Sepharad, Beyond Nostalgia

Esther Bendahan Cohen. Writer and Director of Culture at the Centro Sefarad Israel

The word *Sepharad*, which designates a distant place of exiles, was used to refer to the Iberian Peninsula, while the Sephardim lived in this territory and were expelled in 1492. Many of them went to northern Morocco, some to Eastern Europe or Holland, while others decided to stay and convert, but paid a high price. They all maintained a collective awareness of belonging to a culture, the Sephardic culture, which has survived over the centuries, although the common language, Judaeo-Spanish, is no longer spoken at home. Over the years, many famous figures emerged from that exile, such as the writer Albert Cohen, the philanthropist and businesswoman Gracia Mendes or the poet Emma Lazarus, whose verses are engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. Today, thanks to a series of reencounters and approaches driven by historical and political vicissitudes, the memory of these Sephardic communities in their various dimen-sions can be recovered. This memory is part of Spanish richness and, beyond nostalgia, is one of its multiple identities.

Am I from Sepharad?

When we talk about Sepharad it is important to remember that the word comes from the Bible and that it refers to a distant place – distant from where? – of the exiles from Jerusalem. The word Sepharad appears for the first time in the Bible in Obadiah: 20, referring to the place of the expelled Jews; so the term designates a distant place of exiles. Over time, it would come to designate the Iberian Peninsula, while the term Sephardim refers to the people who lived in that territory and were expelled – again. They maintained an alliance with their history. In 2015, both Portugal and Spain set about granting a passport to these exiles who over five centuries maintained their identity, if we can talk of identity, culture or memory. The truth is that, by integrating into their host countries, they also maintained a connection to their other origin that was added to the earlier one, linked to Jerusalem. Thus, these Jews had several living and active memories that complemented each other.

My family comes from Morocco. They spoke Spanish, but that was never considered surprising even though they spoke it for centuries after the expulsion. Some Sephardim went to Portugal and from there to Holland, and even participated in the formation of New York; others went to the Ottoman Empire, but my ancestors – Tetouan was formed by those who arrived from Granada – came to Morocco. Their Spanish, Haketia – spoken by the Sephardim in northern Morocco –, was evolving, but far removed from its origin, and incorporated words from Hebrew and Arabic into 15th-century Spanish. However, we are fortunate, because instead of us going to Spain, it is Spain that came to us due to the wars in Africa, as Benito Pérez Galdós

explains in *Aita Tettauen*, in his *Episodios nacionales*. Although I do not recognise myself in the novel or my people in its characters, the truth is that an encounter occurs between them: "they discovered us." And when they discovered us, we also recognised them. The writer Ángel Pulido was surprised to hear that kind of Spanish, in this case among those of Turkish or perhaps Bulgarian origin, because they all continued to speak it. Perhaps the women were responsible for passing it on, since it was their mother tongue. My father, Pinhas Bendahan Z"L, who recently passed away, did not even talk to me about Sepharad or that we were Jews. There was no need, everything was related to everyday life. We are, we were, we lived without the need for definitions.

Mois Benarroch, who came from the same place as me, gifted me with a belonging to writing

In contrast to those who proclaim the end of Sephardic culture, who believe that it is something of the past, I want to point out that there is a collective awareness of belonging. Maybe it was the Portuguese or Spanish passport, or the fact that there are Sephardic writers creating with an interest in their past, updating their memory. The truth, dear Albert Cohen, dear Elias Canetti, is that you are not alone. I say the same to my admired Edgar Morin, the most independent of all. This centenarian writer is an example of the complexity of an identity that eschews definitions but recognises itself.

In my case it has been a learning experience. I recognised myself as a writer as well as a Sephardi. "You are a Sephardic writer," Mois Benarroch told me. I acknowledged that complexity. And the writing came.

Mois Benarroch was born in Tetouan, Morocco, and since 1972 he has lived in Jerusalem, a city where he has written thirty works of fiction and poetry in Hebrew and Spanish, notably including *En las puertas de Tánger*, *Mar de Sefarad*, *Llaves de Tetuán, Coplas del inmigrante, Amor y exilios* and *Lucena*, which has won the Amijay Award and the Levi Eshkol Award. In his poetry and novels there is intelligent humour, longing and creative anger that observes with astonishment that once one leaves, when one leaves the place of one's birth – he left Tetouan when he was thirteen, I left earlier –, it seems impossible to connect again with a feeling that is not one of searching combined with the impossibility of already being from a place. Belonging is an empty word for us, children of the road. Were our parents also like this in their childhood?

