The Ethnic Structuring of “Sephardim” in Haredi Society in Israel

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Abstract

This article examines the historical and social conditions that molded the development of the ethnic category of “Sephardim” within haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society in Israel. The significance of this category goes beyond denoting the generalized ethnic origin of Jews from North African and Middle Eastern countries. I explore this category through analysis of the ethno-class relations maintained within haredi society between Sephardim and their reference group, Ashkenazim, whose origins lie in Central and Eastern Europe. Analysis of this relationship, its historical sources, and its social development contributes to an understanding of the ethnic structuring of Sephardim in haredi society, including ethnic separation, the power of the politics of Sephardi identity, and the place of this identity in the movement of religious and political renewal among Jews from Islamic countries in Israel. It also sheds light on variations in lifestyle within the Sephardi haredi sector.

Key words: ethnic structuring, Sephardim, haredi society, Israel, Shas

In this article, I propose a historical, sociological, and ethnographic framing of the ethnic structuring of the group generally known within haredi (ultra-Orthodox) society in Israel as “Sephardim.” The term refers to Jews whose families originated in Islamic countries or the Balkans, as opposed to Ashkenazim, whose origins lie in Eastern or Central Europe. The use of the categorical appellation Sephardim (literally, “from Spain”) seeks, as it were, to identify this group as the

descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain in the late fifteenth century, who maintain a different tradition of halakhah (Jewish law) and customs from those followed by their Ashkenazi counterparts and who are hence organized separately on the communal level, with separate educational institutions and yeshivot (religious academies). My aim is to explain how the term Sephardim, within the context of haredi society, speaks less to an ancient lineage or a distinct set of customs and more to the social structuring of a stigmatized identity category. The term Sephardi haredi reflects a reality of ideological partnership maintained amid conditions of ethnic separation.

The root of this social structuring goes back to the period following World War II, when some leading Ashkenazi haredi figures, in a manner paralleling the strategy of Zionist leaders, set their sights on Jewish communities in Islamic countries as a potential reservoir to replenish and continue their own communities, which had been decimated in the Holocaust. This effort was framed by the ideological vision of “saving Jews” (in this instance, a “spiritual” salvation) that was integral to the sense of solidarity among the global Jewish community following the war. Very quickly, however, solidarity and unity gave way to stigmatization and ethnic labeling of the new arrivals to the haredi ranks, as we shall see. Thus, along with historical social divisions in haredi society, including the distinction between the Hasidic and “Lithuanian” (non-Hasidic) sectors, there was now a further division between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. However, whereas the Hasidic/Lithuanian divide arose over fundamental questions of religious ideology, the Ashkenazi/Sephardi divide was a matter of ethnic designation. Over time, this reality produced a politics of ethnic identity and a politics of religious renewal, both of which have brought radical change to the infrastructure of religious life among Jews of Middle Eastern or North African origin in Israel and to Sephardi haredi identity.

This rather condensed description (which will be elaborated upon below) may explain why Israeli sociologists—myself included—prefer to describe and analyze the ethnic structuring within haredi society using the term Mizrahi (rather than Sephardi) haredism. Rather than signifying the formal sense of the “early” or even “structured” ethnic origin of the Jews from Islamic and Balkan countries (Sephardim), the term Mizrahim gives voice to the encounter and struggle with the results of the ethnic structuring of this identity, thereby connecting it with discussion and research on the broader ethnic schism in Israeli society. The linking of haredism and Mizrahism highlights the tension surrounding the historical and social connections between them:
haredism is a loaded category conveying ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious ideology, whereas Mizrahism is studied within the framework of critical approaches to Israeli society as a category, hinting at the schism separating Ashkenazi designators from the Mizrahi designees. The discussion herein will adhere, for the most part, to the haredi categorization that uses the term *Sephardim* in regular parlance to mark the ethnic identity of Jews from Islamic countries. At the same time, the more critical sociological term—*Mizrahim*—will sometimes be used, especially in relation to the ethnic- and class-based reality produced by this structuring.

The article is divided into five sections. The first addresses theoretical insights arising from discussion of the social structuring of ethnic- and religious-identity categories. I will look first at the prevailing research trend that tries to avoid presenting essentialist, closed identity categories and their inward or outward characterization as such. I will then discuss this theoretical trend in the context of haredi society in Israel and research into the identity of the group known to Israeli sociologists as Mizrahim. The second section elaborates on the origins and maintenance of the complicated connection between Ashkenazi haredim and Jewish communities originating in Islamic countries. The third section explains the ethnic labeling of these Jews within haredi society in Israel and their distinct designation as Sephardim—in other words, something other than “regular” haredim. In the fourth section, I examine the politics of Sephardi identity within haredi society in light of this designation. The final section looks at two complementary expressions of identity politics: the *teshuvah* (repentance) movement and the Shas party. Both play a prominent role in the politics of religious renewal spearheaded by Mizrahi haredim, which has transformed them from Sephardim in the eyes of haredi society into haredim in the eyes of the Mizrahi public.

My argument rests on a combination of accumulated research about Mizrahi haredism, mostly focused on the Shas movement, and the findings of ongoing ethnographic work among Mizrahi haredi groups in Israel. Over many years, this fieldwork has monitored local, textual, and institutional phenomena relating to the Mizrahi haredi renewal of the infrastructure of religious life among Mizrahim in Israel. These include the changing face of rabbinical elites; elements of the religious worldview; ceremonies; synagogues and yeshivot; renewal of religious liturgy; and, of course, political organization.
The argument presented here concerning the ethnic structuring of Sephardi identity within haredi society and its critical implications takes part in a discourse with a number of theoretical developments in the study of ethnic and religious identities in the field of sociology in general and the sociology of Israeli society in particular. In general, for the past several years, research on modern identities has avoided presenting them as discrete social units, each characterized by innate qualities that influence its development. In light of classical works in sociology, such as that of Georg Simmel, who viewed the modern social order as a tangle of human relations,1 or later works such as those of Fredrik Barth or Bruno Latour, who understand social units as fundamentally imagined and dependent on classifying factors,2 society may be viewed as an uneven fabric knotted with contradictions, woven out of the processes of establishing and marking social boundaries, on one hand, and the crossing, blurring, and redefining of them, on the other.3

Against the background of this theoretical position, categories of identity—in our case, haredim and Sephardim—should be studied not as essential groups but rather as social units undergoing constant social structuring. Methodologically speaking, this points scholars in two main directions. One is the study of sociopolitical history: the quest for junctions of historic change, prolonged influences through interaction with other identities, or chronicles of identity-related struggles. Such findings shed light on the metamorphosis and fluidity of identity categories and the power relations involved in their structuring. An example is anthropologist Bernard Cohn’s research into British colonialism and its place in the molding or invention of Indian identities.4 The other direction is the study of everyday life and its role in the preservation or, alternatively, the undermining and eroding of classifications of identity. Some scholars trace the symbolic framing of identity via its manifest expressions in language, ceremonies, customs, music, and the like.5 Others look to the cognitive dynamics of identity structuring. Examples include studies published in the last decade by Michele Lamont6 or Brubaker et al.,7 which emphasize, inter alia, political work and negotiation over the classification of collective identities.

The claim as to the social structuring of identity categories has been illustrated in many instances of ethnic identities in transition—as,
quite commonly, in the case of immigrants—but it is also relevant with regard to categories of traditionalist religious identity that are usually perceived or presented as fixed and unchanging.\(^8\) Below, I elaborate on the connection between a religious identity regarded as maintaining a closed and conservative worldview and an ethnic identity that is contained within it and molded in relation to it: the case of Jews from Islamic and Balkan countries within haredi society in Israel.

