



Hadassah Magazine Presents: Sephardic and Mizrahi Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience

[00:00:00] **Esther:** People talk a lot about how Ashkenazi Jewish stories have basically dominated the film and TV and literature Jewish narrative in the past. Now there's really a push to prop up Sephardic voices and expand the narrative, and I think that that's great. The more people can see Jews and their diversity, the better that is for all of us

[00:00:25] **Libby:** Hello everyone, and welcome to Hadassah Magazine Presents, a program and podcast for those who love *Hadassah Magazine* and want more, and for those who have never heard of the magazine and are looking for engaging conversations with acclaimed Jewish authors, thinkers, celebrities, and culinary stars. I'm your guest host, Libby Barnea, the deputy editor of the magazine.

I'm thrilled to be talking today with three women from rich, fascinating Sephardic and Mizrahi backgrounds. Joining me are Esther Chehebar, Sara Levin, and Rozeeta Maveshev. Amid the ongoing celebrations for America's 250th birthday, it feels timely to focus on the Sephardic and Mizrahi communities in this country.

After all, Sephardic Jews were the first Jews to arrive in America, which they did in 1654 when a group of 23 refugees from Recife, Brazil landed in New Amsterdam. Fast-forward almost 400 years, however, and the Sephardic community is now a fraction, by recent estimates, one-tenth the size of the Ashkenazi community.

But the three women joining me now can speak to the unique history, culture, and traditions of their Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, and how they have

adapted and evolved in America. Esther Chehebar is the author of the children's book, *I Share My Name*, which celebrates the Sephardic Jewish custom of naming children after their living grandparents.

Her debut novel, *Sisters of Fortune*, was named one of *Hadassah Magazine's* best Jewish books of 2025 and a *People's Best Book* of July 2025. *Sisters of Fortune* also received an honor for the 2026 Jewish Fiction Award from the Association of Jewish Libraries. Esther's writing regularly appears in *Tablet Magazine*, where she covers Syrian Jewish culture and tradition, and she is a co-host of the new podcast, GOLDA Girls.

She lives in New Jersey with her husband and three children. Sara Levin is the executive director of JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, where she leads national efforts to elevate the heritage, history, and rights of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish communities. Under her leadership, JIMENA produced the first ever demographic study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish Americans in partnership with leading academic institutions.

Based in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sara is a proud mixed Turkish Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jew. Rozeeta Maveshev is a Jewish leadership strategist, educator, clinical therapist, and public speaker who currently serves as the North American executive director of Masa Israel Journey, where she leads strategic partnerships and recruitment efforts that connect thousands of young adults with transformative experiences in Israel.

A first-generation American and proud Bukharian Jew, Rozeeta serves on the board of directors of SAMi, the Sephardic American Mizrahi Initiative, which works with college students, and she has been recognized as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, and as the first Bukharian recipient of the Wexner Davidson Graduate Fellowship.

Welcome, everyone I'd like to begin by asking a question to help establish parameters for this conversation. The title of this program includes the adjectives Sephardic and Mizrahi. Often those terms are used interchangeably, but are they truly interchangeable? Are there better or more accurate labels for these communities?

Sara, why don't you start with this one?

[00:04:12] **Sara:** So the words, as you said, Libby, Sephardic and Mizrahi are used interchangeably, and they typically refer to ancestry, religion, and/or identity as ancestry. Sephardic references Jews of Iberian or Spanish descent

who typically spread through Morocco, Algeria, Greece, Turkey, all the Mediterranean countries after the Spanish Inquisition in 1492, while Mizrahi ancestry references Jews whose ancestors stayed in the Middle Eastern region and built diaspora communities in countries like Yemen, Iraq, Iran, and Uzbekistan.

But there has been a, a lot of mixing and integrating between the two communities. As religious practice, Sephardic refers to one of the two main traditions alongside Ashkenazi within a largely shared system of halakha, which is Jewish law, and *minhagim*, customs, each offering its own distinct yet complementary practices.

Sephardic is the word that's been used more traditionally to describe all Middle Eastern and North African Jews, and the word Mizrahi is newer and it emerged in Israel in the first half of the 20th century as Jewish refugees were pouring in. But typically, prior to the 20th century and even until today, Jews define themselves based on the country or even the city that they came from.

So Moroccan Jews could have come from Marrakesh they could have come from Fes, they could have come from the Atlas Mountains. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews didn't use the word Sephardic and Mizrahi until quite recently, and many communities still, and individuals still describe themselves based on the exact place that their ancestors lived in for thousands of years.

[00:05:48] **Libby:** Esther or Rozeeta, do you have any thoughts about Sephardic versus Mizrahi?

[00:05:52] **Esther:** Of course, I knew that I was a Sephardic Jew, and that's the term that I typically use more broadly speaking when introducing myself to people outside of my community. But- I joke that I had never heard of a Mizrahi Jew before five years ago.

