

LANGUAGE(S) AND (NATIONAL) IDENTITY: THE CASE OF SEPHARDIC JEWS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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Original scientific paper
DOI: 10.31902/fll.54.2026.7
UDC: 94(497)(=924)“15/18“

Abstract: Following the exodus from the Iberian Peninsula, a large number of Jews found refuge in – the Ottoman Empire. In the new surroundings, the Jews had the autonomy guaranteeing the preservation of both faith and the language they spoke. Shortly their Spanish origin became an important (distinguishable) quality in the Ottoman Empire. Judeo-Spanish came to be valued in the domains of commercial activities. Historical circumstances, however, also implied the struggle to preserve Judeo-Spanish as the language of the Ottoman Jews. Due to the influence of French culture, and then the impact of the languages of newly-formed national states in the Balkans, the Jewish experienced several language shifts which threatened to extinguish the Judeo-Spanish. By forming the state of Israel, there is another (final) language shift whereby it is transferred to – Hebrew. In the text, we deal with the question of what (actually) the final identity of a Jewish national being is, whether that identity can be fully outlined, and how it is defined according to ideological (signifying) pressures. We will begin by delineating the theoretical framework that underpins this study; the focus will be on Althusser's concepts of *interpellation*, along with Močnik's and Renan's reflection on the notion of *nation*. Through this relatively modern analytical lens, we will attempt to explain the position of Jewish settlers in the Ottoman Empire and their subsequent transition from ethnic minority to national state.

Keywords: Sephardim, identity, language, interpellation, ethnic minority, the Ottoman Empire, ideology, nation

1. Introduction

We will examine the relationship between identity and language through the example of the Jewish Sephardic community, which, following the exodus from the Iberian Peninsula, found refuge, among other parts of the European continent, in the Ottoman Empire.¹ The

¹ It is estimated that somewhere between 100.000 and 150.000 Jews left Spain at the end of the 15th century. (Benbassa and Rodrigue xxxvii).

guiding question of this paper is: What has served as the primary reference point of Jewish national identity throughout the long history of the Jewish people's wondering – a history that, among other things, dates back further than the Iberian exodus? Or, to put it simply: what can we identify as the *conditio sine qua non* while determining Jewish identity being? The problem with this question is that the terms "nation" and "identity" themselves enter into theoretical use several hundred years after the Jewish exodus, and their insufficiently clear definition in the context of the "Jewish national issue" can cause certain difficulties. Understandably, the syntagm "national identity" also requires clarifications. Therefore, we will first deal with the terminology.

We understand identity as a construct shaped by (dominant) discursive practices, where the characteristics of an individual or a group are *signified* or singled out. "Characteristics" are identification categories with which an individual is drawn into a complex system of interpellating signifiers even before it manages to form some sort of judgment about them. This means that ideology possesses signifiers that precede the existence of the subject – signifiers that are accepted as "natural" and are necessary for individuals to orient themselves within an axiologically structured world. The value of the individual is (pre)determined by ideological roles – those ascribed at birth (e.g., "nation", "gender", "name") and those accumulated over time (e.g., "profession", "nicknames", etc.) By positioning itself within an ideologically structured place, an individual enters a social game of signification, aware of its tasks and limitations. Abandoning these limitations is possible only through adding new ideologically approved roles, a process that ultimately leads to the (re)invention of identity. Ideology thus *saying* (producing signs) assigns signifiers to individuals by interpellating them into subjects, all to establish a harmoniously organized, controlled, community.² "By responding to ideological speech, the interpellated are established as subjects by 'finding themselves' there where the ideology *put* them." (Močnik 3) "Response" to the speech of ideology represents identification momentum whereby an *individual* is "caught" in a complex network of signifiers, which paves axiological paths for them (moral, esthetic, and the like) at whose end they are (now already as *subjects*) to attain the meaning of their existence. Therefore, by response itself, they are

² For more details about the mechanisms of interpellation and control see in Малешевић 2013, 144 and so on. It should be borne in mind that the "speech" of ideology is never without its addressee, without recipient which is *unconditionally* tinged with semantic determinism of ideological discourse.

automatically “put” in a *proper* place. Not only have they positioned themselves in a value system of ideology, but they become flywheels of class reproduction. (Althusser 7) It is clear, however, that a multitude of discursive patterns creates many identities that a given social group may carry.³ Hence the process of *identifying*, or identity structuring, is constant. A group, or an individual, thus remains enclosed in a kind of semantic prison determined by the strict structure of own identities, which are always being rebuilt.

We can observe a nation as a convergent point of a multitude of discursive (identity) patterns which (ultimately) becomes a discourse in itself, which is specified in the name of the state: “Serbia”, “Israel”, “France”, etc. The name of a nation, “the name of a state” is the discourse of ideology. Precisely due to the possibility of holding many heterogeneous discourses together, a nation represents, as Močnik teaches us, a kind of “zero institution”, which reconciles (ideological) differences, by compensating for intolerance (bias) between various “organizational elements” (i.e. other institutions with a clearly identifiable function) in society.

