

Rabbi Joseph Dweck: More Ashkenazi “Rupturing and Reconstructing”

I recently wrote a lengthy response to Haym Soloveitchik and the Tradition magazine symposium on his 1994 article “Rupture and Reconstruction”:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NBCYyz07l0iTs34hfKZu CZ9croAiB8Mb-JK4Gx9BOFE/edit>

Here is Soloveitchik’s original article:

<https://traditiononline.org/rupture-and-reconstruction-the-transformation-of-contemporary-orthodoxy/>

And here is the link to the symposium articles:

https://traditiononline.org/archives/?_sft_category=fall-2019-issue-51-4&_sf_ppp=20

The aim of my article was to engage with the Anti-Sephardi racism of both Soloveitchik and the symposium participants, which is ultimately related to the Medieval schism over Maimonidean Jewish Humanism and the Sephardic approach to Gentile culture in contrast to Ashkenazi Ghetto Judaism, as embodied in the Orthodox tradition:

Judaism is therefore always alone and on the outside of civilization. There is no possibility of a true synthesis based on cultural and religious evolution. The primordial is the true, the atavistic and the literal become absolute markers of a closed Jewish epistemology.

It is thus fascinating that this harsh rejection of Sephardic Jewish Humanism, with its robust philosophical and scientific values, would come up against that other Ashkenazi stand-by: Sephardim have no relationship to Modernity.

I made note of two footnotes in the Soloveitchik article which assert a pretty obnoxious form of Anti-Sephardi racism:

Several points very much need underscoring at the outset. First, the orthodox community described here is of European origin. This essay does not discuss religious Jewry issuing from Muslim countries, commonly called Sefaredim, primarily because, unlike their Western brethren, their encounter with modernity is very recent. (p. 103)

Significantly, demons and ghosts are still part of the popular Israeli Sefaredi cosmology, and is reflected in the preachings available on cassettes in Israel. This difference should be corollated with the divergence that exists on the issue of "hellfire." Direct appeals to the horrors that await sinners are strikingly absent from contemporary Ashkenazic writings and equally from the burgeoning cassette literature. It is found abundantly, however, on the cassettes by Sefaredic preachers

(e.g., R. Nissim Yagen in the series *Ner Le-Me'ah*: no. 41, *Neshamotj* no. 86, *Ha-Parpar ha-Kahol*" Part I; no. 140, *Ha-Shoshanah she-Navlahj* in the series *Hasdei Naomi*: no. 3, *Omek ha-Din*). This suggests that in the Ashkenazic community, after some five or six generations of exposure to modernity, thoughts of the afterlife have lost much of their vivacity. The Jews from Muslim countries arrived in Israel soon after its founding in 1948. For those who came from rural areas this was their first encounter with the modern world; the same was true even for some coming from more urbanized settlements. Only a generation removed from their former culture, their vivid sense of the afterlife has not yet been dulled by modernity. (p. 115)

Soloveitchik has made it clear that Sephardim are not part of Modernity, only Ashkenazim are.

What makes his racist assertions so complicated is the following passage from his father's book *The Halakhic Mind*:

It is pertinent to note that modern Jewish philosophers have adopted a very unique method. The source of knowledge, for them, is Medieval Jewish philosophy. The living historical religious consciousness which embraces both antiquity and modern times is ignored. Such a method cannot cope with the problems of Jewish philosophy for three reasons. First, medieval Jewish thought, despite its accomplishments and merit, has not taken deep root in Jewish historical religious realism and has not shaped Jewish religious world perspective. When we speak of philosophy of religion, we must have in mind foremost the philosophy of religious realities experienced by the entire community, and not some abstract metaphysics cultivated by an esoteric group of philosophers. Second, we know that the most central concepts of Jewish philosophy are rooted in ancient Greek and medieval Arabic thought and are not of Jewish origin at all. It is impossible to reconstruct a unique Jewish world perspective out of alien material. (p. 100)

Digging deeper into this ethnocentric idea, we would do well to note that the famed Brisker Method of the Soloveitchik rabbinical dynasty, initiated by Hayyim of Volozhin in the late 19th century, was an attempt to turn Talmud study away from the practical, and into the mystical Platonic conceptual-theoretical in a way that sought to apply PILPUL to the Maimonidean rational tradition, thus subverting it in the process:

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-methodology-of-brisk/>

As we read in the My Jewish Learning post:

His method of Talmud study is difficult to define, but it departs from earlier methodologies in several ways. First, and perhaps most importantly, Rabbi Hayim shifted the focus of Talmud study from textual to conceptual analysis. Rather than analyze the flow of discussion in a particular *gemara* (the part of the Talmud that records the discussions of the sages in the years 200-600 B.C.E), he analyzed the

conclusion of that *gemara*, the different positions that arise from that discussion. What are the practical ramifications (*nafka minot*) of the different positions? What principles underlie them? Rabbi Hayim took the vast case-based literature of the Talmud and created legalized, formalized principles to describe what is happening in the innumerable particular cases.

We can thus see how the Platonic essentialist method connected to the Jewish Ghetto separatism of *The Halakhic Mind*:

Although Rabbi Hayim was not the first to use this type of conceptual analysis, he was unique in that he constructed a new terminology for these concepts and categories. This terminology was rooted exclusively in the sources of *halakhah* (Jewish law); Rabbi Hayim strongly opposed borrowing concepts from the world outside *halakhah*. The new terminology enabled Rabbi Hayim to transmit his methodology to numerous students.

In the end it is deeply antithetical to the Maimonidean-Sephardic pragmatist tradition:

Rabbi Hayim shifted the focus of Talmud study from the give and take—called *shakla ve-tarya*—of the *gemara*, to the positions that arise from that discussion. He therefore devoted a large portion of his study to Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, the great medieval legal code. Maimonides took out the *shakla ve-tarya* from the *gemara* and only recorded the conclusion of a discussion. For this reason, his work was ideal material for Brisker analysis.

Rabbi Hayim also shifted the orientation of Talmud study from practical to theoretical. He did not study in order to produce practical legal rulings. Rather, he saw *halakhah* as an ideal, a priori system, and he was not primarily concerned with how that system plays out in reality.

The Brisker Platonic Method has permeated contemporary Talmud study in the Lithuanian Yeshivas, as it has sought to eliminate the clean lines of the Maimonidean hermeneutical approach and its logical strictures:

https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Talmud_Study#id0e5sae

As I indicated in my “Rupture and Reconstruction” essay, this Anti-Maimonidean ideology can also be found in the thought of Samson Raphael Hirsch:

This great man, Maimonides, to whom, and to whom alone, we owe the preservation of practical Judaism to our time, is responsible, because he sought to reconcile Judaism with the difficulties which confronted it from without, instead of developing it creatively from within, for all the good and the evil which bless and afflict the heritage of the father. His peculiar mental tendency was Arabic-Greek, and his conception of the purpose of life the same. He entered into Judaism from without, bringing with him opinions of whose truth he had convinced himself from

extraneous sources and — be reconciled. For him, too, self-perfection through the knowledge of truth was the highest aim, the practical he deemed subordinate. For him knowledge of God was the end, not the means; hence he devoted his intellectual powers to speculations upon the essence of Deity, and sought to bind Judaism to the results of his speculative investigations as to postulates of science or faith. The Mizvoth became for him merely ladders, necessary only to conduct to knowledge or to protect against error; this latter often only the temporary and limited error of polytheism. Mishpatim became only rules of prudence, Mitzvoth as well; Chukkim rules of health, teaching right feeling, defending against the transitory errors of the time ; Both ordinances, designed to promote philosophical or other concepts; all this having no foundation in the eternal essence of things, not resulting from their eternal demand on me, or from my eternal purpose and task, no eternal symbolizing of an unchangeable idea, and not inclusive enough to form a basis for the totality of the commandments.

Indeed, it is quite confusing when we attempt to understand what the Ashkenazim think of Sephardim.

Are we Jewish Humanists who rejected the irrational Ashkenazi PILPUL, preserved in the Brisker Method, and adopted the values of philosophy, science, and general culture at the time of Maimonides, the man who was made anathema in the Ashkenazi rabbinical tradition?

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/killing-off-rational-juda_b_498846

Or are we primitive boors who lack any of the basic traits of the Modern, as Haym Soloveitchik claims?

The Tradition symposium displayed its usual White Jewish Supremacy by not inviting a single Sephardi to respond to Soloveitchik's calumnious statements.

But not to worry!

We have just gotten a "Sephardic" response from the YU-trained Rabbi Joseph Dweck that has been published in the latest issue of the magazine:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BOrUXGLCx9GUx4jpQER9pqSyVgMMe3Sw/view?ths=true>

The written article was preceded by an oral presentation which is available on-line:

<https://events.limmud.org/limmud-together-uk/programme/timeslot/sunday-1200/925/>

<https://traditiononline.org/podcast-a-sephardic-response-to-rupture-and-reconstruction/>

Dweck, who moved to London after years in the Brooklyn Syrian Jewish community, where he apparently hopes to return as soon as possible, presents his response in a fascinating way.

His main strategy, contrary to the current reality, is to argue that Sephardim have maintained their tradition without Rupture:

But as an American Sephardic Jew, this was also a world that I did not feel a part of nor one in which I truly belonged. The Sephardic world evolved in different ways. It had not relinquished its mimetic traditions to the degree that Soloveitchik had illustrated with the Ashkenazic community. The rupture of which he spoke was not as profound amongst Sephardic Jews and we also did not share the historic catalysts of Enlightenment and Holocaust which he identified as generating and influencing the rupture he was describing. For us, it was more of a tremor—if anything. There was reverberation, upheaval, change, yes—but not rupture. In the twentieth century Sephardim were developing from a different history and towards a different future than the Ashkenazim. Still, we were no longer isolated. The last century brought the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews face to face, living side by side, and they influenced one another.