What Sara said is exactly right. My whole life identified as a Syrian Jew, and not just a Syrian Jew, but a Syrian Jew whose ancestors came from Aleppo, and there was also a big distinction between Syrian Jews who came from Damascus and who came from Aleppo. Those are the terminology that we typically use.

But now it's interesting. It's been like a learning experience for me now that these terms are becoming more popularized. There is a growing interest in them to actually learn about my own background. So that's been interesting.

[00:06:39] **Libby:** Now it would be wonderful if each of you could tell us a little about your family background and how much your particular ethnic culture was central to your identity growing up.

[00:06:51] **Rozeeta:** I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, Borough Park specifically. I always like to say that 'cause then people can better understand how I show up in my Jewish identity, and then further explain how I show up in my cultural identity, which is Bukharian. I grew up in a Jewish communal world that was very Ashkenazi.

Like, there weren't schools, at least where I was growing up, that identified or addressed sort of who I was or what I was to learn. A lot of my education was very Ashkenazicentric. But it wasn't until college where I started to realize, wait, I'm Bukharian. Uh, a lot of it was stereotypes being put onto me.

People started telling me who I was versus who I really was, and I didn't know much about it because of my upbringing and education. So it wasn't until then that I actually started to explore it. And yes, I got the cultural minhagim at home, and I got the food at home, but a lot of the times my parents, who are immigrants, were very into, like, "We gotta fit in, we gotta make things work," so a lot of their identity was checked at the door in many institutions.

So I kinda silenced it for a while until I was sort of... I was held accountable for an identity I didn't get to experience in the way that other people got to learn and experience. And sort of that's how my journey started, and that's how I ended up doing what I'm doing now, 'cause I started to see in certain spaces that I wasn't seen in the larger picture.

Parts of my story were missing, things I didn't know, and that's how I got to travel to Uzbekistan multiple times and be immersed in what my parents went through and where they grew up, learn more about the culture and why we do things the way we do things. And that's when I started to take the lead and get involved in SAMi.

I worked at Hillel for a while, helping Sephardi Mizrahi Jews, leading their employee resource group to support professionals in the field that come from similar backgrounds, as well as bringing light to the voices that weren't particularly heard in certain spaces when it came to students and professionals.

[00:08:45] **Libby:** Esther, you started to mention some about your background, but tell us a little bit more.

[00:08:49] **Esther:** So I also grew up in Brooklyn. I grew up in the Midwood neighborhood of Brooklyn, very immersed in the Syrian Jewish community there. Growing up, I actually did not know any Jews who were not either Syrian or Egyptian Jews.

The community was that- I don't like to use the term insular, but it was so... It was that immersive and that populous in that area actually. I lived with both sets of my grandparents in my younger years until the age of 16 actually. My dad's father was born and raised in Cairo and came here as a young man in his 20s, and my mother's father was born and raised in Aleppo, moved to Israel, and then also came here as a young man in his 20s.

And so I really had this appreciation for where I came from, and I had a sense of what my grandparents went through just from having lived with them, but they never actually spoke about what they went through, and I think that's typical of, of a lot of Syrian families actually that I've spoken to. It's sort of the mother or the father or the grandparents, they don't actually want to discuss their exodus story or what they went through to come to this country.

The sort of this attitude of, "We're here now, and let's pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and move ahead." The community is a very forward-thinking community, so as soon as they arrived in Brooklyn, Bensonhurst mainly, they became very focused on, "Okay, how do we build Sephardic yeshivot? How do we build Sephardic synagogues?"

They were very adamant about preserving the *minhagim* and the *pizmonim* that came along with Syrian culture. I grew up attending a Sephardic yeshiva, which was largely Syrian, Mach and David Yeshiva, along with my siblings. I grew up eating the same foods that my grandparents cooked in their respective countries, and my mom cooked the same foods, and I'm now cooking the same foods for my children.

But I do think that there was a period of time- In my teenage years when I started to feel like, okay, you know, you live in Brooklyn, New York, this is sort of like the mecca of culture, right? There's so many different neighborhoods and different immigrant populations in Brooklyn, and there's a huge art scene and culture scene, and I started to feel like what's beyond my Midwood bubble, beyond living with my grandparents and attending my Sephardic yeshiva, and I started to feel that pull of wanting to step out of it.

And there's a misconception, you know, when I tell people, "Oh, I grew up an Orthodox Jew in Brooklyn." The picture that a lot of people have in their minds

is of a Hasidic Jew in, in Borough Park or something like that. And what's unique about the Syrian community was that we always toed the line between tradition and modernity.

So it's not like it was such an insular community where you weren't aware or immersed in the outside world through work or going to college or whatever, whatever it was. So I was aware of what else was beyond the, so to speak, parameters of my community, and I began to become very interested in exploring that.

And now I, again, I live in New Jersey, very immersed once again in the Syrian Jewish community where I'm raising my kids, so full circle.

[00:12:09] **Libby:** Sara, tell us a little bit about yourself.

