Converging Identities
The Creation of Argentine Sephardim in the Early Twentieth Century

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the formation of Sephardic Jewish identity in Argentina in the first decades of the twentieth century. Jews began migrating to Argentina in large waves beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, and between these initial years and the early 1930s the Jewish population grew exponentially. Although only 13% of Argentine Jews, the Sephardic Jews who left Morocco and the (former) Ottoman Empire in search of economic opportunity and refuge from growing tensions in their home communities emerged as a visible migrant community. The Argentine Sephardic newspaper *Israel* and the memoirs of Sephardic migrants to Argentina demonstrate the process of adjustment to life in Argentina and the daily experiences that led to the formation of identity. They settled in Argentina, established new communities, yet also retained affinities to the places from which they migrated. As a result, this Sephardic community represented a heterogeneous mix of cultural and linguistic practices. They all referred to themselves as Sephardim, but had lived in distinct communities for centuries. Upon their convergence in Argentina, Sephardim needed to redefine their community identity to fit with their new surroundings, including other Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and non-Jewish Argentines.

While not homogenous, the community formed by the Sephardim in Argentina developed out of common experiences of diaspora and migration, and a desire to ensure the survival of Sephardic traditions. They negotiated a balance between their Sephardic and Argentine identities, resisted impositions of unity by external organizations, and formed their own transnational relationships between their homelands and Argentina. In doing so they formed an Argentine Sephardic identity specific to their surroundings. Therefore, the Sephardic community that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century in Argentina fulfilled both the necessity of survival and the desire to unify around common experiences of migration and settlement in new surroundings. The formation of an Argentine Sephardic community demonstrates that new identities develop out of migration and the specific conditions of the sending and receiving communities.
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This thesis was inspired by a class taught by Alicia Ramos González at IES Granada about the memory and identity of Sephardic Jews. Her class opened the door to further exploration of the formation of Sephardic identity.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

All translations from Spanish to English are my own for Israel, Mundo Israelita, Los sefaradim y el sionismo, Crónica de una familia sefaradí, El Ladino: dichos y refranes, Cocina sefaradí, El inmigrante: de Alepo a Buenos Aires, La vida según Marcos Levy, Presencia Sefaradí en la Argentina, and Árabes y judíos en Iberoamérica.
INTRODUCTION

The first Moroccan Jews arrived in Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century, initiating migration waves of Moroccan and (former) Ottoman Jews that lasted until the early 1930s. According to a 1935 report by Simon Weill the overall Jewish population of Argentina grew from 1,572 to 253,242 members between 1888 and 1934. Of this community, 131,000 Jews lived in Buenos Aires in 1934, with the rest dispersed around the country in agricultural colonies or smaller communities. The Sephardic Jews from Morocco and the Ottoman Empire composed a small portion of this population; of the 253,242 Jews in Argentina, the Sephardic community numbered only 43,228, with 24,000 of those Sephardim living in Buenos Aires.¹

Scholars and community members have long debated the categorization of Sephardic Jews. The community has roots in medieval Spain, yet expulsion by the Catholic monarchs at the end of the fifteenth century and the subsequent process of diaspora and migration since has broadened the boundaries of this category. Margalit Bejarano defines four categories of Sephardic Jews: Jews with roots in the Iberian Peninsula, from North Africa, Ladino speaking Jews from Turkey, Greece, Rhodes, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia, and East Ottoman Jews. However, she concludes that scholars should include any groups who considers themselves Sephardic.² For this thesis I will lean towards broader definitions and self-definitions, which allow me to recognize the constructed nature of this identity. In newspapers, memoirs, and pamphlets Sephardim identified themselves as part of the community, and therefore their

experiences of migration warrant attention, regardless of the specificities of their family histories.

Migration to Argentina led to the challenge of redefining Sephardic identity in new surroundings. Bejarano notes the particular challenge of forming this identity when not legally enforced, as in the Old World: “In Latin America they had to re-create their Jewish world on a voluntary basis and to adapt themselves to the model of other minority groups as well as to legal requirements.” The newfound freedom to self-define religious, cultural, and national identity blurred boundaries since they could vary based on individual understandings of community. Further, Sephardim needed to balance this Sephardic identity against Argentine belonging and other Jewish groups; encounters with new populations compelled Sephardim to “to redefine the boundaries that separated them not only from the ethnic groups that constituted the majority societies, but also from other Jewish groups.”

The convergence of communities that called themselves Sephardic yet had adopted different traditions during centuries of global dispersion, Ashkenazim, and non-Jewish Argentines forced Sephardim to reconstruct identities created in different surroundings.

By 1934 the Sephardic community composed only 17% of the Argentine Jewish community, which also included the larger Ashkenazic community composed of Eastern European Jews. The Jewish Colonial Association (JCA) founded by Baron Maurice de Hirsch in 1891 facilitated much of this migration. JCA funds covered the costs of travel from Europe and

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the tools to begin farming in agricultural colonies.\(^6\) Argentina attracted these Ashkenazi Jews, who left Europe to escape rising antisemitic violence, with its less restrictive immigration laws.\(^7\) The necessity of leaving Eastern Europe meant that large numbers of Ashkenazim dominated the Argentine Jewish population.

Sephardic Jews left their home communities for a variety of reasons, including a search for economic opportunity and a desire to escape growing tensions in their home regions. Moroccan Sephardim began migrating to Argentina around 1860, at the time of the Spanish-Moroccan War.\(^8\) In Argentina they found a small Jewish community and worshiped alongside Western European Jews until they founded their own religious institution in 1891, Congregación Israelita de Buenos Aires, as more Moroccan Jews migrated to Argentina.\(^9\) Soon after, in the 1890s, Ottoman Jews joined this wave of migration in search of improved socioeconomic opportunities and an escape from the draft to the Balkan Wars. The Young Turk revolution in 1908 spurred a peak in Ottoman migration that lasted until 1914. Migration slowed during World War I, but beginning again in 1919 Jews in the now deteriorating Ottoman Empire, especially those from Aleppo and Damascus, left in larger numbers with the hope of increased stability in the Americas. Additionally Jews, such as Marcos Levy from Izmir, fled the Greco-Turkish war in the early 1920s.\(^10\) Migration in high volume continued until the early 1930s when it slowed due to a military coup and economic depression.\(^11\) Argentina attracted Sephardim for a number

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\(^7\) Elkin, *The Jews of Latin America*, 53.
\(^8\) Brodsky, *Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine*, 17.
of reasons: they could migrate to Argentina more easily than the United States, they hoped to find stability, and saw a quickly growing Jewish community.\textsuperscript{12}

In Buenos Aires Sephardim often settled in neighborhoods with other Sephardim from their home communities. The large Aleppine community lived in Flores, Once, and the suburb Ciudadela; the next largest community from Damascus lived in Flores and Boca; the Moroccan community lived in Constitución; finally, the Ladino speaking community, which included Sephardim from Izmir and Istanbul, lived in Flores, General Urquiza, Once, and Villa Crespo.\textsuperscript{13} Despite the high concentration of Sephardim in these neighborhoods, they were not Sephardic neighborhoods; rather the Sephardim in these neighborhoods lived alongside Ashkenazim and non-Jews. Many of these Sephardim worked in the textile and clothing business, but could also be found working in factories and workshops, contributing to newspapers, and in countless other professions.\textsuperscript{14}

Argentine Jews did not consider antisemitism, and especially violent antisemitism a significant issue in the first decades of the twentieth century. With the exception of the \textit{Semana Trágica}, few instances of antisemitic violence appeared in Argentina. That week, from January 7\textsuperscript{th} to 13\textsuperscript{th} of 1919, Buenos Aires residents attributed a general workers strike to Ashkenazi Jews, referred to as \textit{rusos} (Russians), which led to government supported violent suppression.\textsuperscript{15} Since many Argentines did not understand that Sephardim, who they sometimes referred to as \textit{turcos} (Turks), were also Jews, they largely escaped the violence, a disconnect that Estela Levy

\begin{footnotes}
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described in her memoir.\textsuperscript{16} Beyond this one instance, some mentions of isolated non-violent antisemitism emerged, but never enough to consider it a significant issue between 1900 and 1930 in Argentina.\textsuperscript{17}

Traditionally scholarship about Latin American Sephardim focused on community divisions based on origins; this focus on tradition contrasted Sephardim with the supposedly more modern Ashkenazim. It based identity in community organizations, so since community organizations normally corresponded to specific countries of origin, historians saw an isolated and fragmented community. Robert Weisbrot’s 1979 book \textit{The Jews of Argentina}, for example, dedicates only one chapter to the Sephardim, that compared their smaller internal communities to those of the more consolidated Ashkenazim.\textsuperscript{18} Victor Mirelman also describes finite distinctions between the Sephardic and Ashkenazic community and links the Sephardim to a propensity for tradition in his 1990 book, \textit{Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930}. Like Weisbrot he emphasized internal divisions and isolated sub-communities.\textsuperscript{19}

Historians, such as Raanan Rein and Adriana Brodsky, produced scholarship in recent years challenging simple divisions of the Sephardic community. Rein’s and Mollie Lewis Nouwen’s studies of the newspaper \textit{Israel} as a shared space makes apparent the sites of unity that formed between Sephardim of different origins and Ashkenazim. They argue that historians who rely too heavily on institutional documents fail to consider the large numbers of unaffiliated

\textsuperscript{19} Mirelman, \textit{Jewish Buenos Aires}, 79, 128.
Jews in Argentina. Further, Rein cautions against defining populations as either diasporic or national, but rather argues that for Jews ethnicity can exist alongside nationality. Thus, the focus on organizations paints a false image of isolated and insular communities.

Brodsky also shows the manners by which Argentine Sephardim negotiated and overcame their differences. She argues that community organizations created identity through an intentional process and as “the product of the realities lived in new diasporic destinations,” rather than existing as an ahistorical reality. These organizations and burial societies maintained malleable boundaries, especially in smaller communities outside of Buenos Aires. Out of convenience these provincial communities overlooked difference to preserve Jewish existence, yet also relied on Buenos Aires for religious and cultural advice. Further, she argues that Sephardim held multiple diaspora identities that “dovetailed with national identities” and allowed them to connect both to their local communities and the larger Sephardic diaspora.

Sephardic incorporation into Argentina existed alongside similar patterns followed by all Jews. Historian José C. Moya argues that Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews fully adopted Argentine national identities: “The broader reality in Argentina… is one of strong and universally-shared nationality, not just in legal terms but most importantly in an unconscious,

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20 Raanan Rein and Mollie Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone: Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews Bridge the Gap on the Pages of the Argentine Newspaper Israel,” in Contemporary Sephardic Identity in the Americas, 74.


22 Rein and Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone,” 71.

23 Brodsky, Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine, 7.


25 Brodsky, Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine, 5.
existential, and quotidian way.” Therefore, patterns of integration and perceptions of Jews in this period demonstrate belief in their ability to join the Argentine community as Jews.

Beyond scholarship specifically focused on Argentine Jews, studies of Jewish diaspora and diaspora more generally also provide a framework for understanding the borders of Argentine Sephardic identity. Jonathan Ray argues that diaspora brought Sephardim together: “the experience of exile, migration, and resettlement helped to forge a Sephardi collective identity much as it has for modern diaspora communities.” A common Sephardic consciousness emerged only after centuries of dispersal from Spain, the collective experience of searching for a new home could overcome different customs.

Even in the absence of access to a common physical space, national identities form through connections to common traditions. Susanne Lachenicht and Kirsten Heinsohn show that a lack of homeland leads to a common identity developed through perceived cultural connections. Further, Robin E. Field and Parmita Kapadia dissociate diaspora from physical homeland: “reverence of a particular soil or space has been supplanted by a more multivalent sense of identity, community, and belonging.” Thus, identity does not rely alone on a particular space. They argue that Jews survived so long without a common homeland because the shared process of negotiating with absence formed a common culture in place of a common space. Therefore, this thesis views Sephardic identity culturally, instead of only spatially.

28 Susanne Lachenicht and Kirsten Heinsohn, Diaspora Identities: Exile, Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in Past and Present (Campus Verlag, 2009), 8-9.
30 Field and Kapadia, eds., Transforming Diaspora, xiii.
Built upon the scholarship questioning firm divisions within Sephardic identity and recognizing the importance of process in identity formation, this thesis will explore the manners in which Argentine Sephardim negotiated their identity in a new context, especially with regard to intentional constructions of identity and the communities that they formed. Through newspapers, memoirs, and publications by community organizations Sephardim from a variety of origins expressed similar concerns regarding the shape of their communities and the individuals and institutions that defined them.

In 1917 the Argentine-born Moroccan Sephardic Jews Samuel A. Levy and Jacobo Levy first published the newspaper *Israel* as a monthly, and it became a weekly in 1918; Samuel soon assumed full ownership after Jacobo’s death. In 1920, he unsuccessfully attempted to publish it daily, yet the front page still continued to celebrate Samuel as “the founder of the first Spanish-Jewish daily in the world” in the late 1920s. As the only Spanish language Sephardic newspaper published in Argentina until the founding of *La Luz* in 1931, it tried to unify Sephardic community understandings. No official statistics on circulation exist, but in 1925, the editors claimed to sell 10,000 copies read by six people each, at a time when the entire Argentine Jewish population including both Ashkenazim and Sephardim numbered 180,894.

Newspapers, such as *Israel*, construct identity by uniting the community around a common ideology. Derek Penslar draws connections between the Jewish press and public sphere to demonstrate that, although newspaper does not represent unanimous opinions, “it remains invaluable as a site of representation, representation of the sensibility of the Jewish activist elite

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31 Rein and Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone,” 76.
32 Rein and Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone,” 79; *Israel*, April 22-29, 1927, 7.
33 Rein and Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone,” 79.
34 Rein and Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone,” 78; Weill, “Población Israelita en la República Argentina,” 29.
and the cultural matrix in which it formed.” Further, Jewish newspapers act as “accessible public space for the expression of private views” so *Israel* could amplify private opinions to the larger community. Josef Fraenkel adds that Jewish newspapers help form and maintain community and public opinion, especially for spatially divided Jewish communities: “one of the chief functions of a Jewish press is… the preservation and strengthening of the Jewish spirit and of Jewish morale. But there is also the formation and consolidation of a Jewish public opinion.”

Thus, Jewish newspapers constructed a Jewish community around their readers’ interactions with their surroundings.

Further, Benedict Anderson, in his characterization of nationalisms as “imagined communities,” describes the temporal unity created by the collective act of newspaper reading: a newspaper reader “is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion.” By reading *Israel*, readers could connect with the rest of the newspaper’s readership and the broader Jewish community whose news *Israel* documented.

While *Israel* demonstrated collectively formed identities, memoirs presented perspectives based in personal experience. Paula Fass argues that when used as historical sources memoirs give voices to individual experiences of cultural transformation: “memoirs force the historian to remain aware of the often-silent realm that exists everywhere and always as a function of human consciousness.” They challenge the authority of collective documentation by representing personal thoughts and reflections, and by showing the ways in which individuals understand their

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world. The memoirs and recollections of Estela Levy from Istanbul, Nissim Teubal from Aleppo, and Marcos Levy from Izmir all provide a window into the formation of Argentine Sephardic identity that occurred at a personal level.

