

‘Miss Sefaradí’ and ‘Queen Esther’: Sephardim, Zionism, and Ethnic and National Identities in Argentina, 1933-1971*

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In 1940, Esther Bahbouth, a Sephardi young woman representing the *Centro Sionista Sefaradí* (CSS), won the title of ‘*Reina Esther*’ in the Purim contest organized in Buenos Aires by the *Keren Kayemet Leisrael* (KKL).¹ The Sephardic community was ecstatic; it was the first time a Sephardic young woman had won the coveted crown.² In these early decades of the twentieth century, when Zionist activity among Sephardim was still being defined and organized, the victory of Esther Bahbouth carried significant weight for this minority. The relationship between the *Centro Sionista Sefaradí* and the local *Federación Sionista Argentina* (made up of Ashkenazi Zionists) was conflictive, even antagonistic, and the Sephardim complained bitterly about the way in which the ‘majority’ of the Argentine Jewish community treated them. A Sephardi young woman in the Zionist dais, they rejoiced, clearly signaled to the Ashkenazim their undeniable commitment to the Zionist project.³

But rather than continue to send only one candidate each year to the KKL Purim Ball to compete for the Queen Esther title, in 1944 Argentine Sephardim decided to organize their own Queen Esther beauty contest.⁴ At the *Gran Baile de la Colectividad*, as this event came to be called, the most beautiful representative chosen from a handful of Sephardic organizations was elected “*Miss Sefaradí*” and immediately crowned *Reina Esther*.⁵ Also sponsored by *Keren Kayemet Leisrael*, these events soon became a rallying point for all Sephardim,

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regardless of their origin; they participated eagerly and enthusiastically, reported the Balls in the press, tasked youth commissions with their management, and raised considerable funds for the Zionist project.

The decision to organize the “Sephardic” event marked the creation of a parallel Zionist Sephardic structure. In this new context, then, by choosing a beautiful Sephardic woman as the Queen of the community every year, Sephardim were asserting their right to their own place in the Zionist movement both in Argentina and in Palestine/Israel. The Zionist movement, Sephardim believed, had been reluctant to recognize their participation in the nationalist project, and had played a deaf ear to their request for ‘separate’ Zionist institutions. By the time the Sephardim organized their first beauty contest in 1944, they had been ‘fighting’ for over twenty years with the *Federación Sionista Argentina* over control of their agenda and contributions.⁶ Yet the resolution of this ‘internal’ conflict was not only achieved thanks to agreement at the local level (in Argentina); instead, it was the ‘international’ Zionist context that allowed for its end.

The establishment of the “*Miss Sefaradi*” beauty contest, moreover, signaled the creation of a new Sephardic-Argentine identity that ultimately helped shape the construction of a modern Argentine Jewish identity. This new ‘Sephardic’ identity was ‘Argentine’ for two reasons: on the one hand, Sephardim had been able, in Argentina, to overcome their various cultural origins. Sephardi groups from diverse areas such as Morocco and the Ottoman Empire (Arab-speaking Aleppo and Damascus as well as Ladino speakers from present day Turkey and surrounding areas) had initially maintained their individual identities by organizing their own immigrant associations (mutual aid societies, *Talmudei Torah*, schools, temples, butchers, cemeteries, etc.) and settling in distinct Buenos Aires neighborhoods, rarely crossing paths. Zionism *and* Argentina provided a common ground from where to fashion a unified identity, and the election of *Miss Sefaradi* was the culmination of that process.⁷ The second “Argentine” aspect of this new identity had to do with beauty contests themselves. Although the beauty contest mirrored Queen Esther contests held by other Jewish communities around the world, this Jewish practice should also be read within a visibly “Argentine” context that was itself in flux. Beauty contests in Argentina, and in particular during the early Peronist years (1946-1955), had increasingly placed the female body on the stage, and the Peronist regime used it as an element of their cultural project to create consensus and support. Of course the *Miss Sefaradi* contest was not ‘Peronist,’ but in the popularization of beauty contests, in the utilization of ‘Argentine’ music bands, and dance salons, Sephardim were participating, as well, in Argentine performances that allowed them to assert their ‘national’ belonging.

In 1971, Miriam Noemí Jaffif, the Sephardi Queen Esther, was crowned the Argentine Jewish Community Queen Esther.⁸ The regular Purim Ball (now called "*Purim Ball Central*") organized by the KKL since the 1930s, elected the Sephardic representative as their beauty queen, just like they had chosen Esther Bahbouth in 1940. By the early 1970s, then, the two Zionist parallel balls had come together, and the winner of the Sephardic contest (still held independently) was invited to participate in the election of Queen Esther, title that came to be popularly known as '*Miss Colectividad*' (Miss Argentine Jewish Community). Argentine Jews finally came around a single Queen Esther, a young woman who, again, could be the Sephardic representative.

This article will trace the history and development of these beauty contests and use them as a window onto the process of creation of the Argentine Jewish community. By focusing on the Sephardim, a minority within the rest of the Argentine Jewish community, this article also addresses some of the historiographical imbalances that have characterized academic production on this topic, and which have been noticed by various scholars.⁹ As well, the time period covered by the beauty contests allows for an examination of identity construction that moves away from 'essentialist' and static positions. The Argentine Jewish community in the 1940s was very different from that of the 1970s, when a first or second generation of Argentines was redefining the boundaries of their ethnic identity in much closer conversation with their national identification. The Zionist context was different as well; the reality of the State of Israel, and the role assigned to youth in its construction and support, shaped developments in the Diaspora. But in both instances, in the 1940s as well as in the 1970s, women were at the center of these identity constructions and negotiations. It was an Argentine Jewish young woman (always, and sometimes, a Sephardi) who came to embody and reflect these changes. The "Miss Sefaradí" beauty contest, ultimately, reflected how Sephardim, by becoming Argentine, came to symbolize a new Sephardi identity that could parade its commitment to the Zionist project; and in the last development of the contest, the coming together of the two groups, we can further see how Sephardim had found a way of remaining a separate ethnic group *and* capable of representing the whole Argentine Jewish community at the same time.

Purim Festival and Queen Esther

Before there was a "*Miss Sefaradí*," there was Purim and a "Queen Esther." Purim, the Jewish holiday that commemorates the actions of Esther in favor of the Jews living under King Ahasuerus and his evil secretary Haman, is one of

the few Jewish holidays that does not emphasize the Torah or mentions God. The Scroll of Esther tells the role this “beautiful and lovely” woman, the winner of a beauty contest herself, played in preventing the killing of the Jewish people in Persia.¹⁰ During Purim, celebrated in the month of Adar (February-March), when the scroll is read at the synagogue, people are encouraged to yell, make noises and boo as the name of Haman is read. The festivity is also celebrated by drinking in excess, by dressing as gentiles, and even as the opposite sex; in the words of Monford Harris, it is “a topsy-turvy festival” that stresses the end of oppression and victory over annihilation.¹¹

Because of its vague religious overtones and its connection with freedom, Purim, together with Hannukah, was a festivity that easily allowed for a secular appropriation. These two celebrations became central in the socialist Zionist construction of a secular Jewish culture: while secular in their re-invention, they were clearly visibly steeped in Jewish tradition. Starting in 1920, Tel Aviv, the first ‘secular’ Jewish city, celebrated Purim in grand style with a two-to-three day event. Invited artists helped decorate buildings, cars, and open spaces of the city; people danced in the streets at night, children attended their own activities during the day, and men and women participated in several costume balls. The culmination of these events was a parade with floats through the main streets of Tel Aviv.¹²

In 1926, the Tel Aviv Purim “carnival,” as it was called until 1932, also hosted, for the first time, a Queen Esther competition.¹³ Created and organized by Baruch Agadati, an artist and dancer who believed that the contest lent itself perfectly for merging Jewish traditions and modern and European culture, the contest became immensely popular. Supporters nominated candidates with the collection of fifty signatures, and, on the night of the gala, attended by a select group of guests, those present cast their vote: Queen Esther was announced late in that evening, and her reign, which lasted until the following Purim, started with a visit to the city hall, and sometimes with a parade in the streets of Tel Aviv.