[00:12:12] **Sara:** So I'm from the suburbs of Chicago, and my story's a little bit different because it was my great-grandparents who immigrated to the United States from Turkey.

In the early part of the 20th century, there was a wave of immigration from Turkey, and also from Syria, actually. My great-grandparents helped establish and build the Sephardic community in Chicago, but by the time I was born, that community was already kind of dying out. I grew up very much immersed in Ashkenazi, like the typical Ashkenazi world of Jewish summer camp, and Hebrew school, and public school.

But then at home and with my family, especially in my grandparents' home, I was fully immersed in Sephardic life, and also when I would go into the synagogue that my great-grandparents helped create. So I didn't grow up in a community, but I had this very strong family tradition that was instilled in me from the time I was born.

My father made sure that the first synagogues I went to were Sephardic synagogues, that I observed Judaism the way his father and his grandfather, et cetera, et cetera, observed Judaism. Shabbat every Friday night. I had to stay at home. I wasn't allowed out. I was with my family all the time. So I understood as I grew older that this one half of my family was very different from my mother's family, which had Holocaust trauma and was a very typical kind of Holocaust, post-World War II immigrant story to the United States.

And I saw as I, as I grew older that the story of my history and my identity from my father's side was really excluded in every single mainstream Jewish space

that I lived in, that I was a part of, that people didn't even really know that there were Jews who came to the United States from the Middle East and North Africa.

And that fueled my work and my passion for making sure that Mizrahi and Sephardic history is not only included, but that people know about what happened to the one million Jewish refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. And that's also connected to my Zionism and my love for Israel because I still, I truly believe, and I felt this way my whole life, American Jews cannot understand the state of Israel.

They cannot understand Israelis unless they're familiar with the histories, the contemporary histories, and the stories of Jews from Arab and Muslim lands. More than half of Israel's Jewish population come from Arab and Muslim lands. It's not only a part of Israeli soci- it is Israeli society. It is the identity of the majority of Israeli Jews.

So that's kind of what drew me into this work and what keeps me engaged in this work.

[00:14:53] **Libby:** The Sephardic population in the United States is estimated at 10% of American Jewry. That equates to just under 600,000 adult Sephardic Jews among a population of seven and a half million Jews. That was one of the major data points to arise from Jimena's 2025 demographics report.

Sara, can you give us some of the reasoning for commissioning that study and what some of its most important findings are beyond that big population number?

[00:15:22] **Sara:** For many, many years, people would ask Jimena for data. We're one of the few North American Jewish organizations that's representing the heritage and the history and the rights of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

So we were constantly asked to provide them with the demographic data of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish Americans that simply just didn't exist. So while we were receiving these questions, Sephardic leaders were also watching as new community studies and demographic research emerged that consistently misrepresented or underrepresented our communities.

Researchers lacked common language and shared definitions for describing Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, and this resulted in really unreliable data. So, like, one major study would refer to Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews as Middle Eastern,

while the next would refer to us as Jews of color, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish category.

So there was just incredible inconsistency and a lack of data because of that. And beyond accurate numbers, we really wanted to be able to provide researchers with a clear set of recommendations for how to define, identify, and describe Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews for future research. And that required building consensus among leading Sephardic and Mizrahi experts on Jewish history, identity, and demographics, which all-all of it is included in our study.

There are a lot of data points that I think are actually far more important than that 10% number. Just to throw out a few of them, nearly 30% of Mizrahi Jewish Americans are considered economically vulnerable, compared to just 18% of Ashkenazi Jews. And that is a very significant disparity that should influence how the Jewish community thinks about and approaches social service and philanthropy.

We also learned that 31% of Mizrahi Jewish Americans were born outside of the United States, compared to just 14% of Ashkenazi Jews. Over these last several years, so many of the conversations around Jewish identity have centered on race and ethnicity, but our findings suggest that for many Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, immigration, language, and socioeconomic realities are more important factors in shaping actual lived experiences, and this points to a different set of communal needs and interventions.

The last data point that I'll share is that 31% of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish Americans are also Israeli citizens, and that's compared to just 5% of Ashkenazi Jewish Americans. To me, this represents an incredible opportunity for bridge-building. So this data point highlights the importance of the wider Ashkenazi community deepening its understanding of Mizrahi Jewish Americans, and creating spaces for different Jewish experiences and identities to be better understood and appreciated, especially within the context of support for Israel and building a deeper understanding and connectivity to the people of Israel.

[00:18:25] **Ad:** For more than 20 years, Masa Israel Journey has helped young Jewish adults from around the world experience Israel not as tourists, but authentically like locals. If there's a young person in your life, a child, grandchild, niece, nephew, student, or friend, who is looking for meaning, direction, community, or a deeper connection to Israel and the Jewish people, Masa can help them take that next step.