The term *haredism* denotes a version of ultra-Orthodox Judaism that is perceived from the outside as an expression of conservatism, religious extremism, and opposition to processes of modernization and secularization. In the Israeli context, haredism is also associated with historical criticism of the secular Jewish state. The haredi community is viewed as a collective that does not recognize the state and distances itself from activity within society’s main spheres of life and thus as a group that defines itself in binary terms—“them” versus “us,” secular versus haredi.\(^9\) On the basis of this approach, in the view of sociologists such as Samuel Heilman and Menachem Friedman, haredim have organized themselves politically and built their various communities as a counterculture to broader Israeli society.\(^10\)

The sources of the category of Mizrahism, and the signified collective, Mizrahim, lie in the critical theory developed by Israeli sociologists during the 1980s and 1990s in analysing the ethno- and socioeconomic situation of Jews from Islamic countries in Israel. This view perceives Israeli society as a battleground on which descendants of Jews from Europe (Ashkenazim) are pitted against Jews from Islamic countries (Mizrahim).\(^11\) The root of this situation goes back to the 1950s and 1960s, when tens of thousands of Jews who arrived in Israel from Islamic countries were settled in towns offering few economic possibilities; this was coupled with marginalization and stigmatization of the cultures they had brought with them.\(^12\) According to critical sociological theory, this background explains the cultural and political restlessness accompanying the ethnic identity of Mizrahim and their ongoing desire to organize themselves politically, whether within broader integrative frameworks or in separate ethnic frameworks, with a view to improving their living conditions and advancing their cultural representation within the Israeli collective.\(^13\)

Research on both haredi society and Mizrahim in Israel has shifted over the years from positivist sociological characterizations of these categories to critical studies of the social and political interactions in which they engage. In the case of haredi society, some studies explain haredism as a conservative identity, organized in Israel as a “scholar
society” (a society organized around institutionalized study for men in yeshivot), that maintains thick boundaries separating it from the Israeli majority, whereas other studies increasingly seek to illuminate the heterogeneity of haredi society, the different models of organization operating within it, and the range of interactions that have developed over the years between it and general society. Examples of such interactions include participation in national rescue organizations and the appearance of a “haredi middle class” (comprising, inter alia, haredi graduates of academic institutions) that is situated on the seam between haredi society and general society in Israel. Recently, more attention has also been given to the broadening of the margins of haredi society and the growing phenomenon of youngsters and even families choosing to leave their haredi communities for a new way of life, whether on the margins of organized haredi society or outside of it. The picture that arises is one of a society whose outward image of insularity demands a more complex and nuanced review.

Though in the haredi instance the critical scholar seeks indications of interaction with general society, in the case of Mizrahim less significance is attached to interaction with the surrounding society as evidence of social integration. The prevailing trend in critical research tends to view Mizrahism as an ethnic identity that essentially rests on the power relations replicated in increasingly sophisticated form from one generation to the next. Scholars who adhere to this approach are suspicious of what they view as “nationalist” attempts to present Mizrahi identity as being gradually eroded, whether through the closing of economic gaps between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim or as a result of marriages between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim and the rise of mixed ethnicity. Their main argument is that “old-style,” traditional, stigmatized ethnicity—including symbolic ethnicity—has been replaced by a “new” identity discourse that continues, by means of old ethnic markers, to demarcate social hierarchy and define cultural good taste. Thus, for example, the term Ashkenazi is perceived not merely as an indicator of ethnic origin but also as indicative of characteristics such as cultural discernment, a calm disposition, and rational thinking, whereas the terms Sephardi and Mizrahi are perceived as indicating affiliation with a group characterized by folk culture, hot temper, and emotional behavior. A series of studies has shown how these designated ethnic categories continue to be assimilated among the Israeli public via various codes and remain an integral part of both the map of Israeli identities and, more important, the replication of the ethnic divide in the consciousness of future generations.
This being the case, we must ask what happens when these two identities—the haredi and the Mizrahi (or Sephardi, as haredi society would have it)—coalesce.

I propose that Sephardi haredism be viewed not as a closed ethnic group within haredi society but rather as a developing, dynamic ethnic identity that is bound up with both the social conditions endemic to haredi society and prevailing ethno- and socioeconomic relations between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in Israeli society in general. I maintain that the historical development of Sephardi haredism has its source in the Ashkenazi haredi model—as a conservative religious response to the drift away from tradition and the elements of secularism that found their way into Jewish society in Islamic countries, either directly or in mediated fashion. In support of this view, I could cite the resistance of conservative rabbinical authorities to the schools established by the Alliance Israélite Universelle in Baghdad and in Meknes. However, the religious and social makeup of Sephardi haredism is more directly a product of the replication within haredi society of the world of ethnic, orientalist, and sometimes racial images that reinforce the division between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in Israel. In other words, Sephardi haredism refers not to an Orthodoxy split by inherent ethnic distinctions but rather to a phenomenon whose source is the social grappling with unresolved ethnic dissonance and marginalization. Although Israeli society at large takes a critical view of this reality and makes strenuous efforts to moderate and uproot it (whether in the name of the “national melting pot” or as part of some other civic or republican ideology), within haredi society in Israel ethnic separation has become institutionalized policy, integrated in the setting of the internal boundaries of the haredi landscape. It is accompanied by religious arguments that invoke preservation of ethnic traditions or popular arguments concerning differences in mentality.23

From Ideological Integration to Ethnic Separation

For many years, haredism was perceived as an Ashkenazi phenomenon, bound up with Jewish history in Central and Eastern Europe, and not as a phenomenon that existed among Jewish communities in Islamic countries. Moreover, the religiousity of Jews originating in Islamic countries was described as essentially different from that practiced by haredim: it was milder and more tolerant with regard to religious practice.24 The exposure of researchers to a rabbinical
elite from among the Iraqi, Moroccan, and Yemenite communities in Israel that identified itself as an integral part of haredi society was something of a novelty that required further study. Over the course of the 1990s, a number of new studies showed that the connection between Mizrahim and haredism was forged around two main developments in Israel. The first was the protoharedi circles that grew within the Porat Yosef Yeshiva in Jerusalem. The second took the form of ongoing intervention, over the course of the twentieth century, by Lithuanian Ashkenazi yeshivot in the traditional education of the Jews of Morocco and, later on in Israel, of all the Jewish communities from Islamic countries.

The Porat Yosef Yeshiva was established in the Old City of Jerusalem in 1923 by Jews from Aleppo and Baghdad. The heads of the yeshiva aspired to mold it into a conservative Sephardi alternative to the modernist trends that had found their way into the yeshivot that Sephardi chief rabbis Yaakov Meir and Ben-Tzion Meir Uziel sought to establish. The scholars at the helm of Porat Yosef differed sharply from the mild, moderate, nationalistic Sephardi rabbinical leadership up until that time. The secretary of the Sephardi Communal Committee, Yaakov Elazar, noted in his memoirs that Sephardi chief rabbi Yaakov Meir “was concerned about the extremist tendency of Porat Yosef Yeshiva, and did not look kindly upon their seclusion within the close confines of Torah alone, with great religious extremism.” For many years, the Porat Yosef Yeshiva was a prominent center of religious study among Jews from Islamic countries, playing an important role in molding a new generation of rabbinical leaders serving as halakhic authorities, heads of yeshivot, and rabbis of communities in Israel and throughout the diaspora.

