A MOSAIC OF FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES:
THE SEPHARDIM IN LATIN AMERICA

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The Sephardic population in Latin America constitutes a mosaic of heterogeneous groups with different cultural traditions, divided between separate communal frameworks according to the countries of origin of their founders. Their definition as one Sephardic ethnic group or their division between Sephardim and Mizrahim (Orientals, Jews from the Middle East and other Arab countries) is subject to debate. This article uses the term Sephardim in a broad sense that includes all the non-Ashkenazi sectors. It stresses, however, the fragmented character of this complex ethnic group that was textured by different sub-groups: Caribbean Jews of Portuguese ancestry, Sephardim from Turkey and the Balkan countries, Middle Eastern Jews from Aleppo, Damascus, Lebanon and Palestine, North Africans from Morocco and Egypt and small groups of Sephardim from Italy and other countries in Europe.

Viewed from a local perspective, the Sephardim in almost every country are perceived as ‘a minority within a minority’ with respect to the Jewish community at large that is predominantly Ashkenazi (Avni, 1992). Historically, the Jewish communities in their respective countries were represented by Ashkenazi leaders, and their image was created principally by the dominant group—Jews from Eastern Europe.

A global analysis, however, leads to a different vision: Latin America is one of the most important centers of the Sephardic Diaspora today. According to the estimated figures of DellaPergola, there are 58,000 Jews of Sephardic and Asian-African origin living in Central and South America. They constitute the third largest concentration outside Israel, after North America (with 546,000) and the European Union (with 411,000) (DellaPergola, 2002: 149–156). This Diaspora has a

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1 I would like to thank Prof. Jacob Carciente for his valuable comments.
2 For a discussion of the term Sephardim in the Latin American context, see Bejarano, 2005.
3 The figures of DellaPergola are considerably lower than the 180,000 suggested by FESELA (the Sephardic Federation of Latin America). My own estimate, based on a
‘fragmented identity’, being divided into sub-Sephardic groups and dispersed throughout the Latin American countries.

Most of the Sephardic communities active today in Latin America emerged as a consequence of the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and their communal frameworks are based on their identification with the legacy of their mother communities. Though living in different environments in Latin America, members of each sub-Sephardic group reconstructed the similar patterns of communal organization in their respective countries, using the same mechanisms for the preservation of their particular identity and for its transmission to their descendants.

The objective of this article is to analyze the identity of the Sephardim in Latin America according to their ethnic sub-group and to examine the impact of the globalization processes on their particular identities.

The Emergence of a Fragmented Ethnicity

The ethnic identity of each component of the Sephardic mosaic was transmitted from generation to generation by the separate communal structure of each sub-Sephardic group. The early Sephardic communities were founded in the 19th century by Jews from the Caribbean islands who settled in the Latin American republics and by Moroccan Jews who immigrated to Brazil and Argentina (Mirelman, 1992). The institutional infrastructure of the Sephardic communities, however, was created by immigrants from the Middle East and the Balkan countries during the second and third decades of the 20th century.

The basic entity of each community was formed by a closed institutional framework, composed of at least one synagogue, a Talmud Torah, beneficiary organizations and a cemetery for the exclusive use of persons from the same town or the same region. The Moroccan Jews in Buenos Aires refused in 1909 to bury turcos, arguing that their cemetery was exclusively “for the burial of Jews from Southern Europe or North Africa uniquely of the Portuguese rite.” The founders of Bene Emeth in Buenos Aires decided in 1913 to purchase a plot of land

different calculation of the proportions between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in each country is around 103,600. See Bejarano, 2005; 20.