Tradition and History: Sephardic Contributions to American Literature

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Sensitivity to cultural diversity in our national literature has propelled us to reexamine our literary histories and critical canon, a necessary undertaking even for a narrow specialization such as American Jewish belles lettres. Among the general reading public, Jewish or not, names like Malamud, Roth, Gold, Bellow, Charyn, Ozick, Paley, and numerous others of primarily Eastern European background are well known. Much less familiar are writers of Sephardic background, though two exceptions readily come to mind, Emma Lazarus and Robert Nathan. Other Sephardic belletrists generally have reputations only among scholars and critics. For example, historians know Mordecai Manuel Noah as a playwright as well as a politician, journalist, and proponent of Jewish causes; educators may know Annie Nathan Meyer, a founder of Barnard College, also as a playwright, short fiction writer, and memoirist; critics specializing in contemporary American Jewish literature will be familiar with Stanley Sultan’s novel Rabbi and Stephen Levy’s poetry, and so on. Several histories and critical works on American Jewish literature, however, have excluded figures like Meyer and Sultan; and nowhere have Sephardic writers been examined as a group.

While surely there have been and are American writers of Sephardic background, the question of whether the Sephardic Jewish writer exists as a class with special concerns and approaches different from the German or Eastern European Jewish writer is a complex one. The paucity of evidence may explain why this issue has not so far been addressed. Sephardic writers are relatively few in number, and their works are scattered across several periods in American literature and diverse literary forms. Some of them are or were professional writers and rather prolific, but others were amateurs, and a few produced only one work—and that not distributed widely. The
works of some Sephardic authors have a strong Jewish content, those of others have no Jewish characters or identifiably Jewish themes, leading one to ask whether the category of "Jewish writer" should include all Jews who write or only those who write on matters of Jewish concern. Further, the national backgrounds of the writers we will discuss are considerably varied. Mordecai Manuel Noah, Penina Moïse, Emma Lazarus, Elizabeth Cardozo, Annie Nathan Meyer, Robert Nathan, and Nancy Cardozo were all American-born descendants of the earliest Sephardic settlers in the United States, and their connections to Judaism ranged from the devout to the unconcerned. The Sephardic Jewry of the eastern Mediterranean, which has a much shorter history in the United States, is represented by Leon Sciaky, who was born in Salonika; Stephen Levy and David Raphael, whose families originated in the Levant; and Stanley Sultan, whose family came here from Syria.

The question for us here is whether the members of such a diverse group display a common sensibility derived from their Sephardism and whether the Sephardic heritage infuses their literary work. To determine this requires examining their personal histories as American Sephardim, when possible, as well as their writings. I believe that subtle commonalities exist among several of the writers I have mentioned, most notably in a cosmopolitan outlook bequeathed them by either of two strains of Sephardic cultural background. Among the descendants of the early Sephardic settlers this expresses itself as a tendency to espouse traditional democratic and sometimes religious values, and among the Levantine Sephardim as a preoccupation with memorializing and revitalizing Sephardic history. In both groups, furthermore, heritage has influenced the writers' relationships to America, which in turn affected their chosen subjects.

Among those writers whose ancestry goes back to the early Sephardic settlers—Mordecai Manuel Noah, Penina Moïse, Emma Lazarus, Annie Nathan Meyer, and Robert Nathan—we find that they all displayed a Jewish consciousness in their personal lives and expressed it in their writing. Yet we find nothing parochial in this group: they possessed an impressively broad range of interests and were fully engaged in the wider American culture, even if, like Peni-
na Moïse and Emma Lazarus to a degree, they led sheltered and
domestic-centered lives.

Whether they regarded Judaism piously or cursorily, these writers
did not shun the Gentile community and were not shunned by it in
turn. Discord was not the general tone of their relations with Chris-
tians, although most of them were familiar enough with anti-Semi-
tism, either through direct experience or through their knowledge of
history and contemporary events. Despite some personal tensions
between their American nationality and Jewish group identity, their
literary efforts—even when critical of American institutions—as a
rule display tremendous faith in America’s democratic promise, and
they consistently affirm the qualities of the America they value: the
individual’s importance at the center of life, dissent, liberty, and iden-
tification with the suffering of others. Their families’ long history
without persecution in America, and the subsequent security most of
them felt as American Jews, encouraged them to espouse these val-
ues, to urge equal opportunity for others as well, and to take up Jew-
ish or other causes in their writing. In the case of most of the writers I
plan to discuss, mixing a chronological and thematic framework,
both their personal lives and their writings illuminate their relation-
ships to tradition, to history, and to their adopted home.

Penina Moïse

Ill-health and poverty kept Penina Moïse (1797–1880) physically close
to home throughout most of her life, but the domestic sphere did not
limit her outlook or narrow the subjects of her poetry. She was a
respected figure in the cultural, religious, and educational affairs of
the Jewish community, holding salons for the intellectually inclined,
keeping abreast of current literary trends, writing hymns for the syn-
agogue, and establishing a school with her sister. Biographical data
suggest that Gentiles also esteemed her and that she had quite friend-
ly relations with them, although she firmly rejected intermarriage for
herself and frowned on it among her coreligionists.4

Throughout her life Moïse contributed poems and essays to
numerous periodicals, and her cosmopolitan outlook is certainly
revealed in her wide subject and style range. She is best known for
her religious poetry, especially the hymns still included in several prayerbooks. The conventional style that marks most of her poetry, making some of it seem unimaginative, is appropriate to hymns, which must have traditional appeal. Accessibility, ability to provide comfort, and simplicity of images mark these works, which reveal a sincere, unquestioning, and almost absolutist faith. Some of the hymns discuss salvation and death, but life is the true subject of most, a life completed and vitalized by religious faith. The God of these works is generous and forgiving, a source of truth and goodness.

Moïse downplays her own imaginative powers in the hymns; instead, she relies on standard ways of showing God’s power and so reveals her own humility before God. For example, the idea expressed in “The Immutability of God” is a simple one: huge changes take place over time; these changes are beyond human conception, but God’s presence is constant and thus comforting.\(^5\)

Further, the rhyme schemes are not innovative, as in,

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Oh! bless the meek
who daily seek
Thy praise to speak;
Whose efforts blend,
Faith to extend
In thee, man’s never-changing Friend!
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[p. 5]

No effort to reveal passion, intensity, or sensuality marks such lines; neither are the images fresh and striking—“wings of light,” “rain-drops large and bright,” “tears of recent storm” (p. 14). To describe creation Moïse will use the phrase “vivid colors” rather than duplicate the colors for the reader. Again, Moïse’s purpose, not innovation but illustration of the force and constancy behind religious tradition, is satisfied by such poetic language.

