Ajenos[1]

A Personal Perspective

by Louise Chiprut Berman

I grew up in a wonderful time, a morphing of old and new, a time of finding our place, the birth of a new generation. We were not part of the first generation-born who spoke Ladino[2] at home and only knew life inside their newly created community. Their ways were foreign to ajeno neighbors, outsiders. They didn't step too far from their homes as they were strongly tethered to each other and their kehila.[3]

This regal group of multi-lingual immigrants and their first generation-born children all shared the same struggles, the same goals, supporting each other in a glorious, caring way. If one had extra, they'd share. They never understood a dog-eat-dog world. They thrived on helping others in their unique, tightly knit community. These giants cared deeply for neighbors and relatives and strived only to help lift them up, never to pass them up, always offering a hand. Behavior seen in ajeno communities was foreign and clearly not who they were culturally. Do unto others.

In their dream to give us boomers[4] a better future, they could never have imagined it would one day move us away from the community they loved so much. Our grandchildren would never fully understand what was sacrificed to give us this better future.

First-generation born Americans still lived with the same strong maneras[5] of their immigrant parents. They didn't attend Garfield high football games. Games were on Friday nights. School dances were not encouraged as they might somehow send a message it was okay to mix with non-Jewish classmates. This mentality permeated into the next generation. Over time, such ways were diluted as we became semi-Americanized.

All social events were tied to the kehila. Snowball dances, card night, mah jongg, weenie roasts at Alki. No D'var,[6] no Birkat[7]. Simply social.

We saw first gen-born Ashkenazim fitting in more easily. They had been in this country longer, had already learned the law of the land, the language, had established a larger business pool such as selling metals and scrap. They reached their American dream of independence and financial success. We formed friendships and learned from our new friends. Our parents married non-Sephards.[8]

Having a jump on making money in a post-war environment offered our Jewish counterparts the chance to invest in lucrative opportunities, to become landowners sooner, philanthropists, owners of the Seattle Seahawks, the Supersonics, or on the board of the Seattle Symphony. This was a stark difference from our Sephardic men whose livelihoods were still restricted to areas they knew such as the fish industry, selling produce. They embraced the public market[9] and built a fabulous community there. Amon, Calvo, Levy, Hasson, Almelech, Condiotty.

We watched ajenos climb the social ladder.

'Americanas'[10] shopped at high-end stores, such as Frederick and Nelson and had their hair colored like Marilyn Monroe. Eating NY steak and drinking martinis were signs of inclusion. Our lifestyles were still modest. Some became semi-kosher.

We were conflicted watching others leave orthodox synagogues for reform congregations, which now more closely aligned with their lives.

Our second generation-born brothers and sisters, those born before 1955, heard Ladino at home, mainly because their immigrant grandparents were still alive. We were given names like Susie and Sam because Sultana and Nissim were odd to ajenos.

When I was four, my parents stopped speaking Ladino at home believing it would help me fit in at school more easily. In those days, being bilingual was not a sign consistent with being educated, just the opposite. I followed in my older brother's footsteps and took French at Franklin high, a well-integrated, culturally accepting inner-city Seattle school.

I loved hearing our golden language spoken by Nona[11] and Papoo[12]. Although I understood them, I listened in Ladino and responded in English. Watching Ladino take a back seat to English was another sad unintended consequence of the American dream as we became assimilated into this new culture.

Conversations with close friends, and cousins were glittered with Ladino expressions. We called each other hijica.[13] We commented on things that were barato[14] while shopping and noticed people with a strange fedor[15] or huezmo.[16] We made up words with Ladino roots and English endings. Avlaring,[17] comering,[18] pesharing,[19] We jokingly identified ajenos as bovas[20] and laughed a lot loving our special unique communication tool.

With the exception of the orthodox, children bought school lunches as keeping kosher was no longer absolute. We shopped at Safeway. We dressed in bell bottoms, wore make-up, high-top sneakers, and were enamored with American Bandstand. We were simply a little slower coming to the game but when we arrived, we melded well, embracing the ways of ajenos.