The connection between the election of Queen Esther, Purim, and donations to the Jewish National Fund (JNF) was made in Tel Aviv as well. The JNF was Agadati’s partner, and, as such, kept a percentage of the profits resulting from the event.¹⁴ In 1929, when the rabbis of Tel Aviv and Jaffa questioned the “Jewishness” of the beauty contest, they warned the JNF leadership that such close association between the Queen contest and the JNF would distance a great part of the public, both in Eretz Israel and in the Diaspora, from supporting the JNF.¹⁵ Although the Queen Esther contest in Tel Aviv ended in 1929, this aspect of Purim, and its link to the JNF, became, unlike what the rabbis had predicted, central in the Diaspora.¹⁶

“Queen Esther” and Purim in Argentina: 1920s to 1950

Of course Purim had been celebrated elsewhere prior to the creation of the JNF, and the money raised during these festivities had also been given to charity. In turn-of-the-century New York, for example, the “Purim Association” organized yearly balls, which became highly sophisticated upper-class affairs, and donated its proceedings to worthy causes.¹⁷ In Argentina, the beauty queen contest did not begin until 1933, but the KKL began using Purim as a fund raising opportunity some years before that. In 1926, for example, “the Youth Group Pro *Keren Kayemet Leisrael* of Moises Ville [a Jewish agricultural colony in Santa Fé]....organize[d] a Purim festival to benefit the National Fund.”¹⁸ In Buenos Aires, that same year, the JNF sent “a letter to all the Jews living in this city, inviting them to send a donation to the Jewish National Fund, following the tradition of *Schalaj Manoth* [sic].”¹⁹

In Argentina, for the Sephardim, the option of donating to the World Zionist Organization through both their Funds (the Jewish National Fund and the *Keren Hayesod*) was ridden with conflict. In 1925, Sephardic leaders in the Middle East and in Europe had founded the World Union of Sephardic Jews (WUSJ) and met “under the auspices of many Zionist leaders” in order to make sure that their position as a minority within the Zionist movement did not translate into concrete measures against Sephardim.²⁰ They claimed that although nearly one third of the Jews living in Palestine were Sephardim, these Jews were not receiving sufficient attention upon their arrival, or adequate information prior to leaving their countries of origin. They therefore began a campaign to boycott, specifically, the work of the *Keren Hayesod*, and sent representatives to countries with large Sephardic congregations to try to raise money *among Sephardim for Sephardim*.²¹

The reservations Sephardim had about the leadership of the Zionist movement, and what their role in it was, provoked some responses at the local and international levels. The *Federación Sionista Argentina* (FSA), the umbrella Zionist organization, had requested early on that the World Zionist Organization (WZO) send a delegate of Sephardic origin to work among the Sephardim living in Argentina.²² It was believed that a Sephardic Jew would be able to convince other Sephardim that Zionism would indeed benefit them and their communities in Palestine.²³ The WZO finally sent Ariel Bensión in 1926,²⁴ and he arrived in Argentina in the midst of the controversy begun by the World Union of Sephardic Jews (WUSJ)²⁵ in which Sephardim had been told not to contribute to the *Keren Hayesod*. In that vein, the president of the *Centro Sionista Sefaradí* (CSS), which had been founded in 1925, declared to Bensión that the *Centro*

would not recognize his delegation unless all the money raised during the visit was sent to the WUSJ and not to the JNF.

Bensión's campaign in Argentina on behalf of the WZO was successful, to a degree. He founded three new Sephardic Zionist societies (*Bene Kedem*) in Buenos Aires, Rosario and Mendoza, and brought these organizations within the folds of the World Zionist Organization.²⁶ Yet, although the Sephardim agreed to channel donations through the WZO and the National Jewish Fund, suspicions between the two groups at the local level continued to color their relationship into the following decade. But in 1933, the second *Centro Sionista Sefaradi* received a letter from the KKL inviting a member of the *Centro* to participate in the organizational meetings of a "Purim Ball."²⁷ Mr. Bahbuth, a member of the CCS, explained to the rest of the steering committee that

this party will be advertised by an extensive campaign carried out by 50 young ladies using 1500 phones, on the radio, and in the press. The Ball will take place in the *Coliseo* [Theater], and it will be the same as the one organized in Tel Aviv during the Carnival season. Each invited center will have to organize a ball in which they will select their "Beauty Queen," who will then participate in the "Beauty Contest" to be held during the Purim Ball.²⁸

In an effort to ensure participation in an event that was being organized by a group with which the *Centro* had conflicting relations, the invitation made reference to the beauty contests and Purim Balls that had been held in Tel Aviv in the 1920s, legitimizing the event in the eyes of a particularly skeptical audience. Note, however, that although reference was made to the Carnival in Tel Aviv, only the beauty contest was going to be emulated. The Carnival itself, characterized by the 'takeover' of the city, was not a viable option in Buenos Aires.²⁹ From that year on, until 1944, the CSS participated regularly in the Argentine KKL Purim Ball, both by sending candidates and by selling tickets for the event.³⁰

But in 1944, as mentioned above, the Sephardim decided to organize their own "*Baile de la Colectividad*."³¹ "At the beginning of 1944 we began to realize," claimed Salvador Camji, a member of the CSS, "the need to constitute, officially and definitively, on solid bases, a Sephardic Department of the KKL for Argentina."³² This "official" creation of a KKL Department within the CSS gave impetus to the need both to send significant donations to the KKL in Palestine and to raise enough money to support the newly-created local structure. The Sephardic participation in the KKL collections would now be more evident, as the creation of this Sephardic branch made it possible to wire sums independently rather than submit their collections to the (Ashkenazi led) KKL

offices in Argentina for a single remittance. And the existence of a local structure with its own budget made it possible to organize a plan of action that included "spreading knowledge of the National Jewish Fund, its sacred objectives, the idea of the redemption of *Eretz Israel*" to their own, without needing to depend on the will of the KKL.³³ In that vein, the Sephardic branch created a "Young Women's Committee" (*Comisión de Señoritas*) in order to attract young people and spread the Zionist ideal among the various Sephardic communities.

The process that culminated with the creation of the Sephardic Department of the KKL was also advanced, partly, by international events. During the 1940s, the complaints voiced by Sephardim in the 1920s were finally acknowledged by the WZO, and new institutions, which confirmed the need to address those differences, were created. These new organizations also helped to centralize the work being done among Zionist Sephardim. Three conventions were held and the decisions reached furthered the process of the institutionalization of difference. Representatives from various communities of the interior provinces and from several organizations in Capital Federal, Chile and Uruguay met in 1942 for the *Primera Convención Regional Sefaradí* (First Regional Sephardic Convention), in 1945 for the *Primera Convención Regional Sefaradí del Keren Kayemeth Leisrael* (First Regional Sephardic Convention of the Keren Kayemeth Leisrael), and in 1948 for the *Segunda Convención Regional Sefaradí* (Second Regional Sephardic Convention). The first and second conventions were organized by the *Centro Sionista Sefaradí*, and three delegates from Palestine joined them: Adolfo Arditti (representative of the Keren Hayesod), Eli Eliashar (who had travelled on behalf of the Keren Hayesod, the Jewish Agency, and the Sephardic Community of Jerusalem, of which he was president) and Elias Castel (from the World Federation of Sephardic Communities).³⁴

These conferences, and the decisions arrived at in them, contributed to the context that gave birth to the Sephardi "*Baile de la Comunidad*." As a result of the first meeting, the *Comité Sefaradí Argentino pro Keren Hayesod, KKL y Refugiados* was created.³⁵ This was the first step towards ensuring that control over the Sephardic communities' resources was exclusively in the hands of a Sephardic organization. But the creation of this committee was also the confirmation, at the local and international levels, that Sephardim deserved to be in control of the activities, propaganda and means for achieving their financial obligations with the National Jewish Fund. Nominally independent from the *Centro Sionista Sefaradí*, but led by almost the same men, this new organization was able to utilize its resources exclusively for fund-raising, freeing the CSS from that task. This was also a much more successful organization in bringing the Sephardi Jewish communities of the Argentine provinces into closer contact with Buenos Aires.³⁶ Yet this organization was not yet a 'branch' of the National

Jewish Fund itself; it was a committee organized by Sephardim in order to better work the various communities for donations that would be then sent to the Funds.