Through this thesis I hope to portray an accurate and fair representation of the Argentine Sephardic community. My positionality as an Ashkenazi Jew raised in New York meant that I encountered both similarities and differences between this community and the stories that I heard from my grandparents growing up. I needed to find a balance between familiarity with my subjects but also recognition of the challenges of writing about a community distinct from my own. I chose to write about the Sephardic community because it has been significantly underrepresented in studies of Latin American Jews, with the hope that new scholarship on the Argentine Sephardic community will continue to emerge.

Writing about the intersection of Zionism and community building posed a challenge in the face of modern Zionism and Israeli politics. I needed to understand a movement deeply connected to modern politics in an era before it encompassed the connotations that it does today. While the Zionism held by the Sephardim in the 1920s and 1930s did aspire to a Jewish state, and violence between Jews and Palestinians occurred during this period, Zionism took a more directly political form after 1948.³⁹ Therefore, the commentary on Zionism in this thesis should not be projected onto modern violence rooted in institutionalized power imbalances. For the sake of this thesis the reader should consider Zionism in its temporal context and its influence on the Argentine Sephardic community.

This thesis divides into three sections to argue that the convergence of Sephardic communities in Argentina led to restructured community boundaries in order to form a community that, while not homogenous, found commonality through a common desire to preserve Sephardic and Jewish traditions. The different traditions and perceptions of community brought to Argentina sometimes clashed and at times Sephardim struggled to negotiate their relationships with the larger Ashkenazic community and the non-Jewish Argentine community; nonetheless, through constant reckoning with their community identification a new Argentine Sephardic identity formed.

Through the periodical *Israel* and the memoir of Estela Levy, section I addresses attempts to balance Argentine and Sephardic identity. In new surroundings, these migrants needed to reconstruct what it meant to be Sephardic, while also negotiating what it meant to be Argentine. *Israel* demonstrates that this reckoning took place in highly public fashion and that disagreement arose around deviance. Estela Levy experienced the tensions between different levels of adjustment to Argentina within her own family; stuck between integration and exclusion she demonstrates the transitory nature of Argentine Sephardic identity.

This Argentine Sephardic community became prominent enough for global Jewish organizations to invest in its unity. Section II discusses external impositions of Zionism, the visit of Yugoslavian Rabbi Sabetay Djaen, and B’nai B’rith’s attempt to form a Jewish federation. Despite initial positive reactions, especially in *Israel*, all of these projects failed because they attempted to formulate Argentine Sephardic identity from the outside, rather than letting the community develop its own identity.

Section III shows that although these larger attempts at community failed, Argentine Sephardim formed their own communities that allowed them to retain connections to their
communities of origin while also overlooking community distinctions. Thus, they could preserve a Sephardic and Jewish community. Transnational identities, associated not with nation-states but with community identities, allowed Sephardim to remember their homelands while forming new communities in Argentina.
I. COMMUNAL AND PERSONAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY:

CENTERING ARGENTINE SEPHARDIM

On February 24th, 1928 the front page of the Argentine Sephardic newspaper *Israel* declared that “Our Carnival is Purim.”\(^{40}\) This declaration, which a reader could have easily skimmed over in search of social events in Buenos Aires or the latest news about Palestine, came in response to fears that Jews in Buenos Aires chose to partake in Carnival celebrations instead of the Jewish holiday of Purim. The article argued that Carnival degraded the Jews, but that they could participate in the similar celebration of Purim: “a lot of our coreligionists, who are accustomed to ‘dancing in the weddings of non-Jews’, celebrate Carnival, which was originally meant to mock the Jews, with enthusiasm.”\(^{41}\) Further, Jews falsely understood Carnival as an Argentine celebration that would allow them to connect to their new nation, rather than “a religious vice from the times of the Romans.”\(^{42}\)

Two issues later, in its March 9th descriptions of Buenos Aires’s Purim celebrations, *Israel* again raised concerns over Carnival replacing Purim. The article mentioned that the edition included a letter, by an author with “astounding naivety,” who challenged *Israel’s* February 24th characterization of Carnival as a festival meant to mock the Jews.\(^ {43}\) The letter, written by a local Jew named Benjamin Koen who belonged to a Jewish society that had celebrated Carnival, argued that the meaning of Carnival had changed in modern times: “Your article says that Carnival aims to mock the Jews: in ancient times that was true, but today in the century of light when people fight for peace and happiness for others, it has lost that meaning.”\(^ {44}\)

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\(^{43}\) “Crónica: Bailes de Purim,” *Israel*, March 9, 1928, 7.

\(^{44}\) Benjamin Koen, “Carta Abierta,” *Israel*, March 9, 1928, 10.
Further, although the youth of Buenos Aires played an important role in the realization of these Jewish Carnival celebrations, they “remain faithful to the beliefs of their parents and the doctrines passed on by their ancestors.”\(^{45}\) Benjamin thus addressed fears that Jews who adopted elements of Argentine culture would compromise their Jewish identity and argued that Argentine and Jewish identity could exist simultaneously. While this debate seems to have ended after the March 9th edition, similar negotiations of community identity repeatedly appeared as Sephardim tried to become Argentine while remaining Jewish.

The debate over the celebration of Purim points to greater concerns reproduced by Sephardim in Argentina over the voluntary formation of community identity. They needed to learn to be both Jewish and Argentine once removed from the old world legal restrictions that had previously formalized identity.\(^{46}\) New identities intentionally created by converging Sephardic diasporas compelled Argentine Sephardim to overlook difference and form community. During centuries of dispersal and migration they constructed an identity in Argentina that responded to new surroundings through central modes of discourse, like newspapers, and personal reflections. They addressed the challenge of voluntary identity formation by attempting to retain political, religious, and national unity through the formation of common understandings of Judaism and Argentina.

*Israel* and memoirs brought community and individual experiences into the same discourse, since newspapers express and disseminate personal opinions found in memoirs and represent the community’s concerns. The debate over Purim existed within *Israel*’s participation in larger debates over the construction and negotiation of Argentine Sephardic identity, which

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\(^{46}\) Bejarano, “The Sephardic Communities of Latin America,” in *Contemporary Sephardic Identity in the Americas*, 21.
reproduced concerns expressed privately. The process of disseminating and receiving information that took place in highly dependent public and private spaces shows the impact of both local and global experiences on identity formation. *Israel* demonstrated the manners by which a newspaper that claimed to embody Sephardic identity regulated community boundaries and the memoir of Estela Levy demonstrated that the tensions between new and old identities that emerged in *Israel* extended into the personal realm of family relations.

**DISCOURSES OF COMMUNITY: REPLACING POLITICS WITH RELIGION**

The appearance of the discussion about Purim in *Israel* held special significance given Rein and Lewis Nouwen’s characterization of *Israel* as a “point of contact” through which Sephardim could learn about their new environment while remaining connected to the Jewish community. As anticipated by Anderson’s “imagined communities,” *Israel*’s readers could connect with the rest of the newspaper’s readership and the broader Jewish community whose news *Israel* documented. In the case of Purim, Sephardim collectively learned that they needed to negotiate a delicate balance between becoming Argentine and staying Jewish.

*Israel* saw itself as central to community development. While other Jewish newspapers—mostly Ashkenazic—existed, or tried to exist, *Israel* proclaimed in April of 1927 that “none have been comparable to ISRAEL which is a faithful expression of the needs of the community, that goes to all of the Jewish homes, whether they are in the capital or in the farthest towns of the interior.” Further, in October of 1931 the front page explained that “Thanks to ISRAEL Sephardic Argentines encounter national cohesion.” By claiming to guarantee a space of unity

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47 Rein and Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone,” 77.
Israel placed itself at the center of a community discourse of commonality. While Israel’s actual community impact remains unclear— not everyone read Israel, despite its articles’ confidence in their reach—its choice to claim its own centrality shows that it perceived a need for unity.

Cognizant of the role of host countries in delineating an immigrant community’s external boundaries, Israel claimed to act as a mediator with non-Jewish Argentines. In January of 1928 it claimed that “ISRAEL has been one of the most effective factors of Argentine-Jewish solidarity” and that it “dismissed many old prejudices and swept away absurd errors due to misunderstanding and lack of knowledge of our traditions, customs and goals.”

Therefore, Israel claimed to both create and defend Jewish identity in Argentina. By challenging misinformation, it tried to construct an environment in which Jews could become Argentines on their own terms.

Israel promised to avoid political discourse and limited its commentary to specifically Jewish matters, such as Purim, to protect the community from divisions. In February of 1928, in light of widely publicized impending elections that brought Hipólito Yrigoyen back to the presidency, Israel reaffirmed its commitment to independence from political ideologies. The editors believed that all Jewish newspapers, both Sephardic and Ashkenazic, should uphold this commitment because all political parties could both hurt and help the Jews. Israel would only encourage Jews to partake in national life, rather than prescribe specific political beliefs: “Our predicate is only from an intense nationalism to encourage citizens to complete civic duties, but without attracting people to one party or another.”

51 “Israel es la publicación Israelita de mayor circulación en Sud América,” Israel, January 6, 1928, 21.
52 Yrigoyen easily won the 1928 elections with considerable middle and working class support. However, in September of 1930 his followers turned on him and a military coup overthrew him. The mentions of this election in Israel indicate the Sephardim’s investment in Argentine life. Rock, Politics in Argentina, 239–41.
53 “Israel y la Política,” Israel, February 24, 1928, 7.
54 “Israel y la Política,” Israel, February 24, 1928, 7.
encouraging its readers to vote, the editors tried to preserve community unity while supporting involvement in Argentine life. The Jews could participate in Argentine civic duties as long as the institutions, such as newspapers, that upheld unity refrained from divisive activities.

The editors tried to ensure that Sephardim retained their Jewishness, even while becoming Argentine, and Israel attempted to establish itself as the legitimate Sephardic voice that could connect them to their new community. It became especially active in light of conflict over the meaning of Argentine Sephardic identity, such as in the case of Purim. Through descriptions of itself as apolitical Israel ensured that it introduced Jews to Argentina in a unified manner. However, when Israel’s editors perceived a threat to unity, such as in the case of Purim of 1928, they intervened to ensure that Sephardim did not abandon their Jewish community.

The debates over Purim of 1928 existed within a larger discussion in Israel surrounding holidays as the backbone of community. On each major Jewish holiday, the newspaper described the holiday’s story and its local celebrations. While no other holiday received quite as much debate as Purim of 1928, the discussions of other holidays also grounded unity in common traditions. For example, in 1929 Israel described Passover celebrations: “In all of the houses we celebrated the traditional acts of Passover, the kids had the old four questions and the parents told the story of liberty” and in 1931 the front page told the Hanukkah story: “When we see the lights of Hanukkah they evoke the great Jewish period, in the second century of the Christian era when the valiant cry of the Maccabees awoke the people of Israel from their lethargy.”

Religious commentary allowed Israel to form community around holidays since it constructed common understandings and showed readers that other Argentine Jews took part in the same practices and told their families the same stories.

Through common understandings of religion and holidays, *Israel* forged connections between Jews in diaspora. Stéphane Dufoix argues in his study of diasporas that the preservation of common traditions helped Jews maintain unity despite spatial separation: “Long deprived of a geographical center and a central land, the multipolar structure of Judaism in exile maintained Judaism’s identity thanks to its religious temporality, which allowed people to feel they were all celebrating religious events at the same time, despite being physically apart.”56 Knowledge that other Jews practiced the same traditions allowed *Israel’s* readers to preserve Jewish identity by maintaining a virtual community through common temporarily, despite their adoption of new national traditions in Argentina. Therefore, *Israel’s* Purim commentary aimed to protect a tradition that connected Jews to each other.

Concern about Jewish unity extended beyond the pages of *Israel* and holidays themselves to traditions of prayer. A letter from 1914 addressed to Rabbi Haim Nahun in Istanbul from an Argentine Sephardi named David Pisanté confronted the challenge of re-orienting oneself in a new environment. While sources do not show the frequency of letters like this, it frames its request as unspectacular, and other community events, such as the influence of a Yugoslavian Rabbi (discussed in section II), show a continued link to old world community structures. In response to concern over divisive community debates, Pisanté asked how Sephardim should adapt prayer traditions to seasons in the Southern Hemisphere: “Permit me to bother you in the name of the Jewish collective of Rosario, because of a divergence of opinion arising between us, about which we desire your guidance.”57 The fear of dividing the community, led him to seek

advice from Istanbul. Through knowledge of the correct way to pray he attempted to mitigate
tensions between Argentine and Sephardic identity.

Concerns about politics and holidays showed efforts to create unity by defining a central
Argentine Sephardic identity that allowed for some integration, but never at the cost of
abandoning Jewish community. Israel established its role as the community’s voice, refrained
from politics to preserve unity, and used holidays to maintain connections to Judaism. Thus, the
potential for deviance around Purim in 1928 concerned Israel considerably because it
represented a potential failure in the development of an Argentine Sephardic identity, and the
risk of losing the community to complete assimilation. Through its broadcast of the debate,
Israel demonstrated the importance of addressing the tensions between Argentine and Sephardic
identity in order to find a middle ground that could unite the community.

ARGENTINE AND SEPHARDIC AS COMPLEMENTARY IDENTITIES

To adjust to Argentina Jews needed to negotiate what it meant to be Sephardic and
Argentine. These identities developed both separately and in conjunction with each other.
Confronted by the emergence of religious freedom in Spain, a desire to adopt elements of
Argentine culture, and concerns about losing religious traditions, an Argentine Sephardic identity
developed. Thus, they created complementary identities.

Sephardic Identity and Roots of Belonging

Despite global dispersion, Israel insured that Argentine Sephardim retained a
mythologized connection to their historical homeland, Spain. Although diaspora identity does
not need to develop from homeland and Brodsky notes that the existence of multiple real and
imagined homelands created Sephardic identity, the brief emergence of the Spanish Republic in 1931, and its subsequent allowance of free practice of religion, led Sephardim to re-conceive the preservation of their cultural and religious community history.\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Israel} met the emergence of a potential Sephardic homeland, to which Sephardim could migrate until the Spanish Civil War and the rise of Franco in 1936, with a desire to establish a spatial root for Sephardic identity.\textsuperscript{59}

Descriptions of Sephardim in relation to Spain face the challenge of recognizing the alternative roots of Sephardic diaspora. Since many Sephardim did not directly descend from the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, definitions of Sephardim need to recognize heterogeneous origins. Bejarano includes Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, who lack direct Spanish lineage but whose families adopted Sephardic culture in her understanding of Sephardim.\textsuperscript{60} Nonetheless dominant voices in the community, such as \textit{Israel}, understood Spain as a homeland, so perceptions of the Sephardic connection to Spain warrant analysis here.

