

The Term *Sephardic Jew*

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Many researchers believe the term "Sephardic" originally referred to Jews living in and later expelled from Spain in 1492. Today the term "Sephardic" has come to be accepted as a reference to the Jewish exiles and their descendants who settled in countries along the Mediterranean Sea, North Africa, the Balkans, Italy, Syria and Palestine, as well as indigenous Jews who already lived in these places. Some of these Jews fled to Brazil, Holland and the Jewish communities of the New World, including New Amsterdam (New York), Mexico and Curacao in the Caribbean. Sephardim of the Iberian Peninsula (what are now Portugal and Spain), spoke Ladino, a combination of Hebrew and Spanish.

There is debate in academic circles about the definition of the term "Sephardic Jew."

Is a Sephardic Jew a descendant of Spain and the Iberian Peninsula? Are Syrian Jews, many of whom came from Spain in the 16th Century, all Sephardic? The issue revolves around the fact that Jews were indigenous to the Middle East for centuries before the birth of Christianity and later, Islam.

The official definition of Sephardic according to Rabbi Marc Angel of Sephardic House, is "almost any Jew who is not Ashkenazi." The official definition of Sephardic according to Rabbi Marc Angel of Sephardic House, is "almost any Jew who is not Ashkenazi. Although there are wide cultural divergences within the Sephardic world, common liturgy and religious customs constitute underlying factors of unity."

One issue is whether it is possible to bring under one heading Jews who spoke Ladino for generations and those who never set foot on Spanish land who spoke various Oriental languages, such as Arabic and Persian. Further complicating the issue is what to call the indigenous Jewish populations of the Middle East and North Africa, where a majority of the Jews expelled from Spain settled.

Daniel Elazar, the first President of the American Sephardi Federation and a distinguished scholar, said

"For Jews, what is most important as a distinguishing characteristic is not the specific culture acquired in any particular country of exile by any particular Jewish population but the broader issues of *halakhah* and *mishpat* (Jewish law), community organization, and cultural patterns from food to synagogue rituals. In these respects, the Sephardi world is one, from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans, significantly influenced by its location within Islamic civilization."

Another issue concerns the Talmud and is expressed by S. Alfassa Marks.

"The Crusades which started in the beginning of the last millennium virtually destroyed Jewish intellectual life. It was suppressed and almost brought an end to the Jewish creative process in the middle European countries and the Holy Land. It was during this period that the further development of the Talmud passed to Jewry living in Iberia and North Africa. Our Talmud, the base of how we interpret Jewish law, came to Spain from Babylon (Iraq) and the Middle East. It was not developed there; it went there with Rabbi Saadia ibn Joseph Gaon, Rabbi Chanoch ben Moshe and Rabbi Hananel ben Hushiel in the 10th and 11th centuries. These rabbis were born in North Africa. These three rabbis fueled Rabbi Yitzhak Alfassi (born in Algeria, raised in Morocco), who later became one of the highest recognized Talmudists in history. He later lived his life in Cordoba and Lucena, Andalusia."

Marks notes that it was common for Jews, especially traveling merchants, to travel and have homes in more than one place and on more than one continent. Rabbis commonly thought of as Sephardic settled and lived in many places. In one reference, Marks notes that Rambam lived most of his life in North Africa, not in Spain.

According to references in Genesis, 10.3 and Obadiah, 1.20, the lands called *Sepharad* were located in areas north of the Holy Land, and were not necessarily in Spain and the Iberian peninsula, as the term is generally understood. Joseph A. D. Sutton contends that Jews in Spain, also known as Sephardic Jews, lived there for many centuries, but were descendants of Middle East ancestors who came to the Iberian Peninsula in stages from Egypt, Baghdad, North Africa, Palestine and Syria. Arabic was the principal language in large sections of Spain until the Christian conquests and was used by the Jews for daily communication and religious works.

"In effect, Jewish Spain was merely an extension of the Middle East, to all extents and purposes, the Sephardim did not substantially differ from their brothers in the Fertile Crescent, in language, religious practices and endeavors."

Today, many religious leaders in Israel consider themselves as Sephardic and identify with the founders of the Babylonian Talmud, who went to Spain and were considered 'saved' in the West. Marks states that the Babylonian Talmud was written by their ancestors in what is today Iraq, and codified in Iberia. In sending the Talmud to the West, many believe that Judaism flourished and survived.

Joseph A. D. Sutton contends that since the Jews of Spain originally came from the Middle East and their descendants went back to the Middle East, it is reasonable to categorize all of these Jews as Sephardim.

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