

Rupture and Return: The Shaping of a Mizrahi Epistemology

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ABSTRACT: *"Rupture and Return" challenges the ghettoized nationalist analytical framework for understanding Mizrahi identity. Although, it suggests that Mizrahi identity was "invented" within the process of the Zionist invention of the "Jewish Nation", it also proposes a diasporized analysis that situates Mizrahi culture and history within a different conceptual framework, one formulated within a multi-chronotopic notion of temporality and space. In this meta-historical essay, the author suggests the contours of an intellectual/institutional space for critical analysis called here "Mizrahi Studies". It re-articulates a Mizrahi perspective within a multicultural methodological approach, one entailing a relational understanding of culture as well as a non-finalized and conjunctural definition of identity as a polysemic site of contradictory positionalities.*

Eurocentric norms of scholarship have had dire consequences for the representation of Palestinian and Mizrahi histories and identities. In my previous publications I explored the historical, political, and discursive links between the question of Palestine and the Mizrahi question and argued for the importance of a scholarship investigating such links. Here, I will focus on the processes and discourses that have led to the erasure of such links, specifically through the hegemony of an isolationist approach to the study of "Jewish History". I will examine some of the foundational premises and substratal axioms of the Zionist master-narrative concerning "Mizrahim". (The terminology itself will be the object of such an investigation). Writing a critical Mizrahi historiography in the wake of colonialism and nationalism - both Arab and Jewish - requires the dismantling of a number of master-narratives. I will attempt to disentangle the complexities of the Mizrahi question by unsettling the conceptual borders erected by more than a century of Zionist discourse, with its fatal binarisms of savagery versus civilization, tradition versus modernity, East versus West and Arab versus Jew. This paper forms part of a larger project in which I attempt to chart a beginning for a Mizrahi epistemology by examining the terminological

This essay synthesizes and reworks ideas, arguments and methodologies that I have been elaborating in numerous scholarly publications over the past two decades. Some of these publications are referenced here in the footnotes.

paradigms, the conceptual aporias and the methodological inconsistencies plaguing diverse fields of hegemonic scholarship concerning Arab-Jews and/or Mizrahim.

Central to Zionist thinking was the concept of “Kibbutz Galuiot” - the “ingathering of the exiles”. Following two millennia of “homelessness” and living presumably “outside of history”, Jews could once again “enter history” as subjects, as “normal” actors on the world stage by returning to their ancient birth place, Eretz Israel. In this way, Jews were thought to heal a deformative rupture produced by exilic existence. This transformation of “Migola le’Geula” - from Diaspora to redemption - offered a teleological reading of Jewish History in which Zionism formed a redemptive vehicle for the renewal of Jewish life on a demarcated terrain, no longer simply spiritual and textual,¹ but rather national and political. A corollary of the notion of Jewish “return” and continuity in Israel was the idea of rupture and discontinuity with diasporic existence. In order to be transformed into “New Jews” (later Israelis), the “Diasporic Jews” had to abandon their diasporic – galuti - culture, which, in the case of Arab-Jews, meant abandoning Arabness and acquiescing in assimilationist modernization, for “their own good”, of course. Within this Promethean rescue narrative, the concepts of “ingathering” and “modernization” naturalized and glossed over the epistemological violence generated by the Zionist vision of the New Jew.² This rescue narrative also elided Zionism’s own role in provoking ruptures, dislocations and fragmentation, not only for Palestinian lives but also—in a different way—for Middle Eastern/North African Jews. These ruptures were not only physical (the movement across borders), but also cultural (a rift in relation to previous cultural affiliations) as well as conceptual (in the very ways time and space, history and geography were conceived).

While one might examine the position of Mizrahim within the restrictive parameters of what Zionist scholarship constructed as “Jewish History”, I have long argued against creating such a segregated discursive space for history, identity, and culture. Even if Mizrahi identity was “invented” within the process of the Zionist invention of the “Jewish Nation”, I have proposed to challenge the ghettoized nationalist analytical framework.³ A *diasporized* analysis would

¹ On the notion of textual homeland, see George Steiner, “Our Homeland, the Text”, *Salmagundi* 66 (Winter-Spring 1985): 4-25.

² My critique here of the Zionist Diaspora discourse and its projection of the “Ostjuden” within an ambivalent East/West discourse is largely taken from my *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Ph.D. Dissertation written for New York University, 1986, published by the University of Texas Press, 1989) especially see pp.3-100 and p. 208. For an elaborate critique of the negation of exile, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Exile within Sovereignty: Toward a Critique of the ‘negation of exile’ in Israeli Culture”, *Theory and Criticism* (1993) 4: 23-56; & (1994) 5: 113-132; and Yerach Gover, *Zionism: The Limits of Moral Discourse in Israeli Hebrew Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

³ On the invention of the Mizrahim see Ella Shohat, “The Invention of the Mizrahim?” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. XXIX/1-No.113, (Autumn, 1999)

situate Mizrahi identity within a constellation of multi-directional and palimpsestic cross-border movements. My purpose has long been to re-articulate a different conceptual framework, one formulated within a *multi-chronotopic*⁴ notion of temporality and space, highlighting a dynamic palimpsest of identity-formations. In this essay, my hope is to suggest the contours of an intellectual/institutional space for critical analysis called here “Mizrahi Studies”. I will articulate a Mizrahi perspective within a multicultural methodological approach that I have proposed elsewhere, one entailing a *relational* understanding of culture as well as a non-finalized and conjunctural definition of identity as a polysemic site of contradictory positionalities.⁵ The multicultural Mizrahi project proposed here understands that Mizrahim have been, at least partly, invented within Zionism, but simultaneously refuses to accept the Zionist master-narrative concerning the Zionist account of nationalism and ethnicity. Furthermore, as Mizrahim are also actively re-inventing their identity, a critical Mizrahi scholarship must invent a new understanding of the continuities and discontinuities entailed by the movement across national borders to Israel. This high-velocity history of the past century requires the rethinking of identity designations, intellectual grids and disciplinary boundaries. Critical scholars especially need to dismantle the zoning of knowledge and rearticulate the relationships between the diverse interdisciplinary practices constituting multicultural Mizrahi inquiry.

In the following I will critically explore the dialectics of continuity and discontinuity and rupture and return as central to Zionist discourse, especially concerning Jews from the West Asia/North Africa.⁶ I will examine these dialectics through the following grids: a) **dislocation**: spatiality and the question of naming; b) **displacement**: narrative of cross-border movement; c) **dismemberment**: the erasure of the hyphen; d) **dis-chronicity**: temporality and the paradoxes of modernization; e) **dissonance**: methodology as discursive rupture; f) **disciplining**: the move toward Mizrahi Studies as a relational inquiry.