The *Convención Regional Sefaradí del Keren Kayemeth Leisrael*, which was convened by a group of active Sephardic Zionists and 81 delegates from various other (not all of them Zionist) organizations, created, in 1945, a Sephardic Department of the KKL. Until then, the work in favor of this fund was done by commissions in the various Sephardic communities, which were not Zionist organizations per se, and by the *Comité Argentino* mentioned above. When the KKL founded its Directory for Argentina, the CSS officially created its KKL department in June 1944.³⁷ The work carried out by this department was very successful, and even after only two years of existence as an independent branch, they had managed to raise a significant amount of money.³⁸ With the creation of the Sephardic branch of the KKL, all Sephardic institutions (openly Zionist, like the CCS, as well as those not exclusively Zionist, like religious congregations, and social institutions) would be represented in this umbrella organization under the sponsorship of the KKL Argentine Branch.

The *Segunda Convención Regional Sefaradí*, held in 1948 with the presence of two important delegates from the soon-to-be-born state of Israel, gathered almost all the Sephardic institutions in Argentina and created a *Consejo Central Sefaradí*, entity which would further centralize all Zionist Sephardic activity in Argentina. This *Consejo Central*'s main objective was to "care for the interests and rights of the Sephardim in *Eretz Israel* and in the Diaspora," and it would keep close contact with the *Comité Sefaradí Argentino pro KH, KKL and Refugees*.³⁹ This new committee would also be in charge of a new *Consejo Central de Damas Sefaradíes*, created to "interest the Sephardic woman in the general rebirthing work and to bring funds to those Sephardim in need in *Eretz Israel* and the Diaspora."⁴⁰

This move towards centralized Zionist organizations took place outside the Sephardic community as well.⁴¹ In the 1940s, and partly as a result of a war-ridden Europe, the World Zionist Organization began to pay more attention to the American continent as a source of money and help for the movement. Although the United States housed the largest Jewish community and therefore the main efforts at fundraising centered on them, Argentina and its Jewish community also became the center of attention. The *Keren Hayesod* created its Latin American offices in Buenos Aires in 1941 and the *Keren Kayemet Leisrael* followed suit in 1943. As well, the Jewish Agency founded a Latin American Department in New York. In 1943, the *Consejo Central Sionista* (whose name would be replicated in the organization created within the Sephardic community years later) was formed, council which now became the umbrella organization for all Zionist groups in Argentina. A *Primer Congreso Sionista de América Latina* took place

in 1945, and it was here that the creation of a Jewish Agency office for South America was discussed. This branch of the World Zionist Organization came into existence in 1947, and it placed emphasis on the need to instill Zionist ideals through education and the formation of youth committees. By 1948, then, the WZO had created local offices in Argentina, and within these organizations, Sephardim had formed their own departments.

Gran Baile de la Colectividad in the Early Years

The separate Sephardic Queen Esther Ball was, then, the manifestation of these organizational changes, and the central role youth and women were poised to take in the Zionist movement. The success of the 1944 party was almost instantaneous. From five initial institutions that participated sending 'representatives' in 1944, there were eight in 1945; and although there were only four in 1946, there were nine in 1948.⁴² The money collected also augmented as the years went by, from a profit of \$3,666.95 in 1945, to \$5,976.20 in 1947. This amount becomes even more significant when we compare it to other sources of revenue for the Sephardic Branch of the KKL. In 1945, for example, donations made to the KKL through the use of the 'collection tin boxes' amounted to \$4,167.85 for the *whole* year, and donations given during the Passover campaign were a mere \$102.

In its mechanics, the Sephardic ball would become almost an exact replica of the event organized by the KKL, with a much more visible presence of its youth. The organization of the ball was in the hands of the Youth Department of the CSS, the Sephardic branch of the KKL, and its Young Women's commission.⁴³ Other Sephardic organizations, however, participated actively as well. The organizing committee would ask Sephardic institutions and centers (not all of which were 'Zionist' organizations) to assist with the various activities associated with the event, such as the selection and hiring of the hall and orchestras, the raising of money for the advertisements to appear in the magazine, the selling of tickets, the preparation of various kiosks, the propaganda committee, and other tasks.⁴⁴ Each Sephardic center would organize beauty contests among its members, and then send their representatives who would compete for the title "*Miss Sefaradí*." The judges in charge of the selection were prominent members of the community, representatives of the organizations that had sent candidates for the title, as well as well-known Sephardic and non-Sephardic Zionist leaders.⁴⁵

The *Baile*, although "Jewish," Zionist, and "Sephardic," did not take place behind closed doors, as it were. As I have argued elsewhere, these philanthropic events necessitated the use of 'non-Jewish' spaces to legitimate their activities.



Photograph 1: La Jalutzá,
Buenos Aires, 1944

Jewish Women's philanthropic fundraisers always took place in the same salons where Argentine female philanthropic societies organized theirs.⁴⁶ The election of *Miss Sefaradí* during these first years, with few exceptions, took place in a ballroom called "*Les Ambassadeurs*," located in an upper middle class neighborhood of Buenos Aires.⁴⁷ The event itself came to be associated with the salon, as if the contest's importance derived, in part, from the location itself.⁴⁸ The orchestras hired to play were also famous Argentine bands, not "Jewish" groups contracted to provide 'Jewish' music. The Programs for the *baile* announced the presence of two bands: a Jazz group (it was the late 1940s and 1950s, after all), and a *Típica* band that played, usually, tango.⁴⁹

Given the 'Argentine' tone of the event, one element seemed out of place. In the program of the first *Baile*, the organizers of the event (the Youth Zionist Sephardic groups) had included, among the photographs of the candidates to the title, a picture of "*la jalutzá*," the pioneer woman living in Palestine (see Photograph 1). She looked young, fresh, happy and committed, as if the image had been taken from a KKL poster encouraging settlement in Palestine. Her presence on the first event's program suggests that there was the hope that the elected *Miss Sefaradí* should embody the ideological commitments of the pioneer Zionist woman, ready to physically contribute to the construction of the future State by settling in one of the many colonies that already existed in the *Yishuv*. But that was her first and only appearance.⁵⁰ The link between the *jalutzá* and *Miss Sefaradí* was lost (probably to the great discomfort of the ideologically committed Zionist youth), and the contest was presented as a way to celebrate 'natural' (and "Argentine") beauty and not just ideal 'internal' qualities, like political commitment.⁵¹ The absence of the ideologically involved Jewish young woman in Palestine from future programs (and indeed, from all discussion



Photograph 2: Queen Esther, Tel Aviv, 1928.



Photograph 3: Candidate to the Reina Esther title, Buenos Aires, 1946.



Photograph 4: Candidate to the Reina Esther title, Buenos Aires, 1946.

regarding the beauty contest) reminds us, as well, that Zionism in Argentina was used not just to link the Diaspora to (the idea of) the Jewish State, but (in what may appear to be a contradiction but was not) to evidence belonging to the Argentine nation. A ‘Zionist’ young woman in Argentina did not look like a Jewish settler in Israel; she was purposefully Argentine.

The ‘Argentine’ candidates for the title were not meant to look ‘Sephardic’ either. While in the Queen Esther contests held in Tel Aviv the candidates wore their ‘Oriental’ clothing (see Photograph 2), and in Argentina “ethnic communities” beauty contests elected ‘ethnically’ dressed candidates,⁵² the “*Miss Sefaradí*” hopefuls in Buenos Aires did not have their ethnicity inscribed in their clothes or bodies. In fact, there was nothing that readily identified these women as *Sefaradies* besides their belonging to a Sephardic institution (see Photographs 3 and 4). The event, the organizers explained, had become a “*modern tradition*,” (emphasis mine) which would clearly have necessitated the erasure of a tradi-

tional past that ‘traditional’ clothing would have brought to the fore.⁵³ These women were elected because of their natural beauty, as they paraded in ‘regular’ fashionable clothes, in fashionable salons. Being *Sefaradi* in Argentina meant being ‘modern’ and ‘classy,’ indistinguishable from other Argentine “*señoritas*.”