Few \textit{Israel} articles, which mostly referred to Spain as a distant, important but unrealistic, dream, appeared about Spain prior to 1931. In 1929 a contributor named Abraham Peretz wrote that Jews lived marginal lives in modern Spain: “They are all foreigners… None are naturalized out of fear of the consequences, since all of the laws of the inquisition are still intact.”\textsuperscript{61} Before expulsion in 1492, the Jews felt Spanish, but those that lived in twentieth century Spain existed outside the visible nation. A few months later Matías Abala, a correspondent for \textit{Israel}, traveled to Spain and reflected on the harms of expulsion felt by modern Spanish Jews: “Now one does not hear Hebrew voices in the orchards of Granada and the streets of Toledo, except for an echo


\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Spain: A Country Study}, 110.

\textsuperscript{60} Bejarano, “Sephardic Communities in Latin America,” 12–13.

\textsuperscript{61} Abraham Peretz, “Los judíos en la España actual,” \textit{Israel}, June, 28- July 5, 1929, 14.}
that could not be extinguished.”\textsuperscript{62} Still, Spain could not have completely eliminated Jewish presence, as the “echo” of their history remained. This absence and nostalgia characterized \textit{Israel}’s portrayal of modern Spain in this era.

Rhetoric changed in April of 1931, when Spain’s declaration of religious freedom appeared on \textit{Israel}’s front page.\textsuperscript{63} The following months saw a steep increase in articles about Spain, all of which reimagined Spain as a Sephardic homeland, especially in regard to religious mythologization. A front page in May of 1931 connected return to Spain with the arrival of the messiah: “This brings us closer to the praise of the great prophets of Israel, when the Universe’s peace will not be a dream, but a beautiful reality.”\textsuperscript{64} Until this time Spain, as only an imagined homeland, had held a religious character. In 1931 Sephardim suddenly no longer needed to imagine Spain, but could consider actual return, whether or not they decided to do so.

\textit{Israel}’s choice to publish articles by non-Jews illustrated the importance vested in the connection between Spain and the Jews; non-Jews could also perceive the extremity of longing present in Sephardic discourse about Spain. An article by the Spanish author, Rafael Cansinos Assens implied that Sephardim constantly longed for return to “the treasured country that their grandparents [abuelos] abandoned a long time ago with tears that have still not dried.”\textsuperscript{65} This persistent connection to Spain redefined Sephardic identity, from one that developed through the long process of exile and migration to one that always existed in relation to Spain, and that


\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Israel} described this religious freedom as “libertad de creencias y cultos.” “Crónica: Libertad de cultos y creencias en la república española,” \textit{Israel}, April 24, 1931, 7.


outsiders, including Spaniards, could understand. Suddenly a Sephardic homeland could legitimize Sephardic lineage and identity, even though Sephardim had adopted different nationalities in the communities in which they lived since expulsion.

Other non-Jewish sources reproduced in Israel extended upon the compatibility of Argentine nationality and Sephardic religion and culture. Israel reproduced an article from the Argentine newspaper Mundo Español, founded by a Spaniard living in Argentina, which argued that Sephardic history would accelerate adjustment to Spain even if Sephardim did not return:

“The Sephardic colony of Argentina should stay in spiritual contact with the Sephardim of other regions, and, support when possible, a cultural and economic exchange with the nation in which their ancestors lived.” External influences could help reinforce Sephardic connections to Spain. By including Spain in Argentine Sephardic identity Israel tried to show that Sephardic identity could be just another national identity that a migrant could hold, so Argentine and Sephardic identity would not conflict.

For a population living in diaspora, the emergence of a homeland provided an opportunity to justify identity. Israel’s intensive documentation of religious freedom in Spain constructed a source for the Sephardic identity that it wanted to preserve in Argentina, although it presented an alternate homeland to the one proposed by Zionists. This legitimized identity paralleled the emergence of an Argentine national identity.

**Home in Argentina**

Israel facilitated the partnership of Argentine and Sephardic identity, which according to Moya, occurred beyond officially mandated inclusion; it extended to the informal mixture of

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identity. Argentine Jews incorporated Argentine culture into their own identity, which Israel broadcasted through articles about Argentine national holidays and Jewish affinity to Argentina.

Argentina’s July 9th Independence Day always received considerable attention in Israel articles. These articles mirrored articles about Jewish holidays by focusing on shared celebration; thus Sephardim applied similar frameworks to creating Argentine Jewish identity as they did to the preservation of Jewish unity. Like in the case of Jewish holidays, the community formed through shared celebration which allowed Jews to feel as if they belonged in Argentina. Holidays, both Jewish and Argentine, thus formed community through common practices, as described by Dufoix’s characterization of diaspora unity through shared traditions.

Articles emphasized gratitude for Argentina’s freedom, with one 1929 edition of Israel going so far as to describe Argentina as a promise land. That year an organization called the Jewish Social Circle hosted a dance to celebrate Argentine independence, which Israel wrote “has given evidence for the enthusiasm with which the Jews associate with the celebration of an event of national magnitude.” Through independence celebrations, Sephardim proved their desire to adopt an Argentine identity, despite the challenges of preserving Jewish identity. They also united the community through common celebrations of Argentine national holidays since all members of the community would participate in similar activities. This interest in Argentine celebrations showed the desire for some integration, and despite concerns that it could challenge Jewish identity as shown in the Purim debate, they still pursued it.

69 Dufoix, Diasporas, 69.
71 “El círculo Social Israelita celebrará la efemérides nacional,” Israel, June 28- July 5, 1929, 46.
Sefardim adopted Argentine nationality beyond Independence Day. *Israel* repeatedly proclaimed that Jews were Argentines, despite the persistence of marginal Argentine antisemitism: “Argentina does not make distinctions between its children. He who is born on Argentine soil, no matter who he is the child of, is Argentine and has the rights shared by all.” Jews born in Argentina could be Argentine and Argentine nationality did not eliminate Jewishness.

Jews began to create their own institutions that extended beyond religious and cultural needs as they established themselves in Argentina. The author of a 1932 article justified the creation of a unified Jewish bank: “We have before us true Argentines and now their nationalism will manifest in their thoroughly bound contributions to commerce and national industry, developing their activities in all sites of national activity, the Jews now form an integral part of the Argentine nation.” A unified bank would help permanently incorporate Jews into Argentina because it would compose a central institution while simultaneously providing an entryway into Argentina’s economic life.

Since Argentina allowed Jews free practice of religion, their ability to openly practice religion only existed because they lived in Argentina. In 1932 a student proclaimed his newfound Argentine identity in a speech written by community leader Saby Alací and given at a festival held by the Society of the Temple of Jerusalem:

> I love this Argentine land, because in her for the first time my eyes have seen the light of day; because in this fertile land my happy youth passes; and I love this country a lot because its constitutional laws allow one to live under its protection of liberty and without distinction between people who want to work and contribute to its prosperity, to its enhancement and to its general wellbeing.

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72 “Crónica: Es necesario replicar, si no hay quien lo haga, a los que difunden calumnias,” *Israel*, December 4, 1931, 8.
73 “Crónica: Los Israelitas y el empréstito nacional,” *Israel*, June 10, 1932, 7.
74 “Sociedad del Templo Jerusalém y Colegio Hatikvah,” *Israel*, October 7-14, 1932, 16.
By becoming Argentine, Sephardim could also preserve their religion. Therefore, in this temporal and spatial instance Jewish identity relied on belonging in Argentina.

*Finding a Balance: Concern About Losing Jewishness*

Language facilitates common modes of communication through which communities pass information to create unity. In the case of Jews, linguist John Myhill shows that biblical Hebrew helped preserve religious identity: although “Jewish identity has not been traditionally related to everyday language: it has, however, been related to a sacred language and writing system.”75 Jews could speak the language of their host country, yet still preserve their religious and cultural identity through sacred language. Further, since Sephardim spoke many different vernacular languages, the preservation of biblical Hebrew, even if only as a religious written language, represented religious commonality.76

Argentine Sephardim linked biblical Hebrew education to the preservation of religious and cultural Jewish identity. In a 1928 article about Jewish schools in Argentina, *Israel* affirmed its commitment to preserving Hebrew: “In ISRAEL we always declare the supreme necessity to impart upon Jewish-Argentine children, the knowledge of the old language of Hebrew so that despite their assimilation to Argentina, they do not break their links with the race and remember their duty.”77 The author believed that children would remain Jewish even as they became Argentine if they learned biblical Hebrew. Another article published around the same time, about lacking Jewish education in Montevideo, Uruguay, also described the consequences of forgetting

76 This biblical Hebrew differs from the modern vernacular Hebrew spoken presently in Israel. Barnavi and Eliav-Feldon, eds., *A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People*, 200–201.
Hebrew: “The lack of Jewish education will be the cause of our disappearance.” Language, like holidays, inspired feelings of unity, and the concern that children would forget Hebrew paralleled the fear of losing a base for Jewish religious affinity. Further, since much of Jewish religious practice occurred in Hebrew, Jews who forgot Hebrew would lose their ability to practice religion.

Concern about education and language extended beyond Argentina to Sephardim around the world, as shown by the article about Montevideo, illustrating the desire to maintain global Sephardic unity. In May of 1927 Israel excerpted an article from the New York based The Jewish Gazette about the failures of North American Sephardic Hebrew education. The article connected ignorance of Jewish history with the failure to learn Hebrew: “The Sephardim born here know nothing about Judaism, they have not learned but a word of Hebrew nor a pace of history.” By broadcasting this concern in Israel the editors showed global concern over Sephardic preservation; a unified Sephardic identity in Argentina served little purpose without the preservation of Sephardic identity elsewhere. Biblical Hebrew education served as the site of this preservation by reinforcing religion’s importance.

Community leaders expected the youth to inherit Sephardic traditions so they supported Jewish education. At a Hanukkah celebration hosted by the Temple of Jerusalem and the Hatikva School, Alacid gave a speech linking youth and tradition: “Soon, the tender youth, will walk before us, in who us older people place our hopes, who will tomorrow form part of our indestructible fortress, in whose peak always shines the glory of Israel.” Since the youth would

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79 This section focuses on Jews in the Americas, but Israel also included articles about Jews in other parts of the world. “Los judíos vuelven al Asia,” Israel, January 20, 1928, 8; “Crónica: Despiertan las comunidades judías de la India,” Israel, August 7, 1931, 7.
80 “La educación hebrea de los Sefaradim de Norte América,” Israel, May 27, 1927, 17.
81 “Gran Festival organizado por el Templo Jerusalem y Colegio Hatikva,” Israel, January 8, 1932, 3.
grow up to lead the community, they needed to understand the traditions that they would uphold. In another part of the speech Alacid proclaimed that “In our school we teach children to be good Jews.” Education would preserve Judaism because the youth, as future community leaders, would ensure the survival of traditions.

Israel’s excitement about efforts by the youth of Tucuman to form a Jewish youth organization in 1929 illustrated its faith in the youth as the future of Judaism. Frustration from the absence of a Jewish youth organization led these youth to form an organization with the goal of “tightening the links between the components of the community,” by developing Zionism and creating a unified culture. Israel enthusiastically endorsed this effort because it would address the disparity between the youth and the rest of the community: “It is necessary to have this most recent attempt in favor of a youth that appears to have moved away from us.” The Zionist Cultural Center of Tucuman would create a space for the youth to pass Jewish tradition along to future generations even though they grew up in Argentina. Thus, they became Argentine alongside adherence to religious tradition. This attention to the future recognized longevity in Argentina, even as these Sephardim also supported the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Further, it raised tension around the desire to emphasize definitions of Jewishness while simultaneously defining their relationship with Argentina, since as noted by Brodsky, educational organizations helped shape a new generation of Argentine Sephardim. This new generation would therefore learn to balance national and religious identity in cases such as the debates over Purim in 1928.

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82 “Gran Festival organizado por el Templo Jerusalem y Colegio Hatikva,” Israel, January 8, 1932, 3.
83 “Centro Cultural Sionista Tucumano,” Israel, July 19-26, 1929, 16.
84 “Centro Cultural Sionista Tucumano,” Israel, July 19-26, 1929, 16.
85 Brodsky, Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine, 203.
ESTELA LEVY AND DEFINING IDENTITY IN “TRANSITORY MOMENTS”

Memoirs represent individual experiences and personal tensions within Sephardic identity and compliment Israel’s collective perspective. Estela Levy’s 1983 memoir *Crónica de una familia sefaradí* (Chronicle of a Sephardic Family) recounts her memories between 1908 and 1920, the years encompassing her family’s migration from Istanbul and eventual settlement in Buenos Aires. She attended school and learned Spanish, yet retained her Sephardic identity. As Estela grew up she negotiated her presence in Argentina as a Sephardic immigrant inhabiting social spheres linked to both her new and old communities. She formed her identity through similar processes as Israel’s efforts to define an Argentine Sephardic identity.

In addition to the memoir, Estela wrote a Sephardic cookbook in 1978 and a book of Ladino sayings in 1979. She also contributed to various community organization. The cookbook, *Cocina sefaradí* (Sephardic Cooking), gathers recipes from Sephardic women in Estela’s community that to her reflect the amalgamation of different Sephardic cultures over time. This specifically gendered portrayal of Sephardic identity presents one of the clearest views into women’s contributions to Argentine Sephardic identity. The book *El ladino: dichos y refranes* (Ladino: Sayings and Proverbs) explains the meanings of different Ladino sayings and preserves the memory of her specific migrant experience: “We who live here, in Argentina, in a group with few family members and little contact with other peoples and voices, stay almost frozen in time, losing the richness granted by movement and interchange, but gaining for us the purity of recollection.”

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86 Ladino was the language spoken by some Sephardic Jews in diaspora, especially in the Ottoman Empire, derived from Spanish. Myhill, *Language in Jewish Society*, 123.
89 See the conclusion for further discussion of *Cocina sefaradí* and gender.
Argentine identity to preserve personal memories of the initial formations of Argentine Sephardic identity.

Estela’s account represents only one perspective of migrant experience, due to the personal nature of memoir. Yet, she situates it as part of a greater Sephardic experience: “This story could seem incomplete and in effect it is, since it has not delved into the trajectory of the different communities that form the Argentine Sephardi presence… but we believe that in a small or large degree everyone has had a similar development in the era in which our story is situated.”

Her membership in the larger community grappling with Argentine Sephardic migratory identity allow her recollections to reflect the larger phenomena that appeared in Israel. By looking at Estela’s memoir through Paula Fass’s framework of memoir as “human consciousness,” historians can consider personal manifestations of identity.

Each member of Estela’s family encountered Argentina in a manner dependent on personal circumstances. Despite her father’s involvement in Sephardic community life in Buenos Aires and her siblings’ quick adjustment, “It did not happen this way for my mother. It was difficult for her to accept the change but she took on the situation without emitting a single complaint. Only in her face did she reflect the pain.” Since her mother struggled to learn Spanish she remained isolated from life in Argentina. Yet, she accepted the difficulty because her family needed to settle in Argentina. Thus, she grew distant from the rest of the family.

Estela’s mother struggled to assume an Argentine identity, but the younger children born in Argentina grew up more connected to Argentina than to Istanbul. Estela writes of her younger siblings that “They were the Argentinians of the family. They always formed a small entity. This

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91 Estela Levy, Crónica de una familia sefaradí, 12.
93 Estela Levy, Crónica de una familia sefaradí, 39.
tight union was affirmed with time and one could not expect any dissidence between them.”