Our hypothesis is that a nation is a special kind of zero institution. [...] While other institutions, facilities, distinctions, oppositions and similar organizational elements in modern societies perform some function or even more functions simultaneously, it seems that the nation is ‘without function’. However, we could hardly say that the nation is not functional, but it is tempting to say that the nation has no function, except the one to enable the society to exist. Accordingly, the function of the nation is to ‘hold together’ all the other (functional) institutions, facilities, organizational elements and to unite and to totalize them into a ‘society’ (94)

³ A multitude of discursive patterns leads to the issue of ideological pluralism and (in)ability of establishing communication (interaction) between various ideological formations, or, as Močnik calls them, “background beliefs”. Solving the problem of ideological pluralism, however, goes beyond the bounds of our text, and therefore we refer to: Močnik 3-76. It should be emphasized that ideological pluralism (and the consequences arising from it) does not influence the mechanism of the identity determination of the addressee, that is, the individual the ideology is addressing. In other words, no matter how many different background beliefs the individual comes across, the interpellation mechanism remains identical.

The function of the nation is to position itself between heterogeneous ideological pressures and to neutralize conflicts and differences from that "zero" place, by converting the energy of various interest groups and views of the world into a *modus vivendi* acceptable to all – the nation. On that dividing line of interest groups, "the nation" becomes an empty signifier which is to be filled with the meaning of common identity. The starting point of that identity is a compromise, based in the "nonpertinent" (93) aspects of the other's worldview, a mutually accepted empty (zero) point that serves as the basis for the accumulations of the shared symbolic traits. Therefore, we can state that *national identity represents a meaningful convergence* of heterogeneous "worldviews" (ideologies), for the purpose of social homogenization with the aim of realizing a common interest.

It is not easy to delineate (or quantify) what we have called "shared symbolic traits." For such traits to be recognized as a foundation of (national) identity, they must be embedded in collective memory as undeconstructible and enduring form of ethnic inheritance. They need to be historically validated (evidenced through documents), transmitted and cultivated across generations. In instances where historical evidence fails to substantiate the permanence of these traits, myths often intervene to fill the epistemological void left by the absence of scientific explanation. In either case (whether scientifically or mythologically) memories (of a glorious past) ought to be preserved. It is precisely through the concept of the perpetuation of "received heritage" as well as "desire [of people] to live together" that Ernest Renan finds the basis for the idea of a nation.

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things that, in truth, are but one constitute this soul, this spiritual principle. One is in the past, the other in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of heritage that one has received in an undivided form. (...) The cult of ancestors is the most legitimate of all; our ancestors have made us who we are. A heroic past, great man, glory (I mean genuine kind), this is the capital stock upon which one bases a national idea. To have common glories in the past, a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more, these are the essential preconditions for being a people. (261)

Ergo, a nation reconciles differences between various types of institutions (with their respective assignments) while accumulating

everything that can be signified as a "glorious past." The foundation of this accumulation shapes the idea of national unity. National pride is built upon an inherited symbolic "stock" derived from that "glorious" past. Needless to say, this "stock" must be stripped of all negative aspects of ethnic uprisings (such as war crimes, acts of aggression, etc.) that could call into question the ethical and symbolic purity of the people being unified. In short, nations (or rather, national pasts) are always presented as immaculate; this is the prevailing rule.

Millet⁴ system in the Ottoman Empire recognized ethno-religious communities as autonomous social structures. These communities were granted freedom of religion, as well as the right "to run their own education system with curriculum and language based on their preferences." (Hidayat 30, 32) This relatively liberal ethno-religious policy, adopted by the Ottoman Empire, enabled minority groups to preserve core features of their identity – language, religion, history, legends, rituals etc. – which would later provide a symbolic foundation for the emergence of national consciousness. At the same time, through pseudo-institutions ("education system with curriculum and language based on their preferences") allowed by the Ottoman government, these communities preserved their inherited symbolic habitus and an idealized vision of their own (glorious) history.

However, this does not suggest that the ethno-religious non-Muslim communities recognized under Sharia law possessed *all* the characteristics of a (modern) nation. Rather, it indicates that the socio-political structure of the Empire allowed these communities to maintain and transmit their historical heritage, thereby facilitating a smoother transition into nationhood. This explains why so many nation-states emerged in Balkans after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The transformation of ethno-religious communities into national entities was significantly easier in this region – compared to the experience of ethnic minorities in Western Europe – due to the strict religious differentiation enforced by Ottoman state, which largely prevented assimilation and acculturation. The concept of nation entails features

⁴ The term *millet*, of Arabic origin, can be translated as "nation." The *millet system* regulated the relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim communities within the Ottoman Empire. Non-Muslim groups were granted protection by the state based on Qur'anic injunctions concerning religious freedom. Jews and Christians were recognized as "People of the Book", and as such, were accorded a protected status within the Islamic framework of the Ottoman state. (Öztürk 72-73)

that were absent in earlier ethnic, or, as Victor Roudometof terms them, *premodern social formation*:

An *ethnie* may have the following characteristics to differing degrees: a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, some elements of common culture (e.g., langue, religion), an association with a specific homeland, and a sense of solidarity. (...) Contrary to modern secular nations, characterized as they are by a mass public culture, common economy, and the legal rights and duties of their members, *ethnie* are predominately premodern social formations. (12)

Ethno-religious communities, on the other hand, encompass many of the elements found in complex national structures. What they lack, however, are the discursive (ideological) mechanisms that bind diverse ethnic traits – “a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories...” – into a single unifying entity. The “nation” serves as the name for that unification: a construct that articulates the legal (equal rights and duties among members), political (relations with other nations, discourses on “national interests” and historical narratives), cultural (symbolic assets, including language), and economic (frameworks for development and growth) dimensions of an integrated population. If we are permitted to appropriate Marxist terminology here, one could argue that the nation functions as the ideological superstructure of the *ethnie* (base).

