time probably most Ottoman-origin Jews had migrated to new neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn.”

However, some Sephardic Jews and members of the Hispanic community in Harlem had blended together over time as their mutually intelligible languages served to unite them. David Altchek was a former native of Salonika who immigrated to the U.S. in 1914. He relocated his family of ten from the Lower East Side to Spanish Harlem because he “felt more comfortable with Spanish-speaking people.” His son Emanuel opened a Spanish-speaking medical practice in the mid-1920s in Harlem, where he served a primarily Puerto Rican and Cuban clientele (Ben-Ur 2009: 155). This is just one example of the coexistence of Sephardic Jews and Latinos. There also existed many cases of marital mixings, to the chagrin of those who wished to maintain a strong Sephardic familial tie. “In the late 1920s and early ‘30s, Moise Soulam a columnist for *La Vara*, reported a rising incidence of Sephardic girls running away from their parental homes to clandestinely elope with non-Jewish Puerto Ricans. Anecdotes of married Sephardic women leaving their husbands for gentile Puerto Rican men were also described” (Ben-Ur 2009: 156). In 1933, Henry Pereira Mendes, Minister Emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel, spoke out against the rash spousal choices of the young Sephardic girls who had “thrown off all Jewish loyalty” by their intermarriage to “Porto-Ricans” or other Spanish-speaking men (Ben-Ur 2009: 156). These cases of course posed a serious threat to pure Sephardim, but were a side effect of the freedom and rights of the melting pot of the United States.

The Sephardic Jewish community, by the early 1930s, was a shadow of its former self. No longer the dominant player in Shearith Israel or any other congregation, their religious influence waned. The massive influx of Ashkenazi had completely reshaped the perceived identity of a Jew in the United States. Sephardic Jews were not only unidentifiable by gentiles

but also by their fellow Jews. And Ladino, the hybrid language born of medieval Spanish, was falling into disuse by the second generation.

Education

The perceived threat of the now dominant Ashkenazi culture and the danger of assimilating into the Hispanic community emphasized the need for Sephardic education and a strong leadership to direct the community towards unity if the group was going to survive at all as a distinctive Jewish community. Thus, the major intention of the English section of *La Vara* was to educate and inform the Sephardic youth by giving them easy linguistic access to Sephardic and Jewish news. Henry Benezra who would become a regular contributor wrote a piece entitled “Hail Progress” in one of the first English sections. He declared in that column, “It is a source of inspiration to the younger element of Sephardic Jewry that after so many years of its existence as a Ladino newspaper, *La Vara* has finally decided to edit a portion of that pioneer periodical – in the language of the [people] and thus catering to the wishes and desires of the younger members of the Spanish-speaking Jews of America” (Benezra 1934a:1). He added that the youth should begin to take up the mantle of the section, and in turn, the paper, symbolizing how they would one day be the guardians of the culture and the interests of the community. In a later letter to the editor, Benezra reiterated his support and belief in the advantage an English section was affording to the Sephardic youth, who represented the future of the community: “It is a matter of serious importance that the young Sephardic Jew is being lost to his religion and his community. The fact that you have given space to articles on the subject is most significant and in the right direction. To my mind your valuable paper is destined to play a great part in the rebirth of our Sephardic Youth movement” (Benezra 1934b:1). The very forward thinking Benezra also predicted in his first column that in the future *La Vara* would develop into an

English paper with a Ladino section, as English was now the language of thinking and learning of the community. But his statement does not directly deal with the real social situation for the Sephardic community in the 1930s: namely that its major cultural influence and strength was in steep decline.

While *La Vara*'s desire for the youth education was clear, a deeper purpose was to also educate and inform the adults in the community. The English language additionally opened the readership of the paper up to any American who happened upon a copy. If anything, this made the articles and their subjects in this new section of the utmost importance in terms of making a message that could be heard by a broader audience. After a column was published in *La Vara* that did not portray a good opinion of the Sephardic Jews, Albert Levy wrote a response in the next week's section. Levy restated his point that "this page was introduced with the sole purpose to enlighten, educate, develop, and enhance the genuine Jewish teachings" (Levy 1934a:1).

