

# **Syrian Jewish Women in Mexico City: From Immigration to Modern Challenges**

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## **Abstract**

This article focuses on patterns of Jewish immigration from Syria to Mexico City, focusing on the 1878–1950 period and placing special emphasis on the roles and experiences of women in order to observe absorption and socio-cultural change from a gender perspective. Although most Jews who immigrated to Mexico did so between the 1920s and the 1950s, immigration flows in that direction began earlier, during the *Porfiriato*—the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1880 and 1884–1911). This period marked the onset of Jewish immigration from Syria, primarily from Aleppo, and Damascus. These flows were characterized by chain or family migration led by male contingents and closely followed by women. Although the first-generation immigrants overcame their status as newcomers by adopting national dress and language, they remained cultural others due to their religion. Their children became part of both cultures and constructed a hybrid identity. Women members of this second-generation were more aware of social inequalities shaped by religious and traditional attitudes toward gender than their first-generation immigrant mothers had been.

This article is one of the first to delve into the concept of gender in the context of immigrants to Mexico. Women immigrants were expected to engineer their families' integration into Mexico while maintaining the Jewish culture and customs of their places of origin. Consequently, those who participated in the initial stages of immigration and acculturation created an infrastructure of Jewish Mexican women's organizational activities. In the 1930s and 1940s, some of these women attended university and participated at an individual level in all sectors (political, educational, cultural, etc.). They were instrumental in consolidating mutual-aid and charitable associations and developing cultural and social activities. By the 1940s, their areas of activity

I would switch it and write הערה[B1]:  
Jewish Mexican instead Mexican-Jewish.  
For them, being Jewish is more important  
than being Mexican. They have stated this  
throughout my interviews.

for society at large included collecting handicrafts for charity, volunteering for the Red Cross, and distributing clothes to the needy.

The article also examines the status of both Halebi and Shami women in the Syrian Jewish community, tradition vs. modernity, the power structure, and the main challenges that first and second-generation women faced upon arrival and later their granddaughters and great-granddaughters in the contemporary community. The Jewish community in Mexico City is highly organized, close-knit, and centralized. It is comprised of four main sectors differentiated by ancestral places of national origin: Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and two distinct Syrian-Jewish subgroups (Damascene and Aleppo). Syrian Jews from Aleppo are known as *Halebis* (Haleb signifying Aleppo in Hebrew [I added this]) and center on the Maguén David Community; those from Damascus are known as *Shamis* and belong to the Monte Sinaí Community. While the Jewish community of Mexico City is considered traditional, the modern Syrian Jewish community leans toward Orthodoxy. Overall, the Halebis are more religious than the Shamis.

Even though third- and fourth-generation Syrian-Jewish women are more open-minded and freer than their foremothers, they sustain the religious traditions by transmitting values that are central to the preservation and maintenance of their identity as individuals and as members of their collectives.

Syrian Jewish women tend to be wealthier than their Sephardi and Ashkenazi counterparts, in stark contrast to their immigrant beginnings as peddlers. The wealthier they became, the more options for self-fulfillment they had. Greater wealth gave women the opportunity to escape the confines of the home and build careers. This, however, was in the short run only; in the long run, the increase in wealth made them increasingly home-focused. The challenge, then, is not one of survival, as it had been for their grandmothers and great-grandmothers, but one of becoming more liberalized, individualistic, and independent.

They are known as Halebis :[B2]הערה  
not Halebim!!!!

I would take this out since :[B3]הערה  
Halab is also in Arabic. I don't want to get  
into semantics in this short paper. Also the  
audience is Hebrew speaking, so I would  
just leave that out.

Congregation is not used in :[B4]הערה  
the Mexican context. They use Comunidad  
which means community.

They are known as Shamis :[B5]הערה  
and not as Shamim. They use the "s" in  
Spanish. This shows cultural fusion,  
combining Hebrew and Spanish.

The data were gathered from interviews, questionnaires, archival materials, observations, and content analysis and were analyzed using a comparative approach (historical and cross-national perspectives).

Further research should examine the experiences in, contributions to, and centrality of women in this Diaspora ethnic community. One hopes that this study will encourage other studies on immigration, women's status, role, sexuality, and identity, and their manifestations at the personal and public levels elsewhere in Latin America.