Mois Benarroch, who came from the same place as me, gifted me with a belonging to writing. His recognition allowed me to establish the idea of a new territory and the certainty that we had a personal and unique renewal in common; each on one side of the sea, with the enormous differences that returning to Spain and returning to Israel entailed. As the poet Herbert Pagani, who influenced us when we were young, said, we were Palestinians from a thousand years ago, but we spoke Spanish and had that nature between the emotional and rational that characterises the people of Castile. The exile was palpable for us. He arrived as a Moroccan, while I travelled to Israel as Spanish and Sephardic. And when once on a beach in Tel Aviv a man like those you find on any beach told me that he did not want his children to go to school with Moroccans, I understood my friend's anger, because you are also how others see

you. In Israel, Sepharad is confused with oriental. Sometimes we get angry, and is that not also an egocentric attitude? Yes, but it is true that there is also a great deal of oriental in Sepharad, a lot of humour and a permanent dialogue with the Other. I, who feel I am an heir to Albert Cohen and Isaac Bashevis Singer, cannot say if there are different characteristics in Sephardic writers or if they all participate in what is called, according to Alain Finkielkraut, the nostalgia for a common paradise. I think that, in some way, the Spanish mark can be recognised in all of them, the mark of the departure, of the Inquisition. There were many who converted, and those converts influenced, in their turn, the culture of the interior. However, they were not Sephardim but Spanish, although in reality it was the same. Albert Cohen's literary discourse is a dialogue with a European interlocutor who, in some way, is an anti-Semite – he never talks to the Nazi, perhaps because, as Mihail Sebastian says, it is useless – and he wants to seduce him so that he understands that Judaism and the Jews are Europe, as human as he is. Thus, he creates a paradigmatic character of the European Jew in which he shows how Europe suffers from a serious problem: xenophobia, anti-Semitism that is reborn. He raises a very current topic.

Oh You, Brothers…

Albert Cohen recognises himself as part of Sepharad, mocks the "carp eaters," the Ashkenazim – Jews of Central European origin – and feels part of those who endured the Inquisition. Furthermore, in his character of Solal, the protagonist of the novel of the same name, we see a reflection of the converts, the Jews who secretly converted to Judaism because in modernity it is not easy to be Jewish and Western. Cohen was a writer born in Corfu and a diplomat at the Bureau International du Travail in Geneva, who asked himself about Europe and responded with a peculiar: "Listen, Europe." He provides two answers, one in the diplomatic field, through the creation of the passport for refugees, and the other literary. His work, from *Oh vous, frères humains* to *Her Lover (Belle du Seigneur)*, is a dialogue with Europe, which he wants to seduce to be loved through truth, humour and the dramatisation of feelings, in a work where women and loving passion function as a symbol.

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Ashkenazim and Sephardim are Europeans and Jews with different languages and variations in cuisine and in some traditions, but they are Europeans with the same origin. In *La condition réflexive de l'homme juif*, Robert Mishrahi says: "The Jewish subject of the first generation is, by nature, split and divided between the two cultures he encounters in his life... Affectively torn between the two parts of himself; internally he is a kind of dynamic gaze and speculative movement situated in front of two terms that are also outside himself: the non-Jewish substance is the Being which he is not yet, but towards which he strives with the same movement by which he desires to distance himself from the Jewish religion, as a Being that no longer is."

The tearing, the splitting in us, has two levels: one intangible and narrated, the past of an exile; the other is that of family narratives, something more intimate. The reality of Israel emerged in the last century, which for many Jews meant a change. To go or to stay? Jews from Arab countries also had to leave them, like those who fled pogroms or Nazism. Many of them were also Sephardim like those in Morocco, others were not. We must talk about this great leaving, this abandonment, in order to live free of danger. The reduction of the Jewish population in these countries is a reflection of the persecutions and abuses suffered: the case of Iraq is an example, perhaps with a more active population. The one hundred and forty thousand Jewish people were reduced to two. Egypt went from eighty thousand to just a few. That great exile, which broke centuries of permanence and culture in those countries, was as significant as the expulsion from Spain.

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Thus, not only were there displacements and emigration in Europe, but also the Jews of these southern countries had to go into exile. However, this has been happening over the centuries. We come from Sepharad, but those who lived in Sepharad travelled to other places, like Maimonides, who arrived in Fez and then Cairo. He is one of the most important Sephardic thinkers, and has left his mark on all Jewish thought. Another case is that of the poet Yehuda Halevi, who was born in Tudela and died in Jerusalem, and who wrote: "My heart is in the East and I am in the confines of the West / How am I going to find delight in the delicacies and enjoy them? / How will I keep my vows and promises, if Zion continues under Christian power and I am submitted to the Arabs? / How easy it would be for me to abandon all the goodness of Sepharad! / How wonderful to behold the ruins of the destroyed Sanctuary!"