Moïse asserts her own acceptance of God’s law, despite her personal hardships, with rather upbeat resignation, actively espousing traditional verities about the afterlife and other Jewish teachings. Often, she aims to cheer:

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To ev’ry evil that annoys,
to every trial fearful,
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Thou bringest some light counterpoise.

[p. 11]

And in a similar vein,

Meek faith converts the couch of pain
Into a bed of roses;
For there we moral vigor gain,
To bear what G-d disposes.

[pp. 13–14]

Or consider Moïse’s poem about personal loss, “Immortality of the Soul.” She begins with grief: “A mournful lament for the dead! Woe unto me!” However, this is the most complaint she allows herself, and by the fifth stanza she avows, “Excessive grief is unbelief.” The words she has God speak in this poem are ones she accepts:

Death, my messenger of peace,
Frees the soul my grace will save. . . .
Then tremble not at empty names
Ye who mercy’s word believes.

[p. 34]

A poem about her brother’s death continues this optimism, ending with the charge that mourners should

celebrate with one united voice
Thy first birthday among immortal souls.

[pp. 294–295]

Moïse is not interested in the philosophical complexity of how faith lightens pain; this is left for others with a more analytic bent and a more questioning relationship to God.

Nothing in Moïse’s religious poetry prepares us for her humorous justification of card-playing and writing as mental sport in “The Muses’ Vindication of Cards,” or for the wit displayed in “Love and Law,” in which a lawyer, smitten with a woman who spurns his love, imagines her trial and the verdict convicting her. Personal poems about her family, nature poems such as “The Apple,” “The Comet Again,” and “The Gift of the Snowdrop,” and historical poems about
the United States further exhibit the range of her poetic style and interests. Most interesting, Moïse’s political and historical poetry reveals that she felt no tension about being a Jew in America; in fact, her secure American identity contributed to her ability to express personal outrage in poems about the Maryland Jew Bill, which imposed religious restrictions on public officials, and the persecution of Jews in Damascus, and to speak out vehemently about non-Jewish issues such as the Irish famine and the plight of Civil War widows.

Moïse was both a religious traditionalist and a person sure of her secular democratic values. Both of these attitudes were possible because her heritage was generally respected by those around her, though, of course, she did see some crumbling of the Jewish world as her coreligionists intermarried and even converted. Still, her community was well established, she experienced no personal anti-Semitism, and she received considerable praise for her efforts on behalf of the Jewish community. Her life, reflected with little distortion in her writings, represents a common adjustment of mid-nineteenth-century Sephardic Americans to the new land: traditionalism and assimilation appear to coexist, each with a circumscribed sphere of influence.

**Mordecai Manuel Noah**

Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851) provides both a contrast and a parallel to Moïse. His penchant for full involvement in the life of the United States and the Jewish community was similar to Moïse’s. However, not hampered by gender, isolation, or ill-health, and blessed with an exuberant, egotistical, and energetic nature, Noah had a more dramatic and public career than Moïse. He was a playwright, a journalist, a publicist for the Jewish community, a diplomat, and a politician.

Despite the repeated praise for the American experiment in democracy in Noah’s speeches and writings, a defensive insecurity about his American identity comes through in his highly patriotic plays. He was also overtly concerned about anti-Semitic remarks directed at him in the press, and he addressed these in his own newspaper columns. Further, he believed that anti-Semitism was responsible for his recall as envoy to the Barbary States, although the historian
Jonathan Sarna suggests that this problem was more perceived than real, and that Noah's sloppy financial arrangements led to his recall. No doubt, he experienced some tension between his religious and national identities, a point I will raise again later.

As a dramatic issue, anti-Semitism appears in none of Noah's plays, but Sol Liptzin suggests that Noah's avoidance of the ubiquitous evil Jewish character so popular on the stage in his day evinces his concern with anti-Semitism in the American theatre. Whether theatregoers noticed this oblique technique is, of course, unknown; however, it seems safe to say that Noah's Jewishness propelled him to write repeatedly about democracy's promise of tolerance, justice, and equality.

Noah is probably known better for his failed Ararat plan, the attempt to colonize Jews in upstate New York, and for his journalism than for his plays, which even he called amateurish. Nonetheless, many critics have regarded these efforts as worthy contributions to a budding native theatre, and it is certainly worth examining how his private values and infatuation for the American Dream gain full expression in the dramas.

Noah's historical plays focus on the nature of virtue and honor, loyalty and liberty. They are conventional in style: three of the four extant plays use the familiar device of the woman disguised as a man, and all of them depend on predictable intrigue and some contrived circumstances. Still, they are paced well and are quite entertaining.

She Would be a Soldier; or, The Plains of Chippewa, which takes place during the War of 1812, offers an excellent example of Noah's political intentions. It begins with a paean to the American Dream spoken by a Frenchman, Jasper, who is "imbued with the spirit" he had felt as one of La Fayette's soldiers during the Revolution. After the war he became a true pioneer, taming the wilds, settling down, and raising a daughter, Christine. This opening establishes both Jasper's and the play's values, and though Jasper errs in promising Christine to Jerry, a man she cannot love (mostly because he studiously keeps out of the fighting when his militia unit confronts some British troops), and so sets in motion Christine's escape, his values are the ones affirmed in the end. Christine loves Lenox, a soldier, and, disguised as a soldier herself, follows him to the battlefront to save herself from
bumbling and cowardly Jerry. Despite her bravery, her emotions are stereotyped, as when she quickly concludes that Lenox does not love her when she sees him conversing with another woman. To other soldiers, Christine seems a suspicious character because she lurks around her lover’s tent, and when she refuses to reveal her identity or motives she receives a death sentence. By the end of the play, all threats to a happy resolution disappear, Lenox and Christine are reunited, and the British are defeated.

Although the play depends on humor and expected plot turnings, Noah conveys a serious message through his repeated mocking of the cowardly Jerry and his scorn for the British General’s paternalism toward the Indian Chief and for Captain Pendragon’s self-inflation as a “man of fashion.” The humbler and rawer Americans receive full praise, and from their lips come the idealistic closing words, “enemies in war—in peace, friends.”

*The Fall of Athens* offers another example of Noah’s political intentions, though it is a much more ambitious theatrical venture than *She Would Be a Soldier*. Characterized by an elaborate setting, several subplots, and much intrigue, it admirably avoids predictability by involving the Greek heroes in plans for liberation that are neither simplistic nor easily fulfilled. Further, the heroes and heroine face personal and political struggles and so are not one-dimensional. As in his other work, however, Noah’s decidedly American values emerge clearly: he praises individual and collective action for freedom, stresses the right of choice, and urges full equality for all classes of people.

For Noah the playwright there was, apparently, no conflict in a Jew’s using the stage as a platform to espouse the democratic ideal. Nonetheless, one wonders about his motivations. Did he fear that if America could not live up to its promises the Jews would suffer? If so, did he feel a special responsibility as a Jew to remind American audiences of their country’s principles? In his fine book, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Manuel Noah*, Jonathan Sarna suggests that Noah’s Ararat plan revealed the fragile underpinnings of his espoused beliefs in American opportunity for equality.

