

MizraWho?

Eylan Ezekiel: [00:00:00]

Eylan Ezekiel: Hi. Eylan here. The episode that follows was recorded before the horrific events of October 7th. And today, Friday 27th of October, 2023. In the third week of the unfolding nightmare in the middle east, things are still very bleak.

Eylan Ezekiel: We had been due to take the podcast and our work to be part of a festival at the museum of London. And we were booked into a number of other events, but understandably, these have been put on pause.

Eylan Ezekiel: We also paused our episodes, partly because like so many people affected by this crisis. Penny and I both have family and friends too close to immediate danger. And we were barely functioning in day-to-day life. Let alone to think about this podcast. Our rule in this podcast to stay away from current affairs in the middle east has never felt so essential. And I don't intend to break it now, except to say that our hearts are breaking for all those [00:01:00] suffering in Israel and Gaza and in the wider region.

Eylan Ezekiel: We've just started planning again. Rescheduling planned interviews, reorganizing the episodes we had ready to go. And I found this one. And it gave me hope and made me smile

Eylan Ezekiel: It's hard to see when might be a good time to restart this podcast. And we know for some people, this might be too soon and too sensitive, a set of topics.

Eylan Ezekiel: We believe that understanding Jewish identities and histories is part of any hopeful future. And now. As things feel so hopeless. We want to imagine that positive change is possible. We also know that as humans, we have more in common. Than we do differences. Thank you for listening so far. And if now it doesn't feel right, we respect that, but hope you'll come back. For those ready to go further? Here we go.

Eylan Ezekiel: you've just got to read out the cheesy [00:02:00] thing.

Penny Rabiger: Welcome to who do you do?

Penny Rabiger: Oh God, this is going to be,

Penny Rabiger: Welcome to the Who Do You Think You Are podcast with me, Penny Rabiger, and Eylan Ezekiel. Exploring the wonders of the Jewish universe, and in particular, exploring Jewish experiences from individuals and communities for whom the label Jew isn't enough.

Penny Rabiger: And today, we're going to be thinking about... Mizrach, who? So we talked previously about the big three, Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Mizrachim, and today we're going to look at Mizrach, who are you?

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Eylan Ezekiel: So who are these people? I mean, I guess that's what we're here to try and answer.

Eylan Ezekiel: We should also say that we, I, you are not experts here, right? We're going to try and give a bit [00:03:00] more detail than we did last time in episode two, we're going to. Try and give a, a helpful, uh, sort of lay of the land, introduce some of the big topics.

Eylan Ezekiel: Our listeners are going to meet people who will identify as being Mizrachim, and use that terminology. And we just wanted to sort of get people comfortable with that. So that's what we're trying to do here. We're not going to try and fill in all the gaps.

Penny Rabiger: And we could even say, This episode is sponsored by Wikipedia because we did quite a lot of reading and just learning for ourselves to get some of the basics in place. So that's, that's the level of expertise is we expertly have done some reading. I don't know why you're laughing. I think it's good basis.

Eylan Ezekiel: I'm not, I'm not, Wikipedia and there's nothing wrong with it. I think it's also. The, what was been really interesting is that these are words and ideas that I think I, you know, in the past few weeks I've been having [00:04:00] conversations, months, been talking to people about, uh, the Mizrahi community and I realized as I read some of the stuff leading up to today, that I've been making some terrible assumptions and I, um, so there's things that it's been okay to talk about and, I've been able to get away with it without really understanding what I was saying.

Eylan Ezekiel: I'm hoping that some of the people who are familiar with, um, the phrase Mizrahi might come away today, um, thanks to our Wikipedia reading, uh, having to save themselves doing that reading and going, Oh yeah,

that, I didn't know that. So there, you know, I think there is, I think there are some, interesting, little surprises ahead.

Penny Rabiger:

Penny Rabiger: And I want to say also that my. My lens on the kind of, um, communities that are Mizrochim also comes from my scholarly pursuits, um, and kind of personal [00:05:00] vicarious experience, um, around, um, the issues around whiteness and otherness and othering in relation to Ashkenazi slash Mizrahi and the kind of perceived um, dividing lines and how that plays out in terms of opportunity and progression and stuff.

Penny Rabiger: So we might touch on some of that as well.

Eylan Ezekiel: I don't think we're going to be able to avoid it really

Eylan Ezekiel: Should we, should we head off into the Juniverse?

Other Easterner Oriental

Eylan Ezekiel: , Let's start at the beginning. Yeah. The term Mizrahi really was coined in 1948. in Israel, by the state of Israel, to describe non European Jews. It literally means Easterners.

Penny Rabiger: There you go. So, isn't that interesting already, that the kind of, the race project was all about splitting the world into [00:06:00] European and non European.