With programs ranging from six weeks to 10 months, Masa offers immersive experiences in Israel across internships, studies, volunteering, Jewish learning, career development, and more, creating opportunities for young adults from all backgrounds to find the right path for them. Especially at this moment in Jewish history, giving the next generation the chance to live, learn, serve, and grow in Israel is one of the most powerful gifts we can offer.

Since 2004, Masa Israel Journey, founded by the Jewish Agency for Israel and the government of Israel, has served more than 220,000 young people from over 60 countries. Help someone you love begin their Israel journey. Learn more at MasaIsrael.org.

[00:19:36] **Libby:** Mainstream Jewish culture in America can feel overwhelmingly Ashkenazi, but in an era of more inclusivity, has that translated to more opportunities to share Sephardic experiences? Do you think efforts that exist now to surface more Sephardic stories are productive and helpful? Esther, would you like to answer this?

[00:19:58] **Esther:** I definitely think on just a very basic level, it's extremely heartening to see such a push and an interest in Sephardic and Mizrahi narratives. My book came out last July, and I think this speaks, you know, more broadly to the Jewish community as opposed to specifically Sephardic community. But I think in like a post-October 7th world, what we've really seen is that while Jewish voices have been sort of pushed out or silenced or ignored in certain spaces, there's been this rallying cry amongst Jewish organizations to really try and stymie that effort and prop up Jewish voices, and I've just seen so much support in that arena.

I've spent the past year basically on tour with my book, speaking with different Jewish communities, but often I go to a library in a town where there was very few Jews, where the majority of the audience had no idea, did not even know that there was such thing as a Syrian Jew, for example, and were not familiar with these terms, you know, Sephardic and Mizrahi.

And they were so interested and open to learning about these very specific cultures and histories. And I just have chosen, I guess maybe it was a conscious choice to, to focus on that and to really- I guess I was surprised at how willing and excited people, both from the broader Jewish and Ashkenazi community, and people who were not familiar with these smaller Sephardic communities to learn about them.

People talk a lot about how Ashkenazi Jewish stories have basically dominated the film and TV and literature Jewish narrative in the past. Now there's really a push to prop up Sephardic voices and expand the narrative, and I think that that's great. I mean, the more people can see Jews and their diversity, the better that is for all of us.

The more we're known and understood, I think antisemitism will go down when people feel like they can understand us or have some knowledge of our history. So I'm excited, and I think it's great and warranted, but I guess I was even more so heartened by the support from the Jewish community and organizations as a whole.

[00:22:23] **Libby:** I'm curious to learn about how Gen Z and millennial members of the Sephardic community are celebrating their heritage. There is data that suggests that they do so more publicly than their grandparents and parents did. Rozeeta, a lot of your work is with younger Jews. What do you think is behind younger Jews' embrace of their Sephardic identities?

[00:22:44] **Rozeeta:** I think a lot of it has to do with sort of how the new generation sees themselves. Diversity is celebrated, right? It's not like the same story my parents had coming to the States where they had to check their identity or hide their identity, and a lot of it also stemmed from them wanting to survive, right?

Like Esther spoke about her grandparents. They pulled themselves up from the bootstraps and were like, "We have to live here. We have to make it here." So a lot of who they were was kind of put on the back burner, 'cause a lot of their life was about how do I make a life for myself here, and that took precedence, right?

I think for the younger generation now, a lot of the forward sort of thinking and their identity was really giving themselves the space and time to ask themselves, "Who am I?" They also need to know who they are, right? Social media, their brand. What does that say about me, right? Intersectionality, all these identities about me are coming together, and what is that story to tell?

So I think since that is celebrated in social media or even online, any medium online is always talking about, like, tell your story, tell your story, and in order to tell your story, you have to ask yourself what that story is. And I think a lot of that comes... It's a privilege. It's an honor, and they get to ask those questions.

I think for me at least, the gap is that a lot of the history got lost, so the people that they want to ask these questions to are not really sometimes around to

answer those questions, so there's a lot of resources lacking. But then there's a lot of work that's happening, what Jimena's doing, and a lot of books that are being published and a lot of things coming to the forefront where they can find those resources and start to explore.

So I think it's beautiful that they're asking, and I think the way that needs to be answered is how do we now do more of the work to find those lost resources, to gather that and really answer those questions? That's the way I see it.

[00:24:23] **Libby:** I wanted to approach the Sephardic and Mizrahi experience in the United States through a gendered lens.

Esther, your novel, *Sisters of Fortune*, does an outstanding job examining the lives of Syrian Jewish women in New York. So let's begin with you. How would you define the opportunities open to women in your community today, and have those options evolved in the last few decades?

[00:24:48] **Esther:** That's a great question.

I'll take the second part of the question first. 100%, opportunities and the viewpoint on women in the workforce or moving towards a degree and a secondary degree has absolutely evolved and progressed over time. I spent a lot of time, you know... It's funny that I had to research this book when I sort of lived the experience of the book.