Since they only knew Argentina they held different allegiances than Estela, who also remembered Istanbul. Estela therefore needed to mediate between many identities within her own family; her mother never adjusted to Argentina but her younger siblings knew nothing of Istanbul. As the family member who both remembered Istanbul and adjusted to life in Argentina she lived in a moment of transition, which Jonathan Ray describes as emblematic of diaspora: “transitory moments between dispersion and integration.” While her mother never fully experienced dispersion from her homeland, her siblings integrated into their new homeland, leaving Estela in the ‘transitory moment.’ In this transitory moment she could start to define her relationship to Argentina while remaining Sephardic.

Language facilitated connections with Argentina. The Levys spoke Ladino so they could learn Spanish more easily than non-Ladino speakers. Although the children learned Spanish quickly, they needed to speak Ladino in order to communicate with their mother: “Us, the kids-at the edge- bettered our Spanish and left Ladino, which was similar to Spanish, to the side, but we would use it in our conversations with Mama who was always distant and closed within herself.”

In Argentina they needed to speak Spanish in order to communicate with their new nation, but to retain their family ties they needed to continue speaking Ladino. Thus, Estela’s family, and her Argentine Sephardic identity transcended language. However, her mother remained excluded from Argentina because she could not cross that border and needed to rely on her Sephardic familial connections to form community.

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94 Estela Levy, *Crónica de una familia sefaradí*, 50.
96 Estela Levy, *Crónica de una familia sefaradí*, 50.
Religious tradition allowed the Levys to feel closer to other Jews, similarly to the connection between religiosity and community represented in *Israel*. Estela felt closest to her family during religious celebrations. On Sukkot she built a Sukkah with her family: “We all cooperated to assemble this structure [escenario] that transported us to the pastoral days of a people that could forget tragic days and renew to preserve the faith, a Virgilian scene in the tight limits of a citizen’s patio.” Participation in acts of tradition related to a holiday allowed her to reconnect with her Jewishness and with Jews around the world. Her family built their Sukkah in the patio of a house in Argentina, but it brought her to another world. Simultaneously, it brought this other world to Argentina and showed Estela that Judaism could exist within it.

Estela still struggled to mediate between the differences in her home and community life. School represented a site of tension with non-Jewish Argentines: “It was difficult to associate our home life with the climate outside… In that time they had not required students to wear uniforms so it was harder to create equality between girls of different social backgrounds.” At school she felt disconnected from the other students because of her migrant origins. She could not match them visually because the students did not wear uniforms to erase difference. The classroom brought her to a new other world that made her difference visually apparent, but in order to receive an Argentine education she needed to accept feeling like an outsider.

Migration required Estela Levy to move between identities in order to connect with different people and places. Even within her own family she needed to speak different languages with different people. Still, she settled in Argentina and established her own identity as a Sephardic Jew from Istanbul living in Argentina. Towards the end of her memoir she noted the

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98 Estela Levy, *Crónica de una familia sefaradí*, 72.
spectacular qualities of Sephardic Jews: “We all preoccupy ourselves with everything and the spirit of support is always there, generated between members- perhaps unknown to each other- a community faithful to its legacy and dedicated to selflessly show up.”\textsuperscript{99} Despite her transitory identity, she found support in familial and community ties that allowed her to build her own identity under her new circumstances. Estela’s particular experience mirrors the debate over Purim of 1928 in its efforts to find a place between Argentine and Sephardic identity. She thus shows that Sephardim experienced the tensions raised in \textit{Israel} in their personal lives and that personal formations of Argentine Sephardic identity existed alongside its community manifestations.

**CONCLUSION: A RETURN TO PURIM**

As Sephardim settled in Argentina, they negotiated a middle ground between their Sephardic and Argentine identities; they became Argentine while preserving their religious and cultural identity. Argentine Sephardim took a definitive apolitical stance, emphasized the importance of ritual and holidays, remained connected to global perceptions of Sephardim, yet also expressed a desire to integrate, and finally, attempted to pass on traditions to the younger generations. As demonstrated, this occurred in both the community space of \textit{Israel} and the personal space of Estela Levy’s family.

The discussions around Purim in 1928 illustrated the precarious nature of this balance and the difficulty of preserving community unity within a new external framework. One can read this debate as an attempt to consolidate a community that migrated from around the world, spoke different languages, held different understandings of religiosity, yet still defined themselves as

Sephardim. Thus, the specific identity that formed out of these debates and tensions lacked homogeneity - and identities often do - but encapsulated a community attempting to grapple with the tensions and experiences of balancing diaspora and unity.
II. EXTERNAL IMPOSITIONS OF UNITY: INSTITUTIONAL JEWISHNESS

The large waves of migration to Argentina attracted the attention of global Jewish associations as part of a shifting understanding of the centers of world Judaism. Through the 1920s and 1930s various Jewish groups based in Europe and North America turned their attention towards Argentina and tried to situate it within their traditional models of Jewish community. The 1926 campaign of a Sephardic representative of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) and subsequent developments of Argentine Sephardic Zionism, Yugoslavian Rabbi Sabetay Djaen’s attempts at community consolidation around religion on behalf of the World Confederation of Sephardic Jews, and the Argentine chapter of the American Jewish organization B’nai B’rith’s attempt to form a Federation of Argentine Jewish Societies (Federación Argentina de Sociedades Israelitas, F. A. S. I.) all illustrate Argentine Sephardim’s resistance to the attempts by outsiders to define their identity. However, initial positive receptions to these efforts, especially by the editors of and contributors to Israel, show a desire to form a coherent community in Argentina beyond the localized efforts discussed in section III.

Israel raised tensions in its ability to reflect the goals of the community and craft community consciousness by reinforcing imposed unity. Since newspapers both represent public opinion and dominant community voices, Israel could impose a specific community understanding on readers. The disparity between Israel’s projections of unity and the community’s responses to the projects on which Israel reported showed a community interested in formalized institutions, yet also in disagreement about the means by which to achieve unity.

ZIONIST PROJECTIONS OF UNITY: ARIEL BENSÍÓN AND ISRAEL

By the 1920s the modern Zionist movement, born at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, had achieved global recognition and a positive reception in Argentina. Still, as Rein and Lewis Nouwen note, this Zionism did not mean that Argentine Jews wanted to move to a future Jewish state, but rather that they wanted a Jewish state to emerge while they continued to live in Argentina; thus Argentine Jews could be both Zionists and Argentines. As the Argentine Sephardic community developed it negotiated its place within global Zionism, especially with regard to its relationship with Ashkenazi-dominated organizations, both in Argentina and abroad. For example, Sephardim sometimes felt isolated from established Zionist institutions that often conducted their business in Yiddish rather than Spanish. As a result the WZO realized that if it wanted the support of the growing Argentine Sephardic community it needed to convince them to belong. Encounters with the WZO and other international Zionist activities pushed Argentine Sephardim to grapple with their relationships with each other and with outsiders.

Zionism lends itself especially well towards crafting community because the shared act of defining a homeland develops common understandings of roots. Asher Biemann describes the imagination of Jewish “spiritual homelands” as “anticipatory places of rooted existence.” Common anticipation of a homeland unites communities because members collectively craft homeland: “imagining a homeland implies the desire for belonging in an otherwise alien world;

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102 Rein and Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone, 70.
103 Brodsky, Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine, 120.
it implies the election- the declaration- of affinity.”\textsuperscript{105} Zionist cooperation could unite Ashkenazim and Sephardim around a common belief in a future homeland, even if they held different customs otherwise, since the idea of distinct Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities developed in diaspora.

\textbf{The Project of Bené Kedem: Argentine Sephardim Meet Global Zionism}

In 1926 the WZO sent the Sephardic representative Ariel Bensión to Argentina to garner support from Argentine Sephardim.\textsuperscript{106} That year an organization established by Bensión called Bené Kedem published a pamphlet explaining its work in order to recruit Argentine Sephardim. Bensión and the pamphlet indicate an international perception that the Argentine Sephardic community could unite and contribute to the Zionist movement.

The pamphlet named Bensión Bené Kedem’s honorary president and granted leadership roles to other key figures in the Argentine Sephardic community. With Elias Teubal, a businessman and member of a prominent Argentine Sephardic family, as the treasurer and Samuel A. Levy, the director of \textit{Israel}, as an advisor and an honorary member, Bené Kedem represented a cross section of important Argentine Sephardic communities.\textsuperscript{107} Thus, it played a central role in the formulation of Argentine Sephardic Zionism.

Bené Kedem claimed to prioritize Sephardic needs. It aimed “To organize and congregate all of the Sephardim, in the Zionist movement” and to “Assume the rights of the Sephardim before the Universal Zionist Congress.”\textsuperscript{108} Sephardim could legitimate their place within the

\textsuperscript{105} Biemann, “Imagining Homeland,” 123.
\textsuperscript{106} Brodsky, \textit{Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine}, 123.
\textsuperscript{107} \textit{Los sefaradim y el sionismo} (Buenos Aires: Bené Kedem de la Argentina, 1926), 17. I will discuss the memoir of Nissim Teubal, Elias’s brother in the following section.
\textsuperscript{108} \textit{Los sefaradim y el sionismo}, 15–16.
larger Jewish community by joining the Zionist movement and Bensión would bring this unity by serving as a spokesperson for world Zionism: “This position is the first stone in the building that will recollect the souls of the American siblings.” Thus, Bensión, an outsider, would initiate unity and construct the Argentine Sephardic Zionist movement.

Bensión called upon the Sephardim of Argentina to overcome difference and unite as one nation since they held common traditions despite their diasporic subjections to different experiences. According to his message “We have made the necessary moral sacrifices that tend to bridge over the difference that separates us, to an end that we can be in the diaspora of one nation, that works for the grand objective, aspiring to realize a grand ideal and looking for a brother to work with in each Jew.” Despite its challenges Jewish unity could successfully enact a Zionist vision; even though Sephardim adopted different characteristics over time, their common experiences of diaspora united them.

Yet, through exposure to Ashkenazic voices the pamphlet centralized Zionism around Ashkenazic understandings. It included a message from Chaim Weizmann, the president of the World Zionist Organization, to the Sephardim calling on “our Sephardic brothers” to act: “of them we wait for a sufficient approach to the current works originating from the Balfour Declaration this great toast to the Jewish people in their totality.” Another message from Naum Socolow, the President of the Executive Committee of the World Zionist Organization, expressed his confidence in the Sephardim’s preparation to join the global Zionist movement: “the Sephardic Jews that ultimately awoke from their lethargy, sensed the voice of liberty and

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109 *Los sefaradim y el sionismo*, 83.
110 *Los sefaradim y el sionismo*, 13.
111 *Los sefaradim y el sionismo*, 20. Chaim Weizmann would later become the first president of an independent Israeli state. Barnavi and Eliav-Feldon, eds., *A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People*, 254
rose like a single man to contribute to the reconstruction and rebirth of our nation.”\textsuperscript{112} Finally, Isaac Nissensohn, the Ashkenazic president of the Argentine Zionist Federation, noted the comparative unimportance of Ashkenazic-Sephardic divisions to the importance of Jewish unity around statehood: “But Judaism is one. The division between Ashkenazim and Sephardim is merely superficial and does not reach to have significance before the proportions that suggest the realization of the Rebirth of Judaism in Palestine.”\textsuperscript{113}

These messages called Sephardim to join the dominant Ashkenazi Zionist movement by moving past historical resistance to unity. Weizmann, Socolow, and Nissensohn understood the Ashkenazi movement as the center and all other movements as marginal. Still, they also recognized that legitimacy relied on acknowledging other significant Jewish communities, such as Argentine Sephardim.

Bené Kedem’s pamphlet encouraged Sephardim to support Zionism out of religious duty, regardless of their traditions. According to Jacob Meir, the Great Sephardic Rabbi in Palestine, religion should compel Sephardim to financially support Zionism: “It is the holy obligation of all of the Jews to contribute to Zionist funds.”\textsuperscript{114} Through monetary contributions Sephardim would help establish a Jewish state and express Jewish religion. In response to the question “what is Zionism?” the pamphlet described it as “the purest expression of Judaism. Zionism is the synthesis of Judaism” and that “To be Zionist, is to be an upstanding Jew, proud, without vanity, and elevation without arrogance.”\textsuperscript{115} Thus, to prove their Jewishness Sephardim needed to unite under the World Zionist Organization. They could connect to the organization through religion, and thus contribute towards the future Jewish state.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{112} Los sefaradim y el sionismo, 22.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Los sefaradim y el sionismo, 29.
\item \textsuperscript{114} Los sefaradim y el sionismo, 39.
\item \textsuperscript{115} Los sefaradim y el sionismo, 41–42.
\end{itemize}
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After lengthy explanations of the importance of Zionism to Sephardim, the pamphlet closed by discussing tangible actions that Sephardim could take to contribute to Zionist causes. They could purchase a “schekel” from Bené Kedem to join the movement: “It is only necessary to acquire one annual ‘schekel’ to be part of the Zionist ranks.”116 Sephardim should buy a “schekel” because “Our Sephardic brothers have a debt contracted with themselves and with the people of Israel.”117 The Zionist religious and financial duty that Bené Kedem placed upon Argentine Sephardim required them to advance the movement towards a Jewish state by uniting them around the purchase of the schekel.

**Israel and the Imposition of Zionism**

Articles in *Israel* amplified Zionist activities, such as Bené Kedem’s “schekel” campaign, to the larger Argentine Sephardic community. Rein and Lewis Nouwen argue that *Israel*’s Zionism, which included articles by both Ashkenazim and Sephardim, created a space of unity: “there was contact between the two groups—they read and wrote within the same newspaper, creating a social network of people that interacted with each other and attended the same social events and meetings of their common organization.”118 While Sephardim wrote the majority of the contributions to *Israel*, Ashkenazim also wrote articles and thus contributed to the development of Sephardic Zionism. These articles also show that *Israel* tried to form community in response to external forces that Argentine Sephardim did not always welcome.

117 *Los sefaradim y el sionismo*, 50.
118 Rein and Lewis Nouwen, “Cultural Zionism as a Contact Zone,” 74.
Through articles calling for the purchase of the “schekel” *Israel* extended Bené Kedem’s campaign to the wider Argentine Sephardic community. In May of 1927 it described the schekel as a vote for Zionism, more powerful than conferences or memorandums:

> Any people expresses their ideas with a vote. The popular and individual vote shows the popular inclinations. We already know the power of the vote in democratic countries. From all of this we infer the transcendental importance of the vote in the form of the ‘schekel’ that we have become accustomed to obtain.\(^{119}\)

Through financial contributions Sephardim could show their support for Zionism and its progress. *Israel* defined the schekel as a vote, and thus imagined the existence of a shared national community that all Sephardim could partake in.

Other editions of *Israel* from the spring of 1927 included advertisements for the schekel. They called for “the Sephardim of Buenos Aires and of the entire Republic” to buy a schekel because it proved their Jewishness and unified them around Zionism.\(^{120}\) The schekel allowed Sephardim to contribute to the birth of a Jewish state: “The obligation to buy a ‘schekel’ cannot be avoided by anyone, since it is a simple adhesion the nationalist idea.”\(^{121}\) If Sephardim wanted to belong to the national community they needed to help form it. Thus, through these advertisements *Israel* created a space to form Jewish identity.

