Abstract:

The invisibility of the community of Arab Jews living in the United States, better known as the Mizrahi community is intriguing. Its identity combines two seemingly paradoxical elements and it is assumed that this community is encompassed by two larger ethnic groups: the Jewish American and the Arabic American ones. However, a closer look at this community shows that such assumptions are not corroborated by facts. Little is known about this diaspora, which suffers double alienation from the two larger ethnic groups. This paper attempts to delve into the identity formation of the Mizrahi community in the United States by starting with a bird’s eye view on its immigration and integration patterns in an attempt to understand its distinctiveness and the obstacles that prevent the community from being visible and more influential. This paper also intends to spotlight the way such a community managed to preserve its identity for generations and the way members of the community perceive their Arabic and Jewish identities in an American context which presents both identities as incompatible.

Key words: Mizrahi, Jews, Arabs, United States, identity.
It is not so easy for many Americans to digest the combination of being Arab, Jewish and American at the same time. Being Arab and Jewish at the same time is more complicated by living in the US where media regularly stereotype part of one’s identity and glorify the other. The case of Arab Jews who immigrated to the United States, better known as Mizrahim, is intriguing. Jewishness and Arabness are interwoven in their experience. Their heritage entails them to be part of the Arab American community. Yet, they cannot be considered solely Arab Americans because “to expect Mizrahim to be simply Arab would be like reducing African Americans to be simply Africans” (Shohat 17). Likewise, they cannot be considered just Jewish Americans. To get an insight into their identity, a glimpse of their immigration history and integration patterns are highly needed.

Mizrahi Jews started immigrating to the United States during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century and Multiple factors can stand as an explanation for their immigration. The desire to avoid military conscription along with the economic downturn and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire represent the push factors, while the prospects of economic progress represent the pull factor. Like their fellow Syrian Christians and Muslims, Syrian Jews provided for living by working as peddlers and owning small shops and merchants. One way of tracing the identity construction of Arab Jews is to shed light on their patterns of integration in the United States, patterns that are usually determined by an array of variables such as period of arrival, subgroups’ diversity, social and economic status. These variables influence, to a great extent, the choice of adaptation strategy: (1) ethnic denial, (2) ethnic isolation, or (3) ethnic integration. Perceiving the culture of the host society as a threat, first generation of Jews emigrating from Arab countries tended to develop a defensive strategy which celebrated ethnic heritage and maintained a strong sense of community and ethnic solidarity. In other words, they cultivated a strong sense of social identity. The latter is defined by Henry Tajfel, the eminent social psychologist, as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (qtd. in Hogg 2). Social identity, then, is our sense of who we are in relation to the community and society which we are part of.

What makes the social identity of the Mizrahi community in the US interesting is not just the fact that it combines both elements from the Jewish American and the Arab American identities but also it reflects the community’s success in fully preserving their identity and heritage, unlike many Sephardic communities in the US. Writing in 2012, Jane Gerber asserts that “the contemporary Syrian descendants of the same early-twentieth-century migration possess the strongest, best organized, and most cohesive community among American Jews today. Their third and fourth generations thrive as Americans and as Syrian Jews nurturing a strong sense of Syrian Jewish identity, while becoming fully American” (40). This success was largely a result of the community’s anti-intermarriage stance. It kept a very low intermarriage rate partly because of the decision of religious leaders who strictly forbade it and put much importance on marrying co-religionists within the community. Furthermore, the community promoted collective consciousness and a strong sense of identity through ethnic narratives, literature, art, and music. Such a heritage helped them construct and preserve their identity. Commenting on the importance of sharing an ethnic narrative and a common heritage, Alain De
Benoist, in his book, *On Identity*, writes, “Collective imagination is real: common representations and images build the framework of a group. All people and nations have a number of beliefs related to their origins or their history. Whether these beliefs refer to an objective reality, an idealized reality or to a myth is irrelevant. They just need to be reminiscent or representative of an exordium temporis, a founding moment” (24). Indeed, ethnic narratives and a sense of shared memoir maintain and strengthen ethnic identity. Being aware of that, Arab Jews were very interested in preserving art and culture and passing it on to the next generations in order to ensure the survival of the community’s identity and culture.

After their arrival to the US, Arab Jews established their own communities. They joined neither Jewish American nor Arab American communities, despite being Arabs. This is mainly because living in Arab American neighborhoods might result in tensions especially after the 1948 war. Arab Jews, particularly Syrians, are very religious; many of them are Orthodox and support the Zionist movement which is despised by other Arabs.

Starting from the mid 1950s, most Syrian Jews stopped sending their children to public schools; they rather opted for yeshivas, Jewish religious schools. It should be pointed out here that the community succeeded in establishing its own institutions. It has its own synagogues, cemetery, Talmud Torah, mikvahs (ritual baths), community center and a wide range of social services. Mizrahim seems to be a closed community, not very much interested in forging bonds with other Jewish communities probably due to fear of the incremental loss of their Mizrahi identity. Another obstacle that prevented them from integrating into bigger Jewish communities is their Arabic culture which is unwelcome among Jewish communities especially among the European Orthodox. Arab Jews still hold to their Arabic heritage. Aspects of their heritage are reflected for example in music and what is more fascinating is the way such a heritage is passed from a generation to another. In fact, the preservation of Arabic musical heritage appeared to be happening through the synagogue services (Zenner 166). The Arabic heritage of Mizrahim does not only manifest in music but also in the religious services themselves which foreshadow the impact of living in societies with a majority of Muslims and Arabs. Examining such an impact, Marc Kligman points out, “One finds within Syrian liturgy parallels to the murattal and mujawwad style of Koranic recitation, as well as the improvisatory singing found in Arab vocal music and the interaction between the leader and listeners, or, in the context, the cantor and the congregation” (219). Needless to say, Language is a very crucial element of the Arab Jewish identity. Unlike other Jewish communities, they use Judeo-Arabic, which a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew. Being a source of literary, scientific and philosophical heritage, Judeo-Arabic was instrumental in keeping alive the unique Jewish identity of Mizrahim. It sets them apart not just from Ashkenazi communities but also from Eastern Sephardic communities. Their success in preserving their identities through generations can partly be explained by the socialization mechanisms.

