Sephardic Heritage Update

A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information
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"Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it." -Marian Wright Edelman

Special Edition "Arab Jew"

On the Arab Jewish Refugee Controversy

Rejecting the 'Arab Jew'

By: Philologos

'A senior Saudi royal has offered Israel a vision of broad cooperation with the Arab world if it signs a peace treaty and withdraws from all occupied Arab territories," a Reuters dispatch reported last week, citing an interview with former Saudi ambassador to the United States Prince Turki al-Faisal. In the course of this interview, the prince was quoted as saying, "We

will start thinking of Israelis as Arab Jews rather than simply as Israelis."

Some vision of cooperation!

Needless to say, Prince Turki's use of the term "Arab Jews" reflects either a comically naive misunderstanding on his part of who Israelis are, or the more sinister hope that they will one day cease to be who they are. In the best case, the prince's remarks are ignorant and patronizing, and they reveal how even many supposedly sophisticated Arabs haven't a clue that Israelis, although they live in the middle of an Arab expanse, are a people with a unique language, culture, history and identity of their own. If Prince Turki thinks that once peace is declared, Israelis will cheerfully agree to become another ethnic minority in the Arab Middle East, he is living in a cloud of nargileh smoke.

On the whole, however, one doesn't come across the term "Arab Jews" in this context. Rather, it is used — mostly by Arabs but also by some anti-Israel and anti-Zionist intellectuals in the West — for the close to 1 million Jews who lived in Arab lands prior to the establishment of Israel, after which they left or were expelled from their native countries and immigrated to Israel or elsewhere. Thus, for instance, Ella Habiba Shohat, a professor of cultural and women's studies at New York's City University, writes of herself in an essay titled "Reflections by an Arab Jew":

I am an Arab Jew. Or, more specifically, an Iraqi Israeli woman living, writing and teaching in the U.S…. To be a European or American Jew has hardly been perceived as a contradiction, but to be an Arab Jew has been seen as a kind of logical paradox, even an ontological subversion [leading to] a profound and visceral schizophrenia, since for the first time in our history Arabness and Jewishness have been imposed as antonyms…. The same historical process [that is, the establishment of Israel] that dispossessed Palestinians of their property, lands and national-political rights was linked to the dispossession of Middle Eastern and North African Jews of their property, lands, and rootedness in Muslim countries….

There is, of course, a cynical absurdity in blaming Israel for the wholesale plunder of Jewish property by Arab regimes in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Algeria, Morocco and other countries that forbade Jews to take money or possessions with them when they emigrated from or were thrown out of these places. But apart from this, what is it that makes one wince at the term "Arab Jews"? After all, don't Ms. Shohat and others like her have a point? If a Jew living in America is an American Jew, and a Jew living in Europe is a European Jew, why isn't a Jew living in an Arab country an Arab Jew? Is not the objection to calling him that a form of Arabaphobia?

I think not. Anti-Arab prejudice has nothing to do with it. Historically speaking, Ms. Shohat is simply dead wrong.

It's true that Jews lived for hundreds and even thousands of years throughout the Middle East, and that after the Arabization of the region that started with the spread of Islam in the seventh century, they became linguistically and culturally Arabized, just as Jews in America have become linguistically and culturally Americanized. But it's also true that, in the course of these centuries, no Middle Eastern Jew, if asked whether he was an Arab, would have said yes, no matter how at home he felt in his environment. And for that matter, no Arab would have called his Jewish neighbor an Arab either. Jewishness and Arabness were perceived as antonyms in the sense of denoting two mutually exclusive ethnic identities, just as "Jew" and "goy" were antonyms in Eastern Europe. It was only in the 20th century that small numbers of Jews — most of them communists or on the Anti-Zionist political left — in cosmopolitan Arab cities like Cairo and Baghdad began to argue on behalf of an "Arab Jewish" identity as a way of repudiating Jewish nationalism and justifying their participation in Arab revolutionary politics.

One speaks of "American Jews" and "European Jews" rather than of "Jews living in America" or "Jews living in Europe," because Jews in these places think of themselves as Americans and Europeans. But traditionally, Jews living in Arab lands never thought of themselves as anything but Jews living in Arab lands, and I challenge Ms. Shohat to produce a single pre-20th-century text that suggests otherwise. To refer to these communities as "Arab Jews" is not only to imply that Zionism tore them away from their true homelands for the false lure of a Jewish state; it is to demean them by denying them their own sense of themselves. It's a term that justly deserves to be rejected.

From The Forward, February 1, 2008

From ShU 304, March 12, 2008

On the Use of the Term "Arab Jew"

By: David Shasha

Since the emergence of multiple Diasporas over the course of two millennia Jews have found themselves assimilating in various degrees to the cultures of their adopted homelands. While the Jewish religion contains many proscriptions regarding ritual life and the details of human behavior, there is a tremendous amount of cultural variation that Jewish law does not speak to.

Jews, for instance, are required to maintain laws of ritual purity when it comes to food that may be eaten and even how that food might be prepared. But nowhere in the Kosher laws does it state how the permissible food may be combined. There are no recipes for Kosher food that are mandated, no ways to require that once a food product is deemed fit to determine its proper use in a specific way.

The same value applies to language use. Jews in their sojourns through places all over the world have been successful in maintaining and propagating the study of Hebrew, the Holy Tongue, and yet we know that within the two major Jewish

sub-ethnic culture blocks, the Sephardi and the Ashkenazi, there have been a number of languages that have served as vernaculars – not supplanting Hebrew, but adding to it. These languages, Yiddish for the Ashkenazim, Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish for the Sephardim, have themselves taken on a quasi-sacred status. These languages, and I would include Greek and Aramaic here from earlier stages of the Jewish history, served as conduits for many unlettered Jews to understand the language of Scripture as they all at one time or another have served to render the Bible in the vernacular.

Indeed, today we see the almost complete anglophonization of Western Jewry with English becoming a major force in Jewish expression. In the 19th century we saw the same thing taking place among German-speaking Jews who produced a major Bible translation, done by Martin Buber and Franz Rosezweig. This sense of cultural assimilation through translation has been one of the major elements of Jewish life in the Diaspora. The tradition of translation goes back to the earliest Aramaic renditions of the Bible, continued with the Greek Septuagint, peaking with the pioneering translations of Se'adya Ga'on into Arabic and on through history.

Judaism has from its very inception not been averse to finding ways to bring its native Hebraic culture into line with other non-Hebrew cultures and to find ways to exchange its ideas and texts with non-Jews.

Ethnic identification is a complex yet completely transparent thing. There are cultural ties, religious ties and other ties such as class and gender that make up the various parts of an individual's relationship with his or her surroundings.

Jews throughout history have taken on as a moniker the name of their lands of birth or adopted homelands as a way to identify their culture. In spite of the fact that Jewish life was displaced into Europe after the dispersion from Roman Palestine, there was an identification of Jews as European that has gone on to this day. Jews were not native to Europe and yet such a term is widely used without objection. This was early on codified by the term "Ashkenazi" which is a Biblical identification that was utilized to apply in a wide sense to Jews who had gone from the Middle East to the European continent. The term "Ashkenazi" was then used to apply to the cultural traditions of its adherents. Specific rabbinic schools and ways of learning were associated with the term Ashkenazi Jew.

So too did there emerge the term "Sephardi" in the wake of the efflorescence of Jewish cultural life in Islamic Spain. Though Jews had lived in Visigothic Spain, there was no type of Hispano-Jewish culture that could be seen as unique. But with the development of Jewish life in a pointed way after the Arab conquest of Spain a sense of something special was noted and identified. This term "Sephardic," another Biblicism, spread throughout the Middle East. For instance, the famed rabbi Moses Maimonides, whose family was prominent among the Spanish Jewish elite, moved to Egypt and continued to utilize the moniker Sephardi when signing his name. The movement of Jews from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Western Mediterranean and back was fairly fluid during the 9th-15th centuries when we can rightly identify a fairly homogeneous cultural entity that would rightly be termed "Arabic."

The term "Arab" would historically have been used to mark the nomadic tribes of a place called "Arabia" but with the emergence of the Islamic religion the conception of "Arab" was greatly expanded to include those who lived and developed culturally under the umbrella of Arabo-Islamic civilization.

This civilization was one of the great world cultures forming a bridge between the dying Greco-Roman culture and the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. Arabic civilization was not seen as limited to the Muslim people, nor was it now marked only by those nomadic tribes in the Arabian peninsula. The Arabic language had become a lingua franca not only in the Middle East, but throughout Spain, Sicily and the many educational institutions emerging in Christian Europe that looked to profit from the cultural and scientific inroads of Arabic civilization.

Arabic was thus seen as the language of culture at a time when Europe had largely been under the sway of disparate barbarian tribes which had overrun the last remnants of the Roman Empire. Under the rule of tribes like the aforementioned Visigoths, Gauls, Saxons, and the like, Jewish life in Christian Europe during the Middle Ages was a relentless hell and frequent persecutions and expulsions from European countries, culminating with the Spanish Expulsion in 1492, took place.

In the Arab world, the situation was far different. Jews were able to make their mark on Arabic culture in a number of different ways: With the adoption of Arabic as the language of culture, Jews found themselves immersed in the scientific and philosophical educational system of the Arab world. Figures like the aforementioned Maimonides, Se'adya Ga'on, the poets Moses ibn Ezra and Solomon ibn Gabirol, the statesman Samuel ibn Nagrela and so many others marked this transition into a Judeo-Arabic cultural universe that quickly established itself as the cutting edge of Jewish self-expression. Even when the poet Judah Halevi composed a biting critique of this Judeo-Arabic culture in its elitist philosophical formation in his classic book The Kuzari (written in Arabic, its original title was *Kitab al-Radd w-al-Dalil fi al-Din al-Dhalil*), he did so using the same Arabic language and couched his arguments in the same academic terms that would only be intelligible to a student well-versed in the philosophic rationalism of the time. And it should be well-noted that Halevi continued to produce Arabic-style verse until the very end of his life; never relinquishing the profane themes of the erotic and sensual that typified this cultural school.

In the main, Ashkenazi culture had developed in isolation from the dominant cultures in Europe. And for good reason: The Jews of Europe had been denied the basic autonomy and cultural freedoms that were commonplace in the Arab world. They were carefully monitored by the Christian authorities and were frequently the object of persecution, ridicule and a deep cultural intolerance. There was no comparable equivalent to

Maimonides or Samuel ibn Nagrela among the Ashkenazi Jews. It would have been nearly impossible to imagine an Ashkenazi Jew producing a work such as Moses ibn Ezra's *Kitab al-Muhadara w-al-Mudhakara*, a treatise on Hebrew poetics as its author contextualized it within the Arabic literary system.

Ashkenazi Jews had developed a deeply hermetic Talmudic scholasticism that had little if any room for extraneous influences.

The clash between the two value-systems, the Judeo-Arabic and the Ashkenazic, took its most pronounced form with the emergence of what has been called The Maimonidean Controversy; a bitterly fought intra-Jewish battle over the philosophical oeuvre of Maimonides after the publication of his Judeo-Arabic masterpiece *Dalalat al-Ha'iran*, better known as The Guide of the Perplexed. This controversy exposed the fault lines that separated the Sephardi and Ashkenazi cultures: Maimonides' openness to the Arabic appropriation of Greco-Roman rationalism and his use of this culture in trying to understand the very foundations of a Jewish metaphysics was deeply disconcerting to Ashkenazi rabbis who had completely circumscribed the inclusion of non-Jewish influences within their cultural system.

But as we know, culture is a permeable construct and the Ashkenazim who rejected any overt cultural borrowing, were somewhat unsuccessful in shielding their Jewish culture from taking on many of the mental and social conceptions of the surrounding Christian cultures of Europe. Ashkenazi Judaism developed a keen sense of the mystical at the very time that mystical writings permeated European Christian religious thinking. The sense of rigidity and intolerance and exclusionary elitism that had characterized European Christianity and was to prove so damaging to Jews there was unwittingly adopted by many Jewish clerics in an Ashkenazi civilization which presented a much stricter and less open form of Jewish self-perception than that developed and promoted in Judeo-Arabic civilization.

The Maimonidean Controversy of the 13th and 14th centuries, already begun with attacks on Maimonides during his own lifetime and to which he was forced to respond to defend his doctrinal orthodoxy, exemplified the split that had separated the Ashkenazi form of Judaism from its Sephardic counterpart. Maimonides had combined an exacting Talmudism which he learned from the traditions emanating from the academies of the Judeo-Arab universe stretching from the Arab East to Spain through North Africa and Southern Europe along with the new Arabic learning. Maimonides' own thought-patterns were similar to those of his Muslim peers, Ibn Rushd and al-Ghazali who also sought to systematize their traditional religious teachings within a larger intellectual context having opened their minds to the new sciences and trends of the Arabic reading of Aristotle and the Greco-Roman traditions.

The Ashkenazim had frozen the Jewish tradition back into its Talmudic variant. Having lacked any substantial human or intellectual contact with the Talmudic academies of Babylonia as the Islamic era was developing, the Ashkenazim, as the great Sephardic political theorist Daniel Elazar had pointed out some years ago, were in the process of congealing a "Romantic" form of Judaism that was based on a novel reading of the traditional rabbinical sources that became suspended in time, thus forcing the Talmud into a limiting vise that lacked the ability to truly evolve and develop new ideas and assimilate into different and differing cultural contexts. Ashkenazi Judaism was thus caught in a bind that forced it to remain static.

The challenge of Maimonides and his incipient cultural creativity was a stark challenge to this Ashkenazi fundamentalism. What Elazar termed Sephardi "Classicism" was not a conservative reactionary understanding of the Jewish tradition, but was a free-flowing and dynamic symbiosis with the surrounding cultures in the places where Sephardim lived. This Classical form of Judaism was not a forced replication of an ideal past, but was an elegant series of reformulations of the Jewish tradition with a pronounced bent of rational ethics, an embrace of scientific currents, an adoption of an aesthetic system all combined with a deep reverence for the inherited wisdom of the ages.

Sephardic Jews in Spain, North Africa, Sicily, Syria, Provence, and elsewhere in the Mediterranean found themselves participating in a unique cultural system that was organized under the unifying umbrella of the Arabic language and Arabo-Islamic culture. Because of Islam's embrace of the most pronounced ecumenical values at that time – though they were by no means perfect, they permitted to participation of non-Muslims in the larger society – Jews were able to produce a culture of great intellectual, aesthetic and ethical worth that had clearly eclipsed the dogmatism of an Ashkenazi culture that had lacked any facility with the Gentile world.

After the Spanish Expulsion, the Hispanic Jews returned to the Islamic world, this time as immigrants to the Ottoman Empire. Jews found themselves in Ottoman Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, the Balkans and other locales of the Empire. The Ottomans had taken the Arab world by storm and had adopted its Islamic faith. There was little difficulty in the transition from the old cultural world of Mediterranean Arabo-Islam to the new Ottoman universe. Royal courts adopted the traditional Arab cultural values and literary standards, while intellectual thought and pluralism thrived in the Ottoman society.

After many centuries of cultural pluralism, the Ottoman system was brought to a crushing end after the destruction of the Empire at the hands of the European powers. Emerging from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were individual Arab states. With the emergence of these states, Jewish statesmen like Haim Nahum Effendi sought to confirm Jewish loyalty to their Arab hosts and continue to maintain the cultural relationship that had tied Jews to Arabic civilization as we have already pointed out.

With the emergence of political Zionism, the Arab Jews were placed in a precarious situation: Having been deeply tied to and immersed in Arabic culture and civilization for many centuries

and seeing themselves as a part of that civilization, they were now being forced to choose between their Jewish identity and their Arab culture.

Traditionally in the Arab world, culture was a unifying factor and religion a divisive one. Having used the term divisive, I do not mean to imply that the division was in any way seen as illegitimate or intrusive. Each faith community in the Arab world was provided with communal autonomy while the maintenance of Islam as the dominant and dominating religion was clearly affirmed. But under this system Jews were able to conduct their intra-communal affairs in relative ease having established internal institutions and entities to administer the affairs of the community without the interference of the Islamic authorities.

Haim Nahum had been a founding member of the Arabic Language Academy, a prestigious cultural organization that chose its members from the cultural and political elites, and became a crucial figure linking the Jewish community to its Arab host. Nahum was deeply troubled by the emergence of an exclusionary Zionist movement whose primary aim was to remove Jews from their lands of birth, physically and culturally, in order to have them return to the Biblical land of Israel. Nahum correctly understood that life for Jews in the Arab world was going to be shaken to its very foundation and he counseled the Jews of Egypt to take the formal steps of becoming citizens of the emerging independent country when they were given the opportunity.

But the machinations of Zionists and Arab nationalists conspired to begin a process that would lead to the destruction of the old pluralistic Levantine culture in the wake of the emerging mono-ethnic cultures that were soon to take over the region and lead to a tremendous amount of violence and bloodshed.

It was here that the Jewish identification with Arabic culture began to tear apart.

The use of the term “Arab Jew” as a means of identifying those Jews who had adopted the cultural system of the Arab civilization became a political football.

Though it is completely clear that Arab Jews are identified as such because they speak the Arabic language, eat Arabic-style food, listen to Arabic music and generally exhibit the many cultural traits common to all Arab peoples, the term was isolated from the standard Jewish nomenclature – under strong Zionist influence – that had little difficulty identifying other Jews by their places of origin.

Indeed, Ashkenazi Jews continued to be identified as such with sub-divisions of German Jews, English Jews, French Jews, Polish Jews, Russian Jews, and the like continuing to be utilized as a means to name the various Jewish communities in the Ashkenazi world. In spite of the many tragedies experienced by these Ashkenazi Jews, they continued to identify themselves by their countries of origin. It is telling that even after the Holocaust Jews from the Rhineland could still be identified as German Jews.

The only nomenclature that had changed was that of the Arab Jews.

The term that was created after 1948 to identify Jews of the Middle East was “Jews from Arab lands.” There seemed to be a very careful elision of Jews from the Arabic cultural system that was marked by a strong political bias. Arabs had now become the enemy par excellence of the Jewish State which was now seen as the sole legitimate representative body of the Jewish people. With the traditional antipathy of the Ashkenazi Jews – and it should be remembered that Ashkenazi Jews dominated the Zionist movement and had once even considered making Yiddish the national language of Israel – towards the classical Sephardic culture in place, the adoption of a new anti-Gentile animus towards the Arabs similar to that sense of exclusion that had animated Ashkenazi culture for many centuries, caused the Arab nature of Jewish identification to find itself singled out for extinction.

It is for this reason that the only Jewry that has been forced to remove its adjectival prefix is that of Arab Jewry. There is no other Jewry that is called “Jews from such-and-such lands.”

All sorts of petty and pedantic arguments attach themselves to this issue but it is quite clear that Jews participated in and were a part of Arabic civilization. They did not live in isolation from their Arab neighbors and had adopted many of the folkways and civilizational patterns of the Arabic culture. In an ethnographic sense the Jews who lived in Arab lands were ARAB JEWS just as Jews who live in the United States are American Jews. The modifying adjective “Arab” does not signify that Jews are not Jews but simply means that Arab Jews are a part of a larger cultural system that may be termed “Arab.”

It is clear why there is an objection to my use of the term “Arab Jews.” The attempt by the Zionists to oppose Arabs in every way possible, a value that was deeply embedded in the very foundations of the Jewish State of Israel, trapped Arab Jews and forced them to decide how they were going to see themselves and identify themselves. Such is not a linguistic or cultural consideration, but a political consideration that cares little about the historical facts at hand. In fact, such an elision of Arab Jewish identity is a completely specious falsification of the historical record.

At the very time that it would seem advisable for Jews – even Ashkenazi Jews – who live in Israel in the midst of the surrounding Arab world to reconnect with the regional culture – which is Arabic, we have a complete cultural disconnect. Rather than using the Arab Jewish traditions as a bridge back into the Arab world, Zionism has sought to occlude this Judeo-Arab culture and suppress any possible sense of its continuity. It has used language and naming to help it achieve this goal.

But it cannot change the cultural realities of the Arab Jewish tradition.

Arab Jews in Paris, Brooklyn, Tel Aviv, Montreal and elsewhere continue to sing Arab songs, continue to eat Arab food and continue to study the Judeo-Arabic texts of their progenitors. And while we have traced the ways in which this culture is dying out, one can still find its manifestation within the various markets in Israel and Brooklyn where the sounds, smells and attitudes of the Arab world continue to make themselves felt.

So while you can try and play games with names, and names are indeed very important, the external reality of the Arab Jewish communities remains what it is – any outsider would walk through Brooklyn's Kings Highway and its many Arab Jewish food shops and restaurants – all Kosher – and without any doubt identify these places as part of Arab culture.

You can continue to browbeat me over my use of the term "Arab Jew" if you so choose. The historical and existential record is plain for all to see: Jews were not simply inert figures who came from "Arab lands" as the current politically correct Ashkenazi Jewish/Zionist nomenclature would have it. Jews were Arabs insofar as they developed their culture using the Arabic language and the civilization of the Arab world.

I understand all too well the reasons that lay behind the objections to the use of the term "Arab Jew." It is yet another attempt to break off the ties of Jews to their nativity in the Arab world and replace that affiliation with a new non-Arab affiliation that would serve to tear asunder the links of native Middle Eastern Jews to their lands of origin and the cultural traditions that are so crucial a part of their heritage.

From SHU 304, March 12, 2008 (First published in SHU 168, August 3, 2005)

Arab Jew, Part II
By: Philologos

I have received two long letters arguing with my column of two weeks ago, in which I objected to the term "Arab Jew." Here are parts of them.

From Jack Warga of Boynton Beach, Fla.:

My family lived for at least 150, and probably several hundred, years in Poland. I spoke Polish and attended a Jewish school that taught Hebrew, Bible, and Jewish history in Hebrew but all the other subjects in Polish. Now, seventy years after leaving Poland, I still continue to read Polish books and correspond with a Polish fellow-mathematician in his language. This does not make me a Pole, but it does make me a Polish Jew. So why should the term Arab Jew not be analogous to the term Polish Jew? It should just refer to one's previous residence in a particular country or part of the world.

And from David Shasha, director of Brooklyn's Center for Sephardic Heritage:

In an ethnographic sense the Jews who lived in Arab lands were Arab Jews just as Jews who live in the United States are American Jews. The term was isolated under strong Zionist influence from the standard Jewish nomenclature that had little difficulty identifying other Jews by their places of origin, such English Jews, French Jews, Polish Jews, Russian Jews, and the like. Even after the Holocaust, Jews from Germany are still identified as German Jews. To object to the term Arab Jew is yet another attempt to break off the ties of Jews from the Middle East to their lands of origin and cultural traditions.

Both Mr. Warga and Mr. Shasha have fallen victims to a linguistic confusion whose nature I perhaps failed to explain clearly enough in my original column. I suggest they consider the following terms and tell me which make sense and which don't:

The French countryside. The Hispanic countryside. Russian citizens. Celtic citizens. English weather. Arab weather.

The answer is obvious. One can speak of the French countryside, Russian citizens and English weather, because these things can be restated as the countryside of France, the citizens of Russia and the weather of England. One cannot speak of the Hispanic countryside, Celtic citizens or Arab weather, because these cannot be restated as the countryside of Hispania, the citizens of Celtland or the weather of Arabia. Words like Slavic, Celtic and Arab denote linguistic, cultural and ethnic affinities, not nationality or discrete countries or geographical areas. And for this reason, too, although one can logically speak of French Jews, Russian Jews and English Jews, one can't really speak of Hispanic Jews, Celtic Jews or Arab Jews.

Let's take the case of Polish Jews, a term no one would quarrel with. How are we to understand the adjective Polish in it? Not linguistically, because for most of their history, Polish Jews did not speak Polish as their first language and often did not know it at all. Not culturally or ethnically, because, again for most of their history, Polish Jews had a cultural and ethnic identity totally different from that of Polish Catholics. And not in terms of nationality, because for most of its history, Poland was not a sovereign state and had no nationals. The word's use is geographical. A Polish Jew was a Jew who lived in Poland. If asked whether they identified as Poles, nearly all Polish Jews prior to the late 19th century, and most 20th-century Polish Jews up to the time of the Holocaust, would have given the same answer that Mr. Warga gives.

One can grant Mr. Sasha that, ethnographically, the Jews of Arab lands were far more acculturated to their Arab environment than the Jews of Poland were to their Polish environment. And yet these Jews were exactly like the Jews of Poland in having their own strong sense of group identity and drawing a clear line between themselves and their Arab neighbors, who drew a similar line. In the countries of the Arab world, a Jew was a Jew and an Arab was an Arab. Jews and Arabs never intermarried; as a rule, they did not mix socially, and they led separate

communal lives. No Jew could be an Arab because, unlike "Polish," "Russian" or "German," the words "Arab" and "Jew" could not be restricted to a geographical, juridical or even cultural meaning; they denoted one's deepest allegiances and sense of self.