Beyond Bené Kedem’s work, *Israel* encouraged Sephardim to donate to Zionist causes. In April of 1927 it included a list of donations of matzah to Palestine by various Argentine Jewish organizations and in July of 1927 it called upon Sephardim to support the victims of an earthquake in Palestine.\(^{122}\) Even though the earthquake killed few Jews, the Argentine Zionist Federation still called for donations: “in this moment of intense human pain one should not consider differences in race, religion, or nation. Together with the others who inhabit Palestinian

\(^{119}\) “Es necesario que todo sefardí compre un ‘schekel,’” *Israel*, May 27, 1927, 3.

\(^{120}\) “Bene Kedem,” *Israel*, June 3, 1927, 3.

\(^{121}\) “Bene Kedem,” *Israel*, June 3, 1927, 3.

land we cry for the death of the disappeared souls and allow for the pain and suffering of the injured.”

While not responsible for the land’s administration, by supporting earthquake victims Jews showed care for all of the inhabitants of Palestine and laid their claim to it.

In other instances, however, Israel expressed considerably less support for the non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. Violence between Jews and Arabs erupted in 1929 in response to the expansion of Jewish access to the Western Wall, and occupied a central place in discussions of Palestine. Israel mobilized a unified response to the violence and on August 29th, 1929 a report under the headline “Universal Civilization Has Been Offended” occupied the entire front page. The article claimed that the entire world supported the Jews and commended the development of Ashkenazi-Sephardi unity in light of the violence: “All of the Sephardim like a single person united with their Ashkenazi brothers without distinction, Syrians, Orientals, Moroccans and especially the children of Jerusalem.” Thus, Israel used the Jewish relationship with and concern for Palestine to unite Jews from many different backgrounds.

Sephardim did respond visibly enough to violence in Palestine to receive recognition from an Ashkenazi newspaper in Buenos Aires called “El Diario Israelita.” Israel excerpted this article, which focused on the consolidation of unity as a result of the violence: “This fraternization Ashkenazi-Sephardi is an interesting aspect of today… But today, when Eretz Israel calls, all of the differences disappear.” Long histories of dispersal around the world made it difficult for Ashkenazim and Sephardim to mix and find commonality; Israel tried to

123 “Federación Sionista,” Israel, July 29, 1927, 12.
125 “La civilización universal ha sido ofendida,” Israel, August 29, 1929, 7.
126 “Los sefardim de Buenos Aires,” Israel, September 6, 1929, 3.
show that Palestine could bring Jews together when they found themselves sharing a community in Argentina.

The following article again portrayed financial contributions as the most effective support of the restoration of the land of Israel to the Jewish people. All Jews needed to finance the creation of the future state of Israel since “The Jewish heart is the land of Israel.”

It called upon “Hebrew brothers, Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Complete your duty rich and poor, men and women. Bring your money with open hands to honor of God, of Zion, of Israel.” Through response to a conflict felt universally by Jews regardless of tradition, they could form a common care for a future Jewish homeland.

While conflict brought Ashkenazim and Sephardim together, concerns over unity within the Zionist movement frequently arose. An article by M. Helfman from October of 1932 argued that a Jewish state could override differences: “The reconstructed Palestine, should return to give monolithic unity to the Jewish nation and erase cultural and linguistic difference between each Jew that have been created through millennial exile.” Diaspora created differences in traditions, language, and religiosity that hurt Jewish identity, so a Jewish state would repair the harms of exile.

Israel used famous Zionists to create a central point around which to base Zionism. On November 2nd of 1917 the Balfour Declaration asserted that Britain believed in the Jewish right to a national state in Palestine. Each year Israel commemorated the Declaration and the manners by which Jewish organizations around Argentina celebrated it. However, the

127 “Un corazón hebreo,” Israel, September 6, 1929, 5.
128 “Un corazón hebreo,” Israel, September 6, 1929, 5.
129 M. Helfman, “Eretz Israel y los Sefaradim,” Israel, October 21, 1932, 8.
130 Barnavi and Eliav-Feldon, A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People, 202. The Balfour Declaration serves as a reminder of contemporary British colonialism, which Israel fails to address.
131 “Los sionistas de Rosario conmemoraron dignamente el 2 de Noviembre,” Israel, November 11, 13.
Declaration’s importance extended beyond its anniversary to mentions in *Israel* at other times of the year. In the spring of 1928 an article attributed global Jewish progress to Balfour’s work:

“None of us can forget that November 2nd of 1917, when Balfour, upright and energetic, gave a solemn promise, on the floor of the British Parliament, the resurrection of Judaism.”\(^\text{132}\) Balfour facilitated the rebirth of Judaism, so *Israel* tried to unite Jews around the memory of his work.

Theodor Herzl, the founder of the modern Zionist movement, also received considerable attention in *Israel*. In July of 1929, as in July of other years, *Israel* ran a story commemorating the anniversary of his death.\(^\text{133}\) Still, *Israel* also made sure to recognize Sephardic contributions to Zionism, thus placing Ashkenazic and Sephardic Zionism within the same discourse. In August of 1929 an article told the story of Jehudah Ben Salomon J. Alcalay, a Sephardic Zionist from Sarajevo who predated Herzl. The article noted Alcalay’s work as especially important because “The interesting thing is that Herzl, without knowing the work of his predecessors, arrived at the same conclusions.”\(^\text{134}\) Therefore *Israel* carved a place for Sephardim within the Zionist movement because their Zionists could match the great ideas of Herzl.

While Zionist movements embraced the potential of a return to a Jewish homeland, and some did return, *Israel’s* Zionist discourse defined Argentine Sephardim’s relationship with a future state from afar and affirmed Field and Kapadia’s separation between diaspora and physical homeland.\(^\text{135}\) In August of 1929, around the same time as the violence in Palestine, *Israel* included a poem that compared the contemporary struggle for Palestine with the Maccabees’ struggle in defense of Jerusalem, thereby placing it in a larger continuity of Jewish


\(^\text{133}\) “Homenaje a Dr. Hertzl con motivo del 25° aniversario de su muerte,” *Israel*, July 19-26, 1929, 12.

\(^\text{134}\) “Antes que Hertzl, un sefaradí había organizado un proyecto de estado judío en Palestina,” *Israel*, August 29, 1929, 3.

\(^\text{135}\) Field and Kapadia, eds., *Transforming Diaspora*, xiii.
tradition: “We want justice and peace/ And if the fight is precise/ We will know how to confront it/ Forward comrades/ Maccabees without Caesar/ Need to defend the cause/ of our national home.”  

Therefore, *Israel* included the Zionist movement in a multi-millennial struggle with which all Jews could identify, whether or not they moved to Palestine. An article from July of 1931 expressed similar sentiments of longing and hope for success in a lengthy struggle: “Just like the microscopic star filters its light between black and dense storm clouds, as well as it makes room for hope without clouds of despair… Despite the hurricane winds, despite the clouds, my valiant star forces itself out of captivity.”  

According to *Israel* Palestine needed rescue, and through existence alone Jews could overcome darkness. Through this article *Israel* tried to keep hope alive and contribute to a perceived fight for freedom.

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Influenced by the WZO and reinforced by *Israel*, the Zionist rhetoric that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s among Argentine Sephardim emphasized unity despite different histories and traditions. However, the imposition of consciousness by a global organization overlooked the identities that Sephardim already held in relation to the rest of their community. Concern that Sephardim would not join the movement otherwise compelled the WZO to send a representative to Argentina to recruit Sephardim. Further, *Israel*’s relentless stream of articles about Zionism and the inclusion of Ashkenazic perspectives also illustrated an external entity defining Jewish unity around Zionism.

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SABETAY DJAEN AND THE IMPORTATION OF UNITY

In 1927 the recently formed World Confederation of Sephardic Jews sent the Yugoslavian Rabbi Sabetay Djaen to Argentina to visit the Sephardim. Raised in Belgrade, he became a Rabbi and held positions around Europe prior to his involvement with Argentina.\textsuperscript{138} After the success of his initial visit Argentina’s Sephardic organizations brought him back more permanently in 1928 to modernize their community and articles in \emph{Israel} reported heavily on the entire affair. By 1931, however, he fell out of favor with the Argentine community and left for a position in Romania.\textsuperscript{139} The conflict that emerged between Djaen and Argentine Sephardim tainted memories of his visit, but the community’s initial reception to his ideas and interest in future unification projects reflected a desire to form a community. However, the various responses to tensions that arose underscored the differences between the manners in which Argentine Sephardim saw themselves and the manners in which outsiders thought that they should fit into the larger Sephardic and Jewish communities.

Djaen’s invocations of religious unity conflicted with Argentine realities. Since, as Moya notes, both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Argentine Jews incorporated into their new communities, they adopted elements of Argentine culture, such as their celebrations of Argentina’s independence discussed in section I.\textsuperscript{140} Thus, the community into which Djaen arrived lacked the familiar higher rates of old world isolation. This incongruity between Djaen and the Sephardic community of Argentina as portrayed by \emph{Israel} raised deeper concerns about who could define community.

\textsuperscript{138} Brodsky, \textit{Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine}, 96.
\textsuperscript{139} Brodsky, \textit{Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine}, 91, 94–96.
\textsuperscript{140} Moya, “The Jewish Experience in Argentina,” 7.
Djaen’s 1927 Visit and Positive Receptions

When Djaen first arrived in Argentina Israel showed great interest in his activities by publishing information about his visits to various Sephardic communities. Upon his visit to the Sephardic community in Flores, Israel described him as: “The most popular man known by the Sephardim in Argentina.” Even though Argentine Sephardim believed themselves to hold a vast variety of religious and cultural beliefs and differed in levels of religiosity, Djaen’s popularity united them.

Israel described the importance of Djaen’s work to help the Sephardic community overcome its divisions. In May of 1927 an article celebrated Djaen’s role in connecting the Sephardic community to the Zionist movement: “the objective of the parents like the children the ideal and eternal objective, always sacred, always glorious: The awakening of the Sephardim and their contribution to the Reconstruction of Zion.” Djaen’s presence could help Sephardim realize objectives that they already held. In the eyes of Israel only through Djaen could the community join the global Zionist movement.

Djaen’s presence represented Israel’s perception of the Sephardic community’s needs. The World Confederation of Sephardic Jews sent him to construct the future of Argentine Sephardim: “He did not come as a simple citizen, he does not speak the name of one or certain people, he came here as a boss, in the name of the Sephardim from fifteen countries, he came from Palestine cradled by our dreams to shake this solemnness that sets aside our brothers from there, abandoned and uncared for.” The editors of Israel believed that he represented a unified Sephardic voice that Argentine Sephardim needed to adopt in order to retain a Sephardic identity.

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141 “Siguen efectuándose con gran entusiasmo los agasajos y las conferencias del eminente Rabino Sr. Djaen,” Israel, May 13, 1927, 5.
142 Saby Alacid, “Un gran huésped sefaradi,” Israel, May 6, 1927, 10.
143 Saby Alacid, “¡Basta de inercia exclama Djaen!” Israel, May 13, 1927, 15.
similar to that of the Sephardim around the world. While this viewpoint may have only represented *Israel*’s stance, at this point in 1927 it tried to show that Argentine Sephardim welcomed that external guidance and trusted it to succeed.

During his 1927 visit *Israel* tried to show that the Argentine Sephardim felt like they needed the unity that Djaen provided. According to Alacid his presence elevated the Argentine Sephardic community to the level of other Sephardic communities around the world:

> Like in Jerusalem, like in Tel Aviv, like in other countries big and small, we also should have a great talented Sephardic Rabbi, a man that knows how to show the people his superiority as a boss, to form the masses, inculcate Hebrew education, group the societies, awaken the feeling of those that sleep, form an entity capable and organized.144

A Great Rabbi historically defined great Jewish communities, so *Israel* believed that Djaen’s presence could legitimize the Argentine Sephardic community.

Djaen contributed to the development of Argentina’s religious life by crafting a unified understanding of Jewishness for the Sephardim to follow. Estrella, a contributor to *Israel*, described him as: “A patriarch, a prophet sent by God [Él] passed through our lands awakening our sleeping brains, shook our sensibilities, showed his prodigious knowledge, inflamed our hearts with love of humanity, scattered his spiritual richness, sowed ideals of perfection.”145 Thus Estrella believed that the Sephardim did not understand their religious unity until Djaen’s arrival.

This initial visit demonstrated the community’s interest in finding commonalities. Sephardim received Djaen positively because they could overlook boundaries between their communities when necessary, and the divisions between Sephardic communities tended to blur over time. He appealed to the community because Sephardim associated his outsider status with

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144 Saby Alacid, “¡Lo que nos ha faltado a los sefaradim es un Djaen!” *Israel*, May 20, 1927, 8.
145 Estrella, “A mis hermanos Sefaradim de Buenos Aires (y a mis hermanos también si se quieren interesar en la lectura de este artículo),” *Israel*, July 29, 1927, 11.
special knowledge from the Old World; he “awakened” the Sephardim and helped them mirror other great Jewish communities. Nonetheless, this temporary excitement faded with his more permanent visit from 1928 to 1931.

**Failed Permanence and Djaen’s Dismantled Project**

Djaen’s permanent role as the Sephardic Grand Rabbi beginning in 1928 addressed a desire for long-term community unity.\(^{146}\) Inspired by his successful tour in 1927, public figures met Djaen’s return with excitement. Upon his arrival Djaen told the community leaders who met him at the port that “he would make his home here to work for the highest ideals of Sephardic Judaism,” thereby establishing permanence in his new role.\(^{147}\) Once again he promised to bring modernity and shape Argentine Sephardim to fit into traditional understandings of Jewish community.

*Israel* again showed enthusiasm for Djaen’s work and published his schedule so that readers could follow along. Within the span of two months *Israel* reported that he visited a prominent Jew in Mendoza, the Spanish Embassy, the headquarters of the JCA, a synagogue in Reconquista, the houses of Moroccan Sephardim, Sephardic communities in Uruguay, and societies in Rosario, among other activities.\(^{148}\) His reach extended beyond Argentina, and *Israel* also celebrated his unification of other communities, such as the Chilean Sephardic community: “Djaen came. His voice newly sounded of fire and truth that shook all of their hearts.”\(^{149}\) His presence alone could awaken communities and bring them back together.

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\(^{146}\) Brodsky, *Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine*, 96.

\(^{147}\) “Ha vuelto el gran Rabino D. Sabetay Djaen,” *Israel*, September 28-October 5, 1928.


\(^{149}\) Ana Albala Levy, “Una ojeada a la Comunidad Israelita de Temuco,” *Israel*, April 19-26, 1929, 32.
Djaen again based unity in religion. In 1929 he wrote an article in *Israel* that constructed Jewish unity around the Shema prayer in light of the violence in Palestine discussed above: “We do not need tears nor mourning, since we have cried enough over 2000 years. With our combined blood we would die for our sacred home, our Hebrew blood calls us to the duty. It inspires us and animates us together, like a single man, to start the reconstruction of our sacred home.” According to Djaen, Jewishness and “Hebrew blood” would compel Argentine Sephardim to respond as one person to the violence in Palestine. His decision to base unity in religious commonality points to Djaen’s understanding of Sephardim solely as a religious group.

