Negotiating a diasporic identity: the Jews in Thessaloniki

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Abstract

Since the ancient times, Jews used to be in a diasporic situation. While embracing new elements, being in and out of their borders, in and out of their communities and regarding social, political and economical factors of the place they lived in, the Jewish people were reconsidering and reconstructing their ethnoreligious and cultural identity. In this paper, the contemporary Jewish identity will be explored, —both individually and collectively— in the context of the pluralistic city of Thessaloniki, Greece. Which are the components that their identity is compromised of? On the one hand, how does the factor of their recent Sephardic (Judeo-Spanish) origin influence their identitarian reference? On the other hand, how does the current state of Israel remodel and form new identitarian aspects of them? And finally, how does the Greek context affect their personal, communal and national identity? Living in a Greek secular state, where the majority of its citizens regard themselves as Orthodox Christian believers, what relations might be shaped between the non Jews and the Jews? How do the Jews perceive their self identity? By using empirical data of fieldwork, the writer will endeavor to attribute the diasporic paths of the long term indigenous, Greek, Jewish identity —both national and religious— in the geographical place of the city of Thessaloniki.

Keywords: *Jews, Greece, diaspora, contemporary identity.*

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1. An Introduction

In most societies, religion plays a determinative, interactive role in the process of identity-formation for the people of each time and place (Beals, 1978: 147-162; King, 2003: 197-204). From the perspective of the social sciences, a thorough study of identity structures is a difficult task with ambiguous and diverse interpretations, inasmuch as it is influenced by the social changes that have taken place in late modernity, combined with individuals' predilection for self-determination. It is therefore reasonable for one to conclude that the individual and collective composition of identities in a framework of communal life can be changed by multiple social, cultural, and local factors (Tsironis, 2007: 74-76). In this context, the challenges of modern society bring to the forefront issues of diasporic identity/ies (Boyarin and Boyarin, 1993: 693-725; Safran, 2005: 36-60; Edrei and Mendels, 2008: 163-187; Rubesh, 2010: 114-136) in Jewish communities both in Europe and in America (Rebhun, 2004: 43-63; Hartman, Hartman, 1999: 279-311).

This article will attempt to outline Modern Greek Jewish identity as diasporic, based on empirical, qualitative data and evidence from ongoing research. I attempt to explore the relationship between Diaspora and identity by focusing on the city of Thessaloniki and the city's local, indigenous Jewish Community.

This research will provide the basis for an examination of the identitarian aspects of contemporary Jews in Thessaloniki. What are the contours of their diasporic identity? Is it: a. their ethnic/local Sephardic origin? b. their Jewish cultural heritage? c. the connection with Israel? Can one observe an ethno-religious or ethno-cultural identity? How do these Jews see themselves in the public sphere, in relation to the local Greek reality and mentality? What identitarian trends are being formulated? Is it a static identity, or is it

elastic enough to be negotiated? Is it open or closed toward the extra-communal "other"?

According to social scientific theory, cultural identity is inextricably intertwined with individual and cultural background. Changes in social, political, and economic living conditions alter the terms of identity composition, while identity itself evolves in interaction with the socio-political context. Factors in identity formation and preservation may include language, religion, descent, traditions, and customs. Some of these factors are transformed as they interact with a multicultural living environment, while others remain unchanged (Cuche, 2001: 147-150).

Cultural identity is often understood in a dual way. On the one hand is the inherent and unchanging collective cultural identity, which constitutes, maintains, and unifies the individuals within a communal whole through common features such as race or ethnicity. On the other hand lies the existence of an unstable, contradictory, and constantly shifting cultural identity, characterized both by the same common features as well as by disparate and divergent ones (Hall, 2003: 222-237 [here: 233]).

2. "Thessalonian" Jewish History

In order to achieve an in-depth understanding of the mechanism for creating modern Jewish identity, we must first, of necessity, undertake a brief historical overview of the local Jewish presence. According to sources, during Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman times, the city of Thessaloniki served as a cultural meeting place and "melting pot" for individuals with diverse features and religious identities. Within this multi-religious mosaic, we can identify the presence and evolution of four different Jewish ethnic groups, the Romaniotes (316, 140 BCE), the Ashkenazim (1376, 1470 BCE), the Italiotes (1536 BCE) and the Sephardi(m) (1492-93 and thereafter). During the years of Ottoman rule, the

Sephardic heritage and tradition became firmly established and took precedence over the other Jewish traditions, remaining until today the cornerstone of Jewish cultural identity in Greece (Nehama, 2000: 177, 266-267, 280, 284-285, 288-290).