This is not a matter of Zionism or Eurocentric Judaism, as Mr. Sasha seems to think. The modern Middle Eastern equivalent to Polish Jew, Russian Jew and English Jew is not Arab Jew, but Iraqi Jew, Egyptian Jew and Syrian Jew. No one could possibly object to such terms, because Iraqi, Egyptian and Syrian Jews did not object to them either and used them self-referentially. They lived in Iraq, Egypt or Syria; they had Iraqi, Egyptian or Syrian citizenship, and they were even capable of being Iraqi, Egyptian or Syrian patriots. But they never, never thought of themselves as Arabs. To come along now and tell them they were wrong is inaccurate at best and insulting at worst.

From The Forward, February 13, 2008

From SHU 306, March 26, 2008

Further Reflections on the Use of the Term "Arab Jew"
By: David Shasha

If it waddles like a duck, looks like a duck, and quacks like a duck … then it must be a duck.

Having already written what I thought was a fairly definitive essay on this subject I have found that the matter of the term "Arab Jew" will not seem to go away. Having also written a very lengthy essay that I called "Sephardi Typologies" which discusses the pusillanimity of Sephardim when having to deal with Ashkenazi challenges to their organic identity, I have identified a number of identity types and formations that also serve to provide an explanation to why this whole "Arab Jew" issue is so contested.

What I would like to do here is to add an additional excursus which would supplement the two articles I have already written.

As we have continually argued, the Ashkenazi Jewish tradition is fraught with hatred of the Other as well as an internal self-censorship that verges on the pathological. Ashkenazi Jewish identity is a complex amalgam of hermetic Jewish rigidity, expressed best by Orthodoxy, coupled with a deeply ambivalent sense of the individual self as it encounters the outside world. The Ashkenazi dialectic combines a strictly circumscribed Jewish ethos with a disdain for dissent and a phobia of the world as we know it.

As is now well-known, the so-called Emancipation of the Ashkenazi Jews from their ghettos – constructs that perpetuated the tradition of misanthropy that we have described – permitted many new variations of Jewish life that broke from the certainties of the old life.

Sephardim, those Jews whose ancestry originates in the Arabo-Mediterranean world that was most precisely formed after the Islamic conquests, have traditionally organized themselves under the rubric of their rabbinical authorities; most prominently Maimonides whose life spanned the Iberian West and the Arab East. Various sub-groups of Sephardim emerged based on regional, ethnic and cultural affiliations. So there were Sephardim who lived in North Africa with Berber culture; there were other Sephardim living in Persia whose culture and tradition was tied to that region; while there were many other variants as can be understood from the plethora of historical works on the subject.

The key here is that the larger rubric of Sephardic life was lived under the umbrella of an Arabo-Islamic civilization that informed many if not all aspects of this Jewish universe.

After the Crusades and the Reconquest of Spain by Christian armies, Sephardim added the European-Latin vernacular to their identity. Even at the time of the great poets of the Andalusian Golden Age, the use of what was called Romanecero – an early form of Spanish – could be found scattered in their literary texts.

Sephardic culture was in its very essence a polyglot culture. It was not limited to any specific model of influence. So too was the tradition of Middle Eastern Arabic civilization which was formed on the crucible of the Greco-Roman civilization that it had conquered militarily.

So what of the term "Arab"?

In the current attacks on the usage of the term, the word is limited to the warring tribes of Arabia in the pre-Islamic age. This is what "Arab" signifies in the current attack literature on the use of the term "Arab Jew." As Jews were not Bedouin warriors living in the Hijaz – though this in itself is also historically untrue as there was a tribe of Jewish desert warriors who in fact ruled non-Jews in the Arabian Peninsula – it is seen as a truism that Jews cannot be "Arabs."

One of the problems with this view is that the very self-identification of the Arab Jews was to use an Arabic term – Arabic being their native language for many centuries – "Musta'arab." As pointed out by my friend Alan Brill, this term was in common use in the Middle East – particularly at the time of the Spanish Expulsion when many Latin Sephardim were welcomed into the Ottoman Empire. The native Jews of the Middle East distinguished themselves as "Musta'arab" – literally, "Arabized," given the nature of the word's linguistic form in Arabic – to mark their native Arab culture in the face of a more Europeanized Sephardic Jew.

Internally, the problem was not really much of anything as a complex process of adaptation and unification quickly took place. As a personal example I can cite a custom in my mother's family, the Mishaans, who continued to light one extra candle on each night of Hanukkah to commemorate an event that no one in the family seemed to remember, but which had something to do with a miracle taking place in Spain saving the

Jews there from some atrocity. So it was that the Mishaans were Sephardic Jews who settled in Syria many centuries ago and whose culture and language was Arabic, but who maintained specific customs of an Iberian provenance.

If we look into the family histories of members of the Brooklyn Syrian community we will find these patterns emerge time after time. The Sephardic lineage is cross-pollinated between the Iberian West and the Arab East.

It should not be forgotten that the founding of the Andalusian caliphate by Abdel-Rahman was itself a transplanting of the Syrian 'Ummayad caliphate that was on the run from the 'Abbasids in Iraq.

Spain itself – to the dismay of the Inquisitors and their fans – was Arabized!

Now, does anyone discussing the matter give one whit about any of this history or the way that this history is actualized in the daily lives of Arab Jews?

I do not think so.

The problem that we have – and this is something that I have discussed in both of my articles on the subject, is that the word "Arab" has been reconstructed by the Ashkenazim – mainly under the baneful influence of Zionism as formulated by the Ashkenazi Bolsheviks – and now set in absolute opposition to the term "Jew."

It is important as well to keep in mind the paradoxical nature of Arab Jewish and Ashkenazi Zionist relations. The early Russian immigrants, many of whom served as leaders of the military, the government and the vital infrastructure of the new state including the Kibbutzim, transformed what was essentially a mercantile, capitalist Sephardi class into a proletarian community. The Ashkenazi "socialists" were in effect the elite class controlling the state's resources, while the Arab Jews were forced into a status of dependency turning them into parasitic wards of the state.

Once Ashkenazi hegemony was set, a neo-liberal revolution turned the "socialist" Ashkenazi elite into a firmly grounded capitalist class with varied results for the Arab Jews.

With this in mind, a number of observations come to mind in mulling over the recent attacks on my work and the work of other Sephardic activists dealing with this issue:

First, the idiotic use of history to entrap us into converting our own self-understanding is not only foolish, but dangerous. In addition, it should be carefully noted that such a conversion is not being uniformly applied. Just take the use of the term "Jew." If we scour the Pentateuch, we will not find the term used. The Hebrew term used to identify the inhabitants of the Bible is not uniform. There is the term "'Ibri" that is used, but this has fallen into disuse as "Jew" replaced "Hebrew" many centuries ago. There is also the use of the term "Israelite" which is still used but has an antiquated ring to it. The use of the term "Yehudi" is, strangely enough, found in the Book of Esther – a product of the Diaspora.

The word "Jew" – if we follow the same logic that denies the use of the term "Arab Jew" – should be deemed illegitimate because it is belated. So silly is all of this that we should simply ignore it – if it were not for the larger issues that the polemic continues to deploy, but artfully hide.

Next, who is it that has made Ashkenazim the language police?

And, to boot, why should we be told by others what we can legitimately call ourselves?

As I have already said, the self-perception of what it means to be Jewish is something that is an all-consuming debate in Ashkenazi culture. In the Sephardic world identity is far more fluid. The Sephardic identity is so fluid that there was often little formal concern for nomenclature. One adopted cultures and identities in such a haphazard manner, that there was often little thought of marking those identities with names. People were who they were and until there was a need to invent a name, the idea was not deemed important.

But as we have seen with the use of the Arabic term "Musta'arab" there was a pressing need to identify the native communities of the Middle East as "Arab."

Now with the compulsively paranoid sense that seems to mark so many inter-Ashkenazi debates, there will be those who will seek to parse the Arabic word "Musta'arab" and add an "ized" as a suffix. So according to this logic where we must have a precise sourcing for the term, we would have to be equally punctilious to make sure that the term would be "Arabized" and not "Arab"!

Again, even with this nonsensical way of seeing things – something that does not at all deal with the fact that Jews in the Middle East would be seen by those not of the region as ARABS, just like their neighbors – the idea that there is no such construct as an Arab Jew is deeply flawed in both the historical and cultural senses.

Next, we must enter into the unstated premise that fuels the debate – that Jews hate Arabs, so that they could never be Arab Jews.

More precisely, Ashkenazi Jews hate Arabs.

Now, this is something that cannot be stated explicitly as it is deeply racist and offensive. But at the very heart of the argument that Jews cannot be called Arabs is a patent Arabophobia brought on by Zionism.

For Arab Jews none of this is good news, as they will have great difficulty trying to make sense of their own organic identity.

If Jews cannot be Arabs, then what happens to our culture?

Our food, our music, our literature, our religion – you get the idea – is all predicated on the foundations of Judaism – this is not contested – but also on the civilization created after the Muslim conquests. Once the Arab substrate is eliminated, all we have is a Judaism that has lost Maimonides, Moses ibn Ezra and Israel Najara – among many others. Arguments will then be made that these figures were not Arabs – and people will scream at the top of their lungs that this is so.

But is it really so?

I chose each of the three names because – in spite of the names they used to identify themselves – each displayed their virtuosity in the arts and sciences perfected under the rubric of Arab civilization. So for the outsider looking in, each of the three men was an ARAB – this is how someone trying to understand the work of Maimonides, Moses ibn Ezra and Israel Najara would have to see the matter. They would have to learn about the history and culture of the ARABS to make any sense of these people and who they were.

We have a conceptual problem here: with the rise of an Ashkenazi Zionist acculturation, the idea that Jews could live in the Arab world – as Arabs – was a logical impossibility. Those Ashkenazim who studied this world understood that such a thing is incoherent – but there you have it!

In my article "Sephardi Typologies" I made the argument that Sephardim today have a sense of self-loathing that forces them to become one or another form of Ashkenazi.

Let me add to this yet another idea: The African-American activist Malcolm X developed a very important concept that he articulated in his discussion of the "House Negro." According to Malcolm X, slaves were apportioned into two categories, "Field Negroes" and "House Negroes." In the film "Gone with the Wind" we see the characters of Hattie MacDaniel and Butterfly McQueen as prototypical "House Negroes."

The "Field Negro" was outside the domain of civilization; an uncouth figure akin to an animal.

The "House Negro" was properly dressed and displayed an acceptable comportment to the White masters that were being served.

Malcolm X's insight into this dynamic was that the "House Negro" often became deeply protective of the Master – to the point of denying his own self-interest. "House Negroes" always took the side of the Master and would do so with an enthusiasm often bordering on the pathological, completely forgetting that they too, like the "Field Negroes," were Slaves.

As Arab Jews came to Israel, the Ashkenazi society called them by two pejorative names: "Schvartze Chayas," Black Animals (from the Yiddish), and "Shchorim," Negroes (from the Hebrew). These were well-known terms of opprobrium that have long since become taboo in Israel, just as the so-called "N" word has become here in America. But it should be remembered that before there was the term "Mizrachi," Oriental, that Arab Jews went through a number of interlocked processes. They were separated from the "Sephardic" Jews; where the term "Sephardic" meant Latinate Iberian and not Arabic Iberian. Then they became "Bnei Edot ha-Mizrach," literally meaning "The Children of the Eastern Communities."

This latter term began the balkanization process that fixed each Arab Jewish community as separate and unique. It would make a good deal of sense from Ashkenazi Israeli logic that Arab Jewish communities would become separated and their civilization divided into non-compatible compartments. This mentality showed us what the true power of "divide and conquer" really meant.

So now there were "Moroccans," "Iraqis," "Persians," "Yemenites," "Syrians" etc. The communities were rent asunder into separate entities and encouraged to stay this way. Such was a good way to weaken Sephardim and rob them of their identity.

With a process we can now confidently call "De-Arabization" ongoing from 1948 to the end of this immigration in 1967, the creation of a new Sephardic underclass was ensured. Those who exhibited the traits and folkways of Arabs were stigmatized as belonging to the "enemy" and went through a process of cultural disorientation; the traces of which are with us to this very day.

Seen as "primitive" and "backward," the Arab Jews were shorn of their culture and identity which was replaced with a Master/Slave dialectic that has functioned in often bizarre ways in the Sephardic world. Arab Jews who came to Israel were forced to acclimate to an Ashkenazi-superior culture which expressed its disdain for the ways of the Arabs. This was cruelly reinforced by the participation of Arab Jews in the State's military and security structure.

Arab Jews learned first hand what they were being asked to do by the State and by and large acclimated. After many generations of this reality, Arab Jews in Israel have ceased to be Arabs and have forgotten who they are. They have internalized the mechanisms of oppression of their Ashkenazi masters, and have lost their culture and tradition. And while the food and music of Arab Jewish culture remains – though run through the ubiquitous Israeli filter – the literary-intellectual culture of the Arab Jews has more or less disappeared.

In America where such a forced "De-Arabization" never took place, the mechanisms of displacement have been different. Acculturation to the Ashkenazi-American model took place due to the demographic changes of American Jewry made Eastern European Jewry the predominant ethnically Jewish community in the country. It was simply a matter of numbers.

But when we go back to this sense of what it means to be a "House Negro" we see that Arab Jews, now shorn of their native

organic culture and identity, have played the role of Ashkenazi enforcer.

Sephardim are now more Ashkenazi than the Ashkenazim themselves.

This fact has become painfully clear to me since the publication of articles attacking "Arab" Jews in the Jerusalem Post and the Forward. The most vehement responses I have received have come not from Ashkenazim – some of whom are thankfully beginning to understand the point I have been making – but from Arab Jews who act as "House Negroes" defending the perquisites of the very Ashkenazim who have destroyed our culture.

As I said in my essay on Yehouda Shenhav's book "The Arab Jews" – one of the primary flashpoints for this whole sorry debate – Sephardic history is perhaps the most contested history of any ethnic minority in the world. The reason for this lies in the debate over the term "Arab" and what it signifies in a Jewish context.

Part of the problem of the "House Negro" Sephardim is that they have been programmed to ferret out all the Arab elements of their past. Those who scream at me today would have been deemed as lunatics by my grandmother who never separated out the different parts of her being – and never saw the need to think about who she was. For her, there was no analytical need to delve into such a moronic question as to whether she was an Arab or not. But anyone who knew her – or the many others like her – would know that she appeared to be like any other Arab matriarch – that was who she was and no polemic can change that.

Let me quote the late community leader Sam Catton who told Kay Kaufman Shelemay for her indispensable book "Let Jasmine Rain Down":

Now in the Syrian Jewish community, in our community, we have something that's a little different. Being that we are Sephardic, and being we are Arabic, of Arabic origin, or we mixed with the Arabic … our ancestors picked up the Arabic music.

In point of fact, the transformation that has now taken place in a post-Sephardic world has falsified who we are not only in intellectual-conceptual terms, but as human beings.

And this new variant is not merely an academic concern, but is tied to a transformation of morality and ethics in the Sephardic community. A new barbarism has engulfed the community here in Brooklyn and elsewhere in the Sephardic world that is best seen when skirmishes like this one over the use of the term "Arab Jew" come up. The depth of viciousness and primal hatred that is dredged up marks a new stage of Sephardic culture that shows the way in which the concept of "Suffeh," manners and good breeding, has been discarded.

In the new Ashkenazified world of Sephardic Judaism that we live in, the display of such bad manners is not seen as an issue. The internalization of the Ashkenazi pathology – the world of the ghetto – is now our reality. In the world of traditional Ashkenazi culture –which can still be seen in places like Borough Park, Monsey, Lakewood and Bnei Brak – the pathological is seen as normative. People yell and scream at each other all the time. Anathemas are hurled as freely as candy. Human dignity is not respected. All for the sake of "being right." This is what has now happened to Sephardim.

And that is where we now stand. All arguments showing that Jews can be Arabs are thrown into the maelstrom of a PILPUL that forgets that by deploying such logic, the very use of the term "Jew" can equally find itself contested. Once we enter into the PILPUL dialectic all bets are off; one form of destruction invites another.

So this asinine discussion validates my refusal to enter into the world of the Blogosphere. It is just such a useless and debilitating discussion that so much time is wasted and acrimony created.

But there is no way that I am going to let anyone, whoever they may be, destroy my culture regardless of their reasons or motivations.

From SHU 308, April 9, 2008

Arab Jew, Part III

By: Philologos

This one puts the poisoned cherry on the top.

Not only are we not Arab Jews – we are defined by the Palmach designation of Jews pretending to be Arabs!

DS

The discussion in this column of the term "Arab Jew" has solicited two additional letters. One comes from Shaye J.D. Cohen, Littauer professor of Hebrew language and literature at Harvard University. The professor writes:

"Apropos of your column re: Arab Jews, I note that there is a category of Arabi(ic) Christians. The Christians of Muslim Spain were known as Mozarabs, and their liturgy is still known today as the Mozarabic Rite. I do not know the history or etymology of the word 'Mozarabic,' but I wonder if it might serve as a precedent for the concept of Arab(ic) Jews."

And Alan Brill, a professor of the graduate department of Jewish-Christian studies at Seton Hall University, writes to point out that in "rabbinic, pietistic, and kabbalistic works…. Jews of Arab lands [are called] 'mustarabs.' The pietistic literature of [the kabbalistic school of] Safed often uses the term mustarabs to distinguish Sefardim from native Arab Jews. The term certainly

exists. The problems are more subtle about whether it is a noun or an adjective, and how much of an affinity it implies."

As you probably have already guessed, Professor Cohen's Mozarabs and Professor Brill's "mustarabs" are linguistically related. We have, in fact, three words to deal with: Spanish *mozárabe* (plural, mozárabes); Arabic musta'rib (plural, *musta'ribun*), from which mozárabe derives, and Hebrew mista'arev (plural, *mista'arvim*), which also comes from *musta'arib*. Let's take them one by one, starting with the Arabic.

As is the case with Hebrew, Arabic morphology is based heavily on three-consonant roots, the root of *musta'rib* being *'-r-b*, with the single apostrophe standing for the pharyngeal consonant Ayin. These are the consonants of the word arab, which means Arab, and in the Istaf'al or Tenth Form of the Arabic verbal system, they yield the verb ista'raba, which means, "to become like an Arab, to behave like an Arab, or to pretend to be an Arab." The nominal and adjectival form of *ista'raba* is *musta'rib*, which denotes or qualifies a person who does these things.

During the long Muslim rule over the southern half of Spain that started in the eighth century, most of the region's inhabitants converted to Islam, adopted Arabic as their language and came to be regarded as Arabs themselves. A minority, however, while also switching from Spanish to Arabic and adjusting themselves to an Arab lifestyle, clung to Catholicism as their religious faith, just as other Arabic-speaking Jews in Spain clung to Judaism. This minority became known in the predominantly Muslim south as the *musta'ribun*, and in the predominantly Christian north as the *mozárabes*.

As is the case with English "Mozarabs," these words cannot be correctly translated as "Christian Arabs." "Arabizing Christians" would be more accurate. And as an adjective, "Mozarab" can also denote the cultural products of the Mozarabs, as when one speaks of "Mozarab architecture" — that is, medieval Hispano-Christian churches or other buildings constructed in the Islamic style. (The opposite of Mozarab is "Mudejar," from Spanish *dèjar*, "to remain" — that is, a Muslim who stayed on those parts of Spain that were re-Christianized after the Catholic re-conquest but kept his Muslim faith while adopting the Spanish language and its culture.)

As for *mista'arev*, it is a rare case of the Istaph'al form in Hebrew, which does not have such a verbal construction. As Professor Brill points out, the word was used in Hebrew to distinguish the Arabic-speaking Jews of the Levant from two other communities, the Ladino-speaking Sephardim and the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim, who lived side by side with them in such places as Safed and Jerusalem. But to call the *mista'arvim* "native Arab Jews," as Professor Brill does, is a mistranslation. The verb *hista'arev* in Hebrew means to be *like* an Arab, not to be or become an Arab, and the *mista'arvim* were Arabizing Jews. "Arab Jew" in Hebrew would be *yehudi aravi*, a term found nowhere in rabbinic literature.

Ironically, *mista'arev's* meaning of a Jew who is like an Arab is borne out by the word's use in contemporary Israeli Hebrew, in which it denotes an Israeli soldier who has been specially trained to pose as an Arab for undercover work. Units of *mista'arvim* were first organized in the Israeli army in the early 1990s to help combat the Palestinian intifada that broke out in 1987; composed of soldiers who speak fluent Arabic, they operate in small groups in Palestinian towns and refugee camps, hunting down wanted Palestinians and suspected terrorists.

But the military sense of the word goes back further than that. It was first introduced in the Palmach, which was the elite commando unit of the Haganah, the main Jewish fighting force in British-mandate Palestine. In 1940 the British asked the Palmach to train a unit of Arabic-speaking soldiers who could be infiltrated into Vichy-controlled Syria for behind-the-lines missions. At first known as *ha-yeh.ida ha-surit*, "the Syrian unit," it soon began to be called *yeh.idat ha-mista'arvim*, a name that it eventually passed down to the Israel Defense Forces. And with that, let us hope that our discussion of the term "Arab Jew" has reached an end.

From The Forward, February 28, 2008

From SHU 308, April 9, 2008

Are We Arab Jews or Jews from Arab Lands?

By: Sarina Roffe

Years ago, I identified myself as an Arab Jew. As a descendant of four Syrian Jewish grandparents for whom Arabic was their first language, it seemed to fit. Even my parents spoke Arabic as their first language. While I never spoke the language, I could count, say angry words, love words and of course, "food," in Arabic. Yet I was uncomfortable with the term because it seemed politically incorrect.

A few years ago, I saw the term being used by David Shasha, who writes an online newsletter. We got into a heated debate about the term and later I got into a discussion with Dr. Zvi Zohar of Bar Ilan University about the same issue. I wasn't entirely convinced until I started to do some research of my own.

The issue came to my attention again in March 2008 when Forward readers took issue with the term Arab Jews when used by Saudi Arabian Prince Turki al Faisal. The remark created a firestorm of comments. Why was this term so hot?

Here in Brooklyn, we hear and use Arabic in daily life. Although second and third generation Syrians have forgotten the language, there has been a tremendous resurgence since the arrival of the new Syrian immigrants in the early 1990s. Lebanese, Moroccans, Egyptians and others who speak Arabic have found a home in our country. We hear Arabic in the markets, sing Arabic songs during parties, and use the Arabic terms for foods and sayings. We eat Arabic food, and retain the

habits and superstitions of our ancestors. Are we Arab Jews or Jews from Arab lands?

In November, during a program at the Museum of Jewish Heritage entitled "Jews of Islamic Lands," Dr. Robert Satloff, Executive Director of the Washington Institute on Near East Policy, said that the term Arab refers to a person who speaks Arabic and understands Arab culture. He said that a Muslim was a person who practiced Islam and was not necessarily an Arab. Yet Dr. Satloff, who was moderating the discussion, refrained from using the term Arab Jew. And all of the Islamic countries he referred to spoke Arabic.

In February 1975, Albert Memmi wrote that "the term Arab Jews is not a good one." His article appears on the website of the nonprofit organization, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa

In 2005, David Shasha wrote in the Sephardic Heritage Report that Arabs included those who developed culturally under Arab-Islamic civilization. The language of the Middle East was Arabic and it was not limited to Muslims. In the Middle Ages, the language of culture was Arabic. Jews adopted Arabic and made their mark on Arabic culture. They immersed themselves in science and in the educational system of the Arab world. The Rambam, Sa'adia Gaon, statesman Samuel ibn Nagrela and poet Judah Halevi all wrote in Arabic.

Shasha writes that while Ashkenazic culture developed in isolation from the dominant cultures in Europe, Sephardic Jews in Spain, North Africa, and other Arabic speaking countries developed under the unique cultural system organized under the umbrella of Arabic languages and Arab-Islamic culture. German, Polish, French and Russian Jews all continued to identify with their language and culture of birth. The term French Jew reflects both language and the culture. As does the term German Jew, Dutch Jew or Italian Jew.

More than 800,000 Jews fled Arab countries after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In the book Arab Jews, Yehouda Shenhav writes that when the State of Israel was created, Arab Jews were the only ones stripped of their linguistic and cultural identity. German Jews continued to identify as such, as did French, Italian, Dutch and Russian Jews. Israel called Jews who had hailed from Arabic speaking countries Mizrahim. Shenhav says that Israel wanted to strip them of their Arabness. The Arab countries were the enemy of Israel. Arab Jews were asked to change their identity because the term Arab Jew was a hot term. It was a term that became a political football in 1948.

Israel regularly recruited Arab Jews into its ranks to spy. Eli Cohen was recruited to Mossad in the 1960s because he was an Arab Jew. He was able to infiltrate the Ba'ath Regime in Damascus. Caught and executed in 1965, his body was never returned to his wife in Israel. Arabness was part of Eli Cohen's identity.

Today, Israel is using the loss of land and property suffered by Arab Jews as leverage against the argument by the Palestinians over their claim to the right of return. An organization, Justice for Jews from Arab Lands, was created to collect the claims.

The term Arab Jews identifies Jews who adopted the language and the culture of Arab civilization. After a century here in New York, the Arabic speaking Jews and their descendants in our community are still part of the larger Arabic cultural system, where food, language, music and superstitions rule who we are. The cultural reality of who we are has not changed over time.

Now that I more fully understand the term, I am proud to call myself an Arab Jew.