What can be inferred is that the issues that would be written about in this section define Sephardic Jews to every other English speaking community. As a result, its contents were given attention and care before being published.

Throughout the 1930s, the intentions of the section would continued to be educating the youth, informing the rest of the Sephardic Jews and building new bridges to the greater New York community of which the Sephardic Jews played an active part. In keeping with this mission, the editors often included information about Jewish education in the city, such as when NYU started Hebrew classes in September of 1935, open to all. The paper considered it to be an interesting experiment, and one that reflected the now long presence of Jews in New York City (Levy 1935e:1). An issue that made the importance of the work of NYU even greater was the lack of funding that many Jewish schools and congregations received at the time (Levy 1935f:1).

As Benzra and the editors of *La Vara* made clear, education was the backbone for supporting the culture of a people, and a lack of monetary support represented a declining investment, and in turn interest, in Jewish values. However, Spanish and Sephardic education did exist in other places, like the Hispanic Institute, which provided an excellent outlet for the few but proud Sephardic intelligentsia. For example, “Maír José Bernadette offered history lectures on Sephardic Spain, including ‘El judío en la España Cristiana del Medioevo’ (summer 1935)” (Ben-Ur 2009:167). Despite the broader challenges to Sephardic identity, the influence of the Sephardic section reached its peak in the 1930s. As the immigration from Eastern Europe of Sephardic Jews waned, so did the Sephardic involvement in the Institute (Ben-Ur 2009: 171).

A People Without a Leader

The editors of *La Vara* recognized another problem that needed solving: the absence of strong Sephardic leaders needed to unite and strengthen the Sephardic community. Without strong leaders within the community, a proper education and passage of traditions and customs to the youth could not occur. Many columns called for not only leaders, but for the Sephardic public to become aware of the dangers of further fragmentation. As one stated plainly in *La Vara* in 1935, “The Sephardic public must act now, if it will avert the doom awaiting....” (Opal 1935:1). Henry M. Alvo added his concern in his own *La Vara* column, “The Sephardic Problem,” in which he asserts “the responsibilities we are facing as a group are numerous. Sephardic Jewish life in America is decaying. We must choose between two things: either a forward march as a vitalizing force in Judaism, or a complete disintegration” (Alvo 1937:1).

By 1937, Joseph S. Crespi felt that Sephardic Jews had still not achieved effective leadership or involvement on the Jewish stage, and wrote an article in *La Vara*. He believed that the Sephardic Jews still had the opportunity to join and head up many American businesses and

institutions, as well as regain the leadership that had originally had been theirs within the New York Jewish community. Crespi was convinced that “We can demonstrate that the Sephardic is willing and eager to assume his responsibility and liability on par with the rest of Jewry in the country” (Crespi 1937b:1). Joseph Gedalecia agreed in *La Vara* with Crespi when he wrote that Sephardic Jews needed to be strong in order to support their fellow Jews and citizens. “We as Sephardim should organize our communal lives and form the means whereby we will be enabled to put forth our efforts in aiding those who are in need of the help we will be able to extend them” (Gedalecia 1937:1). Robert Fresco defined *intelligencia* as a Russian term for a learned class that engages in the spread of culture. He boldly claimed in his *La Vara* article, “Whither Jewish Intelligencia?” that Sephardic professionals and academics were not standing out in Americana or Jewish society. This scarcity of an *intelligencia* was attributed to a lack of zeal and fire to motivate others. According to Fresco, no youth can be inspired to carry on traditions or even learn about them if they do not identify themselves with the Jewish community through their actions. “That is why we, Sephardim of New York, are not achieving anything in Jewish life” (Fresco 1937c:1).

