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Author

Sharim, Yehuda

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The Arch of a Sephardic-Mizrahi Ethnic Autonomy in Palestine, 1926 to 1929

Yehuda Sharim

University of California, Los Angeles

During the World Sephardic Meeting in August 1925, members of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership questioned the role of a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity in politics.¹ Their dilemma revolved around one doubt articulated by multiple Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in 1926 and 1931: “to be or not to be” (“*lehiyot oh lachdol*”)²—that is, to be or not to be identified as a political entity separate from the growing Zionist enterprise in Palestine. Throughout the decade, from 1926 to 1929, to even ask this question was to invite accusations by *Yishuv* members of being seditious and anti-Zionist, of “promoting mistrust and division,” and of receiving “foreign” donations intended to the Zionist project.³ Nevertheless, the idea of Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy persisted in the minds of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders.

This article examines how Sephardic-Mizrahi groups envisaged and fought for an autonomous entity in Palestine from 1926 to 1929, but then devolved into being an ethnic group without a distinct political representation or a clear political agenda. Additionally, this paper explicates how the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership’s resistance of an “abusive” Zionist organization ultimately yielded a discourse of self-inferiority.⁴ A dichotomy resulted from the growing associations of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity with cultural backwardness and ideological stagnation. At this point of the internalization of a cultural and intellectual hierarchy, the once-allied Sephardic-Mizrahi community divided itself into “the enlightened European Sephardim” and “uncultured Mizrahim.”⁵ This internal divide allowed the Jerusalem’s Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership to produce its own identity as “Sephardic intelligentsia,” in contrast to the Mizrahi “simple masses” (“*ha’amon hapashut*”).⁶

This paper explores the decoupling of Sephardic and Mizrahi identities in 1920s and 1930s Palestine by examining the political and social climate of

the region in from 1925 to 1926. It then investigates the creation of separate Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine and the formation of an independent Sephardic Federation, which spread across the globe from 1927 to 1930 and had its own economic resources. This article also illuminates the ways in which the Zionist Organization used hidden reports about the Sephardic Federation's activities to stifle the economic and political expansion of a global Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition.

Becoming Sephardim-Mizrahim in Palestine, 1925-1926

From 1925 to 1926, the demographic changes that transformed the political and social fabric of the *Yishuv* influenced the Sephardic-Mizrahi community. Five interrelated factors shaped the consolidation of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity in 1926 Palestine. The first factor was the fourth major wave (*aliyah*) of Jewish immigration to Palestine that doubled the Jewish population.⁷ The second involved the concentration of Jewish residents in the urban areas of Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem. Third, the global economic depression at the end of 1925 sharply reduced the influx of capital and curtailed the activities of the Sephardic-Mizrahi community. Finally, the fourth component that shaped Sephardic-Mizrahi consolidation was the political division between the left and right Zionist parties in the *Yishuv* that occurred following the 1925 founding of the Revisionist Party.⁸ Finally, in addition to these factors, the growing nationalist tensions between Palestine's Jewish and the Arab populations produced a Sephardic-Mizrahi consciousness about its new minority status within the growing Jewish settlement.

In order to understand how these factors influenced the Sephardic-Mizrahi community in Palestine, it is necessary to analyze these factors themselves. Among the Jewish immigrants who arrived during the 1924 to 1925 wave, more than half were middle- or upper-class Polish Jews (40 and 25 percent, respectively); thus, this wave was known as the "Bourgeois Aliyah" or the "Polish Aliyah."⁹ Among shopkeepers and small business owners, over 50 percent of these immigrants settled in Tel Aviv and other urban areas.¹⁰ Faced with the arrival of more immigrants, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership began to question why their immigrants remained such a small percentage of the total Jewish immigrants in Palestine.

This 1925–1926 population surge impacted Sephardic-Mizrahi communities' perceptions of themselves. For the first time, the Sephardic-Mizrahi population became a minority within the Palestinian context. From the records on Jewish immigration from 1919 to 1930, 80 percent of immigrants came from European countries and identified themselves as Ashkenazim. By contrast, the percentage of Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants during the same years was two percent, while Yemenite immigrants also accounted for two percent of the total immigration wave. Whereas the Sephardic-Mizrahi population constituted 50 percent of the Jewish population in 1918 and 1919, by 1926 they accounted for only 33 percent of the Jewish population and five percent of the total population of Palestine.

Still, the growing number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine was a pivotal force in shaping its Jewish settlements. During 1925 and 1926 the number of new Jewish settlements doubled. Apart from the Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements of Kfar Har-Tuv (founded in 1897) and Kiryat Shaul (founded in 1922), Jerusalem served as the central enclave of Sephardic-Mizrahi life in Palestine.¹¹ Outside of urban areas, ethnic and communal “segregation” dominated and also characterized the Jewish settlements in the *Yishuv*.¹² Indeed, ethnically exclusive settlements fit the needs and interests of various immigrant communities.