⁴ I am elaborating here on Mikhail Bakhtin’s term the “chronotop”.

⁵ On the method of relationality in analyzing culture and identity I have elaborated throughout my work, see especially “Ethnicities-in-Relation”, in *Unspeakable Images*, Lester Friedman (ed.), University of Illinois Press, 1991, pp. 215-250; *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (London: Routledge, 1994, with Robert Stam); “Columbus, Palestine and Arab Jews: Towards a Relational Approach to Community Identity”, in *Cultural Readings of Imperialism*, Keith Ansell Pearson, Benita Parry & Judith Squires (eds.) Lawrence & Wishart in association with New Formations (Britain, 1997), pp. 88-105; Ella Shohat “Introduction” to *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

⁶ Since the term “Middle East” (as “Near” and “Far” East) indicates a colonial perspective, I use here, whenever possible, the term “West Asia”.

Dislocation: Spatiality and the Question Of Naming

In the paradigmatically Zionist film *Sallah Shabbati* (Israel, 1964), the spectator is first introduced to the Oriental Jew, Sallah, when he and his family land in Israel. He comes from the Levant, but within the film's Eurocentric imaginary mapping, he comes from nowhere: first, in the literal sense, since his place of origin remains unknown; and secondly, in the metaphorical sense, since Asian and African geographies are suggested to amount to nothing of substance. While the protagonist's Levantine essence forms the dynamic center of the narrative, his Levantine geography is crucially invisible. Sallah's physical presence in Israel only embodies that geography's absence and highlights the process of erasure. Within the Zionist view, Jews from West Asia/North Africa arrive from obscure corners of the globe to Israel, the Promised Land, to which they have always been destined. In this way, Mizrahim could be claimed as part of a continuous Jewish history/geography whose alpha and omega, or, to use the Hebrew, aleph and tav, is in the Land of Israel, a land which the Zionist movement purported to represent. While superimposing a nationalist discourse on the spiritual messianic idea of Jewish renewal, Zionist ideologues not only sought the physical transfer of Palestinians to Arab countries, but also the transfer of Jews from Arab/Muslim countries to Palestine. However, for the latter, physical dislocation was not adequate, since the displaced Jews had to undergo a metamorphosis. The establishment, in a contemporary retelling of the biblical Exodus from Egypt, called for "the death of the desert generation" (*moto shel dor hamidbar*), in order to facilitate their birth as the New Jews-Israelis embodied by the Sabra generation.

The question of continuity and discontinuity is central, therefore, to the Zionist vision of the nation-state. Yet, one could argue that by provoking the geographical dispersal of Arab-Jews, by placing them in a new situation "on the ground", by attempting to reshape their identity as simply "Israeli", by stigmatizing their Arabness, by racializing them and discriminating against them as a group - the Zionist project of the in-gathering of exiles itself provoked a dislocation that resulted in a series of traumatic ruptures and exilic identity-formations. The Israeli establishment obliged Arab-Jews to redefine themselves in relation to new ideological paradigms and polarities, thus provoking the aporias of an identity constituted out of its own ruins. The Jews within Islam thought of themselves as Jews, but that Jewishness was part of a larger Judeo-Islamic cultural fabric. Under pressure from Zionism, on the one hand, and Arab nationalism on the other, that set of affiliations gradually changed, resulting in a transformed cultural semantics.

The identity crisis provoked by this physical, political and cultural rupture is reflected in a terminological crisis in which no single term seems to fully represent a coherent entity. The very proliferation of terms suggest the difficulties of grappling with the complexities of this identity: "Sephardim", "Non-Ashkenazic Jews", "Jews of Islam", "Arab-Jews", "Middle Eastern Jews",

"West Asian/North African Jews", "Asian and African Jews", "Non-European Jews", "Third World Jews", "Levantine Jews", "Jews of the Mediterranean", "Maghrebian and Mashreqian Jews" (from the Western and Eastern parts of the Arab world), "Bnei Edot Ha Mizrah" (descendents of the Eastern communities), "yotzei artzot 'arav ve-ha-Islam" (those who left Arab and Muslim countries), "Sh'horim", (Blacks), "Israel ha-Shniya" (Second Israel), "Toshavei Shkhunot ve-Ayarot Pituh" (Residents of Neighborhoods and Development Towns), "Dromiyim" (Southerners), "Mizrahiyim", "Mizrahim", or "Iraqi-Jews", "Iranian-Jews", "Kurdish-Jews", "Palestinian Jews", "Moroccan-Jews" and so forth. Each term raises questions about the implicit history, politics and discourses which generated the terms and which made them catch-words at specific conjunctures. Each term encodes a historical, geographical and political point-of-view.

Prior to their arrival in Israel, the self-designation of Jews in Iraq, for example, was different. They had thought of themselves as Jews but that Jewish identity was diacritical - it played off and depended upon a relation to other communities. Hyphens, in a sense, captured diverse aspects of a complexly-embedded identity articulated in relation to other communities: Baghdadi-Jews (in contrast to Jews of other cities); Babylonian-Jews (to mark historical roots in the region); Iraqi-Jews (to mark national affiliation); or Arab-Jews (in contradistinction to Muslim and Christian Arabs, but also marking affiliation with the greater Arab culture or nation). Even the concept of Sephardiness was not part of the self-definition. The term strictly referred to the Jews of Spain who retained their Spanishness even outside of Iberia, for example in Turkey, Bulgaria, Egypt and Morocco. At the same time, however, a kind of transregional geo-cultural Jewish space, from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, was shaped where Jews under the aegis of the larger Islamic world traveled and exchanged ideas. They were culturally and politically interwoven into that world, even if they retained their Jewishness. They were impacted by Arab-Muslim culture and helped impact that culture in a dialogical process that generated their specific Judeo-Arab identity.