William S. Mehoodar takes over half of his June 1937 *La Vara* article “Sephardic Leaders, Be Courageous!” to describe why the quality of courage is the most necessary attribute of the long sought-after Sephardic leaders. He then concludes with the sentiment that the new leaders must embark with the confidence of those supported by an Almighty God. “If the things we wish to do are right, let us do them; if the enterprises that we wish to enter upon are for the general good of our fellow men and our community, let us undertake them without any hesitation and without any doubt in our minds. For we have an all-powerful Partner at our side. And HE is with us all the days of our life” (Mehoodar 1937:1).

Robert Fresco wrote another provocative article for *La Vara* “Sephardic Leaders, Where Are They? Who Are They?” in June of 1937 in which he states boldly, “Truly speaking, there is no Sephardic leader in our midst. They exist only in our imagination.” This harsh condemnation of the current Sephardic leadership highlighted the dire situation in which Fresco and the other aforementioned writers perceived the Sephardic community to be. Fresco went on to qualify the statement a bit, but not without emphasizing the essentiality of Sephardic leaders for the future of the community: “The truth may hurt many of us. But, for the interest of truth and the advancement of our Sephardic community, as a Jewish community, I must say that there are no Sephardic Leaders in our community” (Fresco 1937b:1).

In “Our Sephardic Intelligencia” by Leon Aelion, written for *La Vara* in August of 1937, Aelion describes the three main agendas that any leader must possess in order to make a difference in the future of Sephardim in New York: first, a fearless and courageous fight by the youth to gain said leadership; second, constructive but radical reform with democratic ends; and third, the ideas set forth by a leader must propel the youth into action to forge a new strong path of New York Sephardim (Aelion 1937:1). This article, written three years after the first English section was printed, expressed the continued need for leadership and unity amongst Sephardic Jews, despite the efforts made by *La Vara*. Perhaps unfortunately for the New York community, this became a lesser concern as the 1930s wore on. As national and international concerns for the Jewish community as a whole became to preoccupy the contributors to *La Vara*, the focus of the New York Sephardic community began to shift more and more widely during the 1930s, and the English articles *La Vara* published highlighted challenges, most notably anti-Semitism and nationalism, facing Jewish-Americans and the world Jewish community. These new themes reflect how the relations of Jews with non-Jews both at home and abroad affected and even came

to be at the center of the concerns not only of the Sephardic community, but also of the broader Jewish community in New York.

Anti-Semitism: At home and abroad

In the 1930s, anti-Semitism was as alive and present as it ever had been in history. The Sephardic community of New York reacted weekly to the very open hostility towards Jews either at home or abroad through the English section of *La Vara*. New York Sephardic Jews were no strangers to the Nazi Party, the problems in Poland, the lack of communication with certain European Jewish groups, and how these foreign situations affected the global Jewish community. Not only were international Jews affected, but American Jews still felt the backlash of anti-Semitic attitudes in the United States. Leonard H. Wacker believed that a unity of Jews would help to end generations of discrimination:

“The only weapon the Jews have to combat anti-Semitism is a solid, well-organized united front. The voice of a united Jewry can expose the hypocrisy of the various shirted anti-Jewish organizations. However, before we can hope to overcome prejudice and intolerance from without we must eliminate the same evils from within our own ranks. It is a well known fact that prejudices exist between German and Russian Jews, between Austrian and Romanian Jews, Spanish and Greek Jews, etc. For some baseless reason one group feels itself superior to the other” (Wacker 1936:1).

Yet, anti-Semitism in the United States during the 1930s usually manifested itself in more subtle ways than did that of the Nazi Party in Germany. In January of 1934, Fortune magazine did a survey about how Americans felt towards Jews: 14/100 Americans felt openly hostile towards Jews, 55% friendly, and 31% had no clear feeling. When asked, “Do you believe in the long run that Germany would be better or worse off if it expels the Jews?” 14% responded better, 55% worse, and 3% didn’t know (Levy Measuring 1934b:1). The 14/100 who felt openly hostile and the 14% who said that they thought Germany would be better without the Jews make up a still significant portion of the population at the time. Their responses could not have been not totally reassuring, regarding the kind of support Jews would feel in the United States if they were

directly threatened. J. X. Cohen, a rabbi asked in his 1935 article, “Is it necessary for Jews to enroll as members of churches to gain employment in certain companies?” (Cohen 1935:1).

