From the Eastern Mediterranean to the Deep South: Ottoman Jewish Émigrés in 20th-Century Montgomery and Atlanta

By

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Preface: Archives

I first stumbled upon the subject of this thesis while working at the Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) in Jackson, Mississippi. The ISJL has a longstanding public history project on southern Jewish communities that is embodied in their online encyclopedia. I arrived at the ISJL in June of 2019 hoping to spruce up sections of their encyclopedia that covered the history of Sephardi Jews in the southern United States. In addition to my work on the encyclopedia, I helped the History and Heritage departments develop and catalog a new institutional archive.

I was also searching for a thesis topic. I spent the winter and spring of 2019 researching the World Sephardi Congresses held in the 1950s and wanted to take a closer look at how small, southern Sephardi communities were interacting (or not) with these larger, international organizations. I also suspected that several weeks sifting through the ISJL's materials—a collection of papers and objects the ISJL had acquired over several decades—would likely yield something that I could pursue for my thesis. At the beginning of that summer, I knew that US southern history and Sephardi history shared a marginal position in the broader historiography of Jewish history. This, of course, made the prospect of writing a Jewish history that was both Sephardi and southern particularly intriguing, but at the time I wasn't fully aware of the historical silences on Ottoman Sephardi southerners.

While researching the Atlanta, Georgia section of the encyclopedia, one article led me to another, and a curious footnote led me to a series of newspaper articles in the digital archive of the *Southern Israelite*, an Atlanta-based Jewish publication that ran from 1929 to 1986. The articles detailed the 1936 formation of a Sephardic League organized by the leaders of Or Ve Shalom, a Sephardi synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia, and Etz Ahayem, a Sephardi synagogue in

Montgomery, Alabama. The League envisioned an organization that would unite Sephardim from across North and South America, from Montgomery to Seattle to Mexico City. I began to wonder: why would Ottoman Jews go to Atlanta and Montgomery? What did life look like for these immigrants? Where did they live and work, what traditions were preserved or discarded, and how did the community organize itself? As my research has progressed, another, perhaps unanswerable question arose, too: why are these Ottoman Jews missing from the dominant narratives of both Southern and Jewish history? More importantly, *how* have they been erased and what made these historical silences possible?

The ISJL also holds an extensive collection of oral history interviews they've conducted over the last several decades, primarily in the 1990s. I suspected these would prove valuable for the encyclopedia and my own research. Dr. Josh Parshall, the staff historian at the ISJL, and I pulled the VHS tapes and cassettes out of a filing cabinet and, cross-referencing with a decades-old spreadsheet, studied the list of names and guessed who may have Sephardic ancestry. The spreadsheet noted some of the content covered in some of the interviews—things like Holocaust survivor testimonies or the civil rights movement—but nothing related to Sephardi heritage or the Ottoman Empire, or even the name of the interviewee's synagogue.

I spent the next few weeks watching the tapes on a dusty VHS player and a VHS-compatible television that materialized from a top shelf in someone's office and, fortunately, several of the tapes contained hours of interviews with Ottoman Jews who settled in Montgomery and Atlanta. While it is particularly delightful to uncover sources in such a nostalgic format, it is also troubling that these interviews were not (and are not) easily identifiable. There are still dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of hours of interviews I was unable to listen to, both because of my own time constraints and because the audio and video quality has

deteriorated. It is quite expensive to convert VHS tapes and audio cassettes to DVDs or digital files, and some have deteriorated beyond recognition. Organizations like the ISJL simply do not have the funds or the capacity to undertake such an extensive digitization project. In an academic world where researchers rely on what is catalogued, it is unsettling that sources are lost when they are not properly catalogued in an archive. Indeed, this project has made abundantly clear the importance of the work of archivists and the role of those who build and fund archives in constructing historical narratives.

The sources I have consulted includes newspaper articles from over a dozen publications, oral history interviews, government documents, family histories, self-published congregational histories, and personal interviews I conducted, in addition to documents from the Center for Jewish History, the American Jewish Archives, the Auburn University at Montgomery Special Collections Archive, and the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum and Cuba Family Archives in Atlanta. All sources are subject to the biases of the moment in which they are created, but the oral histories on which this thesis heavily relies to construct a historical narrative are particularly vulnerable to subjectivities. Oral histories are reflective of the time in which they were produced rather than the period of time discussed in the interview. Further, oral history interviews are prompted and guided by the interviewer. The types of questions that are posed and the direction in which the interviewer steers the conversation prioritizes certain aspects of history and silences others. Oral histories are thus an valuable tool in understanding the two types of history: what happened and that which is said to have happened.[1]

Many historians of Jews in the southern United States argue, rightfully so, that there are enormous historiographical silences on the experiences of Jews in the south in American Jewish

[1] Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History.* Beacon Press, 2015.

historiography. When southern Jews are included in histories of Jews in the United States, they are often treated separately in their own section of a chapter or article. Most historiography of Jews in the south exists in a somewhat closed container—that these southern Jews were part of national and international networks is too often forgotten or ignored. The absence of Ottoman Jews from southern Jewish historiography is a silence within a silence. What is silenced, excluded, or forgotten—and why—are as important as the most memorable historical facts.

When I presented my research to the entire ISJL staff at the end of the summer, I received surprised and curious—though positive—reactions from the staff. Even at an organization that is dedicated to the historical preservation of and deliverance of direct services to southern Jewish communities, my fascination with these Ottoman Jewish communities in the South was perceived as extremely niche and somewhat peculiar. Even those Sephardim born and raised in Montgomery or Atlanta wondered why and how I settled on this topic for my Master's thesis. On one particular phone call with a Rhodesli woman who grew up in Montgomery, she interrupted me before I could ask my first question: "Before anything else, I *have* to know how and why you ended up interested in *Sephardi* Jews in *Montgomery*!"

There's little evidence that anything came of the 1936 Sephardic League that first piqued my interest beyond the formalization of a special bond between the Ottoman Jews who settled in Atlanta and Montgomery—likely because of the ongoing economic depression and the subsequent outbreak of World War II. Nevertheless, since the moment I first read those newspaper articles in *The Southern Israelite*, I couldn't forget the conviction of these Ottoman immigrants and their vision of an international league that was based in—of all places—the American south.

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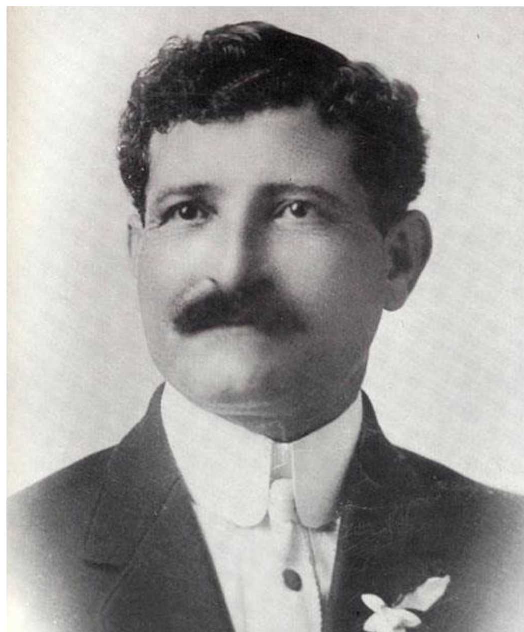
Chapter 1: Ottomans

The first Ottoman Jew arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1906. Ralph Nace Cohen hailed from Rhodes, the largest of the twelve Dodecanese Islands in the southeastern Aegean Sea, tucked between what is now Turkey and Greece. From Rhodes, Cohen had traveled to the Island of Patmos, where he boarded a small frigate to the United States. Though it was early June, Ralph was horrified by the cold weather he encountered in New York City. Unable to bear the city's frigid temperatures, he quickly made his way to the train station. Presenting the clerk with every penny he had, Cohen asked for a ticket that would take him as far south as possible. That ticket took him to Montgomery, Alabama.[2]



Ralph Cohen, the first Jew from Rhodes to settle in Montgomery, Alabama.[3]

[2] Morris Capouya, interview by David Sampliner, September 1999, VHS and mp3 audio, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, MS; Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections. "Dodecanese" literally translates to "the twelve islands." This term first appeared in Byzantine sources around the eighth century.

[3] "Montgomery's Jewish Community" in *Encyclopedia of Alabama.* Photo courtesy of the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

This is, at least, the story that Morris Capouya, a dentist and long-time cantor of the Sephardi Etz Ahayem Synagogue in Montgomery, Alabama, told to David Sampliner, an oral historian working for the Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL), in September of 1999. Capouya recounted this story with a laugh, noting that no one actually knew why Ottoman Jews first chose to settle in Alabama. (Capouya himself, also born in Rhodes, had initially decided to immigrate to Atlanta, and only later settled in Montgomery). The question of precisely why and how Ottoman Jews ended up in Montgomery—and the US South more broadly—has puzzled locals and historians alike. It is, in fact, not entirely unreasonable to surmise that a subset of Ottoman Jewish émigrés in North America sought out a warm environment in the United States that reminded them of the Mediterranean climes they had left behind. We know, for example, that Jews of Ottoman descent had made similar arguments about the desirability of settling in Mexico during the same period.[4] Yet, the spontaneous nature of Cohen's decision appears to be apocryphal: according to Stuart Rockoff, who has studied the history of Jews in Montgomery, a Greek Orthodox Christian man who also hailed from Rhodes sponsored Cohen's immigration.[5] It would seem, then, that the traditional avenues of word-of-mouth communication and networks of support that drove so much of the chain migration of the period also applied in the case of the Ottoman Sephardi Jews who began arriving in Montgomery and Atlanta at the start of the 20th century—and that their networks were regional but not strictly religious. Archival materials kept at Auburn University Montgomery Library confirm this narrative, suggesting that various others followed Cohen to the US South after he had regaled them with "glowing accounts of

[4] Albert Avigdor, "Porke los sefaradim deven pensar en Meksiko," *La Luz*, February 5, 1922. Translated from Ladino by Devi Mays as "A Sephardi émigré encourages Levantine Jews to move to Mexico," in *Sephardi Lives*, ed. Cohen and Stein, 355-356; Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports,* 159-160.

[5] Stuart Rockoff, "Montgomery's Jewish Community" in *Encyclopedia of Alabama.* Retrieved from encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2393. Kerem, "The Settlement of Rhodian and Other Sephardic Jews in Montgomery and Atlanta," also makes this claim, though I have thus far been unable to verify this with immigration or other archival documents.

opportunity" in his new home.[6] Beyond the fragmentary picture such sources paint, however, it isn't surprising why questions about the origins of Ottoman Jewish settlement in Atlanta and Montgomery still exist: after all, the sources themselves tell contradictory stories. Yet it seems equally plausible that such questions persist in part because the arrival of Sephardi Jews of Middle Eastern origin to the Jim Crow era US South does not easily fit within existing popular or scholarly narratives alike.

There are certainly good enough reasons for this. For one, the vast majority of Ottoman Sephardim who left Southeastern Europe and the Middle East starting in the late 19th and early 20th centuries settled in larger cities like New York, Seattle, and Los Angeles, where sizeable Ottoman Jewish communities sprang up during this period.[7] And while Ottoman Sephardim found that their German, Eastern European, and even "Western" Sephardi brethren were not always particularly receptive or welcoming to the newer Sephardi immigrants who began showing up in their cities during this period, elsewhere their numbers and level of organization were greater than it was for the Montgomery and Atlanta Sephardi communities.[8] In the US South, there were no special organizations established to welcome Sephardi newcomers or

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[6] Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.

[7] Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*; Naar 2007; Naar 2015; Naar 2016; Cohen, "Oriental by Design," 364-398; see also the work of Rabbi Marc D. Angel, who has written about the Jews of Rhodes, and the work of Joseph Papo, who included Montgomery and Atlanta in his manuscripts and books on Sephardi Jews in the United States. Papo, *The Sephardic Community in America*; Papo also corresponded with Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen of Atlanta, Georgia in the years before Cohen's death. Box 3. Series B. MS-866. Joseph M. Papo Research Materials. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio; 1979 correspondence, Box 2, Folder 23, MSS-65, Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen Family Papers, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.

[8] Box 5, Folder 18, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309; See Rebecca Amiel's story in which she showed her Ashkenazi neighbors a mezuzah bearing a Hebrew inscription to demonstrate her Jewishness, Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 101; and Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.

Ladino serials as there were elsewhere (particularly New York).[9] In Montgomery and Atlanta, the new Sephardi communities that took shape in the early 20th century were also much smaller, never numbering more than 27 families and 65 families, respectively.[10] In light of all of this, it isn't difficult to understand why the overriding impression given by writing about "the Jewish South" both today and a century ago is that Jews in the US South are (and were) either German, Eastern European, or "Western" Sephardi in origin.[11]

The story of the arrival of a group of Ottoman Jews to the deep south in the first decades of the twentieth century seems unlikely for other reasons as well. The majority of Ottoman immigration to Atlanta and Montgomery occurred precisely as the racial status of Southeastern Europeans, Middle Easterners, and individuals of various other backgrounds remained a hotly contested issue being actively challenged in the courts.[12] Between 1909 and 1944, the United States federal courts heard 52 cases regarding the racial prerequisite requirements for US citizenship. Of course, such debates occurred beyond the courtroom, too. The racial status of Jews of all backgrounds was often regarded as distinct in this period.[13] The impact of these struggles on the ways that Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Ottomans as well as other racially

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[9] The Oriental Bureau, for example, provided services to new Eastern Sephardi and Mizrahi immigrants in New York. Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*, 27. Ladino Serials in New York included *La Amerika*, edited by Moise Gadol (1910–1925); *La Boz del Pueblo/El Progreso/La Epoka de Nu York*, edited by Maurice S. Nessim (1915–1920); *La Luz* (1921–1922); *La Vara*, edited by Moise Soulam, Albert J. Levy, and Albert J. Torres (1922–1948). Also *El Mesajero* (1933-1935), a Ladino periodical in L.A., see Kirschen, "Reading Ladino in Los Angeles."
[10] Box 5, Folder 18, 19, and 20, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309; Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.
[11] Bauman, *Dixie Diaspora*; Bauman and Bayor, *A New Vision of Southern Jewish History*; Diner, *Roads Not Taken*; Ferris, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo;* Ferris and Greenberg, *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil*; Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*; Mendelsohn, *The Rag Race*; Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier*; Sarna, *American Judaism* to name only a few. One exception to this is Kerem, "The Settlement of Rhodian and Other Sephardic Jews in Montgomery and Atlanta," 373-391.
[12] Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White: Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora*, 6-20, 57-64. Gualtieri uses "Syrian" in its "late Ottoman sense of *bilad al-Sham*, or geographical Syria… the territory that now consists of the states of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel Palestine."
[13] Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 37-41.

"undefined" groups moved about the world played out everywhere in the United States (and beyond).[14]

Still, racial tensions were notoriously high in the south, where Jim Crow was the law of the land. Why would Ottoman Jews move to a region where racial divides between white and Black Americans led Black southerners to suffer at the hands of their government and their neighbors—particularly when Ottoman Jews' own racial assignment remained uncertain? The south was arguably no haven for Jews during this time, either. Those who arrived in the country between 1913 and 1915 would have likely seen newspaper headlines—or heard through conversations—about Leo Frank, the Jewish man who moved to Atlanta from New York to manage a pencil factory only to be (falsely) accused of the sexual assault and murder of a 13-year-old Christian girl before being lynched by an angry white mob. There were articles on Leo Frank's case published in the New-York based Ladino newspaper *La Amerika,* to which community members in both Atlanta and Montgomery subscribed.[15] It is thus reasonable to assume that Ottoman Jews were at least aware that a Jewish man had been lynched in Marietta, a short distance from Atlanta, though it is difficult to know the effect of the case on their thinking about the possibility of making Georgia their home. As far as I have been able to ascertain so far, they left no trace of such discussions. Despite their silence on the direct impact of Leo Frank's trial and subsequent lynching on their daily lives, community members left behind no shortage of archival materials that illuminate their communal and individual histories.

Those who chose to build their lives in Montgomery and Atlanta replicated and maintained the communal networks and family ties they had established already in the Ottoman

[14] Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports*, 41, 175.
[15] "Frank, el Dreyfus de Amerika," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), August 15, 1913; "Kualo sera de Leo Frank?" *La Amerika* (New York, NY), May 22, 1914; "Buena shanse por Leo Frank," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), June 14, 1915.

Empire. Relationships between Ottoman Sephardim in Montgomery and Atlanta were unusually intertwined: indeed, families often moved back and forth between the cities, living with family in Atlanta upon first immigrating and eventually settling permanently in Montgomery, or vice versa, or moving from one city to the other after the death of a spouse or family member. For decades, those relationships persisted and persist to this day, even outside the bounds of formal institutions.