In the context of this historical overview, it is worth noting in particular the landmark date of 31 March 1492, the day of the famous "Alhambra Decree". On that day, the Catholic monarchs of Spain, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, ordered all Jews to leave the country. This set off a steady stream of Sephardic Jewish émigrés to the Ottoman period, which continued until the end of the 16th c. This led to the so-called "golden period" for Thessalonian Judaism at the intellectual, professional, and economic levels, a century of great prosperity founded, however, on a rabbinic, theocratic, and communal system (Nehama, 2000: 115-116, 301).

In spite of the crisis from the 17th to the 18th c. (Nar, 1997a: 87), the Jewish presence from the mid-19th to the early 20th c. made an indelible mark at many levels of Thessaloniki's multi-ethnic society. The Jewish community rose to prominence again with the modernization of Thessaloniki and the arrival of the liberal Jewish organization, "Alliance Israélite Universelle" (A.I.U., 1873-1910) (Molho, 2001: 82, 150-151, 186, 190, 214-215, 217, 219). During these crucial years, which witnessed the annexation of the city to the Greek state (1912-22), Jewish identity is redefined along the twin axes of their national and ethnoreligious identity, Greek and Jewish, as the result of official recognition of the Jewish Community by the Greek state (1920) (Pierron, 2004: 80, 92, 94, 101, 137, 139, 145-146, 148, 150-153). However, the Hellenization of the city's Jews proved to be a laborious process of mixing identities which ultimately ended in acceptance. As one contemporary Greek historian has argued, "Although the official papers changed from one day to the next, the deeply rooted identities needed years to change; as the history of ideas has taught us, mentalities are the slowest to change…" (Varon-Vasar, ²2013: 208).

From the beginning of the 20th century until the arrival of the refugees from Asia Minor (1922-23), the Jewish population constituted the majority in the multiethnic society of Thessaloniki. After the outbreak of World War II (1941-44) and the invasion of German troops, the Jews —within just six months, from March until August of 1943— were expelled from Greece by the Nazi regime and eventually disappeared, losing most of their population (56,000, or around 96%) (Menexiadis et al., 2007: 35-36; Kavala, 2006: 422-447). Very small is the percentage of Jews who managed to survive, either through the help of their Christian compatriots, through the resistance front (Nar, 1997b: 266-295 [here: 289]), or because of their Spanish citizenship (Menexiadis, 2005: 20; Fragkou, 2012).

The years immediately following the war witnessed both the internal and external migration of the remaining Jews in Thessaloniki, tangible evidence of their psychological and economic uncertainty. Indeed, waves of Jews moved both to Athens, to which the center of Greek Jewry shifted, as well as to Israel, France, and America. At the same time, the post-war reorganization of private and communal Jewish life helped resuscitate the lost cohesion and solidarity (Lewkowicz, 2004: 269-295 [here: 269-271, 282-289]), while erecting the pillars for the formation of their modern identity, an identity thenceforth shaped in terms of its diasporic composition, cultural/religious expression, and ethnic consciousness.

3. A Hybrid Jewish Identity

a. From a religious to a modern, Greek Sephardic, cultural identity

Today, the Jewish Community is recognized as a religious community with a variety of goals, including religious,

educational, and charitable (*Jewish Community of Thessaloniki Association*: 3, 13, 15). The community's proper functioning is ensured by the servicing of the communal as well as religious needs of its members, since it is the Jewish religion that distinguishes the community's members from their fellow Greek citizens.

Based on field research, we can say that, in contrast to the prewar period in which the individual's descent played the most important role, today this factor is no longer determinative for their communal and individual lives. The occasional cultural differences between the three Jewish groups, such as their differences in language as well as their variations in religious and cultic practice, seem to have been reconciled. The largest percentage of individuals participating in the community is of Sephardic origin. Consequently, we have to do with a homogeneous community, with a secular character and model of governance, which represents all the Jews of Thessaloniki who are registered in the community.