How Dweck understands this is somewhat unclear, given that in his formative years he was trained at a YU High School in Los Angeles, and is a proud member of the Modern Orthodox group:

https://www.jewishtelegraph.com/prof_378.html

For those who might not recall, he was embroiled in a controversy with the Sephardi Haredim over remarks he made about Homosexuality:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/pKJapxiS8lA/m/S7uqgtFhAgAJ>

He has served, like Rabbi Marc Angel, whose work is frequently cited in his tendentious article, as a “Good Sephardi” who speaks in the codified YU language:

<https://www.yutorah.org/rabbi-joseph-dweck/>

Indeed, he has fully immersed himself in the world of Ashkenazi Modern Orthodoxy and is well aware of the many “Ruptures” that have taken place in a Sephardic community that has dispensed with its mimetic heritage.

Unless we mean “Bourekas and Haminados” and the unique religious customs that distinguish us from the Ashkenazim:

When I was growing up there were many examples amongst Sephardim of mimetic tradition that were unaffected by stringencies that might have been influenced from textual sources. One such example is the kippa. Although Shulhan Arukh rules that

one must not walk more than four amot without a head covering the Sephardim did not take that to mean that one must wear a kippa at all times. Even the most devout Sephardic laymen in my family and community did not wear a kippa outside of synagogue if they were not studying, praying, or eating. In fact, if what one was eating was not a sit-down meal, a sleeve, napkin, or someone else's hand was regularly used to cover one's head for the recital of the pre-blessing in order to keep the law that obligates a head covering when saying God's name. Indeed, a generation earlier, even many of the rabbis who worked in or owned businesses often did not wear their kippot to work. In contrast, in typical Ashkenazic Orthodox communities not wearing a kippa was tantamount to being irreligious. Another example is that every Sephardic family I knew spoke between washing hands and eating bread, an act that even among the lesser-observant Ashkenazic households is known to be prohibited by Jewish law. The Sephardim that I knew largely lit the Hanukka candles not by a window or doorway as prescribed by the legal codes, but on a table inside the house. These practices among others were essentially identical in both Eastern and Western Sephardic communities. These were also not behaviors that the rabbis urged us to change as a part of their usual encouragement towards greater observance and piety. The rabbis' reticence testifies to the strength of the mimetic culture amongst the Sephardim.

Indeed, Dweck's aim is to show how Sephardim are **not** Modern; how they did not experience the Enlightenment upheaval as Ashkenazim did.

He thus strongly reinforces Soloveitchik's racist point.

In the following note he shows how little he understands the matter of Jewish Humanism and its history:

Clearly, the broader culture of the Middle Ages was still a religious one; modernity moved away from that. We should differentiate between a fifteenth-century Sephardi encountering Al Ghazali from his late-eighteenth-century Ashkenazi counterpart encountering Kant. Each community was exposed to "outside" ideas in different ways, and each found its own path to modernity. Generally speaking, Sephardim did not have to exit a ghetto (physical or intellectual) in order to encounter modernity, and this "softened the blow."

He deploys the religious-secular binary, just as his YU Orthodox training has taught him. He makes no distinction between different facets of Medieval Judeo-Arab scholasticism, such as the split between the more pious Ghazali and the more radical Averroes:

<https://nation.com.pk/22-Feb-2016/ibn-rushd-vs-ghazali-did-the-muslim-world-take-a-wrong-turn>

Which is also the case with Maimonides and Judah Halevi:

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/halevi-versus-maimonides>

Because Dweck never deploys the term Religious Humanism, he is able to completely ignore the massive changes instituted in the Sephardic community by his beloved mentor Rabbi Ovadia Yosef:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/zUknG4xW8Kg/m/R1QqbCH42gcJ>

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/pRnfkfaOgV4/m/9LVc9BXAKGsJ>

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/8LjdZFmKAYO/m/yOMSTE0cBSsJ>

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/W_G0C9PV1gY/m/r4gli7dSuwMJ

He makes the point quite clear in the following passage:

The Sephardic world was drawn towards a new center of gravity and overwhelmingly succumbed to the neo-Ashkenazic world that Soloveitchik describes. Still, in this shift towards textual authority and concomitant stringency, emerged a response from within the Sephardic world that answered the textual foundations of the Ashkenazim but did not follow the stringency that it seemed to necessitate. During the 1980s, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, answered the textually based move towards stringency with a call towards leniency using textual authority as his basis. In fact, there are few *posekim* who have so comprehensively and thoroughly used written sources to such an extent in the substance of their legal rulings. Yet, his approach was not accuracy towards stringency, but rather diversity of textual sources for leniency. He drew on an older principle that he identified as being particularly espoused as a central value and aspect of Sephardic halakhic tradition emphasizing the pragmatic and human-centric: the legal value of finding leniency in the law— *koha de-hetera adif*. R. Ovadia's encyclopedic knowledge of texts and deep understanding of the dynamics of Jewish law afforded him the ability to do so.

In his false representation of a united Sephardic community under the SHAS Halakhic banner, which utterly rejects the Maimonidean tradition of philosophy and science, he emphatically neglects the teachings of Rabbi Jose Faur and Hakham Matloub Abadi:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/ORulbdv3qcQ/m/NDIDXjdhAQAJ>

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/Ox-wE_ec5zo/m/GX_d4kVXBQAJ

He also avoids the battle between Haredim and Zionists that has so impacted the Sephardic community, which I discussed in my article “The New Sephardic Jewish Binary”:

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/dx_QfCVHTu0/m/f8HBTmmLAQAJ

Which serves to affirm Soloveitchik's racism:

The absence of Haskala in the Eastern communities left deep and penetrating consequences in the twentieth century, when the aftermath of the “rupture and reconstruction” of the Ashkenazic world would meet with, and impinge upon, the unaffected and, as a result, vulnerable and underdeveloped Eastern Sephardic Jews upon their arrival in the West.

It is thus important to note that he makes no mention of Sabato Morais, Elijah Benamozegh, Henry Pereira Mendes, David de Sola Pool, and their essential role in the advancement of Sephardic Humanism in the Modern age.

I have presented the indispensable work of Arthur Kiron on Morais and its connection to Modern Judaism in the following SHU post:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oJ6PrGWTGHnTnfPkBhPao3oSucPPg-k4sEKZDgCGOZc/edit>

My article “Sephardic Judaism and the Levantine Option” goes into some detail on the matter, providing a general overview of the tradition which stands in contrast to Dweck's SHAS-centered view of things:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvVXVFhBSjh3eVdIU0E/view>

And, as we can clearly see from Dweck's biographical materials, he is squarely on the side of the YU Religious Zionists and the Neo-Con Islamophobes, and presents Sephardic and Ashkenazi Judaism along the lines of the Modern Orthodox conceptual categories in which he was trained.

Indeed, his conclusion is quite curious:

The Jewish people are no longer living in their respective ethnic silos. The world at large is rapidly globalizing and comprehensively redefining itself, and our people are not immune to this. In this milieu it is not simply a question of retention of heritage regarding various unique approaches to religious life, but a question of how, in the great interconnections and interactions of populations of which we are a part, will the various Jewish cultures and communities bring their unique aspect of heritage and cultural knowledge and experience to the Jewish table and offer it as a contribution to the great tapestry that is being woven from the myriad threads of Jewish experiences throughout two millennia of diaspora. Principles do not focus on information per se, but rather provide tools for valuing information. The Sephardic communities had and have a unique framework for viewing Jewish life. I believe it is a core responsibility of Jewish leaders today to teach these principles much in the fashion that the Sephardic rabbis I've mentioned did, as we face the aftermath of rupture and an uncertain future.

According to the original presentation of the “Rupture and Reconstruction” symposium, we are **indeed** living in our “respective ethnic silos,” as Sephardim were kept off the list of participants.

Now we have the Dweck response, which never speaks directly of White Jewish Supremacy, though this passage comes close, in a way that should by now be familiar to us:

In Israel, however, there was now greater upheaval for the Sephardic Jews. Those who had lived in Israel before the establishment of the State, as well as those who arrived from Arab lands afterwards due to persecution because of the existence of the State, were subject to prejudice, ridicule, and disrespect by both the secular Ashkenazim who founded the State and the Ashkenazic Orthodox religious leaders who began to rebuild and establish—indeed to “reconstruct”—academies of Torah study and religious institutions. The Sephardic Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, having not gone through the Enlightenment, were misunderstood by the Ashkenazim and sadly seen as unsophisticated, uneducated, unworldly, and uncouth. Their Torah scholarship was not recognized as significant and their customs and ways were seen as foreign and not recognizably Jewish. This stigma introduced a profound sense of shame and self-consciousness among Sephardic Jews.

Indeed, this passage can fit snugly with the recent article by Hen Mazzig, which affirms a primal Zionist HASBARAH sense as it feebly points to Ashkenazi exclusion of Sephardim in Israel:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/uuYUx4AGMd4>

It goes no deeper than that, because Dweck remains fearful of the institutional White Jewish Supremacy and what it does to the “Wrong Sephardim.” His YU alliance has made him a very popular lecturer in the Brooklyn Syrian Jewish community, and it would suicidal for him to rub against the Ashkenazi consensus.

His contention that Sephardic Jews did not go through the Enlightenment also remains curious, given that the classical Andalusian tradition became a model for the Haskalah and figures like Naphtali Herz Wessely and Moses Mendelssohn, as I have recently indicated in my article “Sepharad in Ashkenaz, That Is the Question!”:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/kKoo0WTd4Pk>

It is likely that, since Dweck strictly divides the Sephardic world into East and West, following the racist Ashkenazi model that does not account for the essential connection between Arabic-based Jewish cultures in Andalusian Spain, the Ottoman Balkans, and the Fertile Crescent over many centuries, he is unable to process the ongoing reformulation of Maimonidean Jewish Humanism which can be seen in disparate figures

like David ibn Abi Zimra, Hayyim Yosef David Azoulai, Moses Almosnino, Israel Moses Hazzan, and Moise Ventura.

