MIJAL BITTON

The Future Is Sephardic

Choosing continuity over social acceptance

MERICAN JEWS have lately been sensing the end of what has been dubbed our "Golden Age" or "An American Jewish Century." Looking back longingly at the past hundred years, we question whether the next century will be as kind to us and our children as the last one was.

It's a reasonable question, but as I've noticed, it tends to be asked more often by American Ashkenazi Jews than by those whose families came from Muslim lands across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), widely referred to in America as Sephardim. There is a profound difference between how American Ashkenazim from the lands of the cross and American Sephardim from the lands of the crescent are experiencing this moment, and in that difference lie competing visions of the American dream, rooted in each community's pre-American history.

When more than 2 million Ashkenazi Jews came to the United States from Europe and Russia between 1880 and 1924, they brought with them the unfulfilled dreams of the Old World — namely, emancipation and enlightenment. These overlapping events — the granting of civic rights to Jews and the modernization of Jewish thought — had been fundamental ruptures in Jewish life. They introduced the possibility of social and political equality in the state on the one hand, and the weakening of religious communal authority on the other. The foundational value of both ruptures was freedom. Jews, as individuals, were now more free — from the religious strictures of the shtetl and to participate in the political, intellectual, and social life outside it — than they had ever been. And when that freedom failed to fulfill its liberatory promise in Poland, Lithuania, Germany, and the rest of the European countries, they and their descendants continued to pursue that dream in America.

The unprecedented achievements of the American Jewish century, such as the Jewish role in American drama and literature, the entry of Jews into America's prestigious academic and professional class, and the robust participation of Jews in the American political system, were therefore fueled by this conception of Jewish flourishing that had been forged in Europe and sharpened by its disappointments. The vision was to achieve social acceptance and integration. The architecture of the American Jewish establishment was set up in accordance with this vision. Wildly successful in its time, it produced one of the most creative, influential, and integrated Jewish Diaspora civilizations in history. This was the liberal Ashkenazi American dream, the one that defined the apex of the American Jewish "Golden Age."

But Jews from the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa came with a very different political, intellectual, and social heritage, and their aspirations in America were the product of that different history. Some came in the early 20th century from

the declining Ottoman Empire. Many arrived after 1948, as Arab nationalist regimes began treating Jews as a fifth column. Having historically been relegated to second-class status as dhimmis, a tolerated religious minority along with Christians and others, they never experienced the possibility of emancipation or the dramatic weakening of religious communal authority; nor were they the singular religious "other" as the Jews of Christendom had been. Although there had long been a degree of cultural and intellectual exchange and even tolerance, the prospect of revolutionary integration had never presented itself. So more stability than rupture. For them, the rupture was the migration itself and all that caused it. What made America golden was not that Jewish life could be transformed but that it could be preserved. What they craved above all wasn't freedom or social acceptance. It was stability and continuity, the opportunity to continue the life that they had led for generations. As I see it, this impulse toward preservation rather than transformation became the foundation of their life in America, leading to their own version of the American dream.

I've spent much of my life translating between these different American Jewish worlds. Over time, this left me feeling both deeply at home in each of them and yet always slightly out of place. Moving between my Syrian-Moroccan-Spanish Sephardic home, the Persian and Syrian communities that shaped me, and the liberal Ashkenazi spaces I later inhabited as a student and professional, I began to realize that the differences making me dizzy were not merely cosmetic. It was not only about saying "Shabbat Shalom" versus "Good Shabbes," or serving *cholent* instead of *khoresh*. Something deeper was at play. I often felt a witness to two competing American Jewish dreams, one that emphasized the need to be accepted and integrated into American culture, and the other that emphasized the preservation of distinct peoplehood.

This is not to say that peoplehood is not an inherent element of Ashkenazi Judaism. Ashkenazi Jews in the US maintained connections to their communities through *landsmanshaftn*, developed mutual aid societies, built global organizations such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to support Jews on the other side of the world, and supported the establishment, safety, and flourishing of the State of Israel. But the defining achievement of the past American Jewish century, constructed by the Ashkenazi forebears of the American Jewish present, was that it allowed space for both dreams: social acceptance in America while maintaining strong communal ties with the global Jewish family. Increasingly today, there is room for only one. American Jews are now told they can be spared the boycotts and the vitriol, which is to say, accepted, as long as they divest themselves of Israel and Zionism. The segments of American society and culture that once had no problem with Jewish peoplehood — Hollywood, music, art, and intellectual culture — now jeer at it. They intimate to Jews that the cost of acceptance is the rejection of Judaism's essence: belonging to an extended Jewish family.