However, one should wonder what role, in that process of nation forming and identity building is played by – language? Language represents a correlate between a nation and identity. *The way we speak conditions what we are*. Language *inscribes* meaning in nation by illuminating its past (if not *by historical facts*, then by *myths and legends*) and showing it the future (through a hazy membrane of “national interests”). A community, ultimately, has to *speak* in order to represent itself to others and others to itself. Language is therefore at the same time both the object and means of representation. It accumulates symbolic goods of the nation in order to represent itself to others through them (as the primary “symbolic good”).

The appearance of romanticism in Europe influenced the birth of patriotism and the liberation of national feelings. At the same time, considerable attention was paid to the development of the *language*, its standardization and institutionalization, as the bearer of the national identity. The issue of language was of exceptional importance for forming and maintaining a national consciousness for countries that

were in the process of gaining independence and rebuilding their national identity within a newly-formed states, particularly in the Balkans, where nations were slowly freeing themselves from Ottoman rule during the 19th century. For the Jewish communities living within these countries, the rise of national awareness combined with radical language policies implemented by the states posed a significant threat to Judeo-Spanish—the language of the Sephardic Jewish ethnic minority. After almost four hundred years, the language spoken by the Balkan Jews was in danger of extinction. Language shift, whereby the mother tongue was slowly replaced with a dominant language of the community, finally took off in the 20th century. Due to the radicalization of the language policy of newly-formed national states, where the institutional support to the language of the Jewish national minority did not exist, as well afterwards, due to the infestation of the Nazis, the number of the speakers of Judeo-Spanish was reduced as much as possible. However, the national feeling of Jews was (still) not threatened by that. Numerous Jewish intellectuals advocated for the full adoption of the dominant community's language as a means of facilitating active engagement in its political and cultural spheres, while simultaneously striving to preserve Jewish identity. (Filipović and Vučina Simović 2008, 311-315; Filipović and Vučina Simović 2014, 531) The question that arises at this moment is whether speaking Jewish (Serbian or French) confers a deeper sense of belonging or identity – making one “more” of a Jew (a Serb, or a Frenchman) – than those who do not engage with that language. Although this comparison is lacking only in its logical-grammatical plain (whether it is possible to be “more Serbian” compared to another Serb), within the domain of identity formation (specifically the discourses produced by state apparatuses) it remains an indispensable point of reference for national constitution.

This paper seeks to highlight the connection between language and identity through the example of the Jewish ethnic minority that settled in parts of the Ottoman Empire following the Iberian exodus. The issue of language will also be amended after the realization of the Zionist dream, where according to the established logic of national identity formation, Hebrew, through state ideological apparatuses, took primacy in the newly-formed state – Israel. In the context of the transformation from an ethno-religious community to a modern nation-state, we examine the historical development of the two primary languages used by Sephardic Jews: Judeo-Spanish and Hebrew. We will explore the role of language not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic and ideological force in the process of national awakening and identity construction.

2. Exodus and Settling

In 1492, Spanish king Ferdinand II of Aragon signed a decree mandating the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula. A large number of expelled Jews found refuge in the Balkans, i.e. in the territory of the Ottoman Empire. There were two large Sephardi centres in that area, Thessaloniki and Tsarigrad, from where, the areas of Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Dalmatia, etc. were later inhabited. The Sephardi culture centers were mainly concentrated in bigger cities – Sarajevo, Belgrade, Bitola, etc.

The Ottoman Empire therefore received, within its borders, the exiles from the West. According to the legend retold in Sephardic circles, the Ottoman sultan Bayezid II said that he was enriching his empire by accepting Jews into his fold. Namely, Bayezid said the following: "Can you call such a king wise and intelligent? [Ferdinand II of Aragon] He is impoverishing his country and enriching my kingdom." (Benbassa and Rodrigue 7) Bayezid hoped that the commercial class in the Empire would be strengthened with the arrival of educated and enterprising Jews. The Ottoman Empire enabled a high level of autonomy to minority ethnic groups. Even though different ethnic groups (Greek, Slavic, Armenian) shared the same religion (Orthodox Christianity), they were not treated as a single community. "Rather, the Ottoman authorities embedded ethnicity into religiosity to create ethno-religious identification for the minority groups, especially in dealing with the Balkans." (Hidayat 2014: 30) In essence, religious commonality alone was insufficient criterion to override deeply rooted ethnic affiliations. However, the autonomy implied the unobstructed practice of confession as well as the use of own language. Furthermore, minority communities had independent judiciary, whereby they could resolve the current issues in the society (inheriting, marrying, etc.). The Ottoman Empire resembled a cultural mosaic, where ethnic groups were able to harbor inherited cultural goods specified in the form of practicing religion and language autonomy.