Montgomery, Alabama

After Ralph Cohen arrived in Montgomery in 1906, several single Jewish men from Rhodes followed him in the same year.[16] Between 1907 and 1908, 26 more immigrants from Rhodes and elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire immigrated to Montgomery.[17] Cohen opened a hat shop at 30 North Court in Montgomery, not unlike many of the first German and Eastern European Jewish settlers in Montgomery who owned hat, shoe, or clothing stores or earned their livelihoods as peddlers and fruit and vegetable vendors.[18] Jews who settled in Montgomery and Atlanta in the early 20th century came from across Southeastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, from places such as Izmir, Monastir, Bodrum, Istanbul, and—most of all—from Rhodes. All spoke Ladino and some spoke French, Italian, Turkish, Spanish, Greek, Bulgarian, or English. The Jewish community in Rhodes peaked around 4,000 at the turn of the century, with nearly half

[16] The first single Jewish men to come to Montgomery from the Ottoman Empire were Isaac Ben Yakar, Asher Cohen, Abraham Cohen, Hacco Capilouto, Simon R. Franco, Solomon Rousso, Abraham R. Franco, Moses "Haham" Franco, Isaac R. Capouya, Victor Avzaradel, Isaac Hasson, and Ezra Tourial. Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.

[17] The following individuals arrived in 1907: Ephraim B. Taranto, Solomon Piha (the husband of Judith Piha, mentioned above), Eli. R. Capouya (the uncle of Morris Capouya, discussed above), Eli E. Capilouto, Haim Pizanti, Asher Pizanti, Joseph Traves, Shalom Traves, David Traves, Morris R. Franco, B.R. Franco, Joe Taranto, Solomon Hanan, Yom Tov Taranto, and Jake Hasson. The following individuals arrived in 1908: Samuel Beton, Nissim Beton, Jack Rousso, Daniel Rousso, Ashlan Mussafer, Ralph Beton, Reuben Piha, Joseph Toledo, Moussani Saul, Morris Capouano, and Mayer J. Piha. Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.

[18] For more on Jewish peddlers in the American South, see Vecchio, "Making Their Way In The New South"; Diner, *Roads Taken.* Ottoman Jews in the city would eventually follow the same pattern, finding employment in these realms as well.

leaving the island for far-flung destinations around the globe, including Atlanta and Montgomery. Nearly all 2,000 who remained in Rhodes would perish in the Holocaust.[19]

This first group of émigrés and those who followed encountered a sizable Bavarian German and Eastern European Jewish population in Montgomery. German immigrants had established an Orthodox synagogue, Kahl Montgomery, in 1849. A few decades later, in the 1870s and 1880s, Eastern European Jews began to settle in Montgomery, and in 1874, Congregation Kahl Montgomery adopted the Reform rituals and modeled their new Temple, built in 1862, after Temple Emanu El of New York City. To mark this transition, the congregation changed its name to Temple Beth Or. In 1901, a group of Eastern European Jews founded their own synagogue, Agudath Israel. The Jewish population in Alabama peaked in 1927, with 12,891 Jews residing in the state and approximately 2,400 of those living in Montgomery.[20] The first Ottoman immigrants to Montgomery thus encountered a Jewish community established by the more significant numbers of Ashkenazi Jews who settled in the city in the 19th century. By the 20th century, Montgomery was also home to a small Greek Orthodox population. Although there was no Greek Orthodox church in the city until 1943, Greek immigrants established a church in Birmingham an hour north of Montgomery already in 1906—the same year Ralph Cohen arrived in Alabama and, as readers will remember, was apparently sponsored by a Greek Orthodox former neighbor from the Island of Rhodes. By the 1940s, there were 50 or 60 Greek families in Montgomery.[21]

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[19] Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 171.

[20] ISJL, Montgomery, Alabama; Moses, "The History of the Jews of Montgomery," 83-88.

[21] Greek Orthodox Church in Alabama. In general, Ottoman Jews who settled in the United States differed from Ottoman Greeks in the permanence of their relocation to the United States. Many Greeks arrived in the United States to eventually return to their families in their place of origin, though many ultimately stayed in the country permanently. See the forthcoming work of George Topalidis and the Ottoman Greeks of the United States (OGUS) project at the University of Florida.

By 1908, Montgomery was home to a steadily growing community of Ottoman Jews. According to a community history compiled by Rubin Morris Hanan, the group held their first public Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services in the "traditional Sephardic form" (mostly an amalgamation of Ottoman Sephardi ritual practices, with Rhodesli customs featuring most prominently) at the Jewish Orthodox Community Center at 504 Monroe Street led by Simon "Mr. Sam" Franco. Mr. Sam served as cantor for fifty years and as the synagogue president several times.[22] The first nuclear families arrived in 1909: that year, Sultana Capilouto and her daughter Boly immigrated from Rhodes, Sol and Baruch Cohen came from Izmir, and Esther Jake Hasson arrived from Monastir. [23] Diana Cohen, the daughter of Sol and Baruch, was the first Jewish baby with Ottoman origins born in Montgomery, in April of 1910. By 1911, the community was sizeable enough to support a local distributor of *La Amerika*.[24] Indeed, by this year—just one year after *La Amerika* was first published in New York—both Atlanta and Montgomery were home to enough readers to warrant a local agent who was responsible for selling subscriptions and collecting payments. Subscribers in both cities used the newspaper to place job and personal ads, to share marriage announcements, and to stay connected to the growing network of Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States and around the world.[25]

Like so many, members of this fledgling Ottoman Jewish community sought, among other things, economic prosperity. Many of those who arrived in the first decade of the century,

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[22] Sam Franco Obituary, *Montgomery Advertiser*, July 2, 1964.

[23] Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections. The Ottoman Empire controlled each these localities in 1909: Izmir was a sanjak of the Ottoman Empire until its dissolution. The city was the site of extensive warfare during the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922). In 1923, the Turkish Republic rebuilt the city as part of the Turkish Republic. Monastir was a vilayet of the Ottoman Empire until its occupation in 1912 during the First Balkan War.

[24] "Esperamos ke esta ves todos nuestros ajentes…" *La Amerika* (New York, NY), December 22, 1911.

[25] "Donos a favor de los sufrientes en la armada otomana," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), Nov. 22, 1912; "Se buska," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), Nov. 14, 1913; "Kazaran proksimiente," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), August 14, 1914; "Shanse de merkansia," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), Oct. 11, 1912; "Se buska," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), June 14, 1918.

primarily single men, sought the opportunities promised by the mythos of American prosperity. But by 1909 new pressures were afoot in their lands of origin as well. In 1909, a new universal conscription law in the Ottoman Empire prompted thousands of men of all backgrounds to leave the country.[26] Further challenges came when Italy occupied Rhodes in 1912 and as the Ottoman Empire became embroiled in two Balkan Wars with neighboring states between 1912-1913.[27] Most of those who left Rhodes traveled via Italy, where they boarded ships, sometimes sailing in steerage class, sometimes in better conditions. Ralph Franco, who traveled from Montgomery back to Rhodes with his parents for a family vacation in 1927 when he was five years old, recalled that his father brought him down to the steerage deck so he could bear witness to the conditions his father had endured the first time he crossed the Atlantic.[28] Clearly long after Ralph's parents had made economic gains after living some years in the United States, they considered their humble past a crucial part of their story.

Those who moved to the United States preserved various ties to the Jewish community back in Rhodes and often felt responsible for the livelihood of those they left behind. As Montgomery's Ottoman Jewish community grew, an interest in creating a formal means to care for family members left behind in Rhodes emerged. To meet this need, Sam Beton founded and chaired "The Benevolent Society" in 1909. The Society collected pennies from members each week to send back to family members in Rhodes. During the High Holidays of 1909, the Benevolent Society raised 200 dollars from a few dozen congregants for the Behor Holim

[26] Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America,* 30. Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 187. It is difficult to determine the precise number of immigrants who arrived in the United States from Ottoman lands because of the ambiguity in immigration reports. Records distinguished "Turkey in Europe" from "Turkey in Asia," for example. Karpat, "The Ottoman Emigration to America, 1860-1914," 175-209.

[27] Ginio, *The Ottoman Culture of Defeat*.

[28] Ralph Abraham Franco, interview by David Sampliner, September 1999, VHS and mp3 audio, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, MS.

Society of Rhodes.[29] Members of Etz Ahayem remained connected to the Ottoman Empire, too: in November of 1912, Joseph Capouya of Montgomery wrote to *La Amerika* to express the community's sympathy and support for the "noble initiative" of the Ottoman army in the First Balkan War. Capouya reported that "36 compatriots" in Montgomery had successfully raised one hundred and four dollars and seventy-five cents which was sent to Haim Nahum Effendi, the Grand Rabbi of the Ottoman Empire.[30] The article also encouraged readers across the United States to follow their example by donating to both the Ottoman cause as well as *La Amerika* itself. The community in Rhodes, the Ottoman military and Haim Nahum Effendi, and *La Amerika* and the Ladino press were all parts of the international network to which community members in Montgomery (and Atlanta) were connected.

Though this group was only a small portion of Montgomery's broader (mostly Ashkenazi) Jewish community, it continued to grow, primarily through the arrival of Rhodesli immigrants. By 1912, the city's Sephardi community was large enough to warrant a permanent organization.[31] On July 27, 1912, founding members of the synagogue wrote a charter in Ladino, establishing the congregation Etz Ahayem to "serve the needs of the Mediterranean immigrants" in the area.[32]

One can imagine the founding members' conversation in which they chose the self-description of "Mediterranean." Others may have suggested "Turkish Jews," or "Rhodesli

[29] Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.
[30] "Donos a favor de los sufrientes en la armada otomana," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), Nov. 22, 1912.
[31] The following individuals arrived between 1912 and 1916: Mazaltov Piha, Sultana Taranto Rousso, Caden Hanan, Behora Candranel, Amelie Franco, Rachel S. Franco, Eli Cohen, Luna Menasche Amato, Jack Halfon, Morris Mezrahi, Ralph M. Franco, Joseph Cohen, Ezekiel Dana, Abraham Camho, Julia Taranto Pinto, Behora de Benzion Taranto, Ester Taranto Capouano, Eli. I. Haim, Catherine Taranto, Sol Varon, and David Cohen. Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.
[32] Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.

immigrants." Scholars, politicians, the press, and individuals have historically used various terms to describe the Jews who descended from those expelled from Spain in the 15th century who ended up across Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Most common at the start of the 20th century were "Oriental Jews," "Levantine Jews," and "Turkinos," but "Levantine" Sephardim, "Spanish Jews," "Spagnuali," "Ladinos," "Turkish Jews," and "Turkish Sephardim" also made appearances. (References to "Arabic-speaking Jews," "Syrians," "Arabians," as well as "Greek-speaking Jews" would have distinguished the primarily Ladino-speaking Sephardi Jews of the western portions of the Ottoman Empire from their Arabic-speaking coreligionists to the east and their Greek-speaking coreligionists to the west and south).[33] Given all of the options at their disposal, it is telling that the community's founders chose to define themselves as "Mediterranean immigrants" in their early days in the United States. Might they have perceived this choice as one that would help them gain the benefits of whiteness in a region, and country, where so much of one's status and rights were predicated on being white? Certainly, just some years later, a major debate arose among Ottoman Jewish émigrés in New York and elsewhere, with some holding fast to their self-designation as "Oriental" and others suggesting "Sephardi"—a term that connected the community back to its Iberian origins in Europe—was more appropriate.[34]

I have nonetheless chosen to describe these historical actors as "Ottoman" Jews in this chapter because, in culture, place of birth, and community, Atlanta and Montgomery's founding members were originally Ottoman. Even when they discarded the term "Ottoman," they maintained communal connections and networks that had been born back in the empire. Well

[33] Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*, 19.
[34] Ibid., 99; Naar, "Sephardim Since Birth," 7-9.

after these Ottoman Jews embraced the US south as their permanent home, they expressed a connection to the time and place of their birth or parent's births.

Montgomery to Atlanta, Atlanta to Montgomery

Many of the Ottomans who first settled in Montgomery used the city as a stepping stone to other communities: some moved to Los Angeles, New York City, Birmingham, or Miami. A few individuals returned to Rhodes, only to then immigrate to Argentina.[35] Many moved from Montgomery to Atlanta, Georgia, or vice versa. For example, Eli Capouya, a founding member of the community, settled first in Montgomery before moving to Atlanta. When his nephew, Morris Capouya, first immigrated to the United States from Rhodes, Morris lived with his Uncle Eli in Atlanta. After Morris earned his degree in dentistry, he moved to Montgomery to open his dental practice.[36] Similarly, Albert Capp (originally Capouano) moved with his father, Morris, his brother Leon, and his sisters Clara and Pearl, from Atlanta to Montgomery when Albert was a teenager. The family moved after Albert's mother Esther was tragically killed in a car accident the same day that his grandmother Hanula, died after a long battle with an undisclosed illness.[37]

Even after moving from Montgomery to Atlanta or Atlanta to Montgomery, most maintained close ties with friends and relatives in both cities. For example, descendants from the Taranto family who lived in Montgomery recalled spending summers in Atlanta with family friends.[38] This persistent link between Atlanta and Montgomery reflects the continued value

[35] Solomon Hanan and David Traves left for New York City; Joe and Al Taranto moved to Birmingham, Alabama; Morris and Rymond Bain and Ralph M. Franco went to Miami. Haim Pizanti, Moshe "Haham" Franco, and Joseph Toledo returned to "Greece and Rhodes." Isaac Menashe returned to Rhodes and then moved to Argentina. Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.
[36] Morris Capouya, interview by David Sampliner, September 1999, VHS and mp3 audio, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, MS.
[37] Albert Capp, interview by David Sampliner, September 1999, VHS and mp3 audio, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, MS.; *The Montgomery Advertiser.* "Woman Killed on Way to Kin's Deathbed." July 12, 1945.
[38] Sara Schreibman, interview.

Ottoman Jewish immigrants and their families' ascribed to maintaining their Ottoman (and most commonly Rhodesli) Sephardi networks. Even as the Sephardi communities of Atlanta and Montgomery formed separate synagogues, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and various communal organizations, and as they became increasingly integrated with other Jews and southerners in their respective cities, they maintained their connection across state lines. Ottoman Jews' continued shuffling back and forth between Montgomery and Atlanta began already in 1906, the very same year Ottoman Jews first arrived in the region.

Atlanta, Georgia

Victor Avzaradel and Ezra Touriel, two of the first Ottoman Jewish settlers to arrive in Montgomery in 1906, moved to Atlanta in the same year. Isaac Hazan and Asher Israel came in 1907, followed by Rebecca and Raphael Amiel and their two sons, Leo and Bando. Between 1908 and 1910, approximately thirty single men arrived in Atlanta from Rhodes and elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire. Conceivably prompted in part by new conscription laws and the Balkan Wars raging back home in the empire, as well as growing networks overseas, the rate of immigration to Atlanta from Rhodes increased between 1910 and 1912. After slowing in the wake of World War One, Sephardi immigration from the Eastern Mediterranean intensified again between 1920 and 1924 until the (formerly) Ottoman community in Atlanta peaked at 65 families.[39] Forty-two of these families came from Rhodes, ten from Bodrum, six from Izmir, five from Istanbul, and two from Melaz.[40] Some individuals from these cities found spouses from

[39] See page 56-57 for discussion of the impact of immigration restrictions on Jewish immigration from Rhodes and elsewhere to the United States.

[40] Bodrum was part of the Ottoman Empire until Italian forces occupied the city in 1919. Turkish troops regained control of the city in 1922. Melaz was part of the Ottoman Empire until the Balkan Wars in 1912, when Greek forces seized the city.

different localities in the Ottoman Empire once they arrived in the United States, while some couples arrived married.[41]

The first religious Sephardi gathering in Atlanta was held on Yom Kippur in 1907 at a hotel on Pryor Street owned by a German Jewish man, Jake Abelson. By 1910, community leaders recognized the need for a formal organization and founded Congregation Ahavath Shalom. The founding members included 40 families who elected Isaac Hazan as the first president. While Ahavath Shalom didn't seek a formal charter, they collected dues at 10 cents per week and held services at Isaac Hazan's home. Beginning in 1911, Raphael and Rebecca Amiel held services at their house near Pryor Street, while the congregation held larger events and holiday celebrations at the Jewish Educational Alliance building on Capitol Avenue.[42]

Like those in Montgomery, the Ottoman Jewish émigrés who arrived in Atlanta in the early 1900s encountered a thriving network of established Jewish communal institutions. German Jews had begun settling in Atlanta in 1845 and by 1880, there were 538 Jews of German or Austro-Hungarian descent in the city. By 1937, there were 12,000 Jews in Atlanta, numerous synagogues, Jewish workmen's circles, the Atlanta Zionist Society, the Hebrew Relief Society, the Council of Jewish Women, and the Standard Club, to name only a handful.[43] Many Atlanta

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[41] Box 5, Folder 18, 19, and 20, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309. For a complete list of members of Or Ve Shalom in 1934, see Beton, *Sephardim & history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 128-129 or Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309. *Sephardim & history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom* contains articles, photos, and community history compiled and published by Sol Beton in 1981. The congregational history included in *Sephardim & history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom* is a translation of a congregational history written by Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen in Spanish in 1936. Box 3, Folder 12, MSS-65, Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen Family Papers, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.

[42] Beton, *Sephardim & history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 101-102; and Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.

[43] Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City*, 110.