And of course in O”Y’s nemesis Haim Nahum Effendi, the last Hakham Bashi of the Ottoman Empire, and Chief Rabbi of Egypt until his death in 1960; a true Jewish Humanist and proud bearer of the Arab culture, which SHAS has rejected:

<http://www.sephardicstudies.org/haim.html>

It was this encounter between European Jewish Modernity and Sephardic Jewish Humanism that played an important role in the development of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, as the Ottoman Empire was crumbling:

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1264-alliance-israelite-universelle>

It is a process that has been presented by Esther Benbassa in her excellent book on Nahum:

<https://www.amazon.com/Haim-Nahum-Sephardic-Politics-1892-1923/dp/081730729X>

And in the work of Aron Rodrigue on the AIU:

<https://www.amazon.com/French-Jews-Turkish-Universelle-Experience/dp/0253350212>

<https://www.amazon.com/Jews-Muslims-Sephardi-Eastern-Jewries/dp/0295983140>

This alternative tradition has not been integrated into contemporary Judaism in the same way that SHAS essentialism has.

Indeed, as I indicated in my “New Sephardic Jewish Binary” article, and as we can see from Dweck’s article, the key issue in these discussions is **how** the conceptual categories are deployed, and how those categories can square with the YU White Jewish Supremacy.

So, as we have also seen with Hen Mazzig and Mijal Bitton, it is not just **what** you say that counts, but what your CV **contains**, and how well you fare in the racist Jewish institutional world.

Dweck speaks in a resolutely Ashkenazi language that not only affirms Haym Soloveitchik’s Anti-Sephardi racism, but which rejects the alternative Jewish History that can be seen in the pioneering studies of scholars who are outside the YU racist orbit.

There is Jose Faur’s groundbreaking work on Jewish Post-Modernism, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots*, which brings the story of Sephardic Jewish Humanism into the current period and its philosophical and literary concerns:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvvXQnNIeEJ3aGdSSjQ/view?ths=true>

It is important to note that two of the fixtures of Post-Modern thought presented in *Golden Doves* are Sephardim, Jacques Derrida and Edmond Jabes, who were both connected to Emmanuel Levinas.

Levinas worked for the AIU teaching North African Jewish students:

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/emmanuel-levinas/>

The definitive intellectual biography of Levinas was written by one of those students, Salomon Malka:

<https://www.amazon.com/Emmanuel-Levinas-His-Life-Legacy/dp/0820703583>

The conclusion of the My Jewish Learning post sums up the ideas of Jewish Post-Modernism nicely:

In part because of his friendship with major figures such as Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot, Levinas has become a truly influential figure in continental philosophy, sometimes grouped with Derrida and other “postmodern” philosophers. Interestingly, Levinas has also become one of the voices in the contemporary conversation between philosophy and theology (both Jewish and Christian), valued for his arguments that both religion and philosophy can contribute to our running conversations about human values.

Levinas has been accepted—perhaps inappropriately—by some postmodernists as a sort of “Rabbi,” an authoritative speaker on matters of Jewish tradition, because he provided readings of Jewish texts that are agreeable to a postmodern sensibility. Levinas argued for the open-endedness of texts, the importance of interpretation, and the relevance of biblical and Talmudic religion, offering a philosophical account of ethical responsibility in both philosophy and Judaism. Still, many of Levinas’ interpreters attempt to disentangle these two strands from one another, but while he wrote for different audiences during his lifetime, it has become increasingly clear that neither “side” of his intellectual project is entirely comprehensible without the other.

I have presented a review of Levinas’ thought in the following SHU post:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1XWNPnJU7ZjavXKNzSH8d3suz3a7L89UqHyf4lSlwgTU/edit>

While the YU Ashkenazim have sought to co-opt Jewish Post-Modernism in their misleading way, it has been Faur’s book that most closely hews to the basic interpretive values of the movement, showing its ties to the Sephardic tradition:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/de-xEWk9-XE/m/nQhx3c1CBwAJ>

And in his book *In the Shadow of History*, Faur shows how Sephardim and Conversos in their battle with the Ashkenazim laid the groundwork for Modernity and Enlightenment:

<https://www.amazon.com/Shadow-History-Jews-Conversos-Modernity/dp/0791408027>

I discussed those issues in the following article:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/viiv-4n-NIw/m/9jwMT5EtVE4J>

We can see in Faur's critical discussions of seminal figures like Solomon ibn Verga, Fernando de Rojas, and the apostate Spinoza, how the Sephardic tradition dealt with the Enlightenment, and provided an alternate vision for Modernity.

Crucial to this approach was his enlightened reading of the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico:

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvXeTMtSjJWWEZft1E/edit>

Picking up from Faur's analysis is Ammiel Alcalay's *After Jews and Arabs*, which penetrates further into the Modern Sephardic intellectual tradition and its Medieval roots with a more political edge:

<https://www.amazon.com/After-Jews-Arabs-Remaking-Levantine/dp/0816621551>

Alcalay tracks the Sephardic literary heritage from the classical Andalusian poets and S.D. Goitein's massive reconstruction in his epic work *A Mediterranean Society*, up to and including contemporary Mizrahi writing in Israel, which reflects the degrading racism and Orientalism of Ashkenazi Zionism.

And in this regard, he builds on the work of the Mizrahi radicals, as we have seen in Ella Shohat's classic article "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims":

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvXa2ZPUWpyZ1pFS0k/view>

And, of course, there are the bracing studies of the late Maria Rosa Menocal on the polyglot Andalusian world:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e9Bi7Y12B3li38_PHne_JThpC67yhH1kJrSK48XXAX0/edit

Menocal has provided a very important popular iteration of the values of Convivencia in her book *The Ornament of the World*:

<https://www.amazon.com/Ornament-World-Christians-Tolerance-Medieval/dp/0316168718>

Her ecumenical view, rooted in the traditional Sephardic cosmopolitanism, has been rejected by Ashkenazi Jewish ethnocentrists in the typical Ghetto manner, which has further served to marginalize our heritage.

Most famously, Convivencia was emphatically rejected by Dweck's primary source Marc Angel, who went to the lengths of defending a book by a Catholic apologist:

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/_nrcdGWekO0/m/9HIHPrs9AQAJ

So, contrary to Dweck's presentation, we are **not** required to accept Ashkenazi racism when it comes to Sephardic Modernity, as we have many academic resources that can allow us to paint a broader yet more detailed picture of the Sephardic world over the course of many centuries; which does not align with the White Jewish Supremacy or partake of its essentialist religious categories and their binary depredations.

It is not necessary for Sephardim to cower in the face of the Ashkenazi attacks, as our heritage has ample literary and intellectual resources that might, as Wessely demanded, more effectively respond to the various schisms that now plague a Jewish world which is firmly controlled by the many contentious Ashkenazi factions.

In the end, Dweck does his readers a disservice by obscuring this vibrant tradition, and effectively submitting to the tyranny of Ashkenazi civilization as it seeks to ultimately erase our Sephardic Humanism, and replace it with the new realities of an Ashkenazi-centric Judaism that would have us remain silent.

David Shasha

From SHU 971, November 4, 2020

Meet the “New Sephardim”: Playing A Very Dangerous Game of Connect-the-Dots with Sina Kahen

In another great act of racist irony, the Ashkenazi-run ASF has just alerted us to the erasure of Sephardim:

https://mailchi.mp/asf/sww_5dec20?e=9f39c396e1

As a start, maybe we should have **Sephardim** running putatively Sephardi organizations!

Although, as we have seen in the case of Jewish Currents and its editor Arielle Angel, Self-Hating Sephardim running Ashkenazi institutions does not make things any better:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/Q82jUjKiHMk/m/EYOCbUQAaAwAJ>

The London Jewish Chronicle article is about someone named Sina Kahen, whose name I had not heard before:

https://www.thejc.com/judaism/features/the-classical-sephardi-tradition-can-be-a-model-for-us-all-1.507664?mc_cid=2adef83b27&mc_eid=9f39c396e1

He is a member of the London Sephardi community, which includes our dear friend YU Rabbi Shalom Morris, who I most recently discussed in an article about White Jewish racism and the demeaning presentation of Sephardim in the Social Sciences:

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/ggJAFoCD7us/m/llz_Gl0BAgAJ

I followed that article up with one more on Devi Mays that carefully reviews the racist movement in academic Judaic Studies:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/i7GjycvgTh8/m/WXhKM8lgBwAJ>

No Robin DiAngelo for Sephardim:

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/c1_dJkCTKhW/m/Zq36INbHBwAJ

Welcome to the wild and wacky world of the “New Sephardim”!

London has indeed become a hotbed of the “New Sephardim,” as I discussed in my article on LIMMUD UK from 2018:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/nW2DNWU19Dk/m/5oaSDp1sAwAJ>

We will recall that Lyn Julius and her HASBARAH organization HARIF are trusted local leaders:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/zIEne4p0bII/m/vBhJaP52AQAJ>

https://www.thejlc.org/lyn_julius_co_founder_of_harif

And for all the blather on Sephardi erasure, I have been informed that London currently does not have a single Sephardi school. They all go to Ashkenazi Yeshivas.

Unsurprisingly, the many enthusiastic blurbs for Kahen’s book make it clear that he has many Ashkenazi Orthodox fans:

<https://www.sinakahen.com/books>

He has quite skillfully garnered plaudits from Religious Zionists, Neo-Haredim, and the usual gaggle of Self-Hating Sephardic rabbis like Bevis Marks head Joseph Dweck and the ubiquitous Washington Heights macher Marc Angel.

