

Interviewee: Rabbi Daniel Masri

Interview Date: March 28, 2022

Interview Location: Congregation Beth Rambam

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## ABSTRACT

Rabbi Daniel Masri was born and raised in Mexico City until his emigration at seven years old. His parents met when they crossed paths in New York City. They eventually moved to Mexico City, where Masri's father lived. Masri's mother had a hard time adjusting to living in Mexico, while raising her kids in a foreign country. When Masri was seven years old, the family moved to New York City. It was a completely different lifestyle, but it helped that Masri's mom was American, and she made his transitions easier. After moving, they didn't lose their Mexican culture and identity, as, for example, they still made Mexican dishes. Masri's Sephardic Jewish background and New York's substantial Jewish community helped him identify more with his religion. He was always involved in synagogues and the broader community since his dad was a rabbi. He moved out of New York City when he was a young adult and found himself in Houston. The Sephardic community wasn't as large as New York City's, but what he saw in Houston was perfect for him.

LB: Hello. This is Lauren Bautista and Max Hosaka interviewing Rabbi Daniel Masri at the Congregation Beth Rambam for the Sephardic Latinx Oral History Project for the University of Houston and the Houston Holocaust Museum on March 28, 2022. So, Rabbi Daniel, what would you say your childhood was mostly like?

DM: What my childhood was mostly like? It was a fun experience.

LB: Were there any aspects growing up Jewish that changed your childhood?

DM: Most definitely, yes. I mean, Judaism was very central to my identity and who I was, and who I was as a person growing up and who I am today. You know, Mexico City is a very close-knit community. It is a warm community. The families – it is very family-oriented. Every Friday afternoon when we came home from school, straight to grandma's house – all the cousins and aunts and uncles – and we had lunch at grandma's every Friday and every Shabbat as well. So, all of us got together literally every week, a couple of times a week, so that was really nice growing up and grew up together with all the cousins and as a family.

LB: That is awesome. And were your parents born in Mexico City as well?

DM: So, no. My father was born in Mexico City in 1940. My mother was born in Siberia, actually escaping the Nazis... My grandfather, one day before they closed the border from Poland to Russia, escaped, made it to Russia, and my grandfather was placed in the Siberian labor camp. And he was there for about 5 years. My mother was born in the Siberian labor camp. And, in about 1950, they made their way to the States.

LB: That is an amazing story.

DM: Yes.

LB: Do you know any more about that? Did he tell you his stories and his experience there?

DM: My grandfather?

LB: Yes.

DH: Some stories. Look – it was traumatic, so he did not talk about it on a regular basis, but yes... I mean, I know he worked, he chopped trees, worked a full day chopping trees in the forest and the payment was a loaf of bread to feed a whole family. So, they were starving. My mother said, as a child, she had night blindness, which is caused from lack of nourishment. So, it was definitely not an easy childhood. Freezing cold Siberian winters and working hard. My grandfather was a unique man though. He was very observant and dedicated, and he refused to chop trees on Shabbat. We don't work on Shabbat, on Saturday. So, he would actually do his workload, divide it into 6 days, and on Shabbat, he would just walk to the fields, but he would just stand there because he had already fulfilled... He had already did his quota, and he would not work. So, he worked double-hard throughout the week to make sure that he didn't have to work on Shabbat.

LB: Well, that is awesome to have learned from him, for sure.

DM: Yes.

LB: So, you are a rabbi – was anybody else in your family a rabbi or did you just decide to do that yourself?

DM: So, my father is a rabbi, not a congregational rabbi but more into education. He built a number of schools and a seminary and different institutions, and he was a teacher for many years as well. So, I guess, my inspiration came from my father.

LB: That is very cool. And how long have you been a rabbi?

DM: I have been a rabbi here in this congregation for close to 12 years. I was, if you call it, ordained. I don't know what the correct word is. In Hebrew, we use a different word, a rabbi... Going back around 17 years ago.