In January of 1935, Wacker wrote in another article, “Anti-Semitism in America,” that stated, “particularly during this period of depression a scapegoat is necessary to cover up political corruption and reactionary fallacies which are the real causes for the miseries that we are now suffering. The Jew, who has no country or government to take his part, has been selected for that role. It becomes most necessary, therefore, for the Jew, more than ever before, to organize his race against all the lies directed and the wrong that are being perpetrated against him.” The theme of the Jew without a homeland or government on his side comes up often in other articles throughout the 1930s. It becomes apparent through such articles that *La Vara* sought to campaign for both a specific country for Jews and further support from the American government for the rights of the Jews. Wacker continued by encouraging his fellow Sephardic Jews to organize into one “United Front” to become conscious of their duty to their Jewish community and fight anti-Semitism. He especially wanted to prevent the community from being “caught unawares by the tentacles of an ‘Americanized’ version of Hitlerism (Wacker 1935a:1). Clearly inspired by the leftist ideal of a popular front of progressive political and social forces, Leonard H. Wacker reaffirmed his concerns about the issue and in his 1936 article, “Jewish Problem Unsolved.” He stated, “The only solution for the Jew is to unite with other workers and oppressed minorities, who only by their unity in the common struggle can win the victory for the benefit of all mankind” (Wacker 1936:1).

Henry M. Alvo added his more middle class version of causes of anti-Semitism, in February of 1935 by citing instances of Jews still being refused membership to clubs and organizations in the United States based solely on their religious views. In the US this should not

be the case and yet this problem persisted. Alvo added that Zionism would “revitalize the economic, social, and political life of our people” (Alvo 1935:1). This sentiment came to be shared by many as the Second World War neared.

Politically, it seems that many Sephardic activists were aligned with the left, and it is likely that a significant number of these activists were committed socialists and communists. Their views influenced *La Vara* as contributors, who sought to attract youth towards their ideas of a future for New York Sephardim, began paying greater attention to the broader Jewish community in the United States and to international crises.

Nationalism

The Sephardic community, while pleased overall with their lives as American citizens, also felt a pull towards a long-desired Jewish sovereign nation. Their fight for unity had shifted to incorporating more than just Sephardic Jews and more than just American Jews in order to combat the anti-Semitic threat that pervaded the world. Zionism became an ideology that many Sephardic Jews followed with the hope that more cultural preservation would occur within the borders of a Jewish nation state. The English section of *La Vara* emerged as an excellent venue for the propagation of Zionist sentiment. Phillip S. Bernstein stated plainly in his article, “The Zionist Cause: the Case for the Jews” that “for these European Jews there is only one hope: Palestine” (Bernstein 1937:1) in reference to the loss felt by the many scattered groups of Jews in the world.

In his December 1934 article, “The Jewish Problem: How to Solve It,” Louis D. Brandeis describes the concept of a nation, and how it can transcend one geographical nation’s borders. “As a nation may develop though composed of many nationalities so a nationality may develop though forming parts of several nations. The essential in either case is recognition of the equal

rights of each nationality” (Brandeis 1937:1). Justice Brandeis quotes W. Allison Philips by describing the several elements that compose a nationality: race, language, religion, common habitat, common conditions, mode of life and manners, and political association. The Jews were, despite their dispersion, a distinct nationality of fourteen million people worldwide in 1934 without a religious home (Brandeis 1937:1).