I was particularly intrigued by the praise from Rabbi Samuel Lebens, whose academic work on Jewish Philosophy is diametrically opposed to the classical Sephardic tradition and its Religious Humanism:

https://ede99318-8261-4878-a975-f67a7add24ff.filesusr.com/ugd/7cf7e9_1e1620c2aad1461798f84f6e3e7ead31.pdf

His biography is a fascinating example of where Religious Zionism is at today:

<https://www.samlebens.com/about-me>

Kahen's actual professional career has nothing to do with Sephardim or Jewish scholarship, but is very commercially-oriented in the standard Hipster marketing manner:

<https://www.sinakahen.com/about>

His book's title is quite Platonic, contrary to the classical Sephardic heritage and its anti-mystical tendencies:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_forms

His list of illustrious influences is a true clash of perspectives:

Rambam
Meiri
Radak
Rabbenu Bahya
Ramhal
Rivash
Ralbag
Ri Migash
Ibn Ezra
Nissim Gerondi
Sa'adia Gaon
Hoter Ben Shelomo
Ya'akov Anatoli
Ibn Kaspi
Nissim ben Moshe
Ibn Tibbon
Yosef Albo
Zakharia ben Rofe
Elia Del Medigo

Ben Zion Uziel
Shimshon Raphael Hirsch
David Nieto
Avraham Yitzhak Kook
Joseph Soloveitchik
Aharon Lichtenstein
Yosef Qafih
Yosef Faur
Jonathan Sacks
Joseph Dweck
Eliezer Melamed
Moshe Shamah

Maimonideans and Anti-Maimonideans stand together in a truly bizarre union.

Here are articles I have written on some of them and the issues they present to Sephardim.

Hirsch:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/AQCL2KNg1So/m/n6WfU5WQBAAJ>

Soloveitchik:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/oh-jil6C4c0/m/JxvGvCl8AgAJ>

Angel:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/g3J2kwjK36w/m/xxH-CD2BBAAJ>

Shamah:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/1YDG73IxkgI/m/yNH4-u9cJwJ>

Dweck:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/fiMfpnIua9I/m/uWtX4mB8BgAJ>

Faur:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/OOpZzMziYP0/m/HWO4PrCMBQAJ>

I recently re-posted my 2003 EDAH Journal article on Rabbi Sacks, which deals with the concept of Jewish Humanism in a Sephardic context:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/xoky3O7XU5o>

But what a difference 17 years makes!

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/ViNnB7rIjps>

A tribute to the late Chief Rabbi took place, featuring many of our good friends – and you know who you are, none of whom are much on Jewish Humanism or the Dignity of Difference:

<https://rabbisacks.org/shloshim/>

I have also written an article that delineates the New Sephardic Jewish Binary caught between Ashkenazi Modern Orthodoxy and Ashkenazi Haredi Orthodoxy, which is now being collapsed by these “New Sephardim”:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/Md20wpiqEk4/m/qCuUrF7-BwAJ>

Kahen is part of this illustrious alliance as we see in his connection to the Od Yosef Hai Synagogue:

<https://www.odyosefhai.com/history/>

He was educated at the Hasmonean High School for Boys, a typical Ashkenazi Modern Orthodox institution:

<https://hasmoneanboys.org.uk/our-ethos/>

He recently presented at LIMMUD, bastion of White Jewish Supremacy:

<https://www.jw3.org.uk/stories/jw3-limmud-present-it-says-what-sina-kahen>

And is a member of a group called, in the usual Ashkenazi nomenclature, The Sephardi Habura, Habura with a “B”:

<https://www.facebook.com/TheSephardiHabura/>

The whole thing is a very fascinating Ashkenazi YU-oriented construct, as we have seen in the work of Joseph Dweck and his fabulous assertion that Sephardim are not Modern:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BOrUXGLCx9GUx4jpOER9pqSyVgMMe3Sw/view?ths=true>

It is a SHATNEZ hybrid that soft-pedals the problem of White Jewish Supremacy and the thorny matter of Arab culture and Zionism, as it seeks unity and synthesis by ignoring the deep Anti-Maimonidean values of contemporary Orthodox Judaism and its deep-seated Islamophobia and Orientalism.

It goes way beyond “Bourekas and Haminados” Sephardischkeit, into a zone of intellectual-religious incoherence that expeditiously seeks to turn Cordoba into Har Etzion.

As we have also seen in the work of Tikvah Tablet Mijal Bitton, a fellow traveler in the “New Sephardi” movement, it is critical to present the Sephardic heritage in a way that is amenable to Ashkenazi racism and not make waves:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/blWox23bvk/m/ZAMDGuYsAgAJ>

Better to be a “Good Sephardi” than a “Dead Sephardi.”

As I have learned from some very bitter personal experience, your wallet and family will thank you!

Indeed, Bitton has expertly alerted us to the Trumpscum Sephardim, who are central to the new movement I am discussing here:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/8InDVESFuJs/m/37KvpqkmAQAJ>

Tikvah Mosaic magazine re-posted an interview she did with the ASF Ashkenazim that marks Rabbi Jose Faur as “eccentric”:

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/religion-holidays/2020/10/an-idiosyncratic-rabbi-who-learned-from-the-best-and-dismissed-the-worst-of-postmodernism/>

It is a sentiment that is reflected in Rabbi Raphael Zarum’s blurb for Kahen’s book:

This is certainly an unusual and eclectic work. The author believes in a Judaism of the mind as well as the heart. He confidently weaves together ideas from scholars both within and beyond the Jewish tradition, but is especially enamoured of his own Sephardic tradition whose richness and profundity has so much to contribute to our understanding of the Torah today. If you want to go on an intellectual adventure, read this book.

Sephardim are still very much a bizarre curiosity to contemporary Ashkenazim, and their “Fiddler on the Roof” universe:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/Gms7spmwnA>

Indeed, reading the introduction to the Kahen book is a truly whiplash experience:

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08C8XFDT4/#reader_B08C8XFDT4

His weighty collection of far-flung citations is stylistically very Modern Orthodox Nehama Leibowitz. The variety is an affirmation of a Rainbow Coalition which effectively turns Sephardim into Ashkenazim, rather than point to how the Ashkenazim like Hirsch and Soloveitchik have sought to destroy our values and mark us as not-Jewish.

Crucial to this point is the idea of Convivencia and its cosmopolitan acculturation to new and different values, which has been brilliantly formulated by the late Maria Rosa Menocal in her many studies of Andalusian civilization:

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/_3JkvXJiTE/m/DrivSaphAwAJ

The “New Sephardim,” as we can see from Marc Angel’s depredations, are not accepting of those Convivencia values:

https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/_nrcdGWekO0/m/9HIHPrs9AQAJ

It has now become common to the “New Sephardic” world:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/QTbtJWS0WC0/m/JFA0XztdBAAJ>

In a more general sense, the traditions of pluralism endemic to Religious Humanism have been expounded in a deeply progressive, anti-Colonialist framework by Karen Armstrong, whose latest book *The Lost Art of Scripture* is a model for creative hermeneutical understanding of sacred texts and how such readings impact culture and history:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/8qr2Ci7gJvs/m/hBQHejt9CAAJ>

This open hermeneutical understanding of sacred texts stands in clear contrast to the “New Talmudism” led by figures like Daniel Boyarin and Christine Hayes who propound an atavism rooted in doctrine and dogma, which is deeply tied to Christian literalism and its debased anti-rabbinical depredations:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/erDn17QuaLc/m/B8wqZOSQBGAJ>

I have further contextualized the “New Talmudism” in my article on Maimonides and the ongoing destruction of Sephardic Humanism:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/VXe7iEiJHJ0/m/XIVCD2AyAgAJ>

As I note there, one of the enthusiastic academic proponents of the “New Talmudism” is Rabbi Ricky Hidary, a devoted student of both Boyarin and Rabbi Moshe Shamah; men deeply resistant to the ideas of the classical Sephardic tradition as presented in the work of Rabbi Jose Faur.

We can also contrast the values of Andalusian Religious Humanism with the militant primitivism of racist Ashkenazi thinkers like Michael Wyschogrod, whose ideas also reflect Christian Literalism of the Evangelical variety.

And here we can point to the shift in the Jewish discourse spearheaded by The Tikvah Fund and one of its driving forces Rabbi Meir Soloveichik:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/Ll-nRoyE2mY/m/FCdgKDIZBwAJ>

Soloveichik has emphasized this benighted literalism, with all its attendant racism and prejudice, in his Princeton dissertation on Jewish Election, written under the tutelage of fellow Tikvah leader and aggressive Straussian Leora Batnitzky:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ytYVvsu-He-LACFKWcSsYGguR5uX33u9/view?ths=true>

Indeed, Soloveichik's prominent role in the Sephardic Question brings us right back to representation and the problem of institutional autonomy, as he has now turned the oldest Synagogue in America, a prime representative of the classical Sephardic heritage, into a Tikvah outpost:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/Gm1W7pJHRYI/m/LArV53KjBQAJ>

And so it is that the three most high-profile "Sephardic" organizations in America, Congregation Shearith Israel, the American Sephardi Federation, and JIMENA, are all controlled by Right Wing Ashkenazi interests rooted in the racist White Jewish Supremacy system.

I recently wrote an article on "Sepharad in Ashkenaz" that speaks directly to the problem Kahen and the "New Sephardi" faction poses to us:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/kKoo0WTd4Pk/m/EiVX0avmAgAJ>

As we have seen with the HASBARAH deployment of the Arab Jewish Refugee issue, Ashkenazim have become more comfortable with the current set of activists that includes the aforementioned JIMENA:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/-kLsi6o2ssk/m/JY9NCio7BAAJ>

It all came together with the promulgation of Naftali Bennett's Biton Committee:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/jPQwQi6kJrg/m/lbJh1g69AAAJ>

In truth, we continue to remain "Idiot Sephardim":

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/HWE675C8-No/m/VxmT4bkxZlcJ>

Like abused pets, we continue to take our whipping and come back for more YU chastening.

The “New Sephardi” movement thus aims to undermine the values of the classical Sephardic heritage in favor of a duplicitous compromise with the very racist forces that continue to displace our culture and institutional integrity.

David Shasha

From SHU 981, January 13, 2021

Noble Savages: Rabbi Joseph Dweck’s Unenlightened View of the Jews of the Arab World

By: Yoel Pimentel

Last October, a Jewish learning initiative called Torah in Motion posted videos of a 3-part series of shiurim given by Rabbi Joseph Dweck, the head Rabbi of London's largest Sephardi congregation.