Judaism, in this new cultural regime, cannot be celebrated as a form of historical peoplehood. Instead, it's commended as a religion like Christianity or Islam that lays claim to all of humanity, a system of values more universal than particular — a system in which the traditional Jewish collective belonging plays no part.

What was once a good deal has now turned sour. And in this context, the lessons of the MENA Sephardic experience can come in handy. American Jews need a fundamental readjustment, from the Ashkenazi American dream to the MENA Sephardic one. If the past American Jewish century was Ashkenazi, the next must be Sephardic.

What does this mean? It means trading the integrationist ethos for a more preservationist one, no longer prioritizing approval from those

who ask us to hollow out our Judaism, and instead finding strength in one another.

To preempt the inevitable accusations of reductionism, let me be clear: There is surely far more to both the Ashkenazi and MENA Sephardic traditions, sociology, and history than what I can possibly capture here, not to mention individual divergences from the broad communal strokes I draw. There are Ashkenazi Jews, and even full Ashkenazi communities, the Hasidim in Kiryas Joel, for example, that exhibit a lot of what I describe as MENA Sephardic norms. The variations within the MENA Sephardic universe can be stubbornly granular, so much so that their commonalities and differences became the subject of much of my academic research. I've loved exploring the variety of more local identities — how Lebanese Jews preserve their own culinary traditions even when living alongside Syrians, how Persian Jews distinguish between Tehrani and Mashadi families, how Moroccan Jews maintain regional variations from Tetouan to Casablanca.

But while there are myriad variations within MENA Sephardic traditions, there exists a common gravitational pull toward certain values, the most central of which is family. This means both nurturing strong family units and understanding community itself as an extended family with bonds of mutual obligation that stretch across the entire Jewish people. In these communities, success means building thick communal networks: synagogues that feel as warm as their own living rooms, businesses that employ relatives, and neighborhoods where multiple generations live within blocks of one another. One telling example: For liberal Ashkenazi Jews, upward mobility has historically meant raising children who outearn their parents and move to better neighborhoods. For MENA Sephardic Jews, it means raising children

who can afford to stay nearby, even as housing prices rise, because no one wants to leave.

What I mean to do with this admittedly provocative and exaggerated binary is to shift the mentality—to recognize that while one dream struggles under changing American circumstances, the other can show us how to flourish in the current landscape.

Since October 7, American and Israeli observers have noticed the resilience of many MENA Sephardic communities: the demographic vitality of Sephardic ethnic enclaves from Brooklyn to Los Angeles, the pan-Sephardic building of new communities in Florida and elsewhere and the cultural vibrancy of these communities, the unapologetic assertiveness of some Sephardic and Mizrahi students on hostile campuses, and the rise of social media influencers from MENA Sephardic and Mizrahi backgrounds speaking up proudly and confidently as Zionists.

Such examples indicate a growing energy in the MENA Sephardic experience. What they don't do, and what we need, is a framework to understand and replicate this energy, a framework rooted in family as the primary vessel of American Jewish identity.

Here I offer four initial reforms for a program of cultural appropriation that I believe can be adapted by all Jews and that directly addresses the crisis of acceptance those of us committed to a Jewish peoplehood that includes our extended family in Israel are facing in America.

The beauty of this approach is that it allows for discernment. I would not advocate, for example, that Ashkenazi American Jews wholesale adopt the insularity of some MENA Sephardic communities. Such an orientation is unnatural and incompatible with certain Ashkenazi norms and would also hurt our ability to wage battles that must be fought, such as minimizing polarization within American political discourse or making sure American public schools avoid

spreading antisemitic ideas. There are also real tensions to navigate. For instance, intermarriage has been normalized in many liberal Ashkenazi environments — how does that square with learning from communities where in-marriage is treated as foundational to family and communal life? I do not pretend to have resolved these questions. What I'm proposing is cultural appropriation through selective adaptation, identifying the strongest and most valuable resources for the moment while leaving others aside.

The first reform is to reinvest in the Jewish family as the center of Jewish education and Jewish identity. For generations, American Jews built extraordinary institutions such as schools, synagogues, JCCs, and summer camps, and they remain indispensable. But those institutions have also made it possible to outsource Judaism: to assume that identity, practice, and knowledge are primarily the responsibility of experts rather than parents and grandparents. Judaism becomes episodic, something that happens *there*, in synagogue or camp, rather than *here*, at the Shabbat table.

A MENA Sephardic approach flips this hierarchy. It begins with a simple but demanding mindset shift: Jewish institutions exist to support families, not the other way around. Jewish continuity does not begin with organizational strategy or professional programming. It begins with parents and grandparents who understand themselves as the primary transmitters of meaning, obligation, and memory.