Neither his patriotic allusions nor his sweeping assertions could conceal the Ararat-American tensions inherent in his plan. If, as he claimed in his address, “in this free and happy country distinctions in religion are unknown,” how
could a separate Jewish colony be countenanced? How could a "government of the Jews" be organized if the constitution and laws of the U.S. were to be binding? How could Jews in Ararat be loyal to America if the asylum was "temporary and provisional"?

Likewise, if Noah felt these tensions, as Sarna convincingly asserts, he very well might have seen the theatre as a forum for safeguarding Jewish interests. For Noah, the century-long history of Sephardic Jewry in America was apparently not enough to assuage his concern that the Jews were living in a country not their own and governed by a people other than themselves. Perhaps Noah believed that through a public and dramatic medium he could influence his audiences to believe and practice the ideals of the democratic tradition.

Emma Lazarus

Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), the best-known of the Sephardic writers, has received comparatively substantial critical attention, and much has been written about her development of a strong Jewish consciousness. Thus, what follows is not new textual or historical analysis but a consideration of Lazarus's similarities to other writers in this study.

Raised in a consciously Jewish but minimally observant home, Lazarus looked not to her own history but to classical Greece, the German poets, and transcendentalism for poetic inspiration. She showed her allegiance to tradition by "rarely stray[ing] off beaten methods of versifying " or "tried-and-true subjects." Like other writers in this Sephardic group, Lazarus had numerous Gentile friends and became part of the general intellectual community through her personal and/or written relationships with Ralph Waldo Emerson, E. C. Stedman, Turgenev, Robert Browning, and William Morris. She did not seek out other Jewish writers, nor did she use Jewish subjects extensively in her work until she awakened to her own minority status during the great migration of Eastern European Jews to New York after 1880.

Lazarus's poem "In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport," written in 1867, is instructive of her attitude about Judaism prior to the last
decade of her life. As Dan Vogel explains in his *Emma Lazarus*, it reveals “the impersonality, the dispassionate objectivity of her review of the highlights of history.” Lazarus sees the Jews “only as a ‘relic of the days of old’” (p. 73). In this poem, nothing vital exists in the contemporary Jew but memory.

A shift in Lazarus’s relationship to Judaism and to other Jews began in 1880, when mounting brutality drove thousands of Russian Jews to emigrate, arousing her awareness of persecution and of the meaning of continuity in Jewish identity. Vogel helps us understand Lazarus’s perspective: “The fountainhead of modern culture was poisoned in her mind, and even classical culture appeared to be relatively empty, if not suspect” (p. 141). Further, in an essay titled “The Jewish Problem,” Lazarus revealed a new consciousness that even America could not fulfill the Jews’ need for safety, decency, and opportunity: “in America every Jew knows that the host society never equates the Jewish community with the best Jews; rather security for the Jew is dependent on the conduct of ‘the meanest rascal who belongs to the tribe’” (p. 142).

To the end of her life Lazarus’s subject remained the Jews and Judaism.” Of the three writers discussed thus far, she was by far the least religious and the most assimilated. Yet neither characteristic hindered her identification with other Jews in time of crisis. Lazarus’s experience must, then, raise the question, What binds the Jewish people together, and to what extent are they assimilable?

Clearly, in Lazarus’s case anti-Semitism compelled her to examine an identity she had neglected. However, her natural sympathy with the persecuted was not the only factor in her conversion. Rabbi Gustav Gottheil influenced her not only to visit the immigrants on Ward’s Island but to expand her deficient education in Judaism and Jewish history. Like Joseph Victor, the protagonist of Robert Nathan’s *A Star in the Wind*, a work written eighty years after her death, Emma Lazarus discovered that Jewishness remained a vital tradition and could be a compelling force in her own life, manifested in part by a commitment to Zionism, a commitment Mordecai Manuel Noah might have made had he lived during the same period.
A strong contrast to Emma Lazarus is her cousin, Annie Nathan Meyer (1867–1951), who minimized the existence of anti-Semitism in the United States and remained firmly opposed to Zionism during all of her long life. A prolific fiction writer, dramatist, and essayist, Meyer was proud of her Sephardic heritage, her familial connection to Rabbi Gershom Seixas, and her family’s long history in America, all of which helped her to move very successfully between the Jewish and Gentile worlds. These attributes, I believe, also contributed to Meyer’s traditionalism; yet she repeatedly claimed for herself a position in the literary and social avant garde. In fact, her own appraisal ignores a palpable tension between the radicalism and traditionalism of her thought.

As a Jew, Meyer maintained an affiliation with Shearith Israel, the oldest Sephardic synagogue in the United States, but she wrote very little about her religious education or the extent of her own observance. She once referred to herself in print as an agnostic, and after her marriage to Dr. Alfred Meyer—for whom science rather than spirituality was the significant force in the universe—she rarely attended religious services or fulfilled religious rituals at home. During the Great Migration period, Meyer’s attitudes toward newcomers were similar to those of the establishment German Jews who feared an anti-Semitic reaction to the influx of Eastern European and Ottoman Jews. She urged the new immigrants to be as unobtrusive as possible, and in fact this founder of Barnard College, so often sought out for her advice about higher education, occasionally discouraged Eastern European Jewish women from applying to Barnard. Also praising Israel Zangwill’s play *The Melting Pot* in her article “The Ghetto in Literature,” she nevertheless warned that such works might incite “racial” hatred by emphasizing the exoticism of the Jews. Jewish writers, she asserted, should write about the Jewish bourgeoisie, just as Gentile prose artists had for decades written of their own middle-class.¹² Meyer herself never undertook such a project; in fact, absent from her creative work is any reference to Jewish characters, themes, or issues.¹³
Meyer's attitudes about anti-Semitism reflect her privileged position in a line of Sephardic Jews with a long and comfortable history in America, and a certain ambivalence about prejudice as well. In her autobiography, *It's Been Fun*, she briefly notes but minimizes one childhood experience with anti-Semitism in the Midwest, and she claims in the book's closing pages that anti-Semitism exists only for those who look for it.4

For a Jewish woman writing in the 1980s, so close in time to the decimation of Jewish communities in Europe and the Levant, and not long after a nasty period of anti-Semitism in the United States, this might suggest ulterior motives. Meyer seems also to have been obtuse about being the object of anti-Semitism, having ignored the possibility that her Jewishness was the reason that Barnard's administration granted her a less than prominent position even though she was a founder of the college. On the other hand, she was aware quite early of the ugliness in Hitler's racial policies and urged Barnard officials not to invite German scholars with fascist leanings to the campus.5

Meyer's varying views of Jewishness match the separation between tradition and the avant-garde in other areas of her life. She seems to be straddling a fence dividing two worlds. While acknowledging that tradition was necessary for group survival as well as to maintain her own position of privilege, she also saw it as exercising as a stranglehold on groups that were without privilege in American society. Her play *Black Souls*, written in 1932, expresses her outrage about the indignities black people still suffered in the United States, and her special concern with their lack of educational opportunity.