The main subject of the lectures was the European Enlightenment, a period between the 17th and 18th centuries, when scientific and philosophical thought started to become more widespread throughout Europe. R. Dweck discusses how this period affected the Jews of the time.

The three shiurim are available for viewing online:

<https://youtu.be/7ckilBd8I18>

<https://youtu.be/hu3EhFkRzcA>

<https://youtu.be/86QjYxUeos4>

Rabbi Dweck falsely claims that the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa never went through or were affected by the Enlightenment, but that only the Western Jews did.

He gives us an example of two Jewish communities living in the West: The Portuguese Sephardim, a community of Jews descended mostly from Iberian Conversos, and the Ashkenazim of Central and Eastern Europe.

During his shiurim, the Rabbi does twice remind us that he is not looking at this subject as a historian, and that sometimes he is using generalizations.

The problem is that numerous times during the shiurim, R. Dweck makes statements which seem to go contrary to the historical record, and which only end up reinforcing racist stereotypes about Arab Jews.

He fails to discuss the different effects the Enlightenment had on Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. His generalizations unfortunately do not suffice. During the shiurim, the Rabbi claims many times that the Sephardi Jews outside of Europe had no learning beyond Torah or access to Western thought.

The first contentious issue is the assumption that Enlightenment and general studies was something achieved and understood by Jews living only in the West. Rabbi Dweck doesn't mention the Golden Age of Spain's high culture, so influential to the emergence of European Modernity, as being influenced by the Syrian Umayyads and the transfer of their dynasty from the Middle East to Spain.

He does mention in the shiur that the Iberian Jews in Europe had enlightenment before the Enlightenment, but not that this was a result of the Arab culture they lived within or the Islamic world's greater tolerance for scientific learning and poetry.

Throughout the shiur Rabbi Dweck instead prefers to use a Eurocentric East/West binary in his discussions. He connects the intellectual thinking of the Portuguese Sephardim in Europe to Maimonides but does not discuss the influence of Maimonides on the Jews in North Africa and the Middle East.

In fact, Maimonides also had an influence over non-Jews during his time living in Cairo.

As stated by Abraham Joshua Heschel in his [book on the Great Eagle](#), Maimonides attracted intellectuals from across the Muslim world:

Maimonides's fame also extended to the non-Jewish world. The educated circles in Baghdad esteemed him as one of the most outstanding men of the age. He exerted such an attraction that the young scholar Abdallatif, who lived in Baghdad, decided to visit Egypt in order to meet Maimonides. Having attended lectures by all the great teachers in Baghdad and having studied grammar, theology, jurisprudence, and medicine, he was convinced by 1189 that there was nothing more for him to learn in the city in which he lived. In 1191, he arrived in Cairo, hoping to make the acquaintance of Maimonides and two other scholars.

He sharpens the point as follows:

Ibn Abi Usaiba , the Arabic historian who later functioned as head at the grand hospital of Cairo, recalls in his History of Arabic Physicians that Maimonides (whom he must have known personally) occupied the first place among the physicians of his time both in theoretical and practical medicine.

By failing to reference the Islamic culture of Spain and its connection to the Middle East, Dweck misses a critical link to the Enlightenment process in Europe.

This process has been well documented by the late Professor Maria Menocal in her book [*The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*](#).

Professor Menocal explains the profound influence of Arab education and knowledge on the rest of Europe. She discusses the story of Petrus Alfonsi, a Jewish convert to Christianity who had likely grown up in southern Spain and found himself as probably among the retinue of physicians attending to Henry I, son of William the conqueror.

Petrus was a bit of a celebrity in the Christian places he lived, according to Menocal, who

...had a level of learning that, customary as it might have been in the Jewish-Muslim circles of educated Andalusians, was astonishing in the far northern climes of Europe in the early years of the twelfth century.

...

Petrus became a widely read-author on high-tech subjects that were just beginning to be apprehended and covered outside the Arabic-reading world.

Menocal cites other instances of how Islamic Spain influenced the Western world.

Petrus himself "popularized Dialogue in Christian Europe, itself with roots in the traditions of religious Dialogue going back at least as far as Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid."

Menocal is not the only scholar to point out the connection between enlightened education in Europe after the arrival of Islam in Spain.

In her 1988 book [*Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World*](#), the historian and religious scholar Karen Armstrong mentions the transfer of knowledge from Spain to Christian Europe and its influence on taking Christian countries out of the Dark Ages.

The historic intellectual and cultural advance of Non-European civilizations is remarked upon by Armstrong as follows: "The Arabs regarded Europe as a poor, savage backwater, that had nothing to offer them." And in reference to the offer by a Frank to Usama Ibn Mundiqlah (1095-1188), a Syrian diplomat, to have his son educated in Europe: "A truly cultivated man would never be guilty of such a suggestion."

In his book [*Sunlight and Shadow: The Jewish Experience of Islam*](#), Lucien Gubbay describes how

as late as 1793 the Emperor of China reacted with incredulity to a proposal from King George III of England to establish diplomatic relations with him on an equal footing. To him, Western Europe was still a barbarian land, beyond the pale of civilised life; and he regarded the King's letter as a gross impertinence.

We might also need to be reminded that one of the world's first universities was established in Fez, Morocco (al-Qarawiyyin, 859 CE), by a lady called Fatima al-Fihri, and the Al-Azhar University was established a century later in Cairo (972 CE).

In the first shiur R. Dweck states (in reference to North African and Middle Eastern Jews) that

they continued and carried on with their investment in Torah thought. That meant they could sit and study Torah alone. Their innovations in Torah continued contained entirely within their Torah texts without having to really worry about what was going on in secular society. It was all self-contained.

In their book [*The Sephardim*](#), Rabbi Dweck's predecessor Rabbi Abraham Levy and Gubbay state the following:

... the traditional Sephardi attitudes of accommodation and tolerance may have something to offer modern Jewish society, deeply polarised towards its extreme. They point out that the terms 'Orthodox' and 'Reform' are both Ashkenazi concepts- as indeed was reform in response to the European Enlightenment, and the vigorous reaction against it.

They continue:

In their better periods, Sephardim managed to achieve a rare synthesis between their own intense religious consciousness and the world around them. They led well-balanced lives, both as devout Jews and as members of society at large. This was demonstrated by the breadth of their learning and accomplishment- not only in Judaism but also in the full range of secular activity. Sephardi interpretation of Jewish law was marked by an openness and tolerance which resulted from many generations of living at ease with their neighbours.

In the Sephardi world we find many examples of a varied curriculum in Jewish institutions.

Historian Mark Mazower describes the intellectual culture in the Ottoman Empire in his book [*Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews 1430-1950*](#).

In the book he explains how many rabbis in Salonica were scientists and how the Jewish students would learn subjects such as science and Arab Humanism alongside religion.

Equipped with the wide-ranging interests of the Spanish rabbinate, exploiting the familiarity with the holy sources that their availability in translation offered, these scholars simultaneously kept in touch with the latest intellectual fashions in western Europe and pursued extensive programmes of study that took them far beyond the confines of scriptural commentary. They applied Aristotle and Aquinas to the tasks of Talmudic exegesis, engaged with Latin literature, Italian humanism and Arab science, and were not surprisingly intensely proud of the range of their expertise.

He humorously notes that the Jewish ladies had a taste for the aesthetic and dressed so extravagantly that the rabbis had to ask them to tone it down. He also describes an encounter between the Jews of Salonica and the Jews from Livorno in Italy. The Salonicans were taken aback by the high-class Western dress of the Livornese.

Although on a surface level, things such as language, culture, and clothes were different from that of Europe, the various groups of Sephardim were all acculturated to aspects of the local culture they lived within without compromising on their own Jewish observance. This is one of the main differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim which Dweck does not mention when asked. This sharing of culture is known in Spanish as "La Convivencia" (a sort of co-existence, mingling).

This difference in relation to non-Jews and secular culture is well-documented in the book [*The Sephardic Jews of Bordeaux: Assimilation and Emancipation in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France*](#) by Frances Malino.

In regards to legal emancipation she writes:

The Sephardic Jews had not abandoned their corporate status, but their silence on this issue was useful. When the time came they quickly dissolved the nation and professed surprise and indignation that the Ashkenazic Jews still wished to live apart. In fact, for a long time the leaders of the Northeast were willing to sacrifice their enjoyment of active citizenry for a retention of autonomy.

Last, the Nation established a Talmud Torah (an elementary Jewish school maintained primarily for the poor), although its continuous existence is questionable. ...the Sephardim stressed decorum, orderliness, and tranquility; prohibited use of the rod, which they viewed as retarding the educational process; and most significantly introduced French and arithmetic into the revised curriculum of March 20, 1774.

The Sephardic Jews in her research are described as already teaching non-Jewish subjects to their children and integrating into French society, whereas the Ashkenazim lived separately and maintained their own dress and customs which cut them off from the outside world. This caused issues when the Jews in France were seeking emancipation and the Sephardim for a long time received privileges and rights as a specific group of Portuguese Jews, instead of having a united front with their Ashkenazi co-religionists.

In Dweck's shiurim, the scholarship and history on Sephardi Judaism is largely overlooked in favour of numerous stereotypes which have been very popular in Ashkenazi racist discourse.

He describes the Torah of his late grandfather-in-law, the former Chief Rabbi of Israel Ovadia Yosef in this manner.

Quoting Rabbi Simcha Wasserman he refers to Yosef's Torah as not having been "sharpened by the knife of Haskalah."

He also mentions how Sephardim moving to Israel in the early days of the state felt inferior to the Ashkenazim and adopted the dress, speech, and learning methods of their European counterparts.

But he does mention that there was prejudice towards the Sephardim and attributes this to the opinion that they had not gone through the Enlightenment, repeatedly omitting that they already had access to a wider arena of knowledge for centuries, including philosophical thought, dialogue, and later, Western thought.

He does not correct this misleading and incorrect view of Sephardi arrivals in Israel, instead saying:

They had no clue about any of the sophistry, the sophistication of thought of the nuanced nature at how it was these things needed to be addressed.