But I did want to get as many perspectives as I could, and part of that was getting perspectives from women of different generations, right? So I sat with my grandmother, and I visited her daily card game just to speak to the women who played with her and my mother and my aunts and my cousins and their contemporaries.

And I heard something interesting, which was- I think for my grandmother's generation, for example, not that they weren't aware that they were meant to, like, aspire to something else, but I think they were very content being homemakers, and they took so much pride in their cooking. And I always say cooking is a competitive sport, because it is, because that's how women treat it, right?

Where there was an immense sense of pride and gratitude in being able to provide for your family and have a beautiful home, and have food on the table, and for your food to be the most delicious. And then I think for my mother's

generation, you started to see perhaps a little bit of a change, but it was very slight.

I think most of the women, their priority still was to get married rather than go to a great college and get a degree. My mother speaks about how she was so proud of herself. She got into NYU, and she ended up dropping out after her first semester because she got engaged to my father. But she doesn't speak of it negatively.

It was almost just like, "This is what we did." There's a huge emphasis on family and tradition, and the way to cultivate that, right, was to get started on having a family and practice those traditions. It was very matter-of-fact. It-- They didn't indulge in a lot of the sentimentalities that I think my generation does.

And my mother ended up going back to college when her four kids were grown, and graduating summa cum laude, and taking the LSAT, and all these amazing things, and accomplished amazing things. But I think also watching her, and for my generation, and friends, my peers, we viewed what our mothers did as an unfair sacrifice, even if they didn't I remember for my friends and I, we were in-- There was a sort of two yeshiva, right?

There was Mag and David, which was largely Syrian, and then there was Flatbush Yeshiva, which was largely Ashkenaz, but it's where the, the very ambitious Syrians went to school. And my parents sort of said, "Okay, you're going to yeshiva Flatbush." And they were very keen on me getting the best education and joining the workforce, like if that's what I wanted, and that is what I wanted.

I was very much fed that message. I wasn't fed a diet of get married young and have lots of babies, and it definitely did change. And I think what's been interesting now is that my generation, and I would even say like my age group and five years, you know, a few years above, a few years below, we really wanted to emulate, you know, that typical "Ashkenaz experience" of like going to a great college and becoming a professional.

That was sort of the end goal. That was the thing that you wanted to do. You know, you made it, you succeeded. And what I'm seeing now is that for Gen Z, for example, in addition to embracing their identity more than even like I did as a millennial, they're sort of turning their identity into a profession.

So what you have is now so many young women who are married and mothers cooking out of their homes. They're running full-blown catering businesses and... or selling jewelry out of their homes, knitting karachas for newly engaged couples. I mean, they're taking all of these things that were quintessential to their culture and turning it into a business.

And so now the community has become its own sort of self-sustaining economy. We're just bartering goods back and forth. The buying and selling aspect of all this is sort of endemic to the community. I think we are like merchants at heart. I think it's in our DNA. I think it's, it's been so interesting to now see a lot of women specifically turning this idea on its head, where, yes, I'm going to have a career, and I'm going to make space for that in my life side by side with my family life, but I'm going to do it in a way that fits with my lifestyle and celebrates my culture, and I'm basically making a business out of something that I know deeply.

That's been interesting to watch. And you definitely have, of course, a huge uptrend in women attending college and grad school and becoming doctors and lawyers and speech therapists and teachers.

[00:29:56] **Libby:** Rozeeta, would you like to answer the same question about how opportunities for women have evolved in your community in the last few decades?

[00:30:03] **Rozeeta:** I had a similar upbringing, but I guess different in a way. For my family specifically, education was, like, the biggest thing that was put in us. I come from a family of all girls. I'm the youngest of three girls. My mother had sisters. It was very female-centric, at least in my upbringing. I was raised by a single mom at a certain point in my life, so everything was very feminine.

My grandmother was a nurse. My mother was a computer programmer. I have my master's, so it was very ingrained that regardless of what my great-great-grandparents had, their growing- their life in Uzbekistan, it wasn't sort of what I went through. In my community right now, I see a lot of push, speaking to what Esther said, a lot more women wanting to go to get, you know, a bachelor's, a master's degree, wanting to pursue things, being businesswomen, starting careers and all that stuff.

So I see that a lot. I guess for the larger Bukharian community that I experienced, it wasn't the norm when I was a kid to see that my friends had the same narrative I was experiencing. But the one thing that did come up over and

over again for me was, like, "Okay, but you have to get married. Okay, but you ha- like, you know, you're gonna have to find a partner, have kids."

So it's very interesting to see how my sisters got married in their 20s, like early 20s, and I'm 35 and not married. I have a dog. I don't have kids, you know? So the way I fit in to the community at large, I would say I'm an exception to the larger cause. I'm not mainstream for my community, but I have seen it evolve, and I think a lot of things that I did in the education rooms that I had walked into, I think I did sort of bring a different perspective on what it is to be an American Bukharian woman in my community.