- LB: Wow, that's awesome! Tell me more about the Jewish community in Mexico. I know you already briefly told us about your childhood but what was it like growing up?
- DM: So, I left Mexico City around the age of 7, but still had relation to come back and forth. Mexico City is a very unique community. There are four main communities in Mexico City: There are Jews that came from Aleppo, Syria; there are Jews that came from Damascus, Syria, and they have their own community; and Turkish Jews also established their own community – they came from Turkey; and then, there is the Ashkenazi community in Mexico City. So, these are the four main communities. Interestingly enough, the driving force in Mexico City is the Aleppo community, which has most of the institutions there, and the Damascus community as well. The Turkish and Ashkenazi communities are much smaller. But they have many, many synagogues. They have what you would call here a JCC. We call it a Deportivo in Mexico City where the community gets you swimming pools and gyms and all kinds of activities. They have their own, we call, bikur holim, which takes care of the needs of those who are sick or those who are struggling financially or all kinds of organizations that help out people in need. They really have a huge infrastructure to really support the community in any way possible, so it is a beautiful community that is united, and it is inspiring to see them.
- LB: In Mexico, was there a lot of intermingling between the different communities? I know, sometimes...
- DM: So, it is interesting. Years ago, they kept very much to themselves. They wouldn't even marry each other, you know. Aleppo Jews only married Aleppo Jews, Damascus Jews only married Damascus Jews, Turkish, the same way, but over the years, that has changed a lot and you will have all different communities marrying each other. Recently, actually, a couple of years ago, the Aleppo and Damascus community got together and built a synagogue together to show the unity of the communities and, as you can see, I am a product of that. My mother is Ashkenazi Jew and my father is an Aleppo Syrian Jew.
- LB: That's really great. We learned in class that sometimes, there is a lot of not intermingling and they are pretty against each other, so it is great to hear that they have done that.
- DM: Yes, and everybody has their customs and traditions and they want to maintain it and they want to keep it strong, but, over time, they realized that being part of/for the Jewish community is healthy.
- LB: So, your experience in Mexico has been pretty great, from what I've heard, but do you feel any discrimination in Mexico?
- DM: I was young, so I didn't feel it. Safety is always an issue in Mexico City, whether you are Jewish or not, you know? There is always a concern for safety. Like everywhere else, there is also some antisemitism. In those days, I don't think people usually walked

around with the yarmulke on the streets on a regular basis. Today, more so. Today... And I was just there... People do walk around with it. So, it doesn't seem to be as much of a concern. I will tell you a funny story. My father was once downtown and, you know, when we lived in Mexico City, he also sold textiles besides education... And a little boy comes over to him and was wearing a head covering and he says to him, "Bless me, Father." He assumed he was a priest. My father gave him a blessing, you know, because, in Mexico City, you can't show religion outwardly, so even priests don't wear a collar. So, it was very hard to tell them apart because you could not legally wear a collar externally outside. I don't know if the law is still that way today, but it definitely was then.

LB: And what year was that?

DM: When that story happened? I would guess probably the late 70s. 1980.

LB: And so, do you have any practices within your family that you have adopted or for your own family?

DM: That has to do with Mexico City?

LB: Just with your religion and everything.

DM: So, look, I am a Sephardic Syrian Jew, so we follow those traditions, but also, my wife is Ashkenazi, and we kind of bring in a little bit of her also. I have lived in many different places, so we've learned from different communities and sometimes incorporate some of the customs, songs, food, from different areas.

LB: And, actually, I do want to go back to the Mexican practices from Mexico when you were a child. Do you have any practices from then that you bring on to your kids now?

DM: Practices as far as Mexican culture or Jewish culture?

LB: Yes, sorry. Mexican culture.

DM: Mexican culture? Yes, I mean, we have a tradition – on holidays, we eat enchiladas. That is our favorite food. So, we like Mexican food. We like spicy food. So, we have kind of incorporated the Mexican cuisine into our holidays and meals that we always do.

