

Fall 2012 Edition
Happy New Year 5773

HAMERKAZ

A PUBLICATION OF THE SEPHARDIC EDUCATIONAL CENTER



NOVEMBER 11-18, 2012

save the date

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SEC MISSION

The SEC is dedicated to ensuring Jewish identity and continuity by transmitting our rich Sephardic legacy to all Diaspora Jews, especially our youth.

Focusing on the timeless values of unity, compassion, sensitivity, tolerance and moderation embodied by Sephardic Judaism, we promote strength of family & community, pride of heritage & customs, increased knowledge of Torah & practice of Mitzvot, growth in spirituality, a traditional approach to Halacha, engagement with the modern world & society, and a meaningful connection to Israel, our People & Homeland.

The Sephardic Golden Path

By Rabbi Daniel Bouskila
SEC Director



I was raised in a home where terms like “Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Haredi, Secular Zionist” or the like were not a part of our vocabulary. Jews were Jews. In our home, we observed and respected our traditions, including Shabbatot, holidays and synagogue life. We may not have been considered “religious enough” by certain people’s standards, but we were unapologetic about who we were. We did not live our Jewish practices to conform to somebody else’s opinion, nor did we change our way of life because a rabbi wrote an article deciding to impose new strictures on the community. We celebrated Judaism with a deep sense of commitment to our heritage, and to the traditions of our family’s ancestors. We observed Judaism with warmth and beauty. Shabbat and holiday tables had a sense of artistic grandeur and culinary magic. We delighted in our foods, our tunes, and our stories. We didn’t spend much time talking about our “philosophy or ideology.” We ate, we sang, told and listened to stories, and we celebrated. Conversations about “Haredim on the right” or “Secularists on the left” were not a part of our Shabbat tables. Classic “Divrei Torah” (words of Torah) were not always shared at the table, but if they were, they were void of so-called “Jewish politics”. Our Shabbat tables – and our Jewish lives in general – were void of denominational ideologies or affiliations. Some may view this as naïve or simplistic. I view it as an “undeclared ideology,” one that was not born in conferences or conventions, but was naturally lived by thousands of Sephardic families, and was the mode of teaching by Sephardic rabbis and sages. This became known as the “Sephardic Way of Life” – tradition, celebration, tolerance, and non-extremism. Life lived in the cherished and golden “middle path,” as Maimonides called it.

When I identify myself as a “Sephardic Jew” today, it is these very values handed to me by my parents that serve as my frame of reference. For me, “Sephardic” means much more than my ethnic background, my cuisine, or my particular set of customs and traditions. It is a Jewish way of life that looks at Judaism without labels, places the unity of the Jewish people above any one particular denomination or ideology, and understands that Jewish tradition – primarily halakha – will only survive and thrive if rabbis are endowed with the creative license and authority (as they were in the past) to facilitate Jewish life within the modern world that we live in.

Until very recently, when Lithuanian Ultra-Orthodoxy came to influence certain sectors of Sephardic rabbinic leadership, the classic position of Sephardic rabbis was always one that balanced tradition and modernity, and reflected a tolerant and moderate approach to halakha. Sephardic rabbis always understood that it does not take a great Talmid Haham (Rabbinic Scholar) to be strict. Anyone knows how to say “no,” and a ruling of “it’s absolutely prohibited” usually reflects ignorance of halakha and of the halakhic system. On the other hand, a freewheeling, irreverent, “do whatever feels right” approach to halakha is also at odds with Jewish tradition. It’s a lot easier to be extreme to either side, but seeking the balanced middle ground takes knowledge, understanding, sensitivity to the circumstances...and creativity.

In an article titled “The Leadership and Tradition of Sephardic Sages in the Modern Era,” Rabbi Yitschak Shuraki of Jerusalem’s Memizrach Shemesh writes:

What characterizes the rabbinic methods of the Sephardic sages? Between the strict and the liberal positions, the Sephardic Sages established a third path in which their great humility before God and their commitment to serve God and the community brought them to adopt original halakhic stances in order to deal with new situations, without fearing lenient decisions, rulings and originality.

But is Sephardic Judaism only for Sephardim?

Given the ethnic etymology of the word “Sephardic,” many people find it to be an exclusive, exclusionary word. Some feel that the use of the word “Sephardic” in organizational titles or synagogue names implies that these institutions are meant exclusively for Jews whose country of origin or ancestry is ethnically Sephardic. Along the same lines, many feel that “Sephardic Judaism” is only for those whose ethnic background is Sephardic.

Where all of this once may have been true, the situation today is otherwise. While not a denomination or movement, Sephardic Judaism – with its creative and unique blend of tradition, modernity, tolerance, spirituality and culture – indeed embodies a distinct philosophy and approach to Judaism. Much like one does not have to come from a Hasidic background to adopt the modes and teachings of Hasidic Rebbes, one also need not be from an ethnic Sephardic background to adopt the Sephardic way of life.

