

The Special Character of Sephardi Tolerance

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Sephardim pride themselves on the fact that there has been no religious reformation in their historical experience to divide "Orthodox" and "Liberal" Jews. Consequently, however individual Sephardim chose to practice their Judaism, they stayed within a common fold because they are not ideologically bound to make clear-cut divisions. In any Sephardic synagogue anywhere in the world, one can find a wide mix of worshippers and a wide range of patterns of religious observance, from the very Orthodox who even imitate Ashkenazi Orthodox dress patterns to the moderately traditional who enjoy the occasional spiritual experience.

Sephardim are noted for and pride themselves on being less fanatic than Ashkenazim in virtually all matters, especially religion. They certainly are not among the militant, black garbed Jews who throw stones at vehicles on the Sabbath and refuse to serve in the army. Sephardim are often bewildered by the Ashkenazic pursuit of *humrot* (new and more difficult *halakhic* refinements), because they have traditionally sought to balance the requirements of observance with those of living in order to achieve a form of religious expression that takes into consideration the whole human being, to encourage and cultivate the range of human attributes.

It is difficult for Sephardim to understand the isolationist trend that is dominant among so many Orthodox Ashkenazim, who see the salvation of Judaism only in separating it from those who do not meet current religious standards, which seem to be always moving to the right. Sephardim see no hope or virtue in isolation; to them, the result is a warping of Jews and a distortion of Judaism. Sephardim always have sought to balance their lives both as Jews and as a part of a larger human society. Isolation is not and was not a Sephardic goal -- that would have been a violation of their sense of proportion and balance. Rather, they seek to accept involvement with the larger world and its challenges. Historically, in the world in which most Sephardim lived, there was little occupation and segregation between Jews and non-Jews and often little residential segregation. Living and working together prevented the development of an isolationist spirit.

The Sephardic method of study is another reflection of balance and proportion. The curriculum of Sephardic schools was always broad, combining *limudei kodesh* (study of sacred texts) with *limudei khol* (general studies), open to the arts and sciences, disciplines beyond those emphasized by the sacred texts. The classic Sephardic curriculum included

reading and writing, Torah, Mishna, and Hebrew Grammar, Poetry, Talmud, Theology, Philosophy, Logic, Mathematics and Arithmetic, Geometry, Optics, Astronomy, Music, Mechanics, Natural Sciences and Medicine. Study was disciplined, analytical, and integrative. As a result, through the ages rabbis were poets and diplomats, diplomats were doctors and scholars, kabbalists were mathematicians, judges were grammarians. Unlike the Ashkenazim, the Sephardim placed great emphasis on the biblical text as the starting point for studying the classic works. Sephardic music also reflects the orientation toward balance and proportion. In its classic Iberian form, the links between Sephardic music and Western classical music at its most classical -- Bach and Beethoven, Handel and Haydn -- are clear. But even in its classic Arabic form, it is balanced and contrapuntal.

Sephardic interest in the arts and sciences in addition to the study of holy texts, their interest in politics and large-scale commerce and not only in the narrow cultivation of religious observance -- these are all aspects of the Sephardic concern for the whole. The worst possible fate that could befall the Sephardim and the Jewish people would be for us to lose this breadth and openness of spirit to become isolated and segregated according to the present vogue. On the other hand, this openness is one of the greatest contributions that we can give to the contemporary Jewish world.