Moving out of our ghetto-like community into newer, non-Jewish neighborhoods was a sign of affluence. The eastside brought a new vision for many. Kids went to school with wealthier non-Jewish kids. Ajenos for sure. Mercer Island, Bellevue, the north-end of Seattle; communities far enough to shield them from any embarrassment of being caught mowing their lawn on Shabbat, but not so far to drive into Seattle for a meldado.[21]

Soon, it was just easier to join a conservative congregation on the eastside or in the north end. This began the migration away from the kehila for second-generation born. It was easier to integrate our children's religious school schedule with soccer practices in safer neighborhoods.

We witnessed as more second gen-borns married Ashkenazim.[22] Elders did not always feel comfortable around their coswegros[23] but tried to find some commonality now that their grandchildren were Ashkefards.[24] Others married ajenos. Overtime, fewer eyebrows were raised. While some non-conforming elders sat sieté,[25] others became more accepting of inter-marriage; another option being woven into the new American fabric we helped give birth to. Dissonance.

There are those still not able to accept such social changes. To shame our children will prove to be wrong as we may never live to see the choices of our grandchildren or theirs. Perspective.

Living in a world of ajenos did not come with a manual; only the hope that future generations would live in a world of greater opportunity than our immigrant grandparents had. We were free to create our own stories. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses.”

It is said that prejudice comes from lack of education. The psychology of keeping one’s distance from ajenos was a huge disservice to our younger population. In an attempt to hold on to our orthodox ways, the elders didn’t outwardly encourage us to socialize with ajenos, but we did to survive. It was necessary in school, sports, music and as we found jobs. Many of us integrated more easily, living on the edge of gossip. Ken son los amigos pretos?”[26]

I believe the transition might have been easier had we been encouraged to form those ties with ajenos, asking more about the kids from school and learn about them, understand their ways and share our customs. Education breaks down walls. “We call these delicate pastries boyos.[27] Do you like spinach?”

Nothing will ever replace the link we have with our culturally rich community. Our common experiences created a truly unique identity, one that future generations will never know. Pecado.[28]

As trailblazers, we learned that ajenos became wonderful friends, who made life-long allies. To this day, those relationships enrich our lives by connecting us all to a time when life was simpler.

Some of us connected more closely with friends of color understanding prejudice in a pre-and post-civil rights era. We shared multi-linguistic homes, unique foods, holiday traditions, family values. We listened to Marvin Gaye. Those who were forbidden to form close ties with their ajeno upper-class school friends later realized this loss. We pledged not to take that choice away from our children yet worked hard to maintain our Jewishness. Balance.

My parents patronized the Japanese-owned service station and Mutual Fish on Rainier Avenue. These were their classmates from Garfield high. They were friends who shared a common goal to be accepted in a world where English was not the first language of their parents and whose lifestyles were odd to outsiders. These were friends who respected mom when others were not as accepting.

I saw the wonderful rapport dad had with the Italian community. Most were Catholic and knew my father was a Spanish Jew. They connected with Mediterranean-based roots, bilingual parents, religious homes, and of course, golf. Dad’s alliances with those in the produce community allowed them to break down prejudices and connected them to the same values. Respect came out of doing business together. Chips Produce.

Our grandparents moved here to give us a better life. Our parents worked harder to give us opportunities through higher education, for financial advancement, good jobs, nicer homes, an easier way of life. We saw our parents also rise to higher levels in society, involved in law, architecture, in academia as teachers, college professors, authors, and in business. Progress.

Those of us still alive today had a rich, binding experience with the old Sephardic world. We could almost touch the old country, reluctant to let go of what we felt tethered to and from where our families came.

Our children will not experience this in their lives. Ever. This sad thought keeps me awake at night.

How fortunate for those of us who remember. We hold onto unique expressions, superstitions, and wonderful foods. We honor our parents by naming our children for them. We understand respect. Friends of our parents were our aunts and uncles. We miss them all.

Another unintended consequence was that we would not all live within walking distance of our kehila.