The local response to the 1929 violence, orchestrated by Djaen, also emphasized Jewish unity. In an August 29th article he called for a day of mourning: “We declare Thursday a day of national mourning, and beg the Jewish people of this capital to close their businesses and like a single man attend a great demonstration in the Liberty Plaza and Coliseum Theater, next Thursday, the 29th of August at 2:00 PM.” Again he called the Jews to respond as a “single man” because they should all feel similarly in response to the violence. Further, this duty fulfilled religious necessity: “Waiting for each one of you to complete your Jewish duty, to the respect of the Holy Religion and the most sacred sentiments of Israel, we send our most sacred pastoral blessings to God for Peace in our Sacred Land and for the complement of the high ideas of Israel.” The religiousness of the collective response affirmed Jewishness. Through Djaen’s articles *Israel* supported his actions and extended his reach to the broader Argentine Sephardic community.

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However, Djaen damaged his relationship with the Argentine Sephardic community by basing community in religion and describing himself as superior; as a result he left Argentina in 1931, revealing tensions between the desire for community and negotiating who gets to define Sephardic identity.\textsuperscript{153} Due to missing editions of \textit{Israel} in the collection that I accessed, I cannot provide \textit{Israel}'s perspective on Djaen’s departure, but the Argentine Ashkenazic newspaper \textit{Mundo Israelita}, which often criticized Sephardim, shows the Ashkenazic perspective on tensions that arose between Djaen and Argentine Sephardim.\textsuperscript{154}

In January of 1931 \textit{Mundo Israelita} criticized the Sephardim for failing to appreciate Djaen’s important work. Despite his dedication to community improvement “The Sephardic collective did not respond to the efforts of their spiritual boss, they did not support his initiatives, nor accomplish the agreements that he took on.”\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Mundo Israelita} blamed the Sephardim rather than Djaen, for his projects’ failures: “They are not accustomed to a Rabbi with modern aims, a man that despite his investiture, is not a fanatic.”\textsuperscript{156} According to \textit{Mundo Israelita}, Argentine Sephardim failed to support Djaen because they could not adhere to modernity. Thus it associated modernity with Djaen’s roots in Europe and the traditional centers of Sephardic Jewry. By challenging him Sephardim tried to show that they could construct their own identity.

In March of that year \textit{Mundo Israelita} reproached the Sephardim for Djaen’s departure. An article implied that Sephardim turned on him and divided the community: “The Sephardic Confederation was born with a negative end. Its singular principle objective is to combat the Great Rabbi Djaen, for the crime of being too superior to the environment in which he acted,

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\textsuperscript{153} Brodsky, \textit{Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine}, 100–101.
\textsuperscript{154} Brodsky, \textit{Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine}, 100.
\textsuperscript{155} “La actuación del gran rabino D. Sabetay J. Djaen,” \textit{Mundo Israelita}, January 24, 1931, 1.
\textsuperscript{156} “La actuación del gran rabino D. Sabetay J. Djaen,” \textit{Mundo Israelita}, January 24, 1931, 1.
\end{flushright}
superiority that we precisely underline.” Mundo Israelita argued that Sephardic inferiority led them to resist Djaen; it implied that of their own fault the community fell apart.

While Mundo Israelita blamed the Sephardim for Djaen’s departure, his attempts to impose identity and community as an outsider gave the Sephardim cause to resist his projects, although their newspaper Israel extended its support to him at least through the fall of 1929. Brodsky attributes this failure to the Argentine Sephardic community’s development of political unity, rather than the religious unity attempted by Djaen: “Religion and ritual, they realized, could continue to be addressed by each community individually and would remain an ‘internal’ affair.” Thus Djaen’s imposed identity overemphasized the religious element of their Sephardic identity and failed to acknowledge the development of a hybrid Argentine Sephardic identity rooted in common experiences of diaspora.

ENFORCED UNITY: B’NAI B’RITH AND THE FEDERATION OF ARGENTINE JEWISH SOCIETIES

Attempts to form unified organizations continued after Djaen’s departure. These largely unsuccessful endeavors again demonstrated the negotiation between Argentine Sephardim’s understandings of community and external impositions. Further, Israel’s initial positive reception to attempts at enforced unity demonstrate tensions between the community that Israel wanted to create and its realities.

In June of 1931 the representatives of various Sephardic organizations met to discuss the formation of a Federation of Sephardic Jews. They eventually abandoned the project, but their

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157 “Un organismo que nace muerto,” Mundo Israelita, March 7, 1931, 1.
158 Brodsky, Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine, 105.
efforts show an interest in formulating unity on their own terms.\textsuperscript{159} \textit{Israel} reported on the meeting’s attendance, which included representation across the Argentine Sephardic community, such as Samuel A. Levy, the Teubals, and the Damascene community organization Bene Emet:

“This assembly is represented by delegates of almost all of the Societies of Sephardim in Buenos Aires of all origins: Moroccans, Damascenes, from Smyrna, Aleppines, Jerusalemites, from Rhodes, from Constantinople and presented a comforting element.”\textsuperscript{160} The Confederation hoped to “be the collective representation and defense of all of the Sephardic Jews” by uniting all of these groups.\textsuperscript{161} Along with another proposal for a unified organization in August of that year, the Confederation showed a desire for internal unity.\textsuperscript{162} While the evidence does not show the outcome for the second proposed organization, the Federation of Sephardic Jews decided to abandon its activities to support a new organization, the Federation of Argentine Jewish Societies (F. A. S. I.).\textsuperscript{163}

In July of 1931 articles began appearing in \textit{Israel} about the formation of a federation to unite all of the Ashkenazic and Sephardic organizations in Argentina. The organizers of this project belonged to the newly founded Argentine branch of B’nai B’rith, an international Jewish organization formed in New York in 1843.\textsuperscript{164} While past attempts at unified organizations failed, B’nai B’rith blamed the organization’s structures rather than inherent incompatibility:

\begin{quote}
The necessity of a Federation of Jewish Societies has been recognized for a while. Many entities formulated projects. They tried diverse forms of societies, without positive results, because there would always be differences of opinions and for this reason the problem became uselessly complicated. A lot of societies were in opposition in order to not lose their identity.\textsuperscript{165}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{159} Brodsky, \textit{Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine}, 108.
\item \textsuperscript{160} “Confederación Israelita Sefaradi,” \textit{Israel}, June 19, 1931, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{161} “Confederación Israelita Sefaradi,” \textit{Israel}, June 19, 1931, 3.
\item \textsuperscript{162} “Es necesario tener un organismo representativo de la colectividad para la mejor consecución de sus fines,” \textit{Israel}, August 7, 1931, 7
\item \textsuperscript{163} Brodsky, \textit{Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine}, 107–8.
\item \textsuperscript{164} Brodsky, \textit{Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine}, 107–8.
\item \textsuperscript{165} “Federación Arg. de Sociedades Israelitas,” \textit{Israel}, July 3-10, 1931, 32.
\end{itemize}
Past opposition to unified organizations grew out of failures to account for the many perspectives brought by Jews. This new attempt needed to ensure that local communities could preserve their identities.

*Israel* expressed enthusiasm about B’nai B’rith’s potential to contribute to and unify the community. An article from May of 1931 shared positive opinions about B’nai B’rith: “The conscious membership of B’nai B’rith is convinced that each Jew is a ring in a great chain that destiny has forged over centuries; that everyone is a member of the Jewish congregation if one was born into it, and one cannot in whatever way elude their duties.”166 Links between Jews compelled them to contribute to the construction of their identity. Further, common Jewishness could unite Jews of different backgrounds: “Their most important end goal is the solidarity of all of the Jewish groups, always giving to the spiritual element of Jewish life.”167 Through attempts to build an umbrella organization, B’nai B’rith could bring Jews together.

Articles about F. A. S. I.’s progress filled *Israel’s* pages in 1931 and 1932, especially regarding the relationship between the Federation and provincial Jewish communities, which Brodsky shows overlooked community boundaries and maintained connections with larger and more established communities in Buenos Aires.168 Thus, communities in both Buenos Aires and the provinces remained connected despite different community compositions, and these communities outside of Buenos Aires held a stake in community changes occurring within the Capital.

In October of 1931 *Israel* reported that letters from the interior of Argentina received at the Federation’s committee meeting expressed support for the Federation: “The majority of the

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entities express their warm enthusiasm for the work. There is a climate of sympathy with the Federation.”\textsuperscript{169} However, later on in October Israel conducted a poll asking “What should be the function of a Federation of Argentine Jewish Societies?” to which Isaac Levy, a Jew from Venado Tuerto in Santa Fe replied.\textsuperscript{170} He saw failures to include provincial organizations in the development of the Federation as part of a larger pattern of failing to include Jews outside of Buenos Aires in community decision making: “I read the newsletter and from my perspective I thought it was a great idea in principle, that will be nullified because as always it only represents Buenos Aires, and the rest of the important societies in the provinces and territories have to appoint someone in the Capital to represent them.”\textsuperscript{171} While Isaac saw the benefits of a unified federation, he wanted to make sure that the federation would hear concerns outside of Buenos Aires, which he felt in its present form would fail to do so. Further, as shown by Brodsky, organizations in the interior already overlooked community boundaries out of necessity so they would not need this type of organization.\textsuperscript{172}

Despite criticism such as Isaac’s, Israel continued supporting the Federation’s work. In December of 1931 it published a press release from the most recent meeting that addressed the concerns raised about the inclusion of communities outside of Buenos Aires. Yet, it claimed that “thanks to the press it can be in contact with interior communities,” so communities in the interior could send delegates to Buenos Aires to join F. A. S. I.\textsuperscript{173} It called upon these communities to send delegates so “F. A. S. I. will have representation of all of the Jewish societies in the country and will be able to intervene with its advisors who are knowledgeable

\textsuperscript{169} “Comité pro Federación Argentina de Sociedades Israelitas,” Israel, October 9, 1931, 17.
\textsuperscript{170} “Las encuestas de Israel,” Israel, October 30, 1931, 6.
\textsuperscript{171} “Las encuestas de Israel,”Israel, October 30, 1931, 6.
\textsuperscript{172} Brodsky, “Re-configurando comunidades,” 119.
\textsuperscript{173} “Para los primeros meses de 1932 quedara definitivamente establecida la federación Argentina de sociedades Israelitas,” Israel, December 16, 1931, 5.
about whatever item of general interest.”\textsuperscript{174} Thus, even if difficult, these communities needed to take it upon themselves to send delegates to Buenos Aires to receive benefits from the Federation.

With F. A. S. I.’s official establishment at the beginning of 1932, \textit{Israel} celebrated its achievements and retained a positive perspective on its work. At the beginning of April, news of the organization’s official formation and the creation of its constitution made the front page in an article describing it as a historic act. The organization would both initiate progress for the Jewish community of Argentina and connect it to Jewish community traditions: “Following the example of older and established Jewish communities, who organized representative entities to combat antisemitism, to speak in the name of everyone, to defend the good name of the Jews. The Federation of Argentine Jewish Societies will mark a new era in the life of Argentine Judaism and will put things in their place.”\textsuperscript{175} The Argentine Jewish community could finally carry on traditions of past Jewish communities by unifying in order to protect their identity.

The next month \textit{Israel} again granted F. A. S. I. a platform by publishing a report by the organization’s president. The report proclaimed that “the climate is perfectly prepared for the creation of our representative entity” and expanded upon the Federation’s goals.\textsuperscript{176} It reiterated its goal of unifying Ashkenazim and Sephardim:

Another of the ends pursued by F. A. S. I., is the sincere and honored union between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, the ideal encouraged for a while and that our organism will have occasion to lift or end, since they are treated by a robust organization, healthy and well disciplined, all of the Sephardic societies living in the best harmony.\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{174} “Para los primeros meses de 1932 quedara definitivamente establecida la federación Argentina de sociedades Israelitas,” \textit{Israel}, December 16, 1931, 5.
\textsuperscript{175} “Cronica: La constitución de la F. A. S. I. es un hecho histórico en el judaísmo Argentino,” \textit{Israel}, April 1, 1932, 8.
\textsuperscript{176} “Comite pro F.A.S.I.,” \textit{Israel}, May 6, 1932, 3.
\textsuperscript{177} “Comite pro F.A.S.I.,” \textit{Israel}, May 6, 1932, 3.
F. A. S. I. tried to illustrate the formation of a new Jewish community that overlooked difference and merged identities.

Despite the positive reception in *Israel*, F. A. S. I. ultimately failed to craft a lasting impact on the community. Like the other external attempts to unify the community supported by *Israel*, it failed to fully address community needs and realities, such as the inclusion of provincial Jews, because it imposed community rather than allowing it to develop naturally. *Israel* reflected the larger desire for unity by supporting the Federation, yet its pages also revealed a confusion around whether the community should unify on its own or with the influence of outsiders.

**CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGES OF IMPOSED UNITY**

Attempts to unify the Sephardic and Jewish communities around Zionism, Rabbi Djaen, and the Federation of Argentine Jewish Societies demonstrate both the desire to form a unified community, yet also the exclusions that could grow out of top-down attempts that did not reflect community realities. *Israel* reflected Penslar’s characterization of newspapers as the products of the desires of the communities in which they existed. Yet, those desires did not always translate into concrete plausible projects, and thus *Israel*’s support failed to recognize the entire community.

The difficulties that emerged in these three projects illustrated the manners in which large scale projects overlooked individual or local negotiations of identity. In the case of Zionism, the WZO attempted to fit Argentine Sephardim into its prescribed image of Zionism; Argentine Sephardim rejected Rabbi Sabetay Djaen who represented the World Confederation of Sephardic

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Jews since he misread their community identity; finally, B’nai B’rith and F. A. S. I. failed to represent the entire community. In contrast to these institutional attempts at unified community, Argentine Sephardim negotiated interconnected local communities, as shown in the following section.
III. TRANSNATIONAL SPACE: FORGING A HOME AND PRESERVING A HISTORY

While external organizations attempted to impose community identity on Argentine Sephardim, local communities forged their own common identities through associations that responded to their new environments. Argentine Sephardim simultaneously belonged to a larger Jewish community and found smaller communities with Sephardim of origins similar to their own. Many of the associations that they formed to support the community often represented these specific communities of origin, especially with regard to the larger communities from Morocco, Damascus, and Aleppo, who often lived in the same neighborhoods in Buenos Aires. 179

Transnational identities facilitated Sephardic connections to communities of origin and preserved identities based on local tradition. Ava Kahn and Adam Mendelsohn, in their study of Jewish migration to the Americas, define transnational identity as “a descriptive term to explain cultural, religious, social, institutional, and economic linkages that spanned political borders and boundaries” and as a “distinct alternative to the term ‘migrant’” to highlight strong connections to a past homeland independent of the chance of return. 180 Thus, as they permanently settled in Argentina, Sephardic migrants held an identity that transversed national borders. This identity differed from diasporic identity because it specifically connoted an identity that adopted characteristics from different nations and communities. These connections to distinct global communities preserved a prominent role for community of origin in the construction of Argentine Sephardic identities. Further, transnational identities linked Sephardim and

179 Brodsky, Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine, 61–62.
Ashkenazim, with distinct linguistic, religious, and cultural practices, to different spatial pasts and customs.