Argentine Beauty Queens

The *Reina Esther* and *Miss Sefaradi* were not the only Beauty titles awarded in Argentina. The 1930s, in particular, had seen the popularization of beauty contests. Many “*reinas plebeyas*” (*Reinas de la Primavera, de la Colectividad, de la Simpatía*, etc.) would reign in interior towns, having won their titles in festivals organized by local newspapers and businesses.⁵⁴ Local and regional governments, together with rural and industrial businessmen, elected ‘their’ queens in order to promote the products and goods of their region.⁵⁵ The female body was increasingly paraded and celebrated in public. The “Miss Argentina” contest, although not yet in its modern form, had appeared in the late 1920s. Two beauty contests, organized by Argentine magazines, crowned their *Reinas* as the most beautiful women in Argentina.⁵⁶ The practice (newspapers and magazines organizing the events and carrying out the process) was reiterated in the early 1930s by other Argentine publications.

But it is not until the first Peronist government that these beauty queen contests acquire widespread interest, thanks, in part, to the active involvement of government institutions. The regime utilized female beauty as a means to garner popular support. The discursive link between “Argentina” and “worker,” which legitimized as citizens a group of people that had, until that point, been left out of the political arena, became embodied in the “*Reina del Trabajo*” (Queen of Labor) title.⁵⁷ Around May 1st (a socialist holiday appropriated by Peronism to form part of their repertoire), Buenos Aires would host ‘provincial’ Labor Queens who came to the city to compete for the prized title of *Reina del Trabajo*, who was crowned by none other than Eva Perón, the first lady of Argentina (see Photograph 5). This contest was held in visible public spaces; it became part of official propaganda and was, decades later, televised in the State-owned channel. And although the 1955 coup interrupted the practice, the election of the “*Reina del Trabajo*” was re-established in the 1970s, with the return of Peronism to power.

It is impossible to imagine that the Argentine Jewish community was not aware of all these very public beauty contests and events. And while it is true that the election of “Queen Esther” was deeply embedded in Jewish practices and culture, the Argentine context clearly provided new layers of meaning to this ‘Jewish’ event. In 1932, Ana Rover, a Jewish young woman representing



Photograph 5: *Reina del Trabajo* crowned by Eva Perón, 1949.

the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Once, was elected “Miss Capital Federal.” As such, she participated in the final election for the candidate that would represent Argentina in the “Miss Universe” contest to be held in Belgium. Although the Argentine press made no reference to her Jewishness, the possibility that a Jewish Argentine woman would indeed represent the whole country would not have been lost to Argentine Jews in general.⁵⁸ Participating in Beauty Queen contests, even if only Jewish, was an opportunity to place Argentine Jewish beauty on a similar, if separate, stage.

Zionist Activity among Sephardim after 1950

After the creation of the State in 1948, Zionist activity, especially among Sephardic youth ballooned. While the 1940s had seen Zionist work among Sephardim be dominated by the activities of an apolitical *Centro Sionista Sefaradí* and by the increasing importance of the Sephardic Branch of the *Keren Kayemeth Leisrael*, the 1950s and 1960s would witness the creation of a variety of new Sephardic organizations and groups that were not solely focused on donations and fund-raising. After the creation of the State of Israel, Zionist campaigning had been organized along party lines, with each party sending representatives to the Diaspora for garnering support and ensuring their victory in local Jewish community elections. In this context, Sephardim had no place as their own “group;” their possibilities for participating in the local and international structure depended on their willingness to forgo their ‘singleness’ and belong to political

parties alongside Ashkenazim.⁵⁹ Yet this was hard to do, not only because of the language difference: as late as the 1950s, Sephardim continued to complain that Ashkenazim would mostly use Yiddish in their meetings and public events.⁶⁰ Sephardim had created important and (to a degree) efficient structures that could be tapped into, and they continued to see themselves as a singular group that went beyond political ascriptions. Eli Eliashar's visit to Argentina in 1948, whose purpose was to get Sephardim to raise money for Sephardic causes in Israel, should be seen as an indication that the desire to maintain Sephardim as a unit was also encouraged from outside the community.⁶¹ But that 'unit,' it was also clear, was not to be 'political' but 'practical.' Sephardim in Argentina were discouraged from organizing a political group, but were instead asked to continue working independently for fundraising purposes.⁶² For the 1949 *Campaña Unida*, Sephardim organized into two groups, and the sense of collective beyond the practicalities of working separately continued.

The *Delegación de Entidades Sefaradies* (DESA), one of the sub-groups created for the *Campaña Unida*, came into existence in 1950. Besides raising funds for the new State, they carried out an important 'educational' campaign, which included lectures, films, and social and 'artistic' events on Jewish holidays.⁶³ They organized its Youth Groups in 1951, and its Women's Commissions in 1952, both of which became very active in educational and social activities.⁶⁴ Similar to the magazine published by the "*Juventud Sionista Sefaradi*" in the late 1940s, DESA's publication made an effort to reconcile their ideological stand regarding Sephardic participation in the Zionist movement and the concrete reality Sephardim faced in Argentina.⁶⁵ "We do not believe in the need of a policy to defend *Sephardic* rights," they claimed, but only to defend "Jewish interests, and [to work] on behalf of Jewish national solidarity."⁶⁶ But they understood that Sephardim were left out of educational and publication channels (again, Ashkenazim favored printing in Yiddish), and, in that context, separate Sephardic institutions were essential for spreading the Zionist ideal.⁶⁷

"*Hejalutz-Tejezakna*" was a different type of Zionist youth organization. It was created in 1951 by uniting Sephardic youth groups from Argentina and Uruguay, and, in its early years, "physically" trained young people (both men and women) in the province of Buenos Aires to prepare them for *aliyah* (migration to Israel).⁶⁸ Although this group had organized as an 'independent' Sephardic entity, and 'older' Zionist Sephardim founded a group to support their endeavors, the larger "*Hanoar Hatzioni*" movement (which already existed in Argentina and was led by Ashkenazim) absorbed this Sephardic branch.⁶⁹ The group, reorganized in 1961 with a slightly modified name, continued their activities among the youth with a significant participation of descendants from Damascus and the Balkans.⁷⁰

The “*Movimiento Sefaradí Sionista*,” officially created in 1967, traced its origin to the last years of the 1950s. As described by its publication, the birth of this movement was the result of intensive work done by the Jewish Agency, which sent three missionaries (*sheliach-shlichim*) to train and bring together a committed “second generation Sephardim.”⁷¹ Josef Meuijas (sic), the first of these *shlichim*, arrived in 1958. One of his most remembered and praised projects was to organize the first of three three-month-long leadership seminars in Israel. Eighteen Argentine Sephardim were sent in 1960, and a total of one hundred were trained at the three Seminars combined. Meuijas was also instrumental in convening a “Youth Congress” in Córdoba, which brought together young Sephardim from all over the country.⁷² When Meuijas left Argentina in 1960, the group lost not only an energetic leader, but the constant financial support of the Jewish Agency, which had, however, promised a new delegate. The second *sheliach* arrived in 1962, and the third in 1966. These ‘second generation’ Sephardim, trained in Israel and supported by funds from the Jewish Agency, participated in many of the Sephardic Youth Zionist organizations described above.⁷³ After their experiences in Israel, upon their return, and with the help of the arrival of the second two *shlichim*, most of these young men (and women), became the new generation of Sephardic Zionist leaders. In 1967, they organized their “First National Convention.”⁷⁴