From the Image Magazine, April 2009

From SHU 364, May 6, 2009

Arab Sephardim and Latin Sephardim: Illusory Shifts from the Afro-Asiatic to the Indo-European

By: David Shasha

In a detail that is often forgotten in the life of the great Moses Maimonides, Joel Kraemer – perhaps the most insightful of the Great Eagle's biographers – points out in his new book *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization's Greatest Minds* that rather than leaving a Spain that was being overrun by the Muslim fanatics known as the Al-Muwahidun, Almohads, by traveling north to the Christian territories, the family of Maimonides elected to leave through the south and settle in Almohad Morocco where in all likelihood they were forced to convert to Islam for a short time. Kraemer goes on to point out that Maimonides himself probably hid this conversion while working in the court of the Egyptian Sultan given that reversion to Judaism after converting to Islam was deemed a capital offense.

We know through the peregrinations of many Andalusian Jewish rabbis that the preferred route of escape from the fanatic Almohads – an episode in Spanish history recounted in Anthony Mann's great Hollywood epic "El Cid" (1961) which features a ripped Charlton Heston taking the side of his Andalusian Muslim compatriots who were just as threatened by the Berber fundamentalists as were the Christians and Jews – that led through the Christian north.

A figure such as the saintly genius Abraham ibn Ezra (1092-1167), author of one of the most penetrating medieval Bible commentaries, traveled northward until he ended up in Europe proper. Ibn Ezra was keenly aware of having been exiled from his Andalusian home as he complained bitterly until his dying days over his lost homeland.

Ibn Ezra was certainly not the only Andalusian Jew to move into the world of Christian Europe. As Maria Rosa Menocal has expertly pointed out in her most recent work *The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture*, the early years of the Christian victory over the Andalusian Muslim forces, culminating in the destruction of the

last Muslim stronghold of Granada in 1492, was a good time for the Jews. Embracing the exiles from the south, the Catholic kings incorporated Jews into their courts as well as making ample use of the new intellectual and scientific advances of the Muslim civilization that had been developing on the Iberian Peninsula.

This great synthesis is reflected in one of the seminal documents of the Spanish Golden Age: Cervantes' novel *Don Quixote* (1604-1614). As is not so well-known, Cervantes uses the literary ruse of presenting his epic tale as a Castilian translation of an Arabic text composed by one Cide Hamete Benengeli! "Cide" here, just like Heston's legendary on-screen character, being the Arabic honorific for Sir, al-Sayyid. (See pages 77 and 471 of the Penguin Edition of *Don Quixote* for references to the fictional Arab historian.)

Spanish history is thus a struggle to some extent between the Arabic and the Latin – where the Arabic was the primary substrate of culture and civilization. The pre-Islamic culture of Spain was created by the Aryans and Indo-European Visigoths whose barbarity and Christian extremism would be resurrected at a later, post-Arab stage in the history of the Peninsula.

It was this historical leapfrogging that led to the seminal debate between two 20th century Spanish historians – Americo Castro and Claudio Sanchez-Albornoz – who fought a bitter contest over the Arab role in Spanish letters and identity.

Getting back to Maimonides, it appears rather odd that, instead of leaving the Muslim world at a time when Almohad Islam was killing Jews by the hundreds if not thousands, his family went right into the very heart of Almohad society instead of going to the infinitely more hospitable north where the Christians, already acculturated to the Arabo-Islamic culture of the Peninsula that was developed some centuries earlier, were waiting with open arms for new immigrants to help them build their society.

Why did the Maimonides family escape the fighting in Andalusia by going right into the heart of the Almohad power base in North Africa?

As much as I respect Maimonides' great wisdom, he could hardly have foreseen the coming of the Spanish Inquisition and the Expulsion in 1492.

It must have been some other reason that led them to North Africa, which now leads me to examine a particular point in Jewish identity that, as I have written many times before, has become a highly contested issue.

That is, are Sephardic Jews Arabs or are they something else? What culture did the Jews of the Mediterranean world espouse and was this culture determinative of their personal identities?

Such a question is important for two reasons:

First, in the wake of the Renaissance, a cultural development that was ushered in and prepared by the Arab awakening of the early Middle Ages, Europe appeared to be ascendant on the world stage. The Arabic world was soon marked as second-rate and inferior.

As pointed out by Amin Maalouf on the final pages of his classic study *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, the Arabs won the Crusades as a military conflict, but lost the final struggle for world supremacy. Having developed their military empire and dazzling culture over the course of many centuries, after the close of the Crusader period there was a reversal of fortune where Europe, having ignored Arabic science and civilization for many centuries, all of a sudden began to absorb the new learning, leading to an era of religious unrest and new discoveries. At this very time, Arabic societies began to retreat into the sort of religious obscurantism and mystical obfuscation that had weighed down Europe in the Middle Ages.

To be called an "Arab" in today's xenophobic Western world, rightly or wrongly, is to be seen as culturally boorish, ignorant and fanatical; a stark contrast to the great civilization of the Arab past. It is not something an acculturated sophisticated person would want to be.

Second, and perhaps more important in a Jewish context, the modern Arab world found itself the unhappy recipient of European Jewish attention in the form of Zionism. Incorporating the racist Eurocentric biases inherent in our previous point, something that played a decisive role in the prominent place of Colonialism and Imperialism in the European mind, Zionism was without reflection proclaimed the single vehicle for the expression of the Jewish national identity. This Zionism was a European construct which eschewed the values and cultural realities of the Middle East; now identified as the home of the Arab enemy.

For those Sephardim who felt that Jewish restoration in Palestine was a positive thing that could reconnect the various streams of the Jewish Diaspora into the larger fabric of Middle Eastern Jewish nativity, Herzlian Zionism came as an unwelcome intrusion. As we can see in the long-forgotten figure of the great Sephardi scholar A.S. Yahuda (1877-1951), European Zionists such as Chaim Weizmann were playing complicated diplomatic games with those Jews and Gentiles who promoted colonization as a form of Levantine integration.

Yahuda, a figure whose role in the Zionist history is now more or less forgotten, having been literally written out of that history as he himself states in his screed *Dr. Weizmann's Errors on Trial*, worked with the government of Spain and with others to help secure the Jewish homeland. But, like his Sephardi compatriots in Palestine, Iraq and Syria, people like the great Albert Antebi (1873-1919) and the indefatigable Eliyahu Elyachar (1898-1981), Yahuda's historical place in the new state of Israel was less than secure.

Figures like Yahuda, Antebi and Elyachar were cosmopolitan modern men of the Middle East who felt at home in both the European and Arab worlds. Looking at our question concerning Arab Sephardic and Latin Sephardic identities, we can see

clearly in such men that the two identities were not exclusive in the post-Expulsion Sephardic world.

The Arabic substrate of Sephardic identity is its very foundation. The case of Maimonides is determinative: Maimonides wrote and thought in Arabic. Having been the grateful recipient of the work of the legendary master Se'adya Ga'on (882-942), Maimonides was not required to do much of the heavy lifting of translation work. Much of the Jewish tradition had already been made available in Arabic through the effort of Se'adya by the time Maimonides was born. Jews in the Middle East whose native language was Arabic could read the Torah in Arabic and have access to much Jewish lore in that language as well.

With Hebrew functioning as the language of scholarship and liturgy, Arabic usage freed Jewish writers and artists to develop a vernacular that comported with the lifestyle changes which can be seen in the transition from the Talmudic society to that of the Geonim in the Islamic world. Jews, as is known, developed new forms of literature and began to incorporate scientific and philosophical studies into their religious studies.

The high water mark of this Judeo-Arabic civilization was the extraordinary work of Maimonides; perhaps the greatest rabbi in Jewish history.

Whatever the reasons for his family's move to Morocco – something we will never completely know – Maimonides remained wedded to the Arab world; the only world he would ever know. It should be remembered that with all the blather that we hear these days concerning Christian Zionism, Maimonides knew quite well the genocidal rage of the Church as he lived during a time when German terrorist Crusaders walked into Palestinian Synagogues, filled with Jews, and lit them on fire; killing innocent men, women and children.

It should not be forgotten that it was Islam that saved the Jews from these Teutonic flames. The reason that Arabic Jewish culture thrived in the time of Maimonides was because of the fertile home provided it by Islam.

And we should not forget that during the course of his career as a legal decisor Maimonides held to the principle that Christianity was to be considered *'abodah zara*, a form of paganism, while Islam was categorized in legal terms as monotheism. This legal perspective plays a critical role in the larger context of Maimonides' relationship to Europe and the Arab Middle East.

As Joel Kraemer shows in his brilliant book, Maimonides was a known quantity to his Muslim neighbors who discussed him and knew his writings on medicine and philosophy. He did not live as an isolated hermit in some ghetto. He did not work in the court of the Egyptian Sultan – the great Saladin – as a persecuted figure. He wore the studded robes of the elite and was treated with deference as a noble public figure.

By contrast, as we have seen in the work of Robert Chazan, the Jews of the Rhineland in this very same period – the time of Rashi and the Tosafot – were setting themselves on fire and stabbing their children in a fury of martyrdom – in order to escape the blows of the Crusading terrorists.

Maimonides knew well the difference between Christian mercy and Muslim fury. For the Jews of the Middle East the difference was a matter of life and death. And while it is clear that Islam could be a danger to Jews and Judaism, as we can witness in the famous and oft-cited case of the Jews of Yemen discussed in Maimonides' famous Epistle, such dangers were miniscule compared to the genocidal tendencies of a Catholic Church that incorporated anti-Jewish strictures into its very theological fabric.

We can surely discuss the differences between Islam and Christianity, but must never forget that genocide did not enter into the Muslim equation and that Islam officially established a role for non-Muslims in its very legal structure.

Getting back to the Arab/Latin issue for the Sephardim, we must go back to Spain in the wake of 1085; the beginning of what is misleadingly known as the *Reconquista*. As we have said, the Christians in Spain relied on the advances of the Arabs to construct their new society. Schools of translation were founded in Toledo and elsewhere pairing off Jews, Muslims and Christians into partnerships that permitted the translation of the ancient works of Greece and Rome from the Arabic (!) back into the European languages. While these ancient Western books on science and philosophy were in danger of being lost forever, the translation academies in Spain permitted the Arabic versions of these books – brought to light by Islamic civilization – to be restored to the European library.

This was no innovation for a man like Maimonides who grew up in a Spain where the Talmudic academies and Synagogues were steeped in this learning.

Tellingly, as I have repeated ad nauseum, it was the Ashkenazi rabbis who sought – like their Christian counterparts – to suppress this learning. The Ashkenazi rabbis, as we have learned from Jose Faur's many works on this critical subject, were able to infiltrate the Sephardic culture through people like Moses Nahmanides (1194-1270) and his school. According to David Berger, the famous ban on Maimonides' philosophical works was written by Nahmanides under the influence of his Tosafist teachers, though most scholars date the ban to Nahmanides' prize student, Solomon ibn Adret (1235-1310).

Regardless of who ultimately wrote the notorious ban, the role of Nahmanides in the rejection of the Judeo-Arab culture was decisive. Attacking Maimonides in his glosses to the latter's *Book of Commandments*, Nahmanides began a veritable cottage industry of anti-Maimonidean works following in the wake of the truly reprehensible glosses on the Mishneh Torah by the execrable Abraham ben David of Posquieres (RABAD, 1125-1198).

But the first ban on Maimonides' works took place in France under the aegis of Solomon of Montpellier in 1232 where he was supported by Abraham of Gerona. Ibn Adret's ban was later

proclaimed in Barcelona in 1305. During this period the negative attitudes towards the Judeo-Arab intellectual tradition became firmly anchored in the Ashkenazi rabbinical culture and infected the Sephardic tradition in nefarious ways.

As Jose Faur has correctly taught, the incorporation of Christian thought patterns by the Ashkenazi rabbis reflected the contemporary spirit of Crusade and Inquisition. Ironically, given the prominent Ashkenazi rabbinical role in the matter, the banning of Maimonides' works eventually led to the burning of the Talmud by Church authorities in 1240 – less than a decade after Solomon of Montpellier's ban.

In the words of the great German-Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, Ibn Adret's ban "was the first heresy-tribunal in Jewish history, and Ben Adret was at its head. The Dominicans had found docile emulation among the Jews." (*History of the Jews*, volume 4, p. 40)

It is little wonder that this Jewish tragedy, which culminated in the relentless march of the Inquisition and a spate of Jewish expulsions from Christian European countries, found its source in the poor judgment of the anti-Maimonideans and their public display of an internal Jewish argument. Once the Church became aware of the Maimonidean Controversy, there was little doubt that their attacks on Jews and the Jewish tradition would expand. One bad turn inevitably begets another.

In this dark and tumultuous period in Sephardic history, perhaps its most brilliant light, the great Don Santob de Carrion, Rabbi Shemtob Ardutiel (late 13th century-c. 1345), carried on the traditions of the Judeo-Arab rabbis in his many works. Don Santob remains a luminary not just within the Jewish literary tradition where his Penitential Prayer is still recited in Spanish-Portuguese Synagogues on Yom Kippur, but in the Spanish literary canon where his *Proverbios Morales* are studied and appreciated to this very day by scholars and academics. He not only composed Hebrew and Spanish language works, but translated texts from the Arabic as well.

Unlike Maimonides who did not speak a world of Castilian or Latin, Don Santob was fluent in the European languages. But, unlike many of the Latin Sephardim, Don Santob was, as I have said, also fluent in Arabic – as were many of the great minds of the Spanish Golden Age.

Being literate in Arabic at this time in history meant to be wise and acculturated. Knowledge of the Liberal Arts and Sciences was indicated by Arabic fluency. Golden Age Spain did not exclude Arabic from its curriculum – it incorporated Arabic into its very cultural fiber.

The development of a Jewish vernacular in Spanish – what is commonly known as Ladino – was a late Sephardic development whose roots may be found in the earliest stages of the culture. In the famous *muwwashahat*, those popular strophic poems written by all of the major figures of the Andalusian literary tradition – Jews and Muslims alike, the final couplet would be in a form of Romancero; or in the case of the Jewish texts, sometimes in Arabic, as the Jewish poets only wrote poetry in Hebrew.

A crude form of Spanish among the Jews thus began during the Islamic period in Spain and continued to develop over the centuries, particularly in the field of the oral ballad and folktale. As we have learned from the seminal studies of the great Samuel Armistead, the Sephardic Jews created a vigorous and vibrant folk literature that, though not of the same formal literary sophistication as the more renowned poetry of the Golden Age presented so expertly in Peter Cole's seminal *The Dream of the Poem*, held an important place in the hearts of the Sephardic Jews. Unlike the canonical status of the great Sephardic poets like Judah Halevi (c. 1075-1141), Solomon ibn Gabirol (c. 1021-1058) and Samuel Hanagid (993-1056), these Ladino ballads and folktales were preserved anonymously in a markedly less elitist setting.

What is most interesting about this Ladino literature is that it took on an even more important role **after** the Spanish Expulsion. Finding themselves exiled from their beloved Iberian homes, the Sephardic refugees clung to these songs and stories with the very essence of their being.

In places like Amsterdam, Salonica and Sarajevo, the Latin Sephardim preserved their culture and it was this culture that became the second Sephardic civilization in historical terms. After the central role of the Arabic forms and templates in Sephardic culture, Latin Sephardim developed a new culture in Catholic Spain and Portugal. And it was this culture that traveled into Europe and the Ottoman Empire distinguishing the Latin Sephardim from their Arab Sephardic brethren.

Given the close proximity, mentally and culturally, between the Latin and the Arab Sephardim, the post-Expulsion Mediterranean was able to bridge the cultures in a seamless way. Great figures like Israel Najara (c. 1555-1625) incorporated the two strains into their work and internal alliances were made between Latin Sephardim and Arab Sephardim.

Unlike the dramatic and negative attitude towards the Ashkenazi Jews in the Middle East and Sephardic Europe, the Latin and Arab Sephardim comprised a single cultural bloc. Intermingling and cross-cultural pollination was common and mastery of both Arabic and Ladino was quite common in our communities well into modern times.

But it was the anti-Arab valence of Zionism that created the divide between Arab and Latin Sephardic culture. The very term "Sephardic" is parsed as exclusively "Spanish" in blatant disregard of the fact that "Spain" was itself Arab in its most crucial epoch. Even in the later period known as "Christian" Spain, the place of Arabic remains central, as we have seen in the work of Maria Rosa Menocal and in Cervantes.

There is no need to separate Ladino from Arabic – the two languages are both a fundamental part of the Sephardic experience and were seen as such in communities all over the Mediterranean and the Ottoman Balkans. But in the wake of the

virulent strain of anti-Arab racism beginning with the era of Imperialism and cresting with the malignant prejudices of Ashkenazi European Zionism, we have a situation where Latin Sephardim try to hide from the Afro-Asiatic Arab roots of their civilization and pretend that they are Indo-Europeans.

What we have forgotten – aside from the fact that Maimonides is being thrown under the proverbial bus – is that the Arabic part of who we are reflects the glory and the grandeur of Sephardic civilization. The Latin part of our heritage often reflects the ignominy and the death that we suffered at the hands of the Church. As we see in the example of Maimonides, the violence of Islam was an aberration that was not enough for Jews like Maimonides to abandon the Arab-Muslim world.

In his execrable new book on possible solutions to the Israel-Palestine conflict, *One State, Two States: Resolving the Israel/Palestine Conflict*, the ever-more psychotic Benny Morris continues to repeat the racist canards of people like Bernard Lewis and Norman Stillman that the Muslim world was an unrelenting hell on earth for Arab Jews. Feigning expertise in an area he knows very little about, Morris lists the dozen or so major explosions of anti-Jewish violence in the Arab-Muslim world in order to buttress his pathetic case that the Arabs always hated Jews and that Zionism has nothing to do with it. For Morris, as with so many Zionists, the Arabs carry an anti-Semitic gene in their DNA.

The implications of this vis-à-vis history and culture are enormous. If the spurious claim that the Arabs are indeed Anti-Semites is true, it means that what we know about Jewish life in the Arab-Muslim world from studies like S.D. Goitein's seminal *A Mediterranean Society* is a distortion. It would mean that the Arabs, as Ben-Zion Dinur and Yitzhak Baer insisted, aimed to destroy the Jewish people from Islam's very inception.

But as we now understand, this delusion is a projection of the genocidal tendencies of the Church onto Arab history and reflects in a distorted way the experiences of the Ashkenazi Jews refitted into a Middle Eastern setting. While we cannot and should not ignore the tragic history of the Ashkenazim, where pogroms could be counted by the hour and not the century as Morris tries to do with the Arabs, we must not be blinded to this Aryanization of Jewish history and its implications for Sephardic civilization.

There are Latin Sephardim today who act as if Arabic is not a part of the Sephardic heritage. In their "Uncle Tom" existence, such pathetic Sephardim want to appear "White" to their Ashkenazi masters. They do not want to expose themselves as "Colored" when they are looking to assimilate into the dominant and inviting world of the Ashkenazim. Those who proclaim the Arab nativity of the Sephardim are to be terminated with extreme prejudice.

But we see in the case of the Arab Sephardi Maimonides, a man who was born in Spain and was a proud member of its culture, someone who did not know a word of Ladino; a language that had yet to be a factor in Jewish life at that time.

It is not at all my desire to eliminate Ladino from the Sephardic tradition; that is not the point of my exercise here. What is needed is an acceptance of the fact that the primary stratum of Sephardic existence – a Maimonidean existence – is the Arabic adaptation of Hebrew culture; a synthesis that we inherit from our Arab Jewish forbearers.

For those ashamed to be Arab, you are ashamed as well of being Maimonidean given the fact that Maimonides chose to remain in the Arab world rather than leave that world to enter the world of Christian Europe.

It is something to consider.

From SHU 366, May 20, 2009

The Exodus Obama Forgot to Mention

By: Andre Aciman

President Obama's speech to the Islamic world was a groundbreaking event. Never before has a young, dynamic American president, beloved both by his countrymen and the nations of the world, extended so timely and eager a hand to a part of the globe that, recently, had seen fewer and fewer reasons to trust us or to wish us well.

As important, Mr. Obama did not mince words. Never before has a president gone over to the Arab world and broadcast its flaws so loudly and clearly: extremism, nuclear weapons programs and a faltering record in human rights, education and economic development — the Arab world gets no passing grades in any of these domains. Mr. Obama even found a moment to mention the plight of Egypt's harassed Coptic community and to criticize the new wave of Holocaust deniers. And to show he was not playing favorites, he put the Israelis on notice: no more settlements in the occupied territories. He spoke about the suffering of Palestinians. This was no wilting olive branch.

And yet, for all the president's talk of "a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world" and shared "principles of justice and progress," neither he nor anyone around him, and certainly no one in the audience, bothered to notice one small detail missing from the speech: he forgot me.

The president never said a word about me. Or, for that matter, about any of the other 800,000 or so Jews born in the Middle East who fled the Arab and Muslim world or who were summarily expelled for being Jewish in the 20th century. With all his references to the history of Islam and to its (questionable) "proud tradition of tolerance" of other faiths, Mr. Obama never said anything about those Jews whose ancestors had been living in Arab lands long before the advent of Islam but were its first victims once rampant nationalism swept over the Arab world.

Nor did he bother to mention that with this flight and expulsion, Jewish assets were — let's call it by its proper name — looted. Mr. Obama never mentioned the belongings I still own in Egypt and will never recover. My mother's house, my father's factory, our life in Egypt, our friends, our books, our cars, my bicycle. We are, each one of us, not just defined by the arrangement of protein molecules in our cells, but also by the things we call our own. Take away our things and something in us dies. Losing his wealth, his home, the life he had built, killed my father. He didn't die right away; it took four decades of exile to finish him off.

Mr. Obama had harsh things to say to the Arab world about its treatment of women. And he said much about America's debt to Islam. But he failed to remind the Egyptians in his audience that until 50 years ago a strong and vibrant Jewish community thrived in their midst. Or that many of Egypt's finest hospitals and other institutions were founded and financed by Jews. It is a shame that he did not remind the Egyptians in the audience of this, because, in most cases — and especially among those younger than 50 — their memory banks have been conveniently expunged of deadweight and guilt. They have no recollections of Jews.

In Alexandria, my birthplace and my home, all streets bearing Jewish names have been renamed. A few years ago, the Library of Alexandria put on display an Arabic translation of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," perhaps the most anti-Semitic piece of prose ever written. Today, for the record, there are perhaps four Jews left in Alexandria.

When the last Jew dies, the temples and religious artifacts and books that were the property of what was once probably the wealthiest Jewish community on the Mediterranean will go to the Egyptian government — not to me, or to my children, or to any of the numberless descendants of Egyptian Jews.

It is strange that our president, a man so versed in history and so committed to the truth, should have omitted mentioning the Jews of Egypt. He either forgot, or just didn't know, or just thought it wasn't expedient or appropriate for this venue. But for him to speak in Cairo of a shared effort "to find common ground ... and to respect the dignity of all human beings" without mentioning people in my position would be like his speaking to the residents of Berlin about the future of Germany and forgetting to mention a small detail called World War II.

From The New York Times, June 9, 2009

From SHU 376, July 29, 2009

Andre Aciman, the New York Times and Arab Jewish Discourse

By: David Shasha

In his Op-Ed discussion of President Obama's speech in Cairo published in the New York Times on June 10 ("The Exodus Obama Forgot to Mention"), the writer Andre Aciman makes the following statement:

With all his references to the history of Islam and to its (questionable) "proud tradition of tolerance" of other faiths, Mr. Obama never said anything about those Jews whose ancestors had been living in Arab lands long before the advent of Islam but were its first victims once rampant nationalism swept over the Arab world.

Looking back on a piece Mr. Aciman wrote for the same New York Times Op-Ed page on April 13, 1995 ("In a Double Exile"), he states a contrasting view that does not include the word "questionable" as it relates to Egyptian tolerance. It is worth noting that 9/11 separates the 1995 piece and the one that was just published.

The earlier piece states:

After almost three centuries of religious tolerance, we found ourselves celebrating Passover the way our Marrano ancestors had done under the Spanish Inquisition: in secret, verging on shame, without conviction, in great haste and certainly without a clear notion of what we were celebrating.

The 1995 Op-Ed was published on the heels of his excellent 1994 book *Out of Egypt* where we were ushered into the complex web of Mr. Aciman's Levantine Jewish world; a universe of shady characters in a society that was fraying and in convulsion

Out of Egypt was a deeply curious piece of work: Aciman, as he readily admits, was lost in an Egypt that had ceased to honor its egalitarian tradition of religious tolerance. In fact, this tradition of tolerance produced the splendid Spanish-born figures of Maimonides and later on the great Kabbalist David ibn Abi Zimra (RADBAZ, c. 1479-1572). The RADBAZ's most famous student was the legendary mystic Isaac Luria (1534-1572) who was brought to Egypt after his father died to live with his mother's family. Egypt was honored to house two of the great rabbis of the contemporary period, Refa'el Aharon ben Shim'on (1848-1929) and Haim Nahum Effendi (1872-1960). Ben Shim'on was a critical figure in the articulation of a deeply modern understanding of Jewish ritual law, while Nahum dazzled his Egyptian compatriots with his incisive intellectualism and his sensitivity for the needs of a community in transition.

