

## Learning from Cuban Jews and Syrian Jews

**What is the experience of immigrant groups who arrive in American communities where Ashkenazi Jews are already established?**

A theme emerged across several of the scholars in this project: as Jews navigated the boundaries of their racial and cultural identities in the American context, tensions emerged between groups of Jews. To explore dynamics between groups of Jews, this lesson focuses on two case studies: Mijal Bitton's study of Syrian Jews in New York and Mark Goldberg's study of Cuban Jewish migration to Miami. Both scholars consider the experience of immigrant groups who arrive in American communities where Ashkenazi Jews are already established.

Bitton's work explores many factors shaping the identity of the contemporary Syrian Jewish community in New York that she studied, including anti-Arab racism. She suggests that the exclusion that Syrian Jews faced by Ashkenazi Jews when they arrived in America could be one of the factors shaping their group identity, deflecting easy categorization and highlighting further questions about contemporary racial categories. Goldberg's work introduces the development of a new "Jew-ban" (Jewish and Cuban) identity that developed out of the unique experiences of Jewish Cubans who came to Miami in the 1950s and 60s. Goldberg highlights how Cuban anti-Black racism shaped Cuban Jewish behavior, while simultaneously the racial insecurity of Miami's white-presenting Jews led to the rejection of Cuban Jews. For background and further learning on both these communities, please see Bitton and Goldberg's lectures in this series.

## GOALS

- Participants will explore how different identities, cultures, and views divide the Jewish community.
- Participants will consider how factors like U.S. policy, institutionalized racism, and prejudices within the Jewish community combined to shape the experiences of Syrian Jewish immigrants and of Cuban Jewish immigrants.
- Participants will explore the diversity and complexity of Jewish identities, which can partake of ancestry, religious practice, language, appearance, food, dress, kinship, and more.
- Participants will consider how racist ideas and hierarchies penetrate Jewish communal life.

## MATERIALS

- Mijal Bitton video “What the Hell is a Syrian Jew?”  
<https://vimeo.com/784646174/052cff5a8a>
- Mark Goldberg main video (minutes 8-14:25)  
<https://vimeo.com/784641459/0a2ecb41e0>
- Mijal Bitton video “Are Sephardic Jews JOC?”  
<https://vimeo.com/784645524/0b8f36974b>

## LESSON

*Introductions: to the facilitator, the topic and the participants: 10 minutes*

*Opening brainstorm for the group: 10 minutes*

- What do you know about the categories “Ashkenazi” and “Sephardi”? (Make a list of associations)
- What questions do we have about these terms?

# Race, Religion & American Judaism

Facilitator comment: Generally speaking, these are two terms used to describe diversity within the Jewish community. In colloquial usage, “Ashkenazi” usually refers to Jews who trace their ancestry and/or religious practice to the Jews of Europe, while the term “Sephardi” has been used to refer to a specific Jewish ethnic custom, tradition, or historical relationship to Iberian Sepharad. These terms help us recognize diversity within the Jewish world and understand points of difference and potential tension between Jewish groups. In this lesson we will explore a few examples of challenges between groups of Jews, and unpack the source of those challenges.

Mijal Bitton video *“What the Hell is a Syrian Jew?”*: 20 minutes

For many Ashkenazi Jews in America, the concept of Middle Eastern and North African Jews may seem foreign. However, a significant percentage of today’s global Jewish population originated in the Middle East and North Africa. This video will introduce Syrian Jews who experienced bias or discrimination from mainstream Ashkenazi Americans at the time. (Start at 1:23 “there is good data describing discrimination...”)

- Comprehension Questions
  - According to Bitton, how might Ashkenazi behavior have affected the development of Syrian Jewish identity?
  - In the story that Bitton recalls from *The Sephardic Archives* (1986), what clues does Shirley’s grandfather use to assess someone’s Jewishness? What clues “prove” Jewishness?
- Discussion Questions
  - How do factors like Jewish literacy, ritual practice, and personal presentation each contribute to one’s own Jewishness? To how their Jewishness is seen by others?
  - Bitton suggests that this young Syrian Jewish man’s presentation is racialized by the Ashkenazi Jewish grandfather. Which details is she referring to? What might this teach us about the racial experience of these two men as they navigate their Jewishness in America?