So, when talking about Sepharad, are we not talking about travel, cultural influences, breaking borders? The important thing is a firm will to maintain the connection. Every Saturday, a chapter from the Perasha Bible is read, along with another from the book of prophets *Aphtorah Aftará*. I was surprised to realise that the biblical paragraph that is read when the name Israel appears for the first time coincides with the reading of the corresponding chapter in which the word Sepharad appears, as if there were a connection between the texts, an encounter indicative of a reality. Of future. Therefore, it is not surprising that two admirable women, Sephardic women from different times, thought that Israel would solve the problem of persecutions and exiles. The politician and philanthropist Gracia Mendes Nasi and the poet Emma Lazarus are of Spanish origin because that is the agreement they came to with their memory; that is how they felt. They are also an example of that multiple culture linked to Spain, but not only to Spain.

Sepharad in Feminine

The expulsion of the Spanish Jews in 1492 was, among other causes, for economic reasons such as the appropriation of property, which led to the perception of the fragility

of heritage. Thus, new formulas appeared to maintain profits. The exiles influenced the transformation of international trade, promoting a primitive financial system that had to be sustained according to other principles that allowed the mobility of wealth and the protection of an intangible heritage. A surprising example was Gracia Mendes, also known as Gracia Nasi, formerly Beatriz de Luna, the Lady, to whom Cecil Roth dedicates a book where he tells of her importance in the financial world: *Dona Gracia. The House of Nasi*. Let us also recall Joseph de la Vega (Córdoba, 1650-Amsterdam, 1692), Spanish Jewish merchant and writer of the Spanish Golden Age, who went to Holland and, like many other Jewish converts, dedicated himself to Judaising. Thus, they considered him guilty, like Spinoza's family. Joseph de la Vega wrote in the Spanish of that time what is considered the first book about the stock market: *Confusión de confusiones: diálogos curiosos entre un philosopho agudo, un mercader discreto, y un accionista erudito, describiendo el negocio de las acciones, su origen, su ethimologia, su realidad, su juego, y su enredo.*

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But returning to the Lady, the Mendes family and the Nasi family left Portugal under pressure of the Inquisition, because it had reached that far from this new Spain

Sephardic women in Morocco, 1950.

united by the Catholic Kings. The decree that obliged Jews to leave was firm. Many decided to convert in order to stay – although this option was not given by decree, neither was it impeded –; in this way, they avoided the drama of exile and the loss of properties but were the object of a cruel persecution. The converse – the Marranos, as they have been called derogatively – were suspected of Crypto-Judaism; in other words, of maintaining in secrecy their beliefs, and therefore the law of the Inquisition punished everyone considered a bad Christian. It was a time of denouncements and persecutions, of trials that have been well documented as they are so shameful. Those new Christians, as they were called, apart from feeling fear, felt watched, harassed. The vigilance was exerted by good neighbours, friends, and they were always guilty, nowhere was safe. Certainly, some of them were traitors but they held firm to their beliefs. How could they renounce them? Some, those who remained to protect their families and heritage, did not suspect that by staying they fell into a perverse trap.

It is in this environment where Beatriz de Luna was born, in Lisbon, in 1510, to a Nasi family, a Jewish family of Aragonese origin. She married Francisco Mendes at the age of eighteen, thus two houses were united, which were able to maintain a significant fortune, along with their Jewish faith and their traditions, in secret. As Cecil Roth tells us about the Lady, "her ancestors must have been penetrated by a religious spirit of an exceptional strength."

As often happened in that time of ignorance, after the plague epidemic in 1506 a culprit was sought, and therefore thousands of people were murdered accused of Judaising.

Beatriz had a daughter who she named Brianda, Reyna, like her sister, but just in the same year when, through the mediation of Spain, the Inquisition was introduced in Portugal, Francisco, her husband, died, leaving her as heiress and responsible for his heritage: "Thus, in a time of strong women, she was one of the most influential, perhaps the most brilliant woman in Jewish history," argues Roth.

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She travelled to Antwerp with her daughter, and it is important to point out, albeit briefly, that both her nephews and her brother-in-law respected her authority in business, as she was the main decision-maker. Thus, she maintained and increased her fortune, devoted to the trade in precious stones, spices and banking. In Antwerp she made contact with other Sephardim. That community of converts maintained an alliance which allowed the creation of a trade network of trust. In Ferrara, she got permission to continue enlarging her trade network through an exemption to the limitations that the city imposed on women.