This is not a novel idea. In the book of Exodus, while the Israelites are still enslaved, Moses tells them that a day will come when their children will ask questions and that they will have to answer. This is a radical moment. Before freedom, before land, before a centralized religious system, before priests and rabbis, Jewish parents must imagine themselves as responsible for the next generation. Moses is not the children's educator — he will transmit the covenant to parents and help families become the site where Judaism is actually

taught. Jewish continuity is decentralized and family-based at its very inception.

That ancient move feels newly relevant. Since October 7, I have met many thoughtful, committed Jewish parents who do not send their children to Jewish day schools who now feel suddenly exposed. They mourned not having ready-made language or rituals to help their children process what was unfolding. But I've also watched something else happen: Some parents realized that this responsibility ultimately belonged to them.

These parents began educating themselves. They started learning the weekly Torah portion with their children, creating home rituals, organizing Jewish parent groups within their children's schools, and teaching holidays themselves rather than outsourcing them. They leaned on rabbis and educators but not as substitutes. What distinguishes these parents is not ideology but posture. They see themselves as ultimately responsible for their children's Jewish identity and see the institutions around them as resources to help them.

This is what a Sephardic-inspired model offers American Jews now. Institutions matter deeply, but they work best when they reinforce what happens at home and when they encourage and strengthen families rather than replace them. The most precious and revolutionary tool American Jews have is still the family Shabbat table, where Judaism is lived repeatedly, unevenly, imperfectly, and therefore enduringly.

The second reform is for Ashkenazi-led Jewish organizations, especially those serving diverse Jews in pluralistic commitments, to adopt communal boundaries that follow the logic of family rather than voluntary association.

For decades, many liberal Jewish institutions embraced the sovereign

Jewish self—the idea that Judaism is something you choose based on personal conviction and that organizational pluralism means accommodating every choice equally. In practice, this meant avoiding firm communal boundaries altogether, or pretending they didn't exist. The unstated assumption was that setting boundaries would compromise freedom—or would commit the ultimate liberal sin of making people feel judged and therefore excluded.

October 7 and its aftermath exposed the cost of this approach. When organizations had no clear boundaries around Jewish peoplehood, they found themselves unable to respond coherently to antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Some staff and members felt entitled or even obligated to platform views that denied Jewish collective identity, that treated the safety of Jews in Israel with disregard or apathy, or that delegitimized Israel's existence entirely. Organizations paralyzed by their commitment to "all views welcome" could not hold the center.

I want to propose a different model: Commitment to Jewish peoplehood—understood as ethical kinship with our Jewish brothers and sisters everywhere from Tel Aviv to Sydney—should be a nonnegotiable communal norm, even as we maintain broad flexibility on most everything else. Nonalignment with Israeli government policies is one thing. Calling for the end of Jewish self-determination, directly endangering the lives of your family members, is quite another. That is not how family members look out for one another.

I know that many Jewish organizations are already gravitating to this by necessity but they might get more confidence from understanding this as a sociological model that has guided classical MENA Sephardic communities for a long time. Our communities have historically shown much flexibility on practice and theology in not trying to examine or litigate what individuals do at home. In our public spaces, there are clear—traditional—expectations, such as serving kosher food or observing Shabbat in some way or

another. Another bedrock foundation is that Jewish peoplehood matters. Israel is family.

We may argue fiercely about Israeli policy, we may vary widely in religious observance, we may disagree about politics — but we do not platform those who deny our family ties or legitimacy. The boundary isn't ideological or political; it's familial. You don't get to be at the Shabbat table while denying your siblings' right to exist.

This is not a litmus test or ideological gatekeeping. It's a communal norm, the way families have norms. Not everyone has to be equally committed or observant. But everyone has to accept they're in a family bound by mutual responsibility and shared fate. You can be the cousin who barely shows up, who argues at every dinner, who everyone knows is texting on their phone under the Shabbat table, who doesn't agree with half the family's choices — but you cannot be the one who sides with those who seek to hurt it.

This requires confidence that liberal Jewish institutions have often lacked: the confidence to say "this is who we are" without apology, while remaining genuinely open on everything else. It's the difference between a family and customers. Businesses accommodate all preferences to keep customers coming back. Families have boundaries because they are building something together.

Beyond strengthening institutional structure, MENA Sephardic traditions offer to American Jews a third sort of beneficial reform: a different approach to spiritual life, one less burdened by intellectual self-consciousness, more rooted in embodied reverence.