So that has definitely shook some walls, so to speak. Nonetheless, I do value my upbringing. I do align with celebrating whatever women decide to do, regardless of sort of what the narrative was. I think the difference is that no matter what our parents or great-grandparents try to do, our kids are American first.

When I talk to my mother, I remember the day she became an American citizen, but when she talks about herself, she'll say, "Oh, yeah, I'm a Bukharian American," right? And I think Israeli even precedes American 'cause she went from Uzbekistan to Israel to America, and sort of that's how she sees herself. But when I talk to people, I'm like, "Oh, I'm American, and then I'm Bukharian, and then I'm all the other identities."

So I guess because a lot of that is the true reality for our children, there is a level of, of assimilation, a level of what is the mainstream, how do I fit in, in here? What are the expectations of American society? Then there's the Jewish expectation, and then there's the cultural expectation. So when those things take up space, kids are answering and going through their identity a little differently than what I did and what my parents did and what my great-grandparents did.

So to speak to that, that's sort of how I saw it and how I was immersed in it, but I'm definitely the exception. I didn't take the route like everybody else did. When my mother said education, I took it seriously. I'm, "Okay, I need to get, like, two bachelor's degrees and a master's degree, and I need to prove myself in certain rooms."

But I definitely saw it's not just me, but I, I had a different upbringing

[00:33:04] **Libby:** Sara, this is gonna be for you. Somebody would like to know if any school curricula exists that includes the history of Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews, and I'm gonna expand that and say maybe not just school curricula, but is

there curricula maybe for Hebrew schools or even for Jewish schools that specifically cover this history?

[00:33:21] **Sara:** Yes. There's a lot. The catalog of available resources and materials is growing. Jimena was founded as an educational institution. We were founded by former Jewish refugees who traveled to college campuses originally as a volunteer speakers bureau just to share their personal stories of what happened to them, and how they were displaced from the Arab and Muslim world, and how they were the forgotten refugees of the 20th century.

It started as an educational storytelling initiative, but it has grown tenfold since those early years, and there are two tracks in that work. One is public K through 12. The other track is Jewish education. In both of those avenues, Jimena has produced all different types of toolkits, resources, day school assessments, lesson plans, primary source materials, like a huge oral history collection that lesson plans can be developed from.

We're about to launch a new website that sort of integrates both the Jewish material, like for Jewish day schools, and public K through 12 materials into one centralized space for educators. We have probably 5,000 pieces of content for educators, Jewish and non. And we are also heavily engaged in advocacy and policy work.

I'm really proud to say that Jimena was the first organization to produce content on antisemitism in the Middle Eastern Jewish experience that was adopted by California State Board of Education, and this was the first time that there was a lesson plan that was integrated into social studies curriculum to teach on what actually happened.

And research is telling us from the Rand Institute and from other institutions that right now, public K through 12 teachers are looking for more information and training and professional development and content on contemporary antisemitism and contemporary experiences

[00:35:16] **Libby:** of Jews in the Middle East and North Africa.

[00:35:18] **Sara:** We believe Jimena is very actively engaged in this. This is the next sort of chapter in teaching about Jewish identity and history and experiences in public K through 12. We have such rich content on Holocaust. Teachers right now in this moment of heightened identity politics and cultural wars are looking for something a little bit different, and we exist to fill that gap.

We have worked and distributed our materials to all, to 50 state departments of education. I think 20 of them are now sharing out our resources, and this is in addition to districts throughout the country that are utilizing our resources. Even the NEA, I know there's a lot of controversy around the National Education Association, the National Teachers Union.

They share Jimena as a resource for Jewish American Heritage Month. We're in as many places as we can be given the size of our organization, and that's partially because there's really no one else doing comparable work. And it's focused on educating masses of Jewish and non-Jewish audiences to the stories, the history, the experiences of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa.

[00:36:31] **Ad:** At Masa Israel Journey, we often say that Israel is best understood up close through the people, the places, and the moments that stay with you long after you return home. For some Masa participants, that means spending four weeks volunteering with Magen David Adom in Tel Aviv, helping Israeli society in one of the most direct and meaningful ways possible.

For others, it means joining a six-week volunteer and leadership experience across Israel, strengthening their Jewish identity, deepening their understanding of Zionism, and learning how Israel thinks, lives, and responds to moments of challenge. One volunteer described the experience as especially valuable for young professionals interested in activism and diplomacy, offering not only a deep understanding of Israel, but also meaningful connections and real tools for leadership.

Another Masa alumni spoke about gaining a more complex understanding of Israel's history, public speaking, Zionism, and Jewish responsibility. These are not just trips. They are experiences that help young Jews grow into more confident, connected, and engaged leaders. Masa Israel Journey, founded by the Jewish Agency for Israel and the government of Israel, offers immersive programs in Israel for young Jewish adults from around the world.

