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For: article by Norman Lamm  
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MOSAIC TEACHINGS AND THE JEWISH MOSAIC\*

The role that the Sephardim and other ethnic sub-groups play in the totality of the Jewish people has a particular resonance in those countries, such as the United States, where a great debate is underway, especially on university campuses, on the role of minority groups in the culture and politics of the country.

After many centuries of oppression, and decades of political impotence and cultural disregard, groups such Blacks and Latinos and Native American Indians have begun to assert themselves. Indeed, "multiculturalism" has become one of the most significant elements in what is regarded as "politically correct" (PC, for short) in liberal circles which dominate many areas of American life. No more merely "tolerated," these and other such groups now demand not only full recognition but also "compensation" for past discrimination--financially, politically, educationally, and culturally.

Opposed to this is an emerging feeling that this otherwise proper and respectable attitude has gone to extremes and threatens to destroy the unity of the country and to tear apart the fabric of American culture. These more conservative circles do not deny that minority groups should be given more recognition, but such assertiveness should not be permitted to corrode the national identity of Americans. When feminists and Blacks deride the teaching in universities of the classics of Western civilization as composed by "dead, white European males," and therefore dismiss them as prejudiced, that leaves all of us in a socio-cultural vacuum. Add, they say, elements of African history and works by women, etc., but not impugn all the props of Western culture. What this view is propounding, essentially, is that the fundamental character of American national identity must remain unchanged, but that other, newly emerging groups, must be respected--as long as they do not impinge on the overall conception of American culture. This, really, is a "tolerant" but also a patronizing position.

The lines are drawn, the debate rages on. Do we Jews, as Jews, have anything to offer to this important polemic? Does our sacred literature and our history yield insights which may be helpful? Do we face similar problems?

The answer is: most certainly. And the existence of a flourishing Sephardic Studies program at Yeshiva University is testament to such contribution. For in theory and in practice, Yeshiva University caters not only to the Ashkenazic majority of American Jewry, but to all Jewish sub-groups such as Sephardim,  
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\* This is an excerpt from an address at the Sephardic dinner of Yeshiva University on May 18, 1992.



Yemenites, Bucharin, and others. We recognize the fundamental unity of *Am Yisrael*, and at the same time respect the *minhagim*--the special customs and traditions--of each group and the differences between them. Our history has taught us to retain our over-all national-religious identity and, at the same time fully acknowledge the singularity of each group. We have proven that the Jewish version of "multiculturalism" can work without unraveling the fabric of our unity and identity.

The Torah describes the *יובל* or the Jubilee year: every fiftieth year, all debts are forgiven, all slaves emancipated, and all real estate which may have been sold because of poverty returns to its original owners, thus preserving the territorial integrity of each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, we read, "You shall hallow the fiftieth year by proclaiming liberty to all the inhabitants of the land; it shall be a jubilee year for you, when each of you shall return to his own property and family" (Lev. 25:10).

The Torah was not given to one tribe or one community or one group. It was given to *all Israel*. We are one people. And yet, the Torah respects the integrity of each tribe, each community, each family or clan, each *edah*. Judaism can accommodate *כלל ישראל* with each *משפחה*, the whole and the parts. It subscribes to neither extreme--the one which ignores individual variations in the name of unity, and the one which considers only individual groups and ignores the welfare of the totality of the people. The Jewish people, according to this teaching of the Torah of Moses, is not a "melting pot" but a *mosaic*, composed of varying tiles yet, together, constituting a whole.

This is the guiding principle of Yeshiva University and its Sephardic Studies Program. Fifty Sephardic students in our High Schools, over 230 in our undergraduate colleges, 14 studying for the Rabbinate in our Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, and others yet in our various graduate and professional schools--medicine, law, psychology, and social work--are testimony to this principle. These students (as well as faculty members) come from a variety of Sephardic groups in the United States as well as from foreign countries: Albania, Afghanistan, Bukhara, Canada, France, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Panama, Peru, Syria, Turkey, Venezuela, and elsewhere. (Yeshiva University spends over a million dollars a year on its Sephardic students!)

This success of our Sephardic efforts is motivated by our Jewish commitments, and these, in turn, have much to teach the enviroing society. The two elements can and must be reconciled. Each has its role, none may endanger the other--neither an excess of nationalism nor an overemphasis on tribalism.

And this is only one of the contributions that Jews, by referring back to the sources of their sacred tradition, can make to society and the world in general...