LB: Awesome. And I know you talked about this earlier but you immigrated when you were 7, correct?

DM: Yes.

LB: And then, did you come straight to Houston and to Texas?

DM: No, my family moved to New York, so I grew up in New York.

LB: When did you come to Texas? Actually, I want to go back to New York. How was that?

DM: Moving to New York?

LB: Yes.

DM: It was obviously a different kind of life than Mexico City, but there is also a strong Sephardic community in New York, both Syrian and other Sephardic Jews. There is a huge Ashkenazi community. But I was very much a part of the Syrian community growing up in New York. It is a very different community. Not as, I would say, structured and organized as it is in Mexico City communities, where each synagogue is really independent in New York and each synagogue is their own small community, as opposed to Mexico City where they are all kind of under one umbrella. So, it is a very different experience but also a thriving community with a lot of institutions and organizations, so it is also an amazing community to be a part of.

LB: And was it a big flip when you moved from Mexico City to the States?

DM: I mean, my mother grew up in America, and I had cousins and we used to go off, you know. I understood some English because my mother had spoken to me. It was a challenge the first few months just adjusting to the language, like everything else, but, for me, at least, I was young enough – it was a smooth transition. My brothers had a harder time. They were older, and it was harder for them.

LB: Awesome! And then, when did you come to Houston?

DM: I moved to Houston in September 2005.

LB: Okay, so, pretty recently. It has been about 15 years.

DM: It is about 17 years almost. Yes, almost 17 years.

LB: And do you like it in Houston? How has the community in Houston helped you?

DM: Houston is a great place. Texas, in general, is a great state. It is a very warm... Obviously, it is a much smaller community here but it is still very close-knit here and our synagogue, we are a family. You know, many of us here in the synagogue are not native Houstonians and don't have their family here – their parents and siblings are not here – and, kind of, the synagogue becomes their family. So, we have events together, we have meals together and so, it is really a very close, warm community.

LB: That's great. And where in Houston are you located?

DM: A few blocks away from here. Many of us, not all of us, many of us do live in this area, close by to the synagogue, so I am a few blocks away from here. So, this area, I guess, is called Fondren Southwest. That is what it is called. So, that is where we live.

LB: Great. And did anything about this culture surprise you?

DM: Anything about Mexican... Texas...

LB: Or, Houston culture?

DM: It is very warm and friendly. Texas hospitality. It is laid back. New York is a fast-paced, intense... So, here, it is a much more laid back, more wholesome atmosphere, I would say. It is a great place to raise your children.

LB: Yes, and it is pretty close to Mexico City or Mexico, so, there is a lot of culture from there in here.

DM: Right.

LB: How is your Latino and Sephardic heritage important to maintain?

DM: I think it is very important, you know. The traditions that your forefathers have kept for generations and generations is important to pass down, our customs. Judaism, as a whole, is essential to who we are in identity but even the flavor of the region where you come from is also important to preserve.

LB: And there has been a lot of sufficient evidence in the American history of some separation between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities, like we were talking about earlier within different cities. Did you witness this within Houston?

DM: We have a huge Ashkenazi community here close by. The synagogue is a few blocks away. There are actually two communities here close by. We interact. People come by us and we join their synagogue. We are pretty much a pretty united community, and there isn't this huge separation between them.

LB: United. That's great. And some of these questions we have already talked about, so I am just skimming through.

DM: Okay.

LB: And according to the Beth Rambam website, your congregation identifies as orthodox. Can you describe what this entails in the Sephardic context?