In Esther Benbassa's definitive study, *Haim Nahum: A Chief Rabbi in Politics, 1892-1923* (University of Alabama Press, 1995), she presents Nahum prior to his Egyptian sojourn when he was the last Chief Rabbi, Hakham Bashi, of the Ottoman Empire.

Describing his later years in Egypt, Benbassa relates:

Even after he had become blind, he led his community under successive regimes, including Nasserian nationalism. He

remained in the service of Egyptian Jewry until its dispersion began in the 1950s, when the atmosphere deteriorated following the establishment of the state of Israel. The Suez campaign in 1956 sounded the death knell of that old Jewish community. Senator, founding member of the Academie Royale de Langue Arabe, writer, and translator, Nahum was no ordinary chief rabbi in Cairo either. At first a witness of the flourishing years of Egyptian Jewry, then more than ever politician and diplomat in difficult times, he died in 1960 and was buried in Cairo, in the Orient to which he was so closely attached.

The proud traditions of the Egyptian Jews cannot be reduced to a simple schematic of persecution and expulsion. Over the course of many centuries, Egyptian Jewry produced a substantial culture. From the great Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE-50 CE) in the classical period, to the days of Se'adya Ga'on al-Fayyumi (882-942) and Maimonides (1138-1204), to the emergence of modernist writers like the great aphorist and poet Edmond Jabes (1912-1991, author of the classic multi-volume work *The Book of Questions*) and the Alexandrian novelist Yitzhak Gormezano Goren (1941-present, author of a Hebrew trilogy on Alexandrian Jewish life) in the 20th century, Egypt's Jews not only contributed to Middle Eastern civilization, but were critical figures in our historical understanding of the region.

In his recent study of the legendary Sephardic-Egyptian sage Moses Maimonides, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilizations Greatest Minds* (Doubleday, 2008), Joel Kraemer makes this point clear:

One reason for the prodigious Jewish achievement in the Islamic milieu was that the cultural context was Arabic, a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew. Arabic-speaking Jewish intellectuals – mainly physicians, merchants, and government bureaucrats – studied the Qur'an, grammar and lexicography, tradition (hadith), jurisprudence, theology, medicine, the exact sciences, philosophy, and also belles lettres and poetry. These intellectuals emulated the Muslim study of the Qur'an, grammar and lexicography by studying the Bible and the Hebrew language, and they imitated Arabic poetry by writing Hebrew verse. In a gesture of mimetic competition, they extolled their own cultural treasures (the Bible and Hebrew) as superior to their Arab models.

The illustrious history of the Egyptian Jews came to a crushing end at the time of the founding of the Jewish State in 1948. In the tumultuous years that followed Israel's independence, many of the emerging Arab states made the fatal decision to create a moral equivalency between Israel's stance towards the Palestinian Arabs and their own Jewish populations.

Mr. Aciman applies this principle to history in general as he writes that the Jews of Egypt:

The president never said a word about me. Or, for that matter, about any of the other 800,000 or so Jews born in the Middle East who fled the Arab and Muslim world or who were summarily expelled for being Jewish in the 20th century.

By using a word like "expulsion" and linking Egyptian Jewish history to that of German Jewish history, Aciman seeks to euphemistically push some very sensitive buttons, and in so doing recast the history of Arab Jews in a very dangerous frame.

In *Out of Egypt* Aciman told the story of a family in defeat. It is a story that should indeed be better known to the world at large. But the problem in that book, as well as in Aciman's other writings, is that it did not choose to provide the context in which to properly understand the Egyptian Jewish tragedy.

We do not hear any mention of what has become known as "The Lavon Affair"; an episode in Israeli history that is often left forgotten. "The Lavon Affair" was a spy intrigue that was ordered by Israeli officials to cause havoc during the course of the British exit from Egypt.

The episode is discussed by Ian Black and Benny Morris in their study *Israel's Secret Wars: A History of Israel's Intelligence Services* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1991):

On 2 July 1954 small firebombs were placed in several post-boxes in Alexandria. On 14 July small, harmless bombs exploded in US cultural centers in Cairo and Alexandria. On 23 July network members set out to plant bombs in cinemas in Cairo and Alexandria and in a railway marshalling yard in Alexandria.

Ignoring the massively complicated state of war that Israel and Egypt were engaged in, Aciman points to Arab nationalism as being the sole culprit in this tangled web of affairs. In truth, without trying to engage in any moral relativism, the status of Jews in Egypt was fatally compromised by the ongoing violence and psychological struggle being waged by both countries. Sadly, Israel was generally indifferent to the internal socio-political dynamics of the Egyptian Jewish community. Sending various emissaries to Egypt as spies and scouts on behalf of their secret services, Israel showed a blatant disregard for the integrity of a Jewish community whose future was precarious without any further complications.

This is certainly not to discount the Nasser regime's often malicious treatment of minorities and his dispossession of the Egyptian landed classes. Jews played a part in the ongoing attempt to redistribute wealth and property in Nasser's neo-Socialist system. Egyptian Jews were not a monolithic community, but contained poor and rich, socially well-connected and those on the outside of the power structure. For every wealthy family like the Cattaouis or the Mosseris, there were dozens of families who struggled to make ends meet. But as history has shown, Nasser's iron hand was critical in reforming the Egyptian society and in his economic programs he frequently took on the wealthy class of the country and

nationalized private businesses and properties. Jewish shops and business firms were affected in quite negative ways by the new regime.

This economic plan affected not only Jews, but all sectors of Egyptian society. That the Jews had the additional burden of being a religious minority who could be exploited when the need arose was something that remained a nagging reality. In addition, the ongoing hostilities with Israel and the Western powers provided even more instability for Egyptian Jews. The fall of Egyptian Jewry is far more complex than a single-cause theory allows.

Unlike the blanket and pejorative assessment of Egypt by Aciman, we can point to the figure of Haim Nahum Effendi who worked under the many constraints that served to undermine the Egyptian Jewish community. Amid the depredations of Nasserism, Zionism and Arab socio-cultural upheaval, Nahum often counseled the community to remain calm and not panic.

Indeed, the fact that he did not himself leave Egypt during the later years of his life, dying in Egypt in 1960 a few years following the Suez debacle which ultimately decimated the Jewish community, speaks to the tenacity with which he fulfilled his personal mission of securing the legitimate place of Jews in the Arab world.

Though Rabbi Nahum's voice has been occluded amid the emergence of competing and conflicting visions, the wider history and tradition of Arab Jewry is there for all to see. Regardless of the ethno-cultural and religious hatreds that have been promoted by many of the voices that we hear today, we must never forget the organic roots of Jews in the Arab-Muslim world.

In Aciman's article we see a deeply hostile and passionately antipathetic view of Jewish life in the Arab world. While we routinely hear voices of peace in The New York Times discussing the need for rapproachment with the Arab world, in the context of Jews who are native to the region all we hear is the endless refrain of a misanthropic Jewish presence that has little to do with the cultural development of the Middle East.

This militant refrain has led to developments in the political world from groups such as the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC). WOJAC was formed by the Israeli government in the 1970s as a wedge against Palestinian claims for material compensation and to promote the idea of a historic population exchange that would serve to further undermine Palestinian claims, creating many unforeseen issues for the Israeli politicians who set it up.

And then there is the more recent Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC) that picked up the same initiative WOJAC had failed to achieve. Both WOJAC and JJAC are Ashkenazi initiatives that seek to exploit the Arab Jews rather than to open up cultural exchange and dialogue with the Arab world.

This union between Israeli and Arab Jewish interests is one that is fraught with complications. As we have already seen from our reading of "The Lavon Affair," Israel's interests and the interests of the Egyptian Jewish community were not one and the same. Without consulting the Egyptian Jewish leadership, Israeli secret services recruited spies to create havoc and violence on the streets of Cairo and Alexandria which would serve to make a difficult situation even worse for the native Jews, but would further Israeli aims of destabilizing the Egyptian enemy. The dissonance between Rabbi Nahum and the Israeli leadership has generally been forgotten as the intervening years have created an Arab Jewish amnesia and a militant acceptance of the official Israeli narrative.

In a recent discussion of the matter of Arab Jews in this volatile context of refugees, expulsions and populations exchanges, Tel Aviv University's Yehouda Shenhav, author of the excellent monograph *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford University Press, 2006), has made the point clear:

Any reasonable person, Zionist or non-Zionist, must acknowledge that the analogy drawn between Palestinians and Arab Jews is unfounded. Palestinian refugees did not want to leave Palestine. Many Palestinian communities were destroyed in 1948, and some 700,000 Palestinians were expelled, or fled, from the borders of historic Palestine. Those who left did not do so of their own volition. In contrast, Arab Jews arrived to Israel under the initiative of the State of Israel and Jewish organizations. Some arrived of their own free will; others arrived against their will. Some lived comfortably and securely in Arab lands; others suffered from fear and oppression.

The history of this immigration is complex, and cannot be subsumed within a facile explanation. Many of the newcomers lost considerable property, and there can be no question that they should be allowed to submit individual property claims against Arab states (up to the present day, the State of Israel and WOJAC have blocked the submission of claims on this basis). The unfounded, immoral analogy between Palestinian refugees and Mizrahi immigrants needlessly embroils members of these two groups in a dispute, degrades the dignity of many Arab Jews, and harms prospects for genuine Jewish-Arab reconciliation.

The uniqueness of Aciman's personal experience plays a critical part in how he sees history and reality. After his father made the fatal decision to remain in Egypt after 1956, a year that was central to the Egyptian Jews and the mass departure from their homeland, he saddled his family with a burden that was impossible to bear. In the years following "The Lavon Affair" and the Tripartite Aggression in Suez – where the French, British and Israelis failed in their mission – life in Egypt changed dramatically. It marked the end of a certain way of life for all Egyptians and created an intolerable climate for Jews.

There is little argument that the Egypt Aciman discusses was a hell for the few Jews who remained. But we must not ignore the

historical background that allows us to better understand the wherefors and the whys of the situation; even if this does not change the bitter personal experiences of those who were forced to live under such persecution, it can give us a more nuanced understanding of the reasons for the breakdown.

And we must keep in mind the rich history of Egyptian Jewry and its great cultural productivity over the course of many centuries.

A telling statement made by Aciman in his 1995 New York Times Op-Ed that we have already referred to earlier, indicates that this Jewish tradition was alien to him.

Discussing the Passover seder he admits:

I don't know Hebrew. Nor do I know any of the songs or prayers. I can't tell even tell when the seder is officially over. Often I suspect the whole ceremony has petered out or has been cut short for my benefit – or drawn out to prove a point. I always attend with misgivings, which I communicate to others at the table, and try to atone for by reading aloud when my turn comes, only to resent having been asked to read.

In so many ways, Aciman's lack of Jewish culture is a product of his father's fateful decision to remain in Egypt. Bereft of the religious leadership once expertly provided by Rabbi Nahum, Egypt lost its Jewish component. Of this there is absolutely no question.

But memories or Egypt must go beyond the immediate past.

We can lop off the final act of the Jews of Egypt and dwell on the dysfunction, or we can place that tragic era into a larger historical context which would permit us to get beyond the hostility and the fatalism that Mr. Aciman chooses to provide us. Consider coming late to a performance of "Hamlet" and seeing all the dead bodies piled up on the stage but not knowing how they got there.

It is curious that in a world that has largely ignored the voices of Arab Jews, the few we hear are filled with anger, resentment and hostility toward Arabs. Such anger is justified from the perspective of the final act of Arab Jewry in its sojourn, but serves to distort the larger historical context in which that venerable community was able to produce a culture of lasting worth; a culture that has been devalued in Israel and by a Western Jewish world that often treats Arab Jews with derision and a bemused contempt.

Arab Jewish voices have today largely been silenced, and with that silencing has come the lamentable absence of a perspective that could allow us to see the Middle East in different ways.

Rather than accept the harshly pessimistic and bitter fatalism of Mr. Aciman's hostile rhetoric, we need to look at history more objectively and see that within the construct of Middle Eastern history is a shared culture which I have called "The Levantine Option" that does not focus on the religious differences between the peoples of the region, but which promotes a universal culture based on the principles of Religious Humanism that have anchored Arab civilization at its most vigorous and pluralistic.

As Joel Kraemer has said in his brilliant article "Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: A Preliminary Study":

Expressions of humanistic tendencies came ot the fore in the world of Islam during the ninth and tenth centuries. This period, the zenith of the "Intermediate Civilization of Islam," witnesed the emergence of an affluent and influential middle class which, having the opportunity and desire to acquire knowledge and social status, contributed to the diffusion of the ancient cultural heritage. Caliphs, emirs and viziers became devout patrons of learning, and entertained philosophers, scientists and litterateurs in their resplendent courts. The growth of commerce and trade, extending beyond the boundaries of mamlakat al-Islam, as well as urbanization, facilitated communication among peoples of different backgrounds.

In contrast to the fatalism of many contemporary commentators, there lies buried within Arabo-Islamic civilization a generous pluralism that has been short-circuited by the polemics and the politics of the modern age. There is little question that protagonists both Jewish and Muslim have sought to suppress this knowledge in favor of a religious parochialism that supports their xenophobic ethnocentrism.

Looking forward, we will need this old tradition of Arabo-Islamic civilization in order to secure peace and prosperity for all residents of the Middle East. Thus, it was President Obama's visionary address in Cairo that accurately articulated the historical traditions of the region rather than Andre Aciman's bleak assessment. The carnage and dysfunction that we witness on a daily basis remains a crucial impediment to solving the many problems we face. It is what we do not hear about or see that will allow us to better arrange a peaceful future.

The pain of all parties in the Middle East must certainly be acknowledged, but not at the expense of the larger picture of a region whose civilization was once able to be inclusive of all its members. Today, the voices most prominently heard in the discussion promote the idea that we are fated to live in dysfunction and must privilege the wounds of the recent past rather than the more brilliant civilization of a period increasingly forgotten.

"The Levantine Option" is, as I have said many times, a new way of seeing things based on a very old culture.

It is this old/new way that can potentially lead us into a better and more wholesome place if we could only free ourselves to acknowledge its existence and validity.

From SHU 376, July 29, 2009

Review Essay: Contested Histories and Disembodied Voices: How to Speak of the Arab Jew
By: David Shasha

Yehouda Shenhav, The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity, Stanford University Press, 2006

They acted according to their custom, and you acted according to yours,
For, indeed, a man is his custom.

Al-Hutay'a

Each man's fate is fixed by his own custom

Al-Mutanabbi

What the opening hemistich [in Al-Mutanabbi's poem] is really telling us, then, is that man is responsible for his own fate, that his own habit or custom, or what he has habituated or accustomed himself to, determines, or is simply, his fate.

Suzanne Pinckney Stetkevych, The Poetics of Islamic Legitimacy

The history of African-Americans, the ultimate paradigm when determining the way in which people struggle for their civil rights, is generally left uncontested. The basic contours of that history – from enslavement to release to social oppression to the emergence of rights after decades of struggle – is founded on a substantial amount of archival research, on documents, and on the eyewitness testimony of slaves, of those who were witness to Jim Crow lynchings and those who marched to protest the conditions of the African-Americans, raising their voices as one to achieve the desired goal of civic equality with those who had once turned them into beings less than fully human.

By contrast, the history of the Arab Jews is deeply contested. There is not a single point that is agreed upon in this history and the points of disagreement find themselves deeply mired in the current conflict between Zionism and the indigenous Arab world. The very term "Arab" Jew is the first site of contention. How can we call Jews by the moniker "Arab" when the Arab world has been at war with Israel, proclaimed without reflection as the state of the "Jews," and when the Jews who once lived in the Arab world have been spirited away from their nativity and taught by Zionist orthodoxy that their sojourn in the Middle East was one that kept them from living a complete life?

The term Arab Jew is one that is at the very foundation of the contestation of the history of Jews who once lived in the Arab world. With the exception of the Jews who continue to live in Morocco, the robust, if modest, communities of Jews native to the Arab world have ceased to exist. The history of these communities has generally been filtered through the mechanisms of the Zionist worldview which claims at its core two important points: First, Zionism has sought to negate the whole of the Diaspora Jewish history. The Hebrew term *shelilat ha-galut* has become a constant refrain in Zionist and Israeli thinking, most recently being bandied about by the novelist A.B. Yehoshua who has repeated the claim that one can only be a Jew in the land of Israel. The Jewish Diaspora in this context is a place where Jews live(d) abnormal lives and even as they function as a link in the chain that connects Jewish history back to its pre-70 CE phase when Jewish territorial life still existed, that Diaspora existence is viewed as an abnormal state. Second, the Jews who lived in the Middle East, outside the orbit of Europe and its Modernity, have been viewed as primitives and as lacking in refinement and culture. In addition, these Arab Jews, pejoratively known in Israel as Mizrahim – Orientals, represent an uncomfortable link to the current enemies of the Jewish state.

How then do we speak of Arab Jews and who should do the speaking?

For many decades the Arab Jews have remained an oppressed community in Israel. A disconnect was created between those Arab Jews who successfully immigrated to the Western countries who generally prospered, and those who were airlifted to Israel to become impoverished immigrants living in tent cities and newly-built border towns that put them in places of relative danger and trapped them in lives of futility and abject poverty. These Arab Jews found themselves, after 1948, unwelcome interlopers in an Arab world which had become acclimated to the Zionist argument that all Jews were Zionists. After many centuries of living productively in their homes in places like Fez, Cairo, Isfahan, Aleppo, Baghdad, Tripoli and Beirut, the Arab Jews had found their fate manipulated by others who claimed to speak in their names.

Such a shifting of fate and voice bore great and awful consequences for the Arab Jewish communities. These communities had first been fractured by the emergence of European colonialism which used a tactic of divide and rule in the Middle East. The Imperial powers played various religious and ethnic cards in order to suppress indigenous unrest and the Jews of the region were used as pawns to wedge Arab Muslims into a subservient status. There was no real consistency in this approach, but many Jews began to identify with the Europeans and started to drift from their Arab cultural identity.

Such was the beginning of a colonial process engendered by Imperialism that found a home in the emergence of the Zionist movement at just the same time as the Europeans came to settle in the Middle East.

The long history of Jewish life in the Arab-Islamic world was beginning to come to an end.

This history, now deeply contested, has been most successfully reconstructed in the many studies of the German-Jewish scholar

S.D. Goitein. In his epic *A Mediterranean Society*, Goitein provided a sharply-defined portrait of the Jewish communities of the Middle East that drew from a textual archive known as the Cairo Geniza; Geniza being a Hebrew term that signified the place where unwanted scraps of paper with Hebrew writing were sent for storage according to Jewish law. The tens of thousands of texts found in the Geniza permitted Goitein to reconstruct with an amazing fluidity and vibrancy the intimate world of the Arab Jews. From sociology to intellectual culture, the Geniza texts provided Goitein with the raw material that enabled him to write what without exaggeration remains the most accurate and in-depth portrait of a historical pre-modern Jewish community that we currently possess.

The world of the Cairo Geniza as presented by S.D. Goitein became the starting-off point for the seminal studies of Ammiel Alcalay. Alcalay's foundational work *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture*, published in 1993, drew from Goitein as well as from the few studies of Arab Jewish culture and history that remained outside the Zionist consensus. Even with the reconfiguration of Arab Jewish history under the harsh yoke of Zionist ideological prejudice, based on a deeply Ashkenazi sensibility, a few texts emerged over the years to tell elements of the Arab Jewish story:

- Ella Shohat, hitherto a student and scholar of Israeli film, published a lengthy essay in 1988 called "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims"; the title adapted from a chapter in Edward Said's book *The Question of Palestine*. Shohat's article was the first salvo in a battle that fought the Zionist (mis)appropriation of the Arab Jewish history and marked a frontal assault on the ways in which Zionism had sought to oppress and demean the Arab Jews.
- The English publication in 1990 of a book originally written in Arabic and published in Cairo by the Iraqi-born G.N. Giladi. *Discord in Zion: Conflict Between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews in Israel* was a prolonged *cri de coeur* that combined historical polemics and social protest into a work that looked to comprehensively tell the Arab Jewish story from a native perspective, from the perspective of the victim rather than from the oppressor.
- The Israeli journalist Tom Segev devoted a full chapter of his classic book *1949: The First Israelis*, first published in Hebrew in 1984 and translated into English in 1986, to the Sephardi problem in Israel. Segev was the first mainstream writer to discuss the issue of the *ma'abarot*, the transit camps populated mainly by Arab Jews, the controversy over the Yemenite Babies and of the scientific racism espoused by the mainstream Israeli academics and journalists. Segev's recounting of this racism was shocking proof of a concerted effort made in Israel to stigmatize the Arab Jews in a way that served to justify their persecution at the hands of an elite Ashkenazi cadre.

After many years of relative silence and the suppression of the Arab Jewish voice, the few exceptions being the indefatigable Eliyahu Elyachar, the perennial head of the Sephardic *va'ad* in Jerusalem, and a trickle of literary texts from writers like Samir Naqqash, the last Arab Jew to continue writing in Arabic (while rejecting writing his texts in Hebrew), Shimon Ballas who wrote the first novel on the period of the Transit Camps and Tent cities, and Sami Michael; all of whom were intent on preserving, to various degrees, the authentic voices of the Arab Jewish community, there was now a place to go to read of the Sephardi catastrophe in the wake of 1948.

But by and large the efforts of these writers, activists and journalists fell on deaf ears. In the midst of the emergence of what have become known as "The New Historians" and the "Post-Zionists," Sephardic voices were muted and often neglected. The standard Zionist organs continued to either pretend that these voices did not exist, or set out to contest their writings. Official acknowledgment of anti-Sephardi prejudice was subsumed under what would become the standard Zionist stand-by: The Jews are one nation and there should not be any individual claims by what were termed "the ethnic communities" to tear asunder that unity.

Quite often this argument is repeated to anyone who attempts to set out the actual history of Zionism as it relates to the Sephardic world.

While this "one nation" myth is propounded, the Arab Jewish past, once articulated so powerfully by Goitein, has been co-opted by scholars of the school of Sephardi-hater Bernard Lewis. Lewis' school, led by Norman Stillman, has served to reinforce views that were once the provenance of the so-called "Jerusalem School" of historiography led by Ben-Zion Dinur and Yitzhak Baer. Dinur was best known for his drafting of the Israel State Education Law of 1952 which, a mere four years after the establishment of the country, served to lay down the template from which the Jewish past was to be understood. As we have said, the Jewish past would have to be revisited and rethought against the patterns that had been established by the German Jewish historians of the *Wissenschaft* or Jewish Enlightenment of the 19th century.

This revisionist Jewish history, disfigured in the name of Zionism and its new nationalist and anti-Diaspora focus, played down continuity and Jewish normalcy in favor of what the great Jewish historian Salo Baron called the "lachrymose" version of this history. In the works of Dinur and Baer, and subsequently Lewis and Stillman as applied to Arab Jews, Diaspora Jewish history was an unremittingly and unrelentingly bleak string of pogroms and persecutions. The Jewish expulsion from Israel in 70 CE was incredibly re-dated to the time of the Arab conquests rather than to the Roman period as had been the case for many centuries. The reason for the re-dating and the revision of this history was to assert the cognitive paradigms that were now taking shape within Zionist thinking.

The role of Bernard Lewis in this process cannot be underestimated. As is now fairly well-known, Lewis served

British and U.S. political interests during the long and lonely years of the Cold War as an "expert" in Middle Eastern history. Lewis served the Western political establishment dutifully, providing it with an understanding of the Middle East based on an East/West binarism that promoted the idea of a triumphalist Imperial West which would control and dominate the resources of a decadent and enfeebled East that would remain at the tender mercies of the post-War Imperial powers.

Lewis sought to turn back the clock on Arab independence and reinstate new mechanisms of domination and control in the Arab world; leading to a conundrum which remains a source of continual irritation and violence to this day.

Israeli history is therefore based on these Ashkenazi Zionist myths that have implicated the Arab Jews within a vast labyrinth of socio-political complexity that served to separate the emerging Jewish state from the geo-political realities of the region in which it proudly stood as an alien accretion.

It is therefore quite clear that the assertion of a native Arab Jewish voice, like that of the writers and scholars we have mentioned above, writers who have sought to disentangle the stories of Jews native to the Arab world, Jews who saw themselves as culturally Arab, from the new Zionist mythologies, would become controversial and disputed by the mainstream.

With the publication of Yehuda Shenhav's masterful *The Arab Jews* we now have another entry in the small but potent library of works on Sephardic history.

Shenhav, a professor of sociology at Tel Aviv University, tells the story of Arab Jews in a carefully modulated academic voice that Edward Said has promoted as the "subaltern" revolt in academic discourse. Eschewing the heatedly polemical style of writers like G.N. Giladi, Shenhav has written a brilliant book that adheres to the strict protocols of sociological discourse with arguments that have been carefully documented and footnoted. His voice is that of a modern academic who has broken into the system and articulated a position, or series of positions, that serves to respond directly to the endemic racism of the institutional Israeli academic discourse that was once modulated to portray Arab Jews as inferior and culturally backward.

