

# The Alliance

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# An Ashkenazi's Plea to Sephardim

By Rabbi Emanuel Rackman

*This article was written for the Alliance Review by one of the most distinguished representatives of the new generation of American Rabbis, Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, Associate Professor at Yeshiva University, and President of the New York Hoard of Rabbis.*

Perhaps it is presumptuous for a politically and economically secure American Jew to suggest an agenda for the cultural activity of less fortunate brethren. Well might he be reminded of the truism that without bread there can be no Torah. Nonetheless, Sephardim have a great spiritual tradition which Judaism now needs desperately. And it would be most tragic if they permitted their own creative capacities in religious philosophy and Jewish law to suffer atrophy in the process of becoming the wards of western philanthropic agencies.

Judaism can be enriched immeasurably by at least two points of view which were characteristic of the Sephardic tradition. These two points of view the religious community of Israel must now recapture if it is not to lose its battle with Israel's secularism. And I ask Sephardim to consider this. Theirs is the power to save Judaism in the land which was its cradle. Let them be aware of the unique contribution that they can make. Their pride in their own background will be enhanced, and they will also realize that they can give to posterity in even greater measure than they are receiving from their contemporaries.

What are the points of view which I attribute to the Sephardic tradition? First, the Sephardic religious tradition never lost the authentically Jewish perspective that Jewish learning need not

be insulated from non-Jewish learning, lest Jews lose their faith in God or their loyalty to their ancestral way of life. Judaism always regarded the natural sciences and mathematics as avenues to the knowledge of God and His omnipotence.

In the last few centuries the overwhelming majority of Ashkenazi Yeshivot adopted a policy of isolation. As a result, the spiritual leaders whom they have furnished to Israel are ill-equipped even to understand the conceptions and attitudes of the very people whom they want to win back to Judaism. The threat to Torah is indescribable. By insisting upon ignorance of non-Jewish cultures, they in fact insult Torah. By implication, they make it appear that the truth of Torah cannot prevail against the onslaught of the natural and social sciences. Truth they thereby make dualistic, despite the inescapable monism which Judaism's commitment to monotheism implies.

There may be historical reasons for this obscurantism. When ghetto walls collapsed in Europe, an isolated Torah culture clashed suddenly with Western thought. Torah lost many adherents, and isolation was regarded as its only hope for survival. But this was a tragedy that occurred in central and eastern Europe. In the Mediterranean world, on the other hand, educated Sephardic Jews never were as far removed culturally from the learned non-Jews among whom they lived.

They always achieved some synthesis between their ancestral faith and the thought of their age. They had no fear of Torah's capacity to survive the emergence of any new ideas or insights. They emulated the example of their own great

forbears, including Maimonides and file many Sephardic philosophers who ]receded and followed him.

And this confidence which they had in Torah's immortality must be restored to Judaism now. Without it, Israel's religious leaders will only create new ghettos in Israel for isolated religionists, instead of achieving that synthesis of Torah thought with all that is worthwhile in the culture of the world. Only such a synthesis can make Judaism meaningful for all Israeli Jews, including those who are hostile to the faith.

For Sephardic Jews to pattern their institutions of learning on East European lines would mean that they forfeit the autonomy of their own souls and the genius of their own tradition. It would also mean that they have de-71ied Judaism its last best hope of achieving a perspective without which it cannot, again become the religion of most Jews everywhere.

Second, the Sephardic tradition in Jewish law—in Halakha—differs somewhat from its Ashkenazic counterpart. Its Halakhic experts were usually rabbis and judges in communities which enjoyed a large measure of legal autonomy. Of necessity their principal concern was with applied law and not with hypothetical questions or theoretical explorations. Among Ashkenazim the experts were most often academicians. As academicians they were less concerned with the law's relationship to life and experience than they were with the law's inner systematic consistency. Consequently, the pressing requirements of Jews and Jewish society in any given era were reflected more in the Halakhic creativity of Sephar-

dim than in the Halakhic creativity of Ashkenazim.

And if Ashkenazim did have a few notable exceptions, then, unfortunately, these exceptions happened to be influenced altogether too much by the threat of assimilation, which in the past was greater among Ashkenazim than among Sephardim. Fearing assimilation, Ashkenazic scholars often "froze" the Halakha and stunted further innovation.

Among Sephardim, on the other hand, most problems arose from the autonomous Jewish community and its distinctly Jewish needs. What the late Chief Rabbi Uziel, for example, was prepared to legislate for the protection of Jewish women exceeds in scope anything that the Israel Rabbinate is prepared to approve even today. His love of his people, and his intense awareness of their problems—their needs, their hopes, their frustrations — made him a distinguished heir of his own Sephardic tradition, which now begs for more analysis and propagation, particularly for the benefit of an autonomous Jewish state whose Halakhic problems arise from an indigenous Jewish community and not from the pressures of a non-Jewish environment.

This is therefore the agenda I propose for Sephardim. Israel needs their conviction that Torah has naught to fear from the truths of other cultures. Israel also needs their insistence that the Halakha develop with relation to life instead of as pure theory. Let their creative activity demonstrate and propagate what I have outlined and may their influence be felt everywhere as they once again render a historic contribution to Judaism.