Global economic depression soon followed this drastic demographic change. By the end of 1925, Jewish newspapers in Palestine continuously wrote about the Great Depression’s increasing impact on the *Yishuv*. These reports had substantial impact. Whereas the newspapers did not mention unemployment in January 1925, they estimated that, by October 1925, 1,000 people were unemployed. Two months later, the unemployment rate doubled. By the end of 1926, there were 8,000 unemployed workers, resulting in a domino effect on the Palestinian/Israeli market. Land purchases and construction rates slowed. Further, fewer immigrants with capital arrived to *Eretz Yisrael*. Major national industries also ceased operation, including the national cooperative of Construction and Public Works (*Solel Boneh*), which ended its work in 1927. Another consequence of the dire economic situation was that an increasing number of Jewish residents left Palestine.

The economic and social changes affected Zionist, or Sephardic, organizations, which depended on foreign capital, usually in the form of donations.¹³ As donations from abroad dwindled, land investments for Zionist settlements reached a new low. Like the rest of the *Yishuv*, Sephardic-Mizrahi communities were also hurt by this lack of capital. With unemployment and poverty increasing, economic tensions became a prominent issue on the political stage. In addition to the change in the demographics, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership needed to adapt to a redrawn political map.

Emerging right-wing parties, such as the nascent Revisionist Party, blamed Zionist organizations and the British Mandate for not reforming and controlling the economic market in Palestine/Israel.¹⁴ As more Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects aligned themselves with new political parties like this Revisionist Party and the Unity of Labor Party, Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership responded quickly and efficiently to this changing political climate and its destabilizing effects on the Mizrahi-Sephardic ethnic coalition.

In sum, these factors caused the Sephardic-Mizrahi Federation to realize its position as a minority group within the Jewish settlement. This consciousness was solidified during the elections of the Second General Assembly in November 1925, which illuminated the weakening political influence of the Sephardic and Mizrahi factions. Whereas, in the First General Assembly in 1920, the Sephardic list reached its full voting potential by winning 17.3 percent of votes—thus gaining 54 representatives in the Assembly and constituting 19 percent of the

Jewish population—at the end of 1925, only 19 Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates were part of the Second General Assembly, a loss of 60 percent. Hence, the globally unified umbrella of the World Sephardic Federation acted quickly in response to these factors and their lessening political influence.

Early Struggles of the World Sephardic Federation, 1925-26

When Palestinian Sephardic delegates from the World Sephardic Meeting in Vienna (15–18 August 1925) returned, some members in the *Yishuv* tried to establish the idea of “a strong [Sephardic] institution . . . that [would] guide the [Sephardic] community and [would] demand what it deserves from the Zionist organization.”¹⁵ Given the issues of growing unemployment and declining foreign capital, independence from the Zionist organization required achieving financial autonomy. The World Sephardic Federation dedicated its initial efforts to the search for funding to sustain its existence.

With its president, Moshe Pichotto in Brussels, attempting to collect donations, members of the Federation appeared uncertain about its first move. Two months after the Federation’s establishment, members of the Jerusalemite Palestinian center wrote to Pichotto about their concerns over the Federation’s small personnel. They anticipated, “[I]f the work force will not expand, we will feel inclined to submit our resignation.”¹⁶ Pichotto’s response could not be found in the Sephardic Archives.

Regardless, financial issues hampered the work of the Federation from the start. Since the search for funding yielded only a small sum from the Sephardic community in Manchester, England (thanks to Pichotto’s personal connections with this community), ambitions to establish multiple Sephardic Federation branches around the world, including a central office in Jerusalem, stalled. At the same time, two goals remained vital to the work of the Federation: first, maintaining financial support for Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewish settlements and settlers and, second, sending Sephardic-Mizrahi representatives abroad to cultivate new outside funding sources and donations to the Federation.¹⁷

Anxiety turned into anguish as Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi activists reacted to reports on the global economic meltdown. Out of desperation, they wrote to the Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi Uziel, in early November, seeking advice about the Federation’s continuation.¹⁸ They notified him about the difficulty of sustaining their work with the modest funds allocated to Palestine by local activists.¹⁹ Rabbi Uziel’s response, dated 11 November, was little help in solving their financial crisis.²⁰