Within the Turkish state, they [Sephardim] had a high level of autonomy. They had the freedom of worship and all the communal issues were resolved within the Sephardic community itself, which had its judiciary. Sephardic communities were long isolated from the external environment and, for a long time, commercial connections were the only contacts. Because of that, the communities were very interconnected – in economic and cultural aspect – while they were mainly isolated from the external environment. This

enabled the conservation of the culture which the Sephardim transferred from their old homeland. By this, we are referring to heritage such as the spoken language (Judeo-Spanish) and oral tradition (folk songs, stories and proverbs) as well as other aspects of Sephardic culture that were closely related to faith and the language of the holy books – Hebrew. (Vidaković Petrov 10)

Minority ethno-religious communities were obliged to pay taxes for their autonomy to the Empire. This relationship between Muslim and non-Muslim populations (primarily Jews and Christians) was guaranteed through a contract (*dhimma*). The contract did not only regulate the tax obligation of the subdued populace, but it also guaranteed social hierarchy whereby the “symbolic as well as practical” inferiority of the non-Muslim population was confirmed. (Benbassa and Rodrigue 3) Although they were not equal to the Muslim population of the Empire, non-Muslim communities were granted astonishingly broad freedoms to organize and establish self-governance within their own millet. Minority communities were allowed to elect their own religious leaders – patriarch or rabbi (*Milletbasi*) – who served as official representatives of their millet before the Ottoman state. “With this community they were absolutely allowed to live freely their religion, language, tradition and customs. The government completely gave the management of the authority and responsibilities for all education and cultural institutes, churches and hospitals of minorities’ community to this patriarch.” Non-Muslim communities are allowed to impose their own jurisdiction over religious and personal matters, such as family law, marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The rulings of non-Muslim courts on these issues were recognized and enforced by the State authorities. (Öztürk 72, 78, 80-81; Hidayat 32-33) In essence, millets maintained its own institutions and internal hierarchy, which were respected by the Ottoman state. These structures enabled a significant degree of self-governance, providing the foundation for communal autonomy that would later evolve into claims for nationhood in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, we can explain (or at least understand) a) the “conservation” of the inherited cultural capital within non-Muslim communities and b) the marginalization of the Sephardic Jews from participating in the distribution of power within the Empire. Ultimately, they were perceived as *others*; ones who did not believe in the dominant ideological discourse (of *true* faith) and subsequently ones whose *existence* confirmed the higher *value* of the dominant religion. The *dhimma*, which outlined the coordinates of this

tolerated yet subordinate status, was, in essence, a formal agreement that legalized religious (and social) hierarchy.

What did “conserved” and closely guarded cultural capital of Sephardim consist of?

The 1492 Expulsion had disintegrated communal and family structures, and, as a result of this trauma, the Sephardim were obsessed with the task of “continuity” of culture and identity. Therefore, the concept of Sephardic Jews as exiled Spaniards became a *sine qua non* element of their Judaism. The transmission of their Jewish identity implied the transmission of their Hispanicity, both in cultural and linguistic forms. (Romero 21)

Ironically, Jews legitimized their Jewishness by the identity of the nation that banished them. Jewish Hispanicity signified much desired distinction that outlined new social inequalities separating not only Jews from Turks but also Sephardic Jews from the Jews who were previously settled in the Ottoman Empire.

This separate Spanish identity different from other Jews developed early in the Ottoman Diaspora, as the first exiles refused to be represented before the Sultan by the Greek-speaking Romaniot Jewish authorities, which had settled in Istanbul centuries before. The Sephardic community was ultimately allowed to appoint their own spokespersons from within the Spanish-speaking community. (Ibid)

The Spanish past brought Sephardim a new legitimizing discourse whereby this, conditionally speaking, noble Jewishness was confirmed. In fact, during the initial years of their settlement in the Ottoman Empire, the Sephardim enjoyed a relatively high social status. As they became more economically independent, the Sephardim succeeded in imposing Judeo-Spanish, not only as the dominant language of the Ottoman Jews, where various Jewish communities slowly adopted the language abandoning Greek and Turkish they had spoken until then, but also as a language slowly being spoken by non-Jews engaged in trade and artistic pursuits. (Ibid 19-20) The Judeo-Spanish language thus became the language of value, the language which enabled economic mobility and advancement. In that way one of the first language shifts in the area of the Ottoman Empire, which involved Jewish communities, occurred precisely at the end of the 15th century, when the Jews from around Istanbul and Thessaloniki slowly began to adopt not only the

Judeo-Spanish language, but also Sephardic customs and religious practices.

The complete silhouette of Jewish identity cannot be outlined without taking into account the Hebrew language, which remained the indispensable language of liturgical practice. Hebrew was always present in the consciousness of Jews as one of the main bearers of Jewish identity. Considering that the Jewish community suffered a few language shifts before the Iberian exodus (the transmission from Greek to Latin, then from Latin to various Romance language varieties, in order to transfer to Arabic after Muslim advancement in the peninsula, and then again, after the fall of Seville, they returned to the Romance varieties – primarily Castilian language), we can assume that Jews did not pay too much attention to constant adoption of new languages, nor did they feel some kind of identity discomfort (“crisis”), because they considered Hebrew a true foothold of Jewishness. To Iberian Jews, Hebrew represented a necessary condition (or perhaps, more precisely, a sufficient requirement) of Jewish identity, just as Hispanicity became an important feature of Jewishness in the Ottoman Empire. Even in the 19th century, when Judeo-Spanish faced decline, Hebrew emerged as a natural alternative upon which a renewed Jewish identity discourse could be constructed.

Thus we conclude that the identity of Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire was constituted from the following components:

- 1) The Judeo-Spanish language.
- 2) The Hebrew language (which made a connection with the religious aspect of Jewish identity).
- 3) The rituals and culture transferred from Spain.

2.1 Embedded in the Signifier

Appropriating the signifier of ideology the subject is added to the social mosaic as a valuable part of the system. It is necessary for an individual to be identified (identity card, occupation, etc.) in order to get the right to participate in the symbolic distribution of values offered by the given system.