Eylan Ezekiel: Yeah, and when I was growing up, there was the idea of, you know, Orientals, right? You know, that was, uh, perfectly... Every day, you know, it was a different time then, you know, it's not a phrase that, uh, really works now, but, and yet there's a, in, in, in this context, we've got a term that probably was of a similar time, um, which defines.

Eylan Ezekiel: a group of people from the East, but I wanted to ask East of where?

Penny Rabiger: Right, and just for those who don't know Hebrew, Mizrach means East.

Eylan Ezekiel: So it's, it's a, it's a, you know, direct translation. If Europeans, can point east and they can point to, um, uh, I don't know, Syria and Palestine as was Israel, Palestine.

Eylan Ezekiel: Now that area, they can point east. Okay. But we're also talking south. We're talking about Algeria. [00:07:00] We're talking about, uh, Libya, Egypt, all the way around the Levant. So it's not just East. There's a large group of people for whom this term was, uh, applied in Israel. And if they were in Israel when this is 1948, right, these, a lot of these communities would have been West.

Penny Rabiger: Yeah. So it's indicative of other or elsewhere or over there and not here. Yeah. So it's already an alienating term and it's already centering whiteness and Europeanness as standard.

Eylan Ezekiel: Yeah. And I, you know, without, you know, I, you know, there's the lens that you're looking at it from. And I take that, but, and I, you know, I think we're going to come back to it.

Eylan Ezekiel: Yeah. And I think this, when I realized how recent that terminology was. It kind of blew my mind. I thought this was a much older term. I thought this [00:08:00] was something that the, um, that maybe went back somewhere between distinguishing from the Sephardim, and we'll come back to how that would work. You know, ages ago.

Eylan Ezekiel: I just didn't think it was as recent as this. So I think there's a novelty, uh, you know, relative, you know, it's a very recent term and that the term Easterner, Mizrachim, is a sort of geographically confusing term, let alone all the sort of race project stuff and all of that. It's just... A bit weird. Mm-hmm.

Eylan Ezekiel: Because if you're centered in Israel, um, if that's a center, then yes, there are some Rakim who would be from, uh, I don't know, , the BCA Jews up towards sort of northeast, northeast of Israel. And there would've been some, people who might been Adani, so down in Aiden, which is sort of southeast ish, but a lot of these communities would've been directly north.

Eylan Ezekiel: And directly West. So, [00:09:00] there is a sort of question about how weird that must have been for people arriving from the West into Israel going, Huh? You're calling us Easterners? Do you know what I mean? There's like a, there's just a bit of a weird disconnect there about the, the geography.

Penny Rabiger: It's not by chance,

Eylan Ezekiel: of course.

Eylan Ezekiel: No, no. So, and I think that's, there's a subtext here and, you know, on one level, um, obviously there is the wider, Um, othering, European othering, uh, norm, which, which sort of makes sense of that. But, um, there's a sort of, just a sort of linguistic labeling thing that, that, um, must've felt very normal at the time.

Penny Rabiger: Well, normal to, normal to whom? And, and also because, you know, it was the Ashkenazi Jews who were kind of populating Israel and feeling that they were leading on the Zionist project, right? [00:10:00]

Eylan Ezekiel: Yeah, and it meant that these communities were able to be identified for what they were, which is Jews that want, have with a right to return and that they had a, they were able to come in and it gave a, I guess, administratively, it meant that they didn't have to explain everything.

Eylan Ezekiel: Some of the people I've spoken to really, you know, really comfortable with this terminology. So, um, We have lots of questions.

Well,

Penny Rabiger: it's interesting you say that they had the right to return and they came in like everybody, but they had to be labeled differently.

Penny Rabiger: So there were class A, class A, A for Ashkenazi Jews, and then there was the second class citizens, and also the way that they were treated when they came in.

Expulsions and Exodus

Eylan Ezekiel: So who are these communities that were arriving in Israel, , and being labeled as Easterners.

Eylan Ezekiel: Let's get a sense of how far and wide this [00:11:00] label covered. We can start relatively easily with right next door. Which is, , the Egyptian Jews. We are in very carefully staying away from discussing the politics of modern Israel.

Eylan Ezekiel: But let's just, while we're talking history, , there were the war of independence or the war of 1948 with around those surrounding states. , there would have been a lot of Jews who would have left Egypt. And come straight to Israel because they did because of the immediate conflict. So there are Egyptian Jews and then, um, for around there, you've got the Syrian Jews, Lebanese Jews, , people who were in the immediate geography of, , of Israel.

