Middle Eastern and Sephardic Studies

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Like Jewish studies, the field of Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewry cannot be neatly defined. Its specialists in history, literature, thought, anthropology, and religion focus on diverse Jewish communities that span more than fourteen centuries. The two prongs of the field hang together, in part, due to a misperception on the part of non-specialists that equates the terms "Sephardi" and "Middle Eastern Jew." Technically, Sephardic Jews include the Jews of Iberia until the Expulsion and their descendents who resided in places as diverse as North Africa, the Ottoman Empire, the Netherlands, the Americas, and even Poland. Middle Eastern Jews are simply Jews of Middle Eastern countries who do not necessarily claim descent from Iberian Jewry. Iraqi, Yemeni, and Persian Jewry formed distinct communities during the Middle Ages and in modernity. In North Africa and elsewhere, Sephardi and indigenous populations intermingled. Although some general halakic distinctions can be made between Ashkenazi and non-Ashkenazi Jews, the binary division of the Jewish world into Ashkenazic and Sephardic blocs is increasingly recognized as an oversimplification.

This issue of *Perspectives* preserves the alliance among various parts of the field in order to highlight important developments and, hopefully, to affect the way in which Jewish studies is conceptualized and taught. Most survey courses in Jewish studies include some treatment of Iberian Jewry during the medieval period, romantically recalled as the "Golden Age," but, with few exceptions (Shabbetai Zvi, Spinoza, etc.), fail to trace the evolution of Sephardic Jewry. Middle Eastern Jewry has received even less attention; survey courses often treat only the influx of Middle Eastern migrants and refugees to the State of Israel and the West.

The following series of articles does not purport to represent the full range of the growing field of Middle Eastern and Sephardic studies. Medieval Iberia and the Arabic speaking communities of the medieval Mediterranean basin are not addressed at all. Rather, as is commonly done in *Perspectives*, we offer a suite of three essays covering the state of the field, useful tips on pedagogy, and a sample of research in progress. Harvey Goldberg's essay discusses the growth of the field beyond its uneasy beginnings and highlights the ways in which it has been shaped by the study of history, halakah, literature, and anthropology. The essay treats the impact of Western colonialism on Eastern Jewry, self-initiated encounters with ideas of the *Haskalah*, and patterns of modernization and identity. Matt Goldish's contribution on pedagogy provides pragmatic ideas for supplementing surveys of Jewish history with primary and secondary materials pertaining to Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewry, primarily during the early modern period. The third piece by anthropologist Oren Kosansky exemplifies the benefits of approaching a recognized topic within Jewish studies from the perspective of an ancillary discipline. Kosansky treats saint veneration among Moroccan Jews—a practice that has often been exoticized in modern scholarship—within the indigenous categories of those who follow the rite and situates scholarship hailing the practice as a model of Muslim-Jewish "syncretism" within French colonial and Moroccan nationalist discourses.

Like all areas of Jewish studies, the field of Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewry has become increasingly specialized. It is not on the verge of breaking apart, however, as scholars in related sub-fields continue to meet, collaborate, and share ideas. For the first time, the widely used textbook, *The Jew in the Modern World*, by Paul Mendes-Flohr and Yehuda Reinharz, will devote a full section to the field in its forthcoming new edition—a sure sign that Sephardic and Middle Eastern studies has come of age.

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