Another letter to the Sephardic activist, Elazar Elishar, who was appointed in 1926 as the executive of the first Sephardic bank, shows the extent of Sephardic-Mizrahi efforts to address economic concerns. In the letter, the Federation confirmed the establishment of an economic committee to support the Sephardic work in Palestine. The letter said, “[S]ince our work could not be based solely on unwaged efforts as it [has been] so far, we decided to create other committees.”²¹

Thus, Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates were assigned to visit Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Salonika, Alexandria, and New York in order to seek financial support for the Sephardic-Mizrahi settlers.²² One such representative was Yitzhak (Issac) Abadi, a native of Jerusalem and a loyal Sephardic activist who had worked as an English translator for the British Mandate. Abadi traveled to the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in New York at the beginning of April 1926. To prepare Abadi for his assignment, the members of the Federation sent him supplemental information, dated 31 March 1926, on how to “spread our idea among the Sephardic communities in America.”²³

Members of the Federation stressed “the need to widen Zionist activities among the various Sephardic communities.”²⁴ To explain “the negligence [or the lack of consideration] of the Zionist organization,” they emphasized that the Zionists were only interested in Sephardim as donors.²⁵ The letter also articulated the relationship between the terms “Mizrahim” and “Sephardim” within the Federation’s discourse. The leaders wrote to Abadi, “The reality shows us that *Yehudie ha-Mizrah* [Eastern Jews, or Mizrahim] have been separated through their years in exile to various communities [*edoth*] such as Sephardim, Persians, Yemenites, Bukharim and more.”²⁶ Among this state of tribal division, the role of the World Sephardic Federation was to “establish a unified entity of all *Yehudie ha-Mizrah*.”²⁷ The category of Sephardim, however, was the only ethnic identity that the leadership regarded as capable of producing unification and respectability and, at the same time, it functioned as a historical reference to a glorious epoch that, they believed, had to be revisited and reclaimed.

The letter to Abadi registers the emergence of a clear double standard when deploying the categories of Sephardim and Mizrahim. On the one hand, the Federation used “Sephardim” to demarcate an ethnic group situated under the auspices of Mizrahim and the Jews of the East (*Yehudi ha-Mizrah*). On the other hand, the leaders also used “Sephardim” to allude to a cultured ethnic group that “for a great time period was the intellectual and religious center for the whole Jewish world.”²⁸ Inevitably, then, the Sephardim were divorced from and, at the same time, part and parcel of Mizrahi collectivity. But why was there no discourse on Yemenite or Mizrahi “intellectual” past? Why, and to whom, was it important to accentuate the existence of a Sephardic *cultured past* in an effort to politically unify and culturally amalgamate the diverse population of *Yehudi ha-Mizrah*?

Answers to these questions can be found in the Federation’s method of alternating between distinguishing and conflating the Sephardic and Mizrahi categories. It used the term “Sephardim” to refer to donors, who “contributed economically to the building of the nation [*Eretz Israel*] and not less than the communities of [their] Ashkenazi brothers.”²⁹ Abadi was asked to warn such Sephardic donors in New York that their donations to Zionist organizations were “swallowed by it [Zionist-Ashkenazi activity] without any allocation of funding for the Sephardic community.”³⁰ Abadi’s aim, therefore, was not only to

increase the funding from Sephardic donors, but also to establish Sephardim as an entity distinct from the Zionist-Ashkenazi enterprise. Hence, the Sephardic Federation highlighted the separate settlements of Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine.

Whereas the category of Sephardim was used to attract donors who could help reclaim their mythic Sephardic condition by providing financial assistance, the term “Sons of the East” (*Bene ha-Mizrah*, or “Mizrahim”) was used to refer to destitute settlers in need of urgent relief. Identifying Mizrahi settlements was crucial to securing funding. “Among the hundred settlements that sprang up in the land,” the Federation claimed, “there is almost no location that was established for and by *Bene ha-Mizrah* aside from the lousy village in *Har-Tuv* and two or three new settlements that miraculously survive.”³¹ As the Federation presented it to Abadi, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership needed donations from Sephardic-Mizrahi communities beyond Palestine to establish Mizrahi settlements and to assist “the neglected Mizrahi settlers” in their primarily agricultural work.³² Of course, the Federation did not mention what its members already knew; in Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements like Seydoon and Har-Tuv, the Sephardic-Mizrahi landowners hired Arab peasants to work the land.³³

Lastly, amid wishes for his safe journey and return, the Federation asked Abadi to stress the organization’s apolitical mission: “It is needless to say that there is no political element in the work of the World Sephardic Federation aside for its pure [*tehora*] intention building the culture and nation of the forefathers.”³⁴ Again Sephardic identification was used to discuss cultural identity, apart from political concerns. In contrast, the term “Mizrahim” connoted the subjectivity of a victim of political and economic circumstances.³⁵ Thus, the Sephardic/Mizrahi division was born from various economic and political calculations, as well as from the ethnic and intellectual hierarchy that structured the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity.