*Black Souls* was controversial in both its subject, a love affair between a young black man and a young white woman, and its style, for its black characters do not speak in dialect. Meyer was one of the few white writers of her time to depict educated black characters speaking as whites did; and to assure herself that she was right to do so she had James Weldon Johnson read her play for stylistic authenticity. He gave it his blessing. As we will see in what follows, the play reveals a great deal about Meyer's conflicted attitudes toward the world she lived in.

In addition to displaying Meyer's sincerity and passion about equality, *Black Souls* is generally a well-written play, often compelling,
tightly organized, with sympathetic and interesting characters. The setting is a black-run institution of higher learning for blacks in the South. Among the ingredients are the headmaster’s enthusiasm about working for his race, his wife’s secret history as a forced paramour to Senator Verne, and a romantic attachment between Verne’s daughter and a young black poet. While the play is thoroughly enjoyable as a drama and as a historical document, Meyer’s manipulating hand is highly visible, as when the senator’s daughter, Luella, pursues her lover though he has repeatedly warned her of the South’s hostility to their romance. Eventually the young lover relents and takes Luella to his secret room in the woods, thus setting in motion a series of events that lead to his death. The play’s resolution, showing a repentant Verne, may satisfy Meyer’s need for optimism, but is hardly believable. Violence in the form of a lynching reveals Meyer’s understanding of southern realities, but her conversion of the evil and hypocritical Verne displays her need not merely for happy endings but for trust in the American system and in the ultimate success of democratic values.

In most of Meyer’s earlier fiction and drama, primarily in the area of women’s issues, tradition prevented her from being as radical as she considered herself. Nonetheless, she frequently wrote eloquently about the unsatisfactory position of women in contemporary American life and in the institution of marriage; and her work displays seriousness, commitment, wit, and sensitivity to the complexity of human relationships.

Her first novel, Helen Brent, M.D., is radical in its deploring of high society’s materialist values and double standard of sexual morality; its condemnation of society’s silence on venereal disease, and of men who deny their wives’ achievements; and its suggestion that many women ignore women’s collective best interests. In this novel Annie Nathan Meyer sacrifices novelistic subtlety to create a platform for her own views, but she has still given us a detailed and memorable picture of a particular social world. For example, in explaining how difficult it is to combine marriage and career, Helen Brent says, “Women are often more against us than men because they live life in a narrow sphere,” and adds that she has “never found a man willing to take irregular meals and give up vacations.”
Despite these attitudes, Meyer's novel sticks to the traditionalism of happy endings and heroines as models of all the correct views. What is troublesome about Helen Brent as a model, however, is that Meyer too firmly emphasizes her separateness from all other women; thus, Helen may be a model of correct views, but she is not a model to be emulated by other women. Even her best student falls into the trap of willingness to give up all for a man.

Helen Brent is a young and attractive doctor who has refused to relinquish her career for marriage to the highly traditionalist lawyer she loves. Firm in her conviction not to become merely a domestic machine when she marries, Brent is also committed to fighting battles for other women, often with little success. For example, outraged that her prize student's sister is to wed a profligate man known to carry venereal disease, she confronts the mother. Her effort to have the marriage called off or even to warn the bride fails, and later she must witness the young bride's death. But it is not only in this that Helen Brent is unsuccessful. She is also unable to convince her student's mother that this daughter deserves love as much as the more social and less intellectual child. As she rails privately and publicly about the crimes she alone seems to see, other women describe her as sour, never examining their own opinions.

Perhaps the greatest disappointment for the contemporary reader is the novel's closing hint that Helen and her lawyer will eventually marry. Harold has been so blind, intransigent, and stupid that his incipient change of heart is not quite credible, no more so than Verne's conversion in Black Souls. We feel that the novel's denouement into traditionalist roles was preordained. Nor is there anything radical in the central premise of Helen Brent, M.D.—that it takes a highly unusual woman, of which there are very few, to question traditional values effectively.

A later play by Meyer, The Dominant Sex, written in 1911, advances the same message. Here, Meyer uses humor and irony to highlight the main character's folly. Mrs. Cora Mason confuses women's equality with an unthinking espousal of any cause related to women and a total rejection of domestic responsibilities toward her husband and child. Prey to fashionable thoughts about woman's emancipation, Mrs. Mason becomes a neglectful wife and mother and a shallow
thinker, for which Meyer soundly chastises her. There are amusing portraits here of the secretary who spends her whole salary on modish but inappropriate and uncomfortable clothing, a gossiping wealthy matron who pretends interest in political issues but listens most closely to the latest sex scandal, a hard-nosed and somewhat masculine female journalist. Clearly these are all stereotypes, and Meyer relies on them to advance her own views: women should be sensible, immune to fashion, feminine, and involved in women’s issues but only if participation means attending to traditional roles. After reading Helen Brent, M.D. we might expect Meyer to show how Mrs. Mason learns to integrate both sides of her life; yet the play closes with Cora’s assertion that if women have filled their lives with causes it is because “Man forsook women.” Traditionalism wins all.

The conflict between traditional and radical impulses appears again in Meyer’s antisuffrage views, which may seem surprising for such a strong champion of women’s higher education. The notion of female moral superiority proclaimed by some women’s suffrage factions was anathema to Meyer. And on a more practical side, she believed that many women were too unastute politically and intellectually to add an experienced voice to the electorate. Even those utterly sympathetic to these concerns might wonder how Meyer reconciled them with her view that many men were hardly more astute, and why Meyer clung to her antisuffragism until her death in 1951.\(^7\)

The contradictions in Meyer’s work are perhaps not so surprising if we remember that her intellectual coming of age occurred during a period the historian Henry F. May has called “the end of Victorian calm and the beginning of cultural revolution.”\(^8\) Radical thought in the social, political, intellectual, and economic realms of American life was increasingly common among the educated and the working class. For a time, the custodians of America’s genteel tradition were moderately successful in restraining these impulses, but tension and contradiction characterized many of the period’s great debates. In Meyer’s case, the Sephardic Jewish heritage and her social position worked to make her a traditionalist, while her own intelligence and vision propelled her toward change.
The most contemporary of American writers of old Sephardic stock was Robert Gunthal Nathan (1894–1985), an extraordinarily prolific writer whose work spans some sixty years. He was active in the same period as the immigrant and second-generation Eastern European Jewish writers who influenced American literature so dramatically. But Nathan was different from them, a genteel, urbane scion of an old Sephardic family for whom dual Jewish and American identity was never a source of discomfort and even rage, as it was for his East European coreligionists, the newer Americans.