The rise of Zionism and Arab nationalism, along with the implementation of partitions as a colonial solution for regional conflicts, impacted on the identity designations of Jews in the Arab Muslim world. Arabness came to signify a national identity, requiring a realignment of Ottoman definitions. Their religion (Jewishness) was rapidly turning into a national marker in the international arena, which gradually conflicted with their affiliation with the Arab nation-state. With the rise of Arab nationalism on the one hand and Zionism on the other, they have come to occupy an ambivalent positioning vis-à-vis both movements. The explosive politics after the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel rendered their existence virtually impossible within a context of Arab nationalism. Upon arrival in Israel, shorn of any alternative passport, Arab-Jews entered a new linguistic/discursive environment, at once geo-political (the Israel/Arab conflict), legal (Israeli

citizenship), and cultural (East versus West). The normative term became "Israeli", not merely a signifier of a new passport, but also an indicator of a new cultural and ideological paradigm. Whereas Jewishness in Iraq, for example, formed part of a constellation of co-existing and complexly stratified classes, gender, ethnicities and religions, Jewishness in Israel was now the assumed cultural and political "dominant". Arabness became the marginalized category and the religion of Arab-Jews, for the first time in their history, was now affiliated with the dominant power, equated with the very basis of national belonging. Their culture (their Arabness), meanwhile, became a marker of ethnic, even racial, otherness, a kind of embarrassing excess. If in the Arab world, prior to their "Exodus", their Jewishness (associated now with Zionism) was subjected to surveillance, in Israel their affiliation with an Arab cultural geography was similarly disciplined and punished.

Within Israel, nevertheless, in ordinary everyday discourse as well as in official discourse, individuals and communities have been designated by and have referred to themselves by their country of origin: Moroccans, Libyans, Egyptians, etc. - a designation that assumed the Israeli-Jewish national belonging. Although the cultures of Jews from Iraq, Tunis, or Syria, etc. were in some ways distinct, they have also shared common features, but more importantly they have experienced in common a new social and political situation that brought forth new definitions of identity.⁷ Non-Ashkenazi Jews in Israel, more specifically, have been regarded and have begun to think of themselves as belonging to a larger group than their community of origin. For several decades they have maintained their Iraqi, Yemeni or Moroccan specificity in the private sphere. Within the public sphere they have gradually begun to articulate a new collective existence not simply related to their country of origin but rather to the sum of their countries of origin. Yet, the private and the public realms have inter-mingled complexly as their identity has been marked both by their current social markers (e.g. town, neighborhood, class, gender, education, religious practices) as well as by past social identities. (At times, past and present social positioning came into conflict).

The term "Sephardi", meanwhile, gradually acquired a new meaning from the 1950s through the mid-1980s. It no longer referred to its literal meaning of Spanish origin, rather, it came to mark a disadvantageous social positioning and, at times, a revolutionary stance, as with the 1960s efforts to form the Sephardi Revolution Movement (*hamahapeikha ha-spharadit*). In the meantime, the official term "*bnei edot hamizrah*", (descendants of the Oriental communities) became a marker of special departments and programs meant to deal with the "Levantine element", just as special departments were formed to deal with "*hami'ut ha'aravi*" (the "Arab minority") - that is, the Palestinians who

⁷ The younger generation of the 1970s also referred to themselves as "Israel Ha'shniya" (Second Israel).

became citizens of Israel. Gradually, since the 1970s, Mizrahim themselves running for public office also used the term “descendants of the oriental communities”; and since the Likud’s rise to power in 1977, this term also pointed to an embrace of the integrationist ideology of “*kulanu’am ehad*” (“we are all one nation”).

However, it was the Black Panther movement in the early 1970s, which loudly protested the racialized system and re-appropriated the negative connotation of blackness. Its name, an allusion to the black liberation movement in the United States, was a proud reversal of the anti-Sephardi slur “*schwartz khayes*” (Yiddish for “black animals”). While currently the concept of blackness is still at times invoked - and not just in relation to Ethiopian Jews or Orthodox Jews - a new term, “Mizrahim”, emerged in the late 1980s. The term “Mizrahim” as a noun evolved from a previous term, “Mizrahiyim”, an adjective which signifies “those of Oriental qualities” and which had been used largely from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s. However, in radical Mizrahi circles, the term “Mizrahim” has begun to overshadow the rest. Mizrahi leftist activists who were involved in the 1980s in such organizations as “Kivun Hadash” (New Direction) and “Ha-hazit ha-Mizrahit (the Oriental Front) had active discussions that endorsed a move from the adjective “Mizrahiyim” to the noun - “Mizrahim”, as a way of establishing a kind of grammatical/political equality with other comparable nouns as markers of identity: “Ashkenizim” and “Israelim”.⁸

The term “Sephardim” (Spanish), apart from its imprecision, could be seen as privileging links to Europe while slighting non-European cultural origins. Within Shas circles specifically and “traditional” circles generally, the term “Sephardi”, meanwhile, has been given prominence as an identity marker which suggests a coherence premised on common liturgical practices, broadly called “*Nusah Tfila Sephardi*”. For Shas circles, the term “Sephardi” continues to keep its oppositional momentum to Ashkenazi ethnic and religious domination, through the notion of returning to the “glory of a past tradition” (leha’hzir ‘atara le-yoshna) prior to the secularization brought on by Zionism. While up to the late 1980s the term “Sephardim” still signified ethnic belonging as well as political opposition to Ashkenazi hegemony, in recent years the term has come to be associated with a religious/traditionalist ethnic marker. The term “Mizrahim” still imbeds its implicit opposite - “Ashkenazim” - a term that for Israeli-Mizrahim evokes the hegemonic white elite -rather than simply marking an Ashkenazi diasporic culture. From a Mizrahi perspective, the distinction so emphasized in dominant Israeli discourse between post-World War II Ashkenazi “*olim*” and Israeli born *Sabras* has been seen as an intra-Ashkenazi hierarchy, irrelevant for the oppression of Mizrahim. (The term “Sabra” itself has commonly evoked a Euro-Israeli identity). The Mizrahi negotiation of naming has operated vis-à-vis an official terminology that placed non-European Jews as “ethnicities” in contradistinction to the silent unmarked norm of Ashkenaziness or Euro-Israeli

⁸ My account here is based on my own involvement in those discussions.

"Sabraness", simply equated with Israeli. The term "Mizrahim", I would argue, condenses a number of connotations that explain its prevalence within the current socio-political dynamics: it implies a shared experience of marginalization within Israel for non-Ashkenazim; it embraces a history and culture in the Levantine world; it affirms a pan-oriental identity that diverse communities developed in Israel itself and within certain critical circles it, at times, invokes a desire for a future of revived cohabitation with the Arab-Muslim East.