There is no record of Abadi’s reaction to these conflicting directives. Set to leave for New York, Abadi faced a choice of several Sephardic-Mizrahi identities; in the Sephardic sense, an apolitical, intelligentsia identity, in contrast to the highly political, yet underdeveloped, Mizrahi identity.

Political Activism as Cultural Work, 1926-1927

In June 1926, two months after his return, Abadi reported to the World Sephardic Federation about his New York experience. In a three-page letter, he stressed the size and ethnic mixture of his audience at the Spanish and Portuguese She’erit Israel Synagogue in New York, and the “more material than intellectual dullness” of New York’s Sephardic community.³⁶ Abadi estimated that the donations pledged would total \$7,500 and, most importantly, he received the consent of the American Sephardic community to speak on their behalf to the World Sephardic Federation. Although there are no records that his financial estimate ultimately materialized, Abadi’s apparently successful mission motivated the Sephardic Federation to send more representatives to Sephardic-Mizrahi

communities abroad, as well as to increase their activities in Palestine to secure possible funding. Thus, the Federation expanded their solicitations to Sephardic-Mizrahi communities within—as well as outside of—Palestine over the ensuing six months. These propaganda trips aimed to strengthen the relationship between the Federation's Jerusalemite leadership and the various communities across the country, and “to prepare the ground for the coming General Assembly.”³⁷ Other delegates went abroad to find ways to fortify the economic constitution of the Sephardic Federation.

The Federation was concerned with several pressing issues: the condition of the Sephardic-Mizrahi farmers who requested material support from the Federation, a group of fisherman from Salonika that arrived in Acre who sought financial backing to prepare for the upcoming shipping season, and the new Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements in Petah-Tiqwa and the Emek-Yizr'ael Valley area, for which the Federation had to postpone its plans until enough funding could be allocated. The Sephardic village of Kfar-Baruch, in this Emek-Yizr'ael Valley area, was founded only in 1927.³⁸

It is also important to note the Federation's imposed sense of segregation, which had clear economic repercussions, to the point of creating blunt hostility between the Sephardic-Mizrahi organization and the Zionist organizations. The Federation's sense of conflict was based on deep notions of marginalization within Zionist organizations. As early as in 1926, at the dawn of the economic crisis, the Sephardic Federation tried to feed its 9,000 to 10,000 poor, Sephardic-Mizrahi members during Passover. The Sephardic Federation and the Zionists exchanged public accusations; the Sephardic Federation faulted Zionists for being a “strong obstacle” to Palestinian-Sephardic activities.³⁹ “The Zionist Organization approached Mizrahi communities abroad to ask them to provide unleavened bread for the poor among the Sephardim,” the Sephardic Federation asserted, “and indeed they provide some funding for those in need, but then they put that responsibility on the shoulders of the Sephardic organizations.”⁴⁰ The Zionist response, in which organizations asserted their limited support for struggling Sephardic-Mizrahi communities, did not resolve the tensions. According to the Federation, Zionist organizations in Palestine and abroad opportunistically appropriated Sephardic-Mizrahi donations for their own means, rather than providing for the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine, on whose behalf they solicited contributions. Moreover, the Zionists exhausted the pool of Sephardic-Mizrahi potential donors abroad, making it almost impossible for institutions like the World Sephardic Federation to secure funding.

So divergent were the aspirations of the Sephardic Federation from those of the Zionists that Sephardic leaders initiated multiple strategic moves to assert the Federation's distinct identity. These included the opening of a Sephardic-Mizrahi credit bank (1927), which assisted Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements, and the allocation of funding to Sephardic cultural and educational activities. Beginning in 1926, the Federation circulated a number of annual pamphlets

on Sephardic-Mizrahi history, as well as on the Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrant communities' current political and economic situation in Palestine, in order to increase its public influence.⁴¹ Published in Hebrew, Spanish, English and French, and edited by the erudite Moshe David Gaon, these bulletins reported on the Federation's economic and political activities and asked for financial support. Although they announced that the Sephardic Federation was concerned "primarily with the cultural mission," their activities reflected an ardent political, economic and nationalist agenda.⁴² Political strategies to regain Sephardic political power masked the Federation's declared attempts to restore mythic Sephardic culture to prominence in the Promised Land.