Those who come after will not hear elders ask, "Hijo de ken sos tu?"[29] Our kids won't understand superstitious meanings of growing rutha[30] or having ojikos[31] in the baby's room. They will no longer kiss Papoo's hand as a sign of ultimate respect when entering his home. And G-d forbid, they will ask what a mezuzah[32] is for. "Leshos."[33]

Our generation begins to mourn changes we can't stop. We slowly accept this metamorphosis with sadness and defeat.

It's comforting to know that many of us are still connected. We invite friends to family gatherings, b'nai mitzvot,[34] weddings, and these are the friends who support us at funerals.

We find commonality via connections to Rhodes, Tekirdag, Izmir, Marmara, Gallipoli, Salonica, Istanbul. Yes, we are still tethered to the old community, love our beautiful language, our tunes, our holidays, our incredible food. We no longer hear romanzas,[35] but still pull our ear when someone sneezes. We use expressions from our parents, but not nearly as often. "Bivas, es la verdad."[36]

Our grandsons hear us call them hijicos,[37] but don't get the same warm feeling we did from mom's friends. But we say it often as a way to teach them how it feels.

We find ourselves making donations when friends lose their parents. And for as long as we live, we will show ultimate respect to remember those who survived the horrors of the holocaust. Altchech, DeLeon, Schaloum, Tarica. Kavod.[38]

Our brothers and sisters now step up and take over the roles in the kehila that were once held by those we miss so much; those who created this loving community for us; who gave everything they had so we would know opportunity; so we would know belonging.

Viesse, Chiprut, Levy, Almoslino, Roberts, Maimon, Varon, Altaras, Bensussen, Scharhon, Alhadeff, Baroh, Souriano, Abolafia, Benaroya, Behar, Cohen, Amon, Greenberg, Capeluto, DeLeon, Moshcatel, Angel, Morhaime, Azose, Halfon, Amira, Haleva, Romey, Cordova, Hasson, Beneliol, Benaltabe, Funes, Babani, Mezistrano, Lander, Adatto. More.

We no longer call Americanos ajenos. They're just people. People whose neighborhoods we share, those with whom we work, those who teach our children. Others now are newcomers to this land. We empathize for a minute.

Today, we hold onto whatever we can, sing our beloved camp song and remember most of the words to Ya Comimos.[39] We invite our grandchildren over on Friday nights so they will know the importance of lighting Shabbat candles and learn the prayers. We keep their special kipot[40] in the top kashon[41]. We weave in stories from our grandparents, tell them of Joha,[42] and do our best to leave some imprint of the past with our kids and their kids. A somewhat sad acceptance of the dream our grandparents built for us. Unintended consequences.

[1] outsiders
[2] pre-Castilian Spanish spoken by Sephardim
[3] community around the synagogue
[4] baby-boomers: children born between 1946-1964
[5] mannerisms
[6] Hebrew learning
[7] prayer after meals
[8] Spanish Jews
[9] Pike Place public market
[10] a term for non-Jewish
[11] grandmother (Ladino)
[12] grandfather (Ladino)
[13] daughter (Spanish)
[14] cheap (Spanish)
[15] smell
[16] stink
[17] talking
[18] eating
[19] pishing
[20] a foolish person
[21] Jewish prayers read on the anniversary of one's passing
[22] a Jewish person of central or eastern European descent
[23] in-laws
[24] fictitious word for children of mixed Sephardic and Ashkenazic parents
[25] the week of mourning following death; seven in Spanish
[26] "Who are these Afro-American friends?"
[27] pastries filled with spinach and cheese
[28] "What a shame." A sin (Spanish)
[29] "Who are your parents?" Who do you belong to? (Ladino)
[30] ruta or rue: a plant grown as an ornamental herb, superstitiously to keep one safe, out of harm's way
[31] small evil eyes (Ladino)
[32] doorpost (Hebrew) contains the Shema, a Jewish prayer inside
[33] far away (Ladino) Lejos in Spanish
[34] religious ritual when a child turns 13; becoming an adult
[35] Ladino love songs
[36] "May you live… that's the truth" (Ladino)
[37] young sons (Ladino)
[38] respect (Hebrew)
[39] song sung with the grace after meals
[40] head covering (plural) yarmulka
[41] dresser drawer
[42] a jokester, trickster