Visit masaIsrael.org today and help someone you love take the next step in their Israel journey

[00:37:56] **Libby:** In recent years, distinctly Mizrahi culture has been having a bit of a moment. Mizrahi music and rituals such as henna parties and post-Passover Mimouna celebrations are being practiced by some Ashkenazi Jews, for instance. How do you explain this Mizrahi moment? Rozeeta, do you wanna try to tackle this one?

[00:38:16] **Rozeeta:** I think that's really why Sammy or other organizations are doing the work they're doing. Sammy just didn't come up yesterday and do this work. It's been years in the making, and I think we're seeing it now, but it's something that it w- they were seeds that were planted a while ago, since when I was a student and such.

I will say it's beautiful to see that, and I always say that the work of educating and highlighting and bringing awareness is not just on us. I think Sara said it well. There's all these resources available, everything. I didn't even know half the stuff she had said, and I'm sitting in the background going, "Oh my God, go get it.

That's amazing," you know? Cheering her on and what, and the work that Jimena's doing. But at the same time, it's not just on Jimena and women like us on this panel to be pushing this work forward. I think if we encourage an education to ask these questions, you don't know what you don't know. But if we're encouraging students to ask questions, ask beyond what they know, then the resources will come to them.

Like, an example I share often is when I was a kid and I went to, I went to Bais Yaakov, Orthodox Ashkenazi school. That was what was available right across the street from my house. Great, right? Went to school there. I learned morning prayers, and I was very confused because they were teaching morning prayers, but, like, when I went to shul, synagogue, it was different.

And I asked my teacher one day, I was like, "What... Something's missing here," right? And she's like, "Oh, sorry." And I thought that was the end of it, but the next day she came in with a whole new curriculum of like, okay, we're gonna learn the Mizrahi Nusach, like what they pray and stuff like that. And I bothered to ask, but then you have this class where I think it was only me and another individual, one Persian and then me, Bukharian and everyone else Ashkenazi.

But we all learned it, right? We asked, and the resources became available. So I think part of it is also asking and making space for it. And now that there's all this awareness and it's gaining traction online, I think social media has a huge part in sort of highlighting a lot of this. And between you and me, if someone told me henna party, I think that sounds better than a Shabbat dinner.

Like, we have that all the time, but I wanna, I wanna get... Like, when we did, um, the Israel Day Parade or Yom Ha'atzmaut parties I used to host for Hillel, the henna stand was, like, the most popular one. I wanna- Right ... I wanna get a

tattoo. But people aren't aware of all the richness in the culture. That it's not just cultural, but it's also cool, and everyone wants to do it.

Mm-hmm. But through that, people are actually learning and hopefully asking the questions, and that's what's being supplied. So I think it's definitely not just on us, and hearing that actually makes me feel good, where, okay, people are doing the work and wanting to bring it forward. Yeah.

[00:40:40] **Libby:** So h- here's a related question from someone in the audience.

They're asking, "Of any of you, do you consider people who are not Sephardic or Mizrahi initiating things like henna parties or Mimouna celebrations, as opposed to simply participating in them, do you consider that to be cultural appropriation?"

[00:40:57] **Rozeeta:** I don't wanna speak for people, I'm speaking for myself. I think if it's...

The resources are there, and there's gonna be places in America where you might not have Mizrahi party jewelry and you wanna still celebrate and highlight. To me, it's about bringing awareness to the history and the culture. And if that's a way you're doing it and you're giving honor to where it comes from, where it stems from, who it belongs to, the culture and the heritage, I think that's fine.

But that's, again, I'm gonna highlight it's my personal perspective on it. It's the same thing as saying I'm learning about the Holocaust and teaching... Like, can I teach about it? I don't have it in my family history. That's how I sort of see it, but we want people to learn and be aware. Mm-hmm.

[00:41:36] **Libby:** What do you think, Esther?

[00:41:38] **Esther:** No, I agree. I think the more people celebrating these cultures, the better. And I get it. It's e- it's exotic and it's fun, right? And I think people are sort of also starved for community and experiences, and if one of these experiences is going to fill you up, like Rozeeta said, as long as you're honoring where it comes from, then why not?

Have fun.

[00:42:03] **Sara:** For my first few years at Jemena, I was exclusively focused on bringing cultural content into Jewish spaces, and it has been amazing to see just

a complete explosion of interest. And the work that Jemena's doing now is actually to... Or the work we have been doing connected to our education and curriculum lesson plans is just, like, creating lesson plans so schools, any Jewish day school or camp or Hebrew school can host a Mimouna party or host an authentic Hanukkah celebration, and help make connections between local Sephardic Jews and those cultural celebrations.

And I've seen it now in schools, and it's absolutely incredible to see finally Sephardic culture and history integrated into spaces where there aren't many Sephardic or Mizrahi Jews. And I also think as a mixed Jew, someone who carries both Holocaust memory and Sephardic memory, growing up, I always knew that the Holocaust was an embedded part of Sephardic DNA.