Sol Liptzin, in *The Jew in American Literature*, asserts that Nathan . . . and Louis Untermeyer, a descendant of pre–Civil War Israelites, expressed in their prose and verse a far more positive approach to the Jewish past, a far deeper understanding of the Jewish present and a far greater faith in the Jewish future than did the no less talented but only semi-integrated children of the Eastern immigrants.  

Nathan did not see the Jew, as the Eastern Europeans did, as the quintessentially modern alienated victim; instead, in his poems and novels, he emphasized the Jew’s singular position as reviled and suffering but still chosen and surviving. From this foundation springs his concern with a larger humanity and belief in the regeneration of the spirit.

Many of Nathan’s novels contain Jewish minor characters, such as Gus the taxi driver in *Portrait of Jennie* and Rosenberg the violinist in *One More String*, who comment ironically on the agonies that are part of the general human condition. The novels *Jonah* and *Road of Ages* refer more specifically to the Jewish exile, but they make clear that the possibilities for humans to reveal their spirituality and morality rest in a Judeo-Christian tradition, not just a Jewish one.

Nathan wrote all of these works prior to 1940. It is in *A Star in the Wind* (1962) and in some of his poetry, especially *A Winter Tide* (1940), that we find full exploration of his personal relationship to Jewishness. For Nathan, Jewish history is sacred and compelling, and Jewish survival depends on memory of this history. Hitler’s measures against the Jews in the 1930s, the war, and its aftermath aroused in
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Nathan a specifically Jewish consciousness and stirred his natural proclivity to evoke Jewish memory.

As Clarence Sandelin notes in his excellent book-length study of him, Nathan was aware of the Jews' essential conflict in maintaining a tradition that sets them apart from others and makes them the object of scorn, hate, and brutality. Though Nathan often suggested that a secular view of Judaism, not dependent on Orthodox observance, would check tensions with other groups, he understood that religious tradition has a compelling power, and he never advocated abrogation of the covenant. Nor did the inextricable connection he saw between Christianity and Judaism lead him to ignore their distinctiveness.

Two early poems paint a highly positive picture of the Jewish world. "He Attends the Funeral of a Jew" exhibits Judaism's power to sustain a people physically, emotionally, and historically. Serenity and peace characterize the poem. The Jewish heritage surrounds and welcomes its adherents. In "The Poet Contemplates the Exile," Nathan invokes biblical Judaism, mourning the dead glory of Jerusalem and the loss of its spirituality. Here he hints at the dangers posed by the modern world, with its temptations to stray from righteousness.²⁰

A Winter Tide, especially the section titled "The Root and the Flower," sets a new tone in Nathan's poetry. It establishes the Jew as exile and victim, but also as survivor.²¹ In these poems Nathan is a witness. Distance and objectivity may characterize the authorial voice in some of the poems, but in most the poet's tone is urgent. He describes a 1930s world of terrible danger and the human folly of egotism, stupidity, and moral vacuousness. Despite all this, Nathan remains optimistic, believing that human hopes, the desire for peace, and nature's cyclical renewal make the future one of possibility, not despair.

Regarded from a post–World War II perspective, Nathan's philosophy is simplistic. Consider the argument in "This Faith, This Violence":

For if those of us of one blood and mind were ever to destroy
Finally and irreparably, once and for all, forever,
Those others whose differing blood or ideas lash us to fury,
How bare would earth seem, how lonely her hills and watercourses.

[pp. 37–39]
The apparent naivete is rooted in Nathan's focus on the simplest, most ordinary, most common of human actions and the accompanying, perhaps extraordinary, belief that if we were to attend to these with seriousness of purpose, without vanity, with awareness of other human lives, then the world would be at peace. Coming from an American Jew sustained by the long and secure history his people had experienced in the United States, such views may conflate gratitude and optimism.

Most interesting to the contemporary reader is the tension that exists among Nathan's Jewish-content poems. For example, "On the Jewish Exile" affirms with genuine certainty his belief in the Jews' continued survival. Yet in another poem his outrage and fear are palpable: "what madness has the world?" he cries in "Letter to Europe," a poem strewn with prophetic images of fire, flame, embers, ashes, fever, stubble, and waste (pp. 32-33).

Similarly, "Moses on Nebo" reveals Nathan's questioning of God. Moses, still the faithful disciple who praises God for leading the Jews out of Egypt, says he is waiting for a new sign that God has not forsaken his people. He hears "tocsins of alarm" throughout Europe, but so far God is still silent. The poem ends with Moses waiting, and we feel sure that Nathan is waiting too, not necessarily for a sign from God but for intervention on behalf of the Jews by human beings all over the world (pp. 19-21). But Nathan is not one to wait idly, and as he waits he will exhort, warn, chastise, and pray.

Many of these poems implicitly call for the Jews' defense. "The Root and the Flower" explains the strong link between Judaism and Christianity; if one cannot exist without the other, then a threat to either is a threat to both. Though many Christians recognize Christianity's debt to Jewish thought and to biblical Israel, not all would rush to defend the contemporary Jew. But Nathan demands such a defense, and he repeats his plea in the collection's last poem, "Epistle."

Christian, be up before the end of day,
Before the last, the fading hour dies;
Sleep not until the light has fled away,
and night's black trumpet cries.

[pp. 22-25]
Much of the world failed Nathan’s Jews during World War II. His next discussion of the Jewish dilemma in a full-length work appeared in 1962 in *A Star in the Wind*, his only novel to focus on an individual Jewish consciousness and the role of tradition in that consciousness. Although the novel is frequently sentimental and occasionally annoyingly mysterious in probing the protagonist’s uncertainty about where and to what he belongs, it is also an affecting work about a man who rejects an American Jewishness that he associates with smothering families, strong patriarchal rule, and desires for greatness. After a long sojourn in Palestine, Joseph Victor finally commits himself to a spiritual and historical, though not necessarily religious, Jewishness. He learns that Jewish exile, Jewish suffering, and Jewish deaths have meaning because they have molded survivors who understand how to build again, who have the “hunger for life” he did not have before his Palestinian odyssey.

As is true of many of Nathan’s novels, *A Star in the Wind* is essentially a love story, and it is in Joseph’s relationships with two women, the secure, young, untested, and thoroughly New England and Gentile Priscilla, and the tortured and sad Jewish Anna, that he learns how the power of Jewish memory and tradition hold him, however reluctant he was to realize this in the novel’s early pages.

Comparing the language describing Joseph’s two affairs reveals that innocence, dreams, and sweetness characterize the relationship with Priscilla. They meet in the spring when evidence of Rome’s lush rebirth is everywhere: “water falling, fountains playing, flowers and bushes sending out their fragrance on the air.” When the two spend a weekend together away from the city, “they felt far away from everything and everybody, together, by themselves, alone—wonderfully secure, hidden from the world, comforted and safe” (p. 75).