Eylan Ezekiel: And they would have been labeled. as Mizrachim. Yeah. Um, and then we've also got, uh, communities a little bit further on. So you've got, uh, the, [00:12:00] uh, Kurdish Jews, Turkish Jews. I'm going to stop saying Jews after everything. I'm just going to say people from Turkey, people from, um, from further north. Right? Um, and the Bukharin Jews from the Caucasus, Afghan Jews.

Eylan Ezekiel: I've done it again.

Penny Rabiger: Um, You've missed, you've missed the Iranians and the Iraqis.

Eylan Ezekiel: Oh, no, I was going to come back. Oh, you're going to come back to them. Sorry. They're, they're, they're special. I think they're interesting. I think, well, they're kind of,

Penny Rabiger: they're all interesting.

Eylan Ezekiel: They are all interesting, but just sort of like geographically, we've kind of gone the immediate bit around Israel.

Eylan Ezekiel: Fair enough.

Penny Rabiger: I mean, you've got a better grasp of geography than me.

Eylan Ezekiel:

Eylan Ezekiel: Then you've got people coming from the north and then there are a whole load. If you follow the top of, uh, Africa, you you've got people from Libya across to, uh, Uh, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, of course, [00:13:00] missed out Algeria, that's my geography being crap.

Eylan Ezekiel: Um, and there are Jews traveling across the top of Africa towards Israel. And so, again, these are west of, of, of Israel, south of Europe, and being defined as... the Mizrahi. So these are large, historically ancient

communities of Jewish people who've been there, some of them since biblical times, having to be labeled as special, a special group being clumped together.

Penny Rabiger: It's like BAME. It's like the precursor. BAM! You just called them people from over there.

Eylan Ezekiel: So we've got the Maghreb.

Eylan Ezekiel: So, uh, heading across to the top of, uh, yeah, the sort of from the North African coast. And we've got the Jews coming from the North, uh, sort of [00:14:00] heading closer to, to, um, to the, from the Caucasus. And then there is a very distinct group from, from both Iraq and Iran. These were big communities, ancient communities, uh, the, the Baghdad, Egypt, Baghdad being a huge center of Jewish learning for forever.

Eylan Ezekiel: Um, And that's a large community comes, that travels , and arrives. So you've got this sort of a mini exodus following an exodus, um, following another exodus, uh, leaving and arriving from all these very different. Uh, very different cultures, you know, that, you know, I think there's a sort of a question here and this is what we'd love to hear.

Eylan Ezekiel: You know, we're going to be hearing from people who've got family stories about this and investigating this, hearing from the people whose communities these are. But, um, to say that, uh, the Iraqi Jewish experience is the same as the Tunisian experience is the same as, [00:15:00] uh, I don't know, the Adani people from Aden.

Eylan Ezekiel: These are to call. All of these people, Mizrachim, seems odd now, but that's what happened, so they were classified the same. Weird?

Penny Rabiger: Um, Weird, but part of this need to categorize and sort and differentiate.

We've been everywhere and we're going everywhere.

Eylan Ezekiel: who are these people? How did they get there? And what was going on now, this is again, clearly not a history lesson, but there, as we said, there are Jewish communities in all of these, in, in many parts of, um, the

Maghreb and across the Levant and across Europe. And, you know, to say that they were following trade routes and merchants kind of, for me, buys into this whole idea of Jews as connected to money and all of that. There were soldiers, there were sailors, there are, um, skilled workers. There are people [00:16:00] traveling as people, normal people did, right? Yeah. Just travel, traveling around. The idea that, you know, the wandering Jew idea kind of bugs me because actually if you look at the historical records, lots of communities were traveling, but there is a, oh, there is, there is clearly evidence of Jewish communities.

Eylan Ezekiel: Moving around that part of the world into Europe around Africa

Penny Rabiger: and staying still as well Yeah, because while you have movement you also have you know People who stayed and ancient communities that kept going while people flowed in and out So, yeah. Yeah.

Eylan Ezekiel: Until somewhere after the Dark Ages, then it seems to be, again, the academics don't always agree, but the numbers of Jews in the world at the time estimates were that there were far more outside of Europe.

Eylan Ezekiel: Then there was it within Europe, there was clearly a tipping point somewhere in the Middle Ages where the Jewish population of Europe grew [00:17:00] much, much bigger. But, um, you know, the idea that, the majority of the Jewish population would have been in any one place. I think, doesn't stand up to, what the history, seems to show us.

Penny Rabiger:

Penny Rabiger: And it doesn't, doesn't stand up to now, don't they say there's more Jews in New York than there are in the whole of Israel?

Eylan Ezekiel: I think that's evidentially the case for anyone who's been to either of those two places.

Penny Rabiger: We're everywhere. That's the great thing. We're everywhere. And we've been everywhere and we're going everywhere.