Jews of German and Eastern European descent worked in commercial trade or the manufacturing business, and some owned their businesses or were managers. Over half of Russian-born Jewish immigrants worked as peddlers and sometimes eventually opened their own shops. By contrast, the Ottoman Jewish immigrants who arrived in the early 20th century worked primarily in skilled manual labor. In 1914, 67% of the Ottoman Jews in Atlanta were shoemakers, and most owned their shops. Another 20% owned restaurants, saloons, or fruit stands.[44] Not unlike Montgomery, Atlanta was also home to a sizeable Greek community: in 1900, there were 191 Greek individuals in Georgia. By 1920, there were 1,473 Greek individuals in the state, who mostly worked in or owned restaurants, or worked as fruit sellers, in groceries, coffeehouses, or owned companies that manufactured products for other businesses. The community founded a Greek Orthodox Church in 1905 and primarily lived in the area surrounding Pryor Street—not far from their Ottoman Jewish neighbors. They also utilized part of the Jewish section of Greenwood Cemetery. As was the case in Alabama and throughout the United States, many Greek immigrants did not remain in the area permanently. Of the more than 500,000 Greeks who immigrated to the United States by 1931, about forty percent moved or ultimately returned to Greece, a fact that distinguished them from their Ottoman Jewish neighbors, relatively few of whom returned to their homes across the Mediterranean during these years.[45]

While the membership of Ahavath Shalom grew, unrest developed among a segment of members over administrative affairs—seemingly regarding the collection and use of dues.[46] In the winter of 1912, twenty-two members broke off from Ahavath Shalom and formed a separate

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[44] Ibid.

[45] "Greek" as a national term is somewhat ahistorical in this context. For example, Rhodes was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1912 and was not part of Greece until 1947. Ellis, "The Greek Community in Atlanta, 1900-1923," 400-08.

[46] Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the Gate City,* 96 posits that the split also occurred over disagreements regarding *minhagim* (customs) yet archival documents point towards financial disputes as the cause of the split. It is, of course, not inconceivable that both financial and customary concerns were factors.

congregation named Or Hachaim. Though smaller, this group was better financially equipped than the remaining 35 families at Ahavath Shalom. Both groups operated separately for two years. Ahavath Shalom continued to use the Jewish Educational Alliance building facilities and held smaller meetings at Isaac Hazan's home. Meanwhile, members of the Or Hachaim congregation continued to meet at the homes of Victor Behar and Raphael Amiel.

The two congregations reunified two years later after a series of events: It was August 1, 1914, the day Germany entered World War I, and Tisha B'av, the day of Jewish mourning that commemorates the destruction of the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem. Morris Capouano delivered a solemn speech to worshippers during services. He compared the rupture of relations between the two groups to the destruction of Jerusalem's Holy Temples, which resulted in "discord and divisiveness among the Jewish people." Community historian Sol Beton later attributed the reunification to Capouano's speech and, also having exhausted their funds to help new members establish themselves in Atlanta, Or Hachaim's leadership agreed to a joint meeting with Ahavath Shalom. According to Beton, the "total membership" of both groups attended the meeting, where they decided to reunify the congregations. The reconciled group formed a commission to select a new name, settling on "Or Ve Shalom," stemming from "Or" in Or Hachaim and "Shalom" in Ahavath Shalom. The new congregation consisted of fifty-seven families and set dues at fifty cents per month.[47]

When Or Ve Shalom's members wanted to expand, they turned to their Montgomery contacts for support. In 1918, with assistance from Solomon Rousso of Montgomery, the community launched an extensive campaign to raise funds for a synagogue building. On January

[47] Beton, *Sephardim & history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 101-102; and Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309, 103.

2, 1919, Or Ve Shalom purchased a house at 236 Central Avenue for $2,300. On August 28, 1920, Or Ve Shalom purchased a second, adjacent property at 234 Central Avenue. The value for both properties was approximately $5,000. Or Ve Shalom demolished the house at 234 Central Avenue and renovated the house at 236 Central Avenue with a two-story edifice. The upper floor was the sanctuary, and the lower floor was the Hebrew school and event space for social gatherings.

After Or Ve Shalom completed construction on the new building, the congregation formally founded a religious school that was staffed by a slew of educators throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Or Ve Shalom also established a society that provides aid and support to the sick and a burial society in February of 1921, and the congregation also purchased its first section of Greenwood Cemetery. (Until then, the German and Eastern European Jewish community had provided burial services in the Ahavath Achim section of Greenwood Cemetery). Marguerite Behar and Sarah Ereza found the Nessah Israel Society, or Sisterhood, in February of 1920. Thus, by the late 1920s, both Or Ve Shalom of Atlanta and Etz Ahayem of Montgomery had established lasting community institutions. In the following years, the congregations would formalize their relationship with one another.

Pan-Sephardism in the Deep South

By the following decade, the leaders of Etz Ahayem and Or Ve Shalom, now well established in their respective communities, imagined Montgomery and Atlanta as a possible center of an international network of "Sephardic" congregations. In November of 1935, a delegation of congregants from Or Ve Shalom made an official visit to Etz Ahayem. At the time, *The Southern Israelite,* a Jewish publication based in Augusta, Georgia, described the motorcade that traveled from Atlanta to Montgomery for a joint meeting between the congregations. The delegates

appointed a temporary committee at a daytime business meeting and attended a formal banquet in the evening. The committee oversaw the formation of a "Sephardic Congregational Society" that would "unite congregations for a national cultural and welfare program. The movement [was] to be first concentrated in the south, then to extend throughout the country, embracing Sephardic congregations in Mexico and Cuba."[48] The Society would also assist "Sephardic" Jews who lived in small cities.[49]

Those in Montgomery and Atlanta were not the first to conceive of a transnational federation of "Sephardi" communities. Ten years earlier, in 1925, a group of delegates from Palestine, the Balkans, and Western and Central Europe gathered in Vienna ahead of the 14th Zionist Congress. This group established the World Sephardi Federation (WSF), choosing Jerusalem as their center and declaring that this new organization was crucial for the Zionist project. Their purpose was to build a Jewish state with the cooperation of Jewish communities around the world.[50] The founding members of the hopeful Sephardic Congregational Society in the US south in 1935 may have once read about the founding of a similar project in the Ladino press, or in *The Southern Israelite*, for that matter. The Augusta-based Jewish newspaper frequently reprinted bulletins posted by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Yet, unlike the World Sephardi Federation of the previous decade, which put Palestine at the center of its platforms, these formerly Ottoman Jews across the US south planned instead to invest in the Sephardi congregations that spanned the Americas.

[48] Ibid.
[49] "Sephardic Jewry to Convene in Montgomery," *The Southern Israelite*, November 22, 1935.
[50] The Records of the World Sephardi Federation, held at the Center for Jewish History in New York, covers this history. However, the Federation did not begin formally keeping records until 1975. There were two meetings held between 1925 and 1951, the first in London in 1935 and the second in Amsterdam in 1938, though no central executive body emerged. More information on the early years of the World Sephardi Federation can be found in the World Jewish Congress Records collection held at the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio." After World Sephardic Congress, Our Present Tasks," December 14, 1951, Box F19, Folder 8, World Jewish Congress Records, Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Commentators from the community later recalled the event merely as a "special" and "official" visit whose purpose was to "bring the two congregations closer together." Though the lifespan of the Society was brief, it offers us an invaluable window into the way Ottoman Jews living in Montgomery and Atlanta positioned themselves as part of a regional, national, and international network of Sephardi congregations. Not only were they a *part* of this network, but the US south was a viable home-base for such a movement, they suggested. For a brief moment in the 1930s, then, Ottoman Jewish leaders in Atlanta and Montgomery appear to have concluded that the region was—or at least, could be—an important node in an international network of Sephardi congregations.

New York to Atlanta to New York and Back Again

Both Or Ve Shalom and Etz Ahayem were plagued by clergy and teaching issues, not unlike many communities throughout the Ottoman Sephardi diaspora.[51] By the early 20th century, Sephardi rabbinical leadership was in crisis following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and in the conditions of interwar Greece, and there was a shortage of rabbis who were increasingly needed by growing émigré enclaves around the world.[52] Or Ve Shalom opened a Talmud Torah in 1921, but the community subsequently cycled through several teachers and rabbis. The first was Masliah Hazan, who ran the Talmud Torah upon its opening in 1921. Hazan instructed the community's children in elementary Hebrew for nine months until he left the United States with his wife, Rachel. He was followed by Abraham Piha in 1922, who taught Hebrew lessons and also acted as the community's rabbi, performing marriages and conducting services. Next was Rachel Amine, who worked for Or Ve Shalom from 1923 to 1924. Amine was born in Palestine in 1903 and immigrated to the United States in 1921. Congregational historians recalled her as an

[51] Naar, "Who Will Save Sephardic Judaism? The Chief Rabbi," 89-138.
[52] Rodrigue, "The Rabbinical Seminary in Italian Rhodes," 19.

excellent Hebrew instructor.[53] However, after one year of teaching, Rachel became engaged to Isaac Benveniste, a congregant, and resigned from her teaching position.[54]

After years of rapid staff turnover, the congregation placed an ad for a Hebrew teacher in *La Amerika,* a Ladino publication based in New York. Haim Levy, nicknamed "Hadji" (presumably for having made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem earlier in his life), responded to the ad and subsequently moved to Atlanta to serve as teacher and cantor for the congregation. After one year, Levy left Atlanta for California.

Reverend Mordechai Abraham Gabay lived in Atlanta when Or Ve Shalom hired him for the first time in 1925, where he initiated a well-regarded program of study at the Talmud Torah.[55] Gabay was born in Istanbul and taught at the Alliance Israélite Universelle school in Istanbul for several years before immigrating to the United States.[56] By 1926, several Or Ve Shalom members had alleged Gabay spent the remainder of their funds at the Talmud Torah, however. This allegation created an "aura of antagonism" that community critics directed at Gabay. Moreno Benvenisty, the synagogue president at the time, called upon Morris Capouano to mediate the conflict, as he had helped to reconcile intra-communal disputes in the past (and had been the one to give the dramatic speech that reportedly helped reunify Ahavath Shalom and Or Hahaim). Incidentally, the election meeting for the synagogue fell on the same week and, after pleading "for harmony for the sake of the Talmud Torah and its students," Capouano was

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[53] Year: *1921*; Arrival: *New York, New York, USA*; Microfilm Serial: *T715, 1897-1957*; Line: *2*; Page Number: *53;* Ancestry.com. *New York, Passenger and Crew Lists (including Castle Garden and Ellis Island), 1820-1957* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2010.
[54] Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 108-109; and Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.
[55] Ibid., 107.
[56] National Archives and Records Administration; Washington, DC; ARC Title: *Petitions for Naturalization, compiled 1912 - 1991*; ARC Number: *718990*; Record Group Title: *Records of District Courts of the United States*; Record Group Number: *21*; Ancestry.com. *Georgia, Naturalization Records, 1893-1991* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.

elected president of the congregation. For the second time, Capouano, a compelling speaker with a knack for intervening in moments of crisis, moved his community with a call for unity. Despite Benvenisty and Capouano's efforts, the antagonism against Reverend Gabay persisted until he voluntarily resigned and moved back to New York.[57] As a result, the children of Or Ve Shalom were without a teacher once again. Realizing the urgent need for a teacher and presumably with no other prospects, the congregation asked Reverend Gabay to return to Atlanta and resume teaching within just two months of his resignation. Gabay obliged and returned to Atlanta that summer, but by the end of 1927, his opponents forced him to resign again.

Between the Talmud Torah's founding in 1921 and 1934, seven educators came and went from the Talmud Torah. Congregant Chilibi Amato, the "leader of the dissenting faction" against Reverend Gabay, was assigned to go to New York to find a new Hebrew instructor and rabbi. In New York, Chilibi contacted Albert Levy, a journalist and the editor of the Ladino serial *La Vara*, for help with his search. Chilibi accompanied Albert Levy back to Atlanta in 1927. After Levy implored the congregation to resolve their problems "peacefully and in harmony," he recommended Rabbi Robert Uziel, a graduate of a seminary in Istanbul, to assume spiritual leadership of Or Ve Shalom. Uziel fulfilled his one-year contract with Or Ve Shalom and then returned to New York. His tenure was without incident, but he also could not be compelled to stay longer than his initial contract required. In 1928, Menachem Sarfati answered another advertisement in *La Vara* to serve as the Talmud Torah teacher and cantor of Or Ve Shalom. According to Sol Beton, Sarfati was an excellent cantor but "lacked the ability of his predecessors in teaching skills" and returned to New York in 1931 after two years in Atlanta. [58]

[57] Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom,* 107-108; and Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.
[58] Ibid., 108.

Reverend Gabay was invited by the board to return to his previous position in Atlanta a third time, but the "dormant antagonism" towards him reemerged, and he left Atlanta for New York—this time for good—in 1933. [59]

What had gone wrong? The congregation's leadership was actively invested in hiring, monitoring, and firing the staff who served their community. Notably, many of the instructors, including Gabay, Uziel, and Sarfati, not only left their position at Or Ve Shalom but left Atlanta altogether. They likely left Atlanta for other teaching jobs elsewhere as employment opportunities for Jewish educators (especially those of Ottoman ancestry) in the region were scarce. Still, their haste to leave also points to the potential challenges of living in the south and the particular challenge faced by Or Ve Shalom's leaders had to find a rabbi who fit their needs *and* wanted to live and work in south. The members of Or Ve Shalom who spearheaded the search for a rabbi thus undertook the task of finding a rabbi who was well suited to actualize their ambitions plans and who saw the promise that they did in the Atlanta community.

Finally, in 1934, Or Ve Shalom found a spiritual leader who met the community's expectations. Once more, Or Ve Shalom had placed an advertisement in *La Vara*, to which three individuals responded, one of whom was Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen. Fluent in English, Ladino, Castilian Spanish, French, and Turkish, Cohen had been born and educated in Istanbul at an Alliance Israélite Universelle primary school and the Galatasaray gymnasium before moving to Havana, Cuba in 1920.[60] In Havana, Cohen had worked as the rabbi of the Unión Hebrea de Cuba and was headmaster of a Jewish day school, Colegio Hertzel. The congregants of Or Ve

[59] Ibid.

[60] Year: *1940*; Census Place: *Atlanta, Fulton, Georgia*; Roll: *m-t0627-00726*; Page: *7A*; Enumeration District: *160-40*. Ancestry.com. *1940 United States Federal Census* [database online]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012; Kerem, "The Settlement of Rhodian and Other Sephardic Jews in Montgomery and Atlanta," 373-391.

Shalom held a meeting at the Henry Grady Hotel in Atlanta, where they unanimously agreed that Cohen should lead the congregation. Or Ve Shalom's voting members thus formally installed their new rabbi at a meeting of the entire community on Sunday, April 21, 1934. Cohen immediately overhauled the Talmud Torah and assigned new instructors to each grade level. Through a new initiative for the regular collection of *tzedakah*, or charity, Cohen fostered new relationships between Or Ve Shalom and various international Jewish organizations, including the Jewish National Fund, Hadassah, and a fund for Jewish Marranos in Oporto, Portugal. Community historians also credit Rabbi Joseph Cohen with establishing regular Shabbat services on Friday evenings, Saturday mornings, and all holidays, organizing a choir, and introducing "the spirit of Zionism" to the congregation.[61] Unlike his predecessors, Cohen served Or Ve Shalom until his retirement in 1969. He remained active in the community and served as Emeritus Rabbi until his death in 1981.[62]

After Cohen's appointment as rabbi, the rapid turnover of staff ceased in Atlanta. In Montgomery, however, the problem persisted for decades. Etz Ahayem cast a wide net for teaching and rabbinical applicants. They placed ads in Ladino publications like *La Vara* and *La Amerika*, seeking anyone with "Sephardic roots" who could provide spiritual leadership while maintaining their cultural practices.[63]

Both congregations may have struggled to retain staff because of the small size of their communities, and, especially in Montgomery, the poor financial situation. In 1951, Rabbi Elias Levi, who served as Etz Ahayem's Rabbi from 1948-1951, contacted Dr. David de Sola Pool, of

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[61] Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom,* 109-110; and Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.
[62] "Rabbi Emeritus Cohen Dies," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 28, 1981.
[63] 1967 Correspondence regarding hiring, Box 1, Folder 2. MS-387. Temple Etz Ahayem (Montgomery, Ala.) Records. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

the Union of Sephardic Congregations in New York, asking to be reassigned to a different community. Rabbi Elias stated that he "harbored a desire to seek and serve a larger congregation." He cited a "lack of progress" regarding classrooms, attendance, and the lack of funds to improve these situations.[64] While he explained that he had originally planned for a "long-range" stay when he first arrived in Montgomery, Levi claimed that the "local conditions are not conducive to the actualization of these plans."[65]

In 1958, Victor Terry of the Union for Sephardic Congregations wrote to then-congregation president Morris Capouya to notify him that he had interviewed two prospective rabbinical candidates, Rabbi Benjamin Saruya and Rabbi Joshua Biton, "a native of North Africa." The Haham Gaon of London had also contacted a certain Rabbi Seruya, but had been unable to persuade him to move to Montgomery. Etz Ahayem did not hire any of these rabbis. It proved very difficult to find rabbis who could speak English well enough to teach the community's English-speaking children but maintained a "Sephardic accent" in their teaching. The community also seemed to want someone who was sufficiently conservative so as to be seen as "traditional" but also shied away from hiring someone they deemed too "old." Their situation was not helped by the fact that many Sephardim with the appropriate credentials had trouble imagining why they might want to live and work in Alabama. Victor Terry thus responded to Morris Capouya that he was "very much aware of your problem and … [was] anxious .. to find someone" appropriate. "As you know, there is a great shortage of Sephardic rabbis, and we must

[64] 1951 Correspondence, Box 3, Montgomery Folder, ASF-AR-3. Records of the Union of Sephardic Congregations. Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.

