

## Arabic and Syrian Jewish Identities in Mexico City, A Century after Migration

By Evelyn Dean-Olmstead

Although Aleppo and Damascus had thriving Jewish communities since Biblical times, the situation changed as the Ottoman Empire faced its demise. First to avoid conscription, then to escape the crushing poverty of the 1923-1943 French Mandate period, and finally for persecution associated with Syrian nationalism and anti-Zionism, Jews fled in great numbers in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Émigrés went to Israel, Europe, and the Americas. Although the United States and Argentina were the most popular destinations, Mexico also received its share of Jewish and other immigrants from Ottoman lands. Sociologist Liz Hamui (1997) suggests the first immigrants selected Mexico either out of general ignorance of North American geography or because they saw the country as a stepping stone to the United States. Whatever their rationale, once these pioneers settled in Mexico, the process of chain migration took over as they sent for family members and brides. Often starting out in the port towns of Tampico and Veracruz before moving to Mexico City, they worked as itinerant peddlers, eventually accumulating enough capital to invest in textile shops and factories.

Established in 1912, the first Jewish communal organization was called “Alianza Monte Sinai” and originally served all Jews in Mexico. However, rifts soon occurred as Ashkenazi (East and Central European) Jews established their own institution and Sephardic Jews from Turkey, Greece and the Balkans followed suit. Finally, the Aleppan or *halabi* Jewish broke away from the Damascene or *shami* and created their own congregation. These groups remain distinctive, providing religious, educational and other services to their members. The two Syrian groups comprise 40% of the total Mexican Jewish population of about 40,000 (Hamui Halabe 2005: 217).

The term “Syrian Jewish” is certainly an academic one, and few self-identify as such. Syria, of course, did not exist as a unified political entity when most of the emigrants left. Rather, the strength of affiliation with a city-based community or *kahal* among Middle Eastern Jews, as was the case in Aleppo and Damascus, continues in the popular designations of *halabi* and *shami*. In Mexico, these have taken on many layers of local meaning, and serve to index styles of religiosity, naming traditions, foodways, and language practices. In my dissertation in linguistic anthropology, I focus specifically on the role of language on perpetuating unique Syrian Jewish identities in Mexico City.

From the beginning, language was important in defining distinctions among Jews in Mexico. During a tour of old Jewish neighborhoods I attended in February 2009, guide Monica Urikel discussed the tensions that frequently arose between Judeo-Arabic-speaking *shami* and *halabi* Jews and their Ashkenazi counterparts, who hosted community events exclusively in Yiddish. Today, none but the original Syrian immigrants speaks Arabic. Most did not see the language as worthy of conscious preservation, as opposed to Yiddish, which is still taught as a second language in Ashkenazi day schools. This attitude toward Judeo-Arabic has a long history dating

to the expansion of European influence in the Ottoman Empire beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As part of this process, European languages gained prestige at the expense of local dialects. This extended to Jews largely through the French-language Alliance Israelite Universelle schools, established by French Jews throughout Middle Eastern Jewish communities. French replaced Judeo-Arabic in many spheres as the latter came to be seen as “the language of the poor,” as described by my consultants.

Given such ideologies, I expected that Judeo-Arabic loan words and phrases would be rare in the Spanish of those I studied. However, this was not the case. As I inventoried these phrases and documented occasions of their use, I was amazed at both their variety and frequency in the speech of even third and fourth generation individuals. They tend to belong to certain semantic categories, including food, blessings and verbal talismans, terms of endearment and “bad words.” For example, *alamák* is said when saying goodbye, both in person and on the phone. My consultants glossed it as “*Que Dios te acompañe*” (‘May God accompany you’). It is derived from the Arabic *Allah ma’ak*, ‘[May] God [be] with you’. Also common is *jaram*, Arabic for ‘forbidden.’ (I use /j/ as it is used in Spanish, to represent what might be described as a “raspy” /h/ sound). Sometimes *jaram* is used as an adjective to describe something that is indeed forbidden, and other times it is an exclamation similar to ‘God forbid.’ For example, “You took a taxi? *Jaram!* I could have given you a ride!” (Many thanks to Avraham Ben-Rahamiël Qanaï for his help in determining the derivation of these phrases.)

In my dissertation, I delve into the social functions and consequences such phrases have by analyzing recordings and field notes of interactions in which they appear. Certainly, they serve to create solidarity among *shami* and *halabi* speakers and draw lines of distinction with regards to outsiders. Several Ashkenazi people characterized the use of Arabic words as evidence of Syrian Jewish “superstition” and other negative stereotypical qualities; a reminder that language practices never exist in an ideological vacuum, but are rather linked to broader social categories and are subject to constant evaluation. As I continue my analysis of Judeo-Arabic loan words and other phenomena, I seek to uncover the range of ways people use language to construct themselves as both Jews of Syrian descent and modern Mexicans in their everyday interactions in different social spheres.

Language research among Middle Easterners in Latin America is a promising and largely unexplored field, save works such as the multi-generational studies of Arabic among immigrants in Argentina (Biondi Assali 1991) and Brazil (Guedri 2008). By investigating fates of ancestral languages and attitudes surrounding them, we not only learn about language contact and change; we also shed critical light on the long-term processes of integration and identity formation among immigrants and their descendants.

## Bibliography

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