Introduction: Who is a Sephardi?

The tragedy of our culture is that our parents did not speak to their children in their mother tongue

RUTH LEVIN on Yiddish culture in Russia, in a feature, “Light-blue Twilight” by Noam Ben Ze’ev, Ha’aretz, Thursday, 11 November 2010

Jerusalem Once upon a Time

In 1998, I participated in a researchers’ conference held in Tudela, Spain. As accepted at academic meetings, arranged in the lobby was a display of books and publications likely to interest the participating scholars. Among the items, I came across the book by Ángel Pulido Fernández, Españoles sin patria y la raza sefardí. The title attracted me. At that time, I had only a meager notion about this Spanish physician and senator, Dr. Pulido Fernández and his activity, but “the Sephardi community” (la raza sefardí), which appeared in the title stimulated my interest. On side of my father, Moreno Meyuḥas, I am the scion of a Sephardi family whose members immigrated to Jerusalem from Salonika in the second half of the seventeenth century, and live in it to this day. As I browsed through the book, which includes a survey of the communities of the Sephardi Jews in Europe and the Orient, I encountered the picture of the rav Yissa Berakhah – Rabbi Ya’akov Shaul Elyaschar [Eliachar] – the Rishon Le-Zion for the Jews of Palestine [The Land of Israel – Eretz Yisrael], who was my father’s great-grandfather on the side of his mother, Simḥa Meyuḥas née Eliachar. The report about Rabbi Yissa Berakhah was given to Pulido by Mr. Albert Antébi, the representative of Alliance Israélite Universelle in The Land of Israel, and Mr. Moisés [Moshe] Azriel, a printer and publisher in Jerusalem.

2 Abraham Ben-Yaacob, Jerusalem Within the Walls: On The history of the Meyuḥas Family (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1976) [Hebrew].

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This informed me that the Sephardi Jews of Jerusalem were among the target audience to whom the Spanish senator aimed his writing. Thus, I had before me material about the Sephardi Jews in general and about the Sephardi community in Jerusalem in particular. Yet, only after I completed my academic role, fulfilling my obligations to Tel Aviv University, where I dealt with the teaching of western-European medieval history and was about to retire, I turned to treating the world of the Sephardi dispersion.

In the beginning were the yearnings. In tractate Sabbath,\(^4\) we read about “a son yearning for his father” and the suggestion of Rabbi Ḥama bar Guria on how to assuage them. Even though in his interpretation, Rashi does not ascribe this cure to women, saying “This cure does not apply to women, since, from the beginning, the father does not care for them so much that they would yearn for him,” for me, who has already lived the greater part of my life, I was struck by yearnings for my parents, for my Sephardi family, against the landscape of my youth and the intimate, modest world of Jewish Jerusalem in the first half of the twentieth century. The writer A.B. Yehoshua described “the divided Jerusalem of the sixties – a provincial city but content with its clear boundaries”.\(^5\) The author Eli Amir described little Jerusalem, to which he came in 1954: “A city entirely of military zones and borders yet intimate, small, and beautiful that enters the heart with clear centers”.\(^6\) Of interest is the use the two writers, each separately, make of the adjective “clear”; as “clear borders” and “clear centers” of the city of Jerusalem. Apparently this reflects a contrast to the city’s current situation in the twenty-first century.

My parents, my father’s family, and their Jerusalem – all of these alike have ceased to exist. I especially longed to listen to the foreign yet still familiar sounds of Jewish Spanish, which in Jerusalem was called Spanyolit, that I heard, but did not understand, from my grandmother and her daughters – my aunts. In our family, the generation of my father (b. 1901) was the last for whom Spanyolit was their mother tongue. My generation spoke Hebrew as its mother tongue, through a clear-cut decision by our parents to integrate into the modern, Zionist society that was taking shape in The Land of Israel. Moreover, my

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\(^4\) TB, Sabbath 66b.


\(^6\) Eli Amir in an interview with Ron Cohen: *Bein Ha-Shurot* [Between the Lines] in the “In the City” section of the newspaper *Ha’aretz*: 9 September 2011 [Hebrew].