The term "Mizrahim", however, raises a series of questions. Although Mizrahi activists/intellectuals coined the term "Mizrahim" over a decade ago, only in recent years has it been blessed with ontological status within the academy. Yet, the term simultaneously signifies a broad spectrum of spatio-temporalities (applied retroactively even to past centuries) and to a narrowly defined period strictly within the borders of Israel. When and where, then, do we begin speaking of the Mizrahim? Within which temporal and spatial frames? Does the term signify the moment Jews from Arab-Muslim geographies were incorporated into the Zionist project; or only when they actually landed in Israel? Or, does it mark the process of assimilation into the melting-pot ideology? Or, should we develop a transnational *diasporized* analysis which would situate Mizrahi identity within a constellation of multi-directional cross-border movements? Here I am referring to movements, not only from the Arab world to Israel but also movements *from* Israel to countries such as France, Britain and the Americas, along with the cross-border dialogue with Arab culture that continues to inform Mizrahi cultural practices despite dislocation and taboo. Also, do we address the concept of Mizrahim only with the actual birth of the term - as signifying political agency and the emergence of a collective subjecthood? And finally, who are the Mizrahim? Is it merely an ethnic category? Or should we insist on the concept of **race**, given that Mizrahim have been racialized within Zionist discourse, despite being constructed as an **ethnicity** within the state apparatus? And how do questions of essentialism and hybridity impact such categorizations and intersect with other axes of identity such as gender, class, sexuality, religion and nation?

Given these processes of spatial rupture and cultural displacement, then, it is not a coincidence that identity designations have shifted. Each term, as I tried to show, implies a different historical moment, geographical space and ideological perspective. Throughout this essay, I will move back-and-forth between different namings, precisely because I am interested in situating identities rather than proposing an essential core identity. Since I am arguing for a conjunctural, historically situated definition of identity, I also want to highlight the processes and discourses that made possible such identity transformation. I am not suggesting that one designation (for example, "Mizrahim" or "Arab-Jews") is necessarily superior to another ("Sephardim" or "Iraqis", "Moroccans", etc.). , but rather that each designation calls attention to a different dimension of a complex history and spatial trajectory, and that each term foregrounds specific

aspects of communal affiliation. Although I have often used the term “Arab-Jew”, it was never meant to suggest a reductive and essential Jewish or Arab identity. Hyphenating the terms “Arab” and “Jew” called into question the Eurocentric nationalist paradigm that erased the hyphen and made it taboo. The term “Arab-Jew” obviously assumes an Arab cultural geography and, therefore, is not meant to cover, in a global sweep, the histories of *all* Jews. In fact, I have inserted the hyphen in diacritical opposition to the monolithic concept of “Jewish History”, partially to argue for Jewish histories. The term “Mizrahi history”, meanwhile, implies a recent history, one produced within the ideological space of Israel and Zionism. And, while one might rightly argue that there is no single Mizrahi history, the term nevertheless highlights the dislocation and the shaping of a new hybrid identity, neither simply Arab, nor simply Jewish.

In sum, I am calling for more precise definitions, as well as for a more complex deployment of identity designations. My argument is not that one identity-designation is wrong and the other is right, but that each frame illuminates only partial aspects of overlapping collective identities shaped within the movement across borders. Each designation addresses specific and even contradictory dynamics between and within different world zones. There is a need for more flexible relations among the various conceptual frameworks - a mobile set of grids, a diverse set of disciplinary as well as cultural-geopolitical lenses - adequate to these complexities. Flexible, yet critical, usage of the terms that can address their politics of location is important not only for pointing out historical and geographical contradictions and differences, but also for reaffirming historical and geographical links and structural analogies.

Displacement: Narratives of Cross-Border Movement

The question of naming is also problematic in relation to the unprecedented movement across borders of West Asian/North African Jews from the late 1940s to the 1960s. Nationalist paradigms, by definition, cannot capture the complexity of this historical moment, particularly for Arab-Jews. Perhaps due to the idiosyncrasies of the situation, being trapped between two nationalisms - Arab and Jewish - each term used to designate the displacement seems problematic. None of the terms—“*aliya*” (ascendancy), “*yetzia*” (exit), “exodus”, “expulsion”, “immigration”, “emigration”, “exile”, “refugees”, “expatriots”, and “population-exchange” - are adequate. In the case of the Palestinians, the forced mass exodus easily fits the term “refugee”, since they never wanted to leave Palestine and have maintained the desire to return. In the case of Arab-Jews the question of will, desire and agency remains highly ambivalent and ambiguous. The very proliferation of terms suggests that it is not only a matter of legal definition of citizenship that is at stake, but also the issue of mental maps of belonging within the context of rival nationalisms. Did Arab-Jews want to stay? Did they want to leave? Did they exercise free will? Once in Israel, did they want to go back? Were they able to do so? And did they regret the impossibility of returning? Different answers to these questions imply

distinct assumptions about questions of agency, memory and place.

The displacement of Iraqi-Jews, for example, was not simply the result of a decision solely made by Arab-Jews themselves.⁹ Even if some Arab-Jews expressed a desire to go to Israel - or to "Sion", ("Zion" in Judeo-Arabic pronunciation) - the question is why, suddenly, after millennia of not doing so, would they leave overnight? The massive displacement for most Arab-Jews was the product of complex circumstances. Panic and disorientation, rather than merely desire for *Aliya*, in the nationalist sense of the word, played a key role. The "in-gathering" seems less natural when one takes into account the circumstances forcing their departure: the efforts of the Zionist underground in Iraq to undermine the authority of community leaders such as that of Haham Sasson Khdhuri;¹⁰ the Zionist policy of placing a "wedge" between the Jewish and Muslim communities, generating anti-Arab panic on the part of Jews;¹¹ the anti-Jewish propaganda, especially as channeled through the *Istiqlal* or Independence Party; the inability of most Arab intellectuals and leaders to clarify and act on the distinction between Jews and Zionists; the Arab-nationalist failure to actively secure the place of Jews in the Arab World; the Iraqi regime's persecution of communists - among them Jews who opposed Zionism; the secretive agreements between Israeli and some Arab leaders concerning the idea of "population exchange";¹² and the misconceptions, on the part of many Arab-Jews, about the differences between their own religious identity, affiliation or sentiments and the secular nation-state project of Zionism, a movement that had virtually nothing to do with those sentiments.

The official term "Aliya" therefore, is multiply misleading. It suggests a commitment to Zionism when, in fact, the majority of Jews - and certainly Jews within the Levant - were decidedly not Zionists. Zionist discourse normalized the telos of a Jewish nation-state; the move toward its borders was represented as the ultimate Jewish act. The actual departure of Arab-Jews is narrated as merely an act of devotion on the part of Jews from Arab lands. Produced for the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel, the 1998 TV documentary series *Tkuma* juxtaposes images of Yemeni Jews arriving at the Jewish Agency camps with a

⁹ Even subsequent to the foundation of the state of Israel, the Jewish community in Iraq was constructing new schools and founding new enterprises, a fact hardly indicating an institutionalized intention to leave.