[65] A 1956 telegram from community leader Rubin Hanan to a Rabbi Gilberman in Lakeland, Florida expressed Etz Ahayem's interest in a teacher who spoke and chanted Hebrew with a "Sephardic accent," although Gilberman ultimately wasn't hired and didn't refer anyone else for the job. It's not clear based on Hanan's telegram if he was recruiting Gilberman, or if he was asking Gilberman to recruit someone else on his behalf. Notably, Gilberman is not an obvious Sephardi name and may not have been of Sephardi or Ottoman ancestry, which may be one reason why he was not hired. 1956 Correspondence, Ibid.

be a little patient," he concluded.[66] By 1963, there was some correspondence regarding the hiring of a Rabbi Solomon Acrish. After learning that he "desecrated the Sabbath by driving on Shabbat, Etz Ahayem's leaders decided that they were no longer interested in hiring him.[67] The community thus had to get by with piecemeal solutions. Morris Capouya served as the synagogue's cantor nearly his entire life. Eventually, the community's children began attending religious school at the (Ashkenazi) Reform synagogue in Montgomery.

What do these staffing challenges tell us about these communities in Atlanta and Montgomery? First and foremost, it is clear that the Atlanta and Montgomery synagogues and their congregants remained connected to a formal network of Ottoman Jews in the United States and abroad. Both communities sought clergy and educators who were "Sephardi" and had mastery of English, Hebrew, and Ladino. Etz Ahayem and Or Ve Shalom both utilized an international network of religious, political, cultural institutions, personal relationships, and the Ladino press in New York to find staff. That they faced many hurdles in the process should not distract us from the ties they continued to maintain and forge with other Ottoman Sephardi communities, even if they had difficulties convincing some of their coreligionists that it was worth forging new lives in the US south.

The most common tool they used to maintain their connection to these "Ottoman" or "Sephardi" networks was the Ladino press.[68] While *La Vara* and *La Amerika* were based in New York, Ladino-speakers around the country read these publications. Indeed, members of both

[66] 1954-1967 Correspondence, Box 3, Montgomery Folder, ASF-AR-3. Records of the Union of Sephardic Congregations. Center for Jewish History, New York, NY.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Albert Levy, the founder and first editor of *La Vara* and his successors remained in direct contact with Etz Ahayem and Or Ve Shalom over several years. Some instances of communication: Joseph Crespi of Atlanta wrote to Albert Levy in May of 1938 to notify him that Or Ve Shalom had renewed their charter and established a permanent Building Committee. In January of 1943, Etz Ahayem contacted Albert Torres, editor of *La Vara,* to congratulate him on his new position at *La Vara*. They continued to correspond at least through the 1940s.

Atlanta's and Montgomery's Ottoman Sephardi communities relied heavily on the Ladino press. Community leaders including Rabbi Joseph Cohen in Atlanta, for their part, developed a relationship with editor Albert Levy of *La Vara.* In a 1936 speech, Rabbi Joseph Cohen lauded Levy's work on the publication, imploring his congregation to continue to support what he considered one of the greatest sources of Sephardi cultural production—and of "American Sephardism" in the United States: he asked congregants that they help the paper grow "so that it can be the true and worthy spokesperson for our community, since today we have no other."[69] (*La Amerika* ceased publishing in July 1925.) By 1936, the language of "Sephardism" was deeply embedded in Cohen's writing and speeches and the congregation's relationship with *La Vara* was well established.

Members of Nessah Israel Sisterhood with Albert Levy, editor of the Ladino publication *La Vara* on the steps of a church at the corner of Pryor and Glenn Streets in Atlanta, GA, circa 1927. On the left, five women hold an American flag and on the right, four women hold a Nessah Israel Sisterhood flag. [70]

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[69] Box 3, Folder 5, Mss 65, Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen Collection, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309. Translation is my own. Original reads "ayudemos a su engrandecimiento para que sea el verdadero y digno portavoz de nuestro elemento, ya que hoy no poseemos otro."

[70] Beton, *Sephardim & history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 101-102; and Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.

In Atlanta, until the arrival of Rabbi Joseph Cohen in 1934, and Montgomery throughout the first half of the 20th century, both communities sought spiritual leadership outside the bounds of their localities. The first generation of community leaders in Atlanta and Montgomery hoped to build and maintain a religiously active and observant community. Or Ve Shalom found their ideal candidate in Rabbi Joseph Cohen in 1934, though not without much trial and error beforehand. Still, the community in Montgomery remained without the spiritual leadership they sought—except, of course, that of Morris Capouya. He may not have been the community's first choice but he was nonetheless perfectly suited for the task, both because he was Rhodesli born and well versed in Rhodesli customs while also having studied in a school of the Franco-Jewish Alliance Israélite Universelle in his youth. What is more, he already lived and worked in Montgomery, and didn't require a full-time salary because of his dental practice.

Many Ottoman Jews in both Atlanta and Montgomery worked in the shoe repair business, others working in delicatessens or food lines, hat cleaning, tailoring, and the leather business. Some became doctors, attorneys, or dentists like Capouya; by 1945, most were college graduates, and many served in the military during World War II or were employed by the federal government.[71] Some worked on Shabbat out of necessity, but the community still held their leadership to the traditional standard of a work-free (and car-free) Shabbat. The majority of those who immigrated from Rhodes and elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire acculturated, at least in their professional life. They worked closely with their non-Jewish neighbors and increasingly intermingled and intermarried with Ashkenazim and, to a lesser extent, with non-Jews. Despite

[71] Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 114; and Rabbi Joseph Cohen's original Spanish version in Box 5, Folder 18, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.

all of this, or perhaps because of it, they yearned for a spiritual leader who could sustain their cultural and religious traditions in their new home.

Conclusion

In the first five decades after Ralph Cohen arrived in Montgomery in 1906, those Ottoman Jews who followed him to the US south continued to invest in and utilize the networks that originated in and maintained a connection to their places of birth and ancestry. Through the Ladino press, the hiring (and firing) of staff, and their self-organization, they maintained and strengthened these ties across state and national boundaries. Although these communities had far-reaching connections, they also put down deep roots in their new hometowns. When Etz Ahayem built its synagogue at 450 Sayre Street in 1926, the primary fundraising contributors included the Schloss and Kahn Grocery Store, the Hudson-Thompson Grocery Company (local wholesale grocers), and the Coca-Cola Bottling Company. Notably, the financial contributors included businesses local to Montgomery and Atlanta, of which only one, Schloss and Kahn, was Jewish-owned. Four months later, families from Montgomery and Atlanta gathered on a Sunday afternoon, September 25, 1927, to dedicate one of the first Ottoman Sephardic synagogues in the south. Members of Montgomery's Etz Ahayem, as well as the Reform Temple Beth Or in Montgomery, members of Or Ve Shalom in Atlanta, and local leaders, including Circuit Court Judge Walter B. Jones and Montgomery Mayor William Gunter, gathered for the dedication. By the 1920s, their Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors supported and accepted Etz Ahayem as part of Montgomery, at least symbolically.[72]

However, this acceptance was neither immediate nor unconditional. Rebecca Amiel, one of the first Ottoman Jews to arrive in Montgomery, recalled that her Ashkenazi neighbors did not

[72] Ibid.

initially believe that she was Jewish because she didn't speak Yiddish, and they refused to believe her until she showed them a mezuzah with its Hebrew inscription.[73] Examining the relationships between the Ottoman Jews of Atlanta and Montgomery and their neighbors (both German and Eastern European Jewish as well as non-Jewish) as the next chapters will do, makes clear that their desire to remain connected to an Ottoman Sephardi past was both complicated and reinforced as they navigated the hierarchies that necessitated their admission to the local Jewish and southern communities of Atlanta and Montgomery.

[73] Ibid., 101.

Chapter 2: Jews

Before Ottoman Sephardi Jews in Atlanta had a synagogue of their own in 1918, prayer services were held at the home of Rebecca and Raphael Amiel at the corner of Gilmer Street and Piedmont Avenue. On one such occasion around the High Holidays, only nine men arrived for the minyan, for which Jewish law traditionally requires ten men. Rebecca went outside to search for a tenth "Yiddish" man to complete the minyan. A young man approached Rebecca, asking if she knew where he could find a member of their community, Victor Avzaradel. This young man was Isaac Capelouto, who had just arrived from Montgomery to celebrate the holidays with Victor. Rebecca invited Isaac inside, completing the minyan, thus ensuring that a "Yiddish" man was not needed.[74]

Rebecca Amiel's earliest interactions with the German and Eastern European Jews who lived in Atlanta reveal the porous communal boundaries between her Sephardi community and those Ashkenazi Jews who lived and worked alongside them. More so than in cities like New York, Seattle, and Los Angeles, where large enclaves of Ladino-speaking Jews rooted themselves throughout the early twentieth century, those who settled in Montgomery and Atlanta built lives that were more intertwined with and, in some instances, dependent upon their Ashkenazi neighbors. Amiel's story implies a preference for, or at least an increased closeness to (in terms of communal relations and physical proximity), a "Yiddish" Jew rather than a German Jew, though ultimately Isaac Capelouto, an Ottoman-born Sephardi Jew, was the preferential

[74] Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.

choice.[75] This anecdote also offers a glimpse into the gendered division of labor in religious ritual: Amiel went to find an individual to complete the minyan, but she could not complete it herself, since only men traditionally counted in a prayer quorum.

Rebecca was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1875.[76] Raphael lived on the Island of Crete before moving to Cairo where he and Rebecca married. Raphael and Rebecca had two sons, Leo and Bando, before they permanently relocated to the United States.[77] Raphael had been to the United States to work at the World's Fair in Omaha, Nebraska in 1898 and later returned to the United States with his family for the St. Louis Exhibition in 1904.[78] In 1906, they settled permanently in Atlanta, where they ran a saloon. The Amiel family lived about a 5-minute walk from their saloon at 66 Decatur Street and only three blocks east of Pryor Street, where many Jews of various backgrounds, as well as Greek immigrants and Black Americans lived, worked, and prayed. Regina Tourial described the area as "not a ghetto, but really it was. We were all within a small area."[79] Members of the Amiel family were often the first Jews of Ottoman descent to make contact with members of the German and Eastern European Jewish community *and* with new immigrants who arrived from Rhodes and elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire.

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[75] In another version of this story, Rebecca encountered two men from Montgomery who completed the minyan. Lydia Sarda Amiel, interview by Patty Maziar, March 4, 1992, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.
76 "Rebecca Amiel," Ancestry.com. U.S., Find a Grave Index, 1600s-Current [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2012.
[77] "Leo Ralph Amiel," *The Atlanta Constitution.*
[78] Amiel, Lydia Sarda, interview by Patty Maziar, March 4, 1992, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia; ancestry ship register; Leo obituary. For Ottoman Jews at World's Fairs see also Cohen, "Oriental by Design"; Cohen, "On the Streets and in the Synagogue: Celebrating 1892 as Ottomans" in *Becoming Ottomans*; Bali, "from Anatolia to the new world: The first Anatolian immigrants to America"; see also the forthcoming work of Max Daniel.
[79] Regina Tourial's father, Daniel Rousso, arrived in Atlanta in 1908. He was the godson of Rebecca Amiel. Regina Tourial, Regina Tourial, interview by Patty Maziar, March 4, 1992, page 19, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.

Rebecca became "like a mother" to many Sephardi women who moved to Atlanta, and young brides-to-be often stayed in her home in the days before their weddings.[80]

When she first moved to Atlanta, Rebecca, who spoke Arabic, English, and Ladino could not convince her neighbors that she was Jewish until she presented them with a mezuzah bearing a Hebrew inscription. She thus experienced what historian Aviva Ben-Ur has called "co-ethnic recognition failure," in which one sub-group of an ethnic community denies the belonging of another sub-group. In the United States in the twentieth century, Eastern European and German Jews often failed to accept their coreligionists from the Middle East and Balkans as Jews. The resistance of Ashkenazim to recognize Sephardim as their coreligionists were often based on cultural differences, such as foodways, religious rites, and the pronunciation of Hebrew prayers, but also the basis of appearance. In some instances, the "tell-tale sign of circumcision" was the only way to prove one's Jewishness indisputably.[81]

Because of actual and perceived cultural, geographic, and linguistic differences, co-ethnic recognition failure impacted Jewish immigrants from the Middle East and Balkans from the moment of immigration. Their names were often unrecognizable as Jewish to Ashkenazi officials at organizations like the United Hebrew and Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), which helped new Jewish immigrants with entrance and adjustment to the United States. Individuals coming from Ottoman lands sometimes listed their nationality as "Turk" rather than "Hebrew," as was typical for Jewish immigrants in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, or listed their first language as "Spanish" (referring to Ladino).

[80] Amiel, Lydia Sarda, interview by Patty Maziar, March 4, 1992, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.
[81] Ben-Ur, “Funny, you don’t look Jewish!” 14; Naar, “Sephardim Since Birth: Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America,” 77-78.

The terminology used to describe these immigrants was highly contentious. HIAS created a "Bureau for Sephardic Jewish Immigrants" in 1912, which, at the request of Congregation Shearith Israel of New York, changed its name to the "Oriental Bureau." The same year, a group of Eastern Sephardim founded the "Federation of Oriental Jews," though not without much debate surrounding the organization's name. Congregation Shearith Israel, with Rabbi David de Sola Pool at the helm, advocated for the term "oriental" to describe their community. According to HIAS official Isidore Hershfield, the HIAS board disapproved of the term oriental, "on account of its liability to misconstruction into Chinese, Japanese, etc." He explained that "oriental…would not fully or clearly express what we had in mind."[82] "Levantine," though accurate, was not a familiar term to the "public," and so the HIAS deemed "Sephardic" most appropriate. As time passed, both HIAS and some Ottoman-born Jews themselves—like Rabbi Joseph Cohen of Atlanta—increasingly gave preference to the term "Sephardim" over terms like "Oriental," "Levantine," or "Judeo-Oriental" because it more closely connected new immigrant populations with Spain and its "golden age" and bolstered efforts to unite Eastern and Western Sephardim in the United States.[83]

These debates over terminology were one symptom of Jewish and other immigrant groups' ongoing struggle to gain acceptance as white across the United States. This discourse played out differently in Atlanta and Montgomery than in cities with larger "Oriental" or "Sephardi" populations. The most obvious explanation for this difference was the community's size: the Ottoman-born Jews in Atlanta and Montgomery never numbered more than several hundred individuals combined. As such, there was much less opportunity to engage in such

[82] Isidore Hershfield, quoted in Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*, 98.
[83] Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America*, 98-101; Naar, "Sephardim Since Birth: Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America," 75-76; " 'Sephardi but not Oriental': A Polemic in New York," 91914-19150 in *Sephardi Lives*, ed. Cohen and Stein, 342-346; Mays, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports,* 23-24.

debates when the organizational landscape was small compared to a city like New York. Regardless of the preferred terminology, this debate and the language used to describe these Ottoman Jewish immigrants held significant stakes for all parties, particularly in the south where racial categorization was often a matter of life and death for Jews, Arabs, and other immigrant groups who lived on the fringes of whiteness.[84]

These New York-based organizations' names notwithstanding, no such organization existed in Atlanta or Montgomery for the new immigrants who arrived from Rhodes and other Ottoman lands beginning in 1906.[85] Instead, individuals of different backgrounds filled these roles and supported one another. Despite rare instances of co-ethnic recognition failure like Rebecca's, the Eastern European and German Jews in Montgomery and Atlanta more often welcomed and provided significant material support to their new Jewish neighbors who arrived from Rhodes, Izmir, Monastir, Bodrum, Istanbul, Cairo, and elsewhere.

"An Influx of Jews"

While no organization specialized in the absorption of new Jewish immigrants in Atlanta or Montgomery, there was no shortage of Jewish communal infrastructure in both cities. Over fifty years before the first Ottoman Sephardi Jews arrived in Atlanta, Henry Levi and Jacob and Jeanette Haas were the first Jews to settle in the Atlanta area in 1848. Levi and Haas opened a dry goods store in Decatur, six miles from Atlanta (then Marthasville.)[86] The small town quickly

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[84] See, for example, the history of Leo Frank's lynching in Marietta, Georgia, and N'oula and Hasna Romey's lynchings in Lake City, Florida. Bernstein, *Screening a Lynching*; Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case*; "The Romey Lynchings: A Story of Lebanese Immigrants"; Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White*, especially Chapter 4, 113-134; Oney, *And the Dead Shall Rise Again*.

[85] The Hebrew Imigrant Aid Society and the United Hebrew Charities of the City of New York helped place some Eastern European immigrants in Atlanta in collaboration with local Hebrew Benevolent Congregation in the 1880s and early 1890s. However, no such organization catering to "Sephardi" or "Oriental" Jews existed in Atlanta in the early twentieth century. Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 76-77.