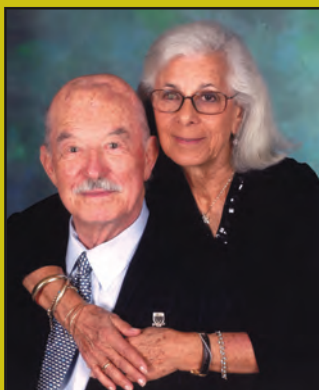
Like all other philosophies and ideologies of Judaism, Sephardic Judaism is open to Jews of any background who find the “Golden Path” of Sephardic Judaism – in its entirety, or even just some aspects of it -- appealing and spiritually meaningful. Sephardic Judaism is beautiful, and when practiced properly, it has the spiritual power to bring much beauty into your life.

Let me conclude with a special appeal to those who consider themselves “Sephardic from birth.” More than any other time during the year, Jews reconnect to God and their roots during these special holidays in the month of Tishrei. From the awakening sound of the Shofar to the uplifting chanting of the Selihot on Yom Kippur, and from the majestic feeling of waving the Lulav and Etrog on Sukkot to the ecstatic spirituality of dancing with a Torah on Simhat Torah, these holidays are endowed with a potent emotional power that recharges our spiritual batteries and strengthens our identity. If you are a Sephardic Jew, use these special days as an opportunity to reconnect to or strengthen your bond to your beautiful heritage. It is in your hands to help preserve and promote Sephardic Judaism as a living tradition. Commit yourselves to keeping the Sephardic way alive, so that future generations of Jews will benefit from our cherished Sephardic golden path.

May we be blessed by God through the merits of our ancestors.

Tizku L'Shanim Rabot.

MESSAGE FROM OUR FOUNDER



Dear Friends:

At this New Year, we are thankful and appreciative that our Executive Committee, working with our wonderful Executive Director, Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, continues their hard work and dedication to realize the vision we have always had for the SEC: A Center for All Jews that can teach the unique contributions and philosophy of our Sephardic heritage.

We also want to congratulate the Film Festival honorees, Rabbi Haim Amsalem, Daniela Ruah, and our dear friends, Joe and Sue Cohen. Our continued thanks to Sarita Fields and Neil Sheff for all they do to make the Film Festival so special.

We are excited about the grand remodel of our Spanish Courtyard building in Jerusalem and want to thank the director of our SEC campus, Israel Shalem, for all his devotion and tireless efforts on our behalf. Please share in the building of Jerusalem by becoming a supporter and dedicating a room on this historic campus, your home in Jerusalem.

We wish everybody a healthy, happy and sweet New Year. May it be a year of peace for all.

Dr. Jose and Freda Nessim



Rabbi Benito Garzon of Spain (l) meets with SEC Jerusalem Director Israel Shalem to review the remodel progress.

Remodeling Underway

Our Historic Spanish Courtyard Building is nearing completion and will be one of the jewels of the Old City of Jerusalem. Secure a place in history by naming a portion of this building in honor or memory of a loved one. **Contact Rabbi Bouskila today for more information** info@secjerusalem.org or (323) 272-4574.

REMODEL NAMING OPPORTUNITIES

- A. 3 Classrooms –Available
- B. Executive Office –Available
- E. Assistant Office –Available
- F. Kitchen –Available
- G. Museum/Exhibit & Visitor's Center –Available
- H. Student Lounge –Available
- I. Lecture Hall –Available
- J. 15 Bedrooms –Available
- K. Courtyard –Dedicated
- L. Library/Beit Midrash –Dedicated

SEC BEFORE



SEC REMODEL IN PROGRESS



Join The SEC in Reaching Thousands of Young Men and Women

Legacy Bequests

You can secure our future with the stroke of a pen! Include the SEC in your planned giving and estate planning.

To learn about the many ways you can support the SEC, please contact the SEC Office at **(323) 272-4574** or by emailing info@secjerusalem.org

All contributions are tax deductible to the extent permitted by law. **Thank you for your generosity!**



HAMSA ISRAEL HIGH SCHOOL TRIP TO ISRAEL

YOU PAY THE AIR...WE PAY THE REST!!!!

WINTER BREAK- DECEMBER 19, 2012 TO JANUARY 6, 2013



Highlights Include: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Northern & Southern Israel, IDF bases, museums & special attractions • Hike Israel's nature reserves, canyons, Masada...plus snow in the Hermon! • Pray at The Kotel, visit holy sites and ancient synagogues • Eat delicious Sephardic food, Sleep at the Sephardic Educational Center's historic campus in the Old City of Jerusalem • Make new friends from around the country.

