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 evidence of the antiquity of Sephardic Jewry, to preserving medieval myths about refugee rabbis from Babylon, reviving Talmudic academies in 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?

“Sephardic Identities: Medieval and Early 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, and ghettoization and emancipation.