[86] Founded in 1842, the town's name, "Marthasville," was shortened to Atlanta in 1845 to fit on a train ticket. Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 10, 16.

became a railroad hub for the southeast. While Levi and Haas left the area by 1850, other German Jewish immigrants soon moved to the growing town. They opened businesses concentrated in the retail trade, especially dry goods and clothing. The community remained small, however, and often could not gather enough people to form a minyan. It was not until 1860 that thirty founding members established the Hebrew Benevolent Society, the first Jewish organization in Atlanta, a burial society that purchased six lots in the city's Greenwood Cemetery.[87]

During the Civil War, in September of 1864 General Sherman's forces burned Atlanta to the ground. The Hebrew Benevolent Society was inactive during the war but quickly rebounded afterward as did the city itself. One local journalist commented only a decade after the conclusion of the Civil War that "nothing is so indicative of a city's progress as to see an influx of Jews…because they are thrifty and progressive people who never fail to build up a town they settle in."[88] The implication of Jewish stereotypes surrounding money and "thriftiness" aside, this journalist correctly observed that the Jewish community of Atlanta was steadily growing and many Jewish-owned businesses were thriving. In 1875, the Hebrew Benevolent Society purchased land on the corner of Garnett and Forsyth Streets, where they constructed a Moorish-style synagogue of brick and stone.[89] By 1880, there were 538 Jews of German and Austro-Hungarian descent in Atlanta.

As the community grew, so did dissenting opinions about the operation of the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation. While originally Orthodox, by 1877, the congregation had mixed-gender seating and had adopted its nickname, "The Temple." Members of the congregation

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[87] Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 23, 50.
[88] Quoted in Hertzberg, "The Jewish Community of Atlanta," *Atlanta Daily Herald*, May 25, 1875, page 3.
[89] Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 50.

cemented their new identity as a reform congregation in 1895 when they narrowly elected Rabbi David Marx, a reform Rabbi, as their spiritual leader.[90] Meanwhile, an influx of Eastern European Jewish immigrants began to settle in Atlanta in the 1880s. These immigrants were typically Orthodox or Hasidic and had little interest in the Reform Judaism practiced at The Temple. In 1887, these immigrants founded an orthodox synagogue, Congregation Ahavath Achim, and, in 1901, built their synagogue on Piedmont Avenue and Gilmer Street.[91]

Ahavath Achim, not unlike Or Ve Shalom ten years later, was plagued by communal divisions over religious ritual and observance, particularly concerning the observance of Shabbat. Members who did not refrain from working on Shabbat were still allowed Torah honors and, in protest of this practice, more conservative congregants separated from Ahavath Achim. These dissenters founded Shearith Israel in 1902, which remained Orthodox, while Ahavath Achim gradually moved towards Conservative Judaism.[92] In 1913, a small group of Hasidic Jews founded their congregation, Anshi S'fard, and purchased a building on the corner of Woodward Avenue and King Street by the end of that year.[93]

The city's German-Jewish community operated as a social and economic elite, founding organizations like the Hebrew Relief Society and the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Society that sought to assist Jews in need. German Jews also founded the Standard Club, a social club housed in a local mansion that largely excluded "Yiddish," or Eastern European Jews.[94] Despite this socioeconomic stratification, German and Eastern European Jews founded the Jewish

[90] Bauman, *A New Vision*, 10-12; Bauman, "The Rabbi as Ethnic Broker"; Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 69-72.
[91] Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 87.
[92] Ibid., 92-94.
[93] Ibid., 94. In their 1911 charter, the congregation became incorporated as Beth Hamedrash Hagodol Anshi S'fard, which translates to Great House of Study of the Men of Spain, or Great House of Study of the Men of the Hasidic Rite (Nusach S'fard). This name referred "not to the Hasidim's ancestry but to elements of their liturgy." "History: Congregation Anshi S'fard: Judaism. Community. Morningside." http://www.anshisfard.org/history/.
[94] Ibid., 117-119.

Educational Alliance (JEA) in 1909. The JEA merged the Russian-founded Hebrew Institute and the German-founded Free Kindergarten and Social Settlement. Providing manual training classes, Hebrew language instruction, and a "clean and wholesome amusement and recreation" space, the JEA was the closest thing to a formal institution to absorb new Jewish immigrants in the city. Nevertheless, those of German descent often treated those from Eastern Europe with a patronizing and subtle condescension wrapped in the guise of charity.[95] Other organizations like the Hebrew Orphans Home, founded in 1889, and the Federation of Jewish Charities founded in 1905 comprised the Jewish organizational landscape in early twentieth-century Atlanta.[96]

Montgomery's early Jewish history is not unlike that of Atlanta, though Montgomery's Jewish community was consistently smaller than Atlanta. Abraham Mordecai was one of Alabama's first settlers and the first Jew to live in Alabama, though there was not any substantial Jewish community until the 1840s. In 1844, the Lehman brothers, Henry, Emanuel, and Mayer, opened a general story in Montgomery.[97] The Lehmans, born in Bavaria, were followed by the Weil brothers, Josiah, Heinrich, and Jacob of Oberlustadt. The Lehmans capitalized on the booming cotton trade. Jacob Kohn of Bavaria, a shoemaker, joined them. By 1846, Montgomery's Jews founded Chevra Mevacher Cholim, a society to care for the sick and prepare the dead for burial.[98]

On May 6, 1849, twelve German Jewish families in Montgomery founded the Orthodox Congregation Kahl Montgomery. The founders purchased a plot on the corner of Church and Catoma Streets in 1859, where they built their own house of worship, funded in part by the New

[95] Ibid., 134-137.
[96] Ibid., 120, 71.
[97] Messing, "Old Mordecai"; Wilson, "Abraham Mordecai," The Encyclopedia of Alabama.
[98] ISJL, Montgomery, Alabama; Moses, "The History of the Jews of Montgomery," 83-88.

Orleans philanthropist, Judah Touro.[99] Unlike Atlanta, Montgomery was spared by the destruction of the Civil War, and many Jewish dry goods merchants prospered due to the high prices of their wares in wartime.[100] In 1871, affluent German Jews in Montgomery formed their own Standard Club. Kahl Montgomery began to allow women and men to sit together during services and made head coverings optional. In 1874, congregants changed the name from Kahl Montgomery to Temple Beth Or to reflect their move towards Reform rituals: using the term "temple" to describe a Jewish place of worship signifies the Reform belief that such places of worship are the only temples Jews will have or need and are equivalent to the temple in Jerusalem. [101]

Like in Atlanta, many of the Eastern European Jews who arrived in Montgomery beginning in the 1880s were dissatisfied with the Reform practices of Temple Beth Or. These members split from Beth Or and founded Congregation Agudath Israel. The founders of Agudath Israel wrote their first constitution in Yiddish. During their services, men sat separately from women, wore head coverings, and prayed exclusively in Hebrew and Yiddish. The first several decades of the twentieth century were a time of growth for both of these congregations. In 1914, Agudath Israel moved into their first permanent synagogue on Monroe Street and hired their first full-time rabbi. By 1927, Agudath Israel had grown to 65 families and moved to a larger space built on newly purchased land on McDonough and High Streets.

These Jewish communities were a significant part of both cities' economic landscape, and some Jews were visibly involved in local politics. Both cities elected their first Jewish mayors in

[99] Judah Touro was a Jewish businessperson and philanthropist whose estate donated money to small Jewish communities across the United States after his death in 1854. ISJL, Montgomery, Alabama. Morais, "Eminent Israelites of the Nineteenth Century," 335-338.
[100] "Military Preparations Deferred," in Rogers, *Confederate* Homefront; Vecchio, "Making Their Way in the New South," 106.
[101] "Our History," Temple Beth Or; "The Synagogue," Jewish Virtual Library.

in 1875: Mordecai Moses in Montgomery and David Meyer in Atlanta. Jews in both cities were involved in the Civil War, and some as soldiers in the confederate army. Debates about prohibition also captivated local Jews, who were overwhelmingly on the "wet" side of the debate.[102] German and Eastern European Jews in both cities worked in retail (such as dry goods and clothing), manufacturing, and skilled trades like hat making and cleaning and shoemaking.[103] There was some economic and religious stratification between the German Jews who arrived beginning in the 1840s and the Eastern European Jews who arrived towards the end of the nineteenth century in Atlanta and Montgomery.

This is the social and organizational landscape that Ottoman Jews like Ralph Nace Cohen and the Amiel family encountered when they immigrated to Atlanta and Montgomery in the early twentieth century. Class, religious observance, place of birth, and language stratified the Jewish communities in Atlanta and Montgomery. However, the community was small enough to necessitate mixing in business, leisure activities, and neighborhoods. Despite the social and economic hierarchies characterized the discourse in and around the Jewish community, Ashkenazi Jews of German and Eastern European descent accepted their Ottoman-born Sephardi coreligionists with little controversy and often provided them with significant support as they built their own communal infrastructure.

“Material and Moral Support”

Before Or Ve Shalom was formally founded and even before the Amiels held services in their home, the very first religious gathering of Ottoman-born Jews was held in Atlanta on Yom Kippur in 1907 at a hotel on Pryor Street. Jake Abelson, a Russian-born Jewish man and locally

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[102] Davis, *Jews and Booze*.

[103] According to historian Steven Hertzberg's 1978 study of Atlanta’s Jews, in 1880, 71% of adult men in Atlanta worked in commercial trade, and 60% were business owners or managers.

famous boxer, owned this hotel. When Or Ve Shalom dedicated their new synagogue building in 1920, Rabbi Marx of The Temple, Rabbi Hermes of Ahavath Achim, and Morris Lichtenstein, the Jewish Educational Alliance president, attended the ceremony.[104] Ralph Tourial recalled that two Ashkenazi butchers, Robert and Jake Zimmerman, provided his parents with the kosher meat for their delicatessen.[105] Until 1921, the Ashkenazi community provided burial services to Or Ve Shalom members and allowed them to use the Ahavath Achim section of Greenwood Cemetery. Ahavath Achim charged the families of the deceased according to their financial means.[106] In 1922, after some unspecified "instances of dissatisfaction" by members of Or Ve Shalom, the congregation purchased its own lot in Greenwood Cemetery. Led by then-President Moreno Benvenisty, the congregation purchased a quarter acre for $500.

Jewish women of Atlanta also supported one another and taught their new neighbors the skills they needed to navigate and thrive in the United States. In the early decades of the twentieth century, a group of German Jewish women who belonged to the Temple provided “material and moral support” to the Ottoman Jewish women who arrived in Atlanta, teaching them English free of charge and assisting them in job searches.[107] Four women reportedly spearheaded this cause: Miss Feibelman, Miss Foote, Miss Sugarman, and Mrs. Montag, all of whom were affiliated with The Temple.[108] Regina Rousso Tourial, the daughter of Sarah

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[104] Box 5, Folder 18, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.; Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 105.

[105] Ralph Tourial, Interview by Merna Alpert, November 3, 10 1993, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.

[106] Ibid., 111.

[107] Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 101.

[108] Ibid., 102. Unfortunately, neither Sol Beton nor Joseph Cohen's papers include the first names of these women. Miss Feibelman is perhaps Natalie Dewald Feibehlman, who married Clarence W. Feibelman or another relative of Clarence Feibelman. Miss Foote may be the wife of Morde Foote, possibly named Sophia. Her volunteer work is also mentioned by Regina Tourial, though Regina also excludes her first name. Regina Tourial, interview by Patty Maziar, March 4, 1992, page 37, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia. Miss Sugarman may be a relative of Rabbi Alvin Sugarman. Mrs. Montag is likely a Montag family member, mentioned in Arthur Heyman's oral

Capouya Rousso and Daniel Rousso, recounted that these women would help the new immigrants "get settled…and find things." They would "show them how to go to a grocery store and be careful with their money." While Regina recalled that there was sometimes tension between the German Jews and newer immigrants, "in this instance, the German Jews were just so open-hearted and open-handed, helping these women get started."[109]

The Nessah Israel Sisterhood in Atlanta was philanthropically engaged with the wider Jewish community, too. Through events like banquets, picnics, card parties, and the sale of handcrafts and embroideries, the Sisterhood raised money for The Atlanta Hebrew Orphans Home, the Jewish Federation of Charity, the Red Cross, the Jewish Educational Alliance, and the Jewish National Fund. While Or Ve Shalom as a congregation and some individual men made more efforts to remain connected to and fundraise for explicitly Ottoman or Sephardi causes, the women of Or Ve Shalom perhaps made the most meaningful connections with both Jewish individuals and organizations beyond the bounds of the Sephardi community.[110]

Amid Or Ve Shalom's staffing issues in the 1920s, The Temple stepped in to provide considerable financial assistance.[111] Under Rabbi Marx's leadership, The Temple offered to provide $25 per month for one year to help Or Ve Shalom cover the expenses of the Talmud Torah. However, when The Temple observed that Or Ve Shalom members were failing to pay

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history interview. Arthur Heyman, interview by Ann Hoffman Schoenberg, February 9, 15 1996, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia. Mrs. Montag may be Rhea Montag, nee Hirsch, who married Harold Montag, his mother, Clementine Montag, or her daughter, Helen. According to Regina Tourial, this was Helen Montag. Year: *1910*; Census Place: *Atlanta Ward 2, Fulton, Georgia*; Roll: *T624_190*; Page: *27B*; Enumeration District: *0053*; FHL microfilm: *1374203*.

[109] Regina Tourial, interview by Patty Maziar, March 4, 1992, page 17, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.

[110] See, for example, "Donos a favor de los sufrientes en la armada otomana," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), Nov. 22, 1912; see also Rabbi Joseph Cohen's efforts to fundraise for *La Vara*, Box 3, Folder 5, Mss 65, Rabbi Joseph I. Cohen Collection, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309; and also the efforts of the Etz Ahayem Benevolent Society, which raised funds for the Behor Holim of Rhodes.

[111] See pages 19-26 for a detailed account of these staffing issues.

their monthly dues of 75 cents, it suspended their subsidy. Subsequently, Or Ve Shalom increased its monthly dues to $1.50 per month in 1924 and $2.00 per month in 1926 but reduced them again to $1.50 per month after the Talmud Torah budget stabilized.[112] Once again, Rabbi Marx and The Temple provided significant but conditional material support to Or Ve Shalom and their Talmud Torah.

In Atlanta, the German-Jewish economic elite founded the Standard Club and initially excluded Eastern European and Sephardi Jews. As a result, these Eastern European Jews founded their own social club, The Progressive Club, in 1913. During the Great Depression, however, the Standard Club was forced to eliminate their discriminatory membership rules to increase membership and ease their financial woes. Anecdotally, these divisions persisted until after World War II but were self-maintained rather than mandated by the social clubs. Montgomery had their own Standard Club and Ralph Franco recalled that they did not admit Sephardim.[113] However, other Jewish social clubs like The Falcon admitted Sephardim, and Franco recalls attending dances and other events hosted by The Falcon.[114]

In Montgomery, the first Sephardi immigrants also received material support from their Ashkenazi coreligionists. Ottoman-born Jews gathered in the Orthodox Community Center for their first religious gathering in 1908, a rental space established by Agudath Israel. Ten years later, the Reform Temple Beth Or gave Etz Ahayem a Torah. Temple Beth Or also invited the children of Etz Ahayem to attend their Sunday school, an exchange that would persist throughout the twentieth century.

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[112] Box 5, Folder 18, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.; Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 106.
[113] Ralph Franco, interview with David Sampliner, September 1999, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, Mississippi.
[114] Ibid.

In each of these instances, individuals like Jake Abelson, the Zimmerman brothers, and the women of The Temple and institutions like Temple Beth Or provided significant support to the Sephardi immigrants who settled in Atlanta and Montgomery. They supported them in finding the tools (space to gather, burial services, money for the Talmud Torah, business connections, and attendance at communal events) to build their communal infrastructure. Many individuals recalled that these Ottoman-born Sephardim and their children were, at least before World War II, "clannish," and almost all families lived near one another in the Pryor Street area in the case of Atlanta. However, there were numerous moments of support and assistance, whether through the teaching of skills or the sharing of resources. This support and assistance allowed the community to build their own, separate institutions and communal infrastructure, but the boundaries between Sephardim and Ashkenazim were more porous in Atlanta and Montgomery than in larger cities.

"What have we, Sephardim, done?"

Communal historians mark Rabbi Joseph Cohen's arrival in 1934 to Or Ve Shalom in Atlanta as a turning point for the congregation. Congregants like Sol Beton credit his spiritual leadership as a catalyst for engagement with Ashkenazim. Cohen "personally introduced the youth to the Ashkenazic community seeking recognition and understanding."[115] His credentials as a rabbi and a community builder were impressive, and Atlanta was not the first city where Cohen had developed the community's organizational affairs. After his ordination in Istanbul and the completion of his studies, Cohen served as a lieutenant in the Ottoman army during the First World War. He subsequently worked in the engineering department for the British government

[115] Box 5, Folder 18, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.; Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 109.

in Jerusalem in Mandate Palestine. In 1920, he immigrated to Cuba, where he oversaw the Sephardic congregation Unión Hebrea de Cuba. In Havana, Cohen founded a Zionist organization supported by the Jewish National Fund, the first Jewish day school in Cuba in 1925, and a second Jewish school, Colegio Hertzel, under the auspices of the Zionist organization.[116]

Cohen immediately instituted changes to Or Ve Shalom after taking the helm of the congregation. The congregation installed Cohen on April 18, 1934, and he began to reorganize the Talmud Torah the following day, on April 19. Eighty students were enrolled, and, according to Sol Beton's 1981 communal history, "he introduced a modern systematic method of Hebrew instruction and a grade classification system for each student."[117] Cohen also reorganized the Sunday school, previously run by Gabay. Notably, Cohen introduced the curriculum of the American Hebrew Congregations, now the Union for Reform Judaism, and combined it with material from the United Synagogues of America, now the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. The use of these curricula was a departure from the strictly Sephardic practices of Or Ve Shalom but are not surprising in light of Cohen's goals for the community.[118]

Members of Or Ve Shalom wholly embraced Cohen for his Ottoman background, fluency in Spanish and Ladino, and experience leading a Sephardi community in North America. He also encouraged a particular brand of integration that included marriage and socialization with Ashkenazi Jews *and* a revitalization of Sephardi culture in the United States. In September and October of 1936, a few weeks after Albert Levy, the editor of *La Vara*, and Rabbi Meir Elias Kasorla, a member of the Sephardi Beth-Din of New York, visited Atlanta, Cohen wrote and

[116] "Rabbi Joseph Cohen," *The Southern Israelite*.
[117] Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*, 109.
[118] Ibid.

delivered a set of speeches exploring the "abnormal situation" of Sephardi Jews in America.[119]

Cohen compared the accomplishments of Sephardi Jews in America to Ashkenazim:

> We must not deny that we Sephardic brothers who had established ourselves for many years in this Republic have had immense opportunities to develop on a very wide scale and create a Jewish cultural environment that could give much light to the Jewish world just as our Ashkenazi brothers have done and continue to do.
>
> The freedom we enjoy here is so extensive, and the economic situation—with little exception of the past Depression—is so favorable that any cultural initiative we undertake is within reach. If we had begun this project from the first years of Sephardic immigration to this country, American Sephardism would have yielded the most cultural benefits to Judaism in general.