However, despite the historical change that it heralded and its role in nurturing a haredi and Sephardi rabbinical elite that was aware of its ethnic identity, the phenomenon of Porat Yosef fails to explain the great masses of students from Islamic countries who eventually flocked to haredi yeshivot. The key to this puzzle lies in another development, first exposed by historian Jacob Lupo more than two decades ago. Lupo’s pioneering work showed how, between the years 1948 and 1959, more than four thousand Jewish children and youth from Morocco were transferred to Lithuanian yeshivot in Western Europe and in America. One prominent figure in this project was the president of the Mir Yeshiva in New York, Rabbi Avraham Kalmanowitz (1891–1964), who viewed the post-Holocaust period as a time of crisis for the haredi yeshiva world and regarded the students attending traditional religious institutions in Morocco as a key to rehabilitation. An
example of this phenomenon is the story of Rabbi Avraham Hafuta. Hafuta was born in Marrakesh and as a child received a religious education in the traditional and conservative Otsar ha-Torah institutions. A religious magazine published in the 1960s described how

at the initiative of the president of Otsar ha-Torah, R. Yitshak Shalom . . . of New York, and director of the Mir Yeshiva in the U.S., Rabbi Kalmanowitz . . . , 14 top students from yeshivot in Morocco were selected to travel to the Mir Yeshiva in New York, to become familiar with the study approach followed in Lithuanian yeshivot.27

The magazine stated that upon turning 13, Hafuta

was selected as part of a delegation that included men aged 30 . . . to continue their studies at the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. These students became the nucleus of intellectual stars for whom Neve Shalom—an institution adjacent to Ponovezh Yeshiva, for Sephardi Torah scholars—was established.28

The case of Hafuta indicates that this was not a mass recruitment. Indeed, on the contrary, the transfer of the youth—at least in the early stages—followed a selective policy, focusing on outstanding religious scholars with great potential.29 The story also indicates that even at a very early stage, separate educational frameworks maintaining the Lithuanian approach were established for Moroccan-born students. In addition, the story demonstrates that students such as Hafuta were in fact the human capital by means of which the haredi leadership sought to rehabilitate the yeshiva world that had been destroyed in the Holocaust.30

With the great Jewish exodus from North Africa during the mid-twentieth century, Lithuanian recruitment of Sephardi scholars became focused on the newly established state of Israel. Separate haredi institutions were set up for children of immigrant communities from other Islamic countries, too, and they became less selective. Institutions for girls and young women were also established, such as Or ha-Hayim Girls’ Seminary in Bnei Brak.31 The rabbinical authorities who encouraged and oversaw this educational mobilization in Israel included prominent heads of Lithuanian yeshivot, such as Rabbi Hayim Graineman, who was involved in establishing a network of Sephardi yeshivot ketanot (religious institutions for high-school-age students) called metivtot. These metivtot became the foundation upon which Sephardi yeshivot gedolot (for post-high-school-age students) were established under Lithuanian patronage, along with a new rabbinical
elite that viewed itself as completely subservient to the authority of the Lithuanian Ashkenazi yeshiva world.

The willingness of religious and traditional immigrant families from Islamic countries to accept Ashkenazi haredi patronage might be explained in light of Samuel Heilman’s presentation of haredism as the preferred option for increased religious awareness and commitment within a traditionalist religious sector. He describes a “slide to the right” toward an enclavist orthodoxy in which educational institutions play a decisive role in determining and building identity. And indeed, the connection between Ashkenazi haredim and Jewish immigrants from Islamic countries was in some ways a natural development in view of the typical traditionalist Mizrahi background. Along with the educational and social opportunities that they described to parents of large immigrant families, representatives of haredi institutions also argued that haredi education was the track best suited to preserving tradition, family values, and responsibility for Jewish continuity. Within an environment saturated with religious faith and facing a daily existential struggle, this offer seemed like a lifeline.

As a result of these outreach efforts, by the mid-1960s some Sephardi haredim described in rosy colors how “in contrast to those claiming discrimination and prejudice, there are hundreds of students of Mizrahi and Sephardi origin learning in Ashkenazi yeshivot—and they signify the path to sociocultural unity.” However, a decade later, a different reality had become manifest. The spiritual leader of Lithuanian haredism, Rabbi Eliezer Menahem Shakh (1899–2001), had to plead with the director of one of the educational institutions under his supervision to instruct his colleagues, “with no excuses or pretexts, that they are obligated to accept students of Mizrahi origin, . . . and I write this as a practical ruling that must be followed with no deviation.”

This transition is reflected in the outcome of an organized campaign undertaken by students from Ashkenazi yeshivot in the 1960s to direct boys and youth from Mizrahi immigrant families living in peripheral towns in Israel, in the Galilee and the Negev, to Ashkenazi haredi educational institutions. This activity was carried out with the approval and approbation of the leadership of the Ashkenazi yeshiva world, who viewed it as integral to the “spiritual salvation” enterprise—the effort to maintain the religious consciousness and lifestyle of those who might otherwise be “lost” to secular society.

However, most of these children were not accepted to the flagship institutions of Ashkenazi haredi scholar society, which allocated only a limited number of places for Mizrahi students. The few who were accepted had difficulty acclimating, and the majority were referred to
the ethnic yeshivot and institutions that had been set up specifically for Jewish immigrants from Islamic countries (“Sephardi yeshivot”), which carried little prestige within haredi society.36

This outcome was indicative not only of the ethnic schism in haredi society, which gradually widened over the years, but also of the growing rift between the Lithuanian haredi leadership, with its desire to view the yeshiva world as a sort of ideological melting pot, and popular forces (including both the general public and the heads of local institutions), whose day-to-day functioning reinforced ethnic differences and turned them into social gaps. Haredim of Ashkenazi extraction—from Hungary, for example—could, via the melting pot of the Lithuanian yeshiva world, assure their children easy and egalitarian integration into haredi scholar society, but no such option existed for those whose families were from Morocco, Tunisia, or Persia. The Ashkenazi haredi yeshiva melting pot might have brought the two groups face to face, but it could not overcome the popular mechanisms that sought to cement the separation between Ashkenazim and Sephardim in the educational realm, in the matchmaking market, and in geographic dispersion.

The Ashkenazi recruiters who had tried to integrate Mizrahi students into the Ashkenazi yeshivot from which they themselves had emerged and in the name of which they operated encountered a lack of enthusiasm for their ideological vision on the part of their colleagues and the heads of the institutions. They accepted this verdict, however, and their frustration did not become overt bitterness.37 The youngsters, on the other hand, saw things differently: the fact that they had been rejected by the more prestigious institutions undermined their feeling of self-worth and amplified their sense of social marginalization.38

What had first appeared to the Mizrahi immigrants to be an opportunity to extricate themselves from the socioeconomic distress they were experiencing in Israel and to integrate within a society that presented itself as a nucleus of values, faith, and continuity became a source of ongoing social crisis. Those who were spiritually “saved” became ethnically rejected. And although within broader Israeli society they might have integrated by “passing as,” within haredi society the ethnic label—Sephardim—came to signify a marginalized identity with low social prestige and no possibility of real integration.

**The Ethnization of Sephardim in Haredi Society**

The “ethnization” and diminished social prestige of immigrants from Islamic countries and their descendants in haredi society in Israel
comprises several aspects. Firstly, from an external perspective it is easy to see that haredi society is generally poor, with meager resources. Thus, for example, even after the appearance in the last few years of a trend toward integration within the labor market, the poverty level among haredi society in Israel remains at 53 percent, and the average haredi family income is about half of the Israeli average. The difficulty in effecting change here arises not only from the persistence of the “scholar society” ideology but also from the fact that haredi society—including its Sephardi sector—has a high birth rate (approximately 4.1 percent per year, as compared to the Israeli average of 1.3 percent per year). Sociological research across several decades indicates that in this sort of reality the struggle for prestige is often waged by means of an imagined ethnic and class hierarchy.