Eylan Ezekiel: Yeah. What we say that, but I've got Nigerian friends who talk about Nigerians being everywhere at the moment, you know, people travel, that's okay. You know? And, and of course, when you go places and you spot people who are like you and you want to, of course you make the joke like, Hey, we found out, we found each other, we're everywhere.

Eylan Ezekiel: So I think there is a sort of, , a historical, experience of travel and of, uh, community building. Across the Levant and across the Maghreb, that was probably very normal for Jews [00:18:00] and into the Sahel going further south as well. But we are going to perhaps talk about them, about that group separately.

Eylan Ezekiel: Um, or certainly with a bit more focus and perhaps with people who know what they're talking about. .

Noone expects the Spanish Inquisition

Eylan Ezekiel: What changed? Well, one of the big things that changed was that in 1492, the, um. The Inquisition, Spain and Portugal, kicked out all Jews and an established group of Sephardim, so Sephardim means Spanish, from Spain, so these were Jews from Spain, um, and the Iberian Peninsula, they were forced to leave.

Eylan Ezekiel: So where did they go? Some went north into the rest of Europe, but a lot of them went to the established Jewish communities elsewhere. So they went south, they went east, they went to the, um, to Baghdad, they went to Tunisia, they went to safe places. [00:19:00] So, we've got a very particular point where these communities, um, mixed.

Eylan Ezekiel: And, I think up until, you know, just going to the terminology. Until, uh, the state of Israel came up, you know, started applying that term, a lot of these communities would have called themselves Sephardim, which means Spanish, right? Because they followed the Spanish customs and liturgies of prayer and of, um, of their religious practice.

Eylan Ezekiel: So it didn't mean they stopped being Tunisian people. Didn't mean they stopped being, uh, you know, Algerian Jews. . I don't think that would have been that weird then.

Eylan Ezekiel: You've still got this slight disjunct where you meet people who are, uh, in Israel referred to as Mizrahi and in outside they'll see themselves as Sephardim. They'll describe themselves as being Sephardic because they follow Sephardic practice, but they're from, um, yeah, [00:20:00] from Morocco.

Eylan Ezekiel: So you've got these, uh, labels bouncing around, not really doing the work. And the label Jew doesn't do it. The label Jew doesn't really cover who they are. The label Sephardi Jew, no, they're not actually Spanish. They're not Iberia, they're not then, you know, but there's, there maybe was

some intermarrying and there would've been some connection of course, but it's not as simple as that.

Eylan Ezekiel: So the label Raki , as you said earlier, is like a, a sort of big label of other, but it covers a huge amount of rich history and diversity. Mm-hmm. Or, and, and, and that big mixing point of the, of the effect of the Inquisition really kicked that off.

Eylan Ezekiel: So let me just get this straight. So from 1492 until 20th century, there's a bunch of people who are Jewish practicing Jews, but they're living in Arab lands or, you know, Muslim practicing. [00:21:00] Islamic lands. Yeah. How did that, how did that work?

Eylan Ezekiel: Well, in many of those countries, in those, uh, areas, they would have been dhimmi. So people of the book, and actually some of these communities will have predated the arrival of Islam into those areas. There would've been, accommodations made so that those communities could carry on being harmonious and, and carry on as they were. And, you know, before,

Penny Rabiger: um, and they're basically cousins, right? Anyway.

Penny Rabiger: Yeah. Islam and Judaism, they're basically cousins, so there's no reason why they shouldn't get on their family

Eylan Ezekiel: and the his and the history. of different parts of Jewish, the, the experience of different Jewish communities histories is not all of conflict with Islam and with their Muslim neighbors. Not at all.

Eylan Ezekiel: It's really not like that. And there were, there were tensions. And there were problems in different places. And again, we're skimming across huge amounts of geography, [00:22:00] huge amounts of time history. Yeah. There was intermarrying. There was people, there were people moving between, there was people moving from Europe, from mainland Europe, from, uh, You know, from Spain and Portugal across, , through,, the Caucasus, through Iraq and Iran, and then also to India, there was huge amounts of movement, but people just got on because that's what people were doing, just living their lives, right?

Eylan Ezekiel: Not defining themselves by their religion.

Penny Rabiger: Do you know what also, I think, really united them? remains similar as food.

Penny Rabiger: , I often want to do like, um, chasing the Paratha, which is also Malawak. Which is also kind of roti, which is also, you know.

Eylan Ezekiel: Well, rice traveled, right?

Eylan Ezekiel: You know, there's the foods that the [00:23:00] foods will have traveled and they would have been common and exciting. And there are, um, there are historical records of the time of people importing food from North Africa , to where they were working as traders on the Indian West Coast.

