

2018-2019 Sephardic Identities, Medieval and Modern

Before the contemporary period, the Jews of Sepharad (Iberia) were regularly depicted—and regularly depicted themselves—as part of a unique and exclusive group, more distinguished than the Jews of other lands. From highlighting biblical references to “the captivity of Jerusalem, that is in Sepharad” (Obadiah 1:20) as a foundation of the ancientness of Sephardic Jewry, to preserving medieval myths of the restarting of the Talmudic academies of Babylonia in Sepharad after the migration of the *geonim* to Iberia, examples abound of how Sephardic identity was always marked by a claim to unique origins and distinguished membership. What are the origins of this traditional claim to Sephardic exceptionalism? How were traditional claims enhanced or altered by the decline in Jewish-Christian relations in the Christian kingdoms of Iberia in the later Middle Ages and by the eventual expulsion of the Sephardim, first from the Spanish kingdoms in 1492 and then from Portugal in 1496? How did such claims survive or evolve over the early modern period and contribute to Haskalah myths of the Sephardic “Golden Age” or to the eventual rhetoric of Jewish emancipation? What has led some in Israel to prefer the designation of “Sephardic” over “Mizrahi” and others to feel that the designation of “Sephardic” has sometimes been imposed from without by the state?

On the other hand, current discussions of Sephardic identity in Israel regularly focus on how to maintain Sephardic uniqueness under pressure from Ashkenazi discrimination or hegemony. What are the roots of this current inversion? How have traditional myths changed or persisted in the face of the often-strained discourse of Sephardic-Ashkenazi relations today in Israel and beyond? How has the meaning of “Sephardic” evolved under these pressures, and in the face of anti-Mizrahi discrimination?

“Sephardic Identities, Medieval and Modern” proposes to look at Sephardic myths of identity from a diachronic perspective. Rather than focusing on only one period, this Frankel Institute year looks to bring together two different lines of inquiry into

Sephardic identity: the origins of Sephardic exceptionalism within medieval Sephardic communities themselves; and the evolution of such notions under pressure from forced conversion and inquisition, expulsion and diaspora, ghettoization and emancipation, holocaust, and modern political and cultural rivalries.