At this point, in order to delve more deeply into the issue of Jewish identity, we must clarify certain terms, such as "Israelite", "Jew", and "Israeli". First, the term "Israelite" (in Greek: "Ισραηλίτης"/"Ισραηλίτισσα") is the term used by the Greek state, which officially characterizes the Jewish identity of individuals in the Greek public sphere. Conversely, members of the community seem to not accept this designation in their daily lives. More common is the use of the term "Jew", which indicates that individual embraces the Jewish religion, or retains traits of that particular ethno-religious and cultural identity. Finally, individuals from outside the community use the term "Israeli" - a national characterization devoid of religious connotation, which derives from being a citizen of the modern state of Israel (1948) - which only causes confusion with the aforementioned terms (Rozanis, 1995: 14-15).

Empirical evidence suggests that, today, the Jews of Thessaloniki most frequently identify themselves as "Greek Jews", i.e., on the basis of an identity defined by both their Greek nationality and their Jewish, ethno-religious heritage. Indeed, individuals' sense of their Greek nationality is so strong that, when asked, "What is your origin?", some emphatically emphasize their Greek origin, declaring, "This is where we born; this is where we grew up". In fact, the observer will note that the majority of Jews not only have Greek citizenship, but also accept and feel their Greek identity, which they express with the term "Greek Jew". In other words, they give equal weight to both aspects of their identity, emphasizing the importance of their locality (See, Interviews [b]).

In addition, while the religious identity of the communal subjects refers to their acceptance of the Judaic religion and is presented as their primary constitutive factor, it has nevertheless acquired a cultural significance. In other words, the Jewish identity inwardly retains a mixture of ethnic and religious elements. These components are: a. their direct Jewish and indirect Sephardic, diasporic origin; b. the Judeo-Spanish language; c. the observance of Judaic holidays as the mechanism for interlinking and preserving their traditional identity; d. personal, selective, and individualistic observance of the holy day of the Sabbath; and e. memory of the traumatic event of the Holocaust (Sidiropoulou, 2015: 105-106).

The religious and secular elements—i.e., the community and the synagogue—seem to maintain a weak relationship, which is not intended to empower the religious aspect, but rather to maintain and continue a traditional culture that distinguishes them from their fellow Greeks, who are Orthodox Christians. This is driven in part by the fear that they will be completely assimilated into Greek culture. For most, the synagogue is understood as a complement to the communal body. They themselves have noted that "The synagogue

has a religious role, while the community has a functional one", which includes the former. Moreover, members emphasize that there is "A connection but not an identification" between the two, as was the case in the past. They also add, "Although the one presupposes the other, the role of the synagogue has been abrogated", since the community is the polysemous center, while religion "…Includes cultural elements of identity" (See, Interviews [b]).

To summarize, the community's primarily Sephardic origin and culture, completely interwoven with the local Greek social reality, produces a deeply embedded dual identity of both Greek on the one hand and Jewish on the other. This Jewish identity, however, is not purely religious, but ethnocultural, with a Sephardic character, which retains its ethno-racial, ethno-religious complexion, while also being influenced by modern social, political, and economic changes and developments.

b. The Israeli aspects of a Greek Jewish Identity

The need for communication between all Jewish Communities in the diaspora and particularly, in this case, Thessalonian Jews' search for a line of communication with their co-religionists on the world stage, and especially with Israel, is of course a vital issue of unique importance for the community—primarily for the continuation of their community, but also, secondarily, for the preservation of their distinct identity in Thessaloniki and Greece.

At first glance, the empirical evidence, such as conversations and interviews with Jews in Thessaloniki, does not reflect a direct connection with Israel, with the obvious exception of many young people moving to study in Israeli academic centers and universities.

Considering the outside cultural and religious influences exerted by the rest of the majority Greek community of Thessaloniki, the danger of assimilation, and the threat of anti-Semitism (See, Int. Reference [c]), it would be reasonable for one to assume that the rallying of Thessaloniki Jews was a key communal concern. In recent years, bringing together members of the Jewish Community, with an emphasis on the younger people, has been achieved by every available means, through social and religious gatherings and events, in collaboration with local and international institutions and organizations. Community activities and initiatives are aimed, first, at the establishment of social networks and mutual solidarity between Greek and international youth on the one hand and Israeli Jewish youth on other, and secondly, at the latter's religious and cultural empowerment (See, Interview [a]).

Seeking to establish closer ties with the Jewish diaspora, the president of the Jewish Community in Thessaloniki regularly meets with leading politicians as well as representatives of Jewish agencies, organizations and institutions, both in Greece and abroad. For example, in the framework of strengthening relations between Greece and Israel —apart from the activities of the local association "Greece Israel"— the community supports activities, initiatives, and meetings with leaders and people of the State of Israel (See, Int. References [d]; [f]; [a]; [e]; Sasson, Kadushin, Saxe, 2010: 297-319).