Secondly, the religious culture of Sephardi haredim is often presented as no more than a weak echo of the magnificent oriental Jewry of the distant past, and they are often depicted as having been spiritually “saved” by the Ashkenazi haredi sector. Thirdly, Sephardi haredim are perceived as not having brought with them any tradition of serious talmudic study comparable in scope and depth to that produced by the yeshivot of Eastern Europe. For example, a biographical work about the head of the Porat Yosef Yeshiva, Rabbi Ben Tsiyon Abba Shaul, depicts him as exceptional in light of the fact that “although he did not study in the manner of the heads of the Lithuanian yeshivot, but rather in the manner of the Sephardi heads of yeshivot, his insights were profound.” Moreover, the fact that so manifestly Zionist an institution as the Sephardi chief rabbinate was considered a worthy aspiration by leading rabbis in the Sephardi haredi community served only to intensify suspicions as to the degree of commitment and adherence among Sephardi scholars to the haredi worldview.

In addition to all the above, in the eyes of Ashkenazi haredim—as in the eyes of sociologists—the difference in social structure was clearly manifest. Whereas Ashkenazi haredi family, community, and political structures are based on insulation from and even conflict with the nonharedi population, which is viewed as a threat, Sephardi haredim had no legacy of ideological confrontation, nor did they feel in any way threatened by the traditional culture of the extended family and community with whom they continued to maintain ties. Hence, to the insular Askenazi view, the Sephardi ability to maintain a separate religious identity from that of society at large was seemingly compromised.

All of these arguments boiled down with time into a popular, pseudosociological claim that became a sweeping justification for the ethnic isolation of Sephardi haredim, namely, the argument as
to a “different mentality”—a generalized characterization expressing social qualities and collective disposition. The concept of *mentality* in haredi dialogue is part of the toolset for decoding the self and creating maps of social reality (in the words of sociologist Michel Lamont, “symbolic boundaries”). The “Sephardi mentality” is synonymous with a backward, unsophisticated, emotional, and pliable religious culture. At the same time, it might be understood—in no less essentialist terms—as the opposite. Thus, for example, a Mizrahi haredi father seeking to enroll his son in an Ashkenazi yeshiva asserts that “the warmth and love prevalent among Mizrahim are quite unlike the cynicism and coldness of Ashkenazim. . . . The Ashkenazi way of thinking and worldview are not shared by Sephardim.” An Ashkenazi family that was interviewed as part of the fieldwork for this study reported that one of their daughters was warned by a teacher at the seminary where she studies “not to fall into a Sephardi mentality” after the girl grew angry at one of her classmates. Discourse about a mentality, voiced in a resolute psychosocial tone, may quickly degenerate into talk about mentality as embedded in biology. There is no escape from this sort of identity marker (unlike, for example, a family name), since one is instantly given away by the color of one’s skin, hair, and eyes. The concept of mentality is used to imbue imagined qualities, as well as external physical characteristics, with psychological and genetic substance. The idea of a “different mentality”—which, to haredi ears, has a quasiscientific, objective ring to it—transforms the fact of a person’s social origin into an identity that cannot be transcended; to put it differently, it cannot be civilized.

Thus, those referred to as Sephardim within the haredi sector found themselves headed into a position of ethnic marginality. Sephardi haredim might have been considered, by the Ashkenazi haredi reference group, an integral part of haredi scholar society, but they could not be integrated as equals within that society. This marginalization is expressed in different ways: a tendency on the part of Ashkenazi haredim to belittle the status of contemporary Sephardi halakhic scholars; the assessment of the quality of educational institutions on the basis of ethnic criteria, accompanied by an image of Sephardim as weak, in terms of religiosity, mentality, and studiousness; or the perception of a suggested match for an Ashkenazi haredi Torah scholar as less attractive if one of the parents of the girl is Ashkenazi and the other Sephardi. This stereotyping has exposed Sephardi haredim to a fundamental dissonance in their lives: on one hand, they view themselves as an inseparable part of the haredi worldview, discourse, and identity. On the other hand, a question mark constantly hovers
over them, casting doubt on the quality of their haredism. Sephardi haredim are in fact committed to an ideology and a culture whose dominant reference group (Ashkenazi haredim) identifies them as “ethnic” haredim—as opposed to “real” or “ideological” haredim. They are “Sephardim” rather than “full” haredim.52

The prevailing public response to this reality on the part of the Sephardi rabbinical leadership maintains that each group should preserve its own identity. To this end, when questioned by their followers about difficulties encountered in the Ashkenazi haredi world, Sephardi rabbis will often invoke the pluralistic biblical model of the twelve tribes of Israel as an analogy for a partnership between different groups that embrace the same worldview. A different response appears in the words of one of the most prominent rabbis and preachers among contemporary Sephardi haredi circles, Rabbi Ben-Tzion Mutzafi (1946–). His website features the following question, posed to him several years ago:

The honored rabbi speaks about the importance of education at a Beit Yaakov [ultra-Orthodox girls’ school] and haredi institutions, but unfortunately our girls are not warmly received in these institutions, for all sorts of strange reasons: because we are Sephardim, or because the grandfather wears a knitted skullcap, the father does not wear a hat, or is not a full-time Torah scholar—even though the family maintains a haredi lifestyle. The question is, why do the rabbis not object and protest most vociferously in order to improve the situation?

Rabbi Mutzafi’s answer is brief: “We protest and no one pays attention. This is part of the exile.”53 His response makes it clear that the situation is not as it should be, but he accepts it as an inseparable part of the broken reality that he describes as the situation of exile. This is an interesting argument, since it suggests that Rabbi Mutzafi does not blame the Ashkenazi haredim for the discrimination but rather relegates it to the long list of deficiencies and defects of the Zionist state that is often described in the extremist haredi worldview as “exile among Jews.”

From Ashkenazi Haredi “Colonialism” to Politics of Identity

The ethnization of Sephardim within haredi society serves to confirm Yaakov Lupo’s claim, made over a decade ago, that the pattern of relations in haredi society might be described as haredi “colonialism.”54
Henry Clement Moore defines the colonial situation as one in which one society controls another and holds a complete monopoly over its power and resources while consolidating differential physical-, class-, and economic-control structures that are anchored in law and social dynamics. Historically speaking, discourse about the colonial situation developed in the context of the imperialist-colonialist period of European society, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, some scholars have pointed out that a colonial situation can also develop with the spread of cultural or religious groups that view their way of life and traditions as exclusive models for proper human existence, believing that they promote social progress and human redemption. Research on colonial control indicates that it rests, inter alia, on the invention of classifications that are loaded with meaning pertaining to social affiliation and hierarchy. The ladder of colonial identities reflects a process of cultural progress toward full integration within the culture of the colonialist—an aim that is forever out of reach, as in the instance of the Sephardi haredi. This was brought home to me for the first time when I sat in an Ashkenazi yeshiva and listened to 18- to 20-year-old students explain to me that the Sephardim who studied with them at the same yeshiva would never be like them. “We might study together,” one of them commented, “but it’s a different mindset. It’s a different world. Everyone knows his place.”