DM: It is funny... By the Sephardic Jews, there was never this split between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. It didn't exist. We were all traditional Jews practicing traditional Judaism as our forefathers practiced it for the past thousands of years. There

were those who were more observant and those who were less observant. But, when they came to synagogue, they wanted to practice the way their forefathers practiced, so, you know, they weren't interested in changing or adopting to new modes in the American culture but preserving who they were. So, you know, it could be outside the synagogue, they are not practicing Jews necessarily, but they wanted to preserve the traditions of their forefathers, so, we don't find these denominations amongst the Sephardic Jews so much.

LB: So, in Houston, I know that there is a big Latino community but most of the time, it can be, like, Latino Catholics or anything like that, so, do you think, within your Jewish community, like, you are one of the only Latinos here?

DM: So, there are actually a lot of, I guess we call them Latino Jews – those who lived in Latin American countries, part of our community, are Jews from Panama, Jews from Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, some Colombian Jews, even Cuban, so we really have representation from many... Obviously, Mexico City... Many Latin American countries. You know, that Latino flavor is clearly expressed, especially being that we are in Texas, but culturally, actually, it blends nicely with the Sephardic traditions. Latino and Sephardic cultures, obviously, they are not the same, but they do blend. They are both very different than American culture.

LB: And back to the discrimination when you came here. Did you feel anything different being a Jewish... Well, you came to Houston in 2005?

DM: Yes.

LB: Did you feel any discrimination during that time?

DM: So, no. Thank God, I have never felt any discrimination here in Houston. It was just the opposite, you know... Random people walking on the street, "Oh, you are the chosen ones," and things like that they say to you while you are walking down the street. Or, "I just studied the Bible in church," and they kind of share things with you randomly if they see you walking with the kippah, so all of my experiences have been positive in Houston.

LB: Do you have any family in Houston?

DM: I have distant cousins. Not siblings. But I do have distant cousins in Houston. Actually, my niece and nephew are moving here soon, so I will have closer relatives soon in Houston. But it is mostly cousins who also moved here many years ago from Mexico City. I actually encountered a cousin of mine who just passed away at the age of 97 about a year ago, and she was my grandmother's first cousin. Her mother and my grandmother were first cousins. They lived one block away from me, and I bumped into

her when I moved here, and it was nice to have a relationship with her for many years. She was a really special person.

LB: It is great when you have a family-oriented community like this but also when you have real family that you haven't seen in a while.

DM: Yes.

LB: And is there anything else that you would like to bring to light about with your community?

DM: Anything else I would like to bring to light about my community?

LB: Because, right now, we are university students and we are also learning about Sephardic nationality, Judaism, so, I didn't know if you had anything to point out.

DM: Sephardic culture, in general, is unique. We kind of connect through joy. We love to sing. We like to dance. We like to smile. We say hello to each other, not with just a handshake – we give a hug when you welcome somebody who walks in. It is a very warm kind of community, and we like to experience our Judaism through joy.

LB: And we learned that you were part of a community, or one of the leaders of J-HYPE. Do you know much about that?

DM: Sure. So, J-HYPE is run by Johnny Ouzzan who we brought down, I would say, right now, is 8 or 9 years ago to Houston. He was an assistant rabbi in the synagogue who worked with us many years, and under our auspices, he opened up an organization called J-HYPE, which focuses on young professionals in Houston, outreach to young Jewish professionals trying to connect them to their heritage and the focus there is not necessarily Sephardic or Ashkenazi, just Judaism. Connecting Jews to the Jewish culture and Jewish identity. And it is really amazing... Our organization is doing great work here in Houston and we are proud that under our auspices, he is doing a great job.