Reports from the Sephardic Federation suggest that, from 1926 to 1928 it expanded its work far beyond Palestinian borders. Among its branches across the world were Sephardic centers in Damascus, Santiago, Montevideo, Havana, Cairo, Lima, New York, Cordoba, Buenos Aires, Manchester, and Rio de Janeiro. These centers succeeded in soliciting philanthropic aid, especially in the Americas.⁴³ From 1925 to 1927, the Sephardic Federation solicited £1,230 from Sephardic communities in Jerusalem, Belgrade, Manchester, and Cairo and Alexandria.⁴⁴ In 1927 to 1928 alone, the sum budget of the Federation almost doubled to £2,085, due to donations from Sephardic communities in Manchester, Rio de Janeiro, Cordova, Santa Fe, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, to name a few.⁴⁵ Using the donations received, the Federation founded a credit bank on November 1927 that "put at their disposal small sums of money, to give them once more a desire for work and personal effort."⁴⁶ Additionally, the Federation increased its support to Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine and succeeded in establishing more Sephardic settlements between 1925 and 1928 than it ever had in the past. Also, in 1927, the Sephardic Federation was able to provide economic support to the group of fishermen from Salonika, who joined *Be'er Yacob*.

Yet, alongside these attempts to resist the Zionist organization and establish a separate, active political entity, the Federation also promoted a notion of Mizrahi inferiority among the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership and among the communities both in the *Yishuv* and around the world. However, rather than modify the established characterizations of Sephardim as cultured intellectuals and Mizrahim as destitute laborers, the bulletins and protocols of the Federation during those years preserved and propagated a hierarchy of Jewish subjects in Palestine. At the bottom of its scale were the "Oriental Jew" and the "Eastern immigrant," who "have . . . not yet reached that state of culture to understand the necessity of belonging to a political party or to a syndicate."⁴⁷ The Federation's discourse surrounding "Oriental" Mizrahi immigrants, which described them as being inhibited by their "uncultured" conditions, while hailing them for their "physical endurance . . . suitable for agricultural settlement than other elements," condemned them to poverty and demise.⁴⁸

As the Eastern immigrants belong to no organized society it is difficult for them to find work quickly and to settle down. Deprived of resources, the strongest amongst them are forced to do debasing work and become porters and scavengers, whilst their children, instead of going to school, become vagabonds. The weaker amongst them either throw themselves upon our charitable organizations or become beggars.⁴⁹

In contrast to the Mizrahim—who the Federation perceived as “unenlightened” immigrants who lacked history and refined culture—was “the enlightened European Sephardic element.”⁵⁰ If poverty was associated with the “undeveloped Oriental Jew,” the “enlightened” Sephardic immigrant was destined to experience disillusionment that might lead to two possible ends: reawakening, or ultimate discontent; the Federation explained:

As to the enlightened European Sephardic element who enter Palestine with the permission of the Zionist Executive, they come out of national enthusiasm, and many of them suffer great disillusionment. Those of them who possess small means to go in for the purchase of land, industry, commerce, etc., and for want of disinterested advice often fall in the traps laid by brokers and suffer very materially. Often bearing their loss in silence, many of them leave the country quietly.⁵¹

Sephardic Federation leaders used these “scales of enlightenment” to assess the various constituencies that made the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition. At the same time, they used the term “Sephardim” interchangeably with “Oriental” or “Mizrahi” Jews, chiefly in demarcating and defining “Ashkenazim.” The category of “Ashkenazim” was only mentioned when discussing the desired level of education in the *Yishuv*.

Federation leaders invoked this notion of cultural hierarchy, erasing the differences between the categories of “Sephardim” and “Mizrahim,” while extolling the superior category of “Ashkenazim.” Indeed, within the discourse surrounding the problems within the Sephardic-Mizrahi population, they identified education as “[a]nother sphere in which there is much help to be given to our Sephardi brethren.”⁵² This cultural problem emerged as a way to rank, set apart, and divide the Jewish community and the Sephardic-Mizrahi population; the Sephardic-Mizrahi asserted, “Their level of culture is certainly in parts of the Diaspora much inferior to that of our Ashkenazi brethren, therefore, it is our duty to raise them intellectually.”⁵³

Hence, the discourse surrounding Sephardic-Mizrahi identity emphasized subservient cultural status and a separate sense of self. As a matter of fact, in the name of cultural and intellectual enlightenment, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders propagated and supported other initiatives that further spread this discourse of Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority. One influential source that contributed to this notion of a subjugated Sephardic-Mizrahi self was a series of lectures given in Jerusalem in