I'll admit I struggle to explain the mechanism, but I can describe the phenomenon. Go to a Sephardic selichot service on Manhattan's Upper East Side or in a Miami suburb or at the Kotel. You will be transformed.

You will see Jews with different levels of observance and practice joining together to sing to God with intense joy and spiritual connection. It feels like a concert: ecstatic, unselfconscious, direct.

I remember an Ashkenazi Orthodox friend in college confessing her confusion. She knew MENA Sephardic young women who she would have thought were less observant. They wore skin-tight jeans, they went clubbing. But then she'd see them pray and sense something she couldn't access: an experience that was transcendent, that held reverence, and that, most important, treated God as a parent. She couldn't reconcile the categories. In many ways, the logic of family has allowed MENA Sephardic Jews to have a relationship with God that is less fraught. It is less caught up in intellectual questions about belief as is more organic in its expression.

There is less shame in displaying reverence, in kissing the hands of elders, in talking about miracles. There isn't the same self-consciousness that comes from being shaped by progressive cultural norms according to which spiritual sophistication requires maintaining distance from God or rejecting God entirely.

I know for me, whenever I have struggled with God and spirituality, I have had a simple tool to stabilize me: I will always have faith in my grandmother's God, in my *abuelita*'s God. This faith is family-oriented in both senses: We approach God as a parent, and we approach God through our parents.

As Egyptian-Levantine author Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff wrote when describing her childhood: "When Grandfather Jacob's hand rested on my head, I felt that this blessing was something ancient and precious, a treasure, which the grandfathers of our grandfathers had received from God. Because of this blessing, I was in God's safekeeping and belonged to the people of the stories in the old prayer books."

Since October 7, we have seen this spiritual orientation grow exponentially in Israel. People who do not identify as observant have turned

to prayer and challah bakes and Psalms not as ideology but as reflex, as what it means to be part of the Jewish people drawing strength from our spiritual core.

For Ashkenazi American Jews, learning from Sephardic Jews in this sphere means cultivating spiritual practices that are not afraid of God, that lean away from over-intellectualizing, and that allow wonder and reverence to feel as natural as family.

The fourth reform is to cultivate a thicker skin, an American Jewish confidence robust enough that we do not need to be cool or liked by the surrounding culture.

The cultural upheavals of the past two years have exposed the fragility of a Jewish identity dependent on external approval, measured by entry into elite spaces: universities, media, the cultural mainstream. When those spaces turned hostile, many American Jews experienced not just disappointment but identity crisis. If we are no longer welcome in the institutions that validated us, who are we?

Sephardic Jews from the Muslim world, those whose American identities were never tied to elite validation, embody a different orientation. Their confidence comes more from within: from family continuity, communal life, economic stability, and ancestral memory. When I've asked MENA Sephardic friends about the current wave of antisemitism, I've been struck by their relative steadiness. Rejection from the mainstream might be painful and worrying, but it's not identity-threatening. It doesn't signal a decline in Jewish self-worth.

This is structural resilience. When your primary source of affirmation is internal, external condemnation becomes more bearable. I know I have felt this. I have joked with friends that if I'm canceled on X for being a Zionist, my MENA Sephardic community and family

will hold me up as a hero. The difference is between, on one hand, pride that derives from being popular and beloved by others — à la Adam Sandler's Hanukkah song — and, on the other, pride that derives from community and inheritance.

This direction also invites a different vision of American patriotism in which loving America means gratitude for a country where you can succeed and flourish even if you aren't universally liked, where your rights are protected even if your neighbors don't understand you. It is loving devotion to an America that doesn't ask you to trade in your family for social acceptance.

Imagine an American Jewry with this posture: a rootedness that cannot be canceled, since it does not depend on external endorsement. When campus students jeer at you, when colleagues pressure you to distance yourself from Israel, when invitations dry up, it hurts, but it doesn't destroy you. You have family. You have community. You have a civilization that has survived far worse and will outlast this too.

My aspirational message that American Jews become more Sephardic rests on a particular understanding of Jewish diversity. For us, diversity has never been a problem to solve; it has been the lifeblood of Jewish strength. Our diasporic wanderings, our divergent histories under crescent and cross, our many languages, cuisines, liturgical melodies, skin tones, and sensibilities are not a liability. They are a reservoir of cultural appropriation in the best sense: a shared Jewish capacity to borrow, adapt, imitate, and experiment across difference. This is both a commitment to Jewish peoplehood and one of its rewards.

We might as well reap it. ✳

MIJAL BITTON is a scholar-in-residence at Maimonides Fund and the *rosh kehilla* at the Downtown Minyan in New York City.