Patrick Kalilombe’s study on the development of the black church in Britain paints a similar picture of social rejection. Kalilombe describes the activity of British missionaries in Africa and their efforts over a lengthy period to win great numbers of Africans over to their ranks. When Christian Africans immigrated to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, in the wake of decolonization, they were brought face to face with the disparity between the integrative ideology in the name of which the missionaries had operated and the racial differentiation practiced by the Anglican Church in Britain. Kalilombe asserts that the Anglican Church refused to accept the African immigrants as equal members. The same system that had mobilized to change their identity and had persuaded them of the truth of its theological arguments and its egalitarian ideology now prevented them from integrating as equals. The African immigrants found themselves faced with an existential paradox: on one side was the ideological integration that had attracted them to the church; on the other side was the ethnic segregation that kept them out of it. Kalilombe’s study points to three responses to this situation: abandonment of faith and the religious framework; establishment of separate black church frameworks as part of the Anglican
Church—in other words, acceptance of the discrimination and managing complex relations with it; and the establishment of a new, separate, independent church framework.

The responses that Kalilombe describes would appear to have relevance for the situation of Sephardi haredim in Israel. With respect to the first response, we know that from the very start of the recruitment of Mizrahi youth to haredi institutions, some boys ultimately abandoned the haredi way of life. Some did so because of the rigid discipline in the educational institutions, the distance from home, and the longing for a gentler religious framework. Others turned their backs because they sensed the dissonance between the ideology and the reality. In recent years, researchers studying haredi society are finding that young Sephardi men and women are choosing to leave the haredi way of life—which, as the “second generation,” they were born into—in order to be part of broader Israeli society. They testify not only to personal religious crisis but also to the sense of always being regarded as “second class” haredim within haredi society itself. The scope of this trend is not clear, but echoes of it find their way into the Israeli media. A few years ago, the phenomenon was given literary expression with the publication of the novel Yedid nefesh (Beloved of the Soul, 2010). The book describes the identity questions plaguing a yeshiva student of Moroccan extraction who is studying at a prestigious Ashkenazi haredi yeshiva, in view of the ethnic labeling that accompanies him and the degrading and racist attitude that he and his family encounter in the application process for Ashkenazi haredi educational institutions. The author, Ari Eitan, asserts that the novel is based largely on his own life experience.

Along with abandonment of the haredi way of life—or, at least, of the frameworks of the haredi scholar society—there has developed an option of living with the discrimination and with the constant maneuvering in relation to it, adopting a thoroughly haredi lifestyle and attempting to “pass as.” In haredi society, this practice is known as “Ashkenazification,” and it entails abandoning everything that is thought to emphasize or indicate a Sephardi identity—the style of prayer, the accent and style of speech, and even traditionally Sephardi names—replacing it with Ashkenazi characteristics as perceived in haredi society. Similarly, there are Ashkenazified yeshivot—institutions whose student body is of Mizrahi origin but whose manner of study, worldview, and Jewish law follow Ashkenazi custom. The heads of these yeshivot—many of them of Mizrahi origin themselves—encourage their students to adhere as closely as possible to the modes of study, lifestyle, and emotional reserve that haredi society associates
with Ashkenazim. This approach mirrors the path of well-known rabbis in Sephardi haredi society who are influenced by the Lithuanian Ashkenazi outlook and view the Ashkenazi haredi communal format and the worldview guiding it as the preferred religious lifestyle, accepting and internalizing the prevailing ethnic stigmas along the way. For example, Rabbi Yehuda Ades, head of the Sephardi Kol Yaakov Yeshivah in Jerusalem, once stated, “I prefer that my grandchildren study Torah in Yiddish than that they curse in Sephardi style.” This is stark evidence of assimilation of the stigma that attributes serious and profound Torah study to Ashkenazim and a superficial, popular atmosphere with a negative influence to Sephardim.

One of the questions that has occupied me over the course of my fieldwork is how Sephardi youth who choose to remain within haredi society explain the dissonance of living a haredi lifestyle within haredi society while bearing an ethnic label that constantly presents their haredi identity as somehow deficient. In interviews with young yeshiva students whose parents are of Mizrahi origin and who attempted—some successfully, some less so—to gain acceptance to Ashkenazi institutions, I learned much about their complex image of the Ashkenazi haredi world. Two main themes surfaced in justifications for seeking admittance to Ashkenazi yeshivot: one was utilitarian, the other orientalist. The utilitarian justification emphasized the advantages of studying in an Ashkenazi institution, first and foremost among them the intellectual prestige that it brings. The Sephardim espousing this view regard Ashkenazi yeshivot as possessing a well-developed reputation of what some of them call modern study, developed over decades of experience of Ashkenazi-style learning. Another utilitarian argument concerns the social resources that study in an Ashkenazi yeshiva will afford them. In the relatively impoverished haredi scholar society, in which there are few signs of class distinction, study at an Ashkenazi yeshiva is a significant status symbol. Indeed, the word respect was repeated over and over in the interviews. “Studying at an Ashkenazi yeshiva brings you a lot of respect,” one young man told me. “It’s something you can’t achieve if you’re studying at some Sephardi yeshiva.” This status can also offer significant socioeconomic benefits: the young man is in a better position to marry with what haredi society refers to as full arrangements—meaning an expensive dowry including an apartment purchased for the young couple by the bride’s parents, and sometimes even two apartments, one for living in, the other to rent out as a source of income.

The other justification invokes what we might call haredi orientalism. Even haredi society, which is generally suspicious of Western culture and the modernization (and secularization) that it has brought
with it, turns out to harbor a stereotypical distinction between East and West. Askenazi haredi culture is considered more modern and more Western. These distinctions were revealed when the interviewees described an Ashkenazi yeshiva education as synonymous with logic, restraint, rationalism, and elitism—qualities regarded as the opposite of a Sephardi yeshiva education, which they viewed as lacking order and method and tending too far in an emotional, folksy direction. “What can you do?” one interviewee commented. “If you want to be modern, you have to study with the Lithuanians. Sephardim—that’s the world of the past. It’s good to remember all that, but if you’re serious then only a Lithuanian Ashkenazi yeshiva [will do].” The orientalist justification for preferring Ashkenazi institutions is occasionally backed up—especially among the older generation—with expressions of gratitude toward Ashkenazim for having extended spiritual sustenance and “saving the souls” of the Sephardim who would otherwise have been lost. Haredi orientalism is also bound up with another world of images that we have mentioned above, relating to the idea of mentality. Here, too, many interviewees made repeated mention of the difference between the Ashkenazi mentality and the Sephardi one, which, to their mind, justifies the distinction between these two categories and the ethnic and class boundaries separating them.

Thus far we have defined two responses to the dissonance experienced by Sephardi haredim. One is abandonment of the haredi framework; the other is adaptation, maneuvering, and “passing as.” A third response seeks to turn the weakened Sephardi identity into a pronounced, empowered one. In this context, great importance is attached to the ethnic halakhic oeuvres of leading Sephardi haredi rabbis. Their books have become guides not only to everyday observance of Jewish law but also to empowerment of the ethnic identity and its structuring as a source of prestige—at least internally. A prominent example of this phenomenon is the canonical oeuvre of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was born in Baghdad in 1920 and moved with his family to Jerusalem in 1926. He attended the Porat Yosef Yeshiva, leaving in 1949 to take up the position of deputy chief rabbi of the Jewish community of Cairo. Two years later, he returned to Jerusalem and was later appointed to a position in the young state’s rabbinical-court system. In 1968 he was elected Sephardi chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, and in 1973 he attained the position he had long aspired to: Sephardi chief rabbi of the state of Israel. In 1983, his tenure—limited by law to ten years—came to an end. It was soon after this that he agreed to serve as the head of the Shas Council of Sages.
In his quest to empower Sephardi religious identity, Rabbi Ovadia pursued two main aims. One was to unify Jewish religious practice in Israel under Sephardi halakhic norms and authority. The other, which seems to have become increasingly important to him over the years, until his death in 2013, was the attempt to direct the haredi Sephardi public away from the Ashkenazi halakhic tradition that they had absorbed in the Ashkenazi yeshiva world.