Yet we know from the beginning that this idyllic relationship cannot last. Priscilla claims that Joseph’s Jewishness makes him more of a person, but she also admits to herself that his darkness and strangeness are disturbing and will never yield to her. More telling of the gulf between them are Joe’s dreams of death and entrapment. To his query whether she has ever felt the same, her reply is a curt “Certainly not.”

By contrast, on a ship bound for Palestine, Joe encounters Anna, a survivor of a death camp. He immediately recognizes her pain
though he doesn’t understand it at first, and he is impressed by “the proud and frightened way she held her child close to her” (p. 120). Here, the passengers sleep in an “airless hole lit by a few unshaded bulbs” (p. 113), and when Joseph and Anna first make love in Tel Aviv, it is not in a quiet sun-lit pensione but in a dark and just-emptied bomb shelter.

If the affair with Priscilla has taught Joseph about the nature of love, it has also pressed him to confront his yearning for meaning—as yet unconnected to his heritage. The language describing his responses to Anna, a “soft brave strong sad beautiful woman” (p. 184), evokes Joseph’s entrance into a more mature, serious, responsible, and suitable relationship. Even without Nathan’s editorial comment that Anna is part of Joseph’s “homeward dream,” we know Joseph belongs with Anna because he learns to identify deeply with her immediate personal past and with the historical tradition that surrounds them and binds them to other Jews.

*A Star in the Wind* suggests that America as ideal will not make Joseph whole. Though typical of many second-generation American Jews, Joseph does not feel his American identity very deeply, and remarks early in the novel that he has no country. Later, Anna touches again on America’s lack of a hold on Joseph as she tries to imagine living in Cleveland, not Tel Aviv; and when the novel ends Joseph has found new direction—as he says, “I am committed,” though we don’t know whether this commitment is to living in Israel and to a new Jewish identity, whatever form it may take, or to helping Israel from a distance.

In any case, the novel implies that even centuries of life in America have not provided Jews with the kinds of traditions and bonds they need and want, that something more than absence of persecution and promises of opportunity are necessary. It is interesting that this possibility is expressed by a man descended from the first Jews in America, the very people whose history in the United States attests to the Jews’ having successfully made the country theirs. But perhaps this is not surprising in the wake of the Holocaust.
A major change in the literary productions of Sephardic writers occurred after World War II, when for the first time in the United States we have works that illuminate a specifically Sephardic Jewish life. These works memorialize a minority culture, reveal its vitality as a subject for literature, and explore how collective and individual memory restores the past and makes it understandable. These contemporary Sephardic writers trace their lineage to the Ottoman world, and their connection to Sephardic cultural and religious traditions is much closer than that of the writers of old American stock examined so far.

**Leon Sciaky**

Leon Sciaky's *Farewell to Salonika*, written in 1946 and his only book, was the first literary work in English by a Levantine Jewish immigrant to be published in America. It is the autobiography of an educator, peace activist, and explorer, a man deeply moved and affected by his physical surroundings—both the Ottoman world in which he grew up and the upstate New York that became his adopted home.33

A sentimental and nostalgic book, *Farewell to Salonika* provides a lovingly crafted picture of a world destroyed by greed, corruption, force, and murder. Through a compassionate, intelligent, and sensitive consciousness, it describes the Levantine world from which many Sephardic immigrants came and examines the importance of place to Sciaky, his strong attachment to the smells, sights, and sounds of the city and countryside, and his yearning for these after having emigrated.

The Levantine world shaped Sciaky's intellectual development and later the content and texture of his memories. Sciaky was strikingly similar in some ways to the American-born Sephardic writers. Just as they were generally secure in their sense of being American and belonging on American soil, praising the country's best values, Sciaky, too, was cosmopolitan in outlook, passionately attached to his homeland, and promoted the democratic values for which many in the Levant were striving.
Like other post–World War II Sephardic writers, Sciaky differs from most of the writers previously discussed in his direct preoccupation with history. Both Sephardic cultural tradition and his family’s secular outlook had shaped him, and while one sharpened his predilection to preserve cultural traditions, the other committed him to reform and to liberal social and political thought. In the aftermath of emigration and the massacre of the Jews, Sciaky’s desire for preservation and for change both intensified, creating *Farewell to Salonika*’s dual focus: the author’s private memories and the violence of history.

Sciaky’s concern is with violence done to land, people, ideals, and the individual consciousness, and with the inevitable destruction of religious and cultural traditions. He suggests that the secular Jew can pay homage to the past through memory, but that memory preserves only for the individual who remembers. In a similar vein, *Farewell to Salonika* records tradition but cannot transmit it. Neither can culture, in Sciaky’s view, be transplanted.

What saves his autobiography from being a sad memorial to a dead world is Sciaky’s continued optimism about the idealistic secular values of peace and harmony that he learned in the Levant. He ends his book with an exhortation to the United States to fulfill these ideals, but unfortunately he wrote no sequel to evaluate his half a century of life in this country.

*David Fintz Altabé*

David Altabé is a professor of Spanish, a translator of Judeo-Spanish and Spanish writings, a poet who writes in English, Judeo-Spanish, Spanish, and French, and the current president of the American Society of Sephardic Studies. His poetry is notable for its simplicity of language, its strong conviction about the universality of human pain and joy, and its directness of emotion. The poems in his collection, *Chapter and Verse,* cover a wide range of subjects; love and marriage, fatherhood, the nature of art, mourning, religious heritage, are among the most prominent.

In the section “Poems of the Nations and Races” emerges a distinctly American Sephardic Jewish sensibility, a combination of identification with others’ suffering and a clear-eyed sense of history’s
disruptions, injustices, and promises. "March 17, 1975" addresses the poet's horror of the current Irish bloodshed. The color green in stanza 1 symbolizes harmony and hope, while red dominates the last stanzas as the poet's donning a red shirt reveals his firm commitment to speak of private and communal agony. The poem's last line, intentionally colloquial and, hence, jarring, suggests that even the poet's facility with language fails before the ubiquity of contemporary terrorism. In another poem, "Hey There, Whitey," the perspective of a writer who is himself a member of a minority group within another minority group, allows Altabé to express sympathy with African-American aspirations and anger while urging the understanding that race is not the only determinant of want and discrimination.24

"Homage to our Turkish Brethren," a new poem written to commemorate the sultan's welcome of the Jews after the expulsion, helps to explain why some Sephardic Jews are so fierce in their loyalty to Turkey, even glossing over that country's present-day repressive policies:

The benevolence granted by your forefathers did not end in 1492,
For five hundred years we have lived side by side, Turk and Jew;
We have shared your destiny, we have eaten your food;
Our Spanish is enriched by your words, our music by your tunes.