1927 that the Sephardic leadership (with the help of the Sephardic party, Pioneers of the East) initiated and presented to its community. Among its prestigious speakers was the poet, Hayim Nahman Bialik, who Sephardic leaders approached and openly expressed their sense of inferiority. The Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders handed the task of “rescuing” and educating their community to the “superior” and “cultured” Ashkenazim. This leadership felt that the Sephardim were not capable of rescuing themselves from their indigent present, and an ascending series of claims of inferiority followed: “[W]e Sephardim feel the frailty of our power . . . Bialik and Ussishkin, please provide us with the inspiration to handle the task you pass on to us.”⁵⁴ As another member of the Sephardim confessed, “We, the Sephardim, recognize the feebleness of our strength, [we are] like a prisoner who cannot rescue himself out of his prison without help.”⁵⁵

Crippling the Sephardic Federation While Reviving a Sephardic Spirit, 1927–1928

On 24 February 1927 in Jerusalem, Bialik delivered his lecture, “The Cultural Work [*Avodah Tarbutit*] among Sephardic Jewry,” to Federation activists and members of the Jerusalemite Sephardic-Mizrahi community. Menahem Ussishkin, the Zionist leader who gave some preliminary words, introduced Bialik as a prominent member of the “Ashkenazi intellectuals.” Before Bialik’s lecture began, Ussishkin and members of the Sephardic Federation asked Bialik “to contribute to Sephardic life” by assisting in “the development of Sephardic intellectual culture.”⁵⁶

Addressing “the Sephardic tribe,” Bialik asked, “[H]ow could that be that since its glorious days they [the Sephardic tribe] became diminished in the materialistic and cultural aspects, to the point that they [Sephardim] had distanced from Hebrew creativity?”⁵⁷ Then Bialik concentrated on the diminished status of the larger Sephardic tribe in the *Yishuv*: “Sephardic Jewry became inferior in national ideology in all fields of life to Russian-Polish Jewry, which is named *Ashkenazit* [Ashkenazim].”⁵⁸ To him, Sephardic-Mizrahi stagnation resulted in an “undeveloped” culture that showed in the community’s lack of national ideology.

Bialik proposed a three-step solution: “the revival . . . of their [the Sephardic] mythic past”; “[the organization of] educational and literary material,” and “the solidification of Sephardic peoplehood [*amamiut*].”⁵⁹ In short, Bialik called for a renewal of the “Sephardic spirit” by emphasizing the educational and cultural aspects. However, he tacitly ignored the possibility of any political or national issue. As the greatest Hebrew poet of his generation and a Zionist, Bialik was actually promoting a Zionist agenda, as he had in the twelfth and thirteenth Zionist Congresses in Carlsbad (1921 and 1923).⁶⁰ Thus, for him, the revival of this “Sephardic spirit” meant Sephardic acceptance of Ashkenazi superiority and authority, and maintaining the cultural and national distance of the Zionist-Ashkenazi leadership from the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities.

In response to Sephardic audience members who expressed doubt whether “Sephardim [were able] to revive their Sephardic culture of the past, and, at the same time, to formulate a specific educational system,” Bialik identified the Sephardic-Palestinian leaders who should be involved in the reawakening of the Sephardic spirit.⁶¹ It seemed clear to him that only the Sephardic center in Palestine was equipped to foster the Sephardic renaissance; he explained, “[T] here are various wealthy Sephardic Jewish communities in other places but they have no hope.”⁶² Bialik thought of the Sephardic communities outside Palestine as not Zionist enough and, thus, hopeless. Hence, along with the de-politicization of Sephardim, Bialik promoted the isolation of the Sephardic Palestinian community from any position of power located outside of Palestine.

Bialik’s speech characterized the dilemma of Sephardic leaders in asking whether Sephardim should emerge as a political party or only as cultural community. However, it also reflected Zionist organizations’ general response towards the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities. His strategy of “divide-and-conquer” first de-politicized the Sephardim, and then isolated the Palestinian-Sephardim leaders from support within, and outside of, the *Yishuv*.⁶³ This approach presented the Sephardic-Mizrahi case as merely a local concern or an internal affair. Bialik’s lecture underscored the Zionist organization’s concern about growing initiatives and, thus, the possibility of political resistance by the Sephardic Federation.