Even if it wasn't a 1- even if Sephardic families didn't live through the Holocaust, that genocide shapes the Jewish identity, period, regardless of where your ancestors lived. I would very much like to see the same for Sephardic experiences, both good and bad, and, and Sephardic culture, both good and bad, because we are ultimately, in the end of the day, one big family.

[00:43:30] **Libby:** There are several questions in the chat where people want to drill down a little bit on the parameters, some of the rules, really what it means to be Sephardic or Mizrahi. If everyone is Orthodox, they wanna know a little bit more about intermarriage, marrying outside your community. What resources would you recommend if people want to learn more about the community?

Are there... You know, if they wanna learn about the history, culture, and the customs, do you have favorite books or do you have favorite websites? Where would you direct people to learn more about the community?

[00:43:59] **Sara:** So I think first and foremost, the study that we produced, which was led by Dr. Michal Biton, it was conducted at New York University, and it included a wonderful team of researchers from universities throughout the United States, is a really good starting place to learn about Sephardic Jews today.

It's sephardicstudy.org. There's one other resource we created with support from the Covenant Foundation, a toolkit for Jewish educators, but it's really a great resource for anyone who's interested in learning more about Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews as a whole, and it's divided by discipline. I think reading books like Esther's is also phenomenal.

We have a really great bibliography on our website. And I also think that it's important to, like, reach out to your local Sephardic synagogue, and go to services, and meet people in your community. And if you're on campus or if you have a child on campus, definitely link up with Sammy.

[00:44:56] **Libby:** As the food editor at Hadassah Magazine, I have to ask what I suspect many in our audience are wondering, and that is what are your favorite Bukharian, Turkish, and Syrian Jewish cuisine?

Like, what are your favorite recipes? Sara, tell us about your favorite Turkish Jewish delights, and then I'll ask Rozeeta and Esther

[00:45:17] **Sara:** So my great-grandparents, my great-grandmother's pumpkin boureka recipe lives on strong. My children love it, and to- the idea of my great-grandparents is so abstract to them.

That is one that I don't think will ever die.

[00:45:33] **Libby:** That's great. Esther, what about you?

[00:45:36] **Esther:** Okay, I have to give two, because I need to honor the Egyptian side and the Syrian side.

[00:45:41] **Libby:** That's

[00:45:41] **Esther:** very

[00:45:41] **Libby:** diplomatic.

[00:45:42] **Esther:** Um, very diplomatic. And they're very different, believe it or not. But on the Egyptian side, it would definitely have to be molokhia.

Molokhia's an herb. It's a very herby soup that you can either make with, like, a chicken or a beef in it. My grandmother taught me how to make it. I make it for my kids, and, uh, it's really, like, healthy, and hearty, and good for you, and they absolutely love it. And on the Syrian side, I have to say probably the most, like, quintessential food when you think of the Syrian community is sambusak, which are bite-sized cheese calzone type of pastries with sesame seeds on it.

And I always joke, this is, like, the way that Syrian moms introduce sesame to their kids- ... like, to make sure they don't have, like, a sesame allergy. And if

you ever travel on an airplane with Syrian Jews, there will no doubt be flying sambusak all over the place. So those two, I think, would be my favorite.

[00:46:42] **Rozeeta:** Great. Rozeeta, how about you? So I'm gonna honor two different sides. For what you don't know, my grandmother's Ashkenazi from Belarus, but she actually migrated as a teen from the war to Uzbekistan and married my grandfather. So you have this little Russian woman cooking Bukharian foods, so it's really funny.

But one thing that she really made well was pelmeni. It's very Russian. It's like those little dumplings in soup. Like wonton, so to speak, but a little bit different. But my most favorite, favorite dish that I try to explain to people, it's very hard to pronounce, but it's called bagosh. It's a green rice cooked in a bag with meat, and parsley, and cilantro.

Some people put mint and dill, and chopped up veggies and everything. But it's amazing, and it's boiled overnight and we serve it on Shabbat. But if you're ever in any restaurant, there's a few I can recommend, but taste the green rice. It sounds funny. It's wa- it's made funny, but it tastes delicious.

[00:47:35] **Libby:** It sounds delicious.

Well, that is a delicious note to end our program on. Thank you, Esther, Sara, and Rozeeta, for being with us for this important discussion. I would like to thank the magazine's digital editor, Ariel Kaplan, who both promoted and produced this event. And I'd like to give a shout-out to our partners in the Engagement Division and the Marketing and Communications Division of Hadassah, who always play an important role in making these events happen.

And a huge thank you, of course, to Esther, Sara, and Rozeeta, for taking the time to share their insights and wisdom with us.

[00:48:14] **Lisa Hostein:** Thanks for joining us today. If you liked this episode of Hadassah Magazine Presents, please follow the podcast on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts, and please rate and review us and tell your friends about us to help bolster our audience. Check out the show notes for further resources, and if you'd like to watch a video recording of this or any previous episode, you can find that on Hadassah Magazine's YouTube page.

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