She was the only woman in 16th-century Ferrara who could manage her enterprises. She was interested in its culture, and therefore she set out on a project as a patron: the publication of the *Bible of Ferrara* (1533), a translation of the Bible into Judaeo-Spanish. The work gave the Judaeo-Spanish language presence and autonomy, thus helping to promote it. The Lady also showed her interest in education and culture by supporting authors such as Alonso Núñes de Reinoso,

author of the novel *La historia de los amores de Clareo y Florisea*; Samuel Usque, who wrote *Consolação ás Tribulações de Israel* (1553), or Bernardim Ribeiro and his novel *Menina e moça* (1554). As in Ferrara there were tensions between the different Jewish communities, she finally decided to travel to Constantinople and settle there with her daughter.

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In Constantinople, she formed part of the intimate circle of Sultan Soliman the Magnificent. Her strong commitment is clear if we examine the moment when Pope Paul IV condemned twenty-five Jews in Ancona to the fire: then, with the help of the sultan, the Lady organised a boycott on the city port, diverting the entrance of products that arrived from the East to the port of Pesaro.

Partly because of this constant situation of fragility and vulnerability of her people and also because of a spiritual idea of the return to Sion, with the help of the sultan she organised a settlement in the region of Tiberias – which at that time belonged to the sultan – in exchange for a large amount of money and special taxes. Thus, it became a space for study and continues as such. It can be said that the Zionist idea of return also has this Sephardic aspect: although a Jewish presence continued in Palestine, the idea of forming a community for survival had a special beginning among Sephardic Jews. Great figures such as Rabbi Isaac Luria lived there and the Kabbalah developed, which had its origin in Spain.

But, Will Someone Remind Us In One Thousand Years?

The phrase "But, will someone remind us in one thousand years" starts the book *A Journey to the End of Millennium*, by the Israeli Sephardic Avraham B. Yehosua. The action of the book takes place in early 1000, according to the Western calendar. When I read this phrase, I was working on the publication of a book on Emma Lazarus and her texts. Publishing her poems for the first time in Spanish was a great challenge. And I realised that, while we recalled this 19th-century poet who lived in New York but felt Sephardic, she, in her turn, had recalled other great Sephardic poets such Ibn Gabirol, who she translated into English. What drove this young woman to read this poet? Above all, we should note that the expelled, far from rancour, maintained their culture. Emma says about herself that she is, above all, a poet, and forms part of this Jewish line of readers who break temporal distances to find those influences mentioned by Harold Bloom in texts by distant authors, but with whom in some way they linked to as part of a genealogy; a link provided by the legacy, the family, the belonging, identity, an open identity. In Emma we see a special relation with history and her memory in Sepharad, that is in Spain, and with the Sephardim, as she is one of those exiles who took that belonging from Spain and Portugal to the so-called new world. Judaism as a civilisation, its books and traditions, along with Israel, is the other angle of the triangle, which, like one of those that form the Star of David, are the star matter shaped by her verses. She is a poet because her drive and desire is to serve the text, and this is how those around her

saw it, like the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, to whom Emma dedicates the long poem *Admetus*: *To My Friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson*, which starts: "He who could beard the lion in his lair." She is also a leader and social activist because she is not indifferent to suffering. She does not unlink herself from the pain of those she considers her people as a metaphor for all of the sufferers of the Earth. In her articles, before the political Zionism that leads to the need for the construction of the State of Israel, she was already thinking about the need for a place where Jews from all over the world could live without the need to justify themselves, free from danger. There begins her double commitment to writing and the pain of the exiles.

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But, what does being Sephardic mean? In Spain, we have seen the rebirth of genealogical studies in search of ancestors to obtain a Spanish passport. In the 19th-century, there were several determining events that opened the doors to a meeting, which coincided with the establishment of the Protectorate of Morocco and the discovery of the Sephardic communities that maintained the language they took with them in their exile. In 1905, the book *Españoles sin patria y la raza sefardí* by Ángel Pulido was published, and in 1924, among other important cultural events, Miguel Primo de Rivera's decree was promulgated, which established a period of six years for the former Spaniards protected by the pre-nuptial agreements – among whom there were many Sephardim – to apply to nationality. Some years later, the decree of 29 April 1931 enabled the Sephardim from the Protectorate to obtain nationality after two years of residence. Nobody could imagine that a Spanish passport would enable Europeans to save their lives under Nazi occupation, thanks to the Spanish diplomats.