The end of 1928 marked the start of the World Sephardic Federation’s erosion as an effective entity. The existence of a competing political party to the Zionist organization endangered the Zionists’ aspiration to represent Jewish interests abroad and in Palestine. From London, Dr. Leo Lauterbach, the Zionist Secretary, sent letters to other Zionist leaders about the danger of a separate Sephardic entity.⁶⁴ Lauterbach secretly urged the Sephardic-Zionist leaders from Bulgaria and Italy to refuse to recognize the authority of World Sephardic Federation. Both the Bulgarian and the Italian Sephardic-Zionist leaders agreed to his request, and would not allow any other institution besides the Zionist organization to deal with issues of discrimination or inequality among the Jewish community in Palestine. In the last months of 1929, Bulgarian-Sephardic leaders published a letter of protest in the popular daily newspaper, *Davar*, which spoke out against the World Sephardic Federation, its “rare cultural work,” and its radical political activities.⁶⁵ Thus, the letter concluded, the Palestinian-Sephardic leaders were to blame for “damag[ing] the national effort . . . by advancing what appeared as Sephardic interests that go beyond the national efforts and only creating mistrust and division among the Zionist organization.”⁶⁶ Although the Sephardic Federation responded with evidence of how the Zionist organizations in *Eretz Yisrael* consistently privileged Ashkenazi immigrants over Mizrahi-Sephardic immigrants, the Bulgarian and Italian leaders joined the Zionists in sanctioning the validity of a Sephardic-Mizrahi political identity.

Conclusion

This article explicates the political and social context that prompted Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership's efforts to be an independent organization. These efforts included the formation of separate Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements and communities, the inception of a distinct Sephardic bank, and the establishment of an independent, global Federation with its own economic resources. In this process, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders invented the idea of a separate "Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy," chiefly as a result of growing sense of discrimination among Palestine's Jewish community. Sephardic-Mizrahi political initiatives evolved in tandem with an internalization of cultural hierarchy and a timeless sense of Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority. The larger, global Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition eventually dissolved, due to Zionist organizations' strategies to sabotage the Federation's economic and political expansion. Thus, this research reveals the somewhat hidden and distinct genealogies of competing Jewish identities, as well as the complex political, national, and racial processes that advanced and resisted the entanglement of these identities.

Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders consequently internalized notions of inferiority, especially in the contexts of growing nationalist tensions between Jews and Arabs from 1929 to 1931 and the decline of the World Sephardic Federation from 1931 to 1936. Hence, this paper raises additional questions about the racial construction of the Sephardim-Mizrahim category and its rise in Palestine from 1936 to 1948. Finally, this paper calls for additional research surrounding the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership's contributions and motives in producing a new understanding of Sephardim-Mizrahim as a distinct, intra-Jewish biological caste.

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NOTES

¹ I refer to "Sephardim" to signal the largely Hispano-cultural communities, who retained the use of Judeo-Spanish, and resided in the former Ottoman lands (largely the Balkans, Anatolia, and in pre-state Palestine. By the term "Mizrahim"—literally, "Oriental Jews"—I am signaling a mélange of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities.

² "Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation," 24 December 1931, general box, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1. The same question—"lehiyot oh lachdo?"—was asked first in 1926. See the correspondence between Pioneers of the East and the World Sephardic Federation, 31 October 1926, file 83, M.D. Gaon Papers, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

³ "Bulgarian-Zionist Against 'The Sephardic Federation,'" *Davar*, 15 November 1928, 1.

⁴ “Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem,” 7 January 1930, general box, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–2. All translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

⁵ “World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, Iyar 5684–Eloul 5686 [1925–1927].” Manchester: Massels, 3.

⁶ *Meir Leinado’s Speech: “The Ways To Create One [Ethnic] Community in Eretz Israel,” or, “Why Did we Create the Liberal Party?”* general box, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 3.

⁷ Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine in such large numbers due to, in part, the United States’ 1924 immigration laws, which restricted Jewish migrants from entering. Another central reason that Polish Jews settled in Palestine was that the Polish government, headed by Władysław Grabski’s, began to tax private organizations, in order to turn them over to the Polish government (Giladi 1973, 40–44; Naor and Giladi 1990, 154–166).

⁸ The Revisionist Party was founded in 1925. The prominent leader of this Zionist faction was Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky (1880–1940), a Russian intellectual who was a vocal supporter of Sephardic awakening (1921). During the mid-1920s, the Revisionist Party grew rapidly; it went from achieving ten mandates in the fifteenth Zionist Congress in Basel (1927) to achieving 21 mandates in the following Zionist Congress in Zurich (1929). The Revisionist Party appealed to the 3,000 Sephardic-Mizrahi activists who joined the party by 1929 because of its criticism of influential Zionist organizations and parties (Shavit 1978, 40–80; Naor and Giladi 1990, 192–193; Giladi 1973, 239–244; Halpern and Reinhartz 2000, 227–228, 300–301; Tzahor 1987, 71–83).

⁹ Although it is difficult to determine the exact percentage of the diverse groups part of the fourth *aliyah*, records indicate that between 50 to 60 percent were Polish Jews, 20 percent were Russian Jews, five percent were Romanian Jews, five percent were Lithuanian Jews, 2.8 percent were American Jews, and one percent were North African Jews (Giladi 1973, 282).