Eylan Ezekiel: They were so desperate for the food of home that they would pack it in boxes in the ships to so that they could enjoy the spices and tastes of home. And likewise, so there were Jewish communities, but also just peoples of those times sitting around, , enjoying the same grub, , , as long as there's, uh, you know, uh, people's, uh, dietary requirements and dietary rules are respected, sitting around again on good food and is a great connector.

Eylan Ezekiel: I don't want to turn this into some sort of story of this mystical past where everyone got on and it was all, you know, there were no boundaries, man. Everyone was, everyone was cool with each other. But I think, you know, I think to, to, to set the idea that they were, um, that it was all tough is [00:24:00] also wrong because things changed in the 20th century.

Eylan Ezekiel:

1948 and all THAT

Eylan Ezekiel: People quite understandably point to 1948 and the establishment of the state of Israel as the key moment. And, uh, not least because some of those countries were at war with Israel and wanted What we would have called illegal aliens, you know, we, we got rid of people.

Eylan Ezekiel: We were wondering about being traitors out of our country, didn't we? Weren't we, well, we locked them up in internment camps and, um, there was in these, some of these countries, a very. quick turning on the Jews of those, of those countries to get them out. And so there's a very painful and horrible history around that period where people were forced to travel.

Eylan Ezekiel: And I think a lot of Mizrahi Jews have in their history, their family history, a huge amount of pain and [00:25:00] trauma from what happened at that time. Yeah, definitely. Definitely.

Eylan Ezekiel: while the state of Israel is part of that, so is the bigger collapse of colonialism at that time. So the countries that we're talking about across North Africa, around the Levant, these were countries that had been held together by the Ottoman Empire, by various European powers who were going, Oh God, we don't know what to do with this lot.

Eylan Ezekiel: These we can't, you know, after the war. I think there was a real, you know, the, the sort of the, the administration of these countries, the sort of attempt to hold them together was falling apart. So the state of Israel, uh, the establishment, the state of Israel clearly was a major, lever for this, for these painful, um, what became mass expulsions from these countries, but it was, it was bigger than that.

Eylan Ezekiel: And, and it took, in some countries it took a lot longer, so places like Iraq, where, [00:26:00] um, those communities into the, really into the 60s and 70s. Um, before the expulsion was sort of deemed complete, you've got this very painful period of people who were being labeled, who were labeled as Mizrahim, but being forced out of their homes and arriving in Israel, having lost so much.

Eylan Ezekiel: And being given an identity and a home and a label, and that's what I meant earlier about it being sort of almost okay, because it meant that they were safe. So, I think, I think while we, with our modern lens, we can look at the, the idea of the Mizrahim being a sort of version of Orientalism, and there it is, all of that is true, if you put it, if you put the experience of these communities, , the center of the time they were being, they felt, uh, exiled, pushed out of their homes and their cultures and were seeking safety.

Penny Rabiger: We'll hear some [00:27:00] stories of how that panned out, how that felt. Of feeling like you've arrived safety and then slowly realizing that it's a safety of a very specific kind.

Eylan Ezekiel: Yeah, because not everyone was treated equally, um, you, you know, so, uh, these communities arriving in Israel weren't necessarily treated, in fact, they weren't treated the same as some of the European Jews.

Penny Rabiger: And so that kind of brings us full circle back to the need to differentiate them in inverted commas and to call them by a very specific name, a grouping, which meant people from elsewhere and over there.

Eylan Ezekiel: Yeah, them over there, them and us, right? It's another, it's that, that age old game. The arrivals of these communities into Israel was very

different for, um, and even not [00:28:00] just in terms of we'll hear from people whose family experiences directly and we'll get much more personal testimony. And this is not us speaking for anyone, but, um, and. Families arriving and being sent to the hardest parts of Israel to, to live in being in very poor,

Penny Rabiger: the most underdeveloped, under nurtured, um, you know, as in underdeveloped and under nurtured by the new regime because obviously there were people there before and they were being, uh, you know, cultivated and lived in.

Penny Rabiger: Everything fine, but in terms of the new occupants, these were seen as places where, yeah, you could just pop some people and some tents and. Stand pipes of water or whatever and start [00:29:00] to slowly absorb them where hell was considered.

Eylan Ezekiel: They weren't getting the same treatment as some of the Jews arriving from Europe who were welcoming to the kibbutz movement, That's right.

Eylan Ezekiel: who were given homes in lush, um, newly irrigated. Uh, farms and communal farms or placed in the cities, which would have felt, you know, um, Tel Aviv in the fifties was modeling itself on Beirut, which was the Paris of Paris of the East and felt would have felt very European. Yeah. Um. They were not necessarily in those places.