Cohen continued:

> We do not lack great schools, excellent centers, and social and cultural circles, extensive libraries, temples and synagogues, Jewish and national institutions, Jewish publications, and above all this, the opportunity to access many of these resources for free and others at little cost; but we have rejected everything, we did not want to approach these organizations and resources, we gave ourselves to idleness with ambition only to look for money, believing we only need money to live.[120]

Although Cohen claimed his congregants failed to engage with these resources, his claim is not entirely accurate. Numerous community members were heavily involved in the Ladino press, reading and writing to publications like *La Amerika* often and corresponding with and receiving visits from the editor of *La Vara*. Before they had their synagogue, congregants held services in

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[119] "Situacion abnormal." "La Emancipacion Del Sefardismo De America," Box 3, Folder 12, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia, 30309.

[120] "No debemos negar qua nosotros hermanos sefaradim que nos hubimos establecido desde muchos anios para aque en esta Republica hemos tenido inmensas oportunidades para desenvolvernos en una escala muy amplia y crearnos un ambiente cultural judio que pudieramos dar mucha luz al mundo judio al igual que lo hicieron y continuan haciendolo nuestros hermanos Ashkenazim. La libertad que gozamos aqui es tan extensa y la situacion economica -con poca excepcion de depresiones pasadas – es tan favorable que no puediera escaparse de nuestras mano cualquier iniciativa que emprenderiamos para el fin cultural, y si asi lo hiciermos desde los primeros anos de la imigracion hoy el sefaradismo americano se encontraria en la cima de la cultura rindiendo grandes beneficios al judaismo en general. No nos faltan las mejores escuelas, los inmejorables centros y circulos sociales y culturales, bibliotecas gigantescas, Templos y sinagogas, insitituciones judaicas y nacionales, publicaciones judias, y por encima de todo esto, la oportunidad de obtenerlos muchos de estos gratis y otros con poco costo de dinero; pero lo hemos rechazado todo, no quisimos acercarnos a ellos, nos dimos a la olganza y a la ambicion de buscar solamente el dinero creendo que solamente con esto podremos vivir." Ibid.

the Educational Alliance Building, and they were connected with the other synagogues and Jewish organizations in Atlanta. His claim that the community gave itself "to idleness and ambition only to look for money" may have been misleading in this regard, but it reflects much of the congregation's economic success. Indeed, most had established businesses and were thriving economically. Cohen appears to have been convinced that this economic success was coming at the expense of cultural production and pride.

He also invoked the Sephardi Jews' historical connection to the Iberian peninsula:

> If we only reviewed our rich history, we would find ourselves delightfully surprised by all the good and the cultural wealth that Sephardim produced during the Golden Age of Hebrew culture…it is these forefathers who gave so much philosophical, Jewish, and scientific wealth not only to the Jewish world but also to the world in general.[121]

It is clear that by 1936, Cohen had fully embraced the language of "Sephardi"culture and the connection such terminology made to the Iberian peninsula. He made no mention of the Sephardim who produced much culture in Ottoman lands in the past four hundred years, but instead invoked the history of the Haskalah, or Jewish enlightenment, a nineteenth-century Jewish intellectual movement.[122] Ashkenazim, Cohen wrote, achieved such intellectual success amid an "infernal abyss of persecutions and economic distress" in Europe. Cohen emphasized that Ashkenazim were successful in Europe and "transported their culture to the countries they've emigrated to, primarily America." He went on,

> And what have we, Sephardim, done? We abandon and detest the beautiful and rich inheritance of our grandparents, and instead of replicating and improving it, we have retreated to a tragic, regrettable and destructive situation, unable to highlight the role of Sephardim in world activities, whether in the national work

[121] "Si solamente pasariamos una revista a nuestra rica historia nos encontrariamos en la sorpresa maravillosa de ver todo lo Bueno y la riqueza cultural que el element sefaradi hemos tenido durante la EPOCA DE ORO de la cultura Hebrea… son estos padres que dieron tanta riqueza filisofica, judaica y cientifica no solamente al mundo judio sino que Tambien a todo el mundo en general." Ibid.
[122] See Feiner, *The Jewish Enlightenment*; Feiner, *Haskalah and History*; Sinkoff, *Out of the Shtetl*.

of Jewish emancipation, be it cultural, religious, or social. And we are satisfied that others prepare our bread, the bread that we eat.

We have abused our own comforts and good living conditions here. Were these excellent living conditions motivated to make us lethargic and forget our past? If instead of concentrating all our forces and ambitions to accumulate a few dollars, could we contribute to Sephardic culture, could we not have today what we deserve as the heirs of those ancient sages?[123]

Perhaps in his reference to "bread," Cohen may have been alluding to the instance in which The Temple offered to subsidize the cost of the Talmud Torah but withdrew their support when they discovered Or Ve Shalom was not successfully collecting dues. Cohen's underlying message was that others were willing to "prepare their bread" and supported the community. He concluded his speech by applauding Albert Levy and *La Vara's* efforts for their role in the "Haskalah of the Sephardim," and urged his congregants to support the newspaper.

Cohen's speech paints a contradictory picture of his congregants and their Ashkenazi coreligionists, both on a local and transnational scale. On the one hand, Cohen's speech does not reflect many individuals' lived experiences in Atlanta (and Montgomery, for that matter, though he did not address the Montgomery segment of their extended community directly). Cohen had only been in Atlanta for two years, while others like the Amiels and Tourials had been in Atlanta and Montgomery for over three decades by this time. Cohen accurately described the economic success that many Sephardim found in Atlanta in retail and skilled trades, especially shoe and hat

[123] "Y nosotros los sefaradim que hemos hecho? Abandimos y detestimos quella Hermosa y rica herencia de nuestros abuelos, y en vez de imitarla con mejores pasos nos hemos retrocedido llegando a una situacion tragica, lamentable y destructible sin poder resaltar el nombre del sefaradismo en las actividades mndiales habreas, sea en la obra nacional de la emancipacion hebrea, sea en la cultura, sea tambien en problemas religiosos como sociales y nos conformamos con que otros preparen nuestro pan para comerlo con buen sabor.
Hemos abusando nosotros propios de las comodidades y buenas condiciones de vivir que hemos inmigrado. Acaso esta excelentes condiciones de vida eran motive para que nos dieramos a la letargia y olvidar nuestro pasado? Si en vez de concentrar todos nuestras fuerzas y ambiciones para acumular solamente algunos Dolares, dariamos parte para la cultura no hubiermos hoy tenido la Gloria de ser renombrados como verdaderos hijos y herederos de aquellos sabios antiguos?" Ibid.

making, but also as lawyers, doctors, restauranteurs, and owners of various retail businesses.[124] However, his criticism of his congregant's preoccupation with money and the accusation that they “abandoned” and “detested” the “beautiful and rich inheritance” of their grandparents is without evidence. Congregants had gone to great lengths to maintain their foodways, prayer rituals, and the Ladino language.[125] Like Sol Beton in Atlanta and Rubin Hanan and Leon Taranto in Montgomery, members of the community went on to write their own communal or family histories.[126] Many congregants published articles about the long history of Sephardim and the "Golden Age" in Spain. There was never a shortage of individuals to fill lay leadership roles in the Nessah Israel Sisterhood or Brotherhood.[127]

Perhaps, then, we can understand Cohen’s criticism of the community as a rhetorical choice to evoke an emotional response and guilt in order to urge his congregants to empty their pockets for *La Vara*. One individual's concerns—regardless of his significance as a communal leader—can only tell us so much about a community. Cohen's criticism and dramatization of the dire state of Sephardi cultural production did not accurately reflect the state of Sephardim in Atlanta or the United States as a whole.

This speech reveals much about the character of the community’s social fabric, albeit indirectly and cloaked in criticism: the distinctness of Sephardi culture, their financial success,

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[124] James Arogeti, interview with Beryl Weiner, page14-15, transcript, The Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.
[125] Ladino's use eventually wained with the third generation, but in 1936 congregational affairs, individual correspondence, and conversations in most homes still took place in Ladino or "Spanish." Regina Tourial, interview by Patty Maziar, March 4, 1992, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.; Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia 30309.
Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*.
[126] Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom*; Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections; Sara Schreibman, interview by Mimi Brown; Taranto, “Our Sephardi History.”
[127] Beton, *Sephardim & a history of Congregation Or Ve Shalom.*

and their relationship with others outside of their Sephardi milieu. The speech maintained a distinction between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in both their ancestors' history and their lives in the United States. Cohen contrasted the “abyss of persecutions” experienced by Jews in Europe with the “Golden Age” of medieval Iberia. In his view, Ashkenazim succeeded in preserving their culture in the United States despite their suffering in Europe. In contrast, Sephardim failed to do so in the United States despite the achievements of their ancestors. Cohen’s goal was to suggest that they must preserve their distinct Sephardi culture, and that such preservation required effort and commitment.

Rabbi Cohen also encouraged his congregants to "intermarry"—that is, with Eastern European and German Jews. In 1979, Joseph Papo was working on a book on the "Sephardic community in America," and wrote to Cohen asking for details about Or Ve Shalom and it’s membership. In his response on September 18, 1979, Cohen explained:

> Intermarriage with the Ashkenazim has been successfully encouraged since my assumption of the leadership of the congregation, and increasingly reaching a higher proportion in the last decade since our beautiful and award-winning architectural synagogue has been moved to a new location in the city. In fact, actually one third of our members are Ashkenazim who follow satisfactorily the Sephardic minhag (custom) and living fraternally, harmoniously, and progressively within a brotherly atmosphere in all our activities.[128]

Notably, Cohen attributed the increase in “intermarriage” to the synagogue's move from Central and Woodward Avenues to the North Druid Hills location, which they dedicated in 1971. Cohen presumably correlated these two events as the congregation moved from the south side of Atlanta to the more affluent, north side of the city.

[128] Box 2, Folder 23, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia, 30309.

The new Or Ve Shalom building on Druid Hills Road in Atlanta, Georgia was first dedicated in 1971.[129]

Marriage with Ashkenazim had increased by the 1970s. According to oral history interviews and marriage records, the second generation of Sephardim in Atlanta and Montgomery often ventured beyond communal boundaries in search of marriage partners. Jeanette Cohen Rousso, a second cousin of Joseph Cohen, was the "only one" of her family members to marry another Sephardi Jew.[130] Abraham Alhadeff married an Ashkenazi woman, Ruth, nee Reicher, in 1946.[131] When asked how his parents responded to him marrying an Ashkenazi woman, Alhadeff simply said, "they loved her."[132] Sara Schreibman, whose parents immigrated from Rhodes, married Michael Schreibman, an Ashkenazi Jew, in 1977 and recalled that her family perceived

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[129]Mss 65, Rabbi Joseph Cohen Family Papers, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia, 30309.
[130] Jeanette Cohen Rousso, interview with Sandra Berman, March 30, 2011, pages 2-3, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia
[131] Abraham Alhadeff, interview with Sandra Berman, 13, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia; "Alhadeff-Reicher," The Baltimore Sun, p. 83.
[132] Ibid.

their marriage as an "intermarriage."[133] Marriage with non-Jews, meanwhile, was not entirely unheard of in the early twentieth century and increased significantly with the second generation. Ralph Franco, born in Montgomery shortly after his parents immigrated from Rhodes, married a non-Jewish woman named Mary.[134] All three of Morris Capouya's children became engaged to non-Jews, though all three of his children-in-law converted to Judaism under Morris' supervision before the weddings.[135]

Conclusion

Of course, Cohen encouraged Sephardi Jews to marry Ashkenazi, not non-Jews. Nevertheless, both of these marriage patterns occurred with increasing frequency throughout the twentieth century and with different results. In this and many other respects, Sephardi Jews of Ottoman descent in both Atlanta and Montgomery were mired in the complex social, economic, and racial landscape of the US south. Often, Sephardim intermingled with non-Jews in business and leisure, just as they did with Ashkenazim. As such, they were impacted by and sometimes participated in the fraught and often violent landscape of racial inequality of the Jim Crow south in the twentieth century, as we shall see in the next chapter.

[133] Sara Schreibman, interview with Mimi Brown, January 14, 2020, phone conversation; 8/ Dec/ 1977; Charlotte, North Carolina, USA; Ancestry.com. U.S., Newspapers.com Marriage Index, 1800s-1999 [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2020.
[134] Ralph Franco, interview with David Sampliner, September 1999, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, Mississippi.
[135] Morris Capouya, interview with David Sampliner, September 1999, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, Mississippi.

Chapter 3: Southerners

On October 28, 1934, Or Ve Shalom's Charter Committee members gathered at the Henry Grady Hotel in the heart of downtown Atlanta at the corner of Peachtree and Cain streets. A group of twenty-nine men attended the meeting, and an unnamed secretary typed the minutes in Ladino. After venturing north from the Pryor Street area where most Or Ve Shalom members lived, those in attendance would have passed the sign posted at the hotel's entrance: Whites Only.[136]

Segregation was an ever-present feature of the context in which Or Ve Shalom and Etz Ahayem founded their congregations and established themselves in Atlanta and Montgomery, respectively. Segregation and the realities of Jim Crow were prominent features of daily life and an inevitable reality in all public spaces. White supremacy shaped the conduct and movement of Ottoman Jews and their descendants in public spaces and, in some instances, their personal beliefs as well, as they rooted themselves in Atlanta and Montgomery. Critical race theorists explain that, according to racial formation theory, race is socially constructed and contingent on social, economic, and political forces in a given context. Race, and thus whiteness, is not biological or based on appearance, but rather on social structures and, on the micro-level, on everyday experiences.[137]

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[136] "*Minutos del meeting*," Folder 6, Mss 65, Rabbi Joseph Cohen Family Papers, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia, 30309. The Henry Grady Hotel was named after the journalist and orator Henry Woodfin Grady. Grady is best known for his work during the Reconstruction era and his efforts to reunify the northern and southern United States, particularly his advocacy for the industrialization of the south. Grady was also a white supremacist, often speaking on the social and racial supremacy of whites. Under his leadership, the *Atlanta Constitution* frequently wrote of lynching with humor, even condoning and encouraging it. Forde, "An editor and his newspaper helped build white supremacy in Atlanta"; Grady, "The New South," in Complete Orations and Speeches, 19.
[137] Delgado, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 19-43.

In an era in which white, American proponents of “scientific” racism and eugenics articulated new understandings of the Jewish "race" and Americans increasingly contested the racial status of Jews, Ottoman Sephardim were racially assigned as white in the south as early as 1934.[138] Some Christian whites may still have regarded Ottoman Sephardi Jews as racially distinct from Christian whites in some contexts and some Ottoman Sephardi Jews may not have self-identified as white, but their observed race was white. Indeed, they benefitted from the privileges of whiteness and were welcomed and supported by other Jews and their non-Jewish, white neighbors. These benefits were complicated throughout the twentieth century as Ottoman Sephardim navigated the lynching of Leo Frank, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the broader social and political landscapes of Alabama and Georgia. How individuals behaved throughout these historical moments reveal the wide range of beliefs and attitudes southern Sephardi Jews held concerning whiteness and racial and social hierarchies. While white supremacy and racial boundaries shaped what it meant to be southern, the porousness and the frequent crossing of those boundaries also defined southernness. For the founding members of Or Ve Shalom and Etz Ahayem and their descendants, becoming southern involved living in diverse immigrant neighborhoods and cultivating a new culture that was simultaneously southern, Ottoman, Sephardi, and Jewish.

Southern Jews and Southern Antisemitism

The Sephardi Jews who made their homes in Atlanta and Montgomery came to the United States as Ottomans and Jews. How did they "become" southerners, and what did that mean to them, and to others?

[138] Racial assignment refers to “racial self-identification (how an individual sees herself) and observed race (how an individual is identified by another), which do not always correspond.” Lee and Ramakrishnan, “Who counts as Asian,” 1736.

