

# INTERVIEW WITH SARAH ABREVAYA STEIN

Sarah Abrevaya Stein, Professor, Viterbi Family Endowed Chair in Mediterranean Jewish Studies, & Sady and Ludwig Kahn Director, Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies at UCLA, was the keynote speaker for the first Mediterranean Studies Symposium held in Ortigia, Italy, July 1-4, 2021. An adaptation of her presentation was published in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 112/1, Winter 2022, under the title “The Queen of Herbs: A Plant’s Eye View of the Sephardic Diaspora.” Stein has published extensively. Her latest book, *Wartime North Africa, A Documentary History 1934-1950* (Stanford UP, 2022) is the first-ever collection of primary documents on North African history and the Holocaust.

Q. What is your definition of Mediterranean? And your definition of Mediterranean diaspora?

A. For generations, scholars have energetically debated the definition and limits of the Mediterranean, its peoples and geography. As a scholar of Mediterranean Jewry, I am inspired by Matthias Lehmann’s and Jessica Marglin’s grappling (in their co-edited *The Mediterranean and the Jews*, 2020) with what the Mediterranean has meant (and has not meant, and should mean) to scholars of Jews, and Jews to scholars of the Mediterranean.

My current work engages a set of questions that are less definitional. What I am curious about is how Jews experienced the landscape and botany of the Mediterranean while they lived in the region and once they left it behind. Rather than searching for a theoretical, geographical, or cultural answer to the question of what the Mediterranean (or the Mediterranean diaspora) is or was, then, I find myself thinking about how the elements, flora, and landscape of the Mediterranean were experienced by Jews, and perhaps came to define their very Mediterraneanness.

I have published one article related to this topic, “The Queen of Herbs: A Plant’s Eye View of the Sephardic Diaspora” (*Jewish Quarterly Review* 112/1, Winter 2022), which explores Sephardic Jews’ abiding affection for

a single plant, ruda (*ruta graveolens*, or rue). Folkloric writing on ruda has emphasized the immutability of Mediterranean Jewish folkways; but ruda has a history, which reveals how a plant can further a particular diaspora—not the Jewish diaspora from biblical Israel, nor the Sephardic diaspora from medieval Iberia, but Jewish life in and diaspora from the modern Ottoman Balkans and Anatolia.

A conceptually intertwined article, “Sephardic Botánica” (*Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64/3, May 2022), explores the Sephardic embrace of herbalist practices ubiquitous to the Mediterranean – and follows the extraordinary evolution of this tradition in Sephardic owned botánicas across the United States. Botánicas tend to be understood as local manifestations of an intricate, trans-Atlantic Black, Caribbean, and Latinx religious, spiritual, and healing world. Their shelves hold the herbal products, sacramental goods, ritual implements, and counseling that allow patrons of Italian, African and Latin American Indigenous ancestries to practice folk Catholicism, herbalism, Hoodoo (also called “conjure”), Vodou, Santería, Espiritismo, Curanderismo, Òriṣà worship and other ethnomedical and spiritual systems. But the particular botánica my article explores, Caribbean Botanical Garden, was opened in East Harlem in the 1930s by a Sephardic Jewish man from the Italian – and, in his lifetime, Ottoman – island of Rhodes. This (and other Sephardic-owned botánicas in Baltimore, Atlanta, Memphis, Charleston, Chicago, and Los Angeles) integrated Sephardic and Eastern Mediterranean sources of inspiration as well as trans-Atlantic Black, Caribbean, and Latinx ones.

A third, narratively experimental article, as “Eating on the Ground” examines the Mediterranean Jewish embrace of picnics. The picnic and the portable camera came of age together in late and post Ottoman society, and “vernacular” picnic photographs are a ubiquitous feature of the Sephardic photo album. “Eating on the Ground” converses with the children, women, men, and objects that appear in these images, considering how Sephardic Jews relaxed and ate in nature at a time when so much was shifting around them. It also asks whether the scattered, globally diasporic, families-owned archive of the Sephardic photo album can be united to restore a lived, dusty, lusty image of late and post-Ottoman Jewish life.

All told, this work seeks to highlight how Jews expressed themselves spiritually and healed themselves medicinally, how they relaxed and socialized, tended to their babies, moved their bodies, experienced girlhood and boyhood, built homes and businesses, lived and died in the landscape of the Mediterranean. It seeks to speak to the sense of belonging Jews had in the modern Mediterranean, and the ways Sephardim continued to

nurture that affinity in adopted cities across the globe. Looking away from strict definitions of region or diaspora, it thinks about the indelible imprint of land, landscape, and botany on lived experience.

Q. Your article, “The Queen of Herbs: A Plant’s Eye View of the Sephardic Diaspora”, is not only thought-provoking about diaspora but also about women. Can you give us a brief summary and scope of the article?

A. Mediterranean Jews put ruda to many uses – medicinal, magical, ceremonial. Ruda was midwife and protector, the safest company to usher in the next generation and protect the *parida* [new mother] and newborn. In Ottoman times, Jewish women would give it in small doses to a woman in labor; rest it, protectively, on the bed of the new mother or crib of a newborn; pin it to the pillow of an infant boy undergoing *brit milah* [ritual circumcision]; or use it to bless the head of a mother or child. So the plant was evoked, in Ladino, as “*ruda menuda, guarda de las criaturas*” [minced rue, protector of children].