I can add one thing that we didn't focus on. So, the Aleppo and Damascus Jews, in particular, even the Turkish Jews were all under the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century/early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And, at the time, the Ottoman Empire were actually drafting any eligible young men 18 years old and above to the Army. And therefore, the Jewish community particularly, before they turned 18, the boys started leaving. And that is how many of these communities got established. The community here in Mexico City, the community in New York, the communities in Panama, in Argentina, because they were kind of forced to leave, in a sense, and that is how slowly, they spread out, and all these communities got established in the turn of the century. And that is how we have strong presence of Syrian and Turkish Jews in Mexico City and obviously, the Ashkenazi community got established in the upheavals in Europe in the 1930s and obviously in the



1940s, and then the Holocaust and the like. And those who were able to escape, most of them made it to these Latin American countries. And that is how, kind of, you had a strong Jewish presence in those countries the last past 100 years. There have been Jews that have come earlier in the past and, you know, you can do genetic testing – you will notice that many, many Latin American Jews, Latin Americans in general, will find some Jewish ancestry in their blood. This is from the Inquisition times where Jews ran away then and some apparently made it to this area and therefore, you will find many Latin Americans that have some Jewish heritage in their DNA.

LB: That is really cool to know. Would you go to any other place within the States to try to teach Judaism or do you like it here in Houston more?

DM: You know, I focus mostly on my community. I do give classes and they are available online, so, it could be others watch them as well, but my focus is the Houston Jewish community. I do have relationships with the New York community and Los Angeles community and Mexico City community, the Israeli community, but my main focus is the Houston Jewish community.

MH: This is Max Hosaka continuing the interview, adding a couple of followup questions. You said that your mother was an Ashkenazi Jew from Russia, correct?

DM: Originally from Poland, ran away to Russia, yes.

MH: And you said that your father was an Aleppo Jew?

DM: Yes.

MH: How exactly did they meet? Did they meet in Mexico City?

DM: Actually, my father left Mexico City at the age of 14 to study and attend what we call a Yeshiva, to study more about Judaism. And so, he was living in New York at the time and was teaching in New York, and my mother was also working in New York and they met in New York City.

MH: So, why exactly did your father choose to go to Mexico? Like, when my family moved over, they tried to go to the United States but then, they got rejected and ended up in Cuba after that. Is it some sort of similar story to that or did he intentionally choose Mexico?

DM: My grandfather?

MH: Yes, sir.

DM: My grandfather actually first came to Texas. His first stop, I believe, was Texas. He lived in Texas for a number of years. For whatever reasons, I guess he didn't find

himself or wasn't comfortable here, and he made it down to Mexico and then joined the Mexico City Jewish community.

MH: Yes, so, you come from a mixed background ethnic-wise...

DM: Right.

MH: How did that play out in Mexico City? You said that they were starting to integrate more when you were a child?

DM: Yes, so my mother actually had a hard time in the beginning. Culturally, she did not speak the language. She was an Ashkenazi Jew in a Sephardic Syrian community. I mean, for me, it was perfectly fine and no affect on me. I think she had a hard time adjusting, but, thank God, it was really great. Look – it gives you a much broader view of the world because you are exposed to many different cultures and kinds of people, and you see the world in a much broader sense. Not just strictly of how, you know, your community sees things, but you get a broader perspective, so I think it was a great benefit for me and that's why... My wife is Ashkenazi as well... But my kids get to see both worlds.

MH: What influence do you think that has on your kids besides being able to see both worlds? Do you think they have any, like, problems, per se...

DM: I think just the opposite. I think it is more... I think it is all positive. They get to see both cultures, they get to see both ways of practicing and integrate with all different kinds of people, and it keeps them much more broadminded. I think it is a great thing.

MH: That's good. So, when you moved to the States, did you adopt any distinctly American or Texan culture into your Judaism or your Latino heritage? Like, you said that you all eat Mexican food for holidays. Did you eat any American food or similar things like that?

DM: So, would we ever eat American food? Look, burgers and hot dogs is always good, right, so nobody is turning them down. But as far as holiday food and things like that, it is usually Syrian, some Hungarian food... My wife is Ashkenazi, so I obviously ate Mexican food. And she loves to cook from all different cultures, so we incorporate a lot of different stuff. I am sure some American flair made it in there. But as far as American culture... Obviously, you are influenced in where you live, right, so the Jews that come straight off from Syria to Mexico City are one way and, over the years, you see their personalities and the way they function, the way the speak changes and adapts to the society you are a part of. So, obviously, we are much more American than my father was and my grandfather was because we have lived here all these many years. So, definitely it has an influence on you. Not so much on practice but more on mannerisms and maybe

a little bit of personality or how you interact, and maybe even how you view the world, it definitely has an influence on you. But as far as practice is concerned, we have been doing this for thousands of years, so that part, we are not going to change.