And one of the major instruments of State control – along with the police force, the school system and taxation – is the identity card [...] If individuals are described there in greater and greater detail – from genealogical and biographical data down to the whorls on their fingerprints, the patterns of their irises or their gait – it is indeed so that they can be “recognized”

and 'identified', but on what terms? Certainly not on their own... (Riley 77)

The system assigns names to subjects not only to recognize them, but to ensure that they understand how they are expected to behave. "Jewish Hispanicity" is a signifier whereby Iberian Jews joined the Empire. They entered the Empire bearing a distinct cultural value, which they introduced themselves to the others by assuming its own place in the system. The others also accepted them and treated them according to the role which their value brought them ("able merchants and educated people"). The Empire recognized them via the signifier that they themselves brought in and which Sephardim, refusing "to be represented before the Sultan" by Jewish chiefs of the time in the Greek language, defended as well.

Such a discursive conception of identity should be borne in mind in first introduction of Sephardim to the Ottomans upon entering the Empire. The arrival of Jews in the Empire was preceded by a poster where the sultan welcomed the guests and informed the local population that the death penalty was prescribed for mistreating newcomers. (Romero 17-18) This was the primary signifier through which the Ottomans came to know the Jews. They were the ones "who were not to be mistreated" due to the relevance ("relevance") they brought to the Empire. Those first Sephardim were also known as *Andalavizos*, a name that literally answered the question: "Who are you?" Namely, *anda al avizo* means: "go see the poster". (Kohen and Kohen-Gordon 25) Jews introduced themselves in a discursive form – their arrival was announced through *inscription*. There is one collective personal/identity card that goes along with the trust in the protection afforded by the signifier! There is one successful interpellation! Only with their Spanish past they fell under the signifiers inscribed on the poster, which protected them from too curious locals. And which contributed to their economic prosperity. "They could even run their own business and other informal professions based on particular identity. For example, due to their ability to speak European languages the Jews were mainly engaged in international trade and foreign relation and civil service in general." (Hidayat 2014: 34) Jews received a new signifier in a new state, completely surrendering to the caprices of a new ideology. In a word, the Empire *put* them in a *proper* place.

How did Sephardic identities persist within the community for such an extended period, and what factors contributed to their resilience against the new identifying influences of the Ottoman Empire? One of the reasons for this persistence is the previously mentioned

"conservation" of the Jewish community. Positions of power within the imperial administration were predominantly reserved for Muslims. The inability to integrate into the state apparatus, the impossibility of sharing symbolic capital Ottomans believed in (confessions, histories, etc.), led to Jews looking for a foothold for their identity in the signifiers they already possessed. Their tradition and history became discursive bases from which they could draw the content for getting (more) acquainted with – themselves. *The past* so becomes an inexhaustible symbolic oasis which is considerably drained whenever one's own identity is to be confirmed (or endangered) in *the present*. This leads to a paradox (specific to all nations) where the very value of the inherited symbolic goods proves itself through their *antiquity*. The past, in that sense, justifies (explain, support, confirms, valorized) itself through – itself. The understanding of the present is often shaped by identity constructs that language rooted into deep (and rich) forest of glorious antiquity. The more strongly a cultural good is tied to a specific historical period, person, or event, the greater its perceived value in the present becomes. This, in turn, intensifies the desire to preserve and protect it from signifying changes. To the Sephardim, Judeo-Spanish was a language of enduring, antique value – "the language of Cervantes" – and, as such, it was regarded not only as worthy of preservation, but as indispensable corner stone of their present identity (and status). The fact that Cervantes was born a few decades after the Iberian exodus did not prevent Judeo-Spanish from being ascribed a logocentric cultural value. (Filipović and Vučina-Simović 2014, 534) The same logocentric operation applied to Hebrew as well; as one of the oldest monuments of the Jewish culture, connected to liturgical religious practice, the symbolic power of Hebrew was never questioned in the context of Jewish identity building.

The economic power of the Jews was conditioned by the economic power of the Ottoman Empire. The end of the 17th century marked the beginning of the decline of the power of the great Ottoman Empire. The failed siege of Vienna (1683) led to the formation of the anti-Ottoman coalition (the "Holy League"), which later (1699) also caused territorial losses (Hungary was handed over to the Austrians, while Athens and the Peloponnese fell to Venice) which significantly shook the Empire. (Imber 85-86) The tax on the minority ethnic communities was then increased, which led to a large number of Jews deciding to leave the Empire. At the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, the impoverished Jewish community was doomed to do less valuable work, since they could not bear the burden of the tax of dealing in commerce, whereby, at the same time, their economic influence almost completely

disappeared, which again conditioned numerous segregation regulations that the Ottoman administration brought (the manner of dressing, the way of building synagogues, etc.). (Göçek 3; Romero 24)

The beginning of the 19th century brought the Ottoman Empire a multitude of reformation attempts, which aimed at contributing to the social development, modeled after the advanced countries of the West at that time, primarily France. Thus, in 1839, a law was brought whereby the rights of non-Muslims with the Muslim population in the Empire were equaled. Almost twenty years later (1856), the tax on the non-Muslim populace was abolished and they were given the possibility of officer promotion in the imperial army of that time.⁵ The reform from 1856 also implied the inclusion of minority communities into a newly organized education system. (Göçek 522) It also meant that the minority communities, which up to then enjoyed juridical and cultural autonomy, slowly began to participate in the ideological nomenclature of the Ottoman Empire. The reforms of 1856 granted them the right to hold positions that allowed, at least in principle, their participation in the more equitable distribution of power.⁶ It simultaneously meant exiting the “conserved”, self-sufficient and greatly static way of life, which was common during the almost five-century Ottoman rule.