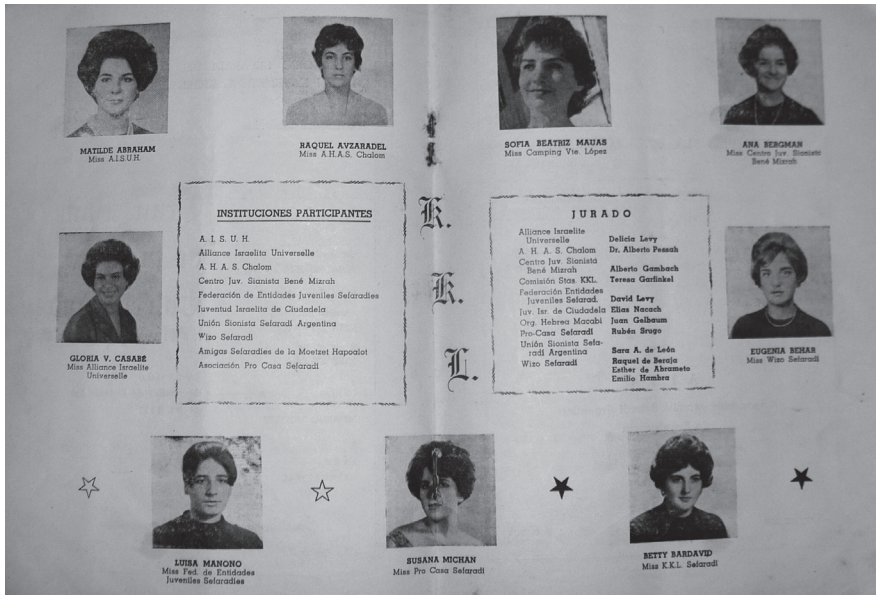
The participation of youth in all these movements was central, and one of the questions this involvement generated was the possibility of *aliyah*.⁷⁵ Some of these groups were openly in favor of settling in Israel (like *Baderej/Tejezakna*);⁷⁶ in fact the Sephardic Zionist publications periodically printed interviews with Sephardi *olim* (those who had migrated to the Jewish State) who described the process of adaptation to their new land. These articles served to stress both how hard life in the new State was and how fulfilling the experience proved to be.⁷⁷ But (Sephardi) parents appeared, as evident in the recollections of youth activists from the 1960s-1970s, strongly opposed to the idea of their children settling in Israel.⁷⁸ Most Sephardi Zionist organizations, then, developed a somewhat less ‘threatening’ discourse regarding *aliyah*. The *Primera Convención Juvenil Judía Latinoamericana*, held in Montevideo in October 1961, stressed that there were many ways to contribute to the construction of the State, of which *aliyah* was just one.⁷⁹ The *Movimiento Sefaradí Sionista* claimed, in 1967, that the meaning of the word *aliyah* did not necessarily entail the physical move to Israel. “Etymologically speaking,” they reasoned, “*alia* (sic) means to ascend.”⁸⁰ “We therefore believe,” they continued, “that to make *alia* (sic) does not mean to migrate to the land of our ancestors, but fundamentally a wish for an integral spiritual elevation.”⁸¹ Parents were assured, then, that their children’s participation in these organizations would not necessarily culminate in the break-up of

the family. Their children could be committed Zionists, support the creation of Israel, and continue to be Argentine.

The World Zionist Organization, in 1972, finally created a Department for Sephardic Communities. This new Department allowed for a more efficient connection between the Sephardim in the Diaspora and Israel, and it was able to channel energy and financial support outside of political party structures. A reorganization also took place in Argentina and in Latin America within the Sephardic communities. In 1972, at the *Convención de Comunidades e Instituciones Sefaradies de la Argentina*, gathered in the province of Córdoba, a new umbrella organization was created (*Ente Coordinador Sefaradí Argentino*), and it was decided that delegates be sent to a meeting of the Latin American Jewish Congress that was held in Lima later that same year.⁸² It was at that Congress that FESELA (*Federation Sefaradí Latinoamericana*), the Sephardi Latin American Federation, was born. This Federation, still at work, became part of the World Sephardi Federation.

Gran Baile de la Colectividad in the 1960s and 1970s and the KKL Baile de Purim

The Baile de la Colectividad continued, into the 1960s and 1970s, to be a significant event for the Sephardi community. Although there were many new youth organizations, the *Baile* continued to be organized by the *Directorio Sefaradí del Keren Kayemeth*, which restructured its youth group in 1970, together with those organizations that sent candidates to the title.⁸³ The mechanism of the election did not change with the years. Each participating association held their own contests to elect their candidate, and sent a member to act as a judge.⁸⁴ Participants were asked to walk on stage to show themselves to those in attendance: Queen Esther, Miss Sefaradí, Miss *Simpatía* (Miss Congeniality), and Miss KKL Sefaradí, were then elected. The “most beautiful” were crowned Queen Esther and her princesses, while Miss KKL Sefaradí was awarded to the representative of the (participating) Sephardic organization that had raised more money for the event by selling tickets.⁸⁵ The Reina Esther was, according to one announcement, “the symbol of the beautiful and intelligent woman.”⁸⁶ The prizes given to the elected Queen were symbolic, and they included sometimes a (fake) crown, flowers, and, in some cases, jewelry.⁸⁷ Although it seems that during the 1960s the *Baile* was held in Sephardic and non-Sephardic Jewish venues, it moved out again into ‘public’ places in the 1970s.⁸⁸ “*Rugantino*” and the still famous “*Les Ambassadeurs*” were some of the famous *boites* (a 1970s Argentine term for a disco) where the contest was held in the 1970s.



Photograph 6: Candidates for Miss Sefaradí/Queen Esther, 1960



Photograph 7: Queen Esther and Miss Sefaradí, 1973.

Again, participants in this event were not made to look “Sefaradí.” The (few) photographs available make it clear that these Argentine Sephardi young women followed local fashion styles, and that the election of the ‘most beautiful’ followed local standards as well (there is even evidence that some of the jurors were members of the local Argentine press).⁸⁹ In the 1970s, the winners of the

Sephardi contest were interviewed by ADAMA, the magazine published by the *Directorio Sefaradí del Keren Kayemeth*, and although the journalist asked the elected Queen Esther if she was interested in Zionism, and the candidate even suggested she would like to settle in Israel, there was clearly no strong political commitment to that action.⁹⁰

As stated in the introduction, in the early 1970s the Sephardic ‘Queen’ and Misses got invited to participate in the general KKL “*Baile de Purim*,” which crowned a *Reina Esther de la Colectividad*.⁹¹ It becomes clear from the description of these ‘general’ contests that not only were now “Sephardim” included as candidates, but that a larger number of representatives (and their organizations) were from the interior provinces as well. From a purely Ashkenazi event, this “*Baile de Purim*” came to truly represent a much more diverse Argentine Jewish community. This event was also very ‘Argentine,’ in that it was mostly held in public spaces (*River Plate*, *Club Comunicaciones*, for example) and, because of larger budgets, boasted the presence of very famous ‘youth’ singers, rock stars, and *animadores* (hosts): Sui Generis, Valeria Lynch, Trocha Angosta, Leonard Simmons, Guillermo Brizuela Méndez, and Silvio Soldán, among others. Tango and Jazz were no longer heard, and Israeli dances and “Jewish” singers made their appearance too, but their performances were announced in much smaller print.

Sephardic visibility in these ‘general’ Jewish events was always highlighted, whether specifically by Sephardic press or by the general Jewish publications.⁹² In 1973 we read, for example, that of the nineteen participants in the general Purim Ball, nine were Sephardim, which suggests that not only the Sephardic Queen Esther and Miss Sefaradí were entered as candidates, but that other Jewish communities (like sports clubs, for example) were electing Jewish young women of Sephardic origin as their candidates.⁹³ Sephardim had clearly become an integral part of the Argentine Jewish community.