The structure of Shenhav's book is deceptively simple yet quite effective. Taking a microcosmic approach rather than a macrocosmic approach to his subject, Shenhav frames the book around two intertwined historical markers that he investigates in great detail: Unearthing a hitherto obscure and unknown episode in Zionist history relating to colonial Zionist activity in Abadan, a city at the cusp of the Iraqi and Iranian world(s), Shenhav is able to reconstruct the ways in which Zionism first approached the reality of Arab Jewry. After this examination, Shenhav goes on to discuss the internal Sephardic discourse regarding its history and how that history functions within the larger context of the Arab-Israeli conflagration.

The book opens with a fascinating anecdote which tells of the internal contradictions of the Arab Jew. Shenhav relates the odd tale of his father and his father's role in the Zionist usurpation of Arab Jewish memory. After the death of his father, Eliyahu Shahrabani (the name Shenhav being a new Zionist accretion as name-changing was fairly common for Israelis whose "Diaspora" names were often transformed into "Zionist" ones thus collapsing elements of the historical past), Shenhav is approached by a mysterious man who came to tell Yehouda about his father's role in the Israeli intelligence services:

When my father was seventeen, he moved with a group of Iraqi-born friends to Kibbutz Be'eri, on the ruins of the Arab village of Nahbir. In that same year, Avshalom Shmueli, a recruitment officer, came to Be'eri and recruited them into Israel's intelligence community. There is nothing surprising about this. They were part of an inexhaustible reservoir of ambitious young people, loyal to the state, spoke perfect Arabic, and looked like Arabs. They had the ideal profile. As an intelligence man, my father worked hard and was sometimes gone for lengthy periods. His absence enhanced my status as a boy in the neighborhood. By working for the state against the Arab enemy, he earned his entry ticket into Israeliness. I was able to benefit from it vicariously. But this does not mean I was comfortable with his Arabness. As a kid, I fought against my parents and their culture. Employing creative tactics, I would shut the radio off or put it out of commission when they wanted to listen to the great Arab singers Om Kolthoum, Farid al-Atrach, or Abd-el-Wahab. The truth is that I was greatly preoccupied with my own and my family's Arab Jewish origins but kept the subject to myself. Those origins did not provide a valid entry ticket to become an equal member of Israeli society, with its basically orientalist mentality, then as now. (pp. 2-3)

In the course of telling this anecdote, Shenhav has quite knowingly laid out the richly complex thematic layers of his book: The dense interstitial patterns of the Israeli identity are shown to be formed out of a paradoxical relationship between the need to retain and make use of Arabic culture and language, but in a way that serves to negate that culture:

It may seem eminently reasonable for the new Jewish state to use immigrants' Arab backgrounds as "expertise" and the basis for a "career." As such, my use of Israel's spies to argue that the incorporation of the Arab Jews into the Jewish collective was complex and internally contradictory may seem facile. But first, though Arab Jews were routinely used as spies, their cultural skills were never used to forge positive links with Arab countries. This disjuncture suggests that the state was after more than just practical help. Its practices were used to separate Arab Jews from their Arab backgrounds. (pp. 5-6)

The interconnectedness between the intrinsic Zionist need for "insiders" who could "pass" as the enemy and a rejection of the culture of that enemy serves as the fulcrum upon which Shenhav's study turns. Israeli nationalism, which had generally sought to use the Arab Jews for strategic purposes, for instance to populate border regions as a bulwark against Palestinian recidivism, after it was clear that Western Jews were not going to immigrate *en masse* to the fledgling country, was required to maintain two mutually exclusive and contradictory positions:

Arab Jews were needed to populate and serve the new country, often using their historical and cultural memory, but those very traits were marked as part of the "enemy" culture that Israel was hell-bent on eradicating.

For a young man like Shenhav, as it was for so many young Arab Jews who grew up in an environment where Arab culture represented not merely the world of the "enemy" but that of an unappealing backwardness and incompetence, the process of "De-Arabization" was a socio-cultural mechanism that had been stitched into the very fabric of the nascent Israeli psyche. The attempt to restore the actual history of this Arab Jewish world would thus be an assault on the very cognitive socio-cultural mechanisms that served to make up Israeli culture which was Ashkenazi in both substance and form.

The meeting of Ashkenazi Zionist emissaries with Arab Jews was one that took place under the guise of the colonial and Imperial encounter. The charge of colonialism against the Zionist movement has been one that is deeply contested by the Zionists themselves. Averring that they were not settler-clients of an Imperial power, the Zionists have consistently sought to mark their relationship to Great Britain as one which bristled with conflict and constant tension, but the reality was far more complex as Shenhav points out:

Solel Boneh [the Zionist company devoted to building and construction] began to undertake "external work" in 1936, a year after the company was reestablished, and by 1945 it employed 7,000 people outside Palestine. Beginning in the late 1930s, and more especially during the war years, Solel Boneh grew and expanded under British auspices, operating in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Bahrain, and Cyprus. The company's collaboration with the British army landed it contracts to build military bases, airfields, oil facilities, and roads. (p. 37)

Shenhav explains that it was becoming quite clear that as Zionism expanded in the region the adoption of a non-Arab element would prove to be beneficial to Imperial interests. The Abadan context provided a perfect example of the ways in which the colonial world functioned:

Indeed, on the ground, in their day-to-day lives, the emissaries were well aware of the social divisions and hierarchies dictated by color and ethno-racial differences produced by the colonial situation. They could not help but be aware of them. Everywhere they looked these divisions were ingrained in the fabric of their existence in Abadan, from their segregated "whites-only" neighborhoods to their privileged working conditions and positions of authority. The emissaries, who had arrived as Zionists, came to identify themselves also – and even mainly – as white Europeans. Those who had not arrived in Abadan already in possession of a colonial consciousness had ample opportunity to develop one on site. The emissaries' descriptions of their day-to-day lives and an analysis of their point of view make it possible to bring in their voices and create a history from below of the colonial experience. (p. 58)

This process was therefore not intrinsic to the situation, but what it did was to reinforce the Eurocentric elements inherent to Zionist thinking and build upon those ideas a new socio-political reality that fused the Zionist theoretical ideality with the colonialist realities.

And how did this affect the Jews who were native to the region?

In the Zionist context, the question of the encounter between European Jews and Arab Jews becomes complicated, because the encounter, which creates the "otherness," does not end there, but also seeks to recruit the "other" into its ranks. It was here that the European emissaries in Abadan positioned themselves vis-à-vis the Arab Jews and tried to define them as "other" (Arab) yet also as "one of us" (Jewish, proto-Zionist). It is just here, in the interstices between the two categories, that the politics of "difference" lies. The interesting thing is that Zionism (like other colonial enterprises) created a politics of belonging and of difference and spoke in a number of voices, yet, at the same time, declined to acknowledge the cultural ambivalence of its own creation and attempted to enfold it within closed binary distinctions. It was a clear case of Jewish orientalism, where one Jewish group orientalized another. (p. 71)

Shenhav lays out a series of detailed statements by the emissaries, those Zionist functionaries who, under the cover of the Solel Boneh project, looked to proselytize the native Jews and exhort them to immigrate to Palestine. In the course of this subterfuge, the emissaries were forced to hide their actual identities in order to fool those Arab Jews who they were preaching the Zionist message to. Their innate contempt for these Arab Jews was barely concealed. In the words of Enzo Sereni, one of the European Zionist emissaries:

This material is not European material, it is material that is quick to become enthusiastic, but also quick to despair…unable to keep a secret, unable to keep their word… There are deep waters, and those waters are not bad … but there is the foam on the water, and it is bad, of an Arab-Levantine sort… Assimilation from a Levantine type into a culture that does not yet exist or is at a nadir… They can be turned into "human beings," but we shall not be able to accomplish that without the help of the people in the Land.

And even more pointedly:

Their whole life is in cafes. There is no family culture. The man is not to be found with his wife and children, but sits in the café and plays at taula (backgammon) or cards for hours on end… In every corner are brothels and arak (hard liquor)… There are clubs of the rich that are frequented by wealthy families. This is a center of matchmaking and gossip, but if they want a good time – they go to a café… The theater has no culture. The talent develops according to the needs of the audience… This culture is largely that of Jews, it is total assimilation in the Orient. (p. 72)

Such racist stereotyping chillingly recalls not merely the many examples of Ashkenazi Zionist racism such as the late Ephraim Kishon's execrable "Sallah Shabbati," but even more pointedly the now-standard arguments presented by Edward Said as a response to Lord Cromer in his classic book *Orientalism*:

Orientals or Arabs are thereafter shown to be gullible, "devoid of energy or initiative," much given to "fulsome flattery," intrigue, cunning and unkindness to animals; Orientals cannot walk on either a road or a pavement (their disordered minds fail to understand what the European grasps immediately, that roads and pavements are made for walking); Orientals are inveterate liars, they are "lethargic and suspicious," and in everything oppose the clarity, directness and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race. Cromer makes no effort to conceal that Orientals for him were always and only the human material he governed in British colonies. (pp. 38-39)

Said's description and analysis of Cromer's words can be easily fitted to those of Enzo Sereni the Zionist emissary to Abadan. The native Jews are presented as pathological and deficient, their rehabilitation can only be effected with the "help of the people of the Land"; the "Land" here meaning those Ashkenazi Zionist settlers in Palestine.

The categories developed by Said in his *Orientalism* are thus operative in the encounter between Ashkenazi Zionists and Arab Jews in Abadan. What is even more startling is the degree of subterfuge that was undertaken in the process of trying to brainwash the Arab Jews to leave Iraq and Iran and come to Palestine. Sadly, this subterfuge implicates the figure of the revered Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook who, as a hardened Zionist fighting his own internal Jewish battles against the Orthodox anti-Zionist Ashkenazi establishment, provided "cover" to emissaries like Sereni who required a new identity in order to be permitted access to the Arab Jewish communities.

What Kook did was to confer upon the emissaries – all atheist socialists to a man – the traditional character of the *shali'ah*, or in Shenhav's term *shadarim*. These *shadarim* concealed their true identities under the guise, ironically, of **religious** emissaries empowered to persuade the local Jews to come to Zion not for secular or nationalist reasons, but for religious ones.

Kook supplies letters to these emissaries providing them with necessary "cover." In a letter written in 1932 for the emissary to Yemen Shmuel Yavne'eli, a completely non-religious Jew, we see the rabbi "state" the following:

The bearer of this letter who is visiting your country is the important dignitary and sage [sic!] Mr. Eliezer Ben Yosef… This dear man was in the Holy Land for many years and he has information about the customs of all our brethren, may they live… We have entrusted him with matters to investigate and to inquire about from the high and honorable sages … in order that we may also allow the communities of Yemenites who are gathering among us to follow their own customs…. (p. 94)

And lest there be some confusion over whether or not Rabbi Kook is explicitly and with malice lying to these gullible Yemenites, let us read the words of Yavne'eli himself who states explicitly how the swindle was to work:

For reasons of caution vis-à-vis the Turkish government … it was decided that this trip should be cast in a religious character and that I should go, on the surface, on a mission from Rabbi Abraham Yitzhak Kook in Jaffa in order to pose to the rabbis of the communities in Yemen a series of questions concerning marriage, divorce, family life, prayer, synagogues, and receive from them written replies. Equipped with a letter and with a notebook of questions from Rabbi Kook … I sailed from Jaffa to Port Said.

And in explaining the way in which the operation was set up:

The mission to Yemen was a joint operation of the representatives of Zionism in Palestine and the Labor movement, together with members of Hapoel Hatza'ir (the Young Workers' movement) headed by Yosef Aharonovich, together with certain circles of farmers from the colonies, and functionaries, such as Eliahu Sapir and Aharon Eisenberg, and a representative of the rabbinical world, the chief rabbi of Jaffa and the colonies, Abraham Yitzhak Kook. (p. 93)

The confluence of various sectors of the Zionist movement, as would become typical of the early years of the state, emerged at a nexus that brought together religious and secularist elements of the Zionist machine in a harmony that permitted them to function as a single unit. Here that unit was brought together in order to create the illusion that Zionism was a logical extension of the Jewish religion in a manner that would engage and persuade the Yemenite Jews to leave their homes and come to Palestine.

From this we can clearly see that Zionism was based on a series of strategically interlinked falsehoods that would serve to undermine the communal integrity of the Arab Jews in ways that are felt to this day: Arab Jews, in Shenhav's words, were "religionized" in ways that went well beyond the organic ways of life in the community itself.

Hence the paradox presented at the outset. Emissaries who declared that they were secular (and even socialists), but who were imbued with a strong ethnic (national-religious) thrust, arrived on a mission to the Arab world via a hybrid network that was religious in origin (shadarut), found there communities that observed religious practices, yet reported back with disappointment about their lack of religion. Rather than accepting this reality, they aspired to infuse the Iraqi Jews with religious fervor. (p. 104)

What Shenhav is pointing out here is the way in which Zionism manipulated religion as a means to undergird and reinforce the nationalist idea which was understood in neo-Hegelian terms. Religion was for Zionism not a concrete reality; unlike the practices of Judaism inherent to the Arab Jewish tradition, Zionism was quite unconcerned with Halakhic praxis. What

Zionism was concerned about was Judaism as the abstract foundational basis of the national entity.

Such a transformation of Jewish praxis and its cognitive realities led to an undermining of the traditional customs and beliefs of the Arab Jews and ultimately led to a fusion of Jewish praxis with the Zionist imperatives that have served the State of Israel quite well through the years.

The second half of *The Arab Jews* discusses the complex ways in which Arab Jewish history has intersected with that of the Palestinian Arabs. Evoking the highly charged and often utilized argument that in 1948 a population exchange occurred between Arab Jews and Palestinian Arabs, the issue of reparations and repatriation of refugees in peace discussions between Israel and the Arabs would take on a quite expansive dimension in the perpetuation of the conflict and the ideological polemics that continued to swirl around it like bees around a hive.

In reality there is no organic connection between what happened to Arab Jews and to Palestinian Arabs. In spite of the fact that Zionists sought to lure Arab Jews to Israel, the Arab Jews by and large did not heed their call and elected to remain in their lands of origin. Indeed, a number of Arab Jews who came to Israel in its first years looked to return back to the Arab world. Mistreatment of Arab Jews took a number of different forms: From the forced settlement in tent cities and immigrant camps to their increased dependency on the organs and institutions of the Mapai (Labor) establishment, Arab Jews were caught in a lethal web of an almost absolute reliance on a venally paternalistic Ashkenazi hegemony.

A particularly heinous example of such racist treatment is presented by G.N. Giladi in his *Discord in Zion*:

Sephardi Jews suffered from harsh health conditions in the camps with each family, usually with many children, living in one tent whose area was smaller than a normal room. In 1950/1 the winter was unusually harsh, with snow falls everywhere. The tents and the huts had no heat, and since there were only a few standpipes in every camp people had to stand in long queues for their water ration. In rural areas, priority was given to the Ashkenazi farmers and the camps had their water cut off. Often the water was muddy and unfit for drinking which led to an increase in complaints and violent demonstrations against the authorities which were put down with a steel hand. There was one shower, with cold water naturally, for every 16 people, but it was rare to find a shower which worked regularly. The toilets consisted of a small pit measuring one metre square, and there was one for every four families. The queues to use them were long and sometimes there was only one per hundred people. After heavy rainfall, the contents of the pits would overflow and in summer they gave off a foul stink and nourished armies of stinging insects. The government did not bother about rubbish removal, and, since the camps had no gutters, mounds of rubbish piled up. Since some of the camps lay on the Lod-Tel Aviv highway, Ashkenazi journalists wrote that these camps were jeopardizing Israel's image since they could be seen by foreign tourists and it would be better to move them away from the highway. The establishment thus started building cement huts a few kilometers away and demanded that the camp inhabitants buy them and move into them. The Sephardim, however, spurned the offer because there was no asphalt road from the new location to the highway, but the Ashkenazi newspapers picked this up and reported 'these Sephardim refuse to live in buildings because they are used to living in tents like the Bedouin.' (p. 121)

A crucial aspect of the contestation of Arab Jewish history lies in the fact that Giladi's text itself has become a part of the debate. Notwithstanding the many Sephardim who have presented such stories which are well-known in our communities, the "official" Israeli version of the history of the period has largely erased the Arab Jewish voice, suppressing instances of institutional oppression like the Yemenite Babies' scandal and the Ringworm Children scandal which continue to remain mysteries even after many vain attempts to have them adjudicated within an Israeli justice system that continues to perpetuate the lies and myths of the state.

And lest we should think that the matter of ethnicity did not play a central role in this, Giladi cites the minutes of a meeting of the Zionist Executive Council from December 1949:

Y. Refael (Hapoel Hamizrahi-Religious Labor): The Polish immigrants are not like immigrants from other countries. Immigrants from other countries came here because we demanded. For a long time they did not want to immigrate and put it off. For this reason we have no obligation toward them whereas Polish Jews could not immigrate – they did not have the opportunity to do so. If we exempt them from the camps and give them priority in housing, they will settle down much more quickly than the Orientals in the camps for there are amongst them professionals who are much in need in the country… The Jews of Poland come from a comfortable background and thus camp life would be more difficult for them than for the Yemenite Jews who consider the camps a rescue operation... This group of immigrants is not like the Yemenite immigrants. When a Polish Jew gets a loan he knows he has to pay it back.

Y. Burginsky (Mapam-Zionist/Marxist): There is a possibility we will have only one camp, which is Atlit Camp where there are at present Yemenites. We'll shove them somewhere else and then we'll be able to cram in between three to four thousand (even though it will not be as luxurious as Greenbaum is demanding), like in the other camp … as a precautionary measure we have rented between two and three hundred flats at 200 Israeli pounds each. We shall take the houses that have been allotted to the North Africans and Yemenites and hand them over to the Polish Jews…

E. Dobkin: We have resolved correctly to give preferential treatment to the Jews of Poland. [But] priority should be given to those who arrive first. This does not have to continue throughout, but our aim is that the first to come should communicate to the others in Poland that the situation is not too bad here. We don't have to treat all the ten thousand like this.

There is no harm in letting those who follow later live like the rest of the refugees.

Y. Greenbaum: Instead of cramming the Polish Jews together like this, I believe it would be preferable to treat the Turkish and Libyan Jews that way. That would not be unfair. You ought to know that those [Polish] Jews are the elite. Every family had three or four rooms – a German house with German furniture and the latest German conveniences. There will be doctors from Poland. You just put one of them in Beit Leed or Pardes Hanna and see what he'll think of them and how he'll feel. (pp. 113-114)

These citations from Giladi provide the context in which we can begin to understand the arguments that Shenhav presents over the history of Arab Jews once they arrived to Israel and the acrimony that ensued over their sense of what they had lost and what they felt that they were entitled to.

Having been herded into ghetto-like conditions far more reminiscent of Nazi Germany than of the vain and illusory promises of the Zionist functionaries who were responsible for bringing over the Arab Jews in the first place, the new Sephardi Israelis quickly sought to raise the issue of compensation to the government. Shenhav cites the minutes of a 1951 cabinet meeting where Bechor Shitrit, himself a Sephardi, raises the specter of the matter:

The Iraqi Jews [in Israel] … are planning to go to the Foreign Ministry, and the foreign minister will have to receive them. I do not think that we can make do with vague words; there is no doubt that their demand for the property of the Arabs in Israel is well-founded. We cannot simply say that we had a windfall. Their [the Iraqi Jews'] situation is due to the creation of Israel, and we must think of a way to compensate them – compensation drawn from the property of the Arabs. Otherwise they can argue, with justification: "If it were not for the state of Israel, after all, [we would not have been obliged to leave Iraq;] we lived there for hundreds of years as free people, we engaged in commerce and crafts, we accumulated riches and property'; and if we tell them that is irrelevant, we shall only be fanning the flames. (p. 126)

In unpacking Shitrit's words a number of things emerge: First, internal to the elite government circles there is a tacit acknowledgement that Jews did not live as persecuted citizens in the Arab world. His words confirm that the situation of the Arab Jews in their homelands was impacted by the emergence of Zionism and by the establishment of the state of Israel. Next we can remark that Israel had gotten a "windfall" through its confiscation of Palestinian Arab property. And not only this; something Shitrit fails to mention – it would be a few years in coming – was the massive reparations that would flood Israel from West Germany. Finally, we see the seething discontent of the Arab Jews which was in 1951 beginning to boil over; the trauma of the camps and the institutionalized racism had begun to take its toll.

What Zionism faced in this case was a clash of histories and a battle of ideological perspectives over those clashing histories.

Were the Arab Jews free immigrants to Israel along the lines of Zionist ideality, or were they persecuted refugees hounded into leaving their homes in the Arab world?

Here many of the explanations would run up against one another and would serve to complicate what was already a very tense situation fraught with the ethnic component that had been suppressed in the external Zionist discourse, but clearly understood within the inner circles of government and institutional Israeli life.

The government of Moshe Sharett took the step of linking the fate of the Arab Jews to the Palestinian Arabs:

The Israeli government's creation of the linked property account was a singular act – something of a historic milepost – that constructed a zero-sum equation between the Jews of the Arab countries and the Palestinians in Israel. The political theory that underlay the Israeli government's construction of that equation rested on a system of moral, diplomatic, and economic assumptions that resulted in a practice of nationalization and naturalization that was riddled with contradictions. The government of Israel automatically assumed that the Jewish ethnicity of the Iraqi Jews meant that they harbored a Zionist orientation. It "endowed" them de facto with that particular form of national identity before they had any intention of immigrating to Israel, and certainly without having obtained their consent. (p. 130)

This linkage would forever mark the ways in which this subject would be discussed and contested by all sides of the equation. Palestinians would continue to fight the linkage as what happened to Jews in Iraq or elsewhere in the Arab world had nothing to do with asserting their own claims to compensation for property that was taken from them. Arab Jews would argue that they were not a single, monolithic group that could be "represented" exclusively by Israel. In addition, up to that time the Arab Jews had more or less been fleeced by Ashkenazi Zionism and had become the de facto underclass of the state. Monies going into the coffers of the government had little impact on the actual day-to-day existence of so many Arab Jews whose poverty and lack of social standing would become more of a problem as time went on.

But within two decades of the Sharett decision, a startling thing occurs:

In 1975, the newly established government-financed pressure group known as the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) argued that Palestinian refugees should not be allowed back into Israel, since an involuntary population exchange had already taken place in the Middle East. (p. 131)

The distance from the age of the *ma'abarot* and the more overt forms of institutionalized racism which had once affected the Arab Jews dissipated to a degree and led to the creation a new

Sephardic elite that was quite amenable to work on behalf of the government in the wake of the PLO maneuvers and the Egyptian overtures which led to Anwar Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the 1978 Camp David accords. WOJAC initially served to reinforce the Israeli position with no questions asked. But as time went on, the group began to take on a life of its own and developed arguments and strategies that were not in sync with the desires of the government.

Shenhav terms WOJAC a "community of memory" which served the Arab Jews with a mechanism of expressing its own history and the way that history functioned within the larger paradigms of the Middle Eastern conflict. Utilizing a model of what he calls the "primordialism" thesis, Shenhav marks the ways in which WOJAC began to deviate from the Ashkenazi Zionist script in order to assert a variant understanding of Arab Jewish history.

As the Iraqi-born WOJAC member David Fattal states:

The Jews arrived in Iraq … in 600 BCE. There they settled, built, produced, [and] continued for nearly 1,300 years. It was only in 638 CE, during the reign of the [second] caliph 'Umar al-Hatib, that [his general] Khalid al-Walid succeeded in conquering Iraq. That was nearly 1,300 years after the Jews came to Iraq, preceding the Arabs and Islam. There they did productive work, developed settlements, and built; there they produced not only earthly things but also things of the spirit and science, of knowledge, and there they produced the Babylonian Talmud in that period. Only afterward did [the soldiers of] Islam come as conquerors… And the Jews of Iraq in all the generations, under all the governments … did not stand aside, but were a great help to them, they aided in the advancement of the building [sic] of each and every Iraqi government. And in recent generations they were even the prime vessels that the rulers used in order to establish the government units, to build the administration, to raise up the economy of that country, and to deal with and administer the natural resources of that Iraqi state that was established after the British occupation. In Iraq, the first finance minister was a Jew, the director of the Treasury's offices were Jews, the managers of the trains, the customs, the post office, and the oil fields … were all Jews. (p. 147)

It should be more than obvious that Fattal's arguments, perfectly consistent with a proper and rational understanding of the organic history of the region, was not the version of the history that the Ashkenazi Zionists had presented as the officially-sanctioned version in Israel. Aside from the fact that Zionism had set out to eviscerate and make invisible the history of the Arab Jews, Fattal was even more dangerously moving to the other extreme in his assertions that Iraqi Jews were not simply a tolerated minority, but a central part of the socio–political configuration of the country.