The readiness of the Ottoman Empire to enter social reforms and to adjust the principles of social organization to the Western political system led to the expansion of the influence of the Western forces (and Russia) in the already shaken Empire.⁷ Each of the great powers tried to

⁵ These reforms were not without resistance of Muslim population in the Empire. The Muslims experienced the equaling before law as treason. Furthermore, not only did they see it as a degradation of century-long dominant Muslim populace (“a day of mourning and despair for the Muslims”), but they also believed that the kind of equality, especially in military service, is almost impossible. Ahmed Cevdet Paşa would emphasize religious division of a potential multi-confessional army, which could lead to practical, organizational difficulties (diet, the number and type of priests, etc.), which may again be fatal for performing military duties. For more details about this, see Göçek 517, 527

⁶ A small percentage of educated people from the minority communities who were schooled under the imperial patronage managed to access state bureaucratic system. The reasons for that could still be founded in latent religious discrimination, but also in the fact that a relatively small number of people from minority communities decided to enroll in the state school at all. Ibid, 522.

⁷ Meddling of foreign powers in the political organization of the Ottoman Empire reflected first in financing and support of minority communities that lived on the Ottoman soil. The following breakdown of the Empire and the

influence that community with which it shared certain identity characteristics. Russia influenced the Orthodox population in the Ottoman Empire, while Western countries extended their impact to other minority communities. The Sephardic community though was under the influence of France, more specifically, under the influence of the French school founded in 1860 in Paris, which aimed at educating Jewish youth in the spirit of the Enlightenment. The school was called *Alliance Israelite Universelle*.⁸ French was considered the language of progress and rationalism. The Alliance opened a large number of schools in the whole Empire. Until 1905, almost a third of the Jewish children attended this school. (Romero 28) Via this influence on the lives of Ottoman Jews, the Alliance created the basis for their new identity positioning. The French language and culture (new signifiers) became for the Jewish community what Hispanicity had been at the beginning of the 16th century. To speak French meant to speak a language of the enlightened Europe.

French culture dominated every aspect of Sephardic culture, and French quickly became the language of the elite, reducing Judeo-Spanish as the language to be spoken at home only. People began to discard traditional Sephardic names and adopted Gallicized versions for the boys [...] and entirely new French names for girls, a tradition that survived well into the late 1930s. (Ibid 29)

formation of national states in the Balkans, according to some historians, is the consequence of the lack of trust between these powers, which, in order to retain their influence in the Balkans (and, at the same time, to limit the influence of others), strived to create and form new, sovereign territories. For more details about this, see Halden 2013.

⁸ Although the Ottoman Empire also adjusted its education system to the French one (especially in the military), Jews (and other minority communities) rather opted for newly-opened schools that were not under the patronage of the Empire, but under direct French influence. However, the influence of French thought (which then launched ideas about the importance of national spirit, and implicitly the nation-state), as Fatma Göçek argues, did not have the same significance for minority communities and young Turks. French models of the social bourgeois order were interpreted according to the position which, in the Ottoman Empire, was held by Turks (majority) and minority communities. While the former understood these ideas as theoretical bases for further reformation of the state, thus far did minority communities see, in these ideas, an incentive towards attaining political autonomy. (Göçek 526)

This coordinated practice, which aimed to bring French culture closer to Spanish Jews, shed new light on the ethnic profiling of Sephardim. A new narrative was born and identification with the values that this narrative produced ("enlightenment", "nation", "liberty", "equality", etc.) led to new interpellation possibilities. Although Judeo-Spanish was continuously discredited through the Alliance and the journals financed by that school (*El Tiempo*, *Le Boz de Oriente*), while at the same time the role of French as the language of cultural Europe was glorified, the complete rejection of Judeo-Spanish never happened. (Ibid 31) This means that the new narrative did not completely suppress the old one; both discourses left deep marks on Jewish national identity.

French was not the last ideological mark used as a complement (or correction) of Jewish identity. The end of the 19th century marked the beginning of "turkification", i.e. gradual introduction of Turkish in schools attended by minority communities in the Empire. "The Young Turks sought to transform the Ottoman Empire into a modern, centralized state, but this in turn led to a nationalistic sense of 'Turkism', which directly or indirectly established a strong link between the new government and Turkish ethnicity and language." (Ibid 35) The emergence of national consciousness gave the right to new reformers (Turkish youth educated in Western schools) not only to establish a strong connection between state and nation, and implicitly language as well, but also to forbid minority communities in the Empire to gain education in *their* language. Even French *El Tiempo* actively participated in the process of turkification, referring thus to Judeo-Spanish as a 'backward' language which ought to be replaced by more advanced Turkish and French languages. In 1920, the Turkish government issued an official document forbidding learning in foreign languages, whereby the influence of the French-Jewish Alliance was officially ended.

Nationalization did not affect just Turkey. Through the breakdown of the Ottoman Empire, new states were created in the Balkans, which also led very restrictive language policies. The languages of the hitherto larger minority communities in the Ottoman Empire now became the official languages of the newly formed states. Not knowing those languages meant exclusion from the political sphere of those states. Jews, who remained a minority in the new states were forced to once again adjust their language policies. This adjustment was not without serious discussions in the Jewish intellectual circles of the time. A fundamental dilemma which Jewish intellectuals tried to solve was whether the language of national states where Jews suddenly found themselves should be completely accepted, or should Judeo-Spanish be retained, even if it implied the exclusion from the domain of economic

distribution of power.⁹ The desire to preserve Judeo-Spanish is explained by the wish to maintain a common identity reference that connects the Sephardim settled in all parts of the now former Ottoman Empire.