Stephen Levy

Stephen Levy (b. 1947) is an American poet whose work has been consciously influenced by his Sephardic heritage. Levy is a preservationist, like Sciaky, but at the same time demonstrates the life still to be found in Sephardic culture. For example, he founded the Judezmo Society and its magazine, Adelante!, whose purpose was to promote not only the study but the use of Judeo-Spanish.25

Preservation may also be a key motive of the poignant poem "With My Father," which addresses the pain of loss a young boy feels when he sees for the first time the now "boarded up storefront, a synagogue with the word Sephardic on the door," where his father attended services with his immigrant grandfather.

Another poem about memory, rather than being merely elegiac in tone, is also redemptive and determined to build on memory. The
poem begins, "For hundreds and hundreds of years my fathers and brothers in three countries along the Mediterranean soon made their way to their synagogues . . . to pray in a language strange to me—I am ignorant." The pain of loss is apparent, but in the poem's closing line, "Lord, listen, listen to me: I am humming home," there is a new element suggesting a religious and cultural continuity, a reclaiming of the past to the present.

In contrast, a lovely short poem called "English" expresses the difficulties the American Sephardi experiences in trying to bridge past and present. The immigrant generation and the intellectually aspiring second and third generations are unable to understand each other's needs.

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quit school go out
and work and all day my father in the coffeehouse or with the holy books
. . . but even when
I was very young
I wrote I wrote
I loved to write
compositions poems
I'm still writing I don't
stop I'll get
all of it published yet
I'll get them all."
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David Raphael

David Raphael, a physician by profession, has written two novels and is working on a third. All set in medieval Spain, they reenact the converso and expulsion period of Jewish history. *The Alhambra Decree* depicts the violence during this period of Jewish history and the Jews' concomitant tenacity in clinging to tradition. Another of Raphael's purposes is to emphasize the universality of Jewish exile, to show parallels between the Spanish expulsion and other Jewish persecutions, and to suggest that a heroism based on faith continues to be possible. In this Raphael is optimistic that Jewish religious culture can be transplanted by those who keep its tenets firmly and are willing to fight and even die for them.
Don Isaac Abravanel, the hero of *The Alhambra Decree*, speaks for Raphael, suggesting the core idea behind his interest in the historical novel. Addressing the Segovia Jewish community after the expulsion edict has been announced, Abravanel says,

The right to reside in this kingdom is nothing compared to our Jewish inheritance. . . . What greater loss is there than to surrender one's very being? What is the price, the inner price, for cutting oneself off from one's people? What is the price for exchanging the truths of Torah for a life of falsehood and hypocrisy?'

Abravanel comes to the congregation shortly after delivering his eloquent final speech to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, a speech that Raphael intends to be a challenge to all oppressive regimes: "We destroy you?" he asks the sovereigns,

It is indeed the very opposite. Did you not admit in this edict to having confined all Jews to restricted quarters and to having limited our legal and social privileges, not to mention forcing us to wear shameful badges? Did you not tax us oppressively? Did you not terrorize us day and night with your diabolical Inquisition? . . . The unrighteous decree you proclaim today will be your downfall. And this year, which you imagine to be the year of Spain's greatest glory, will become the year of Spain's greatest shame. . . . In your heart of hearts, you distrust the power of knowledge, and you respect only power. With us Jews it is different. We Jews cherish knowledge immensely. In our homes and in our prayerhouses learning is a lifelong pursuit. Learning is our lifelong passion; it is at the core of our being; it is the reason, according to our sages, for which we were created. [p. 153]

Memory, learning, tradition—these are the keys to a civilization's survival. Raphael's primary task in this novel is to teach history, to restore memory of centuries-old traditions, and to convey the Jews' heroism and the Spanish rulers' treachery. Thus, the novel provides a panoramic view of Jewish life in fifteenth-century Spain, including extensive biographical information on the political figure and philosopher Don Isaac Abravanel, Don Abraham Senior the tax collector, King Ferdinand and his possible Jewish origins; exhaustive detail about the preparations for expulsion and the brutal persecutions Jews faced after they left Spain; and a picture of Jewish life that explains Spanish proverbs, Hebrew prayers, religious customs, feasts,
and terminology. Further, Raphael provides several long disquisitions on the philosophical distinctions between Judaism and Christianity.

Historical references and authentic detail receive most of Raphael's attention in this work. Recreating experience is much less important to him than a careful retelling of events. The work, then, is more in the style of documentary than fiction, resulting occasionally in a rather artificial integration of background information into the story.

In one scene, for example, Rabbi Maimi is walking to the tax collector's house to discuss new taxes. To introduce a page-long discussion of the Marranos, Raphael tells us Maimi is worried not about money but "about the Converso problem."

At another point, to explain that Jews live in a highly restrictive and often threatening environment, where the political and social authority they answer to is not their own, Raphael sets Senior, the tax collector, the task of finding some decree he can fight. What follows are four pages of Don Abraham Senior summarizing numerous documents, a device that provides useful historical information but tells us little about Senior's personal struggle to be a good leader, a matter of much concern to him, we are told later.

Elsewhere, Abravanel leads Senior to explain King Ferdinand's relationship with the Jews by saying, "Tell me, Don Abraham, I have heard the strangest things about King Ferdinand's origins." Again, a long aside follows, this time about Ferdinand's possible Jewish heritage.

Most of the information presented in this manner is not superfluous to our understanding of the expulsion period. Nonetheless, novelistically, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is too obvious, and the emphasis on telling rather than showing denies us access to the characters' interior consciousness and motivation, thus making them—and the issues that define them—much less complex than they should be.

Still, the novel often succeeds in engaging the reader's emotions. The story itself is so dramatic and the characters so passionate that Raphael's audience will surely hold its breath, sigh with relief, or express outrage at every turn of the plot. Raphael is particularly effective in showing the fanatical De la Pena arouse the Christian populace against the Jews on Rosh Hashanah. Here we recognize the priest's emotional frenzy and irrationality, feel the inherent drama of compet-
ing allegiances as the Hermandad’s security chief weighs and casts aside his responsibility to the Jews, and applaud the sensitive and intelligent fighter Don Isaac Abravanel, who forcefully and rationally defends the Jews’ religious position. Appearing throughout the text, such incidents define Jewish history as violence, oppression, sacrifice, and pain, but also triumph, endurance, faith, action, and survival.

Stanley Sultan

The last novel I will discuss here, Rabbi by Stanley Sultan (b. 1928), is the most interesting recent work by an American Jewish writer. Heartbreaking in its evocation of the physical, psychic, and moral losses engendered by the immigrant experience and the Holocaust, the novel makes us confront the loss of meaning in twentieth-century life—its leaving human beings without anchor, its acceptance of sham and deceit, and of the inability to distinguish between good and evil, the insensitivity to the life-sustaining promise a new land might offer, divorce from homeland language and values, dependence on material prosperity for sustenance, and entrapment in dissatisfying intellectual reasoning.  