Robert Fresco, in his 1937 article “Jewish Nationalism” recognized that Jews are a minority everywhere in the world, and as such there exists no sovereign nation of Jews. Jews do, however, desire a nation on which to focus their emotional and cultural desire for nationalism. Historically, the Jews of course look to Palestine as the geographic location of such a nation. Over the past two thousand years a core group of Jews have always maintained the Jewish presence within this perceived homeland of Palestine. “Jewish nationalism takes cognizance of the fact that the Arabs, at present, are a majority there. In view of the fact that the Arabs have other countries of their own, Palestinian Arabs do not need Palestine for themselves. Their so-called nationalism is but one other kind of an imperialistic national manifestation, and as such dangerous to the peace of the world.” Fresco additionally comments that Jewish nationalism does not, however, only benefit Jews but will also recognize the rights of the Arabs that live there. He merely wishes to express that because Arabs have many other countries on which to focus their nationalistic desires the Jews are entitled to Palestine as their one bastion of national pride (Fresco 1937a:1).

While Zionism appealed to many American Jews, the move to the homeland in Israel was not as desperate for them as for those being persecuted in Europe, as they enjoyed many rights and protection in the United States. From this position of relative safety and tolerance, *La Vara* exposed the New York Sephardic community to what was happening in their world to their

fellow Jews. This controversial topic applied not only to Jewish nationalism, but reflected on the level of satisfaction felt by American Jews about their lives and social status in the United States.

Sephardim as Jewish-Americans

While the United States was generally tolerant of its Jewish community, Judaism and the cultural practices of the Sephardic Jews were often challenged by the new American environment, which blended together so many different types of Jews and other religions. In 1935, Conservative Judaism, as announced in *La Vara*, was defined as the third branch of Judaism in America, with Orthodox and Reform as the others (Levy 1935b:1). While these branches referred specifically to the Ashkenazi, these divisions led to a further fractioning of American Judaism. Albert Levy remained confident that the Jews could survive both anti-Semitism and fracture in his article, "The Fallacy of Assimilation:" "Assimilation must be voluntary. When it is imposed it becomes a joke, a hypocrisy, a farce, a deception. For the Jew, as a group, has shown a strong tendency against assimilation. He has given proof of a strong power of adaptability to any kind of foreign interest while keeping alive his group identity" (Levy Fallacy 1). Such a strong group identity allowed for the addition of a new national identity. Joseph S. Crespi wrote in his August 1937 article, "The Constitution of the U.S.," about the pride he and all American Jews should have about their situation in the United States. "The citizenship papers that many of us hold are not papers for the bottom of the trunk or the safety deposit box to conceal. They are papers by which we have taken an oath to become and ACT as good American citizens" (Crespi 1937a:1). Crespi emphasizes the importance of the rights and protection granted upon Jewish Americans by the Constitution of the United States of America. The right to vote is lauded above all others by Mr. Crespi especially in light of the lack of rights and voice that their foreign Jewish brothers lacked in 1937 (Crespi 1937a:1).

Dr. Stephen S. Wise addressed the difficult political situation between Poland and the United States in light of the extreme anti-Semitism on the part of the Polish government in his 1937 article “A Call to American Jewry.” “Today dire disaster overwhelms three and a half million Jews in Poland, the greatest Jewish community in Europe, and a terror not only equal to but far surpassing that of Hitlerism threatens to engulf them” (Wise 1937:1). The government of Poland in 1937 was not taking action against the anti-Semitic crimes and threats that were becoming too frequent to ignore especially by the American-Jewish community. “To refuse to meet the problems of Polish Jewry now is criminal negligence. The Jews of Poland await economic and political assistance from us” (Wise 1937:1). The American government was responsible for the institution of democracy in Poland in exchange for Poland’s promise to uphold the values of equality inherent in true democracy. As such America has political sway with Poland and Dr. Wise calls upon American Jewry to leverage this influence to assist their brethren. As such articles make clear, Sephardic Jews felt a great responsibility to every level of their identity. The 1930s was a turbulent time for these Jews who watched from the sidelines as anti-Semitism rose with fury in Europe. They wanted to unite as American Jews in order to make a more global impact against anti-Semitism with the weight of their new homeland, the United States, to support them.

Ties to other Jewish communities

Throughout its English section’s circulation, *La Vara* mentioned hundreds of instances of collaboration of the international Jewish community. Their identity now superseded that of just Sephardic American Jews, and now had turned to the international community for world Jewish identity. This reflected the idea held by many in the Sephardic community that they as Jews were not isolated in the United States from their fellow Jews; on the contrary, the editors of *La*

Vara included the following events in the section in order to make the wider English reading audience, be they young Jews or other Americans, more aware of global Jewish happenings.