Trip Leader: Rabbi Daniel Bouskila • Dates: Dec. 19, 2012 – Jan. 6, 2013 *Space is limited and filling up quickly!*

For more information: contact the SEC office at (323) 272-4574 or e-mail programs@secjerusalem.org
Deadline to apply: Friday, November 9, 2012

SEC FAMILIES

YOSI AND ESTHER HAPPY THEY JOINED SEC

Couple Move On to Leadership Roles in Communal Activities

By Jack Israel

It was a story-book romance. Yosi Avrahamy from Los Angeles, and Esther Kassin from Miami, met at the Sephardic Educational Center Leadership Seminar in 1994. The scene was Washington, D.C. One year later at the Sephardic Educational Center's national convention, Sepharad '95, that took place in Washington D.C., these two SEC leaders announced their engagement. The e was dancing, chairs in the air and tears of joy.

Yosi attributes much credit for their good fortune to their leadership roles in their respective branches of the SEC. Without that, they would probably have never met. He spoke of the rewards that come with involvement and participation in communal organizations. Both he and Esther were SEC leaders in their youth and have continued to participate into their adult lives. It is a rewarding, happy pattern of life followed by many more of the SEC alumni.

As the president of the L. A. Chapter for some five years, Yosi recalled with much pride that during his presidency, the successful "Classes for the Masses" was established. Hundreds of youth from all sections of Greater Los Angeles gathered together regularly at the Sephardic Temple to hear leading scholars and rabbis lecture and teach. A couple of meetings drew crowds of more than a thousand young adults. The series of meetings ran for a full 10 years and it was a time for the entire Sephardic community to be proud of their youth.

On a more personal level, Yosi credits the SEC for helping him to develop his speaking and leadership skills. These have come into play in his career as a practicing attorney and the presidency of Shaarey Yerushalym, a Sephardic synagogue in Valley Village, and the new Yeshiva High Tech in L.A. Meanwhile, Esther, busy raising their four children, has recently taken on the responsibilities of President of Or Hachaim Academy's Parent Teacher Association. Even as important, they agree, is that

they have made binding and lifetime friendships with other SEC members, the greatest reward of all.

Esther says that most of her closest friends came as a result of her involvement in the SEC. "The long lasting friendships I have made through the SEC are unique and very special to me". Esther is always volunteering to help with SEC Young Family events, the Film Festival, and won't say "No" to any request. She has a heart of gold!

I asked Yosi to elaborate on the benefits of his experiences with the Sephardic Educational Center as a member and eventually a leader. He went on to express his gratitude that he was able to learn so much about the different Sephardic communities throughout the United States and many other communities around the world. In addition, he could see the strength that any one individual could muster by getting involved and, as well, the rewards of that involvement. Of course, he also cherishes the friendships that the SEC has brought to him and his family. Now their children, Miriam (13), Sara (11), Bobby (7) and Ella (4) are making those important friendships with children of other SEC alumni. This special story continues....

[Editor's note: Jack Israel is our Editor Emeritus and, at 95 years young, he still can write a great story!]



**Join us for a family fun shabbat on
over Thanksgiving Weekend**

Friday, November 23- Sunday, November 25

Brandeis-Bardin Campus - Simi Valley, CA

For more info, contact info@secjerusalem.org

SEC PROGRAMS

Rabbi Bouskila led a **Passover Workshop** for the Community



SEC **Young Adults do Purim** in Laguna...and Salsa in Westwood



SEC **Celebrated Israel's Independence** in LA



SEPHARDIC PHILOSOPHY

Sephardic Judaism emphasizes different fundamental points that can be designated as Classical: (a) Tradition - that is to say the continuity of the heritage; concepts of loyalty, a sense of belonging to the general public, and mutual responsibility both in the present and in relation to earlier generations. (b) Compatibility - that is, balance and harmony between the Torah's requirements and those of our lives, between the individual person's work and his integration into society, between the unique Jewish world and the wider world in general, between the traditions handed down through the generations and the new and changing present, between the internal Jewish knowledge and general knowledge.

by Rabbi Yitschak Chouraqui, "The Leadership and Tradition of Sephardi Sages in the Modern Era"

Mazal Tov!



Congratulations to our Young Adult Co-Chair Denah Angel on her marriage to Sandy Shenkman.

11th LOS ANGELES SEPHARDIC JEWISH FILM FESTIVAL

NOVEMBER 11-18, 2012

Opening Night Gala *Paramount Pictures Studios*

SILENT AUCTION, BUFFET DINNER, FABULOUS PROGRAM, FILM SCREENING

Sunday, November 11, 4 P.M.