- This story took place roughly a century ago. Why does Bitton suggest that it has implications for Syrian Jews today?

*Mark Goldberg on the rejection of Cuban Jews by Ashkenazi Jews in Miami (main video, minutes 8-14:25): 15 minutes*

Scholar Mark Goldberg presents another example of white-presenting Ashkenazi Jews' behavior towards an immigrant group of Jews: Cuban Jews. The Cuban Jews brought their own assumptions about race based on their experience of race in Cuba, while the white-presenting Ashkenazi Jews already living in Miami were navigating the social landscape of Jim Crow era Florida. This video sets up the resulting institutional rejection of Cuban Jews which led to the development of a distinct Cuban Jewish identity.

- Discussion Questions
  - How did Jews who had been living in Miami and the Jews arriving from Cuba compare in racial and cultural terms?
  - How does American anti-Black racism contribute to the treatment of the Cuban Jews?
  - What comparisons can you make between Goldberg's account of Cuban Jews in Miami and Bitton's account of Syrian Jewish experience?
  - How did Cuban and American anti-black racism contribute to the settlement choices the Cuban Jews made when they arrived in Greater Miami?

The examples of both Cuban and Syrian Jews highlight how racialization and racism in America contributed to the mainstream Ashkenazi treatment of Jewish minorities in the United States. As scholar Devin Naar suggests in *Privilege and Peril*, the cost of Whiteness for white-presenting Jews usually involved taking on racist, anti-Black behaviors and beliefs, as demonstrated by the existence of Jewish slave owners in colonial New England. *[For more information, watch Devin Naar's main video lecture in this series.*

*<https://vimeo.com/784630158/61c6e63578>* In recent years, awareness of racism in general, and specifically directed within the Jewish community, has developed, and the American Jewish world has begun to seek new language surrounding the diversity of Jewish racial experience.

*Mijal Bitton video “Are Sephardic Jews JOC?”: 15 minutes*

- Picking up on the complexity of attaching racial terms to Jews in the contemporary context, in this video, Mijal Bitton considers the question of whether Sephardic Jews are “Jews of Color” i.e., does Sephardic identity imply that a person is not White? While this video focuses only on Sephardic identity, it may raise similar questions for viewers about the Whiteness (or not) of Ashkenazi Jews.
- Comprehension Questions:
  - “Sephardic” as a label can mean several things. What are four different potential meanings of this term? Are there others?
    - Those Jews who trace their ancestry to the Iberian peninsula
    - Following specific religious laws and customs associated with Sephardic Jewish tradition
    - Having “Sephardic” DNA
    - All Jews shaped by Sephardic (i.e. Iberian origins) migration and influence, including Middle Eastern and North African communities shaped by the influence of Sephardic Jewish exiles from the Iberian peninsula
  - What examples does Bitton bring to emphasize that neither “Ashkenazi” nor “Sephardic” can meaningfully imply a racial identity as it is generally understood in the North American context? I.e., how do we know that “Ashkenazi” is not equal to Whiteness, etc.?
  - Bitton offers one interpretation of the concept of “Jew of Color” that could make sense in relation to Syrian Jews. What is that interpretation?
- Discussion Questions:
  - How does the effort to map White vs. Person of Color onto the Jewish categories of Ashkenazi and Sephardic demonstrate how racial identity is a construct? How does this mapping demonstrate the harms of racialization?
  - Why is it valuable to recognize all these variations in Jewish racial, cultural, or ethnic identities?

# Race, Religion & American Judaism

*Concluding Reflections: 10 minutes*

Consider what you know about the racial make-up and cultural dynamics of your Jewish communities.

- Where have there been or might there be interactions between groups of Jews that have been shaped by the desire of white-presenting Jews to shore up White privilege?
  - In other words: How has Whiteness shaped behaviors in your community, in the present moment or historically?
  - How has anti-Black racism shaped communal or individual behaviors, recently or historically?
- How might you, individually or communally, address these dynamics?