My Language, My Self
Rifka Cook

I want to introduce you to my life journey through the Sephardic language known as Ladino, Judezmo, Españolit, Judeo-Spanish, Lingua de los Djudios, to name a few. This language was spoken for centuries, and accompanied Sephardim where ever they travelled after their expulsion from Spain. They maintained the language of their ancestors as a means to identify themselves as distinct from others. Over the past several years, I’ve begun to research the relationship between this language and the identity of its peoples. As one of my interviewers, who came to Cuba from Turkey, told me: “When my family arrived in Cuba, and they heard the people speaking Spanish, they were sure that everybody there was Jewish.” My mother, in Venezuela, used to say: “Es de los muestros, mishelanu, purke favla españolit.” “Is from ours, [from our people], because they speak españolit.” For her, assuredly, “Spanish” was synonymous with “Jewish.”

My work explores the Shabbat songs that the Sephardic Jews have been singing since their expulsion from Spain. These specific songs are indicative of the extraordinarily intimate link between the language and its people — and, consequently, its identity. I interviewed many families in Israel whose stories add to our understanding of what Ladino means today for the Sephardic people.

Though friends and colleagues have questioned me as to my research into a “dying language,” I remain steadfast and curious about the multiple uses and dialects of the language I have heard since I was a child in Venezuela. Ladino suggests many memories of my youth. When I started the Jewish school in Caracas, my classmates laughed at me because I was speaking what they called “wrong Spanish.” Ladino was the language my father wrote to us using Rashi letters, and the language my mother spoke at home until we “corrected” her — in our youthful arrogance — with pleas to speak “real” Spanish. What I only learned later was that Ladino was the “lingua franca” that identifies us as Sephardim. The tongue in which I speak tells the tale of who I am! And it weaves my personal and colorful thread into the vast fabric woven by each individual who has belonged to the communities, and sacred traditions, of Sephardic Judaism throughout centuries.

Language helps people identify themselves; either they seek — through language — to belong to a certain group who shares that language, or they evoke it for other reasons. For example, today, there is an explosion of people who speak to one another through cell phone “text messages.” If someone does not know “how to text,” he or she will feel outside the norm, unable to transcend a language barrier. People using text messaging
to communicate are using a language that simultaneously creates a new language (new ways of communicating and building cohesion among identifiable groups) and also destroys language (by communicating without aural speaking).

Language is critical to identity — both preserving and embellishing our identity. By singing songs in our mother tongue, we maintain an enduring Sephardic identity.

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Article published in Sh’má: http://www.shma.com
URL to article: http://www.shma.com/2011/03/my-language-my-self/