The novel begins during Passover, 1948, in the prosperous Syrian Jewish community of Sea Beach in Brooklyn. The Djubal family is at the center of the tale, and the immigrant Rabbi Jacob Djubal—intelligent, devoted to the Law, unwavering in his judgments of human character, sensitive to and understanding of the unspoken—is the most admirable character in the novel, his narrow judgments of women and Ashkenazim coming across almost as quirky endearments. Through the eyes of the rabbi’s grandson Jason, a confused but often sensitive adolescent who alternately eschews and accepts personal responsibility, we see much of the novel’s intrigue.  

The central moral question of the story is raised when Rosalie, a Holocaust survivor and cousin of Reuben Djubal’s Ashkenazi wife, introduces the Djubals to the horrors that struck down the vast majority of Europe’s Jews during the war, including the Sephardim of the Balkan lands, but did not, of course, touch their brethren in Syria. The Holocaust itself and the current shenanigans of Rosalie’s vengeful,
powerful, and morally ambiguous former betrayer and present lover force moral dilemmas upon the Djubals as well as upon the reader.

Upon hearing Rosalie's story, young Jason asks himself what connection Jews should feel to one another. He answers the question by deciding he must adopt a life dominated by Jewishness. As Jewish observance and Jewish identity are inextricably linked, he becomes increasingly devout.

Later he struggles with this resolution. Witnessing hypocrisy among those whose ritualistic piety lacks the spirit of the Law, and realizing that his community no longer fully understands and accepts biblical Judaism, he wonders what values to trust when confronted with evil. Slowly Jason discovers that while his grandfather's absolutism does not work for him, a relativistic morality is dangerous, as it may make evil unrecognizable and judgments of behavior impossible.

Sultan's most interesting strategy in exploring the relationship between meaning, morality, and action is to focus on language. The characters speak three languages, Arabic, Hebrew, and English, with varying degrees of facility; the Sea Beach Jews listen to gossip and pass on rumor; there are unsympathetic figures whose manipulation of language reveals the self-interest at the heart of all their communications; the rabbi's search for truth is a struggle against rumors, hints, and the ambiguity of language; and Jason strives mightily to explain himself in word, thought, and deed.

The languages of the home and of prayer once provided individual and community meaning, but such linguistic rootedness is no longer possible in a land of a myriad cultural transplantings. The dominance of English demonstrates how difficult it is to maintain cultural continuity in the new environment. For some members of the Sea Beach community, the new language, surroundings, and values bring such distance from the past as to lead to a kind of moral obtuseness and vacuity. The only ones who escape this are Rabbi Djubal, in his devotion to religious teachings and to memory, and Jason, whose painfully learned moral lessons and self-awareness are the rabbi's secular counterpart.

Yet Sultan does not equate the two characters. Jason's identification with English speech and with the English rather than the Hebrew form of his name displays his distance from historical and religious memory. It is the role of Rabbi Djubal's moral and personal
example throughout the novel to tacitly insist that to achieve a coherent identity, Jason must eventually integrate his intellectual yearnings with his racial past.

Sultan’s novel reminds us that the United States, beneath its monolithic mass-media surface, is land of small groups rich in ritual, language, ethics, and history, surviving in willed or forced isolation from mainstream American culture and sometimes sending us an interpreter who enriches us by speaking in the rhythms of another community and sharing with us details of another world. The novel’s larger themes capture the quintessential American experience of self-examination, but contrary to the dominant theme of earlier works by American Jews in which self-exploration requires severing ties with the past, here the past demands understanding, engagement, reconciliation.

Summary

This study has aimed to familiarize a general audience with Sephardic writers and to outline the similarities in their concern with tradition and history.

The older group of Sephardic writers traced their ancestry to Jews who had settled in America when the country’s population was largely homogenous and the Jews’ small numbers generated little severe discrimination. These early settlers established a financially stable community, one that was religious but usually not strictly observant, and whose members associated often and freely with Gentiles in business and social affairs.

The Sephardic writers who were descendants of these settlers maintained or developed a Jewish consciousness while also being well-assimilated in mainstream American culture. A dual identity that generated little conflict made them active proponents of America’s democratic values and the American system in their lives and literary works. However, we have seen occasions in which this faith in a sustaining American civilization was strained. In these cases the authors’ traditionalist sentiments were bolstered, not abandoned, though of course by means that were varied and individualistic.

Mordecai Manuel Noah, for example, feeling tensions between his Jewish and American identities, and uncertain about America as a
genuinely safe haven for the Jews, devised a plan for a self-governing Jewish enclave. Years later, when historical events made them face questions of Jewish identity and solidarity in times of crisis, Emma Lazarus and Robert Nathan were no less optimistic than ever about their own assimilated position in the United States, but their writings displayed a highly personal attachment to Jewish tradition that had not been evident before.

American writers of Levantine Sephardic background have also been concerned with tradition, but their focus has consistently been on a distinctly Sephardic religious, cultural, and historical tradition. Profoundly affected by the massacres of World War II and the disruptions caused by the Jewish migrations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and after the war, the Levantine Sephardim have also emphasized in their work the violence and disruptions of Jewish history and their effect on Jewish survival.

Their focus on their own culture is no doubt especially pronounced because the very large Eastern European Jewish population in the United States has dominated definitions of Jewishness, and Sephardic Jewish history and culture have received little attention. It is interesting to note that in comparison to the Sephardim, the writers of Eastern European Jewish background who so greatly influenced American literature between 1930 and 1970 did not explore the European past or write directly about the Holocaust. The concern with morality in Malamud, for example, emerges from his reaction to the Holocaust but is more universalist than Jewish in content. More recently, however, non-Sephardic Jewish writers like Thomas Friedman and Jerome Badanes have begun to display the same concern with historical memory and its relation to Jewish survival that animates Stanley Sultan and Stephen Levy.

Notes

1. I am defining “Sephardic” in the broadest sense to include Jews of non-Ashkenazi origin, i.e., descendants of colonial Sephardim, Levantine Jews from Greece and Turkey, and Middle Eastern Jews.

2. Vera Caspary, in her autobiography, The Secrets of Grown-ups (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), pp. 7–8, says that her Sephardic origin is a matter of speculation, and so I have excluded her from this study.
3. There is little to indicate a distinctly Jewish consciousness in the writings of either Elizabeth Cardozo, the nineteenth-century poet, or Nancy Cardozo, the twentieth-century poet and biographer of Maude Gonne, and so I have not considered them here.


5. Ibid., p. 3. All subsequent page references to this work appear in the text.


13. Myrna Gallant Goldenberg, "Annie Nathan Meyer: Barnard Godmother and Gotham Gadfly" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1987), p. 251. I found the reference to Barriers here; I have not yet been able to locate it.