This "primordialist" thesis became a part of the WOJAC platform even as the Israeli government and certain members of the WOJAC group assertively contested it. Primordialism functioned to raise the haunting specter of the "ethnic question"; just the thing that Zionism had wanted to suppress. The implications are laid out by Shenhav in his expert analysis of the matter:

The narrative presented here imagines a past consisting of several components. The most important of these is the affinity of the Arab Jews with "the region," a perception that splinters Jewish ethno-national unity by adducing different pasts for Arab Jews and European Jews. Although the source of the cultural and political rights of the Jews "in the region" lies in a pre-Islamic world, those rights were not affected even with the rise of the Arab empire to greatness or afterward. In this narrative, Jewish culture remained dominant "in the region" even under the Arab conquest. As opposed to the classic Zionist account, the Jews of the exilic era are described, not as a stagnant community whose existence is lacking, but as almost Promethean progenitors of culture in the Middle East. Relations with the Muslim world are portrayed in narrative association with a Golden Age that existed (or ostensibly existed) until the expulsion from Spain. However, in contrast to the Spanish Golden Age, Jewish culture in the Middle East remained vigorous after 1492 and, indeed, continued to exist as such well into the Modern era. (pp. 147-148)

The primordialism thesis thus looks very much like "The Levantine Option" as I have presented it. What is left unremarked in the WOJAC context is the way in which Palestinian Arabs had become an object of derision among the Sephardim. A breakdown occurred within the Jewish-Arab symbiosis, a matter that has been pointedly accounted for in the Zionist explanation that is here implicitly critiqued and unwittingly rejected: Within the Zionist presentation of Arab Jewish history, the neo-lachrymose features serve to connect the physical existence of Jews in the region, but that existence was one of unremitting misery rather than the vigor and brilliance of Fattal's interpretation. Fattal's sunny optimism forgets that the Jews and Arabs are in a state of conflict that Zionism has marked within a larger context of Muslim anti-Semitism that we can see for instance in the harsh anti-Arab polemics of Bernard Lewis and his school.

So here we see that the "population exchange" thesis is mere book-keeping rather than some form of race-hatred and primordialism that ascribes an eternal enmity between Jews and Arabs – very much contrary to the standard Zionist thesis which colors the Islamic world in Christian tones.

This neo-lachrymose conception is cited by others in the Sephardic community as a counterweight to the approach being presented by Fattal and others in the WOJAC group:

The most radical position concerning the relations between Muslims and Jews was taken by Ya'akov Meron, an official of the Ministry of Justice and one of WOJAC's most articulate speakers from its inception. Grounding his views in the antagonistic model, Meron stated explicitly and plainly that the Jews had been expelled from the Arab countries. Meron cited two arguments in support of this contention. The first was that the Jews had been in a dire situation in the Arab countries; as proof of this, he described at length the pogroms against the

Jews of Iraq (1941), in Libya (1945), and in Egypt (1945 and 1948). The second argument, based on "two pieces of evidence," was that there had been a coordinated expulsion policy among all the Arab states. (pp. 156-157)

Again, we see the manner in which pieces of evidence are marshaled in a way that serves to contest the historical realities of the Arab Jews. The example provided by the Iraqi Farhud, where a few hundred people were massacred by Iraqi nationalists after the failure of a coup attempt by anti-British elements, is a particularly apt one in this context. There is no proof that the Farhud was a coordinated attack and it has become clear from archival research over the decades since its occurrence that the role of the British in permitting the bloodletting to go on was more than a bit suspicious. In any case, it remains clear that although the Jews were the main targets of the attacks, that Muslims were also killed and that many Muslims put their own lives in danger to help save Jews from the attacks.

Meron's position, parroting the Zionist approach, is to fit the persecution model into Arab Jewish history at any cost – even in contradiction to the historical record. Such is the way in which nations contest histories that offer alternative explanations to their own certainties. And the split between Fattal and Meron reflects the ways in which natives and outsiders perceive history; Fattal is at pains to portray Iraqi Jewish history in positive terms while the Zionist functionary Meron bears his allegiance not to Iraqi Jewry, but to the requirements of the Zionist master narrative which rhetorically encodes Arab-Islamic civilization as "barbarous."

And after all of this debate, WOJAC (formally shut down in 1999) was left as an organization that would be manipulated by the steady hand of the Ashkenazi-controlled government of Israel. In spite of working diligently on behalf of the state regarding the Palestinian Refugee question – at least this was the WOJAC understanding of the matter – we see that

[D]espite WOJAC's seemingly tempting offer to the state of Israel, the attitude of the establishment remained patronizing and suspicious. As Leon Taman described it, "The government treated us like infants, little children. When the infant cries, people give it a pacifier and say, Take the pacifier and be quiet. That is how we felt." An analysis of the relations between WOJAC and the Israeli establishment reveals a Tower of Babel syndrome: parallel languages of discourse that never meet. (p. 177)

The image of the Tower of Babel that Shenhav uses here is an apt rhetorical model that both typifies and magnifies the ways in which Arab Jews have been treated in Israel. Like the famous *het* and *'ayin*, two Hebrew letters that cannot be pronounced properly by Ashkenazim and which mark the Sephardi pronunciation of Hebrew, the very idea of an abstract Jewish "unity" is itself an impossibility. Jewish unity as expressed and reified by Ashkenazi Zionist discourse is something that retains the same utopian character as that of the fabled Israeli "democracy": It is a unity and a democracy that is monolingual and monocultural – as it remains discursively constructed by a monocausality.

As Shenhav explores the paradoxical ways in which Zionism has had to be inclusive of a Jewish religion whose legal and textual strictures it has long since marked as defunct, we can better see how at its very conceptual root Zionism is caught in a trap of religio-national ethnocentrism anchored in the Ashkenazi experience and its tragic history. In this regard Shenhav wisely cites Gershom Scholem:

The people here [in Palestine] do not understand the implications of their actions… They think they have turned Hebrew into a secular language, that they have removed its apocalyptic sting. But this is not the case… Every word that is not created randomly anew, but is taken from the "good old" lexicon, is filled to overflowing with explosives… God will not remain mute in the language in which he has been entreated thousands of times to return to our lives. (p. 195)

It is here that Shenhav shows us the paradoxical nature of Zionism and how that paradox functions in the context of Arab Jewish history and identity. Forcing the richness of the Jewish past, its language, its religion, its culture, to serve at the altar of a monocausal identity – of an Ashkenazi Hegelianism – can only serve to touch off the tripwires of history and its wide reserve of hidden energies and suppressed antinomianism.

The Arab Jews is another significant chapter in the literature of Sephardic culture and history as it relates to Zionism. Its impending publication brought me back to pondering the final pages of Giladi's *Discord in Zion*, a book that has never been published in the US or Israel and remains out of print in England, in which he is insistent that, after decades of struggle and failure, the Arab Jews are set to emerge from the cloud that they have been living under. And in the early 1990s figures like Ammiel Alcalay, Ella Shohat, Sami Shalom Chetrit and a few others looked like this promise might actually be fulfilled. But the internal censoring mechanisms inherent in the Zionist project locked into the Sephardic community which resolutely rejected the activist approach and began to fulfill the "death of the Sephardim" project that Shenhav narrates as being a crucial part of the Ashkenazi Zionist project.

With the eradication of the Black Panthers and Matzpen and the increasing movement of Sephardi activists into an academic context – a place where the vast majority of the great Sephardi "unwashed" remain deeply uncomfortable – the discourse of the activists became increasingly esoteric and obscure. The direct approach of Giladi was deemed "controversial" and lacking in the niceties of a civilized academia. The malodorous realities of the *ma'abarot* are direct and immediately accessible in *Discord in Zion* in ways that elude the more reserved nature of the scholarly, even though the anti-Sephardi polemic continues on its harsh and merry way.

Amazingly, I read an article by the hateful Steven Plaut attacking Shenhav in David Horowitz's Front Page Magazine – the article forwarded to me, sadly, by a SEPHARDI who is a fan of Plaut –

a few months in advance of the actual U.S. publication of the book. This Ashkenazi racist-mongering reminded me of a recent unpleasantness that I experienced with an American-born Israeli professor, an Orientalist sociologist who is well-known in interfaith circles and who fancies himself knowledgeable about Sephardim, who attempted to have me removed from a conference that I was invited to as a presenter. When the professor did not succeed in having me removed from the conference panel, he used his time as a respondent on his own panel to attack my paper – confusing the audience because I had yet to present the paper!

The punchline to my personal anecdote is that the professor in question recommended as a corrective to what he called my "wrongheaded and dangerous approach" that I read the work of – wait for it – Yehouda Shenhav! As I had read *The Arab Jews* in its Hebrew edition, I thought the "suggestion" rather odd, and yet when I read the English galleys with all of this in mind, I better understood the ways in which discursive contestation operates within academic discourse. In spite of the fact that Shenhav has written a stinging and at times insistently merciless defense of Arab Jewish identity in its battle with the malignant racism of Ashkenazi Zionism, the manner of its rhetoric and its subtle and wise discursive strategies, quite different from those I utilize which are closer in spirit and tonality to G.N. Giladi's unstoppable rage, enabled this professor to put forward Shenhav's learned subtlety as a way to foreclose its activist potentiality.

And here I am led to the difficulties of assessing *The Arab Jews* in a socially contextual fashion. Like Ammiel Alcalay's *After Jews and Arabs*, the book will prove too difficult for the average reader. The learned nature of its discourse marks it in the ranks of books by people like Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm and other academic theoreticians of nationalism and culture that are widely read by academics in universities but whose arguments rarely enter into the common currency of the average person. This is not to stigmatize any of this writing in an anti-intellectual sense; it is not my intent to argue that we should avoid bringing our activism and our cultural arguments into the fields of the social sciences and of the wide spectrum of literary and philosophical study.

The argument I am making has to do with the way that knowledge is all too frequently marked as inaccessible and unusable in a mainstream context because it partakes of the technical lexicon of the academic. When Sephardim lack the very rudimentary elements of their own history and culture, basic studies which would allow Shenhav and Alcalay's masterfully-argued books to be more easily understood, books like Giladi's which, as I have said, is almost completely inaccessible to the American reader, the complex discourse of these books may estrange them from the very people who so badly need to read them.

Paradoxically, part of the anti-Sephardi racism that has been endemic to the Ashkenazi Zionist argument is that Sephardim are primitive and less capable that Europeans. How better then to show the "other side" that Sephardim are as smart, if not smarter, than they are by approaching the subject of Sephardic culture from within the very scientific and intellectually sophisticated parameters of the European academic tradition?

The Sephardim thus find themselves between the proverbial rock and hard place.

It must therefore be stated without hesitation that Yehouda Shenhav's *The Arab Jews* serves to articulate the Sephardic cause in ways that are bracingly innovative and intellectually challenging. As Sephardic readers we must lift ourselves up to the rarefied heights of such a discourse and not simply sit back and wallow in a sense of anti-intellectualism. The challenge of Shenhav's brilliant book is to internalize the passions and emotions that often serve to fire up our consciences and to see the ways in which the methods and protocols of social scientific discourse can serve to subtly detail the glorious richness of our history and preserve the intensely human complexities of self-understanding within a sociological configuration.

The Arab Jews is not an easy book to read, but the arguments that it so brilliantly makes come to raise our consciousness of who we are as Sephardim. It is yet another mandatory addition to the small but potent library of Sephardica that may yet lead us to emerge out of the darkness that we have sadly been placed in by the often brutal machinations of Ashkenazi culture and the ways in which that culture, especially through Zionism, has served to unsettle and undermine the genius of Arab Jewish culture in its wide historical trajectory.

From SHU 221, August 9, 2006

Congressional Bill Mandates Discussion of Sephardi Refugees

By: Nathan Guttman

In a rare show of pre-election bipartisanship, lawmakers from both parties are sponsoring a bill that would link the plight of Palestinian refugees with that of Jews from Arab countries.

The legislation would require the administration to include mention of the need to resolve the issue of Jews who were expelled from their homes in Arab countries in diplomatic discussions about Palestinian refugees. The bill specifically cites talks that take place within the framework of the so-called Middle East Quartet, made up of the United States, Russia, the European Union and the U.N.

The bill marks the most far-reaching attempt to date to couple Jewish and Palestinian narratives of displacement, and as such it has earned varying responses.

Some advocates of Jews from Arab countries see tying together the two groups' national histories as an important step toward recognizing the plight of Jews who long lived in the Middle East. The history of their expulsion and dispossession from Arab countries after the establishment of Israel in 1948 has often been overshadowed by the tragic record of Eastern European

Jewry. Opponents, on the other hand, view the proposed legislation as no more than a cynical attempt to use the hardship suffered by these Jews, often referred to as Sephardim, as a counterweight to Palestinian claims raised at the negotiation table.

The legislation is co-sponsored by three Democrats and three Republicans, including Florida Republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who chairs the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and Howard Berman of California, the ranking Democrat on the committee. Other sponsors include Democrats Jerrold Nadler and Joseph Crowley from New York, and Republicans Ted Poe of Texas and Bob Turner of New York.

The proposed bill expands on a previous resolution passed in 2008 and includes, for the first time, practical measures. It requires the president to report to Congress within one year on actions he has taken "to use the voice, vote and influence of the United States to ensure" that any international discussion on Palestinian refugees "must also include a similar explicit reference to the resolution of the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries." The bill purposely does not specify what the preferred resolution for any of the refugee problems should be—a deliberate omission, according to a staffer for one of the members of Congress involved in the bill.

Given the upcoming elections, it is not likely that the proposed legislation will come to a vote before Congress adjourns. Its advocates nevertheless see the bill's strong bipartisan sponsorship as an important advance.

"We want it to be on the Middle East peace table; that's all we're asking for," said Stanley Urman, executive director of Justice for Jews From Arab Countries. The group, a coalition founded by several Jewish groups including the American Jewish Committee, the Anti Defamation League, B'nai B'rith International and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish American organizations, has been promoting the call for recognition of rights of Jews from Arab lands. "If there will be a discussion on redress for Palestinian refugees," said Urman, "there should also be redress for Jewish refugees. This should all be on the table."

The plight of Jews from Arab countries was first raised in the 1970s in Israel, when the government tried to get the United Nations to recognize Jewish refugees as part of Resolution 194, which called for the repatriation of Palestinian refugees. The attempt failed, but activists in the Sephardic community, mainly outside Israel, continued to make the case for acknowledging the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries as a matter worthy of recognition and possible reparation. In 2010, Israel's Knesset passed a law requiring the government to include compensation to Jews displaced from Arab countries in any future final status agreement with the Palestinians. The bill, however, is vaguely worded and does not make receiving compensation a condition to signing a peace deal.

Official Israeli estimates put the number of Jews who were forced to leave their homes in Arab countries following the establishment of the State of Israel at 850,000. In some countries, such as Iraq and Yemen, pogroms and riots against local Jews broke out as Israel struggled for its independence, forcing Jews to flee, leaving their property behind. In other countries, Jews were targeted later on. Most of Egypt's Jews left in 1956, following an anti-Jewish government decree issued after the Sinai war with Israel; in Morocco, 100,000 Jews were forced out in 1963, and in Libya, riots and government decrees led to the escape of the country's Jews after the 1967 war.

Gina Waldman was 19 when she and her family were driven out of their home in Tripoli, Libya. She remembers the crowds pouring into the streets in the summer of 1967, torching Jewish homes and businesses. Her family, like other Jewish families in Libya, was allowed to exit the country under the condition they leave all their property behind. Though the angry mob followed the family to the airport, they finally managed to get on a plane to Malta and from there to Italy, Waldman recalled.

"The first step is to acknowledge that these wrongs were done to us," said Waldman, who eventually moved to the United States and became active in the campaign to free Soviet Jewry. After this campaign, Waldman co-founded Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. She is also vice president of JJAC. Both groups, and a British organization named Harif, have been pushing for more than a decade for recognition of Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

"In recent years, as the peace process stumbles, significant people in the Israeli government became more interested in the issue and managed to promote it politically," said Henry Green, professor of Judaic studies at the University of Miami. Green is the international director of Sephardi Voices, an audio-visual project that collects the testimonies of Jews from Arab countries.

In addition to the law it passed in 2010, the Knesset has organized a forthcoming conference scheduled for September to discuss Jewish refugees from Arab countries.

But this flurry of activism has done little to resolve inherent conflicts raised by the calls for recognizing Jews from Arab countries as refugees. Two leading Sephardic lawmakers in Israel, former Knesset speaker Shlomo Hillel and former Meretz MK Ran Cohen, both from Iraq, have spoken out in the past against such recognition. "I am not a refugee," Cohen said. "I came at the behest of Zionism, due to the pull that this land exerts, and due to the idea of redemption. Nobody is going to define me as a refugee."

The other conflict raised by the issue is more practical — but no less fraught: Should Jewish refugees from Arab countries receive compensation for their hardship and lost property?

Even as Israel has demanded that Arab governments acknowledge wrongful treatment of their expelled Jewish populations, successive Israeli governments have discouraged Sephardim themselves from claiming compensation for their lost property.

The reason, said Yehouda Shenhav, a sociology and anthropology professor at Tel Aviv University, was Israel's wish that this lost property be deemed fair exchange for the property lost by Palestinians who fled or were expelled from Israel during the 1948 war that accompanied the country's founding. This narrative is part of a broader Israeli claim of "population exchange," according to which a roughly equal number of Jewish and Palestinian refugees essentially exchanged places during the 1948 war and subsequent conflicts. In Israel's view, both communities should be seen as resettled, thereby preempting the Palestinian refugees' demand for a right to return to present-day Israel, or proposals from some in the international community that both sets of refugees receive compensation for their losses.

Palestinian leaders argue that the settlement of their refugee issues with Israel cannot be held hostage to the separate displacement of Jews, in which Palestinians played no role. Efforts to obtain comment from the bill's congressional sponsors on why their bill makes this link were unsuccessful.

Urman stressed that JJAC and other activists for the cause were not after material reparations. "Our issue is not about money," he said. "We want recognition and justice." He cited South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which identified the victims of the Apartheid era and set the historical narrative straight, as one possible path to justice for both sides at some point, "after resolution of many other urgent problems that need to be settled."

Shenhav, author of the 2006 book "The Arab Jews" and a leading thinker of Israel's left, saw attempts to equate Mizrahi Jews such as himself with Palestinian refugees as politically motivated efforts to circumvent dealing with the Palestinians' claim. "There is no doubt that Sephardi Jews are hurting themselves with this," he said.

The closest that Israelis and Palestinians ever got to discussing the two refugee communities was during the Camp David Summit of 2000. President Clinton then proposed setting up an international fund that would support all victims of the conflict, including Jews displaced from Arab countries.

Today, in the absence of any visible action on the peace process front, "There is an extreme asymmetry," to any linkage between the mass population movements of the Palestinians and the Sephardic Jews, said Hussein Ibish, senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine. The arrival of Jews to Israel from Arab countries, even when forced, marked "the fulfillment of a national project," he said, while the displacement of Palestinian Arabs marked "the destruction of a national project."

From The Forward, August 12, 2012

Arab Jews, Palestinian Refugees and Israel's Folly Politics

By: Yehouda Shenhav

In an article in the Israeli daily ***Ha'aretz*** from 22.10.06, the Reuters Agency reported that Word Jewish groups began a global campaign calling for recognition of Jews from Arab countries (i.e. Arab Jews) as refugees in the Middle East conflict. Stanley Urman, executive director of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC) was quoted saying that

"The world sees the plight of Palestinian refugees, and not withstanding their plight, there must be recognition that Jews from Arab countries are also victims of the Arab-Israeli conflict,".

Justice for Jews from Arab Countries (JJAC), a U.S.-based coalition of Jewish organizations, is one of the groups coordinating the campaign which aims to record testimonies of Jews from Arab countries, list asset losses and lobby foreign governments on their behalf. Reuters also reported that JJAC is working in tandem with Israel's Ministry of Justice, which is collecting and registering testimonials, affidavits and property claims. The daily internt paper Y-NET (October 24 2006 under the title: "Jews of Arab Countries prepare yourself to claim compensation") also reported that the new minister of justice Meir Shitrit is behind this "new effort."

However this effort is all but novel. It started 6 years ago in a folly attempt to use the Arab Jews and their histories to counter-balance the Palestinian claim for the so called "right of return". The campaign has tried to create an analogy between Palestinian refugees and Arab Jews, whose origins are in Middle Eastern countries - depicting both groups as victims of the 1948 War of Independence. The campaign's Jewish proponents hope their efforts will prevent conferral of what is called a "right of return" on Palestinians, and reduce the size of the compensation Israel is liable to be asked to pay in exchange for Palestinian property appropriated by the state guardian of "lost" assets. Whereas in the past, the State of Israel and Jewish organizations have denied any linkage between the two groups and argued that the campaign was launched in the interest of the Arab Jews (see Chapter 3 in my book ***The Arab Jews***, Stanford University Press, 2006), today all parties involved acknowledge that the main objective of the campaign is not to secure the interest of the Arab Jews, but rather to counter-balance the Palestinian political demands. I would like to argue that the idea of drawing this analogy constitutes a mistaken reading of history, imprudent politics, and moral injustice; and that any analogy between Palestinian refugees and Jewish immigrants from Arab lands is folly in historical and political terms

Bill Clinton launched the campaign in July 2000 in an interview with Israel's Channel One, in which he disclosed that an agreement to recognize Jews from Arab lands as refugees materialized at the Camp David summit. Ehud Barak, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, stepped up and enthusiastically expounded on his "achievement" in an interview with Dan Margalit. It should be noted, that past Israeli governments had refrained from issuing declarations of this sort. There were at least three reasons for that. First, there has been concern that any such proclamation will underscore what Israel has tried to

repress and forget: the Palestinians' demand for return. Second, there has been anxiety that such a declaration would encourage property claims submitted by Jews against Arab states and, in response, Palestinian counter-claims to lost property. Third, such declarations would require Israel to update its school textbooks and history, and devise a new narrative by which the Arab Jews journeyed to the country under duress, without being fueled by Zionist aspirations. At Camp David, Ehud Barak decided that the right of return issue was not really on the agenda, so he thought he had the liberty to indulge the analogy between the Palestinian refugees and the Arab Jews, only rhetorically. Characteristically, rather than really dealing with issues as a leader, in a fashion that might lead to mutual reconciliation, Barak and later prime ministers Ariel Sharom and Ehud Oulmert acted like shopkeepers. Furthermore, whereas the article in Ha'aretz mentioned above reports that the Ministry of Justice has already received thousands of claims to date, in actuality the campaign's results thus far are meager. The Jewish organizations involved have not inspired much enthusiasm in Israel, or among Jews overseas. It has yet to extract a single noteworthy declaration from any major Israeli politician. This comes as no surprise: The campaign has a forlorn history whose details are worth revisiting. Sometimes recounting history has a very practical effect.

The World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) who initiated this linkage was founded in the 1970s. Yigal Allon, then foreign minister, worried that WOJAC would become a hotbed of what he called "ethnic mobilization." But WOJAC was not formed to assist the Arab Jews; it was invented as a deterrent to block claims harbored by the Palestinian national movement, particularly claims related to compensation and the right of return. At first glance, the use of the term "refugees" for the Arab Jews was not unreasonable. After all, the word had occupied a central place in historical and international legal discourses after World War II. United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 from 1967 referred to a just solution to "the problem of refugees in the Middle East." In the 1970s, Arab countries tried to fine-tune the resolution's language so that it would refer to "Arab refugees in the Middle East," but the U.S. government, under the direction of ambassador to the UN Arthur Goldberg, opposed this revision. A working paper prepared in 1977 by Cyrus Vance, then U.S. secretary of state, ahead of scheduled international meetings in Geneva, alluded to the search for a solution to the "problem of refugees," without specifying the identities of those refugees. Israel lobbied for this formulation. WOJAC, which tried to introduce use of the concept "Jewish refugees," failed.

The Arabs were not the only ones to object to the phrase. Many Zionist Jews from around the world opposed WOJAC's initiative. Organizers of the current campaign would be wise to study the history of WOJAC, an organization which transmogrified over its years of activity from a Zionist to a post-Zionist entity. It is a tale of unexpected results arising from political activity. The WOJAC figure who came up with the idea of "Jewish refugees" was Yaakov Meron, head of the Justice Ministry's Arab legal affairs department. Meron propounded the most radical thesis ever devised concerning the history of Jews in Arab lands. He claimed Jews were expelled from Arab countries under policies enacted in concert with Palestinian leaders - and he termed these policies "ethnic cleansing." Vehemently opposing the dramatic Zionist narrative, Meron claimed that Zionism had relied on romantic, borrowed phrases ("Magic Carpet," "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah") in the description of Mizrahi immigration waves to conceal the "fact" that Jewish migration was the result of "Arab expulsion policy." In a bid to complete the analogy drawn between Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews, WOJAC publicists claimed that the Arab Jewish immigrants lived in refugee camps in Israel during the 1950s (i.e., ma'abarot or transit camps), just like the Palestinian refugees.

The organization's claims infuriated many Arab Jews in Israel who defined themselves as Zionists. As early as 1975, at the time of WOJAC's formation, Knesset speaker Yisrael Yeshayahu declared: "We are not refugees. [Some of us] came to this country before the state was born. We had messianic aspirations." Shlomo Hillel, a government minister and an active Zionist in Iraq, adamantly opposed the analogy: "I don't regard the departure of Jews from Arab lands as that of refugees. They came here because they wanted to, as Zionists." In a Knesset hearing, Ran Cohen stated emphatically: "I have this to say: I am not a refugee." He added: "I came at the behest of Zionism, due to the pull that this land exerts, and due to the idea of redemption. Nobody is going to define me as a refugee." The opposition was so vociferous that Ora Schweitzer, chair of WOJAC's political department, asked the organization's secretariat to end its campaign. She reported that members of Strasburg's Jewish community were so offended that they threatened to boycott organization meetings should the topic of "Sephardi Jews as refugees" ever come up again. Such remonstration precisely predicted the failure of the current organization, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries to inspire enthusiasm for its efforts.