¹⁰ This effort is clearly expressed in texts written by Iraqi Zionists. See, for example, Shlomo Hillel, *Ruah Kadim (Operation Babylon)* (Jerusalem: Edanim Publishers, Yediot Ahronot Edition with The Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1985), pp. 259-263. (Hebrew)

¹¹ One of the most debated cases concerns the Zionist placing of bombs in synagogues. See Abbas Shibliak, *The Lure of Zion* (London: Al Saqi Press, 1986); G.N. Giladi, *Discord in Zion* (London: Scorpion, 1990).

¹² For an elaborate consideration of Arab-Jewish and Palestinian properties, see Yehouda Shenhav, "What do Palestinians and Jews-from-Arab-Lands have in Common? Nationalism and Ethnicity Examined through the Compensation Question", *Hagar: International Social Science Review* 1(1) (2000) pp. 71-110.

voiceover that speaks of persecution and Messianism.¹³ The film represents the Yemeni Jews as **willing** to cross the desert and sacrifice their lives in order to get to the Promised Land, i.e. the State of Israel. Most Zionist writings highlight a kind of natural inevitability, while erasing the diverse Zionist tactics to actively dislodge these communities.

Even in much of Mizrahi literature and film the historical complexity of the moment of dislocation as well as its concomitant emotional, disorienting trauma operates as a structuring absence. Mizrahi film and literature tend to delineate Jewish life in Israel and in the Arab world as separated existences within disconnected cultural geographies. The split spaces that inform the production of most narratives, still manifest symptoms of a cultural schizophrenia - the difficulty of articulating that actual moment of departure - that crucial moment, whereby overnight, one's marker as an Iraqi or Yemeni ends and suddenly begins that of an Israeli. This difficulty haunts even in texts that do refer to the move. Sammy Michael's novel *Victoria*¹⁴ for example, describes the heroine's life in Iraq from the turn of the century until the 1950s, after which the reader encounters her somewhat magically transferred to her apartment in contemporary Ramat Gan of the 1990s (also known as Ramat Baghdad). The events surrounding her dislocation from Iraq to Israel form a textual silence in which the move to Israel seems an obvious and transparent act in the heroine's life. Yet, in the opening sequence of David Bencheitrit's documentary film about Sammy Michael, *Samir*, (1997) ¹⁵ the writer more clearly articulates the haunting ramifications of dislocation. Sammy Michael speaks of a recurrent nightmare in which he is sitting in his favorite Baghdadi café - a place for which he is nostalgic - but when reaches into his pocket to pay, he takes out Israeli coins - a tell-tale sign of his "enemy" Zionist affiliations. Interestingly, the film interview reveals the novel's lacuna concerning the trauma of dislocation. The repressed returns in the form of a nightmare. Most representations, however, assume the inevitable telos of "*Aliya*" to the Jewish homeland without interrogating its semantics within a specifically Arab-Jewish history.

The term "*Aliya*" naturalizes both a negative pole and a positive pole: the will to escape persecution and the desire to go to the Jewish homeland. Yet, this master-narrative suppresses narratives that relay moments of refusal, questioning or ambivalence toward the immanent dislocations. The term "*Aliya*" (literally ascendancy) is borrowed from the realm of religion (*aliya laregel*) which originally refers to the pilgrimage to the Temple and later to the holy sites of the land of Zion. Yet, within Zionist discourse, the term "*aliya*" has been transferred

¹³ The T.V. series *Tkuma* was broadcast on Channel 1, which operates under the auspices of the Israeli government.

¹⁴ (1993), Tel Aviv: Israel Am Oved Publishers Ltd..

¹⁵ Produced by Akedia Productions Ltd. (Tel Aviv).

to the realm of citizenship and national identity. In this discursive conflation the *olim*, according to official ideology, benefited from spiritual and even material ascendancy, a view sharply contrasted with the multifaceted devastation, the social descent (*yerida*) experienced by most Jews from Muslim countries. Zionist discourse about the transition of Arab-Jews to Israel deploys conceptual paradigms in which religious ideas such as redemption, ascent and the ingathering are grafted onto nationalist paradigms. In this sense, even when scholars acknowledge that *Aliya* was not simply voluntary, they often deploy a term that subliminally encodes this Zionist vision.

At the same time, the dominant Arab nationalist discourse represented the mass exodus as an index of the Jewish betrayal of the Arab nation. Ironically, the Zionist view that Arabness and Jewishness were mutually exclusive gradually came to be shared by Arab nationalist discourse, placing Arab-Jews on the horns of a terrible dilemma. The rigidity of both paradigms has produced the particular Arab-Jewish tragedy, since neither paradigm could contain a crossed or multiple identity.¹⁶ The displacement of Arab-Jews from the Arab world took place, for the most part, without their fully conscious or comprehensive understanding of what was at stake, and what was yet to come. Arab-Jews left their countries of origin with mingled excitement and terror, but most importantly, buffeted by manipulated confusion, misunderstanding, and projections provoked by a Zionism that imposed messianic religiosity on secular political purposes. At times, even Arab-Jewish Zionists failed to grasp this distinction, and certainly never imagined the systematic racism that they were about to encounter in the "Jewish State". Therefore some Arab-Jewish Zionist activists came to lament the day that they set foot in Israel.¹⁷ The incorporation of the non-Ashkenazim into a new culture was far more ambiguous than any simple narrative of immigration and assimilation can convey. Although "*aliya*"

¹⁶ While Zionist writings have often used the fragile position of Arab-Jews vis-à-vis Arab nationalism to justify the expulsion of Palestinians, there have been a few attempts to offer a different analysis. See, Abbas Shibliak, *The Lure of Zion*; Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims" *Social Text*, 19/20 (Fall 1988) pp. 1-35; Tikva Honig-Parnass, "Introduction"; Sami Shalom Chetrit, "The Dream and the Nightmare: Some Remarks on the New Discourse in Mizrahi Politics in Israel 1980-1996"; Zvi Ben-Dor, "A Short History of the Incredible Mizrahi History", Shiko Behar, "Is the Mizrahi Question Relevant to the Future of the Entire Middle East?" in *News From Within* 13, no. 1 (January 1997), a Special Issue on Mizrahim and Zionism: History, Political Discourse, Struggle, pp. 28-75, published by the Alternative Information Center, Jerusalem/Bethlehem; Moshe Behar, "Time to Meet the Mizrahim?" *Al-Ahram*, Oct. 15-21, 1998 p.5; Joseph Massad, "The 'Post-Colonial' Colony: Time, Space and Bodies in Palestine/Israel" in Fawzia Afzal-Khan & Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, (eds.) *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies* (Duke University Press, 2000) pp. 311-346.