Transmitting ethnic identity takes place through the process of socialization, in which the family and religious institutions play the biggest role. Ethnic socialization denotes introducing children to their ethnic heritage and inculcating ethnic values and customs. Patterns of socialization are very important in ethnic identity formation: the individual learns what is
expected from him and what is not as a member of a certain group. In addition, their attitudes are likely to be influenced by the group’s values. Defining socialization, William Bloom maintains that it is a “whole process by which an individual, born with behavioral potentialities of enormously wide range, is led to develop actual behavior which is confined within a more narrow range- the range of what is customary and acceptable for him according to the standards of his group” (14-15). As far as Arab Jews are concerned, they have always been proud of their ethnicity which influenced their children’s identity formation.

Their ethno-religious identity is different in myriad ways from that of Ashkenazi Jews. It incorporates the Arabic culture and heritage which is deemed “exotic” or “inferior” and very different from American culture. Ashkenazim are more or less close to the European roots of American culture but for non-Ashkenazim the situation is different. Their cultural heritage is considered incompatible with the mainstream American culture not just by other ethnic groups but also by fellow co-religionists. The small number of Mizrahi Jews does not mean that their experience is insignificant in comparison with the Ashkenazi experience and that we can study Jewish history without referring to their experience. Although they were ascribed an identity by the larger society, they developed their specific diasporic identity and draw their own ethnic boundaries in order to keep their distinctiveness vis-a-vis other sub-groups with whom they were ascribed a collective identity by the larger society. Indeed, the creation of ethnic boundaries makes ethnic groups seem different from the rest of society and look like a block; a unique entity. Immigrants help create their self-ascribed identity through conscious acts and ad hoc efforts. There is a margin of differences even within the boundaries of each ethnic group. Ethnic boundaries are flexible in order to encompass members with different nationalities as in the case of Arab Jews.

The cultural clash in the United States between the west and east, greatly affected the identity formation of Mizrahi communities in the United States. They had to identify with one of the two camps and the pressure was driving the great majority of them to identify with the west. There were some difficulties for Sephardim and especially Mizrahim in forming their identity because their Jewishness is questioned by the majority of Jewish Americans, Ashkenazim, and so is their Arabness. Their alienation is two folded; it goes beyond the hyphen problem to encompass seemingly paradoxical identity elements. This unwelcoming atmosphere affected their identity construction in myriad ways and made marginalization central to their experience. Ironically, marginalization and discrimination against Arab Jews in the United States helped strengthen the bonds between members of the community, bearing in mind that self-awareness of one’s ethnicity heightens during times of crises especially when a certain ethnic group is the victim of marginalization and stereotyping.

In fact, the alienation of Mizrahim reached the level of exclusion not just from the representational picture of Jewish Americans but also the academic field. Aviva Ben-Ur, in her article “Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic history” explains this exclusion:

This denial of Jewishness was a defining experience for eastern Sephardic immigrants (and, in some cases, for their native born children and grand children as well). Perhaps not accidently, in both U.S Jewish community and the academic study of its past,
Jewishness has tacitly been assumed to be synonymous with Germanic or Eastern European descent. What began at the turn of the twentieth century as denial of shared ethnicity and religion (whereby Ashkenazim failed to recognize Sephardim as fellow Jews) continues today in textbooks, articles, documentaries, films, and popular awareness. More often than not, Sephardic Jews are simply absent from any sort of portrayal of the American Jewish community (2).

What is noticeable about attempting to study the Mizrahi community in the US is the lacking scholarly literature devoted to it, though there are more and more voices especially in academia calling for incorporating the experience of Jewish communities such as Mizrahim into the Jewish American experience, rather than having a marginal status. Despite its uniqueness, the Mizrahi community is invisible in comparison with other Jewish communities. Reasons for its invisibility include the small size of the community and its lack of interest in building coalitions with other communities and ethnic groups, fearing the loss of its peculiar identity. This lack of coalitions partly explains its invisibility at the political and social levels, though it is active at the artistic level and produced highly recognizable works of art. In times of political crises in the Middle East, Mizrahim were asked to take sides and thus denouncing one part of their identity. Taking a middle position cost them criticism from both sides, Arab Americans and Jewish Americans. These complex intergroup relations account for their inability to forge bonds with other groups and also for their invisibility.

The special case of Mizrahim illustrates that the fact that in their ethnic identity formation, the religious factor was of higher importance when it came into conflict with other elements such as language, cultural heritage and nationality. That is why they preferred to distance themselves from Arab Americans and set up their own communities with closer relations to Jewish Americans. The fact that Mizrahim did not join Arab American communities does not mean they were trying to distance themselves from Arabic culture. On the contrary, they were very proud of their Arabic heritage and customs, although such a pride is actually an obstacle for them to forge bonds with Ashkenazim, the great majority of Jewish Americans. Indeed, many Mizrahi Jews identify themselves as Arabs in the first place and festivities such as weddings are very much like those of Arab Christian and Arab Muslim.
References