Also alarmed by WOJAC's stridency, the Foreign Ministry proposed that the organization bring its campaign to a halt on the grounds that the description of Arab Jews as refugees was a double-edged sword. Israel, ministry officials pointed out, had always adopted a stance of ambiguity on the complex issue raised by WOJAC. In 1949, Israel even rejected a British-Iraqi proposal for population exchange - Iraqi Jews for Palestinian refugees - due to concerns that it would subsequently be asked to settle "surplus refugees" within its own borders. The foreign minister deemed WOJAC a Phalangist, zealous group, and asked that it cease operating as a "state within a state." In the end, the ministry closed the tap on the modest flow of funds it had transferred to WOJAC. Then justice minister Yossi Beilin fired Yaakov Meron from the Arab legal affairs department. Today, no serious researcher in Israel or overseas embraces WOJAC's extreme claims.

Moreover, WOJAC, which intended to promote Zionist claims and assist Israel in its conflict with Palestinian nationalism, accomplished the opposite: It presented a confused Zionist position regarding the dispute with the Palestinians, and infuriated many Mizrahi Jews around the world by casting them as victims bereft of positive motivation to immigrate to Israel.

WOJAC subordinated the interests of Mizrahi Jews (particularly with regard to Jewish property in Arab lands) to what it erroneously defined as Israeli national interests. The organization failed to grasp that defining Mizrahi Jews as refugees opens a Pandora's box and ultimately harms all parties to the dispute, Jews and Arabs alike.

The State of Israel, the World Jewish Congress and other Jewish rganizations learned nothing from this woeful legacy. Hungry for a magic solution to the refugee question, they have adopted the refugee analogy and are lobbying for it all over the world. It would be interesting to hear the education minister's reaction to the historical narrative presented nowadays by these Jewish organizations. Should Yael Tamir establish a committee of ministry experts to revise school textbooks in accordance with this new post-Zionist genre?

Any reasonable person, Zionist or non-Zionist, must acknowledge that the analogy drawn between Palestinians and Arab Jews is unfounded. Palestinian refugees did not want to leave Palestine. Many Palestinian communities were destroyed in 1948, and some 700,000 Palestinians were expelled, or fled, from the borders of historic Palestine. Those who left did not do so of their own volition. In contrast, Arab Jews arrived to Israel under the initiative of the State of Israel and Jewish organizations. Some arrived of their own free will; others arrived against their will. Some lived comfortably and securely in Arab lands; others suffered from fear and oppression.

The history of this immigration is complex, and cannot be subsumed within a facile explanation. Many of the newcomers lost considerable property, and there can be no question that they should be allowed to submit individual property claims against Arab states (up to the present day, the State of Israel and WOJAC have blocked the submission of claims on this basis). The unfounded, immoral analogy between Palestinian refugees and Mizrahi immigrants needlessly embroils members of these two groups in a dispute, degrades the dignity of many Arab Jews, and harms prospects for genuine Jewish-Arab reconciliation.

Jewish anxieties about discussing the question of 1948 are understandable. But this question will be addressed in the future, and it is clear that any peace agreement will have to contain a solution to the refugee problem. It's reasonable to assume that as final status agreements between Israelis and Palestinians are reached, an international fund will be formed with the aim of compensating Palestinian refugees for the hardships caused them by the establishment of the State of Israel. Israel will surely be asked to contribute generously to such a fund.

In this connection, the idea of reducing compensation obligations by designating Arab Jews as refugees might become very tempting. But it is wrong to use scarecrows to chase away politically and morally valid claims advanced by Palestinians. The "creative accounting" manipulation concocted by the refugee analogy only adds insult to injury, and widens the psychological gap between Jews and Palestinians. Palestinians might abandon hopes of redeeming a right of return (as, for example, Palestinian pollster Dr. Khalil Shikai claims); but this is not a result to be adduced via creative accounting.

Any peace agreement (which seems now far then ever) must be validated by Israeli recognition of past wrongs and suffering, and the forging of a just solution. The creative accounts proposed by the refugee analogy by the Israeli Ministry of Justice and Jewish organizations turns Israel into a morally and politically spineless bookkeeper.

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From SHU 239, December 13, 2006

What is there between the Mizrahi issue and Palestinian Nationalism?

By: Yehouda Shenhav

For years there has been in Israeli society an enterprise of coexistence meetings supported by the establishment and financed by liberal organizations trying to advance what they call a "civil society". Around this enterprise developed an ideology based in social psychology. These meetings have taken on the character of workshops on interpersonal relations, stemming from the premise that interaction between individuals diminishes mutual hatred and stereotypes (known in social psychology as the "contact hypothesis"). This is, to say the least, a strange ideology. National conflicts cannot be solved by workshops addressing stereotypes. A national conflict is a political phenomenon, the solution to which is to be found in the political arena and not in the individual or interpersonal arena. To say that the conflict is between individuals would be like saying that Yigal Amir assassinated Yitzhak Rabin because of a personal conflict between them.

From here I would also like to cast doubt on the relevance of personal opinions regarding political conflicts - particularly in the way they are expressed in opinion polls. Such polls cannot reflect the depth of ethnic or national conflict. They are subject to momentary whims of the public or to manipulations by political leaders, and they erase the history of the conflict. Herbert Marcusa once said that the attempt to understand our reality as it is does not necessarily mean learning "the facts".

This theoretical and philosophical position has implications regarding our discussion today i.e. the connection between the *Mizrahi* and Palestinian questions. I would like to propose that if the positions of the *Mizrahim* toward the Arabs are more militant, this is at least partially the result of years of European Zionist ideology which regards Arab culture with contempt. Having internalised this ideology, the *Mizrahim* learned to reject their own Eastern, or Arab roots in order to get closer to the

centre of the Israeli collective. Rejection of their Arab roots is expressed in at least two ways. The *Mizrahim*, whose identity is split between their Jewish religion and their Arab cultural roots, may choose to stress their religious identity at the expense of their cultural identity. The religious path offers the *Mizrahim* a way to enter Israeli society while rejecting their connection to Arab culture. Another form of rejection is to adopt an Israeli identity and to deny the relevance of their *Mizrahi* identity.

Here I would like to look, through the *Mizrahi* issue, at the complex question of Palestinian nationalism. The Israeli left, which for the most part remains Zionist, Ashkenazi, and secular, has developed a standpoint that on one hand recognizes the Palestinian question in all its complexity, and on the other hand denies the social and ethnic issues of the *Mizrahi* question. I will present a few examples of this standpoint and try to put them in a theoretical, historical, cultural and political context. I ask your forgiveness ahead of time if the examples and commentary are not as organized as they might be.

A few years ago I wrote an article entitled "Kesher Hashtika" ("A Conspiracy of Silence") that was published in the "Ha'aretz" newspaper (Dec. 27, '96). Here I tried to describe the blind spots of the Ashkenazi left. I tried to understand how it is that the Ashkenazi Left recognizes the Palestinian problem. The Left, appearing as an enlightened and progressive force in the country, was prepared for a Palestinian state long before the present government agreed to it. On the other hand the same Left took the lead in denying the *Mizrahi* question. This is an anomaly. How can we explain the same group's different attitudes toward "the East"? Perhaps part of the explanation lies in the fact that the proposed solution to the Palestinian question is separation. We can solve the Palestinian problem by drawing a border between them and us. This is not an option with the *Mizrahim*. It is this difference that enables the Ashkenazi Left to recognize the Palestinian, but not the *Mizrahi* question. Here lies something that we must look into further. Zionism is a political theory built on a very clear distinction between the *Mizrahi* and the Palestinian questions. The converging of these two questions is one of the most threatening prospects for Zionist nationalism. This could be seen in the 1970's when the Panthers and Matspen movements joined forces. I think that these efforts are sabotaged not only by the government agents planted for that purpose, but by a cultural structure central to the Israeli political system. For example even in the academic world there is a very clear distinction between the historians that deal with the Palestinians and the sociologists that deal with the *Mizrahim*. There is no attempt to integrate the two issues. This is particularly unusual when they address the phenomenon called "population exchange in the Middle East," or the "refugee question". In 1948 the question of "*Mizrahi* refugees" was already on the agenda, at least since Ben Gurion's "one million plan" that he presented in 1941. In research work that I conducted (published in Ha'aretz Apr. 4, '98 as "The Perfect Robbery") I showed how the property of the Palestinian refugees was regarded as being tied to that of the Iraqi Jews. This was well known by the time that Benny Morris published his book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*. Yet Morris did not see fit to mention a word about the connection that existed between these two population groups in the political theory of the Israeli government.

On the other hand there are those who write about the *Mizrahim* from a very critical viewpoint, such as Yosef Meir in his book *Shlichut Yavnieli Leteman* ("Yavnieli's Mission in Yemen"). Meir writes that the attempt to capture the job market with Hebrew labour was the primary incentive behind bringing the Jews from Yemen to Palestine. The mission was to bring Jews who were considered "natural workers", or who worked like Arabs. Though it is obvious that this was all a part of the Zionist nationalist conquest of Palestine, there is not a word in this book about the Palestinian national movement. That is to say that even in the supposedly open world of academic knowledge there are barriers preventing the connection between the *Mizrahi* and Palestinian questions.

When I look at my own biography I find nothing in the formation of my identity more influential than the ethnic issue. My parents are Iraqi. My father was not a Zionist. He came to Palestine in 1941 as a merchant, and he remained. My mother came from Baghdad to Palestine in the 1950's in what was called "*Aliyat* Ezra and Nehemia". I can speak for hours about ambivalence surrounding my identity, creating dilemmas in my childhood between my Israeli identity and my *Mizrahi* – Arab identity. When I brought friends home my mother made it clear to me who were my good friends and who were my bad friends. It was not in anything she said directly. But when I brought home an Ashkenazi friend I received compliments, and when I brought home a *Mizrahi* friend my mother made a face. After a while you get the message and begin to adopt Ashkenazi ways of thinking.

My mother is a woman who knows how to enjoy herself. Arab culture is in her blood. My parents had their circle of friends who would get together every Friday and have a party. They had music playing from the Arabic radio station and the whole neighbourhood could hear it. I would die from embarrassment. I would plea with her, "What are you doing?!".

"What's the matter," she would ask, "this isn't 'culture?' We don't have doctors and lawyers? We don't have music?"

She forgets that during the week she has been sorting out my friends and establishing my own place in the social structure. Almost every *Mizrahi* of my generation tells a similar story of how, on the first Thursday of every month, Um Kul Thum would begin to sing and I would begin to tense up. As the Oriental tones filled the house my mother would gradually make the radio louder and louder and I wouldn't know where to bury myself. I would try to turn the radio off and she would turn it back on and make it even louder. I had become a foreign agent in my own house. This is a result of external socialization that works very effectively. We internalise a very particular kind of logic that I am now trying to understand.

For many years I tried to escape my *Mizrahi* identity and to deny the existence of a *Mizrahi* issue. I adopted the position of the

Ashkenazi Left that identifies with the Palestinian issue and rejects the *Mizrahim*. I went to the United States where I lived comfortably for several years. Upon my return to Israel in 1995, the issue exploded. I was part of a group of second generation *Mizrahim* who founded "*Hakeshet Hademokratit Hamizrahit*" ("The *Mizrahi* Democratic Spectrum") and I began to research the *Mizrahi* issue. The issue did not interest me in the context of a Zionist paradigm. I was not interested in discussing whether or not there is discrimination or a melting pot etc. I wanted to reach the root of the discussion, and I began with Iraqi Jewry. Many books have been written about Iraqi Jewry, but those that address the connection between the Palestinian and *Mizrahi* issues have not been translated to Hebrew. Abbas Shiblak, a Palestinian who wrote about Iraq, made this connection in his book *The Lure of Zion*. This is one example of a book that was never translated to Hebrew. Tough gatekeepers stand at the entrance deciding which literature on the *Mizrahim* can be introduced to the Hebrew reader and which literature will remain outside. Other examples of untranslated work that makes the *Mizrahi* - Palestinian connection are Na'im Giladi's book *Ben Gurion's Scandals*, and Shlomo Svirsky's book *The Seeds of Inequality.*

I began to dig in the archives in order to get a better understanding of the story of the bombs in the Baghdad synagogue. This is a story that many people speak about but no one really knows. In the course of research I came across a fascinating story that ties in to the property of Iraqi Jews. The Zionist movement began to pay attention to *Mizrahi* Jewry in the years 1941 – '42. It was then that Ben Gurion introduced his "one million plan". Anticipating that many Jews will be annihilated by Nazi persecution causing demographic problems for the Zionist movement, Ben Gurion decided that a plan must be introduced based on Jews from Arab lands. In 1950 an agreement was reached with Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri Sa'id, as a result of which a law was passed allowing Jews to forfeit their Iraqi citizenship and leave the country without their property. Of the 120,000 Jews in Iraq, approximately 1,500 registered to leave the country. Around this time, working undercover as representatives of Solel Boneh, Israeli Mossad agents began underground activities in Iraq. All of the sudden there was an explosion in the Mas'uda Shem Tov Synagogue and immediately afterwards 24,000 Jews registered to leave the country. Abbas Shiblak describes in his book how each time there was a fall in registration, another bomb went off followed by another mass exodus. Five of these bombs did the job. In March 1951 the Iraqi parliament decided to expropriate the property of the Iraqi Jews. Shortly thereafter, most of those Jews who had still remained in Iraq left the country in an organized operation and were brought to Tel-Aviv.

What does the State of Israel do with the story of the expropriated Jewish property? In March 1951, Moshe Sharet informed the Knesset that the State of Israel now has an account to settle with Iraq since the latter expropriated the property of its Jewish subjects. The government of Israel allows itself to balance the value of the property that the Palestinians left with the value of the property that was taken from Jews in Arab lands. The connection is made by a political logic, however the basic assumptions behind this interesting linkage are not very clear. What is the connection between Iraqi Jews and Palestinians? How can the State of Israel use the property of Iraqi Jews, which is not even in its hands, to settle the account of another problem that it created?

In order to clarify this issue, I would like to tell you how systems of memory create the *Mizrahi* understanding of the conflict. As I mentioned before, what one or another person thinks is a product of a long history. These systems of memory are mobilized and used to form the insight and positions of people. People's standpoints do not take shape on their own as an individual and rational process. What kind of memory do *Mizrahim* consume regarding the Palestinian issue? We go to many memory sites such as memorials, museums etc. and we consume logic that shapes our viewpoints. I think that a large part of the struggle over multi-culturalism in Israel is a struggle over memory. For example the memory of the holocaust has been taken from the Jews for the benefit of the State of Israel. We see it everywhere. The "marches of life" or the trips of death in which children are sent to visit concentration camps in Poland is a case of the State expropriating memory. This reached the height of absurdity three years ago when General Yosi Ben Hanan suggested that the IDF (Israel Defence Forces) use Auschwitz as a place to conduct initiation ceremonies for its elite units.

Pardon me for dwelling on examples of the holocaust, but here the examples are so obvious that they work best in making my point. In 1952 the government of Israel conducted a discussion on the proposition of establishing Yad Vashem. In the course of this discussion Ben Gurion suggested granting Israeli citizenship, or a "citizenship of memory" to all Jews who died in the holocaust. What is the story behind this idea of automatic and virtual Israeli citizenship? Naturally there is the element of our identifying with those who suffered from the holocaust. But the point here is how the holocaust is used for political ends. We could speak about how memorial sites paradoxically isolate memory. Memorial sites are certainly not about individual memories and in fact they are not about memory at all. Driven by an external logic that isolates and constantly reproduces a particular memory, these sites are ultimately more concerned with forgetting then with remembering.

Regarding the *Mizrahi* issue, which is connected to the Palestinian issue, it is important to understand how memory works. The *Mizrahim*, as opposed to the Palestinians, have a very ambivalent attitude towards Zionist nationalism. And Zionist nationalism has a very ambivalent attitude towards the *Mizrahim*. There is tension between processes of inclusion and exclusion in relations between Jewish nationalism and *Mizrahim*. It is as if we are told, "You are one of us, but a distant relative." That is to say you are almost like the Ashkenazim - but not exactly. As opposed to the Palestinians, you are a part of the collective. However within the Zionist nationalist movement you are marginal and have become ethicised.

In a letter to the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, Hanna Arendt once wrote (paraphrased) "I'm worried. Adenauer has decided to regard 1945 as the 'Zero Hour'. That means that at the moment the war ended all of the Germans have become normal. Seventy million Germans have become normal and the only remaining Nazi is the Mufti of Jerusalem." Looking at Zionist historiography we can see how nationalist logic creates memory to its convenience. Seventy million Germans have in fact been exonerated while the Mufti still remains a Nazi.

In 1941 there was a pogrom in Baghdad. In this pogrom, known as the *farhud*, 160 Jews and 70 Muslims were killed. On the basis of evidence we have today it is known that the British were interested in entering the city, and that British soldiers were involved in provoking the violence. They waited 48 hours allowing a degree of anarchy to reign before making their move. It was classic colonial practice. Apropos memory, it would be interesting to see how Iraqi Jews who were there see this event in retrospect. The Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center is now publishing a book entitled *Sin'at Hayehudim Ufra'ot Be'iraq* ("Hatred of the Jews, and the Pogroms in Iraq"). In this book the *farhud* is described as part of the events of the holocaust. The centre even sent a letter to the Ministry of Education asking why the holocaust in Baghdad is not a major part of the State history program. All of this is part of the *Mizrahi* aspiration to be included in the Jewish national collective by taking part in the civil religion called the holocaust.

In my opinion the connection of the *Mizrahim* to the political right is circumstantial and not essentialist. *Mizrahim* are not by nature any more right wing, nationalist, or excitable than the Ashkenazim. The historical pact between the Right and the *Mizrahim* is generally attributed to Menahem Begin's climb to power in 1977. Though this was in fact a significant change, the more important turning point was in 1967. This is the *Mizrahim*'s formative year. They missed out on the war of 1948 since most of them had not yet arrived in the country. The 1967 War was the *Mizrahim*'s first opportunity to prove their loyalty to the State of Israel. Because of the intensity of the conflict the *Mizrahim* had to prove that they were holier than the Pope. We are all familiar with the efforts that *Mizrahim* make in order to avoid being mistaken for Arabs. How many wear a Jewish Star or a "Hai" around their neck, and how many wear a kipa on their head for national rather than religious motives? Internalised oppression is at least partially responsible for the very nationalist positions that *Mizrahim* have adopted. I can find nothing else that might explain why *Mizrahim* are more nationalist than Ashkenazim.

Finally I would like to say that there is something misleading in the Zionist Left's attempt to end the conflict by separation from the Palestinians. Sami Samoha expressed this well in his call to adopt the Swiss model, ending the struggle over total territorial domination. Zionism, after all, is a colonialist movement built on concepts of Orientalism, negating the East. The question is whether these concepts will disappear once there is peace. Will Arab culture and identity suddenly gain respect in the eyes of the European Jews who have settled in Israel? The negation of the East and the crystallization of western culture within Zionism is a powerful driving force. As Edward Said expressed it, the East serves as a wall, or as "the other" which the West uses in order to define itself. What kind of peace will bring the European Ashkenazi Jew to suddenly like the East?

When Matan Vilnai became the Minister of Cultural Affairs he asked Professor Zohar Shavit to prepare a report about policies regarding cultural matters for the year 2002. We interviewed her about the decision by Yosi Sarid to add poetry by Mahmoud Darwish to the educational program. Sarid had said that the poetry chosen was lyrical, or light poetry. This reflects the attempt to depoliticise every subject. Zohar Shavit added that before introducing Mahmoud Darwish and Sami Michael, students must learn Bialik and Amichai – in other words the canonized assets of Israeli culture. Bialik was born in Odessa, Darwish was born in Birweh (Palestine), and Michael was born in Baghdad, but Bialik is considered more Israeli than the other two. By placing Darwish and Michael together, Shavit, with a slip of the tongue, exposed what Zionism constantly tries to hide i.e. the connection between the Zionist movement's attitude towards the *Mizrahim* and towards the Arabs.

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Spineless Bookkeeping: The Use of Mizrahi Jews as Pawns against Palestinian Refugees

By: Yehouda Shenhav

In the last three years, we have witnessed an intensive campaign aimed at winning political and legal recognition of Arab Jews as "refugees." The aim of this campaign is to create symmetry in public opinion between the Palestinian refugees and the "Oriental" Jews who arrived to Israeli in the 50s and 60s, presenting both populations as victims of the 1948 war. The Foreign Ministry, under the leadership of Deputy Minister Danny Ayalon, is intensively collecting evidence which would offset – as if it were an algebra equation – the testimonies of Palestinians regarding expulsion, looting and killings.

A couple of years ago, the Knesset passed a law ordering every Israeli government that deals with Arab representatives (i.e. Palestinians) to treat the Jews of Arab origin as refugees. Several weeks ago, the National Security Council published a paper recommending the government "create a linkage between the Palestinian refugees and the Jews of Arab origin." Former head of the NSC Uzi Arad decided upon his appointment to lead a special team that would come up with the official Israeli policy on "the Jewish refugees of Arab counties."

Arad has received Prime Minister Netanyahu's blessing for his initiative. He set up a special body inside the NSC and had representatives from the Ministry of Justice, the Finance Ministry

and the Foreign Ministry join the discussions. Historians, economists and representatives of Jewish organizations such as WOJAC (World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries) and JJAC (Justice for Jews from Arab Countries) were invited as well. The council recommended that the prime minister make the "Jewish refugees" and their compensations claims an inseparable part of the negotiations over the issue of Palestinian refugees.

Calls to define Jews from Arab countries as refugees were made in the past, but back then, they were silenced by Israeli governments. Why the change of policy? Partly due to a relatively new recognition that Israel will no longer be able to hide its responsibility for the Nakba.

The Foreign Ministry's bookkeeper's trick betrays the fear of the Palestinian claim of compensation and return – a central tenet of Palestinian demands. It proves that Israeli recognizes that the '67 paradigm will not bring an end to the conflict, due to its denial of the Nakba. As a result of this recognition, the leaders of the new campaign hope to use the Mizrahi Jews to block the Palestinians from carrying out their "right of return," and offset the compensation claims might be forced to pay for the Palestinian property that was expropriated by the Custodian of Absentee Property (the Israeli authority that confiscates and manages Palestinian property, most notably real estate). It is an idea that is historically twisted, unwise from a policy perspective and unjust from a moral point of view – as its history demonstrates.

A miserable history worth reciting

The campaign for the recognition of Jews from Arab countries as refugees was launched by no other than President Bill Clinton, during an interview he gave to Israeli Channel 1 in July, 2000. Ehud Barak, then the prime minister, declared this "achievement" in an interview to Israeli journalist Dan Margalit a month later.

Until then, Israeli governments had avoided recognizing Jews from Arab countries as refugees. They did so because (a) of the fear that such a declaration would reawaken what Israel had tried to erase and forget – the right of return; (b) a concern that Jews might submit compensation claims to Arab countries, and as a result – bring about lawsuits by Palestinians against Israel; and (c) because such a decision would have forced the state to update all of its history books, forming a new narrative according to which Mizrahi Jews didn't come to Israel due to Zionism, but against their will. Any historian raising such a claim would have been labeled a "post-Zionist."

The idea to equate Mizrahi Jews with Palestinian refugees was first cooked up by Bobby Brown, government advisor for diaspora affairs, and members of his office, along with representatives of organizations like the World Jewish Congress, the World Sephardi Federation, and the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Avi Beker, the secretary general of the Jewish Congress, and Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, convinced Professor Ervin Cotler, a Canadian member of parliament and expert in international law, to join the campaign. An umbrella organization was established, called "Justice for Jews from Arab Countries." However, it did not manage to garner much excitement for the campaign, including from among the Jewish world. The campaign failed to enlist a notable declaration from central Israeli politicians until recently. That's not surprising. This campaign has a miserable history that should be internatlized, because history can come in very handy.

In the 1980s, the World Organization for Jews from Arab Countries – WOJAC – was established. Yigal Alon, then foreign minister, feared that WOJAC would serve as a greenhouse for what he called "sectorial organizing." Again, WOJAC wasn't established in order to help Mizrahi Jews but rather to create a deterrent to block demands from the national Palestinian movement – primarily the demand to compensate refugees, and the right of return. The use of the term "refugees" wasn't unreasonable, as the term had become central in the historical discourse and in international law, following World War II. UN Security Council Resolution 242, passed in 1967, referred to a "just settlement of the refugee problem" in the Middle East. In the 1970s, Arab states asked to specifically refer to "Arab refugees in the Middle East," but the U.S. government, through Ambassador to the UN Arthur Goldberg, opposed it.