One of the mechanisms for interfacing between the modern state of Israel and the Jewish Diaspora, and thus in Greece, is the Jewish social action networks. The existence of structured communal networks of Jewish diasporic bodies provides a space for constructive conversations and reflections across Europe. In particular, the European debate has brought to the fore the following crucial question for many Jewish communities: Do the Jews in Europe feel integrated in the state where they live? Do they maintain an ethnic, religious identity, or do they feel that they belong to a global, communal Jewish network (Antes, 2002: 103-130 [here: 105-106])?

Jewish social networks play a central role in the close communication with Israel, both as vehicles of Jewish identity, and as a unifying mode of interaction among Jews everywhere. The founding of the modern state of Israel marked the establishment of a multitude of state and non-governmental Jewish organizations, such as educational and national organizations, with funding both locally and from abroad. The epicenter for many of them is Israel, with input from —as well as influence in— America. These organizations serve a wide variety of functions, such as religious, social, political, and educational objectives, while also encouraging many individuals of Jewish descent to study in Israel (Elazar, 1991: 19-22; Inbar, 1990: 165-183 [here: 167-173]; Mittelberg, 2007: 30-46 [here: 35-37]; Kadushin, 2009: 55-73).

In the area of modern social theory, various studies have highlighted members' sense of belonging to a community even outside that community's geographical boundaries. Although the individuals may possess divergent traits and various cultural characteristics, they are nevertheless tightly connected. Some characteristic models of this type of community existence include, "communities of identity" (Tsironis, 2007: 55-57), symbolically structured communities (Cohen, 1985), or imagined communities, with particular focus on the nation. Because, as Benedict Anderson notes, "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation…will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them… yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson,1997: 26; Phillips, 2002: 597-617).

Surveys have confirmed that Jewish youth have a strong sense of "belonging" to a "Global Jewish people…as a common core". The Israeli aspect of Jewish identity in the Diaspora is a standard component, but its appearance varies, manifesting itself in a multifactorial and multifaceted way. This is based, in each case, on individual factors, such as the extent of the communal subjects' relationship with religious values, the family, and the community. In modern times, taking as an example diaspora Jews' relationship with the state of Israel, these Jews themselves seem to translate this relationship in a multidimensional way, since they understand it either as "home", a "potential home", an "often-visited 'second home'", or a "spiritual homeland" (Cohen, 2014: 234-249 [here: 234-249]; Arian et al., 2012: 72-75).

In the case of the Greek Jews in Thessaloniki, the development of an empowering relationship with Israel is especially marked among the younger generations. As some have remarked, "I love my country, but my second homeland is Israel. Every Jew in the world is a potentially Israeli"; "I'm a Greek Jew with Zionist tendencies". Among the older generations, this dynamic interface manifests itself as more of a safety valve, as a safeguard against a second "exile", a second Holocaust. We thus have to do with an identity with an ethno-religious character, in which the religious element is identified with the ethnic and cultural traits of the Jewish race, as a nation (See, Interviews [b]).

By way of a conclusion, we could say that the safe feeling of belonging to a particular Jewish identity is maintained and enhanced in many ways by the community, as well as by Jewish social networks. However, in cases of anti-Semitism, the Jewish side of the dual Greek Jewish identity becomes more pronounced and is expressed emphatically among the younger generations with nationalist, Zionist sympathies. At the same time, the experience of identity in an international milieu also becomes more apparent.

4. Jewish identity in the context of Thessaloniki

From all the aforementioned, one can discern that, at a collective, communal level, the Jewish presence preserves in a multifaceted way its distinct identity over and against Greek

society. In the framework of our examination of the relationship between Greek and Jewish identity, the empirical data demonstrates three inherent tendencies.

The vast majority of Jews in Thessaloniki believes that their Jewish identity is not at odds with their Greek identity, but rather combined with it. Conversely, there exist a smaller percentage of people which identifies various degrees of difficulty in expressing their identity in the public sphere. This is because sometimes their religious diversity becomes a problematic aspect of their identity, as they themselves state, "There is a hatred out there that makes me want to put the Jewish aspect first, and then the Greek", since "The national identity in Greece is the Orthodox Christian religion" (See, Interviews [b]); Konstantopoulou et al., 2000: 12). We can thus conclude that when difficulties arise in accepting Greek-Jewish identity, they are based on the frequent identification of Greekness with Orthodoxy. A few seek out local identity as opposed to national identity, in the hopes of avoiding the connection with the Orthodox Christian religion and the specifically Greek history. As one remarked, "I grew up in Greece with the slogan 'Hellas, Greeks, Christians', something that does not permit me to say that I am Greek" (See, Interviews [b]).