Penny Rabiger: Yeah, and to the point that people were sprayed with this chemical DDT, an insecticide used in agriculture. And, uh, they were sprayed because they were considered to be carrying vermin with them, carrying, um, parasites, body lice,, considered to be [00:30:00] unclean, whereas the European Jews arriving were not subjected.

Eylan Ezekiel: So it's a bit like,

Eylan Ezekiel: I guess it's perhaps a bit like some, uh, we have people leaving war zones at the moment, arriving to give, being given homes by The great and the good from, uh, you know, from across the country. And then you've got some people arriving from war zones, arriving to immigration centers where they're not allowed to have pictures of Mickey Mouse, Mickey Mouse, um, Disney characters for the children, because we don't want them to feel too welcome.

Eylan Ezekiel: So if you're from Ukraine, you're welcome. We'll look after you. So, you know, there's, I guess that would be the analogy. That would be what it would have felt like. How come. How come they get treated differently?

Pantherim

Eylan Ezekiel: While the story of Israel is a complicated one, and one that we are generally trying to avoid, I think there's [00:31:00] one particular bit of history that is really interesting.

Eylan Ezekiel: Uh, post 48, which is in the early 70s, this difference between the way the Mizrahi were treated, Everybody else led to a movement called the Israeli Black Panthers. Mm-hmm. . So in 1971, uh, a group founded from a series of protest movements, and we are not gonna do the history of this, but I'm just gonna wildly simplify it.

Eylan Ezekiel: They saw very clearly that their ethnic background was the, was the reason they were being treated differently and identified very strongly with the Black Panther movement in America. They felt that level of discrimination and, , and decided to do something about it. So there were a series of protest movements.

Eylan Ezekiel: They were labelled as being agitators and they were, uh, water cannoned protests, protests, perfectly civil protests. They were water cannoned [00:32:00] and, um, weirdly with green paint. Which, which caused a huge upset at the time, because it was seen to be using the color of the flags of some of the countries they were coming from.

Eylan Ezekiel: I don't know. There's a whole sort of a feeling of like, that maybe there was an extra diss in all of that. Yeah. And it, people became more militant. Um, so this, this movement of the, the Israeli Black Panthers did eventually find its way through , into mainstream politics. And in some ways, our modern Israel's politics has been shaped about where, which, which parties welcomed and tried to represent these, uh, the Mizrahi has lasted through to Likud's, the party of the current government having such a strong Mizrahi following.

Eylan Ezekiel: There is a strong history of, um, of pain and trauma and discrimination within the Israeli state, which has led to [00:33:00] some of what we've got in the moment. And some of that is to do with this labeling of so many people, um, from so many diverse backgrounds with just one word.

Penny Rabiger: And I think aside from the word. There are also obviously markers, physical markers, and again taking it back to kind of race, supposed race, categories. The markers were darker skin, darker hair, darker eyes, a lot of people in Israel now say, Oh, well, it's really different now, it's, it's equal.

Penny Rabiger: But if you look statistically at who have the elite jobs, who are in power, um, you know, 60 percent of the country is actually not, Ashkenazi perceived. Um, And yet [00:34:00] that group of Ashkenazi descendant people have, you know, probably 90 percent of those elite jobs. , when I worked in schools, it was really clear, , what the perceptions were.

Penny Rabiger: So those same deficit narratives around class, around education levels of parents, around value. of education, , all of the tropes that, that get reproduced around these groups of blacks. Yeah. Yeah. And I'm saying that in inverted commas for a very specific purpose, um, about. what their potential was, which schools they could attend, which streams they could be in.

Penny Rabiger: So all of my kind of lower sets in English teaching have, , more Mizrahim, in terms of [00:35:00] university access. , and then, you know, going on to academics and professors, um, there's, you know, there's been grant schemes and interventions and things to kind of interrupt.

Eylan Ezekiel: This sounds like that sort of, um, the labeling of, oh, well, we need to do something about BAME.

Eylan Ezekiel: The BAME community. Let's, let's, you know, you know, the sort of use it both the identification of that group as a difficult problem, uh, uh, you know, disadvantaged, identified as disadvantaged, treated with disadvantage, but not actually treated with equality. Just keep on describing them as described as disadvantaged.

Penny Rabiger: And then, you know, Jews in general, there's an issue around intergenerational trauma and health implications, uh, physical health and mental health. But again, you know, that population that is [00:36:00] identified as Mizrahi will have poorer outcomes in health, in education. They will be treated differently by the justice system, by policing, um, army positions that they'll be able to get, you know, who can become judges, um, and so on and so forth.