¹⁷ For example, Na'im Giladi, a former Zionist activist in Iraq, gradually came to change his outlook after living in Israel and has become an anti-Zionist activist. He left Israel in the mid-1980s and settled in New York, renouncing his Israeli citizenship. (From my diverse conversations with Giladi, in New York during the late 1980s, when we both served as representatives of The World Organization of Jews from Islamic Countries, an organization member of the United Nation's NGO on The Question of Palestine.)

to Israel is celebrated by official ideology, and sometimes seen by Sephardim/Mizrahim themselves as a return "home", in fact, this return, within a longer historical perspective, can also be seen as a new mode of exile.

Arab-Jews, in my view, could never fully foresee what the impossibility of return to their countries of origin would mean.¹⁸ The permission to leave—as in the case of Iraqi Jews - did not allow for a possible return either of individuals or of the community. Therefore, even the term "immigration" does not account for that massive crossing of borders. Iraqi-Jews, for example, had to give up their citizenship, losing their right to return. Within Israel, for at least four decades, performing even a symbolic return within the public sphere - the expression of nostalgia for an Arab past - became taboo. The description of the dislocation of Arab-Jews as "population exchange", which somehow justifies the creation of Palestinian refugees, meanwhile, is also fundamentally problematic. It elides the simple fact that neither Arab-Jews nor Palestinians were ever consulted about whether they would like to be exchanged. Although, following the partition of Palestine, both movements across borders in opposite directions can be described as traumatic, the forced departure of Arab-Jews, however, does not exactly parallel the circumstances of the Palestinian no-choice exodus during the *Nakba* (catastrophe). Furthermore, the Right-of-Return for Palestinians has remained a central political issue, even an identity-shaping factor, while for Arab-Jews, the idea of return became a murky issue even when limited to the discursive and cultural sphere. Yet, despite these significant differences, the discursive naturalization of such terms as "*aliya*" or "immigration" has to be re-evaluated, since the question of will, desire and agency remains extremely complex, contingent and ambivalent.

In sum, at the very core of the invention of Mizrahi identity, within the conceptual space of Zionism and within the physical space of Israel, lies an ambiguous relation to movement-across-the border. While for the Jews from the Muslim world the Land of Israel/Palestine was continuous with their cultural geography, the Eurocentric construct of the State of Israel on that land required discontinuity. The passage into the political space of Israel initiated Jews from Arab and Muslim lands into a new process within which they were transformed, almost overnight, into a new racialized ethnic identity. Therefore, a critical Mizrahi scholarship can not afford to foreground or even assume the Zionist master-narrative of choice and desire; rather it needs to look into the deep anxious ambivalences generated by partition and the scars it left on the psyche of the displaced. Such scholarship probes the dialectics of continuity and discontinuity with regards to the Arab-Muslim world as a vital palpating issue that still informs the transformation of Arab-Jews into Mizrahim.

¹⁸ I am basing this argument on numerous conversations I had with Iraqi-Jews in Israel over the past two decades. It also forms part of a project that Sasson Somekh and I are currently collaborating on, focusing on the moment of dislocation from Iraq to Israel.

Dismemberment: The Erasure of the Hyphen

The master-narrative of unique Jewish victimization has been crucial for legitimizing an anomalous nationalist project of "ingathering the exiles from the four corners of the globe". Yet, this narrative has also legitimized the engendering of displacements of peoples from such diverse geographies, languages, cultures and histories - a project in which, in many ways, a state created a nation. Although it has been argued that *all* nations are invented, I would suggest that *some* nations, such as Jewish/Israel, are *more* invented than others. Zionist writings made great efforts to normalize not simply "the Jew" but also the very discourses that redefined the multitude of Jewish communities as the "Jewish Nation". The meta-narrative of the Nation constructed one official past while simultaneously destroying other perspectives on that narrative. Non-canonical memories have been suppressed while previous affiliations have been severed. In the new conceptual vacuum, the hyphen that made possible such terms as "Judeo-Muslim" and "Arab-Jew", was dropped, while legitimating other hyphens (e.g. Judeo-Christian, now a marker of a western geo-political culture).

The nationalist myth-making machine transformed and magnified discourses of a common past (Biblical times), common language (Hebrew) and common Land (Eretz Israel). The Nation's Memory was marshaled into suppressing any other possible memories from diverse pasts, languages and lands. A state of perennial adrenal-anxiety has marked the Zionist master-narrative. Foregrounding an exceptionalist victimization discourse, this narrative manufactured the Muslim-Arab as a common perennial "historical enemy" facing the "Jewish Nation". Zionist discourse has represented Palestinians, Arabs or Muslims as merely one more "non-Jewish" obstacle to the Jewish-Israeli national trajectory. Its historiography concerning Jews within Islam consists of a morbidly selective "tracing the dots" from pogrom to pogrom. The word "pogrom" itself, it must be noted, derives from and is reflective of the Eastern-European Jewish experience. I do not mean to idealize the position of Jews within Islam, rather I argue that Zionist discourse has, in a sense, hijacked Jews from their Judeo-Islamic political-geography, and subordinated them into the European-Jewish chronicle of *shtetl* and pogrom. This picture of an ageless, relentless oppression and humiliation, however, produces a double-edged amnesia: one with regards to the Zionist settlement of Palestine which, for the most part, disregarded the perspective and concerns of the inhabitants of Palestine, culminating in their dispossession and yielding almost a century of Palestinian antagonism to Zionism and Israel, now equated with Jews and Judaism; the second, with regards to the Judeo-Islamic history which deserves to be represented more complexly within a more *multi-perspectival* approach.¹⁹

¹⁹ For more complex accounts of the histories of Jews see Maxine Rodinson, *Cult, Ghetto and State: The Persistence of the Jewish Question* (London, Al Saqi Books, 1983); Ilan Halevi, *A History of the Jews: Ancient and Modern* (London, Zed Books, 1987); Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews*

The Zionist conception of "Jewish History" presumes a unitary and universal notion of History, rather than a multiplicity of experiences, differing from period to period and from context to context. Positing the vision of Jewish nationalism on a demarcated territory as a "natural evolution", is in itself a questionable claim; but positing this vision as a panacea for **all** Jews is especially problematic. In the same period that the idea of Zionism was being formulated within a Christian-European context, Jews in the Muslim world occupied a different position, one that did not necessarily require a nationalist articulation of their Jewish identity. (In this sense, one might argue that the concept of Jewish nationalism was politically irrelevant to their existence as Jews within the Islamic world). The Zionist "proof" of a single Jewish experience, therefore, allows little space for comparative studies of Jews in relation to diverse religious and ethnic minorities, especially within Muslim spaces. The Zionist vision of a single Jewish experience leads to a historiographical narrative that excludes parallels and overlappings with non-Jewish religious and ethnic communities. This narrative rejects the idea of hyphenated and syncretic Jewish cultures as well as the notion of linked and analogous oppressions between Jews and various communities. The selective reading of Judeo-Muslim history, in other words, makes two processes apparent: the unproblematic subordination of Jews within Islam to a "universal" Jewish experience as well as the rejection of an Arab and Muslim context for Jewish institutions, identities and histories.