Rabbi Dweck doesn't consider that the late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's Torah, which focuses on the minute details of Jewish law, is more reflective of the Ashkenazi-dominated world in which Yosef lived from the age of 4, than that of his native Iraq or the wider Sephardi world.

Former Israeli underground Zionist agent, turned Mizrahi activist, Naeim Giladi, explained in an [interview](#) with Harold Channer the connection between the Middle Eastern Jews and the Sephardim in the West, elucidating how in the Babylonian academies subjects such as astronomy were studied alongside Judaism and that this multi-subject learning environment was also common in places such as Spain:

They built, like today, like the colleges, at that time they call it Yeshiva. But it is not a Yeshiva like today. Today it's just religious, but at that time no. Many sciences, astrology, accounting, many many things. And medicine. There were three colleges like that. One Sura, one Pumbedita and one Nehardea.

Giladi describes the Middle Eastern Jewish learning centres historically as "not like the yeshivas of today", referencing today's culture of young religious Jews only studying religious Jewish texts at the exclusion of everything else.

How is it that this Babylonian tradition got lost and the Torah of Ovadia Yosef and the institutions he established in Israel came to lack a wide range of knowledge and learning?

In Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's native Iraq the Jewish community was represented at all different levels of society. They had access to a wide range of scientific education and cultural symbiosis. They had access to Western culture, products, and learning and very often lived with non-Jews who shared linguistic and cultural characteristics in a similar manner to the Jews of Spain.

Many Jews in Iraq and Egypt were left wing activists in the early 20th century, were polyglot, and read both Eastern and Western literature and religious thought.

A cursory glance at the Wikipedia entry on Iraqi Jews reveals that many Iraqi Jews held positions of high office in their native country, something that they were unable to duplicate in Israel, where they were viewed as being inferior.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Iraq#Modern_Iraq

A tome of intellectual output from the Jews of this region called *[Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture 1893-1958](#)*, edited by Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, contains 33 essays from a selection of 19 Middle Eastern Jewish intellectuals.

The broad range of subjects include Islam, Zionism, Communism, British Colonialism, Feminism, Multiculturalism, Ashkenazi racism, Arabic language education in Israel, and much more. Most of the writers who appear in the volume have been almost completely overlooked by the Jewish education system.

The history of Middle Eastern Jews is poorly understood or unknown to most Jewish students today.

Rabbi Dweck honestly admits in his shiur that his own education was at the hands of mostly Ashkenazi teachers at Hebrew Academy in Los Angeles and Yeshiva University, before studying under the tutelage of Ovadia Yosef. It would seem that much of this Sephardi past was not taught in these institutions.

Rabbi Dweck makes a critical and true assessment on the poor ability of Sephardim to maintain and build new institutions of learning of their own. That does not mean however that Ashkenazim working in Sephardi institutions have no obligation to learn and teach outside of their own Jewish culture.

Sephardim should also be free from the type of harassment witnessed in response to the recent statement released by a group of Sephardi Rabbis in Jerusalem permitting the use of Zoom for seders during the Pesah holiday. This ruling relied on an older ruling by Rabbi Ben Zion Uziel which permits the use of electricity on Yom Tob.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZAgoRkSYaUZ7KIbRSUodwgUm3732epHK/view?usp=sharing>

How can Sephardi institutions be established in this type of threatening environment?

And why did Rabbi Dweck and his contemporaries remain silent on this very public affair in which signatories to the ruling were harassed?

Rabbi Dweck makes two interesting statements regarding Sephardim and education, that are likely the result of contemporary and not historical trends.

He says that Haredim were learning nothing but Torah and "that's all that the Sephardim were doing as well," and Sephardim "never really had an opportunity, really, to study, you know, secular learning, not that they would want to".

The study of science and philosophy by Sephardim in a religious environment in Jerusalem was covered recently by Rabbi Yonatan Halevy in his shiur *Exploring Jewish Giants: Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine* in which Halevy discusses the historic Doresh Zion Yesiba of Jerusalem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UqKhaMOR5M>

Halevy states the Yesiba, founded in 1866, had a curriculum that taught "Judaic as well as secular studies that includes math and languages."

The aversion to secular studies was largely an Ashkenazi tradition. Until this day, Post-Enlightenment, there is a large section of the Ashkenazi world who, in monastic fashion, shun outside culture and education and who also shun friends and family who wish to leave their communities or be members of other groups. Many schools in Israel do not teach science today, including numerous non-Haredi religious schools.

Dweck ponders on the Sephardim arriving in Israel:

Even when they come into Eretz Israel and the founders of the state are Ashkenazi Jews, what happens to the Sephardim that don't know from the things that they know.

He states that Ashkenazi rabbis and their works were affected by the Enlightenment; but Haredim studied nothing but Torah, creating a disorientated picture of what the Sephardim were facing in Israel.

Rabbi Dweck's misguided statements and beliefs about Arab Jews were typical of the beliefs of Ashkenazim in Israel at the time and this caused untold suffering for Sephardi immigrants.

Professor Ella Shohat describes in her 1988 essay ["Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims"](#) how racism worked in Israel, how it kept non-white Jews inferior and how this still affects Sephardim today.

The Egyptian Jewish intellectual [Jacqueline Kahanoff](#) describes in one essay, how Sephardim in Israel were often refused services in stores and were treated so badly that they often lost their temper and resorted to shouting.

Stories of the poor treatment of Sephardi Jews arriving in Israel abound, including of the Al-Kuwaiti brothers, popular and respected musicians in Iraq and Kuwait, arriving in Israel in their best suits, only to be covered in disinfectant.

Exclusion from certain jobs and neighbourhoods was not uncommon for Sephardim and the racism reached a climax with the theft of Yemenite babies:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/Mk7NhljOHog/m/4naElduDadMJ>

R. Dweck tells us about Sephardim arriving in Israel and, unfortunately, he says that "the Sephardim didn't feel they measured up and to a certain degree they didn't", with no mention of the discriminatory policies that caused many Sephardim to lose their culture, confidence, and sense of pride.

Dweck also states:

Sephardim that moved to the United States did not look at higher education as paramount. They didn't even understand it.

And that Sephardim had "no knowledge of how to live in the West," even though there are numerous examples which undermine this point, as presented in my essay.

Kahanoff herself left Egypt to live in Paris and New York before settling in Israel. Much earlier, Indian-Iraqi Jewish intellectual, [Flora Sassoon](#) (1859-1936), multilingual and an expert in Judaism, left India for England where she was noted for her hosting in high society. She was also permitted to read from the Torah when she was visiting Baghdad for three months.

[Nissim Rejwan](#), a noted historian of Iraqi Jews and Middle Eastern politics, taught himself English and French whilst working at a foreign language bookshop in Baghdad and wrote and published his books in English. Arab Jews had both religious and secular education, both Western and Eastern culture.

Dweck further backs up his statement by mentioning the disinterest in secular education in his own Syrian community in New York saying:

Once a person finished basic education they went into business. The boy's went into business and the girls got married until at least 10 years ago.

He goes on to say:

... there were certain families that encouraged their children into higher education," but "it was definitely frowned upon and looked on as a waste of time."

Has this attitude to education anything to do with **not** experiencing the Enlightenment or to do with a change of leadership in the New York Syrian community that brought educational standards in line with that of the strictly Orthodox Ashkenazim?

Rabbi Dweck neglects to mention that in many parts of the world, including Europe, completing a basic education and being literate, was a luxury for many centuries. Such education necessitated having a family that owned a business, with international contacts and who spoke numerous languages, putting them in a very privileged position, sometimes even into high society.

Indeed, how many people in England went into University in 1970, and how many go today?

Rabbi Dweck is not the first member of the New York Syrian community to present that community's history as being like the Ashkenazi Haredi communities of say, Lakewood or Gateshead.

The book *Aleppo: City of Scholars* by Rabbi David Sutton does something similar, which caused Professor Zvi Zohar to write a 27 page rebuttal of the book presented in the Sephardic Heritage Update newsletter:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1C7oM2lxCJliAFbpL4CHqqnJK7HZAao9heo6XoBrI9n8/edit>

Rabbi Dweck has recently been involved in founding a Sephardi learning group called 'Habura' in which students learn about Sephardic Rabbis and their halacha, seemingly without the historical background to Sephardi Judaism which I have presented here.

Ironically, Professor Zvi Zohar has become an advisor to this group!

Zohar's presentation to Habura on Rabbi Ben Zion Uziel (1880-1953) and his Jewish Humanism and openness to the general studies greatly contradicts R. Dweck's statements regarding Sephardim and education:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vdpmu6UBHXg>

Zohar also gave the group a presentation about Rabbi Israel Moses Hazzan (1808-1862) and his openness to wider learning in an Arabic context:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5TzqAvuzym8>

How R. Dweck came to the conclusion that Sephardim “never had an opportunity, really, to study, you know secular education, not that they would want to”, is possibly explained by the learning environment of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef which seems to have been against the historic trend for Sephardim and closer to the Jewish environment of Ponovitch than Baghdad or Salonica.

The situation for Sephardim in Israel and their assimilation into the thinking and learning methods of the Ashkenazim have been the subject of many studies in the social sciences.

An article written in 2013 by Israeli journalist and political activist Uri Avnery cites a number of issues related to Ovadia Yosef’s time as the Chief Sephardi Rabbi of Israel and the creation of his political party SHAS:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/pRnfkfaOgV4/m/9LVc9BXAKGsJ>

A point which stands out in Avnery’s article called “Ovadia’s Choice” is the nature of the religious institutions run under SHAS:

In them nothing is taught but holy texts, rather like Muslim madrassas. Their graduates are unfit to join the labor force. Of course they do not serve in the army.

I’m reminded of an encounter of my own at a Tel Aviv beach frequented by Israel’s religious. I was approached by two young Sephardi men dressed in the style of clothing typical of religious Jews from Eastern Europe, who ridiculed army service.