In the debate which was published in the journal *El amigo del pueblo* [...] points out that the Sephardim feel that Judeo-Spanish is the language which has enabled the Sephardic communities scattered all over the world to remain connected over a very long period of time. (Filipović and Vučina-Simović 2008, 312)

The identity aspect of the Judeo-Spanish language (as a language that "connects") remained the main reason why some Jewish intellectuals were reluctant to renounce it.

By founding the state of Israel, the issue between language and national identity was revived. The Zionist movements, which were founded long before the creation of Israel,¹⁰ mainly observed Hebrew as fundamental for the Jewish national identity. The ancient language, which survived only in the domain of liturgical practice, after the founding of Israel, was supposed to serve secular purposes. It did not go without disagreements though. Many believed that Hebrew was impractical for everyday use and that as such it was improper for

⁹ Angel Pulido recognizes several ideological intentions relating to potential Sephardic policy towards their language (or perhaps their languages), which the Jewish intellectuals devoted their attention. In principle, according to Pulido, we could single out four such groups: 1) "Anti-Castilian' language ideologies: Zionist and Integrationist", which would imply the rejection of Judeo-Spanish and the integration in the language domains of the dominant linguistic community or revitalization of Hebrew; 2) "Language ideology favoring independent development of Judeo-Spanish", which would realize its linguistic standardization by relying on Spanish (whose lexis would actually replace all loan words from other languages, which Judeo-Spanish abounds in), 3) "Pragmatic and eclectic evaluation of Judeo-Spanish", where Judeo-Spanish would not be abandoned in favor of national languages, but where it would still be necessary to study them because of the inclusion of Jewish community in economic affairs of the given state. 4) „Pro-Castilian' language ideology“, where Judeo-Spanish is observed as "non-grammatical", i.e. unstandardized and insufficiently developed to be of use to the Jewish community. Therefore, this group advocated for the revitalization of Spanish modern language in the Sephardic community. For more details about this, see Filipovic and Vučina-Simović 2014, 527 etc.

¹⁰ The first international Zionist congress was held in Basel in 1876.

building a modern nation. (Safran 49, 52) However, Hebrew took primacy in the new state.¹¹ Jews who came from the Diaspora to a newly-formed Jewish state (as well as those who came to Palestine before the formation of Israel) were forced to slowly switch to institutionally supported Hebrew. (Ibid 50) In that way, the long Jewish identity journey ended in a state and a national language – Hebrew. And, in the end, the most archaic identity features of Jews (the Hebrew language) which gave momentum to the new identity narrative, which should be believed in, was revived.

Hebrew is not the language of the majority of Jews globally; but it is the *national* language of citizens of Israel, at least of its Jewish ones. Hebrew is *natural* language of native-born Israelis (*sabras*), who are not concerned about its historic antecedents or its biblical basis to justify their use of it. (Ibid 52)

So, the tale about acquiring (and guarding) the identity, where the main actors are *nation, state and language*, is told (for the umpteenth time) with an unmistakable Proppian narrative structure; language is there to support nation and state, nation is there to protect language, while state is there to keep the entire identity balance together (by guarding, of course, language and nation).

3. Conclusion

Identity is a discursive construction which implies symbolic values. A collective identity would represent the inheritance of common values, whose distribution makes a sort of symbolic (or cultural) connection between people. The value order itself, which provides content to

¹¹ Even before the formation of Israel, there was a clear consciousness with Jews about the need and necessity of the Hebrew revitalization. Hebrew had to exit the state of religious hibernation and secularize itself, to make it pragmatic and practical. If Judeo-Spanish was the identity basis on which the Sephardim in different parts of the Ottoman Empire connected, Hebrew was the bond of *all* Jews. Hence its inviolable symbolic significance. “Eliezer Ben Yahuda (1858-1922), a major figure in the revival of Hebrew, realised that this language was becoming increasingly irrelevant and useless to Jewish life in the Diaspora, because of both the pressures of assimilation and the dominance of Yiddish for those Jews in Eastern Europe who still maintained a collective Jewish identity. He therefore advocated a territorial solution – increased immigration to Palestine, because only through practical quotidian use could Hebrew be revived. He set a personal example in 1881 by settling in Jerusalem and refusing to speak to anyone who was Jewish – including his own children – in a language other than Hebrew.” (Safran 45)

identity, can be questioned in a certain historical event. *Language* plays an important role in the process of national identity awareness or constituting ethnic legitimacy. Language gives form to the symbolic good we inherit.