In the early twentieth century, claiming a southern identity for those who were white or white-passing essentially meant embracing Reconstruction-era ideals about the "New South," industrialization, and a post-slavery society shaped by racial hierarchies. For all southerners, to be southern was to live in a society and culture where nearly every aspect of life was (and still remains) racialized. For southern Jews of all backgrounds who were racially assigned as white, to be a southerner meant to enter into this racial hierarchy regardless of one's personal beliefs or past experiences. For Ottoman Jews, and others, this also meant gaining the privileges of whiteness and, sometimes, participating in the racial subjugation of others, especially Black southerners.

Before this, in the nineteenth century, many Americans believed that Jews were both physically and morally distinct from native-born, white, Christian Americans. This philosemitism certainly "othered" Jews, and more harmful forms of antisemitism undeniably existed. Nevertheless, the nineteenth-century racial beliefs of many native-born, white, Christian Americans offered great flexibility for Jews because Central and Western European Jewish immigrants generally embraced (white) American modes of dress, language, and culture quickly and enthusiastically.[139]

In the south, many Jews served in the confederate army or benefitted economically from the Civil War as their businesses met the production and supply needs of the Confederate army. When free trade was curtailed during the war, some engaged in smuggling. This resulted in then-General and future president Ulysses S. Grant's controversial General Orders No. 11. Grant expelled all "Jews as a class" from his war zone, which spanned from Mississippi to western Kentucky. Grant singled out Jews as smugglers, though Jews did not have a monopoly in war-

[139] Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness.*

time smuggling in the region. President Abraham Lincoln quickly revoked Grant's order before Grant's soldiers could force most Jews from their homes, but it lingered in the minds of many, especially when Grant ran for president in 1868. Grant publicly apologized for General Orders No. 11, but they affirmed that Jews could be singled out as a distinct "class."[140] Even in this instance, however, Jews were not classified as a race.

After the Civil War, white southerners generally welcomed Jews in growing southern towns and cities. Remember, too, that both Atlanta and Montgomery elected their first Jewish mayors in 1875. Indeed, the clear distinction between slaves and free whites and, after the abolition of slavery, formerly enslaved Black southerners and their descendants and white southerners gave southern Jews an "automatic level of social acceptance that was unparalleled in any other Western society of the period."[141]

Nativists motivated by the growing eugenics movement in the United States increasingly brought the racial status of Jews into question by the late nineteenth century, however. In the south, the precarity of Jews' racial status became apparent in the early 1890s when populist "white caps" destroyed Jewish businesses in a handful of towns in Mississippi and Louisiana. Jewish politicians found it increasingly challenging to win local elections in the 1890s and 1900s and newly popular social clubs and resorts began to enact exclusionary anti-Jewish membership policies.[142] In response, some Jews made great efforts to emphasize the distinction between themselves and southern Blacks. For southern Jews in the Jim Crow era, their racial status depended on conforming to racial norms. The antisemitism that emerged in the 1890s prompted

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[140] Sarna, *When General Grant Expelled the Jews*, 1-49.
[141] Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 52.
[142] Ibid., 54.

some Jews to make an unambiguous assertion of their whiteness in an attempt to maintain the status quo of the nineteenth century that had awarded them such enormous privileges.[143]

A growing interest in "scientific" racism in the early twentieth century contributed to growing "scientific," racial antisemitism in the United States.[144] Christian American's associations of frugality and learnedness with Jewish particularity gave way to ambivalence and even age-old antisemitic tropes. In the Progressive era, American Jews whose racial status was increasingly precarious began to debate whether Jewishness was a racial identity or only a religious denomination.[145] These debates captured the attention of Jews across the political spectrum and both acculturated, American-born Jews and new immigrants who came primarily from Eastern Europe.[146] Despite the efforts of Jews to assert their whiteness, the legislature solidified their difference and undesirability by setting national immigration quotas with the "Emergency Quota Act" of 1921. These quotas allowed only 3% of the total population of a given immigrant group in the United States (based on the 1910 census) to immigrate to the United States each year. Congress again reduced these quotas to only 2% of the 1890 census in 1924.[147] While Chinese and Japanese immigrants were the primary target of these new quotas, the mass migration of Jews from Eastern Europe and the former Ottoman Empire to the United States effectively ended after 1924. Following a final wave of immigration after the First World War, Jewish immigration from Ottoman lands to Atlanta and Montgomery ceased almost entirely.

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[143] Ibid., 62.
[144] Dollinger and Zola, *American Jewish History*, 2.
[145] Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness.*
[146] Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 91, 95.
[147] Dollinger and Zola, *American Jewish History*, 181.

The Trial and Lynching of Leo Frank

In the decade before the passage of these quotas the Leo Frank case already began to permanently alter the way southern Jews positioned themselves in their communities. Leo Frank, born in Texas and raised in New York, had earned a degree in mechanical engineering from Cornell University. Frank moved to Atlanta in 1908, where he became the director of the National Pencil Company. Mary Phagan, a thirteen-year-old employee at Frank's factory, was murdered on April 26, 1913. Frank was soon arrested alongside several other suspects but was solely indicted for Phagan's murder less than a month later on May 24 and found guilty and sentenced to death on August 25. Prosecutors based much of the case against Frank on the testimony of Jim Conley, a Black man and the factory's janitor, who is now widely believed to be the actual perpetrator of Mary Phagan's murder. Over the next year and a half, Frank's lawyers repeatedly appealed the case to the United States Supreme Court without success. They then turned their efforts towards a campaign for executive clemency, and in June of 1915, Georgia Governor John Marshall Slaton commuted Frank's death sentence to life imprisonment. On August 16, 1915, a group of prominent men from Phagan's hometown of Marietta, Georgia, kidnapped Frank from the state prison and drove him back across the state to Marietta, where they lynched him.

Accusations against Frank, his lynching, and the reliance on Conley's testimony represent an inversion of the much more typical pattern of lynching perpetrated by southern whites that targeted rural Black southerners. White supremacists are known to have lynched fifty-one Black Americans in 1913 alone, for example.[148] Scholars explain this reversal as

[148] Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA. "1901 to 1925 | African American Timeline: 1850-1925" Web page. https://www.loc.gov/collections/african-american-perspectives-rare-books/articles-and-essays/timeline-of-african-american-history/1901-to-1925/.

evidence of native-born, white southerner's growing anxieties surrounding industrialization in the south at the turn of the century. As a "Yankee Jew" who managed a factory, Frank's position made him an ideal target upon which white southerners could direct this anxiety.[149]

Mary Phagan's murder and Frank's trial unleashed a rash of antisemitism across Georgia. During the trial, a small number of non-Jewish Atlantans advocated for a boycott against Jewish businesses, distributing cards that read: "Now is the time to show your true colors; to show your true American blood."[150] Among the many rumors about Frank that circulated throughout Atlanta at the time, one rumor claimed that Judaism condoned violence against gentile women.[151] Local newspapers reported (and speculated) extensively on Frank's trial. The *Macon Daily Telegraph* reported that the trial "open[ed] a seemingly impassable chasm between the people of the Jewish race and the Gentiles…It has broken friendships of years, has divided the races, and brought about bitterness deeply regretted by all factions."[152] In this instance, Jews are regarded as a distinct "race." Now in this moment, seemed the fragile but positive relationship between Jews and white non-Jews in Atlanta had crumbled at least partly. Historians have also flagged Frank's lynching as the event that reactivated the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia, foreshadowing the more violent iteration of the KKK, which would emerge later in the 20th century.[153]

Scholars point to the memory of the Leo Frank's trial and subsequent lynching as an explanation for southern Jews' general hesitance to become involved in social justice issues in critical moments like the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956 and the actions and voter

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[149] Dinnerstein, *The Leo Frank Case*; MacLean, "The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered," 3.
[150] Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 62
[151] Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 204.
[152] *Macon Daily Telegraph*, August 27, 1913, quoted in Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 205.
[153] Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism, 70-77*; Lay, "Ku Klux Klan in the Twentieth Century," in *New Georgia Encyclopedia.*

registration efforts of Freedom Summer in 1964.[154] Frank's trial and lynching confirmed both that white supremacists could and would subject Jews to the same forms of violence as Blacks and that if Jews failed to cooperate with the status quo, there might be economic repercussions, too—though of course only one Jewish man was lynched over the course of decades in comparison to the hundreds of Black Americans who were targeted and lynched every year. The boycott of Jewish businesses in Atlanta during Frank's trial appears to have lingered in the minds of those who remained silent during the Montgomery Bus Boycott or opposed the arrival of northern Jews decades later during Freedom Summer.

While Or Ve Shalom, Etz Ahayem, and their founding congregants left few traces and no official record of their feelings about the Frank case, local Sephardi Jews offered a few small but significant acts of support towards Frank.[155] Isaac J. Hazan and Moreno Benvenisty signed affidavits to support the contentions of the defense.[156] Rebecca Amiel, one of the first Sephardi women to immigrate to Atlanta in 1906, also visited Frank and brought him food while he was in jail in Atlanta. According to her daughter-in-law, Lydia Sarda Amiel, Rebecca may have felt comfortable undertaking this small act of solidarity because she was relatively acculturated and felt at ease in her broader community. This explanation could likely extend to Hazan and Benvenisty, who had arrived in Atlanta in 1907 and 1912, respectively.[157] Rebecca did not know

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[154] Webb, *Fight Against Fear,* 17-22, 43-44; Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 62.
[155] Neither the JEA, the Federation, or any congregation in Atlanta made public or official statements supporting Frank in an effort not to give the impression that "Jews held a Jew above the law." Hertzberg, *Strangers,* 211.
[156] Affidavits of Isaac J. Hazan and Moreno Benvenisty, *State of Georgia* v. *Leo M. Frank,* cited in Hertzberg, *Strangers*, 211.
[157] Year: *1920*; Census Place: *Atlanta Ward 2, Fulton, Georgia*; Roll: *T625_251*; Page: *7B*; Enumeration District: *53*; National Archives and Records Administration; Washington, DC; NAI Title: *Index to Petitions for Naturalizations Filed in Federal, State, and Local Courts in New York City, 1792-1906*; NAI Number: *5700802*; Record Group Title: *Records of District Courts of the United States, 1685-2009*; Record Group Number: *RG 21.*

Frank personally, according to Lydia, but she may have known his family.[158] It is possible that, in addition to their acculturation, Amiel, Hazan, and Benvenisty felt able to defend Frank more publicly because their Jewishness was less evident, as they did not fit many of the stereotypes of German and "Yiddish" Jews.[159]

Ladino-speaking Jews in the south and throughout the United States were well aware of the Frank case. *La Amerika* periodically published articles about the Frank case and the lengthy appeals process and did not refrain from expressing its opinions on Frank's innocence like the Jews of Atlanta.[160] On August 15, 1913, *La Amerika* declared Frank the "Dreyfus of America," and followed the case through the appeals process, sometimes publishing about the case weekly.[161] After Frank's lynching in 1915, a writer for *La Amerika* published a lengthy cover piece describing the events leading up to his murder.[162] While Ladino-speaking Jews in and outside of Atlanta almost certainly knew about Frank's ongoing ordeal, Jewish immigration from

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[158] Lydia Sarda Amiel, interview by Patty Maziar, March 4, 1992, transcript, pages 6-7, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.

[159] Morris Capouya, interview by David Sampliner, September 1999, VHS and mp3 audio, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, MS. Adriana Brodsky points out a similar phenomenon in her study of Sephardim in Argentina, who were not perceived as Jewish because non-Jewish Argentinians did not perceive their language, dress, and culture as stereotypically "Jewish" and thus were "invisible." Brodsky, *Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine*, 1-2, 127, 149.

[160] "Frank el Dreyfus de Amerika," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), August 15, 1913; "Leo Frank kondenado a porka," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), August 29, 1913; Nuevos faktes en favor de Leo Frank," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), March 6, 1914; "Leo Frank de nuevo kondonado," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), March 13, 1914; "Leo Frank es inosente," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), March 20, 1914; "A Leo Frank se la akordara nuevo djuzgo," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), March 27, 1914; "Leo Frank es sin dov'da inocente," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), April 3, 1914; "Kualo sera de Leo Frank?" *La Amerika* (New York, NY), May 22, 1914; "En favor de Leo Frank," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), May 29, 1914; "Leo Frank inosente," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), October 9, 1914; "Segundo djuzgo reposado a Leo Frank," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), November 20, 1914; "El appeal de Leo Frank repozado," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), November 27, 1914; "La kuestion Frank en la korte soprema," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), December 4, 1914; "El appeal de Leo Frank penalmente reposado," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), December 11, 1914; "En favor de Leo Frank" *La Amerika* (New York, NY), January 15, 1915; "El djuzgo de Leo Frank en Washington," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), February 5, 1915; "Leo Frank piedre el appealo," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), April 23, 1915; "Nuevo appealo por Leo Frank," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), May 21, 1915; "Buena shanse por Leo Frank," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), June 4, 1915; "El governador Slaton emprezenta la vida a Leo Frank," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), June 25, 1915; "Leo Frank robado i matado," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), August 20, 1915.

[161] "Frank el Dreyfus de Amerika," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), August 15, 1913.

[162] Leo Frank robado i matado," *La Amerika* (New York, NY), August 20, 1915.

Ottoman and former Ottoman lands to Atlanta and Montgomery was at its height between 1910 and the beginning of the first World War in 1914. While many Jews living in Atlanta left the city during the trial, there is little evidence that Frank's ordeal dissuaded Sephardi immigrants from moving to the south despite the fear it provoked among southern Jews.

Ottoman Sephardi Jews and Local Politicians in the 1920s

While the Frank case appears to have diminished positive relations between southern Jews and non-Jewish whites, these relationships seem to have been repaired partially by the 1920s. Members of Or Ve Shalom in Atlanta and Etz Ahayem in Montgomery were embraced, at least symbolically, by local leaders. In 1926, the congregants of Etz Ahayem began to build a new synagogue at the 450 Sayre Street location. While the community had "put their hearts into" the renovations of the original structure on Sayre Street to create an attractive place to worship, the congregation decided that a new building was necessary.[163]

Construction began on May 19, 1927, when congregants symbolically laid the first cornerstone to the new edifice at 450 Sayre Street. Judge William H. Samford gave an address to the congregation that day, "congratulating the Congregation for building the temple in a land where religious tolerance would give them and their children freedom from all semblance of religious or political persecution."[164] Samford, a freemason and a Methodist, served on the Alabama Court of Appeals from 1917 until 1940.[165] His comments reveal that he saw the Sephardi Jews of Etz Ahayem as a distinct religious group, thus entitled to freedom from persecution on *religious* grounds—a part of the standard narrative of American Jewish life. He

[163] Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.
[164] Ibid.
[165] "Alabama Judicial System." https://judicial.alabama.gov/Library/Judges.

did not indicate anything else—racially or otherwise—distinct about the congregation beyond their religious difference.

Members of Etz Ahayem and guests lay the cornerstone of the new synagogue building at 450 Sayre Street, Montgomery, Alabama, on May 19, 1927.[166]

After four months of construction, families from Montgomery and Atlanta gathered on a Sunday afternoon, September 25, 1927, to dedicate one of the first Ottoman Sephardic synagogues in the south. Members of Etz Ahayem and the Reform Temple Beth Or in Montgomery, members of Or Ve Shalom in Atlanta, and local leaders, including Circuit Court Judge Walter Burgwyn Jones and Montgomery Mayor William Gunter, gathered for the dedication. In 1927, Jones was a circuit court judge and later became a presiding judge in Alabama. He is best known for the 1956 injunction he granted against the Alabama branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The injunction ordered the NAACP to turn over the names and addresses of every member in the state. Jones was a

[166] Ibid.

known white supremacist who would later praise "white man's justice" in his courtroom in the 1960s.[167] Mayor Gunter, who served his first term as Montgomery's mayor from 1910-1915 and then ran and won again in 1919, was an avowed and public opponent of the Ku Klux Klan. His obituary included the headline "Enemy of the Klan." The obituary also credits Gunter with "keeping the state democratic," and founding the Blue and Gray Football Game, which sought to repair relations between northerners and southerners.[168]

Jones and Gunter and their differences are emblematic of the wide range of positions and beliefs that local and state politicians or a white Alabaman may have held in 1927. The racialized reality of life in the south impacted all southerners, but not all responded in the same manner or held the same beliefs. Both of these men were present at the dedication of Etz Ahayem's new building, demonstrating that the congregation found supporters across the political and social spectrum and likely placed themselves across this spectrum. Further, that any local politicians or leaders attended at all—both one who was publicly opposed to the actions of the Klan and one who would later publicly praise the violent lynching often perpetrated by the KKK or their allies—reveals that members of Etz Ahayem were embedded in the local political and racial landscape of Montgomery with all of its contradictions and complexities. Members of Etz Ahayem left no record of their feelings on the attendance of both Jones and Gunter. However, congregant Rubin Hanan noted the attendance of both of them with pride in his congregational history.[169]

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[167] Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 92-93; Lewis, *Make No Law*, 25.
[168] "William A. Gunter, A Mayor 26 Years," *The New York Times*, December 5, 1940, 25.
[169] Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.