Conclusions

The *Bailes* organized by the KKL, in their Sephardic and non-Sephardic versions, can be read as many things: beauty contests, expressions of Zionist zeal, and social occasions, among others; and indeed they were that. But I suggest that we can read them as something more. At the beginning, in the 1940s, with the creation of the Sephardic beauty contest, the Sephardim were able to both make their participation in the Zionist cause visible, and begin to shape a new Sephardic identity, not based on their past cities/countries of origin but on their shared Argentine present, which included their participation in the Zionist movement as Argentines.⁹⁴ Camji, in his speech at the *Primera Convención*

Regional Sefardi del Keren Kayemeth, explained that “[t]his important event of the *colectividad*, which has already become a beautiful tradition to be repeated annually among the Sephardic youth institutions of Buenos Aires... is a clear manifestation of the wish of all our youth to work together for the *colectividad* and for the Jewish people, either morally, materially, culturally or practically.”⁹⁵ This *colectividad* was, they understood, not only one Sephardi group, but a new collective that was being shaped in this new country. “Those who make decisions today about the organization of this event,” Camji continued, “will decide tomorrow about matters of interest shared by all its members... [Y]oung people who are growing up in a free country like Argentina share a willingness to unite all the institutions that organize this ball.”⁹⁶ The young woman who was crowned “Queen Esther” and “Miss Sefaradí” came to represent this new Sephardi (Argentine born) identity.

In the context of the 1970s, with the steady growth of youth movements and increased participation of young people in radical politics, the Sephardi, and indeed the non-Sephardi, *Bailes de Purim* take a whole new meaning. It is clear that with the many available options for *gente joven*'s participation in the Zionist movement, some of which advocated *aliyah*, these *Bailes* (and in particular, the Sephardi one) provided a ‘safe’ option, one that allowed both for the expression of ‘ethnic’ AND ‘national’ identity: these were Argentine Jews who showed their commitment to the State of Israel *as* Argentines living (and hoping to continue to live) in this new country. In the “*Purim Ball Central*” “*Miss Sefaradí*” symbolized the earned right of Sephardim to represent the Argentine Jewish community. *Miss Sefaradí*, a young Argentine-born Sephardic Jew, was now seen as the symbol of a new group identity, predicated on both difference (celebrated and defended) and commonality. Young Sephardi women, beautiful, healthy and Argentine, were both the product and the origin of a new generation of Sephardic Jews that had found in Zionism a platform from where to defend their visibility as a group, and showcase their commitment to Israel as well as their belonging to Argentina.

NOTES

- * I would like to thank the members of the History Department at St. Mary's College of Maryland for their insightful comments on this article; Hisky Shoham, for the many conversations over this topic and for his knowledge of the Tel Aviv contest, Cecilia Tossounian, for sharing her work on Argentine Beauty Contests, the audiences at two CLAH and AJS panels, for their probing questions on previous versions of this paper, and the two anonymous readers whose suggestions have made this a much better final product.

- 1 Jewish National Fund (JNF), which, together with the *Keren Hayesod*, became important fundraising institutions to speed up the process of the creation of the Jewish State. In particular, the KKL bought land in Palestine for settling purposes, and it raised money in ceremonies related to life cycle events. See Michael Berkowitz, *Zionist Culture and West European Jewry Before the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), in particular chapter 7. Throughout the article, I have used Jewish National Fund, JNF, *Keren Kayemet Leisrael*, and KKL interchangeably.
- 2 *La Luz*, April 5 1940, p. 166; CSS, Minute Books, March 31, 1940. Sephardic publications also proudly announced the money collected by the representatives of the CSS for the magazine they published for the event, and the number of tickets sold for the party.
- 3 Although I am aware of the risk of assuming commonalities among all non-Ashkenazi Jews, for the purposes of this article, I have decided to use Sephardim to define the Jews who arrived in Argentina coming not from Eastern Europe. The distinction between Sephardim and Ashkenazim is more than geographical, however, and the terms have been employed to refer to specific religious traditions.
- 4 The Jewish Argentine press used both “Esther” and “Ester” when referring to the Biblical Queen and the Beauty Queen title. Although “Ester” is usually the spelling Sephardim preferred, for consistency’s sake, I have decided to use “Esther” in this article.
- 5 The mechanics of the contest changed with time. Although in the first years “Miss Sefaradí” was automatically crowned “Reina Esther,” we later find that these two titles were awarded to two different young ladies. Given the language used in press reports, Queen Esther was the most coveted.
- 6 One of the most contentious issues was language. The FSA printed materials and carried their meetings in Yiddish, making it impossible for Sephardim to understand. A percentage of all collections made by Sephardim and handed over to the FSA for remittance to the World Zionist Organization was subtracted by the FSA in order to support its local structure (propaganda, meetings, etc.). Sephardim complained bitterly about the fact that their money was being used to print material they could not understand, and pay for meetings they could not attend. The language discrepancy continued well into the 1960s. See, for example, *Centro Sionista Sefaradí*, Minute Books, April 11, 1936; and “Primera convención juvenil judía latinoamericana,” *ADAMA* (newspaper of the *Directorio Sefaradi del Keren Kayemet Leisrael*), October 1961, p.1.
- 7 This fact should not be understood to mean that Sephardim, having found a common ground in Zionism, proceeded to act as a single entity in other aspects of community life. Each ‘geographic group’ continued to support its own philanthropic organizations, cemeteries, and ritual butchers; nevertheless, and precisely because of the separation that existed in all other aspects of communal life, their coming together around Zionism was indeed significant. Although there is no space to fully develop in the context of this article, communities’ official/rabbinical positions regarding Zionism were varied. For the Aleppo community in particular, see Susana Rodgers, *Los Judíos de Alepo en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Nuevos Tiempos, 2005); and “Los judíos Sirios en Buenos Aires frente al sionismo y al estado de Israel, (1948-1990),” *AMILAT V* (2005): 169-84.
- 8 Not only were the participants young ladies from Ashkenazic and Sephardic backgrounds, but they were also from a variety of locations in Argentina, not just from Buenos Aires.

- See "Eligióse a la Reina Esther en un marco de gran brillo," *Mundo Israelita*, April 10, 1971, p. 14.
- 9 For an analysis of the problems with the historiography of Jewish Latin America, as well as of its gaps, see Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, "Challenging Particularity: Jews as a Lens on Latin American Ethnicity," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 1, No. 2 (2006): 249-63; and Judith Elkin, "Rethinking Latin American Jewish Studies," *Latin American Research Review* 45, No. 2 (2010): 253-65.
 - 10 Esther 2:7.
 - 11 Monford Harris, "Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order," *Judaism* 26, No. 2 (1977): 161-70.
 - 12 Nina S. Spiegel, "Jewish Cultural Celebrations and Competitions in Mandatory Palestine, 1920-1947: Body, Beauty, and the Search for Authenticity" (Ph.D Dissertation, Stanford University, 2001), especially chapter 1; Hizky Shoham, "'A huge national assemblage': Tel Aviv as a pilgrimage site in Purim celebrations (1920-1935)," *The Journal of Israeli History* 28, No. 1 (2009): 1-20; and Anat Helman, "Two Urban Celebrations in Jewish Palestine," *Journal of Urban History* 32, No. 3 (2006): 380-403.
 - 13 See Spiegel, "Jewish Cultural Celebrations and Competitions in Mandatory Palestine, 1920-1947"; and Bat-Sheva Margalit Stern, "Who's the Fairest of Them All? Women, Womanhood, and Ethnicity in Zionist Eretz Israel," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 11 (2006): 142-63.
 - 14 Helman cites that the Jewish National Fund financed the Purim parades even before Agadati's organization of the Purim Ball and the Beauty Queen contest. See Helman, "Two Urban Celebrations in Jewish Palestine." pp. 383-384.
 - 15 Cited in Spiegel, "Jewish Cultural Celebrations and Competitions in Mandatory Palestine, 1920-1947." p. 67, footnote 94.
 - 16 The 'original' beauty contest was held last in 1929, year of the 'Arab Riots,' and conflict between the religious establishment and the authorities of Tel Aviv forced the end of this "anti-Jewish practice." The Carnival was re-instated in 1931, but the 'main' beauty contest was not. For a description of the conflict, the various positions, and the outcome, see Spiegel, "Jewish Cultural Celebrations and Competitions in Mandatory Palestine, 1920-1947," and Helman, "Two Urban Celebrations in Jewish Palestine." pp. 385-386.
 - 17 Goodman Philip, "The Purim Association of the City of New York (1862-1902)," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)* 40, No. 1-4 (1950): 134-73. See also "San Diego Purim Ball in 1888," originally appearing in *The Jewish Progress*, San Francisco, March 9, 1888, annotated by Sylvia Arden and re-printed in *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 7, No. 1 (1974), pp. 39-43.
 - 18 "La Fiesta de Purim en Moises Ville," *Mundo Israelita*, February 27, 1926, p. 2.
 - 19 "Fondo Nacional Israelita: Comité de la Capital," *Mundo Israelita*, February 27, 1926, p. 2. For the tradition of donating Purim money to the poor, see Moses Ben Maimon, "Feasting, Portions to Friends and Gifts to the Poor," in Goodman, Philip, ed. *The Purim Anthology* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1988).
 - 20 "Con Sabetay J. Djaen, enviado de la Confederación Universal Sefaradí," *Semanario Hebreo*, Buenos Aires, April 30, 1927, cover page. The WUSJ was also called "Confederation of Sephardic Jews."