Sephardim retained transnational affinities despite adjustment to Argentina and attempts to develop a unified Argentine Sephardic identity. Although Argentine Sephardim all faced similar challenges of adjusting to a new space, their pre-migration heterogeneous cultural practices and roots of belonging challenged the development of a singular Sephardic identity within Argentina. Since, according to Ray Sephardic identity developed through the millennial process of diaspora, it brought these experiences into new identities.\textsuperscript{181} In their smaller communities, Sephardim formed identities that stretched from Argentina back to their sending communities and allowed them to delineate transnational space from individual experiences.

**PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE AND THE TRANSNATIONAL**

In 1906, at 13 years old, Nissim Teubal left Aleppo for Argentina. After living in Buenos Aires for six years he moved to Manchester, England for 18 years to further develop his trading business. Nissim, who returned to Buenos Aires with his family in 1930, was a public figure among Sephardim in Buenos Aires, in addition to running his own trading company.\textsuperscript{182} *Israel* articles highlighted his community visibility at countless local events, including one that mentioned him as a representative for Hessed Schel Emeth Sefaradith at a meeting of the Confederation of Sephardic Jews and one that celebrated his involvement in the creation of a new building for a Syrian religious school.\textsuperscript{183} Despite his prominent role in Buenos Aires’s Sephardic life, Nissim titled his memoir *El inmigrante: de Alepo a Buenos Aires* (The

\textsuperscript{181} Ray, “New Approaches to the Jewish Diaspora,” 18.
\textsuperscript{182} Nissim Teubal, *El inmigrante: de Alepo a Buenos Aires*. (Buenos Aires, 1953), 13, 66, 85, 92, 121.
\textsuperscript{183} “Confederación Israelita Sefaradi,” *Israel*, June 19, 1931, 4; “Inauguración de un edificio social para templo y talmud torah en ciudadela,” *Israel*, May 6, 1932, 7.
Immigrant: From Aleppo to Buenos Aires), which centralized his community of origin in his identity 47 years after his departure and highlighted his specific migratory experience. Nissim’s connections with both his old and new communities showed that Sephardic migrants, like migrants of other backgrounds, retained memories of their communities of origin.

Initially Nissim remembered Aleppo negatively. While Ottoman law granted Jews rights and he acknowledged the lack of mass persecution, he claimed that “we were humiliated by a practically despotic and literally crushing regime.” At the beginning of the twentieth century Nissim witnessed the departure for the Americas of other Jews in his community, which invoked in him a desire to leave as well. In 1906 when presented with the opportunity to migrate to Argentina with his uncle and cousin, he gladly joined them:

> Everything made me want to leave Aleppo. Life there did not have a future. There was not even a business that had more than 20 workers. What would we wait for? Loss, poverty, mediocracy. The Jews were excluded from political and administrative life of the country. Without capital, financial resources, support, at best they could only aspire to be a day laborer, have a vegetable stand, a shop or a small stand.

While he avoided direct violence or persecution, Nissim lacked the social mobility that he hoped to find in Argentina. Like other early migrants from the Ottoman Empire he left in search of economic opportunities that did not exist for him in his home community.

Nissim’s memoir demonstrated his transmission of Aleppine Sephardic identity to Buenos Aires and his personal negotiations with the transnational. Despite his excitement to leave Aleppo, he found community among other Arabic-speaking Sephardim in Buenos Aires and constructed a home in new surroundings. These Sephardim held similar cultural characteristics, so he could form a community distinct from other Sephardim: “More than once,

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in a group of friends, we sat around by the dock to sing Arabic songs. We would feel nostalgia
for our native land. Those songs felt strange in Buenos Aires, but they were full of resonance and
meaning for us.” Temporal distance made Aleppo begin to feel like home; he could feel
Aleppine through the songs, though only because he sang them in Buenos Aires. Placed in a new
context the songs transformed from normal songs to representations of nostalgia for an old land.
Recollection allowed Nissim to construct a transnational identity and thus form a community
with others negotiating connections to the same two lands. At the same time, since he
constructed his identity through Arabic songs, his conception of community excluded non-
Arabic speaking Jews because they could not relate to his homeland in the same manner.

Steven Hyland shows that Syrian immigrants to Argentina of all ethnic backgrounds
retained connections to Syria despite its changing political status. With the dissolution of the
Ottoman Empire in the early 1920s and the development of Arab nationalism, ensuing ethnic
conflicts, especially between Muslims, Christians and Jews, projected themselves upon the
Syrian community in Argentina. Thus, Nissim Teubal’s memoir captures a time of change in
his relationships with other Syrians. Still, he felt a deep connection with the memory of his home
community as he left it and the languages and traditions that he learned there.

In 1935 Nissim visited Aleppo with his family and renewed his nostalgia for his past
community. After spending 29 years away he redefined Aleppo as home, in part due to his
community in Buenos Aires. He rejoiced through recollection as he arrived in Aleppo: “All of
Aleppo produced an intense happiness in me. All of those places that I visited, all of those streets
and paths intimately associated with the first impressions of my life. Their affective value is

188 Teubal, El inmigrante, 85.
189 Hyland, “‘Arisen from Deep Slumber,’” 548, 557, 573.
unique for me and I do not know how to easily explain the emotion that they produced in me.”

Physical return to a home that he could only remember through constructed communities in Buenos Aires provoked unexplainable emotions in Nissim. The transnational longing preserved through Arabic songs recreated Aleppo as his homeland, even though he did not understand it as home when he lived there.

Other Sephardic migrants to Argentina similarly constructed connections to their home communities through recollection. The journalist Ricardo Reinoso conducted interviews in 2001 and 2002 with Marcos Levy, a Sephardic migrant who never fully abandoned his affinity for his community in Turkey. Marcos arrived in Tucuman, Argentina in 1923 after leaving Izmir due to violence and persecution in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish war. He referred to Izmir as “my land” and, unlike Nissim, resented his migration to Argentina. He saw his migration as a necessity, rather than a choice he would willingly make given other options: “No one would go to Argentina for pleasure, but for hunger or to escape the war.” Thus, he preserved his connection to his home city by resenting his departure, even if he could not actually imagine a return.

Both Nissim Teubal and Marcos Levy maintained their transnational identity through memory, but the changing status of their communities of origin challenged that recollection. In 1906 Nissim left an Aleppo that existed inside the multiethnic Ottoman Empire, but in 1935

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190 Teubal, El inmigrante, 133.
192 Reinoso, La vida, según Marcos Levy, 12.
193 Reinoso, La vida, según Marcos Levy, 34.
visited an Aleppo in the Syrian Republic under French mandate; however, upon his return he claimed that political changes had not affected the city. In 1922 the Turkish army captured Marcos’s city. Although it had historically been part of the Ottoman Empire, post-World War I peace treaties had placed it under Greek control in 1919.

In an essay about Leon Sciaky’s memoir of migration from Salonica to the United States, Diana Matza describes the relationship between writing and preserving a timeless past: “Timelessness exists in the act of writing, which here is an act of preservation… Never again will the portulaca look exactly the same, which is one of the reasons Sciaky has described it.” Thus, the transnational identity recounted through memoirs referenced a timeless past rather than a present reality. This meant that migrants understood the reality of their identity based in Argentina, yet still remembered their old community frozen in an ahistorical past.

**TRANSNATIONAL BURIAL: PRESERVING JEWISH MOROCCO AND MOROCCAN ARGENTINA**

Sephardim needed to craft a balance between a larger Sephardic identity and connections to their smaller communities. While traditionally scholarship about Latin American Sephardim portrayed local differences as absolute, recent scholarship, especially by Brodsky and Rein demonstrates that communities sometimes overlooked those differences. Still, these shared spaces challenged existing boundaries that arose based on traditions brought from home.

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195 Reinoso, *La vida, según Marcos Levy*, 6; Trumpener, “Greco-Turkish War.”


communities. The divisions that emerged between Sephardim from different communities, and between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, developed from a preserved transnational identity specific to the process of migration. This transnational identity retained connections to traditions inaccessible to other members of the Jewish community.

Sephardic cemeteries as enclosed spaces preserved connections to communities of origin. Brodsky argues that these cemeteries and burial societies delineated difference to highlight specific cultural characteristics. While Sephardim varied in the attention they paid to these divisions, intentional differences grew especially visible through cemetery walls: “The walls in Jewish cemeteries- and the existence of various Jewish cemeteries in one city or town- did not (and still do not) mark only ‘Jewishness’ but also a desire to highlight origin.”198 Despite understandings of a broader Sephardic identity, the specifically local experience of diaspora left lasting impressions that shaped Argentine community identities. For example, in 1900 Moroccan Sephardim founded their own cemetery in Buenos Aires due conflicts with other Jews that arose in a shared cemetery.199 Since cemeteries allowed Sephardim to represent identity in their new context, they projected it back towards their relationships with their communities of origin.

The importance vested in cemeteries and burial illustrates the salience of death in defining migrant relationships with their communities of origin. Roberta Halporn shows that American Jewish burial customs developed over time and with local characteristics that other communities could not reproduce.200 Sometimes migrants go beyond burial in ethnic cemeteries and return bodies to communities of origin as a final opportunity to return home. In a study of

198 Brodsky, Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine, 51.
199 Rubén E. Beraja et al., Presencia Sefaradi En La Argentina (Argentina: Centro Educativo Sefaradi en Jerusalem, 1992), 50.
posthumous repatriation of Mexican migrants to the United States Adrián Félix argues that “Because a return in life is uncertain, the desire for a posthumous return to the community of origin is a recurring theme in the collective memories, everyday exchanges, and cultural production of rural Mexican migrants.” Further, by returning bodies, both communities retain transnational connections. A study by Lorena Nunez and Brittany Wheeler about posthumous migrant return home in Johannesburg demonstrates a similar pattern of searching for a place of permanent belonging. Thus, migrant communities imagine cemeteries and death as sites at which to retain connections to communities of origin.

While Israel does not show posthumous repatriation for Argentine Sephardim, a request for funds to build a wall around the Jewish cemetery in Tetouan, Morocco illustrated a similar connection between homeland and burial. On April 24th, 1931 Israel published a letter from the Jewish Community of Tetouan that asked for financial support to construct a cemetery wall. The letter described Argentina’s Moroccan Jews, who had largely migrated in search of economic opportunity, as “children of Morocco,” thereby claiming a permanent connection between Moroccan Sephardim in Argentina and Moroccan Sephardim in Tetouan: “Confident in the love that you always show for your city of birth, we hope to see achieved with a lot of success the duty that we entrust you with, not forgetting that tomorrow you might return to honor your magnetic attachment to residence by memories and affection.” Although Moroccan Sephardim in Argentina built lives far from Morocco, the letter implied that those who they left behind still

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202 Félix, “Posthumous Transnationalism,” 177.
expected them to fulfil their duty to their community of origin and maintain a connection with Morocco.

The Moroccan Sephardim in Buenos Aires did fulfil their duty to Morocco, and the following issue of Israel reflected enthusiastically on the campaign’s success. Through donations the Moroccan Sephardic community “all answered as a single person in ample and enthusiastic form.”

A common understanding of community unified the Moroccan Sephardic response. Thus, they connected to their home community in a manner that other Sephardim could not adopt. In light of the successful fundraising campaign, Israel celebrated the continued national affinity that Moroccan Sephardim in Argentina felt towards Tetouan: “The success- it is said- of the campaign, has been brilliant, if one takes into account the fervent love for their childhood homeland, the forever lovers of Tetouan, they profess to their children to settle down in the exterior, only in a foreign place.” Even though they lived in Argentina, they still felt Moroccan and passed that identity down to their children. In Argentina Sephardim defined their identity through cemetery walls, in both their new and old communities.

This similar phenomenon in both Argentina and Morocco indicated a desire to preserve a space for the local community. In Morocco that meant separating their community from those of other religions, whereas for Jews in Buenos Aires it meant protecting their local identity from Sephardim originating in other communities. For both communities, linked by historical ties, the cemetery served as the site through which to preserve identity across national borders.

205 “Los muros del cementerio de Tetuán,” Israel, April 24, 1931, 4.
206 “Crónica: Los muros del cementerio de Tetuán, la colectividad marroquí en la Argentina y la obra de difusión de Israel,” Israel, July 24, 1931, 7.
207 This understanding of the roles of cemeteries came out of a discussion with another student, Leah Budson, about the relationship between cemeteries and homeland.
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS AND CONFRONTING BORDERS

Margalit Bejarano argues that the community organizations created by Sephardim at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries developed from old country community organization structures. Therefore, Argentine Sephardic organizations represented and connected local communities to their communities of origin. Brodsky, however, points to the complications of understanding community organizations solely based in origin, since smaller communities outside of Buenos Aires often overlooked the more finite boundaries within Buenos Aires.

The Levy Family and Bene Emet: Conditional Inclusion

Estela Levy, the immigrant from Istanbul discussed in section I, encountered both the opportunities presented by aligning with Sephardim from different communities of origin and the limits. Although the Levy family migrated from Istanbul, Estela’s father became involved with Bene Emet, a Damascene community organization. Estela described the disparity between her own upbringing and the religiosity of the Damascene members of Bene Emet: “The orthodoxy of our coreligionists was severe and the liberalness, - in some religious matters- of my parents, meant a step back to avoid suspicious looks.” Her family needed to redefine its practice of Judaism and social life to conform to the traditions of a different Sephardic community. Since they needed to find community, the Levy family adopted a different identity, which challenged their transnational connection to Istanbul.

208 Bejarano, “Séfardic Communities in Latin America,” 25.
210 Estela Levy, Crónica de una familia sefaradí, 52.
Despite her discomfort, Estela recognized the importance of sacrifice by her and her family in order to settle in Argentina; while she portrayed finite distinctions between Jews from Istanbul and Damascus, she could override them through her desire for community. Estela justified her family’s adaption: “It was not an error [for my father] to accept… [the role in the community commission] at the heart of a community with such a distant language and customs, but strongly united by community.”

Despite the community’s differences from her own traditions, it still facilitated her adjustment to Argentina. Therefore, she could overlook tensions in order to find comfort.

The sense of belonging created by Bene Emet did not override preexisting boundaries. Bene Emet’s founding documents, which discussed the construction of its cemetery, proclaimed that this cemetery would be “pure and exclusively for Jewish Syrians, composed of those from the provinces of Damascus and Beirut.”

While this evidence does not show the degree of enforcement, the codification of boundaries in community documents preserved the importance of difference among community lines. Therefore, the Levy family would not have been able to completely overcome the boundaries, stretching from Buenos Aires to Damascus, that separated them from the Jews of Bene Emet.