A middle-aged Yemenite resident of Beit Shemesh once remarked to me that Maimonides was Haredi, with his books being the evidence! He remarked that Maimonides only learned general studies and worked because he had no other choice, despite the fact that Maimonides was deeply critical of individuals earning money from Torah. In fact, a close friend of mine whose family hails from Libya told me how shocked his father’s family had been to discover Jews making a living from Torah in Israel.

Anti-Sephardi racism and its effect on Jewish education is barely touched upon and in Habura's recently published newsletter.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1XOVJYfv3nWUIKP0R9-03aZ7JuqI_zXpb/view?ths=true

Rabbi Dweck tells us that understanding how Sephardi Judaism came to be lost is "beyond the scope" of that group. The crucial differences between Sephardim and Ashkenazim are not mentioned, or are not understood. The historic differences of Jews living under Islam and those living under Christianity are not mentioned, nor is the reaction to discrimination from non-Jews and how this affected the different communities’ response to the outside world. No sources are shared for the rabbi's opinions and only in the second shiur does he produce a volume of halacha from Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

The three hours provided to Rabbi Dweck to speak were more than enough to break down some of the generalizations and to provide a richer background to Sephardi Judaism and its literary and cultural heritage, which he sadly did not do.

Yoel Pimentel is a Librarian from London with experience of working in local government, research and as a former project supervisor for the School of Oriental and African Studies, London (SOAS). A graduate of Aberystwyth University, Wales, Yoel currently lives in Israel where he has worked for library software company Ex Libris and as an employment trainer. He is currently involved in long distance swimming and is a keen book collector.

From SHU 989, March 10, 2021

Rabbi Joseph Dweck Embraces the Radical Anti-Maimonideans: SY Rabbi of Ashley Madison Becomes Hero to the Self-Hating Sephardim

It is once again time to check in with our friend in London's formerly-Sephardic Bevis Marks – who is right now working the suntanned SY YU crowd at the very ritzy [Trumpist Jersey Shore](#):

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wZLZSZ-TP8aUVjs351YThh74WHzCBorf37U0HqY2brY/edit>

For those who may not know Rabbi Dweck, he, like his fellow YU macher Mijal Bitton with her Tikvah Tablet pedigree and Shalom Hartman Institute love of White Jewish Supremacy, is an extremely ambitious Self-Hating Sephardi who has an endless array of plans when it comes to World Domination.

Dweck left sleepy California for the more powerful Ocean Parkway SY autocrats of Brooklyn, but eventually landed in Bevis Marks, where he is trying his best to follow the Marc Angel pattern of Washington Heights adaptation.

His project began in a less than optimal manner when he chose to make positive comments on Homosexuality in 2017:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/pKJapxjS8lA/m/S7uqgtFhAgAJ>

The Washington Heights element got involved to help their friend:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/Wjdgn95Gz9I/m/XFPdnCSgAQAJ>

Even Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo weighed in with words of support:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/DGTjM9sL2MU/m/8rm49MsRAgAJ>

Indeed, it became an international incident – but not exactly in the way Dweck had envisioned it:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/is-uks-sephardi-rabbi-fracas-about-more-than-condoning-homosexuality/>

It did not go well for him in the short run:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/1mrPvxpN6vs/m/L-7oclhfCAAJ>

But the UK Beth Din ultimately let him off the hook after he recanted his statement and begged forgiveness.

Wow, that was a close one!

The pompous Dweck taught us a precious lesson in how to stand up for your convictions.

Last year, we learned that his groveling and hypocrisy paid off when Tradition magazine published his response to Haym Soloveitchik's article "Rupture and Reconstruction":

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BOrUXGLCx9GUx4jpQER9pqSyVgMMe3Sw/view?ths=true>

For those who might not recall, here is my response to Soloveitchik's Anti-Sephardi racism:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NBCYyz07l0iTs34hfKZu CZ9croAiB8Mb-JK4Gx9BOFE/edit>

My discussion focuses on a footnote in "Rupture" which claims that Sephardim were primitive boors who had no connection to Modernity.

Amazingly, the basic thesis of Dweck's Tradition article, that did not actually find its way to the printed volume devoted to "Rupture" which was White Jews only, sets out to **affirm** Soloveitchik's Anti-Sephardi racism, claiming that Cosmopolitan Sephardim, unlike Shtetl Ashkenazim, are not Modern.

I then had occasion to write an article on Dweck disciple Sina Kahen and the cadre of "New Sephardim," with their unique spin on erasing our heritage in the name of that very precious Washington Heights Convivencia:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pFWVQTzB3GLzpYLhl8YCF2Q5d9c8yrlYu-yHxWyf38E/edit>

Because **Andalusian** Convivencia, as I have come to learn in private conversations with those in the know, is very much **not** for them.

Naturally, Kahen was welcomed with open arms by the Ashkenazi-run ASF:

<https://americansephardi.org/event/new-works-wednesdays-with-sina-kahen-2/>

Birds of a feather do indeed flock together, as Kahen approaches the Sephardic tradition in a manner fully compatible with the usual Modern Orthodox Ashkenazi ideological dogma, in a way that deftly avoids the problem of White Jewish Supremacy and racism.

It is a very expeditious tactic he learned from Dweck, whose Washington Heights heimische advocacy can be seen in the way he has structured the content of his Sephardi Habura:

<https://www.thehabura.com/>

Yoel Pimentel has written an excellent article on the regnant Dweck Approach and how it turns Sephardim into “Noble Savages”:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1LUsZA48zpKtgkOB2YWRtjC4R0Y2Nt6tw4KHlb_e2rRpE/edit

The interestingly-named Habura, a term associated with the Ashkenazi Renewal movement of the 1960s, is a very canny attempt to clothe ostensibly Sephardic content in Ashkenazi Modern Orthodox YU garb.

But at times the content is **itself** the garb, as we have just seen with the group’s final Dweck class on Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook:

<https://shoutout.wix.com/so/f9NfNSqF4?languageTag=en&cid=5b33d498-ba58-4e5c-a5ce-bf7c3428f7af#/main>

It is the second of a two-part series, because you can never have too much Kook:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Wrb1IbGx1o>

For those unfamiliar with the Kookist weltanschauung, it is marked by a radical fusion of the Zionist eschatological mystical occult and Modern Orthodox views of Science and Technology:

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/abraham-isaac-kook/>

Kook was all about Negation of the Diaspora:

In a typical elevation of sociology to theology, Kook argued that the Jewish imagination outside the Land had become stunted and even deformed. The cause was not merely assimilation to Gentile cultures possessed of far less light and

holiness than Israel. In addition, the Jews had depleted over two millennia the store of creativity carried away with them into exile. During their absence, the flow of spirit had ceased; its gradual diminishing was responsible for the character of *galut* [Diaspora] life. Realizing these facts, the Jews had grasped the urgency of return. Moreover, since the entire world was poor in holiness and sunk in wickedness, it was utterly dependent upon the Jews for a renewal of light and spirit. Israel's return to the Land would thus mark the end of a worldwide era of darkness and initiate the redemption of all humanity.

As he was for turning the Land of Israel into an irrational marker of Jewish identity:

It is astounding to react such claims in a 20th-century work. Instead of engaging in apologetic, Kook merely notes that the unique qualities of the Holy Land cannot be comprehended by reason. Once his assumptions have been granted, however, they legitimate a powerful critique of galut life and galut Judaism, and sanctify political activities and conceptions that would otherwise have been unacceptable. The Jewish spirit meant to guide the rest of creation had sunk to imitation of “the uncircumcised” Gentiles, while the Jewish body, sorely neglected in exile, had suffered a comparable impoverishment. The full and varied character of Jewish life could not achieve expression, given oppression and exposure to foreign winds.

Kook was so fanatically Zionist that, as Yehouda Shenhav has shown in his classic book [*The Arab Jews*](#), he provided false and misleading introductory letters of approbation to official Zionist emissaries working to get the Jews of the Middle East to leave their homes and come to the Old-New land of Eastern European Shtetls, what has been called the “Vienna of the Middle East,” and where our traditions would be brutally erased:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1LQGPldAVbze_Fjb78pZ57LwQ0pC-Pt0eetskBVQ8aq4/edit

Kook's letters sought to assure the gullible Arab Jews that the emissaries were observant Jews who were just coming to look at religious artifacts and learn about local customs:

What Kook did was to confer upon the emissaries – all atheist socialists to a man – the traditional character of the *shali'ah*, or in Shenhav's term *shadarim*. These *shadarim* concealed their true identities under the guise, ironically, of religious emissaries empowered to persuade the local Jews to come to Zion not for secular or nationalist reasons, but for religious ones.

Kook supplies letters to these emissaries providing them with necessary “cover.” In a letter written in 1932 for the emissary to Yemen Shmuel Yavne'eli, a completely non-religious Jew, we see the rabbi “state” the following:

The bearer of this letter who is visiting your country is the important dignitary and sage [sic!] Mr. Eliezer Ben Yosef... This dear man was in the Holy Land for many years and he has information about the customs of all our brethren, may they live...

We have entrusted him with matters to investigate and to inquire about from the high and honorable sages ... in order that we may also allow the communities of Yemenites who are gathering among us to follow their own customs.... (p. 94)

That is a real pal!

Through his son Zvi Yehuda and the Merkaz Harav institute, Kook has become emblematic of the Gush Emunim and the Settler movement:

https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/ACLURM018956.pdf

Indeed, I was not aware that the Gush terrorists made it to the ACLU website!

Well played.

In any case, Dweck aggressively deploys Kook and Kookism as a means to process his putatively Sephardic identity and has transmitted that identity to the “New Sephardim” under his wing.