In a working paper prepared in 1977 by Cyrus Vance, then the secretary of state, ahead of a possible Geneva Conference meeting, he wrote about the pressure to find a solution to the "refugee problem," without mentioning which refugees he was referring to. WOJAC, which had tried to put into use the term "Jewish refugees," had failed. In addition to Arabs, many Zionist Jews all over the world were opposed to the initiative. I recommend that the organizers of the current campaign examine the anatomy of the organization that went from Zionist to post-Zionist in the course of its activities, and to take a page from the laws of political action's unintended consequences.

The thinker behind the idea of "Jewish refugees" in WOJAC was Ya'akov Meron, the head of the department for Arab legal affairs in the Justice Ministry. Meron formulated the link in the most extreme thesis regarding the history of the Jews of the Arab world. He claimed that the Jews were expelled from the Arab countries in an act coordinated with Palestinian leaders, and called it "ethnic cleansing." Meron sharply diverged from the Zionist epos, which he said produced romantic terms like "Magic Carpet" [the operation that brought Yemeni Jews to Israel] or "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah" [the airlift that brought Iraqi Jews], suppressing the "fact" that the departure of the Jews was the fruit of an "Arab policy of expulsion." In order to complete the analogy between Palestinians and Mizrahis, WOJAC's people even claimed that the Mizrahis lived in refugee camps during the 1950s (referring to transit camps for Jewish immigrants), just like the Palestinian refugees. This claim sparked angry complaints on the part of figures in the state's founding institutions, which termed it "treason."

Refugees and free will

The Foreign Ministry, which became alarmed by WOJAC's tenacity, proposed to put an end to the campaign, claiming that classifying the Mizrahi Jews as refugees was a double-edged sword. At the time, Israel insisted upon maintaining a policy of ambiguity regarding this complex issue. In 1949, the state rejected a joint proposal by Britain and Iraq for a population swap (Iraqi Jews for Palestinian refugees), out of fear that it would have to be responsible for settling "surplus refugees" in Israel. The Foreign Ministry called WOJAC divisive and separatist, asking the organization to cease acting independently in opposition to state interests. In the end, the Foreign Ministry cut off funding to the organization. Justice Minister Yossi Beilin even fired Ya'akov Meron from the Justice Ministry's department for Arab legal affairs.

It must be stated that there is no serious researcher in Israel or outside it that adopted the organization's extreme rhetoric. Moreover, in its attempt to strengthen the Zionist thesis and assist the state in its war against Palestinian nationalists, WOJAC achieved the exact opposite. It presented a confused Zionist stance vis-a-vis the conflict, angered many Mizrahi Jews across the world – as it presented them as lacking motivation to move to Israel – and enslaved the interests of the Mizrahi Jews (especially over the issue of Jewish property in Arab countries) to what he accidentally termed "national interests." He failed to understand that categorizing Mizrahi Jews as refugees opens a Pandora's box that hurts both Jews and Arab.

Out of a desire to find a magic solution to the question of the refugees, the state readopted the formula, and is now promoting it with great enthusiasm all over the world. It will be interesting to hear the position of the Minister of Education regarding the narrative that the Jewish organizations present as part of the campaign. Will he immediately establish a ministerial committee to change the history textbooks so that they match the new post-Zionist genre? Every honest person, whether Zionist or not, must admit that the analogy between the Palestinians and the Mizrahi Jews is baseless. The Palestinian refugees did not ask to leave Palestine. In 1948, many Palestinian villages were destroyed, and nearly 750,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from the borders of historic Palestine. Those who fled did not leave out of their own free will.

On the other hand, Jews from Arab countries arrived here through the initiative of the State of Israel, as well as Jewish organizations. Some of them arrived out of free will, some against their will. Some of them lived comfortably in Arab countries, and some lived in fear and under oppression. The history of the Mizrahi immigration is complex and cannot be resigned to one simplistic explanation. Many lost a great deal of property, and there is no doubt that they should be allowed to submit individual property claims against Arab countries, something Israel and WOJAC have rejected until today. For instance, the peace agreement with Egypt does not allow individual property claims against the Egyptian government. Jewish property is seen as the property of the State of Israel, and as important leverage to offset the future claims of Palestinian refugees.

Another example: During the Gulf War, the property of a Jewish-Iraqi family in Ramat Gan suffered damages. In their compensation claim, a seasoned attorney advised the family to include a house that had been confiscated by the Iraqi government in 1952. Israel's Foreign Ministry forbade the move, due to the state's policy of holding onto such property as leverage for future negotiations with the Palestinians.

The analogy between the Palestinian refugees and the Jewish Mizrahis is thus baseless, not to mention offensive and immoral. It serves to cause friction between Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians, it is an insult to a great number of Mizrahim and harms chances for real reconciliation. More than that: the analogy points to a clear lack of understanding regarding the meaning of the Nakba. The Nakba does not only refer to the events of the war. The Nakba is, at its core, the prevention of those who were expelled from returning to their homes, lands and families after the establishment of the State of Israel. The Nakba is an active and clear policy of the State of Israel – not just the chaos of war.

The temptation to use this concept of offsetting claims is understandable, but we cannot use scarecrows in order to refute the moral and political demands of the Palestinians. Such manipulation only worsens the crime and increases the psychological gap between Jews and Palestinians. Even if some of the Palestinians give up on realizing the right of return (as, for example, Dr. Khalil Shikaki claims), such tricks are not the way to achieve this end. Every peace agreement must be based on Israeli acknowledgement of past injustices and finding a fair solution. These accounting tricks turn Israel into a morally and politically spineless bookkeeper.

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From +972 Blog, September 25, 2012

From SHU 556, November 21, 2012

Almog Behar: Iraqi Jews Reject 'Cynical Manipulation' of Their History by Israel

By: Ali Abunimah

"It is far from the first instance of tampering with, exploiting, and deleting our history, but it is the straw that broke the camel's back, and so … we formed the Committee of Baghdadi Jews in Ramat-Gan."

This is how writer, poet and activist Almog Behar described a decision by a group of Jews from Arab and Kurdish backgrounds to speak out forcefully against renewed Israeli government propaganda efforts to counter Palestinian refugee

rights by using the claims of Jews who left Arab countries for Israel in the 1950s.

Israeli diplomats, *Haaretz* reported last week, "have been instructed to raise the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries at every relevant forum. This is part of a new international campaign to create parity between the plight of Jewish and Palestinian refugees, Deputy Foreign Minister Daniel Ayalon announced on Monday."

"The way the Israeli establishment uses our history from the 1950s, is not in order to give us our rights back, but in order to get rid of the rights of the Palestinians, and avoiding a peace agreement with them," Behar wrote to The Electronic Intifada.

The idea is that Palestinian refugee and property rights are negated by equivalent claims from Jews from Arab countries, thus absolving Israel of having to make any restitution to Palestinians. Jews who left Iraq and some other Arab countries in the 1950s for Israel were deprived of their property and citizenship.

But in an extraordinary statement posted on Facebook last week, the newly-formed Committee of Baghdadi Jews in Ramat-Gan, of which Behar is a founding member, hit back:

We are seeking to demand compensation for our lost property and assets from the Iraqi government - NOT from the Palestinian Authority - and we will not agree with the option that compensation for our property be offset by compensation for the lost property of others (meaning, Palestinian refugees) or that said compensation be transferred to bodies that do not represent us (meaning, the Israeli government).

The statement went on to demand an investigation of Israel's complicity in the departure of Iraqi Jews from their homeland including in terrorist acts against Jews:

We demand the establishment of an investigative committee to examine:

1) If and by what means negotiations were carried out in 1950 between Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri as-Said, and if Ben-Gurion informed as-Said that he is authorized to take possession of the property and assets of Iraqi Jewry if he agreed to send them to Israel;

2) who ordered the bombing of the Masouda Shem-Tov synagogue in Baghdad, and if the Israeli Mossad and/or its operatives were involved. If it is determined that Ben-Gurion did, in fact, carry out negotiations over the fate of Iraqi Jewish property and assets in 1950, and directed the Mossad to bomb the community's synagogue in order to hasten our flight from Iraq, we will file a suit in an international court demanding half of the sum total of compensation for our refugee status from the Iraqi government and half from the Israeli government.

The role of Israel and Zionist undercover agents in helping precipitate the departure of Jews from Iraq has long been suspected.

Naiem Giladi, an Iraqi Jew who joined the Zionist underground as a young man in Iraq and later came to regret his role in fostering the departure of some 125,000 Jews from Iraq, wrote that, "Zionist propagandists still maintain that the bombs in Iraq were set off by anti-Jewish Iraqis who wanted Jews out of their country." But "the terrible truth," Giladi said, "is that the grenades that killed and maimed Iraqi Jews and damaged their property were thrown by Zionist Jews."

Giladi, who was born Naeim Khalaschi, gave his account in an article published by Americans for Middle East Understanding in 1998 which summarizes his book, *Ben Gurion's Scandals: How the Haganah and the Mossad eliminated Jews*.

After being sentenced to death in Iraq for his Zionist activities, Giladi fled to Israel. Because his native language was Arabic, Giladi was assigned to assist the Israeli military occupation authorities expel Palestinians from their homes in al-Majdal ("Ashkelon") by pressuring them to sign documents stating they were leaving to Gaza willingly:

I was there and heard their grief. "Our hearts are in pain when we look at the orange trees that we planted with our own hands. Please let us go, let us give water to those trees. God will not be pleased with us if we leave His trees untended." I asked the Military Governor to give them relief, but he said, "No, we want them to leave."

I could no longer be part of this oppression and I left. Those Palestinians who didn't sign up for transfers were taken by force—just put in trucks and dumped in Gaza.

Giladi, who died in 2010, served in the Israeli army from 1967-70, but then became active in the anti-Zionist Black Panther movement of Mizrahi Jews, and eventually abandoned Israeli citizenship and moved to the United States. He gave this hour-long interview in 1994.

I asked Behar by email to provide more background on the formation of the Committee of Baghdadi Jews in Ramat-Gan. Behar said he shared my questions with members of the committee and compiled and translated their answers.

Can you tell me more about the Ramat Gan Committee of Baghdadi Jews? When was it founded? Who does it involve?

The committee was founded because of the Deputy Foreign Minster's refugee campaign, but it will deal with other issues. We decided to establish the Committee of Baghdadi Jews in Ramat-Gan following the attempt by the Deputy Foreign Minister

and the Government of Israel to take advantage of our history in their cynical political manipulation.

It is far from the first instance of tampering with, exploiting, and deleting our history, but it is the straw that broke the camel's back, and so yesterday morning we formed the Committee of Baghdadi Jews in Ramat-Gan.

The committee includes young and old, men and women, from Baghdad (and from Mosul and Basra), as well as some who were born in this country, in the first, second, and third generations, and those with mixed Kurdish and Moroccan ancestry.

We began the committee in order to reclaim our history and our culture (and of course our property), and to prevent others, including Zionist movements and the State of Israel, from possessing it for themselves.

So, we wrote our statement on September 14th in response to the government, and we will continue to be vigilant on a daily basis in the act of claiming our history. We believe that as a multigenerational Iraqi-Jewish community, we can write the story of our past, present, and future in Iraq and in Israel.

How widespread are the sentiments which the statement expresses?

We believe that those sentiments are very widespread among Iraqi Jews – of course more among the older generation, that is less affected by Israeli propaganda, and remembers more the Iraqi past – and knows that our property in Iraq is something between us and Iraq, and not between us and the Palestinians, and remembers also that most of Palestinian property from 1948 was taken by the Ashkenazim and the state, and not by Jews of the Arab world.

We believe that there should be a direct dialoge between Jews of the Arab world and the Arab states, and we hope that after a peace agreement the question of our property will be solved.

But the way the Israeli establishment uses our history from the 1950s, is not in order to give us our rights back, but in order to get rid of the rights of the Palestinians, and avoiding a peace agreement with them.

We do not want to be used, nor our history and personal stories to be used. We hope that the Arab world will understand that a dialouge with us, even before a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, is important to it too. We are a part of Arab memory and history and culture, and it is wrong of the Arab world to forget our part in it, exactly as it was wrong of Israel to ask us to erase our Arabness or forget our past and language.

Were you aware of the account of Naeim Giladi?

We didn't know Naeim Giladi's work, but of course what happened in Iraq in the 1950s is an open wound for us, and we wish an investigation about the connections between Nuri as-Said and Ben-Gurion.

From Electronic Intifada, September 17, 2012

From SHU 555, November 14, 2012

The Truth about the Expulsion of Arab Jews

By: Esther Meir-Glitzenstein

The Foreign Ministry's campaign to recognize early Jewish immigrants to Israel from Arab countries as refugees has faced a fair amount of criticism in Haaretz's pages. Haaretz writer Gideon Levy sees it as a new level of Israeli chutzpah and asks how it's possible that after being told for generations that immigration from Arab countries was motivated by Zionism, it suddenly turns out to have been nothing but a wave of refugees ("How many homelands do the Israelis get to have?" September 20, 2012).

Daniel Zirlin sees the campaign as "a bad move from a Zionist perspective" that does more harm than good. He writes that if the Jews of Arab countries arrived as immigrants, thus fulfilling the Zionist dream, they cannot simultaneously be considered refugees. He says the most damaging part of this assertion is that it weakens Zionism and gives ammunition to its opponents (Letters to the Editor, September 13).

Israeli civil rights activist Yifat Bitton sees the campaign as just another way to exploit the Mizrahim and take away their rights. She claims many Jews from Arab countries came to Israel because of religious-messianic convictions (like Yemeni Jews) or Zionism (like Iraqi Jews). So, she says, they cannot be seen as refugees. On the other hand, she criticizes the idea of equating the financial claims of Jewish and Palestinian refugees, arguing it belittles the Jewish refugee's claim ("Another way to discriminate against Mizrahim," September 20).

These statements show an ignorance of or lack of interest in the history of the Jews of Arab countries. Jews did not leave Yemen based on a religious-messianic vision, nor did the Jews of Iraq immigrate to Israel because of Zionist agitation. In general, the Jews of Arab countries acted based on rational considerations, just like other Jews around the world.

Then there's the idea that the State of Israel must decide why and how the Jews of Arab countries came to Israel and, based on that decision, determine whether they're immigrants or refugees. "The Jews immigrated, willingly or unwillingly – Israel has yet to decide on that one," writes Levy. He gives the right to decide to MK Ahmed Tibi (Ta'al), quoting his question, "How many homelands do you have?" Tibi ignores the fact that all the immigrants, expellees and refugees have or had more than one homeland at various times in their lives.

But the biggest and most important players, the Jew of Arab countries themselves, are not part of the discussion. When they arrived in Israel, they were forced to erase their language and culture, as well as their ancient and recent pasts, and adopt the Zionist ideology that portrayed them as immigrants. During the 1950s, the State of Israel was unwilling to recognize that the proposed solution to the Jewish question in Europe had caused a terrible conflict that endangered the existence of the ancient Jewish communities in Arab countries. It still doesn't recognize this today. It puts the blame for the situation on the Arab countries, which began attacks against the Jewish state and against the Jews of Arab countries at the same time.

But beyond this political debate, the United Nations resolution of November 29, 1947 was indeed a watershed, which forced the Jews of Arab countries into the conflict over the Land of Israel and made them into hostages in their native lands. The pogrom against the Jews of Aden, Yemen, which broke out at the beginning of December 1947, resulted not only in dozens of Jewish deaths, but also in economic destruction. In its wake, most of the Jews of Aden, who were not Zionists, were forced to immigrate to Israel. Libyan Jews also endured pogroms in 1945 and in 1948, which killed and wounded Jews and destroyed their community's economic infrastructure. When, in January 1949, the British authorities announced they would allow the Jews to leave, 30,000 of Libya's Jews chose to go to Italy and from there to Israel, the only place that would accept them.

Fifty thousand Yemenite Jews left in May 1949, as a result of cooperation between the imam and British rulers of Yemen, social and economic oppression, inferior legal status, forced conversion of orphans to Islam and humiliations rooted in laws and customs combined with attacks related to political upheavals and fears of the fallout of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In complete contradiction of the Israeli myth that they arrived by "Magic Carpet," the price of their immigration was heavy in the extreme, in terms of both human life and property. Many of them died on the way out of Yemen. Hundreds more died at Yemen's border, in the long weeks when it was closed to Jews, and yet hundreds more died in refugee camps in Aden. Those who got out left most of their property behind, and the little they had managed to take with them was stolen from them during the journey.

The largest group – 125,000 Jews – arrived from Iraq. What led them to Israel was neither Zionist propaganda nor Zionist agitation but rather their transformation into hostages whose fate was made conditional on the fate of the Palestinian refugees. The Jews of Iraq feared becoming the victims of a second round of the war between Israel and the Arab states. The law that permitted their departure from Iraq was no ordinary immigration law. It created a short one-year window to leave, required renouncing the right to return to Iraq, failed to mention that the government would seize the property of many departing Jews and did not allow registrants to change their minds about leaving. Many Jews saw Iraq as their homeland, but even anti-Zionist Jewish communists, who were jailed in Iraqi prisons, were forced onto airplanes bound for Israel. Their property was taken only after they had registered for departure and renounced their Iraqi citizenship.

The Jews of Egypt suffered an expulsion in 1956, while the Jews who remained in Iraq faced persecutions and executions after 1967 and fled via Kurdistan and Iran. The small Jewish community of Syria also suffered terrible persecution for decades until its members were allowed to leave in the 1990s.

Of course, this is not the whole story of the Jews of Arab countries. The story is far more expansive, complex and varied. It certainly also invovled Zionism and religious yearning, but even those Jews who started out as immigrants, whether out of Zionist motives or not, were transformed into refugees along the way. They arrived in Israel impoverished and destitute.

The story of the immigration of Jews of Arab countries has never been seriously studied. Even as it was happening, Israel used it to strengthen the Zionist ethos, forcing the new arrivals into silence. The desire to belong motivated many of the immigrants to eagerly adopt the Zionist myth, helping to mute the real story of their uprooting. Now Israeli officials have decided to put the story to a new, completely different use. It seems that even now, they are not doing so for the benefit the Jews of Arab countries. Maybe the time has come for the story to be studied seriously, its events examined outside of any campaign, and the voices of the Jews most affected to be considered.

Dr. Esther Meir-Glitzenstein teaches at Ben-Gurion University. Her book, "The Exodus of the Yemenite Jews − A Failed Operation and a Formative Myth," was published by Resling.

From Haaretz, October 9, 2012

From SHU 557, November 28, 2012

Telling Tales: Personal Thoughts on the Arab-Jewish Refugee Question

By: Joyce Zonana

I am the daughter of Egyptian Jewish immigrants to the United States. I was born in Cairo and grew up in Brooklyn, where my parents settled after leaving everything behind in Egypt – possessions, social position, relatives, friends. For many years, my family struggled to establish itself in this new land where Arab Jewishness appeared to be an oxymoron and where their old skills and talents were of little value. My father, who had been a lawyer in Cairo, could not use his credentials here and ended up laboring for many years as a minor clerk in a small business. My mother never got the hang of socializing with her Italian and Irish and Ashkenazi Jewish neighbors. And I, deracinated and disturbed, dropped out of college and spent many years in the darkness of severe depressions. Yet, despite our difficulties, I do not feel any need to seek compensation for our losses nor any desire to balance our sufferings against those of Palestinians. I am not interested in reparations or redress. I am, in fact, deeply troubled by recent Israeli and

American efforts to use the fate of Arab Jews as a pawn in putative negotiations towards peace.

As early as 1994, Ada Aharoni, who has served as President of the World Congress of Jews from Egypt, sought in her autobiographical novel, *From the Nile to the Jordan*, to bring attention to what is now being called the "plight" of Arab Jews:

> Why is it that the historic facts about the banishment of the Jews from Egypt and the other Arab countries are so little known to the world? People knew more about the First Exodus which happened two thousand years ago than the Second Exodus which is happening and has happened in their own time! How come they know about the fleeing of the 600,000 Palestinians from Israel so well and nothing about the banishment of close to a million Jews from the Arab countries where we had been living for more than two thousand years? Why does no one seem to know all our property was stolen or confiscated . . . ? (112-3)

A little further on, Aharoni's central character, Inbar Mosseri, a stand-in for herself, prays gratefully for having been delivered "from the house of bondage in Egypt then and now" (131).

The house of bondage in Egypt? A Second Exodus? I remember flinching when I first read those words, and they still make me bristle. Nothing I had ever heard, from my parents or my huge extended family of relatives (who settled, ultimately, in the U.S., Israel, Brazil, Colombia, England and France) had ever suggested that Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century had been a "house of bondage" for Jews, nor that our departure should be construed as a "deliverance." To the contrary, what my family recalled was an almost impossible paradise, a jasmine-scented heaven on earth where life was easy and the Jewish community flourished. As a character in another novel about Egyptian Jews, Ronit Matalon's *The One Facing Us*, exclaims, "'Egypt, you know what is Egypt? Good life, good people, good country, no Holocaust'" (252). That is the Egypt my family knew, the Egypt they continued to celebrate daily in their language, cooking, music, and customs, the Egypt to which I have been warmly welcomed back when I have returned again and again for visits in recent years.

Yes, we left. Perhaps we even *had* to leave. My father made his decision early in 1946, a few months after anti-Jewish violence erupted in Cairo on the anniversary of the Balfour Declaration. A peaceful anti-Zionist demonstration had apparently transformed into an anti-Jewish riot. The Ashkenazi synagogue on al-Noubi Street was pillaged and set ablaze, Jewish-owned department stores in the elegant downtown were looted, and shouts of "Down with the Jews, down with colonization," echoed through the city. On the second day of the riots, Jewish shops on my grandparents' street were stoned. My father, a timid and cautious (and far-sighted) man, applied for a visa to enter the U.S. as an immigrant. Our turn came in 1951.

I was born in 1949. During much of the year that my mother was pregnant with me, anti-Jewish violence escalated in the aftermath of the establishment of the State of Israel. In June of 1948, a bomb killed twenty-two Jews in the ancient Jewish neighborhood, *harat al-yahud*; in July, after what was believed to be an Israeli bombing in a residential neighborhood, militant Egyptians marched on *harat al-yahud* and set fire to a synagogue. During July and August, four Jewish-owned department stores in Cairo's downtown--a few blocks from the apartment where my mother grew up and where her parents still lived--were bombed and looted. Then, in September, nineteen Jews were killed and forty-two wounded during another attack on *harat al-yahud*. My mother remembers hearing those shouts of "down with the Jews," while she was confined to her bed during the pregnancy.

Yet these were not the stories that my parents told me when they reminisced about their past; these were not the memories that defined their experience of Egypt. I only learned these facts through my reading and research; I had to pry their recollections of anti-Semitic violence from them. Based on the chronology and context, it seemed evident to me that such attitudes and incidents, bad as they might be, were a *reaction* to the establishment of Israel and the expulsion of Palestinians from their lands—along with, let's not forget, *attacks* on Egypt by Israel. Anti-Semitism in the Middle East and North Africa grew from anti-Zionism, and anti-Zionism was perhaps first and foremost anti-colonialism. The departure (expulsion, emigration, "rescue," call it what you will, and it was different in different cases) of Arab Jews from the countries of North Africa and the Middle East would have never happened if there hadn't *first* been the occupation of Palestinian land and the displacement of Palestinian people.

"No Holocaust," the father in *The One Facing Us* emphatically and definitively declares about Egypt. For many years, I searched for fiction and memoir about the lives of North African and Middle Eastern Jews in the twentieth century. Narratives of the Holocaust and of Ashkenazi Jews were of course (and rightly so) in wide circulation, but I was looking for the stories within which I might find my own image. Could it be that Arab Jewish (and, for me, Egyptian Jewish) writers could not find their voices (or their publishers or distributors) in a world still struggling to come to terms with the atrocities in Europe? Where could our narratives fit in? Were our experiences even important in the context of so much Jewish suffering in Europe? Ada Aharoni and Ronit Matalon were among the first to break the silence in the 1990s; they were soon followed by others. But while Matalon explicitly rejects any analogy between the fate of Europe's Jews and those of the Middle East, Aharoni actively encourages it, calling one night of rioting in Cairo "a real *Kristall Nacht*," and offering a romance between her heroine Inbar and a concentration camp survivor named Raoul Lipsky. Inbar worries that her own experiences of suffering cannot match those of Raoul. They don't.

Yet in latching on to the "Justice for Jews of Arab Countries" movement, attempting to create a parallel between their experiences and those of Palestians, Egyptians and other Arab Jews imagine that they have found a way—spurious though it may be—to valorize their own lives, to give them a place in world history. It is a disingenuous and disturbing move—childish at best, cynical and manipulative at worst.

Lucette Lagnado, in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, reports that Danny Ayalon, Israel's deputy foreign minister, "has decided to make the Arab-Jewish refugees part of any negotiations" with Palestinians. Now we are suddenly "refugees," despite the fact that most of us are comfortably established and flourishing in our new lives—often after years of having been actively discriminated against, not by Muslims or Christians but by Ashkenazi Jews! Lagnado also cites Middle East scholar Fouad Ajami, who claims that the 800,000 Arab Jews "have a story to tell."

Yes, we do have a story to tell. Many stories. But they are not those currently being told for and about us by the political interests that seek to deny Palestinians *their* authentic narratives. Each of our tales will be distinctive and unique, emerging from the complex context of the rich Middle Eastern culture from which we derive: therein lies their value, not in any weighing of one story against another.