Another, less widely known example of an all-encompassing religious literary enterprise that is part of Mizrahi-Sephardi identity politics is the oeuvre of Rabbi Meir Mazouz, head of the Kisei Rahamim Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. Mazouz was born in Tunis. His father, Rabbi Matzliah Mazouz, one of his major influences and sources of inspiration, was murdered in 1971 by a Tunisian nationalist. Shortly thereafter, at the age of 26, Rabbi Mazouz moved to Israel and worked to reestablish the yeshiva that his father had headed in Tunis, in Bnei Brak. Among the Sephardi haredi public, Rabbi Mazouz is considered a leading rabbinical proponent of the ethnic approach that characterized Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

As the head of a yeshiva, Rabbi Mazouz has a reputation for directing a move away from the study approach followed in Ashkenazi yeshivot. He views the yeshiva paradigm that he imported from Tunis as a model for the curriculum of any and every Sephardi yeshiva: along with study of the Talmud, attention should be given to intensified study of halakhah, precision in the various prayer traditions, and Hebrew grammar. The yeshiva should also provide its students with the tools and skills necessary to serve the needs of the religiously observant and traditional sector: leading prayer services, public Torah readings following the traditional cantillation, circumcision, ritual slaughter of animals for meat, instruction for young children, and instruction in halakhah. Mazouz is also well-known as a proponent of the traditional Sephardi approach to Talmud study rather than the prevailing approach in the Lithuanian yeshivot. In addition, like the late Rabbi Ovadia, Rabbi Mazouz is intensively engaged in liturgical activity aimed at assimilating the Sephardi approach with regard to the proper linguistic and grammatical aspects of the prayer service.

The respective oeuvres of Rabbi Ovadia and Rabbi Mazouz have become a prominent feature of the politics of ethnic identity among their Sephardi haredi followers. Their approach seeks to infuse Sephardi haredi identity with pride, substance, meaning, and a message. In this view, Sephardi haredim are haredi not in the sociological sense but rather in the genealogical sense: they are descendants of a long line of giants of the Jewish tradition, including Maimonides, Yosef Alfassi, Hayim Ben-Atar, Hayim David Azoulai, Yosef Hayim of
Baghdad, Yaakov Hayim Sofer, and others. This perception was given rather concise expression by Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, son of Rabbi Ovadia, in one of his regular sermons:

Everyone should follow the custom of his ancestors. . . . Even if he immerses himself in a boiling mikvah [ritual bath], it will be of no avail—he was born Ashkenazi, and he will remain Ashkenazi. . . . All the more so, a Sephardi should remain a Sephardi, since he is [living] in the Land of Israel, and here everyone used to follow the Sephardi custom.70

Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef regards Sephardism not as an ethnic label but rather as an identity loaded with historical prestige and essential social meaning. In his view, ethnic identity cannot be exchanged; it is fixed within a person from birth until death. This is a veiled criticism of attempts at “passing as” and Ashkenazification. As to Sephardi identity itself, he regards it as in no way inferior. On the contrary, it carries historical and local genealogical prestige: historical, owing to its connection to a respected tradition of Sephardi halakhic authorities, and local, owing to the Sephardi tradition that, according to this claim, is meant to be the normative custom in the Land of Israel.

One might refer to this approach as ethnic-identity Orthodoxy, both because of its purported guidance as to the proper path to an observant Jewish lifestyle and because of the increasing reliance on this approach in halakhic literature to indicate that path.

From Identity Politics to Religious-Renewal Politics

Along with abandonment of the haredi lifestyle, maneuvering (“passing as”) to achieve social status, and active emphasis and empowerment, another solution developed as a response to the politics of Sephardi identity within haredi society over the years: self-extraction from Ashkenazi haredi colonialist influences by venturing outside the boundaries of the haredi scholar society. This approach is embodied in two movements that have both passed their peak but that laid the foundations for widespread and potent religious and political renewal: the teshuvah movement and the Shas party.

Research on haredi society usually explains the term teshuvah movement as haredi information and propaganda activity that seeks to encourage the adoption of haredism as the proper Jewish path.71 The persuasion of individuals and the public to change their lifestyle and join the haredi ranks sought, as it were, a “historical” victory over the secular majority in the Jewish state. This movement was already active
during the late 1960s among elite groups (artists, IDF pilots, academ-ics), but over the course of the 1980s and the 1990s outreach activi-
ties among the broader Mizrahi public became more prominent—in
neighborhoods, in development towns, and on cooperative farms
(moshavim).

A complementary and significant aspect of the teshuvah move-
ment was the local religious activity of young rabbis, mostly (but not
exclusively) of Mizrahi origin, among congregations of Mizrahi wor-
shipers.72 Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, a steady stream
of young Mizrahi scholars flowed from the haredi yeshivot back to
the neighborhoods, communities, and towns in which they had grown
up. This development essentially brought about a deconstruction and
reconstruction of local religious reality, adapting it as far as possible
to haredi sensibilities. Among the most conspicuous focuses of this
activity were Mizrahi prayer congregations. Accumulated fieldwork
over several years makes it clear that the young scholars who left the
confines of haredi scholar society and made their way toward non-
haredi Mizrahi congregations were in some instances simply seeking
jobs as Torah readers, cantors, preachers, and teachers, utilizing the
skills they had acquired in the various occupations related to religious
practice and, especially, the synagogue. They found the Mizrahi syn-
agogues mired in a generational crisis resulting from ongoing pro-
cesses of secularization that thinned attendance at regular services
and left these congregations short of candidates to take over from
elderly prayer leaders and Torah readers who had acquired the tradi-
tional skills in their youth. This situation served to cast the arrival
of the young Mizrahi scholars as a religious “lifeline,” both because
of their ability to lead the prayer service and offer instruction in hal-
akhah and because their very presence served to rejuvenate these
dwindling congregations. Thus, these scholars and rabbis were trans-
formed—at least in their own eyes—from beneficiaries of (Ashkenazi)
spiritual rehabilitation to “saviors” in their own right.73

The connection forged between these young scholars and the con-
gregations that they came to serve was not self-evident. The haredi
scholars were separated from the nonharedi Mizrahi congregants by a
profound cultural divide that had been nurtured in the haredi institu-
tions as part of the educational effort to distance them from anything
perceived as different, threatening, and/or tempting. In addition, the
activities of the haredi scholars often aroused conflict with older, more
opinionated members of the congregation, who were wary of what they
perceived as an extremist takeover of their religious environment. In
many instances such conflicts led to the synagogue splitting into two
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Nissim Leon

separate congregations, one adopting a stricter religious stance tending toward haredism, the other more moderate.74

More important for our discussion than the effect on these congregations was the significance of the process for the Mizrahi haredi scholars themselves. For them, the path from haredi scholar society to Mizrahi congregations offered an anchor for identity and status. Their haredi activism in what might be called the “haredi outbacks” temporarily (or perhaps permanently) removed the question mark concerning their haredi credentials—both in the eyes of the Ashkenazi haredim, who now viewed them as emissaries of the haredi cause, and in the eyes of the religiously traditional, working-class Mizrahi public—friends and foes alike—who viewed them as haredi in every respect.75 They also acquired status and social prestige as rabbinical figures and viewed themselves as part of a revolutionary historical process. The move to the new environment brought further benefits: it solved the problem of meager resources and scarcity of prestigious positions within haredi scholar society, as well as the perennial sense of ethnic marginalization. Their ethnic identity was now transformed from a liability into an asset. Some of the young scholars who started out by delivering regular religious lectures or serving as synagogue cantors went on to become heads of institutions and spiritual leaders of sizeable congregations, consisting mostly of newly observant Jews and those on the road to committing to a religious lifestyle. Step by step, schools, systems of instruction for adults, and welfare institutions were built up, becoming the foundation for Mizrahi haredi communities headed by the same young yeshiva students or rabbis who had started out by serving congregational needs.

