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, to early modern notions of the Sephardic Nação (nation) in the post-1492 diaspora, examples abound of how Sephardic identity was always marked by a claim to unique origins and distinguished membership. What are the origins on the one hand 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, and the Sephardim often complain about being second-class citizens in Israel. 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.

The goal is not to produce a new history of Sephardic identity but instead to look broadly at how medieval and modern notions have interacted and continue to intersect and to trace how modern notions rely on or defy medieval and early-modern foundations. This Institute theme builds on recent work in medieval and early modern Sephardic identity by scholars such as Jonathan Ray, Ross Brann, Miriam Bodian, and Renee Melamed, as well as on the work of scholars of modern Sephardic and Mizrahi identity such as David Bunis, Zion Zohar, Monique Balbuena, and Aron Rodrigue. Rather than focusing on Sephardic identity in only one historical period, it aims to join such discussions through a diachronic perspective. Rather than focusing only on the history of the Sephardim, it aims to consider the place of ideas about Sephardic identity within discussions of Jewish identity and Israeli identity more broadly. It should be one of the foundational assumptions of the discussion among fellows that there is not and has perhaps never been a single, unified Sephardic identity, but that there are, rather, multiple, sometimes contradictory, models of the meaning of the Sephardim in Jewish history.

As an organizing theme, this approach should prove particularly fruitful because it aims to involve historical, humanistic, and sociological discussions of Sephardic and Ashkenazi identity, and will draw applications from a broad range of scholars working in different disciplines as well as different historical periods. It will bring together a diverse range of
perspectives with the aim of provoking discussion on the place of the Sephardim in broad and unified narratives of Jewish history and also in the construction of narratives of origin and identity of the Israel state. On a historical level, it may explore questions such as: What function did the rhetoric of Sephardic exceptionalism play—as a foundation or as a counterpoint—in the articulation of modern discourses of emancipation and assimilation? How has Sephardic culture and its history brought Jews into contact with non-Jewish societies, and how have non-Jewish cultural traditions contributed to, enriched, or challenged Sephardic customs and beliefs, or vice versa? How did medieval and early modern Sephardim understand their own role in Jewish history and how did the expulsion from Iberia—commonly commemorated as one of the great calamities meriting fasting on Tisha B’Av—enhance the mythic role of the Sephardim in modern discourses of Jewish identity? On a sociological level, it may ask how Sephardic and Ashkenazi cultural movements support, inspire, or antagonize each other. How, for example, do cultural movements supporting the preservation and growth of Judeo-Spanish rely on or imitate already existing movements among Yiddish speakers? How do “return movements” of Jews seeking German and Spanish citizenship compare or differ, especially in light of German laws regarding citizenship restoration and recent invitations from the Spanish government for repatriation of expelled Sephardic Jews? What unique role does Sephardic culture play in non-Jewish/non-Sephardic societies worldwide? And within Israel, how does the current political climate contribute to Sephardi-Ashkenazi relations and how are such relations affected by traditional models of ethnic identity?

At the same time, it invites literary critics and writers to consider how questions of Sephardic identity may be explored in literary works and other cultural expression. How, for example, does A.B. Yehoshua’s novel Journey to the End of the Millennium (about a Sephardic merchant journeying to the Ashkenazi communities of the north in the year 1000) represent and challenge myths of Sephardic identity? What role does this and similar works play in modern Israeli literary movements? How also have oral folklore
projects such as that of Samuel Armistead (Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews, which has collected thousands of recordings of modern Sephardim reciting medieval ballads from memory) altered or strengthened arguments about Sephardic uniqueness?

In debating the meaning of such questions, fellows may consider what place, if any, such discourses have in contemporary debates about cultural unity among Jews today, both in Israel and globally. The combination of historical periods as well as disciplinary perspectives hopes to draw cultural and social historians as well as literary scholars, sociologists, and possibly anthropologists. This theme also highlights the broad range of work being done in Jewish Studies at the University of Michigan.