Contemporary cultural practices illustrate this process of dismemberment, i.e. the attempt to represent the Jews-within-Islam as detached from Muslim-Arab culture, philosophy and institutions. An exhibition of Turkish-Jewish costumes in the Jewish Museum in New York (1989) provides such an example. The exhibition offered a vehicle for imaginary travel into distant geography and history via the colorful costume of the "other" Jews. Displaced from one geography to another, the museological project removed the costumes from their social habitus, displaying them as exotic objects, fetishistically isolated from the Muslim Ottoman context. This isolating approach elides first, the fact of dress codes shared with the ambient Muslim world - albeit at times with some differences depending on the specific place and period; and secondly, the general Muslim support for Jewish adherence to their culture. As European cultural imperialism was marching into the Muslim world, there was still nothing obvious or natural about a discursive act of "separating" Jews from the Muslim world and "unifying" them with Ashkenazi Jews.

In fact, in the late 19th century, cultural dissonance seems to be afflicting

and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross* (Princeton University Press, 1995); Amnon Raz-Krarkotzin, "Historical Consciousness and Historical Responsibilities", in Yechiam Weitz, ed., *From Vision to Revision: A Hundred Years of Historiography of Zionism* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1997); Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of the Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (University of California Press, 1998); Nissim Rejwan, *Israel in Search of Identity* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1999).

the relationships among the co-religionists (Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews) more than those of the co-regionists (Arab Muslims and Jews). Nowhere is it clearer than when the Alliance Israelite Universelle (AIU) was attempting to install what was regarded as an alien culture in the "Levant". The AIU - the schooling system founded in Paris in 1860 by Westernized Ashkenazi Jews²⁰ - was designed to provide a French curriculum for the Jews of the Levant, and to carry the banner of enlightenment and the civilizing mission into the "desolated" regions of the world. The AIU began its programs by requiring its students to change their "outmoded" dress code, customary beard and *peot* (sidelocks) - all perceived as signs of backwardness. The Baghdadi-Jewish establishment partially collaborated with the AIU educational mission, perceiving this education as useful practical knowledge within a world of rising Western powers.²¹ From the establishment's perspective learning French culture and history, however, did not mean the abandonment of their Judeo-Arab culture. Therefore, the Baghdadi Jewish leadership opposed the cultural power exercised by the AIU toward the students.

The Baghdadi-Jewish establishment perceived the AIU's initiation of its students into shaving their beards and sidelocks as a form of becoming "*arelim*", i.e. a term used to mark non-circumcised people, which in the Baghdadi-Jewish context, referred to communities neither Jewish nor Muslim. One of the articles in the Judeo-Arabic newspaper *Perah*, published in Calcutta, India on September 23, 1885, reports on the impact this change had on fellow Jews:

From one day to the next, the phenomenon [of shaving] is spreading so that you can not distinguish the Jews from the 'arelim...A week ago, one man, Hyus Bashi, [a high-ranking Ottoman officer] walked in the marketplace and met another Jew who shaved his entire beard and sidelocks. And Hyus Bashi thought that the other man was 'arel. And then, the man began speaking, and Hyus Bashi understood that the man was a Jew. He [Hyus Bashi] told him: Are you a Jew? The man answered: Yes. He [Hyus Bashi] told him: You are cursed, son of a cursed! Since you shaved, how is it possible to know that you are a Jew? It would have been better had you become a Muslim.²²

Within the hierarchy of religions Baghdadi-Jews, it seems, thought of

²⁰ On the history of the AIU, see Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, 1860-1939* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993).

²¹ See Zvi Yehuda, "The Jews of Babylon and Cultural Change through the Educational Activities of Alliance Israelite Universelle" in *Babylonian Jewry: A Journal for the Research of the History and Culture of the Jews of Babylon* No.1 (Fall 1995) (Or Yehuda, Israel: The Center for the Heritage of Babylonian Jewry) (Hebrew).

²² *Perah*, Calcutta, Sept. 23, 1885, p. 12 (Translation from the Judeo-Arabic language is mine, E.S.)

Islam as possessing higher status than any other religion. Therefore, for Baghdadi-Jews the AIU ideal of an enlightened Jew signified cultural transgression, more sinful than converting to Islam.

The Baghdadi-Jewish negative reaction to the AIU practices was also shared by Arab-Muslims. The *Perah* article reports on Baghdadi-Muslim response to the changes perceived among the upper-middle class Jews. The article notes that the changes have provoked astonishment and bewilderment on the part of Baghdadi-Muslims: "In the marketplaces the Muslims say about the Jews: Wonder of wonders, the Jews have abandoned their religion (heaven forbid)... Before, not one of them would touch his beard and sidelocks, and now they cut them and throw them into the garbage".²³ The newspaper cites the Muslim response as invoking the same shared cultural code concerning Jewish ways of dress as that of the Baghdadi-Jewish establishment. In contrast to contemporary representations of an inherent Muslim anti-Semitism, one sees in this example a Muslim investment in **maintaining** Jewish identity as it had been known within the Muslim world. Jewish identity is seen by both Muslim and Jews as part of a larger Judeo-Islamic civilizational complex while assimilation into European style is seen as a betrayal of traditions at once culturally shared and religiously differentiated. In this respect, the European-Jewish action to assimilate Arab-Jews is regarded by the Baghdadi Jewish establishment and by the Judeo-Arabic newspaper of the late 19th century as a violation of these norms. Interestingly, the anxiety that Arab-Jews manifest here concerns their image not in the eyes of French-Jews, but in the eyes of their Muslim neighbors.