In the case of the Jews, there are small —yet very real— groups who either feel excluded from aspects of daily social life due to fundamentalist outbursts from Christian movements within the Church, or else fear anti-Semitism, especially with the recent rise of the Golden Dawn political party[1] (See, Interviews [b]).

Observers agree that the Jews seem integrated and almost fully assimilated into the Greek social milieu. Living in a country where the majority of Greek inhabitants identify themselves as Orthodox Christians, most Jews believe that, generally speaking,

they are able to coexist. They remark, for example: "We have learned to live together" since "Many have chosen to assimilate...". They themselves emphasize, "I certainly see no reason to identify national identity with religious identity", "...It depends on the people", "The people are what's important, not the religion…". On the other hand, there is also a group, which, while it believes in theory in the ability of multiple religious identities to coexist, nevertheless maintains that, due to the conservative structures and influence of Greek society's cultural and religious homogeneity, in practice it is not feasible. Consequently, secularism facilitates Jews' coexistence in the broader Greek environment, because as they themselves underline, "I have neither a 'national' nor a 'religious' identity. If a Greek possesses both of these intensely, they will not be able to coexist" (See, Interviews [b]).

In Greece today, as difficult as it may be for some people to understand, concepts such as that of "religious and cultural pluralism" are highly intertwined with the contemporary social reality. Core social changes, such as the influx of new immigrant groups and religious currents together with the already existing diverse confessional Christian communities, deconstruct the traditional perceptual system, reshaping the religious mosaic. Social scholars of religion, viewing the matter maturely and objectively, insist that "…Identity… and 'belonging' are issues that are being continuously renegotiated, and which lie in man's jurisdiction. It is thus wrong to identify the concept of Greek citizen with that of an Orthodox believer...By defining the concept of the Greek citizen with religious categories, we automatically reduce all those with a different religious identity, or those who are unaffiliated, agnostic, or atheist, to second-class citizens, which is absurd even to think about. Moreover, not every Orthodox believer automatically becomes a Greek…"

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[1] The "Golden Dawn", is a far-right party direction with anti-Semitic tendencies. See, Int. Reference (b). For a socio-psychological approach on the way this political party reacts, see, Gratsani, Sapountzis, 1996.

(Petrou, 2000: 5-17 [here: 15-16]).

Finally, with regard to Greek citizens' attitude toward the Jews of Thessaloniki, a large percentage of Jews do not see any problems in their interactions. This applies mostly to the people with whom they socialize in their home environments. Conversely, a smaller proportion of people maintain that there is, in part, a sense of prejudice in the public sphere. This, of course, depends on the personality of the individual, but when the situation is exacerbated, it can sometimes turn into anti-Semitism. They point out that, "There are prejudices about the economic prosperity of a few Jews", and that there is a distinct "confusion between the terms 'Jew' and 'Israeli'". Essentially all community members have developed friendly and interpersonal relations with individuals from outside the community, while a considerable proportion has contracted mixed marriages, which could be interpreted as an indication of the level of assimilation with the Greek milieu (See, Interviews [b]).

To summarize, Jewish self-determination in connection with their Greek environment indicates a strongly assimilative trend. This phenomenon is based on individuals' desire to be included in the local social reality. However, when the social fabric threatens their particular identity, there is a clear tendency to turn inward and defend themselves.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the contemporary Greek social reality, the Jewish presence and identity remain distinct, as a hybrid identity.

Individuals see themselves as composed of and expressed by two poles of identity, a national identification and a cultural one—as Greek-Jewish. Jewish identity is grounded in the cultural dimensions of ethnic, Sephardic culture, through the world of the tradition, morals, and customs of the Judaic religion. The existence, in other words, of an alternative, modern, cultural, Jewish identity overrides a purely religious one, making it easier for Jews to interact with individuals outside their community, but within their local environment of Thessaloniki.

Interviews

Interview with the Vice President of the Jewish Community in Thessaloniki (on 8 November 2013) (a).

Interviews with members of the Jewish Community in Thessaloniki (May 2013 – July 2015) (b).

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