The case of Rabbi Hayim Rabi of Holon exemplifies this trend. Rabi was born in Jerusalem in the 1950s and studied at the Lithuanian Ashkenazi Torah Or Yeshiva, headed by Rabbi Hayim Pinhas Weinberg. During his studies, Rabi connected with the students and admirers of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. Later on, he would state that it was Rabbi Ovadia who influenced him to go out and deliver religious lectures to the public at large. Over the years, he centered his preaching and instructional activities around the Vatikim neighborhood in Holon. During the latter half of the 1980s, he moved to the Tel Gibborim neighborhood, which had a reputation as a distressed area. Here, Rabbi Rabi joined a small Iraqi congregation. His lectures on Jewish law and lore attracted a young local audience. Cassette recordings of his lectures spread his renown farther afield. The small synagogue became a beit midrash (study hall) that drew in religious seekers and the newly observant, who wanted a steady rabbinic figure who could help them establish religious schools and frameworks for adult study and offer
day-to-day guidance. Families whose children had turned to crime viewed Rabi’s activity as a real lifeline. Eventually, in the late 1990s, over the ruins of what had been the original synagogue—a wooden hut alongside the neighborhood community center—the congregation erected a three-story marble edifice housing a kohel (yeshivah for married students), a yeshivah ketanah for local boys of high-school age, a soup kitchen, and a range of charitable foundations aiding residents of the neighborhood and beyond.76

Rabbi Rabi’s story is matched by many similar instances, including Rabbi Moshe Pinto in Petach Tikva, Rabbi Shimon Gabbai in Netanya, and Rabbi Yosef Mughrabi in Bat Yam. Although the scope of this discussion does not allow for a detailed biography of each of these figures, the general picture is quite similar. The same pattern was repeated in many places, transforming the character not only of local congregations but also of the Sephardi rabbis leading them.

The flow of haredi scholars from yeshivot to Mizrahi communities and their intensive activities there reached its high point of visibility during the late 1990s. No one who spent any time in neighborhoods or towns with a sizeable Mizrahi population could fail to note its many manifestations: the young men and women filling halls to listen to charismatic Mizrahi haredi preachers; the proliferation of yeshivot, kohels, and spiritual centers; the establishment of haredi educational institutions or schools under haredi management; and the rehabilitation of old synagogues and the building of newer, fancier ones.

We might sum up this point by saying that local activity turned Sephardi haredism from narrow religious propaganda and a marginal ethnic phenomenon into a broad movement of ethnic renewal using haredi tools.

Amid the religious-renewal work led by the Sephardi haredi teshuvah movement among Mizrahi congregations, there was a growing demand among communal activists, community rabbis, and heads of yeshivot for a political home that would represent them. This aspiration was realized with the establishment of the Shas party in 1984 and its consolidation as an independent power over the course of the 1990s.

Shas was originally founded as a response to a range of political and local interests and events that involved Mizrahi haredim and the leadership of Lithuanian haredism. On the face of it, the party grew out of complaints directed against the patrons of Mizrahi haredi scholar society—the heads of the Lithuanian yeshivot—concerning ethnic discrimination against Mizrahi scholars and their families.77 The situation had already led to the establishment of semi-independent Mizrahi municipal parties, and it seemed that the patronage
barrier had been breached. At the same time, the status of two prominent religious figures had been undermined: one was the leader of the Lithuanian scholar society at the time, Rabbi Eliezer Menahem Shahk, who found himself embroiled in a struggle with his Hasidic partners in the joint Agudath Israel party. The second was Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, whose tenure as Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel had just ended.\textsuperscript{78} In light of these circumstances, the Lithuanian leadership identified a number of benefits that a Sephardi haredi party under its patronage could offer. First, it would lower the flames of Mizrahi dissatisfaction. A new political home for Mizrahi haredim could calm tempers and provide Mizrahi haredim with a measure of autonomy, which could also help to institutionalize ethnic separation within haredi society. If there were Sephardi yeshivot under Lithuanian patronage, so the thinking went, why could there not be a Sephardi political party under similar patronage? Second, it was estimated that a Sephardi haredi party could appeal to the nonharedi but religiously observant or traditional public and thereby wield the electoral power necessary to maintain the political arrangements that haredi scholar society had achieved by the end of the 1970s.\textsuperscript{79} Third, according to some opinions today, the Sephardi haredi party founded in 1984 served as a “legitimate” exit for Lithuanian Ashkenazim from Agudath Israel, which was controlled at the time by the Hasidic leadership (which opposed a separate Sephardi party) and was rocked by ongoing conflict between the two groups. (Indeed, the founding of Shas was one of the factors leading to the establishment of Degel ha-Torah in 1988.) The politics of patronage (advanced by the Lithuanians) could be presented as no less holy and responsible a mission than the attempt (by the Hasidim) to maintain the unity of the veteran haredi party. What the Lithuanian haredi leadership failed to take into account or properly appreciate was the independent, activist, and somewhat Zionist agenda of the designated spiritual leader of the party—Rabbi Ovadia Yosef.

Rabbi Ovadia was a link between the old Sephardi rabbinical world and the Sephardi haredi revolution. He viewed himself as committed not only to the Ashkenazi haredi leadership but also to the broader Mizrahi public, which he sought to reach and, first as chief rabbi and later as head of the Shas Council of Torah Sages, to lead. Through his written halakhic works, his regular sermons, and Shas’s propaganda cassettes, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef expressed a desire for liberation from Ashkenazi patronage. In one cassette recording he declares that Mizrahi children “acquired their Torah knowledge in rotting basements and in dark alcoves, or were forced to go and sit at someone else’s table. They were forced to abandon their traditions and go and
feed in strange pastures.” For him, Ashkenazi haredi institutions were “someone else’s table” and “strange pastures.” Rabbi Ovadia Yosef wanted his own table and his own pasture.

Although Rabbi Ovadia started out sharing authority with Rabbi Shakh, leader of the Lithuanian Ashkenazi camp, in 1992 he spearheaded the break with this Ashkenazi patronage, deciding that Shas would join the leftist government that was being formed by Yitzhak Rabin. This move was in direct contravention of the position of the Ashkenazi haredi leadership. It aroused great animosity and led to a crisis among the Shas spiritual leadership. At the same time, the political split turned out to be Shas’s window of opportunity—not only to liberate itself from Ashkenazi political patronage but also to establish itself as an independent social force. Shas was the only religious party in Rabin’s coalition and was the beneficiary of funding that was channeled into the cultural, educational, and propaganda endeavors of Mizrahi haredism, ultimately compounding the party’s political power.

In the relatively short period between 1992 and 1996, Shas was transformed from a sectarian party into a party of the masses. In 1984 Shas had four seats in the Israeli Knesset; in the 1988 and 1992 elections this number rose to six, and in 1996 there were no fewer than 10 members of the Knesset representing Shas. In 1999 the party reached the zenith of its power, with 17 representatives—just two less than the second-largest party at the time, the Likud. Within a decade, Shas had grown from an ethnic haredi list to a national haredi party wielding considerable power within the government and presiding over a mechanism that included an independent educational system, media, leadership, and rabbinical circles subservient to it. The party’s vague positions on political questions, along with its ability to enforce voting discipline among its representatives in the Knesset, made Shas a sought-after political partner for both right-wing and left-wing parties.