It is thus interesting to note that in the same Habura lecture series we got an installment on the Tosafot and their Anti-Sephardi PILPUL; presented bizarrely as “Meta-Halakha,” as if it was Post-Modern:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BZTx8G39D4>

We will of course recall Rabbi Jose Faur’s classic takedown of the school, “The Legal Thinking of the Tosafot,” which shows how PILPUL subverted rationality and ethical normativity in the legal process:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1kbUdiHw_tgRwPh6zkHqFMfDFu4-agV-y5tGKi0jCeFg/edit

In a similar vein, the Habura has presented two lectures on the Maimonides/Nahmanides binary:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdgYzRyEgyk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdgYzRyEgyk>

The first lecture comes from Moshe Halbertal who falsely presents Nahmanides as a “Sephardi,” given that his Talmudic education took place in the very Tosafist academies that were, as Faur has definitively shown in his article, antithetical to the Andalusian heritage. Nahmanides vigorously promoted the mystical occult of the Kabbalah, and was defiantly opposed to the Greco-Arab Philosophy and Religious Humanism.

We will recall that the Sephardic Community Alliance (like the Holy Roman Empire – not Sephardic, not a Community, not an Alliance) invited the Anti-Maimonidean “New Talmudist” Halbertal to participate in one of its public events – on Maimonides!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pb3stzud3ik>

Careful viewers will of course see Dweck, as well as moderator Mijal Bitton, on the dais; confirming how the process of Sephardic Self-Hatred works in real time.

Just after writing the first draft of this essay, a funny thing happened which forced me to add the following discussion on Halbertal:

<https://www.amazon.com/Cambridge-Companion-Theology-Companions-Religion/dp/1108401430>

That’s right – the recently-published *Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology* features Halbertal’s provocative article “The God of the Rabbis”:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-companion-to-jewish-theology/god-of-the-rabbis/4CA9A05BEB3F22815F8E5BAF161F0544>

The article is an accurate encapsulation of Halbertal’s fierce hatred of Maimonides, Jewish Humanism, and the Sephardic heritage in general.

Indeed, in what is supposed to be a review of **Talmudic** Theology, which ends prior to the Muslim period that jumpstarted the Jewish encounter with Greek Philosophy, Halbertal literally goes out of his way to attack Maimonides and the Jewish Rationalists. It is the through-line that runs from the beginning of the article to the bitter end.

Here is how he introduces a typically anthropomorphic Rabbinic Midrash:

One such interpretive encounter that is quoted in an early midrashic source will serve as a starting point to illuminate the rabbinic understanding of God, and the deep gap between the Rabbis’ religious sensibilities and the theological metaphysical stance which dominated medieval Jewish philosophy. (p. 63)

This split between the “Old” Rabbis and Maimonidean rationalists is one that was highlighted in Robert Alter’s attack on Jewish Post-Modernism, which contained a very pointed dismissal of Jose Faur’s seminal study *Golden Doves with Silver Dots*, a book that brought together the classical Sephardic tradition of Religious Humanism with contemporary polysemic readings of Scripture:

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B1NQdm28qvvXeFJDdkdrYmVVQUk/edit?resourcekey=0-UyXKXxZn1otunr3idtpi8g>

Alter's position is an echo of Leo Strauss' thesis in "Persecution and the Art of Writing," which insultingly claims that Maimonides hid his **true** views in order to protect himself from charges of heterodoxy and heresy:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_and_the_Art_of_Writing

Heterodoxy here means that Rabbinic Midrash must be read **literally** as form of Theology. And that means that those narratives are the **actual** meaning of the Biblical texts. How we read texts becomes the measure of our religious understanding. Faur has analyzed this form of anti-philosophical anti-reading as Alphabetical Judaism:

<https://www.amazon.com/Horizontal-Society-Understanding-Alphabetic-Philosophy/dp/1936235048>

It is a totalizing conceptual argument that is on full display in Robert Cover's article "Nomos and Narrative," which has become a ubiquitous source for the "New Talmud" scholarship, as it ties Law and Midrash into a seamless whole, thereby constricting the independent integrity of Jewish Law, forcing it into a narrative trap of relativistic proportion:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jFLXRokGfnxBpVHk-PUEa8baDXHngHwm/view?ths=true>

Halbertal follows in this vein, as his Anti-Maimonidean tendencies force him to reject the One High God of the philosophers, and propound a fallible, human God who is to be seen in anthropomorphic "relational" terms.

His reading of Talmudic texts is rooted in a univocal hermeneutic, which presents the rabbinic viewpoint in a strictly monolithic manner. In his reductive analysis, the Sages always speak in a single voice, as they articulate that "relational" understanding of a human God as a totalizing concept. The figurative-metaphorical reading critical to the philosophical tradition, known in classical Arabic poetics as [Majaz](#), is blocked in favor of dogged literalism.

It is a reversal of what Emmanuel Levinas called a "[Religion for Adults](#)"; marking philosophical Judaism as mature, against the infantilization of having a subjective "human" God.

Indeed, one of Levinas' most personal essays was "[To Love the Torah More Than God](#)," which insists on Ethics as First Philosophy, understanding God in terms of Apophatic Negative Theology and not, as Halbertal insists, a "relational" subject.

Here is how he closes the Cambridge article:

And here we might finish with a further last thought: can we imagine, for example, the perfect parent, a father or a mother, or a perfect friend? We can definitely think

of better or worse parents, but wouldn't it be the case that a perfect parent would be a rather troubling parent? Is it the case that the very attempt at perfection when it comes to God, the relational subject, is flawed? Could the search for perfection within a relational paradigm be ultimately a self-defeating project? (p. 76)

I explain the matter in my [article](#) on the “New Talmudism” and its authoritarian modality:

It is a theory of the Talmud which severs generations of rabbis and scholars from one another, serving to impose a radical discontinuity on the system. The standard understanding has created a harmonious conceptual unity out of the mass colloquy of disparate voices who speak over generations in a form of dialogue that was thought to be organized as transcriptions of academy proceedings. It is this traditional dialectic that has been emphatically overturned.

Central to the new scholarship, which in fact is similar in many ways to the literalist fundamentalism of the classical Ashkenazi tradition embodied in today's Lithuanian Yeshivahs, is the idea of “monologism”:

In other words, the Talmudic canon is a fraud of gigantic proportions; a fraud that misrepresents its rhetorical constructions as it harbors an absolutism which is akin to Platonic “monologism.” Rather than being an Open Text, the Oral Law is a repressive discourse built on duplicity and legal trickery.

So, if Halbertal is correct, then God is human and Rabbinic Midrash is a means – **not** to open the Biblical text to new and diverse meanings – but to **fix** in an indelible manner the human “relational” nature of God as just like us. It is a way of closing the Open Book of Scripture.

The possibility that Midrash should be read figuratively, as a means to affirm the multiple meanings of the text, as Faur teaches, is foreclosed by a militant literalism that expands the human aspects of God and, as in the anthropomorphic Kabbalah of the Ashkenazi tradition, turns the text into a divine iconography rather than a set of narratives open to multiple interpretations.

The net effect of this is a Romantic Judaism which lacks the basic humility to accept that we cannot know what we cannot know. It demands that Talmudic Rabbis and their Midrashim are to be taken in a literal way, foreclosing doubt and skepticism in the philosophical sense. This lack of humility is part of a larger perception of Judaism as irrational and mired in magical thinking. And such thinking can often lead to violence, dysfunction, and cruelty, as we saw in the [Maimonidean Controversy](#).

It is of course Nahmanides, the subject of a recent [book](#) by Halbertal, who is aligned to the Anti-Maimonideans and the Ashkenazi Kabbalah against Sephardic Humanism.

Again, Halbertal shows us which side he is on in the critical battle between reason and unreason:

The equation of God's proper name with mercy in the midrash, which had far-reaching echoes in Kabbalah and subsequent Jewish thought, is even more striking given the fact that within the Bible the tetragrammaton appears as well in the context of punishment and judgment. (p. 65)

I have written an article on the Modern Orthodox icon Samson Raphael Hirsch that explains the matter of Nahmanides' attack on Maimonides in more detail:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1osm0botpWsc_L-yS0ZvOOD-FPmIY75vb7T83BjOI9wE/edit

Menachem Kellner has also provided context on the binary:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/y6U9P1CazZM/m/pDThP8i6BwAJ>

Just think of it, Dweck has opened his Habura to the Kookists, Tosafists, and Anti-Maimonideans!

This is what the Sephardic future looks like.

Though based in London, Dweck remains intimately connected to the Brooklyn SY community, as can be seen by the many rabbis listed in the Habura who are part of the SCA:

<https://www.thehabura.com/shiurim>

It is a veritable beehive of Sephardic Self-Hatred.

As I said earlier, Dweck himself continues to summer at the Jersey Shore, where he holds out hope that the community will bring him back at some future point, preferably as the Chief Rabbi of the YU contingent:

https://63224a98-72da-4c89-8dd9-d1dfbe0e6fa7.filesusr.com/ugd/a4663c_0ceb57c25aeb4925bf9b1934603e3baf.pdf

Indeed, as I have noted, that contingent is being beaten back by the ArtScroll crowd:

<https://groups.google.com/g/davidshasha/c/IVbfy45d7Ic>

As Modern Orthodoxy continues to cede ground to the Haredim, the Faustian bargain made by Dweck and his allies looks increasingly pitiful. Apparently, they do not much care, so long as those checks keep rolling in!

While there is, as we have seen in the case of the ASF, a lot of arm-flailing and vain pretense, in the end, as has been the case with the aforementioned Mijal Bitton and her

Social Science connection to the White Jewish Supremacy of The Tikvah Fund and the Shalom Hartman Institute, their basic idea is to find ways to integrate into the Ashkenazi world and humbly genuflect to its various ideological dictates.

The key for such ambitious “New Sephardim” is never to upset the status quo, while remaining consistent with the socio-religious values of the Ashkenazim. It is where all the money and power can be obtained. Fighting it is seen as a lost cause.

In the case of Dweck and his Habura associates, the key idea is to shut off Sephardi “cultural” representation, while remaining focused solely on matters of strictly “religious” import. The Religious/Secular binary remains operative for them in the standard Modern Orthodox way, as the vast literary heritage of the classical Sephardic tradition remains a closed book, as does the work of [Sephardi Modernists](#) whose values do not match those of Washington Heights.

David Shasha

From SHU 1014, September 1, 2021