Penny Rabiger: So, so that kind of, yeah, the kind of naivety of this setting up a Jewish state for, well, an Israeli state for, Jews, a safe place, even within that, there is the racialization aspect and the differentiation. And so it's not just like picking at things going, Oh, they gave him a different name, , because if you

were to take a kind of colorblind, peace loving stance on it, you go, well, they had to call them something because they were coming from different place.

Penny Rabiger: And [00:37:00] it, the way that that kind of those markers. are identified and how that plays through, through generations in terms of actual, , Outcomes for people in terms of health, education, justice system and so on and so forth is really stark and really does continue on.

Eylan Ezekiel: This conversation should prepare people who don't know much about this, these communities for hearing about those families experience of discrimination in a place and within a community that generally just gets the label Jew, right? And well, you know, all... Don't all Jews, aren't they all like X, aren't they all from this background?

Eylan Ezekiel: Um, and I think there are campaigners like, uh, Hen Mazik , he's really focused on raising the profile of over the past few years is just getting the [00:38:00] media, I think more in America, but, um, just to stop using that idea , that all Jews in Israel are white.

Eylan Ezekiel: Because , it, hides that complexity, it hides that discrimination, , it hides all that history.

A Jew and an Arab

Eylan Ezekiel: I wanted to jump to a really interesting question, which is, I'm going to set it up with a Very badly delivered joke. So apologies, which is you're gonna sing

Penny Rabiger: a song for a minute

Eylan Ezekiel: You should be so lucky a Jew and an Arab walks into a bar and orders himself a drink. So the idea that That an Arab can be a Jew Actually blows so many people's minds and, um, or the Jews, it's not that can be our Arabs and however we go around this idea of who Jews are, who Arabs are, and we are not here to have that conversation.

Eylan Ezekiel: That is [00:39:00] not my area of expertise. . But that a such a difficult idea exposes so many problems. given that both Jews and Arabs are Semites. So, if we, if all Jews, and there's this whole idea of the DNA

connection between thousands of years that all Jews have got this kind of Genetic marker for whether you believe that nonsense.

Eylan Ezekiel: Eugenics, whether you believe that or not. I say eugenics, . I say I, I think I am. I agree with you. Um, but a lot of people do believe that If that's true, then we are all, we, you know, the origin story is not, uh, is not a European story. It's not, it's an Arab story. We are from that part of the world, right?

Eylan Ezekiel: Whatever, however you wanna call it. ,

Penny Rabiger: when you say we, who are you talking about? Jews.

Eylan Ezekiel: I think, yeah, I think, you know, I grew up in the 70s, 80s with the idea that, um, with all the wars and conflict going on in, around [00:40:00] the Middle East, that, um, my family members would be talking about, the Arabs this, the Arabs that, it's us against the Arabs, and the wars against the Arabs, and Um, I think imagine being in, and I'm not from that family, from that cultural background, but imagine if your family background was Arab and you're hearing other Jews talking about wanting to, uh, being at war with Arabs.

Eylan Ezekiel: And I think that for the communities that left the, uh, countries who were, sorry, not who were left, who were exiled, expelled, forced out violently. You can understand why the fact that they are no longer, they weren't wanted as Arabs. meant that they're like, okay, fine. We're Israelis. We're Europeans. We've gone somewhere else.

Eylan Ezekiel: We leave that behind. But it doesn't take away from the, you know, the historical job, you know, the historical and geographical truth that they are the same people. [00:41:00] And from, you know, they would have been neighbors and eating the same foods, shopped in the same shops, gone to pray in places next door to each other, obviously different religions.

Eylan Ezekiel: But, um, uh, these people arrived in Israel. Or wherever they went, they would have come with Arab traditions. And yet, um, there's been this linguistic separation between Jew and Arab.

Eylan Ezekiel: And I think we can't solve that. It's not from, I don't think it's for either of us to comment on. But I, I, I'm going to put a link to an incredible video, which I will warn you is probably not suitable for work, but it's very funny of an Israeli. Comedian artist called, uh, uh, Johan Safadi, which is to be an Arab and it's great music, but it's really challenging.

Eylan Ezekiel: And the video is very strong in, in drawing attention to some of those, um, challenges in modern Israel about what it means to be both Arab and Jew.[00:42:00] I started with a crap joke, but I think it's a question that, um, is at the heart of that term, Mizrahi. Because what do we mean?

Eylan Ezekiel: Who are we talking about? If we saw these people and they weren't Jewish, we'd probably be quite comfortable calling them Arabs, or they'd be comfortable with that term. But because of the history and geography, that's, that's not the way that it's worked.

Penny Rabiger: Yeah. Yeah. And we probably don't want to talk about this so you can cut this whole bit out, but it's really interesting.

