

# Sephardi culture earns rightful place in Israeli society

By TAMAR KAUFMAN

The founding of the State of Israel 30 years ago was the starting gun for a mad rush of Jews coming home. And come home they did - in their hundreds of thousands. The decade immediately following the establishment of the state was a revolutionary one for many veteran settlers as well, with Jews from far and near all converging on one small patch of desert and swamp. And nearly 70 per cent were Jews of Sephardi origin.

They came in airplanes, on board ships, in motor vehicles, on horses and donkeys and on foot. Some combined several modes of travel, like the 120,000 Jews who trudged on foot and donkey-back from Yemen to Aden and from there were flown (during Operation Magic Carpet) to Israel and the 20th century.

There was the man who rode his donkey all the way from Bukhara to Jerusalem. Satisfied that all was well, he turned around, returned to Bukhara, and brought his aged father back with him - all on the same faithful donkey.

As might be expected, the sudden confluence of languages, customs and people was a bit of a strain. "What kind of Jew never heard of gefilte fish?!" This was overheard not three decades ago, but three weeks ago. Who can tell what similar, and even stronger, comments were to be heard back then?

Language was another problem. Even when the herculean task had been performed and everyone was speaking the same one - Hebrew - there was no guarantee that communication was taking place. The European accent drove Easterners crazy with the strain of trying to comprehend. On the other hand, the breathy (and correct) Oriental "kchet" and deep throat "ayin", "kghuf" and "tghet" were harsh on western ears and could easily choke any European foolhardy enough to try and imitate them.

The theory held by Dr. Eliezer Jaffe, a senior lecturer at Hebrew University's School of Social Work, is that in desperation the harried authorities decided on the official policy of forging a new Jew. Unfortunately,

they created him in their own image; he was strictly an Eastern European. In trying to explain the alienation of Israel's Sephardim from their own culture, as well as to understand the difficulties this large segment of the population (55 per cent) have had in getting acclimated, Jaffe explains

that there was a policy of acculturation: of one culture absorbing the other. It wasn't so much that Israel's European-born leaders opposed Eastern culture - they were simply unaware of its existence. "A good dose of ethnocentricity" is how Jaffe explains their ignorance.



YEMENITE WOMAN and child arrive in 1945

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Several years ago the Israeli establishment was rudely awakened to the fact of Sephardi discontent. A group of young Sephardim calling themselves the "Black Panthers" disturbed the status quo by pointing out some very uncomfortable facts and comparing the situation of Sephardi Jews in Israel with that of Black Americans.

It was then discovered that there was an "other Israel," comprised of poor, undereducated, inadequately housed families. Investigations showed that, while 64 per cent of the children entering school were Sephardi, only 34 per cent of the first year high school students were of Eastern origin, 12 per cent of the first year college population and 4 per cent of the BA recipients. (These figures have since improved by about 4 per cent.) 45,000 families, most of them Sephardi, were found to be living in substandard housing.

Immigrants arriving in the 50's to a newly-born state struggling for its physical and economic existence were placed in ma'abarot: tent and shanty towns providing temporary shelter for the hundreds of thousands of Jews suddenly turning up from everywhere. Most of the newcomers accepted these poor conditions because they understood that the fledgling state could do no better at that time. And they patiently awaited the promised improvements.

Under the compulsory education law, the immigrants' children were

sent to Israeli schools and were taught Jewish history and customs according to previously established European assumptions. Every day upon returning home these children were confronted with a reality bearing little or no resemblance to what they were being taught in school. How were they to identify with the Ashkenazi-looking children depicted in their school books? How could they help but compare their parents, many still in traditional costumes and speaking Arabic, with the smartly dressed western teachers and with the parents of their schoolmates? Many of their parents could not read, and the oral knowledge which had served them so well in the old country was practically useless in the new.

Immigrant parents worked to preserve their traditions, beliefs and values; their children worked hard to shed anything that made them different from the Ashkenazim who were constantly held up for their emulation.

Many of the young Sephardim whether they remembered the lands of their parents or were Israeli-born, became totally alienated, ashamed of their origins and their "primitive" parents.

Those Sephardim who fought their way into the establishment demonstrated their success by adopting European life-styles, by

"passing" as Ashkenazi.

When the Israeli Black Panthers came into the picture, they shook not only the Ashkenazi establishment, but also the Sephardi elite who were forced into taking another look at the choices they had made. Many returned to the Sephardi fold and became advocates for their beleaguered communities.

Recently, a powerful lobby consisting of both Israel and Diaspora Sephardim has formed. During the 29th Zionist Congress, held in Jerusalem from Feb. 20-28, they demonstrated their solidarity and strength by presenting certain resolutions to the Zionist Executive. Chief among their demands were more equal representation on the various levels of the World Zionist Organization, a larger cut of the budget for Sephardi Jewish education in the Diaspora, and concrete solutions to the "social gap" dilemma in Israel.

The Israeli government has been working with the World Sephardi Federation in devising plans to combat the poverty cycle in many predominantly Sephardi villages and neighborhoods.

Sephardi culture is finally being given its rightful place in the national life of Israelis. History textbooks are being rewritten to include the contributions and

achievements of Oriental Jews to the State of Israel and the Jewish people. Holidays such as the Moroccan Maimona and the Kurdish Saharana are now receiving official recognition. Public figures are showing up at Sephardi celebrations, giving them the acceptance and stature previously denied them. Pressure is on to elect a Sephardi president, which would be a source of pride to many Eastern Jews the world over.

If Israel's first 30 years were devoted to forging and defending the first sovereign Jewish state in 2,000 years must be devoted, among other things, to facing the challenge of cultural pluralism.