Some of these newsworthy events included:

-Apr. 19, 1935: The significance of Passover in 1935 to Eastern Europe, where German Jews facing persecution could look forward to similar deliverance, was emphasized by Albert Levy (Levy 1935k:1)

--May 29, 1936: Rabbi BD Cohon reported that there was no World Congress, as had been predicted. Europe and the United States had rejected the idea because the Congress would cause more anti-Semitism as a governing body of Jews (Cohon 1936:1)

--June 26, 1936: In the article, "Strong-Weak Poland," Poland is described as hypocritical to readers because its government does not understand the importance of curtailing the anti-Semitic threat growing in its nation in the form of pogroms in its cities (Levy 1936c1)

--July 17, 1936: England, France, Denmark, and Switzerland offered refuge for Jews from Germany (Levy 1936b:1)

--January 22, 1937: The Congress Bulletin reported that the Polish government stated that "there is no room in Poland for more than half a million Jews. The other 3 million must go" (Levy 1937:1)

--July 2, 1937: Benjamin Flager profiled Leslie Hore-Belisha, England's Minister of War, who was a Sephardic Jew (Flager 1937:1)

--March 6, 1936 *La Vara* reported that Ataturk made Turkish surnames obligatory. This mandate stated that Jews and Armenians must drop their surnames, i.e. Levy, Aschkenazi, Cohen, to adopt Turkish ones. The old surnames would not be registered, and unregistered people will be fined. Direct sanctions on those people who would refuse to change their name, as

part of their personal identity was blatant disregard for diversity in Turkey's attempt to modernize (Levy 1935l:1).

Additionally, *La Vara* was careful to specifically mention the goings-on in the Hispanic world, highlighting their special significance as the land of origin for all Sephardim. In April of 1935, *La Vara* reported that Columbia University would be hosting lectures about Maimonides, the great Torah scholar and philosopher of 12th century Moorish Spain, in honor of the 800th anniversary of his birth. The occasion was also celebrated with great pomp at the Casa de las Espanas in New York City (Levy 1935g:1). A frequent column in *La Vara* was called "This week in Jewish History." It sought to highlight certain historic Sephardic events as having lasting significance to the Sephardic community. On August 9, 1935, the column's subject was "Massacre in Valencia Spain" (Levy 1935h:1). The Spanish Civil War also received some coverage, and it was first reported on August 28, 1936. Sephardic Jews in New York City looked to the global in order to connect with yet another layer of their identity. Not only were they Sephardic New Yorkers, but now they took their place in the world Jewish community as international events necessitated a world-Jewish movement.

Conclusion

New York Sephardic Jews came to realize their newest identity after generations of cultural and geographical shift. They began as Spanish and Portuguese Jews with a language that adapted to the new languages surrounding their new home after Diaspora. Four hundred years later, the now many distinct groups of Sephardic Jews were uprooted and relocated to New York City. For a time, they were the majority, but soon found that they must try to unite as Sephardim despite cultural differences in order to have a voice, especially against rising anti-Semitism. Their identity changed from one of dominance to a secondary and rather obscure

status, and they had to strive to identify themselves as a distinctive group to their new nation, fellow immigrants and even other Jews. Once fully American, however, a great pride was felt for their new country. Yet still many felt that a Jewish sovereign nation would help redefine Judaism and create a stronger world Jewish identity. Thus, what it meant to be Sephardic changed over time as the basic conditions of Sephardic life changed and this historical journey of identity formation created a group of people culturally distinct from any other. Sephardic Jews have a little bit in common with many different groups of people: Americans, Jews, Latinos, Spaniards, Portuguese, some with speakers of Arabic, Greek, and other languages of Diaspora. Their true identity comes from the layers of identities that have been experienced in their almost 6000 year history as Jews.

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