Ruda grew in Jewish gardens and in pots in Jewish courtyards in Rhodes, Salonica, Constantinople, Izmir, and beyond. Muslim merchants sold sprigs to Jewish women outside the mikvah [ritual bath] on Friday afternoon, allowing them to walk home clutching a nosegay of ruda over their heart.

In “Queen of Herbs,” I argue that if we invite ruda to center stage, we are poised to learn a new kind of Sephardic history, as well as a new story of migration, material history, and the human-plant relationship. Ruda lets us reconsider the history of an Ottoman diaspora from the earth up: complimenting existing histories of Sephardic Jewry with an approach that is tactile, ethnobotanical and intimate – one might even say, close to the heart.

Q. Your statement about the ruda “easy to regenerate from a cutting” (p. 128) is clearly a comparison of a Mediterranean legacy. Can you elaborate?

A. Basil, garlic, marjoram, mint mallow, chamomile, fennel, anise, parsley, cinnamon, and cloves were all embraced by Sephardic Jews for their curative and magical powers. But ruda was considered “*la reina de las yervas*” [Ladino: the queen of herbs] because of its potency and versatility.

Crucially, ruda was sturdy and easy to replant from a cutting. This made the plant well equipped for migration, which it did along with Sephardic Jews in the early twentieth century. Sephardic Jews planted ruda in new homes in émigré centers like New York, Seattle, and Los Angeles. To speak only of Los Angeles, for our purposes; the first Sephardic Jews to move to Los Angeles planted it downtown where, in the 1920s and 1930s, poor, im-

migrant Ottoman Jews lived, worked, and built institutions in the vicinity of 44<sup>th</sup> and Hoover. These Jews and their children replanted clippings of the same plants when they moved in the 1950s and 1960s to the tonier, whiter, more securely middle-class West Side. And a third generation of ruda clippings found a home in the San Fernando Valley, where Sephardic Jews settled in the 1980s and 1990s. So ruda migrated with Sephardic families across oceans, between urban neighborhoods, and through the generations. In this case, as in many others, we can see how plants and immigrants have symbiotically transformed the landscape, intertwining worlds old and new.

Q. We also loved the idea of the public garden as a space of peace and freedom for the Sephardic Jewish women, queens of the gardens amidst the “queen of the herbs” and how the ruda is associated closely to women for they are not only the gardeners but the healers of their communities. Is it still the case nowadays? What are some other places and ways in which Jewish and Mediterranean women can affirm themselves?

A. Traditional Mediterranean Jewish herbalism has faded to the point of near extinction – but its residue does remain. As I write in “Queen of Herbs”: “Third-and fourth-generation Sephardic Angelenos no longer buy sprigs of ruda on their way home from the communal bath, to be sure, but some do still tuck a sprig inside their bra – a permutation of the Izmirli tradition of carrying a sprig on one’s breast. Others keep a cutting of the plant in their car as a protective mechanism. For Sephardim, as for other residents of Los Angeles, the highways that carry us to and from the Valley have become crucial vectors of Jewish life (and folklore) in southern California. It seems that today, as ever, one can’t take good fortune for granted.”

Q. Do you feel that women are the major key players of dissemination of cultural traditions and customs?

A. I would say that the role of women as shapers of cultural, linguistic, culinary, sartorial, economic, legal, material (and just about all forms of daily) practice in the modern Mediterranean has been grossly underappreciated, for Jews as well as non-Jews. Scholars will need to think inventively about what culture is/does, and about where to look for its traces, in order to reverse this trend.

Q. All your mentions about plants, jasmine, mint, basil, garlic, chamomile, fennel, anise, parsley, marjoram brought us back to our native Sicily (that had one of the largest Jewish communities up until the 1400s) but it

was also the marzipan and the *bomboniere* to hit home. That really confirms the importance of things and their roles in a culture and the transmission of a culture. What are your thoughts?

A. I would absolutely agree! In my book *Family Papers: A Sephardic Journey Through the Twentieth Century* (FSG/Macmillan, 2019), I track through letters the extraordinary number of things that one Sephardic family exchanged, preserved, lost, treasured, fretted and feuded over – over the course of generations, boundaries of nations, and the arc of a century. One matriarch in this family, Vida a-Levi, a woman who lived in inter-war Salonica, Greece whom I suspect may have been illiterate, sent her émigré son in Rio de Janeiro sweets and preserved fruit to express her love. When her other son and daughter-in-law went to the posh spa town of Wiesbaden, Germany to have their first child, a-Levi had a mystic prepare a *kemeá* [a Jewish amulet containing a strip of parchment with blessings meant to ward off the evil eye] for the child. A *kemeá* was the quintessential embodiment of Sephardic folk practices, Wiesbaden, the quintessential site of European Jewish modernity and bourgeois arrival – what an extraordinary material encapsulation of the transformations rocking a single Mediterranean Jewish family!