- 21 *Confederation Universelle des Juifs Sepharadim*, Propagande, 2ème Année, No. 17. Comité Exécutif, Jerusalem, le 31 Août 1927 (Jerusalem City Archives, Box 14, File 129).
- 22 Victor A. Mirelman, "Early Zionist Activities Among Sephardim in Argentina," *American Jewish Archives* 34 (1982): 190-205, p. 195. See also, "Atracción de los Sefardies al Movimiento Nacional Judío," *Mundo Israelita*, October 2, 1926, cover page.
- 23 The rhetoric used by Ashkenazim always assumed that Sephardim did not want to donate money, or that they were not interested in Zionism.
- 24 The local (Ashkenazic) press announced the arrival of the delegate of the Zionist Executive Committee with fervor. See *Mundo Israelita*, September 18, 1926.
- 25 The World Union of Sephardic Jews "has denounced the World Zionist Organization to the Council of the League of Nations Union as not doing anything for the Sefardim. Just like our enemies, the Arab agitators and the Agudath Israel. Now, something must be done to show the world what they are." Letter written by Ida Bensión to Fanny Wachs, Nov. 4, 1927 (Argentine WIZO archives, Buenos Aires). Ida Bensión wrote two more letters to Mrs. Wachs regarding the work of Djaen and his connection to the WUSJ.
- 26 Although the *Bene Kedem* disbanded shortly after their creation, Bensión succeeded in re-establishing direct contact between Sephardim and the World Zionist Organization. See, for example, the letter written to Jacobo Benarroch, the President of the *Bene Kedem* Central Committee, by the World Zionist Organization, January 27, 1927 (CZA KH4 11266). In the same file, see donations made by *Bene Kedem*; for a more detailed description of Bensión's visit to Argentina, see Adriana Mariel Brodsky, "The Contours of Identity: Sephardic Jews and the Construction of Jewish Communities in Argentina, 1880 to the present" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 2004), chapter 3.
- 27 CSS, Minute Books, February 7, 1933. I believe that the exhaustive description of what the party entailed suggests that this was the first Queen Esther ball.
- 28 See above.
- 29 The festival advertised in 1926, however, was possible, as the Jewish agricultural colony was a "Jewish Space." See footnote 18.
- 30 *Mundo Israelita*, February 4, 1933, p. 2.
- 31 It is interesting to note that in Tel Aviv, the Yemenite community began organizing its own beauty queen contest the year after a Yemenite candidate won the title in the 'general' Agadati contest. Although the general Queen Esther contest ended in 1929, the Yemenites continued with theirs, as well as the Bukharan Jews. For a description of the Yemenite contest, see Stern, "Who's the Fairest of Them All? Women, Womanhood, and Ethnicity in Zionist Eretz Israel;" and Spiegel, "Jewish Cultural Celebrations and Competitions in Mandatory Palestine, 1920-1947."
- 32 Salvador Camji, "Informe del Departamento del KKL a la Primera Convención Regional Sefaradí del KKL en la Argentina," *Israel*, November 1945, pp. 13-16.
- 33 Camji, "Informe del Departamento," p. 14.
- 34 Although Eli Eliashar was particularly interested in raising money for the Sephardim in Palestine, he also agreed to raise money for the Keren Hayesod, especially given the outbreak of military operations in Israel after 1948. See Ignacio Klich, "Arab-Jewish Coexistence in the First Half of 1900s' Argentina: Overcoming Self-Imposed Amnesia,"

- in *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities*, eds. Ignacio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD, 1998): 1-37, p. 13; "Discurso del Señor Eliahu Eliachar (sic)", *Israel*, May 31, 1948, p. 11; Elie Eliachar, *Living with Jews* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p. 127.
- 35 "Significativos contornos alcanzó la Primera Convención Regional Sefaradí," *La Luz*, April 17, 1942, p. 179.
- 36 Comité Sefaradí Argentino Pro Keren Hayesod, "Memoria y Balance de la Campaña 1942," Buenos Aires, March 1943. This report lists the donations from communities in various Argentine provinces and important towns.
- 37 "Primera Convención Regional Sefaradí del Keren Kayemet Leisrael Realizada los días 24 y 25 del mes ppdo," *Israel*, November 1945, p. 12. See also Silvia Schenkolewski-Tractinsky, "Cambios en la Relación de la Organización Sionista Mundial hacia la Comunidad Judía y el Movimiento Sionista en la Argentina, hasta 1948," *Judaica Latinoamericana. Estudios Histórico-Sociales I* (1988): 149-66, p. 158.
- 38 "Informe del Keren Kayemet Sefaradí por el Sr. Y. Shabtay," *Israel*, May 31, 1948, p. 20.
- 39 "Resoluciones aprobadas en la segunda Convención Sefaradí Argentina, llevada a cabo los días 8, 9 y 10 de Mayo de 1948," *Israel*, May 31, 1948, p. 7.
- 40 "Resoluciones aprobadas."
- 41 See Schenkolewski-Tractinsky, "Cambios en la Relación;" and Natan Bistrizky, *Del judaísmo y el sionismo en Latinoamérica* (Buenos Aires: Oficina central del Keren Kayemet Leisrael para la América Latina, 1949), pp.139-143.
- 42 See *Programas* for all these years.
- 43 In 1944, the CSS Youth department was in charge of the organization. For 1945, the KKL and the Youth Department of the CSS organized it. In 1946, the KKL Sephardi Directory, together with the Youth commissions of the CSS, were in charge. See *Gran Baile de la Colectividad*, años 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947 and 1948.
- 44 Departamento de Juventud del Centro Sionista Sefaradí, Minute Books, January 24, 1945.
- 45 In 1945, Dr. Mibashan, the representative of the KH, was one of the jurors; in 1947, Mr. José Hoffman, from the Agrarian Fund of the Zionist Organization, participated in the selection; and in 1948, Mr. Cialik, from the KKL Capital Federal, was present. The other jurors belonged to the Sephardic community. It is very difficult to assess the criteria used by the judges in their selections. It is also almost impossible to claim whether the selection of a particular candidate carried 'political' overtones.
- 46 See Brodsky, "The Contours of Identity: Sephardic Jews and the Construction of Jewish Communities in Argentina, 1880 to the present," chapter 3.
- 47 The venue changed in the 1960s. Evidence suggests that in the 1960s, it moved into Jewish community centers, to move out again in the late 1960s.
- 48 In interviews with members of Sephardic Zionist groups who were active in the 1960s and 1970s, when I inquired about the Beauty Queen contest, their first reaction always was "Ahh, the event at the 'Ambassadeurs'...". Interview with Pepe Menasche, and others (August 2008).
- 49 See *Programas*.