Join us for an unforgettable evening as we celebrate the Sephardic experience at our 11th Sephardic Film Festival, the hottest ticket in town. With films depicting Jews from Iraq, Rhodes, India, North Africa, Sudan, Iran, this is the most eclectic and first class film festival around. Just ask any of the thousands from Los Angeles and around the country who have attended our festivals since 1997 and they'll tell you that this is one event not to be missed. Everyone has fun, everyone is moved by the stories told on the big screen and everyone is happy to be supporting such an important cause like the SEC.

We are proud to present our distinguished honorees this year who represent our diverse Sephardic cultures:

Daniela Ruah, a Sephardic Jew from Portugal, is an accomplished actress and proud of her roots. Rabbi Haim Amsalem, born in Morocco, is taking his leadership in the Israeli Parliament to bring religious tolerance and moderation in the classical Sephardic sense to Jewish life in Israel and beyond. Joe and Sue Cohen, native Angelinos who grew up in the Rodesli Sephardic community, are leaders and philanthropists and loved by one and all.

HONORING:



Daniela Ruah

STAR OF NCIS LA- CINEMA SEPHARAD AWARD



Rabbi Haim Amsalem

MINISTER OF KNESSET- MAIMONIDES LEADERSHIP AWARD



Joe & Sue Cohen

COMMUNITY PILLARS- SEPHARDIC LEGACY AWARD



film festival Competition By Denah Angel

On Sunday August 12th, we held a phenomenal workshop at the Jewish Federation with exciting panelists including Producer Bob Israel, Academy Award winning animator Brooke Keesling, Documentary Filmmaker Bette Jane Cohen and Emmy winning animation editor Andrew Ing. They gave us insights into their respective fields in the entertainment industry and were there to answer questions from aspiring filmmakers.

Competition Information and rules at www.SephardicFilmFestival.com

For additional information or questions, please contact denahangel@gmail.com or erome123@gmail.com



From the Editor:

Dear Friends,

It is often said that the journey is more meaningful than the destination. I have always wanted to take a train ride up the coast or through the Canadian Rockies—something that you can't really do until your kids don't want to vacation with their parents anymore! My SEC journey has certainly been like an amazing train ride, one that never seems to end (to the chagrin of the tolerant love of my life, Rachel). My SEC journey has given me the opportunity to ride alongside many wonderful people, making friends as one would on a long journey, meeting and learning from fascinating teachers, leaders, Rabbis and having one great conductor, Dr. Jose Nessim, whose inspiration continues to fuel our mission. Filled with Sephardic passion, I guess you could call this train the "Orient Express". As you never know what wondrous sight awaits you just after you come out of the tunnel, so I can say with optimism that there is great excitement ahead for those who join the SEC train, despite those occasional dark tunnels we have to endure.

Like any Jewish organization, the SEC has had its ups and downs, successes and challenges (I don't call them failures, since we must learn to be strengthened whenever we fall) and while we have an incredible history over the past 30+ years, the next chapters will be more important than the first ones. For the future of our SEC is the future of our children, our communities and our unique philosophy that, as Rabbi Bouskila beautifully described in his message, is a lifestyle that we must not allow to disappear. Dr. Nessim once wrote that "if we Sephardim don't step up and take action to preserve our unique and important religious heritage and philosophy, we will be relegated to a footnote of Jewish history." That call to action is what has driven him and what drives me—knowing that I cannot be the last link in a glorious chain. Not now. Not when the Jewish world is in need of our tolerant and moderate approach. Just imagine what kind of train he would have if we got disconnected from the engine.

It's sometimes hard to describe what it exactly means to be Sephardic, but we certainly know it in our hearts, in our minds, in our celebrations, definitely in our cuisine and in our music, whether in or out of synagogue. Those tunes on Kippur, those delicacies that we can't wait for on holidays, the familiar faces we see all too infrequently in our synagogues that connect us to our past and remind us to hold on as we continue the journey forward. The voices I will never forget from my youth of simple yet pious men who knew to chant our prayers and conduct our rituals seem like a distant memory, but we must not let that memory fade; we must bring it back and package it for our children.

Who will teach these traditions, sing the songs, lead the Shabbat and Passover rituals, cook and bake as part of a religious experience? We will. You and I. We must now learn to be the conductors of this journey. It is what our parents and grandparents have expected. It is our time. It is what our founder Dr. Nessim has taught us for the past 30 years. We cannot remain inactive and expect our heritage to survive.

If you've been on this journey with us and enjoyed the ride, don't go anywhere because it's about to get better. If you've been waiting at the station, get on or you'll be left behind. Like our Sephardic heritage, the sights you see on this train have always been there, it just takes the right journey to experience and appreciate them and bring them to the forefront of our lives. We have an amazing crew, led by Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, and we are planning for nothing less than another Golden Age of Sephardic Jewry.

Tizku Leshanim Rabot- may your New Year be renewed with a commitment to preserve our future.

*SEC...making a difference
in the Jewish world*

Neil J. Sheff
Editor