In sum, the movement of religious and political renewal spearheaded by Sephardi haredim helped them not only to emerge from the confines of Ashkenazi haredi patronage but also to redefine their haredism. Although within haredi society they remained Sephardim, outside of its boundaries they were regarded by the nonharedi Mizrahi public as haredi in every way. Public perception of Shas, which is viewed by the Israeli public as a party loyal to (its own) haredi leadership and to the interests of the haredi sector, underwent the same transformation as had the rabbis who led the teshuvah movement, who are considered to have brought the principles of haredi society with them to the broader public.
Conclusions

The study of Mizrahi haredim in Israel concerned itself for many years with the group's political aspects, focusing on the rise and fall of the power of the Shas party or changes to its political and spiritual leadership. This served to draw the discussion in the direction of frequently tumultuous news and current events, with a gradual erosion of the understanding of the historical and social foundations upon which Mizrahi haredism had developed. One of these foundations is the ethnic structuring of Sephardi identity within haredi society and the constant dissonance surrounding it. This issue is the basis of relations between Ashkenazim and Sephardim in haredi society, and to a considerable extent continues to influence the organized development of Mizrahi haredism. The issue of ethnic structuring also provides a somewhat different perspective from the conventional view of Mizrahi haredism as a relatively monolithic phenomenon. This is evidenced in everyday discourse: the issue of Mizrahim/Sephardim in haredi society is often referred to by the general term for its most prominent political manifestation—Shas. However, looking back, we see that there is no single Mizrahi haredism. The question of the construction of Mizrahi identity in haredi society must address several different dimensions. For example, there is the Mizrahi haredism that conducts itself within the confines of haredi scholar society, seeking to adapt as far as possible to the Ashkenazi environment. There is the Mizrahi haredism that, although it remained within the scholar society, responds to its ethnic labeling by seeking to emphasize its ethnic identity and to consolidate a Sephardi identity that has a substance, commitment, and style of its own. Yet another aspect of Mizrahi haredism operates outside the boundaries of the imagined haredi scholar society enclave as a movement of religious renewal. Israeli sociologists such as Assaf Sharabi and myself refer to the religious and political manifestations of this movement as soft haredism, alluding to the interaction between its haredi leadership and the nonharedi public. This leads us to conclude that Shas, for example, is not an authoritarian organization, as it is often portrayed, but rather a federation of communities, rabbis, and local activists who share this political address. Mizrahi haredism, then—like Ashkenazi haredism—is not all of a kind. However, although the key to analytical organization of Ashkenazi haredi society still relates to divisions based on theological and ideological differences of opinion, one of the keys to analytical organization of Mizrahi haredism lies in the ethnic structuring that I have discussed here.
On this basis, we may also draw conclusions as to the extent to which haredi society—even in an era of change—continues to regard ethnicity as a key to social identity and status, serving as a marker of a thick, almost impenetrable social boundary depicted in essentialist terms. To borrow Heilman’s term, from his description of Orthodoxy’s tendency toward ultra-Orthodoxy (haredism), we might say that if the Mizrahi turn to haredism is an instance of “sliding to the right,” its ethnicism serves as a rough surface that halts the process, or at least slows and moderates it. The various responses to this reality, ranging from abandonment of the haredi framework, via accommodation and negotiation, to ethnic pride, have risen out of the ongoing historical interaction and ethnic structuring whose sources, development, and ramifications I have discussed here.

Notes

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

5. See, for example, Marilyn Halter, Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity (New York, 2000).
8. Prominent in this context is the position of sociologist Jose Casanova and anthropologist Talal Asad, who identify “religion” and religious identities as phenomena shaped by changing historical conditions.


15 For discussion of Hasidic society, see Nava Vasserman, *Mi-yamai lo karati le-ishiti: Zugiyut be-hasidut gur* (Sede Boker, 2015). For the Sephardi instance, see Nissim Leon, *Harediyut rakah* (Jerusalem, 2010).


20 For example, Talia Sagiv, *Hatsi-hatsi: ‘Al Yisreelim mi-motsa adati me’orav* (Tel Aviv, 2014).


23 The case of Noar ke-Halakhah and Yoav Laloum v. Minister of Education, Israel Supreme Court 9106/11, exposed an entire system of discrimination on an ethnic basis in the selection of students at haredi institutions. See also Lotem Perry-Hazan, *Ha-hinuh ha-haredi be-Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 2013), 187–97.


25 Yaakov Elazar, *Ha-rav Yaakov Meir ha-rishon le-Tsiyon* (Jerusalem, 1997), 73.

26 Jacob Lupo, *Shas de-Litah* (Tel Aviv, 2004), 89–93.


28 Ibid.

29 Lupo, *Shas de-Litah*, 75–76.

30 For example, they played an important role in the renewal of the Lithuanian Or Yosef Yeshiva in France, which followed the Novhardok tradition. See Benjamin Brown, *Tenu’at ha-musar ha-litait* (Ben-Shemen, 2014), 112.


36 Lupo, *Shas de-Litah*, 182–87.

37 Ibid., 143–69.


40 Ibid., 56.


42 For example, the frequent reference by preachers to ‘edut ha-mizrah (oriental testimony) rather than ‘edot ha-mizrah (oriental communities) is a way of reminding listeners that the appellation awarded to Sephardim is testimony to a glorious past that is no more.
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43 Yoel Schwartz, Sefer ha-gaon ha-tsadik Hakham R. Ben-Tsiyon Abba Shaul: Mi-toledot hayay shel he-hakham ha-G.R. Ben Tsiyon Abba Shaul ztz’l, (Jerusalem, 5759 [1999]), 87.
44 Aryeh Dayan, Ha-ma’ayan ha-mitgaber: Sipurah shel Shas (Jerusalem, 1999), 96–98.
45 Friedman, Ha-hevrah ha-haredit, 115–43.
47 Leon, Harediyut rakah, 34–36.
51 These conclusions are based on the processing of raw data gathered in fieldwork conducted in the Ramot C neighborhood in Jerusalem over the course of 2015, examining the mutual relations between Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities within a haredi neighborhood. The research has not yet been published.
54 Jacob Lupo, Ha’im tahazir Shas ha’atarah le-yoshnah? (Jerusalem, 2004), 13–19.
57 Interview conducted on March 20, 2007, as part of fieldwork among students of Sephardi haredi yeshivot in Jerusalem between 2005 and 2007. Leon, Harediyut rakah, was partly based on the ethnographic material gathered in this fieldwork.

See above, n. 57.

Interview conducted by the author, March 20, 2007.

Interview conducted by the author, May 16, 2007.

Binyamin Lau, *Mi-maran ve’ad maran: Mishnato ha-hilkhatit shel ha-Rav Ovadia Yosef* (Tel Aviv, 2005).


See, for example, Meir Mazuz, *Darkhei ha-‘iyun* (Bnei Brak, 2002).

See, for example, Meir Mazuz, *Siddur ha-meduyak veha-mevoar ish matsliah* (Bnei Brak, 1998).


Ibid., 78–80.

Ibid., 131–43.

Ibid., 80–82, 141–46.

The description here is based on fieldwork conducted in the summer of 2003 in Rabbi Hayim Rabi’s community. I have visited several times over the decade and a half since then and have watched the development of Rabi’s center into one of the pillars of the haredi community in Holon.


Much has been written about the circumstances of the establishment of the Shas party. For a summary, see Ricky Tesler, *Shas veha-mahapekhah ha-datit* (Jerusalem, 1993), 47–70.


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