Historical circumstances may be such that language shifts (replacing one language with another) may be relatively frequent. In that case, the question that arises is whether the language abandoned by the ethnic community continues to influence the process of identity constitution (of that community). Would the rejection of one language, followed by acceptance of another (a dominant one), result in forgetting a part of ethnic or national identity whose symbolic capital remains memorized in the lost language? This is the dilemma that Jews faced every time during numerous language shifts they experienced, starting from the settlement on the Iberian Peninsula, until the constitution of their own state. It is valid to assume that the identity, which was formed in the domain of one language practice, is not lost, but is transmitted to a new language and together with it forms a kind of symbolic wealth (including the language itself which was lost, i.e. which is no longer spoken) of a people. In this way, we might introduce the concept of *quantitative identity* as a theoretical tool – conceiving identity as the sum of all characteristics of a people, from their earliest known historical origins to the present, transmitted primarily through the medium of modern spoken language. However, the reality is that such a comprehensive awareness of identity is not possible. It is not clear either whether that type of identity awareness would be a product of apocryphal identity or scientifically classified knowledge. Language is not only a means of communicating what something *is*, but also a means of filling in certain lacunae in the historical linear structure. We will remember, for example, Bayezid's words, with which he welcomed Jews in Turkey, and which we cited at the beginning of our research ("Can you call such a king (Ferdinand II) wise and intelligent? He is impoverishing his country and enriching my kingdom."). There is not a single Turkish source that confirms these words. Still, were they truly spoken or were they a result of certain need?

All these quotations [this also refers to the quotations that additionally describe Bayezid's affection towards Jews – N.M.] are taken from Jewish sources; nothing equivalent can be found in Ottoman documentation. [...] However, these apocryphal sentences throw more light on the state of mind of the Jews of the period than on formal Ottoman policy. They also express deep-seated Jewish expectation, in the face of the terrible shock of the Expulsion... (Benbassa and Rodrigue 7)

Is Bayezid's affection a historical fact or the need of Jews to confirm their value? To whom? To themselves? To others? To Other? In any case, language (driven by desire?) intervened and wrote a part of Jewish identity (as "able merchants and educated people who enriched Bayezid's empire") in history books. We are fated to continue writing that identity, but without illusions about its *comprehensiveness*. And the ultimate truth.

However, is it possible to pose the question of the identity of the Israeli Jews, without mentioning the Sephardic Jews? Does what we might consider *sine qua non* of Judaism today (Hebrew, faith, etc.) encompass what was considered the *sine qua non* of the Ottoman Sephardim in the 16th century: *Hispanicity*? Can the Israeli national identity ever be complete without incorporating *Hispanicity* – the very identity that once helped the Jewish people attain a more favorable position within the Ottoman Empire? By expanding this idea, we can ask ourselves whether the Jewish cultural mosaic, which was formed on the soil of various parts of Europe, participates now, as a syncretic identity feature in the newly formed Jewish state? It should not be overlooked that Israel institutionally supports the preservation of languages that the Jewish community used in the Diaspora. (Yitzhak 2011) What is gained by this? Protection (or even better, another "conservation") of the past which, as necessary, can be activated at some moment in the future? Or, perhaps, a better, "more comprehensive" insight into the structure of Jewish identity, under the assumption that the sum of all identities gives one, *final*, ultimate identity which determines Jewishness in its essence. It is understandably an illusion to which every discourse about nation and identity is beforehand doomed.

What matters, in our view, is not the question of how to syncretize various identity layers into a single form, but rather how (and whether) these identities produce a potent desire for ethnic unification. If we take Renan's assertion that "a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle", we can deduce that nationhood does not require a fixed checklist of traits to initiate the process of identification. Instead, the nation is rooted in a collective desire for unity – one that can emerge from many identity elements, or from only a few. The Ottoman Empire allowed its minority populations the opportunity to conserve their ethnically significant features. What was preserved during that time proved sufficient to ignite a desire for unification (under a shared flag, within a shared system, etc.) into a single nation. So, is it possible to be a Jew (a Serb, etc.) without knowing Hebrew (or one of the languages that Jews have used in their history) without faith in God and awareness of the Jewish

cultural and historical heritage? The answer is undoubtedly – yes. The nation is always capable of producing a shared discursive ground. It compensate for internal differences among its various “organizational elements,” (Močnik) enabling peaceful coexistence. Being a Jew (a Serb, a French) is always readily filled with meaning – with signifiers that grant access to the larger process of identification. In a word, being a Jew becomes just a discourse, open, among other things, to new inputs, which at least in principle can be typically non-Jewish. Nation is a discourse burdened by (empty) signifiers in which we unquestionably believe. Nation, that is *us*.

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LANGUE(S) ET IDENTITE (NATIONALE) : LE CAS DES JUIFS SEPHARADES DANS L'EMPIRE OTTOMAN

Cet article traite de la relation entre langue et identité dans l'exemple des Juifs séfarades. Suite à leur exode de la péninsule ibérique, un grand nombre de Juifs ont trouvé refuge dans l'Empire Ottoman. Dans ce nouvel environnement, les Juifs disposaient d'une autonomie garantissant la préservation de la foi et de la langue qu'ils parlaient. Peu de temps après, leur origine espagnole est devenue une qualité importante dans l'Empire ottoman. Le judéo-espagnol est devenu valorisé dans les domaines des activités commerciales. Mais les circonstances historiques impliquaient également une lutte pour le préserver comme la langue des Juifs ottomans. En raison de l'influence de la culture française, puis de l'impact des langues des états nationaux nouvellement formés dans les Balkans, l'identité juive a connu plusieurs changements linguistiques qui ont menacé d'éteindre le judéo-espagnol. L'invasion nazie au XXe siècle a presque mis la menace à exécution. En formant l'État d'Israël, il y a un autre (dernier) changement de langue par lequel il est basculé vers – l'hébreu. Dans ce texte, nous abordons la question de savoir quelle est (en réalité) l'identité finale du peuple juif, si cette identité peut être pleinement décrite et comment elle est définie en fonction des pressions idéologiques.

Mots-clés : Sépharades, identité, langue, Empire ottoman, idéologie, nation