Penny Rabiger: Also, then that position of being in Israel with a defined Arab, Arab kind of described, uh, enemy, um, and the responses that happen from Arab descendant Jews to create [00:43:00] separation, sort of performative separation to say, we are not. those people. Um, and, and that happens, you know, anyway, among Jews, you know, I grew up with family who were like, Oh, we're not those ultra Orthodox Jews.

Penny Rabiger: And we're not those Jews who are like this, you know, we're these Jews, we're cultural Jews, or we're common North London communists, rejecting Jews, you know, so, so there is always that kind of like layers of definition. But, anecdotally, you know, people will often say that the kind of left wing liberal Jews are often the Ashkenazi ones, and the people who are really trying to punch down hard and being punched down on will be more the Mizrahi Jews.

Penny Rabiger: Um, and also, like, loss of [00:44:00] language, um, You know, um, holding on to Arabic, uh, you know, is not something that a lot of people felt that they could insist for their children when they came from Iraq, for example. Uh, it was all about learning the language, whereas maybe European Jews Might have been able to hold on more to Yiddish.

Eylan Ezekiel: Oh, yeah, or just whatever. I mean, I was, I spent a while on a kibbutz in the 80s and I was on a kibbutz which were pretty much all Anglos. So they were South Africans and, um, Uh, Australians and people from, and Brits, and they were, you know, they'd pretty much set up a kibbutz where they could carry on speaking English.

Eylan Ezekiel: I mean, they

Penny Rabiger: obviously weren't, you know. The country is full of people who just will carry on speaking English. And being an English teacher was really cool [00:45:00] because all the kids wanted to learn English. Um. But the only Arabic that is taught in schools is, is the kind of Shakespeare equivalent of Arabic.

Penny Rabiger: It's not the kind that kids actually want to learn. They want to learn daily speaking Arabic, but it's, they're not allowed to. It's not, it's not available in the school curriculum.

Again with the food?

Eylan Ezekiel: Like all immigrant communities, there is oppression and there is discrimination and there is also the gifts that these communities bring to the world around it so that Israel has been Yemeni community, has been transformed by the, uh, the Iraqi Jewish community, these communities have broadened and changed Israel, in, in many good ways as well.

Eylan Ezekiel: And, you know, the music, uh, I mean, people who like Ottolenghi's food, uh, in this country have a lot to thank for those, that Mizrahi food arriving in, you know, being part of Jerusalem, very ancient, but also being reinforced by these waves of, of spices [00:46:00] and these waves of communities coming in and building on that.

Eylan Ezekiel: So that's in Israel. But around the world, these communities have continued to travel. Uh, historically, they, as I said... Ottolenghi,

Penny Rabiger: Italian and German.

Eylan Ezekiel: Yeah, but he worked in, uh, Jerusalem. Yeah. His cooking and his, what he's, that's what I mean. He's labeled. He's kind of repackaged.

Penny Rabiger: I think we're going into really problematic territory because the whole thing about hummus, for example, is that, you know, and falafel is that it's seen as uniquely Israeli, but it's not.

Penny Rabiger: stolen from like Arab cultures. So it's fine for these Ashkenazi Jews to appropriate cultural stuff and call it uniquely Israeli, but also while holding down [00:47:00] people from actually enjoying some of the benefits of Ashkenazi. And also when you said, um, you know, immigration stories.

Eylan Ezekiel: But it's interesting that if you think about Israeli food, it's not Ashkenazi food that's, that, it's not Ashkenazi food that you think of, right?

Penny Rabiger: I don't know, it is for me. I mean, I've ate a lot of, you know, laundered chicken, um, very thin soups

Eylan Ezekiel: with... I'm so sorry, Penny. Yeah,

Eylan Ezekiel: . Well, look, I think the food thing probably needs a bit more, either we do the, is hummus Jewish question, which can you imagine?

Penny Rabiger: You could do a whole episode though, on the, the, the myth of. Falafel and hummus

Outro

Penny Rabiger: so, so this has been, who do you think you are with Penny Rabugel and Ilan Ezekiel. Thanks, dear listeners, for your ears, for [00:48:00] listening. So this podcast is all about inclusion, so it's good to have you included, and great to have you along exploring the Juniverse, whether you're Jewish or just Due Curious, and we'll put some show notes about how you can get involved, learn more, get in touch.

Penny Rabiger: We're on Blue Sky, Facebook, and at least for now, Twitter or X or whatever it calls itself these days. Do us a favor, please like and subscribe. Reviews and ratings really help, especially good ones. Um, so take a moment if you can do that. And I hope you'll join us again, and again, and again, and again, to explore the Jewniverse, asking, who do you think you are?

[00:49:00]