Recently, the act of 2015 enabled a passport to be obtained by providing data that shows this rooting with Spain and being a descendant of those expelled. Undoubtedly, Emma Lazarus might have proven her rooting based on her published texts and ancestry. In *The Jewish Problem*, as we see next, she recalls great authors: "Samuel ha-Nagid, the 'Prince' (died 1055), nominally prime-minister, but virtually little less than regent of Granada, under two successive kings, for thirty years; Moses ben-Ezra and Yehuda Halevi, poets of the first rank, from whom Heine drew a large part of his inspiration; Ibn-Gabirol, better known by his Spanish name of Avicebron, poet and philosopher, in whose works may be found the germ of Spinoza's system and whose sublime poems have been incorporated in all Jewish rituals, side by side with the hymns of the Psalmist and the prophecies of Isaiah; last and greatest of all, Maimonides, the physician of Saladin, 'the glory of the West, the light of the East, the Eagle of the Synagogue, the Second Moses, 'such men as these shed luster upon humanity. And these are only the most eminent from a long and splendid list, for which I refer my readers to Graetz' 'History of the Jews.'

This Sephardic writer, born in 1849 in New York to one of the Sephardic families settled in the city, wrote in 1883 the poem *The New Colossus*. She wrote this poem,

which is on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, to search for funds for the completion of the statue and, paradoxically, it became the emblem that gave meaning to it. Thus, her texts form part of that transnational writing, a part of the corpus of *migritude*, a neologism coined by Leonardo Senkman to name a kind of simultaneous circulatory circuit of writing of the diaspora, in this case Jewish.

It Is Not Nostalgia, the Passport Arrived

I firmly believe that nothing in Sepharad is distanced from Judaism, and nothing of Judaism is distanced from Sepharad. It is a part of the history of the Jews, inherited in its turn from Canetti and Singer. Yes, despite one being Sephardim and the other Ashkenazi. The symbolic case of this crossing is the poet Juan Gelman, whose relatives arrived from Europe in Argentina. Gelman wrote *Dibaxu* in search of that Spanish, Judaeo-Spanish, influenced by the writer Clarisse Nicoïdski. Thus he approached the Judaism of his language searching for the spirit of the past, which lives on in words, filling it with meanings and sounds. Because the words are fluid, they are both solid in moments of speech and liquid in their relation with eras. This crossing enables us, in my opinion, to say that this feeling related to the Jewish past of Spain lives on in many Jews of diverse origin who speak Spanish.

The Sephardic identity is transnational and transtemporal. By allying precisely with time, Pierre Assouline obtained Spanish nationality and wrote a book, *Regreso a Sefarad*, in which he tells about his experience. The act of 2015 opened the possibility of obtaining a Spanish passport and was an opportunity, although it also confronted us with the reality of the difficulties of the crossing of memory that flies over history. You had to prove your origins five hundred years later. While some obtained documents through the Jewish communities, others searched for their origins through the study of their genealogy. Several administrative decisions were taken, such as that the process should conclude in Spain with the signing of a Spanish notary. An online process began via a Ministry of Justice app, obtaining a number and then attaching the documents required. Even though the period to apply ended two years ago, those who have their number can continue the process. In the past, the Sephardic Jews could obtain nationality with a special naturalization document called *carta de naturaleza*, like Latin Americans, by proving they have been in the country for two years. Thus, many are now Spanish, many who were not even linked to Judaism, because the act dealt with Sephardim, not with Sephardic Jews, and many communities were assimilated and lost their cultural religious connection.

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Today, thousands of new Spaniards have recovered a document that validates and grants passage to their memory. In this way, we can confront the pessimism about this Sephardic world, although the language, Judaeo-Spanish, both in the Haketia and Balkans variants, is no longer spoken at

home, as the writer Myriam Moscona points out. I think that it exists in another form, rather than withering away, returning to the timeline of its origin, because what those who left wanted was to speak the same language that they spoke in their country, but the expulsion distanced them and also expelled them from their language, which was everyone's. Today we can reencounter both the language and the expelled, and therefore those sounds, that density of meaning of their words, will always remain within Sepharad. It corresponds to Spain, apart from giving them a passport, to allow in their poets, their scientists, their members of the past so that they find again their place in this void they left when they departed. I do not want to forget those murdered in the Shoah, because in some places such as Thessalonica an important part of the Judaeo-Spanish communities was murdered. Now I meet Mois Benarroch, Margalit Matitiahu, Myriam Moscona, Jacobo Sefamí, Shlomo Aviyu, Denisse Leo or Cynthia Gabbay again, and from different countries we speak the same language – my admired friend and professor Yaacov Bentolila says that it is better to call it Haketia. I have just received the anthology *Abril en Sefarad* with texts by all of them, and yes, we are still here, aware that the *here* is more than a place.

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Sepharad now continues its path close to Spain, and therefore beyond nostalgia, and is yet another of its identities.