Rubin Hanan and Political Activism in the 1950s and 1960s

Rubin Morris Hanan, born in Rhodes in 1908 to Morris Haim Hanan and Rachel Franco Hanan, was a community leader, amateur historian, and local political activist who advocated for causes in local and national politics and on behalf of Etz Ahayem and the Sephardic Jews who comprised his community in Montgomery; he was also a public and outspoken segregationist and supporter of Alabama Governor George Wallace. Amateur and professional historical accounts of the Ottoman Sephardi Jews who settled in Atlanta and Montgomery commemorate Hanan.[170] That so many sources recall Hanan in such an uncritical manner reveals how deeply entrenched members of Etz Ahayem and Or Ve Shalom became in the rhetoric of racial hierarchies and white supremacy.[171]

Hanan's journey to the United States demonstrates both the function of transnational Sephardi networks and the political networks his uncles, Morris and Samanto Franco, had joined in the United States. Though Hanan was a latecomer to Montgomery in 1925, his uncles were some of the first Jewish men to immigrate from Rhodes to Montgomery.[172] In Rhodes, Hanan attended École des Frères de St. John Baptist and the Colegio Tecnico Italiano before following his uncles to Montgomery, Alabama. When Hanan attempted to apply for a student visa to the United States from Naples, Italy, in 1925, he waited for eight months before two Italian Sephardi Jewish women, Margherita Sarfatti, an architect and a certain Mrs. Modiano, intervened on his behalf.[173] Sarfatti and Modiano brought Hanan to the Palacio Venezia in Naples, where they

[170] Kerem, "The Settlement of Rhodian and Other Sephardic Jews," 381-383; ISJL, Montgomery, Alabama.
[171] George Wallace served four terms as the Governor of Alabama from 1963-1967, 1971-1979, and 1983-1987. Wallace is remembered for his segregationist and populist beliefs and his preoccupation with race and the inferiority of Black people. In his 1963 inaugural address as governor, he infamously said, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!"
[172] Morris Franco immigrated in 1907. Box 1, Folder 15, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.
[173] Unfortunately, Hanan does not include Mrs. Modiano's first name in his papers. Modiano was possibly a member of the Modiano family of Italy and Salonika. Naar, "The 'Mother of Israel' or the 'Sephardi Metropolis'?", 86.

introduced him to Benito Mussolini. After Hanan explained his situation to Mussolini, the leader of the National Fascist Party ordered the Italian General Immigration Department to issue him a file number with an assumed name, "Robert Canon."[174] This file allowed Hanan to reach the United States, where Congressman Lister Hill of Alabama assured his release from Ellis Island.[175] That Hanan received assistance from both Mussolini in Italy, and Congressman Hill in the United States shows that Hanan and, by extension, Sephardi Jews in Italy and the US were tapped in to transnational networks, including fascist ones. Hill's intervention on his behalf indicates that Hanan's community (likely his uncles) were somewhat connected and that politicians did not universally oppose the immigration of Jews to the United States, even after the passage of restrictive immigration legislation in the early 1920s.

Rubin Hanan in front of the Penny Profit Grocery Store in Montgomery, Alabama.[176]

[174] It's unclear the precise function of his assumed name. Perhaps "Robert Canon" was more ambiguous than "Franco."
[175] Year: *1926*; Arrival: *New York, New York, USA*; Microfilm Serial: *T715, 1897-1957*; Line: *4*; Page Number: *109;* Kerem, "The Settlement of Rhodian and Other Sephardic Jews," 381-383.
[176] "There's the Rub: Montgomery Favorite Mis' Rubin's Magic Seasonings Live On," Southern Jewish Life Magazine.

Hanan was extremely involved with the Sephardi Jewish community and the wider community in Montgomery. With his wife, Julia Hanan, known as "Mis' Rubin," he opened the Penny Profit Grocery Store in Montgomery, which was a local landmark well known for their homemade spice blends. Rubin also studied accounting, pharmacy, and law, often providing legal advice to community members, and worked as a notary public and a marriage counselor. The cause for which he was most passionate was advocating on behalf of the "aging" community in the United States. In 1938, Hanan helped organize the First Pension Emancipation Movement in Alabama and would continue to advocate on behalf of elderly Americans and to improve social security and Medicaid throughout his life.[177] He served on the staff of Alabama Governors Jim Folsom, John Patterson, George C. Wallace, and Lurleen Wallace as an advisor on the elderly. In 1962 and 1964, Hanan was hired as a consultant on aging by the Jewish Democrat, Abraham Ribikoff, the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), and continued to work in the HEW office until 1968. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed Hanan to the Advisory Committee for Older Americans.[178]

While some scholars have attributed southern Jews' ambivalence towards the Civil Rights movement to a collective fear of social and economic (and sometimes violent) retribution from white supremacists, Hanan spoke openly and publicly in support of Governor George Wallace and segregation. When Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Cleveland visited the south in the early 1960s, Governor Wallace directed him to Rubin Hanan. Lelyveld, a Reform rabbi who sought to improve relations between Blacks and Jews in the US, was in the south to participate in voter registration efforts. Hanan reportedly told Rabbi Lelyveld that “Blacks were never good or

[177] “Essay on Aging,” Box 1, Folder 14, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.
[178] “Biographical Essays,” Box 1, Folder 11, Rubin Morris Hanan Papers, Auburn University Montgomery Library, Archives & Special Collections.

friendly to the Jews." The following day, segregationists brutally beat Lelyveld at a protest march in Selma, Alabama.[179] On a trip to Israel in 1970, Israeli Interior Minister Joseph Burg asked Hanan how he could support such a racist Governor as Wallace, to which Hanan replied that he had been "loyal" to Wallace for years and there was a certain "social order" that existed and could not be so easily changed.[180]

Hanan's comments reveal just how deeply mired in a culture of white supremacy he was. This and his loyalty to Wallace and involvement with other politicians indicate that the political establishment in Alabama accepted Hanan—and presumably other Sephardi Jews—as white by the early 1960s. There was, as Hanan said, a "social order," in which he had found his place. His activism challenges the belief that Jews remained politically ambivalent in order to protect themselves. Indeed, this assertion of ambivalence implies that most Jews would have opposed segregation and supported the Civil Rights movement if it had been safe to do so. Hanan serves as but one example that this was not always the case.

Sephardi Jews in Atlanta and Montgomery also navigated racial hierarchies in their own businesses and homes in the 1950s and 1960s. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956, many members of Etz Ahayem found themselves in a position of power in relation to the Black domestic workers that worked in their homes. Ralph and Mary Franco, for example, employed a Black domestic worker who regularly cleaned their home. In an act of defiance (which was arguably also self-serving), Mary picked up their housekeeper and drove her to their house regularly so she could continue to work without taking the bus. In a 1999 oral history

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[179] Tkacik, Joseph. "Exhibit Captures Freedom Summer of '64 - Variety," September 27, 2007. https://web.archive.org/web/20070927042904/http://media.www.gcsunade.com/media/storage/paper299/news/2002/12/06/Variety/Exhibit.Captures.Freedom.Summer.Of.64-339213.shtml.

[180] Interview with Rubin Hanan, Montgomery, Alabama, October 16, 1989; Hanan, *A Biography of Rubin Morris Hanan*; Hanan, *Affirmation of Life—A Legacy"*; Kerem, "The Settlement of Rhodian and Other Sephardic Jews," 381-383.

interview, Ralph Franco recalled with a laugh that "some people didn't like that very much," though he did not elaborate on who these "people" were.[181] Jeanette Cohen Rousso also recalled that her family hired Black domestic workers who cleaned their home and babysat Jeanette and her siblings. When asked if anyone from Etz Ahayem was involved in the Civil Rights movement, Jeanette said, "Not really. We were a part of it, we did not deny it. We didn't have any [Black] employees in [our family's shoe] store. There were no Black salespeople, but there was a Black porter in the store always. He didn't quit." She went on to explain that the arrival of northern Jewish activists "bothered us, but [we] didn't do anything about it. [We] didn't get up and voice an opinion because you didn't know who might come at you…we were all cowards." As a salesperson in her family's shoe store, Jeanette recalled that she "didn't mind waiting on a Black person. I waited on everybody."[182]

The Franco's actions and Jeanette Rousso's comments portray Sephardi Jews in the south making similar calculations to most southern Jews: their fear of retribution outweighed their desire to defend their Black employees and neighbors. There were moments of defiance and advocacy, but they were minimal and somewhat covert. These moments demonstrate the relative white privilege that most Sephardi Jews of Ottoman descent enjoyed by the 1950s and 1960s in the US south. Many like Rousso may not have believed themselves to be racists and served Black southerners as customers or hired them as employees. However, others like Hanan were not ambivalent and spoke openly in support of segregation and politicians like George Wallace.

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[181] Ralph Franco, interview with David Sampliner, September 1999, Institute for Southern Jewish Life Oral History Collection, Jackson, Mississippi.
[182] Jeanette Cohen Rousso, interview with Sandra Berman, March 30, 2011, pages 11-12, transcript, Herbert and Esther Taylor Oral History Collection, Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History at the Breman Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.

In Atlanta, too, particularly in the Pryor Street and Georgia Avenue areas, many Sephardi Jews of Ottoman background lived among Ashkenazi Jews, Greek and other immigrants, as well as Black southerners in the early twentieth century. Many Black Atlantans lived in homes beside or behind the row houses where many Jews lived, and often they worked for such Jewish families.[183] Relationships such as these may have been pleasant but they were also deeply unequal, as were Rousso and Franco's relationships with their domestic employees. Or Ve Shalom eventually moved from the southside to North Atlanta in the wealthier and whiter Druid Hills area in 1971. Recall that Rabbi Joseph Cohen attributed an increase in marriage between Sephardim and Ashkenazim to this move, as it confirmed the congregation's place in the predominantly white, Northside of Atlanta.[184]

Today, Rubin and Julia "Mis' Rubin" Hanan are best remembered for their legendary seasoning blends. While the Hanans' sold their store, one can still purchase Mis' Rubin's dry rubs at 120 grocery stores across the southeast United States. The Mis' Rubin's website says that the Hanans "lived out the true American dream." It is true that Rubin Hanan spent his life advocating for his community and building his business, yet his advocacy is tainted by his segregationist and racist beliefs.

When racial antisemitism was on the rise in the early twentieth century, Sephardi Jews of Ottoman descent were racially assigned as white by other southerners in some contexts as early as the 1930s in Atlanta and Montgomery. That some Sephardi Jews endeavored to take small acts of resistance during the Leo Frank trial and the Montgomery Bus Boycott demonstrates that on an individual basis, community members fell across the political spectrum and held a range of

[183] Davis, "Streetscape Palimpsest: A History of Georgia Avenue."
[184] Box 2, Folder 23, Mss 57, Congregation Or Ve Shalom Records, The Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish History, The William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, 1440 Spring Street NW, Atlanta, Georgia, 30309.

beliefs about race. Those in the community who neither openly espouse racist beliefs nor participated in acts of resistance throughout the twentieth century were equal participants in various projects of racial formation, in the political sphere, their private homes, and their businesses through which the meaning of race and racial categories are agreed upon and contested.

These anecdotes provide a small window into the relationships between individuals and the racial formation of Jews in the south, but the actions and beliefs of individuals are only part of the picture and do not account for the systemic nature of racism and the centrality of race in the United States. Or Ve Shalom's move to the northside must be understood in the context of how redlining and gentrification have shaped the geography of Atlanta.[185] Jeanette Rousso's acceptance of her family's Black employee did little to improve job opportunities for Black Atlantans. The Franco's small act of resistance did nothing to end segregation on public transportation in Montgomery. Much work remains to be done to fully understand the history of Sephardi Jews' racial assignment and the ways they engaged with racial categories throughout the twentieth century, from the Leo Frank Case to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond.[186]

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[185] Rhodes, Jason. "The Value of Exclusion: Chasing Scarcity through Social Exclusion in Early Twentieth Century Atlanta." *Human Geography* 9 (March 1, 2016): 46–67.

[186] Omi and Winant define racial formation as "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed." Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 55.

Conclusion

This project first took root in the summer of 2019 at the ISJL. Upon completing this thesis in the late spring of 2021 I feel that I have scarcely begun to tell the story of the Jews who left Rhodes, Izmir, Monastir, Bodrum, Istanbul, Cairo, and elsewhere in the former Ottoman Empire and traveled across the globe to build lives in southern US cities like Atlanta and Montgomery. The extent of the networks utilized by Rhodesli and other Sephardi Jews throughout the modern Sephardi diaspora reached (and reach) further than I'd imagined when I first saw the connection between the cities of Atlanta and Montgomery. The life stories of every individual and their descendants mentioned throughout this thesis are richer than I have portrayed them here; each could be the subject of their own project.

Chapter 1, "Ottomans," examined the foundational history and organizational patterns of the Ottoman Jews who settled in Montgomery and Atlanta in the early 20th and the ways in which these patterns replicate Ottoman patterns of connection. It argues that Atlanta and Montgomery are important nodes in the network of Ladino-speaking Jews who spread across the globe in the early twentieth century. The following chapter, "Jews," looked more closely at the role German and Eastern European Jews and their institutions played in the foundational history of the Ottoman Sephardi congregations Etz Ahayem and Or Ve Shalom of Montgomery and Atlanta. The final chapter, "Southerners," offered a cursory look at the role of race, white supremacy, and southernness in the way Ottoman Sephardim occupied social spaces and conducted themselves from the 1930s through the Civil Rights era. The questions raised in this final chapter, perhaps most of all, demand more attention in the future.

The process of constructing a narrative based on sources that have been underutilized or unidentifiable has laid bare the relationship between the production of scholarship and the function of archives. Beyond the ways in which Sephardim are forgotten as discussed in the preface, there are numerous women mentioned throughout this thesis whose first names I've been unable to verify. A large portion of this thesis is based on the papers of Rubin Morris Hanan: if I had known what I know now about his beliefs and legacy, I would have revised the Montgomery portion of the ISJL's encyclopedia with more scrutiny and urgency. The synagogues Or Ve Shalom and Etz Ahayem are the central feature of this thesis, and much of my research was conducted in Jewish archives, which inherently provides a limited view, leaving out non-Jewish Ottomans, including the Greek Orthodox community, Jews who did not belong to Etz Ahayem and Or Ve Shalom or who were excluded from official records, and the Black southerners with whom Jews worked and lived.

As I continue to pursue this research, there are numerous places for expansion and excavation. I hope to utilize municipal and local, non-Jewish archives more extensively in order to understand the lives of these individuals not only as they were connected to Jewish institutions. There are more southern cities with significant populations of Ottoman Sephardi Jews in states like Texas and Louisiana, not to mention Florida, which demand more scholarly attention. Coexisting with this Jewish history is the history of the other immigrant communities who settled in the south in the early twentieth century. Greek immigrants and "Syrian" immigrants who chose the south over places like New York and Los Angeles are also a crucial part of this story that requires more time and attention. This research necessitates ongoing scrutiny of the way sources are catalogued (or not) and how this impacts the formation of historical narratives.

While the formal organizational connection between Or Ve Shalom, Etz Ahayem, and their congregants has persisted, maintenance of Ottoman and communal ties have also taken a less structured form as gatherings like family reunions, exploration of online family genealogy, and heritage trips to Rhodes and elsewhere in former Ottoman lands have grown in popularity. Members of the Taranto family, for example, who first settled in Montgomery in 1907 and whose descendants have scattered across the US south and the globe, continue to hold family reunions every other year. Children who grew up in Atlanta or Montgomery often spent summers with one another. Before the Holocaust, many young immigrant families returned to Rhodes or elsewhere to visit family or introduce their children to their grandparents. Tragically, after the war many of these connections ceased to exist. As Sara Schreibman, a Montgomery-native recalled on a phone call with me in early 2020, before the Holocaust her mother often wrote letters to her relatives in Rhodes and visited the Island a handful of times, but after the Holocaust "there wasn't anyone left to maintain a connection with."[187] Of the approximately 2,000 Jews who remained in Rhodes when they were deported by Nazi-allied Italian forces, only 161 survived.[188] Despite the immeasurable tragedy of the Holocaust, Rhodesli Jews in America continued to raise funds for those who remained in Rhodes and focused their philanthropic efforts on things like repairing and maintaining the Jewish cemetery in Rhodes. Today, many second and third generation Rhodesli Sephardim book Jewish heritage tours to Rhodes.

In Montgomery, Etz Ahayem is now Agudath Israel Etz Ahayem, "A Spiritual Union of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Traditions, uniquely suited to welcome Jews of both Ashkenazic and Sephardic backgrounds, as well as other traditions."[189] Etz Ahayem merged with Agudath Israel

[187] Sara Schreibman, interview by Mimi Brown, January 14, 2020, phone conversation, Nashville, TN.
[188] Angel, Marc, *The Jews of Rhodes: The History of a Sephardic Community*; Benbassa and Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry*, 171,
[189] Agudath Israel Etz Ahayem Montgomery, https://www.aieamontgomery.org.

in 2001, the Orthodox synagogue established in Montgomery in 1902 by Orthodox Jews from Eastern Europe. Or Ve Shalom is still thriving as a “fully Sephardic” synagogue in Atlanta, hosting regular services and events and assisting congregants along the path to Spanish citizenship.

Many of the oral history interviews I utilized throughout this thesis were conducted in the late 1990s before Etz Ahayem’s merger in 2001. Interviewee Morris Capouya lamented the prospect of merging with a non-Sephardi synagogue as a collective failure and explained it as the inevitable consequence of young Jews leaving behind life in the southern United States. I’d reframe this merger as only a continuation of the way these Ottoman Sephardi Jews and their descendants have long used their networks, leaned on their coreligionists for support, and mixed with their Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors over the course of more than a century now.

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