Jews" also means that we accept Ethiopian Jews who can name seven generations of Jewish lineage. While the practices of some marginalized Jewish communities might differ from the ways most mainstream American Jews observe Judaism, who are we to decide whose comfort and familiarity are meant to be the standard? Would we, for example, get rid of "kosher for Passover" products that have rice and legumes in them because the millennia-old Sefardic customs unsettle Ashkenazic customs?

Our ability to embrace and rejoice in the full plurality of possibilities of Jewish peoplehood — and the individual Jews who make up that people — rests on our capacity to look beyond the certainty that we know what a Jew looks like. Jewish peoplehood is a beautifully complex and multilayered business. There are no answers about what constitutes Jewish identity that do not in some way raise more questions. Our own history, sense of Judaism, and personal attachments shape and, unfortunately, also limit our understanding of peoplehood. If we focus our gaze with laser precision on the *kippah*-clad Jewish men of Manhattan, we obscure the complex realities that are our inheritance and also the birthright of our collective future.

Skin color is only one of the many ways individual Jews are, as my colleague Lacey Schwartz notes, "outside the box" of assumptions about what Jewish is. When we open ourselves up to embracing the many possibilities in modern Jewish identity, we will open new bridges toward the Jewish future.

African and African Heritage Jews:
Western Academic Perspectives

MARLA BRETTSCHNEIDER

Since the first large-scale *aliyah* of Ethiopian Jews to Israel about 30 years ago, popular Jewish interest in African Jewish communities has blossomed. Western Jewish academic research on African and African heritage Jewish and Jewishly related communities is a rapidly growing area of study. The field offers tremendous possibilities for research into questions of Jewish identity. All too often, however, we find the academic lens reflecting the observer, rather than the phenomenon observed.

The Jewish African Diaspora is as large as its moniker implies, with communities crossing a wide range of life experience and geographic locales. In sub-Saharan Africa alone, Jewishly identified and related communities include the Abayudaya of Uganda, the Igbo in Nigeria, the Sefwi Wiawso in Ghana, the Lemba in Southern Africa, and the Beta Israel in Ethiopia. In the United States, communities of interest to scholars include various groups of Hebrew Israelites, the Commandment Keepers in New York City, the Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation of Chicago, and Debra Bowen's Temple Beth El of Philadelphia.

With such diversity, the range of questions academics could ask is broad: How has Jewish practice in a given community adopted aspects of local culture, and, likewise, how has the local culture been changed by the community's Jewish practices? How does local language impact liturgy? How has a community's identity grown and shifted, given its geographical context in history, and what new insights does that offer for understanding other, more commonly studied, communities? What kinds of stories do communities tell about their Jewish heritage? And how are the stories and practices of these communities similar or not to those of other such communities, and why?

Yet, to date, asking and exploring the above questions does not reflect the trends in this growing academic field. Instead, Western academics tend to act as gatekeepers, primarily asking: Is "x" group ("truly") Jewish? That this is usually the first question asked also impacts the arc of the broader research agenda that follows as well as methods employed.

Community members are asked to prove their Jewishness while explaining how they came to live in regions outside the areas that mainstream Jews generally associate with Jewish history. The stories of origin given by African and African heritage communities are expected to fit into existing narratives of Jewish exile, and to embody the tropes of Jewish history, migration patterns, and ritual observance common to that of larger, more established Jewish communities.

By framing our questions under the rubric of "being like us," we are perpetuating a belief

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that our Judaism is the "right" kind. It puts into play a power differential not dissimilar from other race and gender dynamics. The kindest way to account for the current approach is that most contemporary Jewish studies scholars lack a sense of self-consciousness about our own status as Westerners and do not see how our methodologies tend to privilege truth claims that make sense only in "our" kinds of Jewish communities. In the process, we forfeit a deeper understanding of our global Jewish heritage.

As scholars, we need to be aware that our work has direct policy implications. The insistence on questioning whether these communities are truly Jewish raises policy issues such as: Can members of these communities claim their right, as Jews, to Israeli citizenship? Is Israel (and the Jewish community writ large) responsible for support they may request? How might accepting these communities as "truly" Jewish impact the delicate balance of Israeli political relations with the often unstable governments in their home countries? We must be aware of our own place within the organized Jewish community, and how the kinds of questions we ask and the methods we utilize in our research may impact our understanding of the emergent communities we study. Most of all, it is incumbent upon Jewish scholars to explore the assumptions we bring to such studies, for the benefit of the communities we research, but also for our understanding of ourselves.

My Language, My Self

RIFKA COOK

I want to introduce you to my life journey through the Sephardic language known as Ladino, *Judezmo, Español*, Judeo-Spanish, and *Lingua de los Djudios*, to name a few. This language was spoken for centuries, and accompanied Sephardim wherever they traveled after their expulsion from Spain. They maintained the language of their ancestors as a means to identify themselves as distinct from others. Over the past several years, I've begun to research the relationship between this language and the identity of its peoples. As one of my interviewers, who came to Cuba from Turkey, told me: "When my family arrived in Cuba, and they heard the people speaking Spanish, they were sure that everybody there was Jewish." My mother, in Venezuela, used to say: "*Es de los muestros, mishelanu, purke favla Español.*" "Is from ours, [from our people], because they speak *Español*." For her, assuredly, "Spanish" was synonymous with "Jewish."

My work explores the Shabbat songs that the Sephardic Jews have been singing since their expulsion from Spain. These specific songs are indicative of the extraordinarily intimate link between the language and its people — and, consequently, its identity. I interviewed many families in Israel whose stories add to our understanding of what Ladino means today for the Sephardic people.

I am curious about the multiple uses and dialects of the language I have heard since I was a child in Venezuela. Ladino evokes many memories of my youth. When I started the Jewish school in Caracas, my classmates laughed at me because I was speaking what they called "wrong Spanish." Ladino was the language my father wrote to us using Rashi letters, and the language my mother spoke at home until we "corrected" her — in our youthful arrogance — with pleas to speak "real" Spanish. What I learned only later was that Ladino was the "lingua franca" that identifies us as Sephardim. The tongue in which I speak tells the tale of who I am! And it weaves my personal and colorful thread into the vast fabric woven by each individual who has belonged to the communities, and sacred traditions, of Sephardic Judaism throughout centuries.

Language helps people identify themselves; either they seek — through language — to belong to a certain group that shares that language, or they evoke it for other reasons. For example, today there is an explosion of people who speak to one another through cell phone "text messages." If someone does not know "how to text," he or she will feel outside the norm, unable to transcend a language barrier. People using text messaging to communicate are using a language that simultaneously creates a new language (new ways of communicating and building cohesion among identifiable groups) and also destroys language (by communicating without aural speaking).

Language is critical to identity — both preserving and embellishing our identity. By singing songs in our mother tongue, we maintain an enduring Sephardic identity.

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Suggested Further Reading

- David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*
- Irena Klepfisz, "Queens of Contradiction: A Feminist Introduction to Yiddish Women Writers" in *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*
- Sylvia Barack Fishman, *The Way into the Varieties of Jewishness*
- David Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity Through the Ages*
- Warren Hoffman, *The Passing Game: Queering Jewish American Culture*

Born and raised in Caracas, Venezuela, **Rifka Cook** has degrees in Hebrew teaching, Spanish language and literature, and linguistics. She is a senior faculty lecturer in Spanish at Northwestern University.