- 50 In Tel Aviv, the *jalutzá* was also absent from the Purim celebrations and Queen Esther contests. Although the ideology of the KKL was very much a visible part of the carnival events in Tel Aviv (slogans on all streets, for example), the pioneer woman was not. I thank Hisky Shoham for drawing my attention to this detail. For a description of the KKL slogans in Tel Aviv during the carnival, see Helman, “Two Urban Celebrations in Jewish Palestine,” p. 384.
- 51 Lobato makes this argument in Mirta Zaida Lobato, ed., *Cuando las mujeres reinaban: Belleza, virtud y poder en la Argentina del siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2005), Introduction.
- 52 See the description of the ‘ethnic’ beauty contests in Berisso, Argentina, *ibid.*, p.182.
- 53 Siu highlights the symbolic value of the types of clothes candidates wore in the election of the Queen of the Chinese Colony in Central America: Lok Siu, “Queen of the Chinese Colony: Gender, Nation, and Belonging in Diaspora,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, No. 3 (2005): 511-42, p. 525.
- 54 See Lobato, ed. *Cuando las mujeres reinaban*. I am borrowing the term “reinas plebeyas” from Bisso’s work: Andrés Bisso, “Monarquías republicanas en tiempos de democracia fraudulenta. Representaciones lúdicas de la soberanía en las elecciones de reinas y misses del interior bonaerense,” in *3ras Jornadas sobre la política en Buenos Aires en el siglo XX* (La Plata, 2008).
- 55 Lobato, ed. *Cuando las mujeres reinaban*.
- 56 Cecilia Tossounian, “Embodying the Nation. Beauty Culture and Miss Argentina in the Global Context” (unpublished manuscript, 2009), pp. 10 and 20-31.
- 57 Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
- 58 Ana Rover did not win the contest. See Tossounian, “Embodying the Nation,” pp. 27-28; Sandra Deutsch, *Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation: A History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880-1955* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 68-69.
- 59 It should be pointed out, however, that the Israeli Histadruth (Labor Federation) had a Sephardic branch in Argentina. But, of course, it did not run its own candidates’ list. See *Despertar*, the newspaper of its Sephardic Youth Group, which was published for a short time in Buenos Aires in the late 1940s.
- 60 See Ricardo Levy, “La Juventud Sefardí y los Partidos Políticos,” in *DESA*, May 3, 1956, p. 4.
- 61 Abraham Mibashan, “Argentina,” in *American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 51, p. 267; and “Discurso del Señor Eli Eliachar (sic),” *Israel*, May 31, 1948, p. 11. Note, as well, that Eliashar’s visit ultimately split the Zionist Sephardi group into two, over the amount of donation that would go to support the Sephardi community in Jerusalem.
- 62 See letter from Baruch Uziel (Tel Aviv) to the president of the Comunidad Israelita Sefaradí, José Ventura, June 12, 1949 (IWO, Buenos Aires, File: Sefaradies).
- 63 *DESA* would publish a list of contributors who had failed to pay their dues alongside articles that dealt with the slow but constant development of the State of Israel. See, for example, “Conozcamos a Israel,” *DESA*, May 3, 1956, p. 7.
- 64 “Juventud D.E.S.A.,” *DESA*, Nov. 17, 1951, p. 6; and “Comité Femenino de la D.E.S.A.,” *DESA*, Nov. 27, 1952, p. 6.

- 65 Ranaan Rein and Mollie Lewis make a similar argument regarding Argentine Jews relating to Zionism in a way that made perfect sense with the local reality they were immersed in (and not necessarily with the far-away-reality of Palestine/Israel). See Raanan Rein and Mollie Lewis, "Judíos, árabes, sefaradíes y argentinos: el caso del periódico *Israel*," in *Arabes y judíos en Iberoamérica: similitudes, diferencias y tensiones sobre el transfondo de las tres culturas*, ed. Raanan Rein (Madrid: Fondo de las Tres Culturas, 2008): 83-115.
- 66 Levy, "La Juventud Sefaradí."
- 67 Idem.
- 68 "Un movimiento jalutsiano sefaradí toma auge en nuestro medio," *DESA*, 18 December 1951, p. 7. It is important to notice that Sephardim had already created organizations aimed at preparing the youth for life in Kibutzim. In 1948, for example, the youth group of the CSS had organized a 'Moshava' which trained youth for the difficult life of the new State. See Brodsky, "The Contours of Identity," p. 187.
- 69 Levy, "La Juventud Sefaradí."
- 70 The genesis and later development of Tejezakna in the 1950s, however, deserves more space that can be accorded within this article. For the 1960s, see "'Seder' del Movimiento Tejezakna," *ADAMA*, May 1962, p. 3. *ADAMA* was the publication of the Directorio Sefaradí del Keren Kayemet in Buenos Aires. It appeared between 1958 and 1977. I thank Dr. Nissim Mayo for this information.
- 71 "Hitos en la trayectoria del movimiento sefaradí sionista," in *Crónica Sefaradí*, April 1967, p. 5.
- 72 "Bienvenido Sr. Shaliaj (sic)," *ADAMA*, May 1962, p. 3.
- 73 Many of the leaders of the *Movimiento Sefaradí Sionista* had been participants in the first leadership seminar in Israel.
- 74 "Estatutos del Movimiento Sefaradí Sionista," June 1967.
- 75 In the early 1950s, the *Centro Sionista Sefaradí* had secured the preparation of *madrijim* (leaders) who were sent to Israel for training and returned to work in Argentina. This was much like the seminaries organized by the Jewish Agency. See *Centro Sionista Sefaradí*, "Asamblea General Extraordinaria de Agosto 23 de 1955," Memoria.
- 76 For *Baderej*, see "Nuestra manera de hacer la revolución," *Raíces*, A. 3, No. 17, April 1970, pp. 72-73. I thank Bea Gurwitz for passing this article along.
- 77 See, for example, "Cartas de compañeros que viven en Israel," *ADAMA*, Nov. 1970, p. 2;
- 78 Interview with Pepe Menasche (August, 2008), and Elena Cohen Imach and others (May 2010).
- 79 "Resoluciones de la primera convención juvenil judía latinoamericana," *ADAMA*, Oct. 1961, p. 4.
- 80 "¿Qué es la alíá?," *Crónica Sefaradí*, April 1967, p. 6.
- 81 Idem.
- 82 "Convención de Comunidades e Instituciones Sefaradíes de la Argentina," *ADAMA*, June 1972, pp.1 and 4.
- 83 "Grupo Juvenil del Directorio Sefaradí del KKL," *ADAMA*, June 1970, p. 2.
- 84 In interviews with candidates, two women recall that sometimes there was no 'election' ball at the individual associations, but rather women were asked to represent their organi-

- zations in the main ball. Keila Gaut de Niborski (interview through her daughter-in-law, August 2009), and Chuchi Cywiner (August, 2009).
- 85 Although I have not been able to talk to a ‘judge,’ participants in the Contest agreed that ‘beauty’ was what judges ranked. Matilde Abraham personal communication, September 2009. Chuchi Cwyner and Keila Gaut de Niborski recall a different practice, however. Chuchi stated that the candidate that had brought more people to the event (number of tickets sold) was elected; Keila, on the other hand, described that each candidate stood on the stage and the one that received the loudest applause was crowned. These two events, however, were not “Sephardic,” but organized by local KKL branches (in La Plata and in Tucumán).
- 86 “Un Purim Diferente,” *ADAMA*, March 1971, p. 3.
- 87 Chuchi Cwyner remembers a ‘torah’ pendant; Keila Gaut was given a gold (or silver) necklace; and Matilde Abraham remembers a crown. Personal communication with all participants.
- 88 In 1960, it was held in Macabi, a Jewish social and sports club; in 1962, in the Chalom Congregation (Sephardic), and in 1964, in Alianza, the Moroccan social and sports club. Thanks to Matilde Abraham for information regarding the contest in 1960.
- 89 “Significativo brillo alcanzó el baile de Purim del Keren Kayemet,” *Mundo Israelita*, April 4, 1970, p. 12.
- 90 “Reportaje a la Reina Esther,” *ADAMA*, March-April 1972, p. 2.
- 91 “Primer paso a la consagración,” *ADAMA*, May 1971, p. 3
- 92 I have not located any reference to these events in the general Argentine press.
- 93 “Purim Ball 5733,” *ADAMA*, May 1973, p. 2.
- 94 Brodsky, “The Contours of Identity.”
- 95 Camji, “Informe del Departamento,” p. 14.
- 96 “El Baile de la Colectividad,” *Programa del Gran Baile de la Colectividad*, 1945, n/a.