¹⁰ As a matter of fact, the Jewish population in Tel-Aviv drastically increased from 21,500 inhabitants in 1924 to about 40,000 by the end of 1925. This migration affected other cities, such as Haifa and Jerusalem, in similar ways.

¹¹ “Report on Sephardic-Mizrahi Population,” 1 October 1926, file 83, M.D. Gaon Archives, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.

¹² See Lissak, 2009: 45.

¹³ For more data about the economic condition in Palestine, see Giladi 1973: 94–95; Abdo-Zubi 1989: 210–214.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925,” general box, file 1268, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 19.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ World Sephardic Federation to Rabbi Haim Uziel, 2 November 1925, box 239, file 44, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Rabbi Haim Uziel to Members of the World Sephardic Federation, 11 November 1925, box 239, file 13, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1.

²¹ World Sephardic Federation to Elazar Elishar, 12 November 1925, box 6322, file 13, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–2.

²² “Protocols of the Working Committee of the Sephardic Federation,” 25 February 1926, box 6322, file 201, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–2.

²³ Sephardic Federation to Yitzhak Abadi, 3 March 1926, box 6322, file 31, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 2.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 1.

²⁹ Ibid., 2.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 2, 4.

³³ *About the Settlers in Kfar Seydoon – A report after a visit in the Kfar*, 7 October 1925, file 38, M.D. Gaon Archives, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. For more reports about *Kfar Seydoon*, see “Sephardic Settlers,” *Do’ar Hayom*, Vol. 1, 27 June 1926, 3.

³⁴ World Sephardic Federation to Yitzhak Abadi, 3 March 1926, box 6322, file 31, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 4.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

³⁶ World Sephardic Federation to Yitzhak Abadi, 6 June 1926, box 6322, file 26, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–3.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Report Prepared by the Working Committee of the Federation to the President of the World Sephardic Federation, Moshe Pichotto,” 6 September 1926, box 6322, file 8, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–4.

³⁹ “The Distribution of *Matza-Bread* in the Passover Holiday During 1926-7.” Published by the Sephardic *Edah* [community] in Jerusalem. Azriel Print: Jerusalem, 1–2.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Report Prepared by the Working Committee of the Federation to the President of the World Sephardic Federation, Moshe Pichotto,” 6 September 1926, box 6322, file 8, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 5–6.

⁴² World Sephardic Federation [signed by the President of the Federation, Moshe Pichotto] to Menahem Ussishkin, 30 November 1926, box 6322, file 275, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–2.

⁴³ For more information about the global efforts of the Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates, see World Sephardic Federation, *World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, Iyar 5684–Eloul 5686 [1925–1927]* (Massels: Manchester).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ World Sephardic Federation, *World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, 1927*, 14–75.

⁴⁶ World Sephardic Federation, *World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, Iyar 5684–Eloul 5686 [1925–1927]* (Massels: Manchester), 6–7.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁸ “Universal Confederation of Sephardic Jews—Executive Committee of Jerusalem Financial Report, General Administrative Report For the Year 5687 (1926–1927),” 6.

⁴⁹ World Sephardic Federation, *World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, Iyar 5684–Eloul 5686 [1925–1927]* (Massels: Manchester), 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

⁵² “Universal Confederation of Sephardic Jews—Executive Committee of Jerusalem Financial Report, General Administrative Report For the Year 5687 (1926–1927),” 4–5.

⁵³ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁴ “Bialik in *Halutzei ha-Mizrah’s Hall*,” *Do’ar Hayom*, Vol. 1, 28 February 1927, 4. See also the articles in *Do’ar Hayom*, Vol. 1, 27 February 1927, 1, 4.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Protocols of Bialik’s Speech,” box 6322, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 2–5.

⁵⁹ Bialik's reference to *amamiut*—תויממע—could also imply a calling for a Sephardic national character.

⁶⁰ See Laqueur 1972: 461–462.

⁶¹ “Protocols of Bialik’s Speech,” box 6322, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 5–9.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ See Herzog 1986: 89; Haim 2000: 193.

⁶⁴ The National Zionist Archives, *Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and the Zionist Organization, June 5, 1928*. File J30/2673. See also The National Zionist Archives, *Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and Rosenblit, October 18, 1928*. File Z4/3579. The National Zionist Archives, *Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and Ariab, November 20, 1928*. File J30/2364. The National Zionist Archives, *Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and Zionist Federation in Eretz Yisrael, April 16, 1928*. File J30/2365. The National Zionist Archives, *Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and Zionist Federation in Bucharest, May 19, 1930*. File Z4/3579.

⁶⁵ “Bulgarian-Zionist Against ‘The Sephardic Federation,’” *Davar*, 15 November 1928, 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

