Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History*, New York University Press, New York 2009.

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A history of Sephardic Jews in the United States has been on the wish list of scholars of American Judaism for quite a long time. Aviva Ben-Ur's *Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History* begins to fill that void. Although it seems self-evident that Sephardic Jewry needs its own history, Ben-Ur argues for the importance of her book "a minority within a minority," on the grounds of "studying the margins as a tool for shedding light on broader society."

Despite its subtitle, "A Diasporic History," *Sephardic Jews in America* does not claim to be a synthetic history of Sephardic Jews throughout American history. Rather Ben-Ur presents a more concentrated analysis of Sephardic Jews, most of whom were immigrants to the United States, in the early twentieth century. Readers of other American Jewish histories will notice that the most familiar American Jews with Sephardic heritage—that is, many of the earliest Jewish inhabitants of the United States in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—get little more than a cameo here. Ben-Ur is more interested in telling the largely untold stories of later immigrants.

The volume also highlights a popular theoretical concern in Jewish studies: why are there so few studies of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, and how can they be integrated into Jewish studies curricula? Ben-Ur, rather than simply chastising other scholars for their neglect of non-Ashkenazic Jews, explores why this tendency has been so widespread. In typical American Jewish histories, she notes, Sephardim tend to disappear after the early nineteenth century. She suggests that the neglect of Sephardic immigrants in the twentieth century is a result of the historical situation in which American Jews with Ashkenazic heritage often either ignored or actively disavowed the

Jewishness of these immigrants. When the Ashkenazic majority insisted on imagining their community without Sephardic Jews, it meant that Sephardic Jews were excluded from the historical record when it came to most "Jewish" organizations and culture.

The historical omission, then, is directly tied to the experience of Sephardic Jews in America. When much of the existing Jewish community marginalized immigrant Sephardim, "This denial of Jewishness," Ben-Ur explains, became for them "a defining experience." In the face of this "recognition failure," as Ben-Ur terms it, Sephardim created their own philanthropic organizations, social centers, and communities.

In her consideration of Sephardic Jewry and its relationship to American Jewry more generally, Ben-Ur also presents a captivating story about how and why most American Hebrew schools use the Sephardic pronunciation instead of the Ashkenazic. Even though most other American Jews did not include Sephardic people or customs when they considered Jewishness, they participated in an international discussion, which ultimately gave Sephardic-accented Hebrew the seal of approval.

Surprisingly, especially for a book predicated on considering the marginalized, *Sephardic Jews in America* concerns itself almost entirely with men. Ironically, Ben-Ur titles her introduction "The Jews Who Weren't There." Jewish feminist scholars may notice the eerie similarity to Rachel Adler's groundbreaking work about the erasure of Jewish women entitled "The Jew Who Wasn't There" (originally published in *Davka* in 1971). But in Ben-Ur's work, women make very few appearances, and when they do appear in the text, they are portrayed as having little cultural or historical effect. In her first chapter, Ben-Ur mentions by name thirty-one different men and only two women, and of those, one woman is called only by her first name as an appendage to her husband. In her defense, some of the reason for this shortcoming is certainly an issue of sources as Ben-Ur relies heavily on the Ladino press for her primary sources, which was heavily dominated by men. With the exception of a very brief discussion of one particular sisterhood, the paltry coverage of women in a text specifically interested in highlighting silenced voices remains a disappointment, especially in light of the fact that

Ben-Ur has written on a Sephardic-American woman elsewhere. Of course, Ben-Ur's lack of sustained attention to women in this narrative only reinforces her larger point that Sephardic Jews in America demand more research.

Overall, however, *Sephardic Jews in America* should prove to be a university classroom staple not only because it covers an understudied group but also for its incisive analysis of primary sources. Historians of American Jews will no doubt welcome this work by a capable scholar who of non-Ashkenazic Jews. It is hoped that Ben Ur's work will inspire others to follow.