MH: Did you have any difficulties, like, trying to eat Kosher, for example, in Mexico City or Texas, because, like, you know, there is pulled pork in Texas and fajitas in Mexico.

DM: So, when we came here, there was a lot less Kosher than there is today. There were a limited amount of restaurants that you could eat in, and small sections in grocery stores, but, you know, this is a way of life for us, so, strangely enough, you can pick up an average product on the shelf and 80% of them are going to be Kosher, they have a little Kosher symbol on them. So, you would be surprised how much Kosher is available in an average supermarket. Obviously, the meat and cheeses is the challenge and we bring in meat... There are places it was always available. And the restaurants were limited. Thank God they are expanding. When you grow a bigger community, you get more restaurants. But, obviously, you are limited on where you can eat.

MH: And so, I am going to go back to the, kind of, broadly Sephardi and Ashkenazi separation. Do you feel Sephardi history has been ignored at all because most of the focus is on Ashkenazi history and just common American or Western knowledge? How do you think that is?

DM: So, the American Jewish community predominantly is Ashkenazi. There are many more Ashkenazi Jews than there are Sephardi Jews, but if you go to Latin America or other countries, they are predominantly Sephardic. So, those countries actually tend to focus a lot more on Sephardic Judaism. It really depends on where you are. And I think also probably the Holocaust played a huge role in that because that was a traumatic event, which is very much focused on, and it should be, and clearly, for the most part, happened in Ashkenazi countries. A little bit in Greece, France, where Sephardic Jews were there as well, but the vast majority, obviously, was Ashkenazi Jewry, so I think that is where a lot of the focus has been in the last generation.

MH: So, when you moved to Houston, you moved to this general area immediately or did you move somewhere else?

DM: Yes, when I went to Houston, we lived in the same house I purchased 17 years ago when I moved to Houston and we still live there.

MH: And, I assume, this is where the synagogue is, this is...

DM: This building actually was built in 2010, this part of the synagogue. Before then, it was confined to the smaller synagogue you saw when you entered. And we expanded in 2010 to this bigger synagogue. I became the rabbi here in 2010. I came along with the

building! And the first 5 years, I worked for a Jewish outreach organization as well called TORCH, which focused also on reaching Jews, predominantly in Houston, and teaching them about their Judaism and about their heritage, and connecting them, too, to their past.

MH: Do you ever think it was necessary to have a main community when moving into Houston and trying to integrate from... I read on the Beth Rambam's website, there were lots of Balkan immigrants, lots of Syrian immigrants, etc... Do you think it is necessary to have a main community focal point at the synagogue in order to help them integrate into American society?

DM: What do you mean by "main focal point?"

MH: Like, when they move to the United States, does the synagogue reach out to them and, are, like, 'Hey, if you are a Jewish immigrant moving here'...

DM: Yes, so, clearly, I mean, first of all, Jews, in general, are going to search out communities to be a part of, but, if not, we also reach out to people that move in or let them know that we are here and we are there for them. Every member of the synagogue has my cell phone number and any time of the day or night, they know they can text me, they can call me, and you know, if they need, we are available. So, we try to create a real support system for our community here in Houston. We have a number of rabbis here as well and we take care of each other, we are there for each other. And, as Jews, in general, we seek out communities because Kosher food is important and coming to synagogue is important and Torah study is important for us, so, we usually congregate around communities.

MH: I think that is everything in my head so, there we go.

DM: Okay. Awesome.

[End of Interview]