**Beyond Sephardim: Ashkenazim and Community Organizations**

Sephardim also negotiated relationships with the more numerous Ashkenazic community, who composed almost 83% of the Argentine Jewish population. While Sephardic migration

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211 Estela Levy, *Crónica de una familia sefaradí*, 52.
212 Beraja et al., *Presencia Sefaradí en la Argentina*, 86.
patterns tended to follow familial ties and informal connections, Ashkenazim found home in Argentina through the involvement of institutions, including Baron Hirsch’s JCA.\textsuperscript{214}

Even for Ashkenazim who did not migrate through the JCA, the presence of Ashkenazim from the same communities as themselves facilitated organized migration. Norman C. Chaitin, an Ashkenazi Jew born in Argentina who migrated to the United States as an adult, wrote a memoir in 1995 that described institutional involvement in his family’s migration: “My parents arrived in Buenos Aires and people from the same area in Russia were waiting for them (Borodiansky). An article had appeared in the press saying that immigrants from that area were arriving and they had gone to receive them.”\textsuperscript{215} Through the process of migration, Norman’s family could maintain a connection to its sending community through the process of settlement in Argentina.

Sephardic-Ashkenazic relationships negotiated transnational boundaries due to histories of migration and traditions carried from home communities, while also recognizing common membership in a larger Argentine Jewish community. The presence of Yiddish in shared Jewish spaces, including Palestine, inspired much of the division between Ashkenazim and Sephardim that arose on the pages of \textit{Israel}.\textsuperscript{216} With the founding of the Hebrew University in Palestine and the creation of a Yiddish department, \textit{Israel} broadcasted opinions about the role of Yiddish in the University. In November of 1927 it opened the discussion by expressing interest in the role of Yiddish as related to Hebrew: “We think the initiative is interesting and useful, in spite of it being a language added to our people, that has a singular and beautiful ancient language,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{214} Bejarano, “The Sephardic Communities of Latin America,” in Contemporary Sephardic Identity in the Americas, 14-15.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Norman C. Chaitin, \textit{From Rio de La Plata to the Hudson River} (New York, 1995), 44.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Yiddish is the language historically spoken by the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. It is similar to German and traditionally written with Hebrew letters. Barnavi and Eliav-Feldon, \textit{A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People}, 192.
\end{itemize}
Hebrew.”217 *Israel* understood that centuries of use made Yiddish important within Ashkenazi identity, yet also believed that its intentional addition facilitated its unnatural inclusion. Further, Yiddish drew insurmountable borders around the Ashkenazi community that linked it to Eastern Europe, rather than to common sites of unity, such as Argentina or Palestine. Although *Israel* expressed interest in further discussion of Jewish language, it warned that this debate would eventually lead to a clash, especially since some Jews, including Sephardim, did not speak Yiddish.218

In February of 1928 this discussion resumed and *Israel* expressed heightened concern regarding the existence of Yiddish in the University. The editors portrayed it as a threat to a shared Jewish identity that included both Ashkenazim and Sephardim: “For us, the Sephardim, this Yiddish department will solidify this wall that separates Ashkenazim and Sephardim, that we are trying to break down.”219 It would create a space in the University, originally meant to include all Jews, that excluded Sephardim through a language that they did not speak. Further, space dedicated towards studying Yiddish took the place of space that the University could dedicate towards the study of biblical Hebrew, which could break down transnational walls between Ashkenazim and Sephardim.220 Although Sephardim spoke different local languages, such as Arabic and Ladino, these languages did not exclude other Sephardim since they represented much smaller groups within the entire Jewish community.

Ashkenazim still constituted the majority group, so they ran many key Jewish institutions in Buenos Aires; Sephardim needed to create Sephardic spaces within those institutions in order to find belonging in the Jewish community. In 1929 Sephardim began fundraising to build a

219 Elias M. Raphael, “¿Hebreo o Idisch?…,” *Israel*, February 24, 1928, 8.
220 Elias M. Raphael, “¿Hebreo o Idisch?…,” *Israel*, February 24, 1928, 8.
Sephardic Pavilion in the Jewish hospital with the goal of unifying Sephardim and Ashkenazim through the project.\(^{221}\) The next week, Israel tried to further mobilize Sephardim by describing their key role in building the hospital and their success in raising money, although it does not indicate the amount of money they gave:

> We should add here that the Sephardic collective has cooperated in a satisfactory manner to the construction of the Jewish Hospital, and due to their excellent economic condition, it will be easy to collect the necessary funds for the construction of a special pavilion, that will be the concrete collaboration of the Sephardim in a great collective work.\(^{222}\)

Even though Sephardim participated in the original construction of the hospital, they needed their own space to cement belonging and make visible their participation. Similar discussions followed other calls for Sephardic support of Ashkenazi organizations, such as that regarding funds for the Refuge for Orphans and the Elderly in 1929.\(^ {223}\)

Perspectives from Ashkenazim on negotiations between Ashkenazim and Sephardim highlighted disunity. In September of 1930 an article on the front page of the Ashkenazic Mundo Israelita blamed Sephardim for community divisions: “The immense majority of the Sephardim live isolated from Jewish interest and demonstrate an excessive zeal for maintaining isolation.”\(^ {224}\) The article portrayed Ashkenazim as the default Jewish group and Sephardim as a variation that failed to conform to Jewish ideals. However, it did acknowledge the involvement of Sephardim in the Jewish hospital as the exception to perceived Sephardic isolation. This indication of some acceptance of shared community spaces and the potential success of the Sephardic Pavilion discussed by Israel in 1929 showed a physical manifestation of Sephardim inside Ashkenazic space.\(^ {225}\)

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\(^{221}\) J. H. Bibas, “Un pabellón Sefaradí en el hospital Israelita,” Israel, April 19-26, 1929, 11.

\(^{222}\) “Crónica: Pabellón sefardí en el hospital israelita,” Israel, May 3, 1929, 7.

\(^{223}\) “Crónica: El asilo argentino de huérfanos y ancianos y la colectividad sefardí,” Israel, July 12-17, 1929, 7.

“Asilo Israelita Argentino para Ancianos y Huérfanos. Llamado a nuestro hermanos Sefaradim,” Israel, August 2-9, 1929, 3.

\(^{224}\) “La cooperación de los sefardim,” Mundo Israelita, September 13, 1930, 1.

\(^{225}\) “La cooperación de los sefardim,” Mundo Israelita, September 13, 1930, 1.
Buenos Aires and the Provinces: Convenient Unity

In 1934 131,000 of Argentina’s 253,242 Jews lived in Buenos Aires, of which the Sephardic community numbered 24,000 members. Besides the JCA agricultural colonies, in which 30,659 total Jews lived distributed around the country, the next largest Jewish community in Rosario numbered only 12,500. Therefore, outside of Buenos Aires local communities needed to overlook difference in order to form sizeable enough communities to exist. Further, Susana Brauner shows that population sizes often determined membership in smaller communities, even though Sephardim prioritized the preservation of their local traditions.

Israel noted the more fluid boundaries between organizations in discussions of provincial community organizations. The editors noted that in the case of the organization Hessed Vehemet in Resistencia, Chaco, although preliminarily founded by Moroccan Jews, “Its work is a symbol of honor for Argentine Jews.” The communities outside of Buenos Aires represented the longed for unity within Buenos Aires. Brodsky uses this phenomenon to argue that necessity created malleable borders outside of Buenos Aires, even while community organizations typically grounded the local community. Thus, transnational identities blended to facilitate survival.

Relationships with Ashkenazim outside of Buenos Aires also showed increased unity between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In one article from 1931 Israel praised the unity of the

229 “Crónica: El extraordinario progreso de la ‘asociación israelita latina Hessed Vehemet’, de Resistencia, Chaco, Israel, July 24, 1931, 8. No demographic data exists for Resistencia’s Jewish population during this time, which leads me to believe that it was smaller than the communities listed in Weill’s report. That would mean that the community numbered under 850. Weill, “Población Israelita en la República Argentina,” 12.
230 Brodsky, Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine, 50.
Jewish community in Rosario Tala, in Entre Ríos: “The example of our coreligionists in Rosario Tala is telling. Siblings look for siblings to reconstruct the great family.”\textsuperscript{231} The author saw a greater Jewish unification between Ashkenazim and Sephardim that formed out of necessity, but also represented natural commonality. Despite centuries of separation, the Jewishness of both Ashkenazim and Sephardim could allow them to overcome differences of origin and custom in order to ensure that the Jewish community survived. As a result, they did not unify against Argentina, but rather in order to exist within it.

CONCLUSION: TRANSNATIONAL BORDERS

Sephardim in Argentina delineated boundaries around their transnational identities that connected them back to their communities of origin. Their common connections to spatially distant communities allowed Sephardim to develop specific identities that differed from those of other origins. Some Sephardim, such as Estela Levy, could challenge those boundaries, but they could not completely overcome different histories and connections to native lands in which they had formed other community connections. Therefore, the Argentine Sephardic identity that formed through the process of migration grappled with the convergence of traditional characteristics in a new setting and the formation of a new identity.

\textsuperscript{231} “Crónica: Sefaradim y Asquenazim en Rosario Tala,” \textit{Israel}, October 16, 1931, 7. No data exists for the Jewish population of Rosario Tala, but the smallest listed community in Entre Ríos is that of San Salvador, which numbered 520. Weill, “Población Israelita en la República Argentina,” 31.
CONCLUSION

Sephardim from communities around the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans converged in Argentina in the first decades of the twentieth century and subsequently reconstructed their identities. Faced by others who also called themselves Sephardim, yet spoke different languages and held different traditions, they redefined their identities to fit new boundaries. Further, interactions with the Ashkenazic community redefined Jewishness to include a community further distant from their own. Simultaneously, these Sephardim negotiated between adopting Argentine customs and preserving their own religious and cultural customs. Out of these balances and tensions developed an Argentine Sephardic identity specific to the influences of its surroundings.

Since Sephardim needed to grapple with numerous influences, they constructed their identities with intentionality. Both community leaders and families negotiated the balance between the Argentine and Sephardic elements of their identity; the community withstood efforts by outsiders to construct a unified Sephardic and Jewish identity that overlooked community realities; finally, Sephardim retained their smaller communities through transnational connections to homelands. Through the process of negotiating identity, they formed new identity that, while not homogenous, constructed unity through the common experiences of diaspora, migration, and a desire for belonging in Argentina.

During the twentieth century both national and global events shaped understandings of Argentine Sephardic identity. From World War II and the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 to negotiations with Peronism, Argentine Sephardim experienced an eventful twentieth
As the world developed a new order, Argentine Sephardim further combined the traditions that composed their identity and created a new order of their own.

Estela Levy’s cookbook, briefly referenced in section I, provides a window into the lasting effects of these initial decades of negotiated identity. Written in 1978, Levy created it to remember the formation of Argentine Sephardic identity through food. In the prologue she explained the significance of her project: “[A Sephardic cookbook] is the complete sentiment of man and a memory. A memory that does not want to and cannot be erased from one’s life, from one’s skin, that paradoxically is not a memory from one’s own land. It is the memory of a land to which one arrived and settled in.”

Migration and the formation of identity occurred through a process that deserved commemoration. The identities represented by the cookbook reference specific cultural characteristics, but do not represent pure identities carried from a homeland; rather, the cookbook describes identities developed in Argentina.

According to Estela, the cookbook represents the exchange of traditions between Sephardim and the development of an identity that included different origins. Estela wrote that the cookbook

undertakes the reunion of memories that we think to have adapted many times to different forms of life and conserved themselves. From there an original amalgamation emerged. We encounter Balkan people who use dishes that people from Morocco, Aleppo or Damascus use with small variations acquired through differences in climate in which they developed their new lives.

Sephardim from various places adopted each other’s traditions, and the convergence of these specific identities created an identity that could only emerge in Argentina.

The cookbook exists as one of few examples of the role of women in constructing Argentine Sephardic identity. Still, using it to represent women also points to the persistence of

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gendered social tropes. Women occasionally wrote in *Israel*, but men wrote the majority of the articles, and thus most of the articles cited in this thesis. Further, of the memoirs written by Sephardim about the early twentieth century in Argentina, Estela’s represented the only woman’s voice. Thus, out of discomfort in using a cookbook as one of the sole representations of women’s contributions to Argentine Sephardic identity, I want to frame it as a call to look in alternate spaces for the manners in which Sephardic women negotiated their place in Argentine Sephardic identity, rather than as an example of women’s self-expression.

Some historians have begun to study Argentine Jewish women in the early twentieth century. A book by Sandra McGee Deutsch, for example, shows that Jewish women actively participated in Argentina’s economic life, yet it focuses mostly on the larger Ashkenazic community. Brodsky’s work adds a Sephardic perspective on women’s involvement in community organizations. Despite exclusion from decision making, they supported their communities by hosting philanthropic events and formed their own women’s organizations. Still, these projects largely focus on specifically gendered activities. Further, this scholarship considers only cisgender heterosexual (and majority married) women. While these identities may have been less visible in the first decades of the twentieth century, historians should be cautious of denying their existence.

Despite my hesitation to characterize *Cocina sefaradí* as the voice of women, it does show that women shaped Argentine Sephardic identity, although excluded from dominant discourse. The combination of culinary traditions illustrated that Sephardim built an identity in Argentina that only could have existed in the specific conditions in which it formed. Therefore,

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235 Deutsch, “‘I Worked, I Struggled.’” 70–71.
Estela characterized Argentine Sephardic identity as the combination of many different identities all trying to find their place in new surroundings.

*Cocina sefaradí* fits into a larger discourse from earlier in the century that grappled with the components of an Argentine Sephardic identity. This initial period of migration and the tensions that developed show that the migration of Sephardic Jews to Argentina fits into bigger discussions about the process of migrants finding belonging in a new land. The case of Argentine Sephardim holds particular characteristics due to the sending and receiving communities involved. Nonetheless, as migration continues to hold a global presence in the twenty first century, contemporaries should remember past instances of migration. Examples like that of Argentine Sephardim show that people constantly move and seek better lives in new surroundings. Thus, receiving countries need to take on the responsibility of creating a space for a new home.
APPENDIX A: Excerpts from “Población Israelita en la República Argentina”
### Población Israelita en la República Argentina

Calculated according to the migratory growth and vegetative increase

<table>
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<th>Año</th>
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<th>Crecimiento Vegetativo</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<th>Crecimiento Vegetativo</th>
<th>Total</th>
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Anexo 2
## Población en la República Argentina

### Anexo 3

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<th>Población Total de la República</th>
<th>POBLACION ISRAELITA</th>
<th>eje que representa la población israelita</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>ALMAS</td>
<td>ALMAS</td>
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<tr>
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#### Provincia de:

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<tr>
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<td><strong>San Juan</strong></td>
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#### Gobierno de:

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<th>Población</th>
<th>POBLACION ISRAELITA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>en Km²</td>
<td>Total de la República</td>
<td>ALMAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chaco</strong></td>
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(1) Esta cifra de la población es según los datos suministrados por la Sección "Estadística de la Municipalidad de la Capital"; las demás de la misma columna están de acuerdo a los suministrados por la "Dirección General de Estadística de la Nación".

(2) Incluye la población israelita existente en las colonias y pueblos de la J. C. A.

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\[
\text{TOTAL} = \frac{2.966.702}{12.400.025} = 0.243
\]
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Newspapers

Israel

Mundo Israelita

Pamphlets/Reports


Memoirs/Personal Texts


Document History Books


Secondary Sources