Chronicling the beginning of the disappearance of the hyphen, then, involves recognition of the incursion of colonialism into the Arab world. It was not their Muslim neighbors, but rather their co-religionists, who were seeking the assimilation of Arab-Jews. The Arab-Muslim negative attitude toward the assimilation of Arab-Jews, meanwhile, was also linked to its own anxiety about the assimilationist programs and policies advanced by the colonial regimes and its institutional emissaries generally in the Levant. The diverse local communities, including Arab-Muslims and Arab-Jews, in other words, shared an aversion to the unfolding cultural imperialism and the colonization of the mind. The emptying out of the Jewish-Egyptian Geniza is also a case in point. Stripped of all its papers by World War I, the contents of the Geniza archives were distributed to Europe and America. Dr. Solomon Schechter - the Cambridge expert in Hebrew documents a century ago - was able to acquire the Geniza document because British military and political presence in Egypt could permit the removal of the documents from Ben Ezra's synagogue in Cairo. Cromer, the British administrator in Egypt, himself took interest in the success of Dr. Schechter's mission. The expert shipped the Geniza documents to Cambridge

²³ *Perah*, op. cit. A selection from *Perah* can also be found in the appendix of Zvi Yehuda, "The Jews of Babylon and Cultural Change through the Educational Activities of Alliance Israelite Universelle". (Translation from the Judeo-Arabic language is mine, E.S.)

with the help of the British embassy. There is nothing unusual about the colonial raid of the metaphoric and literal archive. What is unusual, however, are the ways the two groups of co-religionists, the European Ashkenazi Jews and the Sephardic Arab-Jews, fell out on opposite sides of the colonial divide. European-Jews' closeness to imperial powers permitted the dispossession of Arab-Jews, even prior to the advent of Zionism as a national project.

In this historical episode, the culture of the Egyptian Jewish community was "disappeared" from the public arena through the confiscation of its most sacred documents. At the moment of the Geniza removal, two years after its "discovery" in 1896, Jews-of-Egypt had been a symbiotic part of the geo-cultural landscape of the region for millennia. British Jewish scholars, like their non-Jewish compatriots, cast a similarly imperial gaze at the Egyptian Jews, the very people who produced and sustained the Geniza for almost a thousand years, and whose remarkable achievement these scholars were engaged in appropriating, but whom the scholars describe as "aborigines", "scoundrels", whose religious leaders have the "unpleasant" habit of kissing other men "on the mouth".²⁴ In a traumatic turn of events, the diasporization of the Geniza documents anticipated by half a century the exiling of its Egyptian-Jewish owners. In the wake of Arab-Israeli conflict, especially after the British withdrawal from Palestine, and the establishment of Israel in 1948, Arabs and Jews were newly staged as enemy identities. If the Geniza's removal evokes a moment when Arab-Jews were still seen as "Arabs", colonized subjects, with the partition of Palestine, Arab-Jews, in a historical shift, suddenly metamorphosed into simply "Jews".

The concept of a homogeneous national past precluded any "deviance" into a more historicized and relational narrative that would see Jews not simply through their religious commonalities but also in relation to their *non*-Jewish contextual cultures, institutions and practices. Thus a historiography that assumes a pan-Jewish culture is often the same historiography that assumes the bifurcated discourse of "Arab versus Jew" without acknowledging a hyphenated Arab-Jewish existence or a shared Judeo-Muslim cultural space. In this sense, the erasure of the hyphen was crucial to Zionist writings. The Arabness and the Orientalness of Jews posed a challenge to any simplistic definition of Jewish national identity, questioning the very axioms and boundaries of the Euro-Israeli national project. The cultural affinity that Arab-Jews shared with Arab-Muslims, and which was in many respects stronger than that which they shared with European-Jews, threatened the Zionist conception of a homogeneous nation modeled on the European nationalist definition of the nation-state.

As an integral part of the topography, language, culture and history of the "East", Levantine Jews have also threatened the Euro-Israeli self-image which sees itself as a prolongation of "Europe", *in* the "East" but not *of* it. Arab-Jews, for the first time in their history, faced the imposed dilemma of choosing between Jewishness and Arabness, in a geopolitical context that perpetuated the

²⁴ See Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) pp. 85, 93.

equation between Arabness, Islam and Middle-Easterners, on the one hand, and between Jewishness, Europeaness and Westernness on the other. Thus, the religious Jewish aspect of culturally diverse Jewish identities has been given primacy within a reductive nationalist categorization tantamount to dismembering the identity of a community. Indeed, the continuity of Jewish life meant the ceasing of Arab life for Arab-Jews in Israel - at least in the public sphere. What was called by officialdom an "ingathering", then, was also a cultural dismembering, both within and between communities. But the Zionist reading of that dismemberment, prior to and subsequent to the actual rupture, rendered it as a healing and a return.

The past is subjected to contestation within diverse institutional force-fields. Its narrators argue for a privileged ownership of the historical pain, collective memory and of the copyrights on their deployment. Memories that endanger the hegemonic discourse are forbidden, become taboo and disappear from the public arena. These taboos are often internalized even by the scarred bodies that might potentially articulate history from a different angle and within a different frame. Zionist discourse, which argued for the "right for normalcy", narrated the historical past and envisioned a utopian future as a homogenous unified model. However, this regulation of "normalcy" created in its wake myriad forms of social "abnormalcy" - the syndromes of which have included the silencing and the kidnapping of the language of critical thinking. Rearticulating the terminology, concepts and methods that critical scholars utilize is, therefore, crucial for undoing the ways in which knowledge has been produced within the Zionist ideological normative apparatus.

Dischronicity: Temporality and the Paradoxes of Modernization

Discursively multifaceted, the ruptures provoked by Zionism were conceived at once geographically - dislodging the communities and transferring their bodies into a newly imagined political space of the "*alt-neu-land*"²⁵ of Israel - as well as historiographically, separating Jews from their culturally ossified habitus and integrating them into the dynamic march of universal culture. The Zionist discourse of return to the old Biblical land, in other words, was never premised on a simple return to the ways of Biblical times, even if it at times expressed nostalgia for ancient ways. (Hence the romanticization of both Bedouins and Yemeni Jews within an exoticized temporality). As with all civilizing missions, the "inevitable" March of Progress simultaneously produced in its wake the devastation of "primitive" worlds and the mourning for their disappearance. Undergirding these paradoxical conceptualizations was a modernizing assumption of what I call here "dis-chronicity", or the rupture of time, as though communities live in split time zones, some advanced and some

²⁵ Herzl's visionary Zionist utopia was the subject of a 1902 German-language book, Theodor Herzl, *Altneuland: Old New Land*, Translated by Mirian Kraus (Tel Aviv, Israel: Babel Publishers, 1997).

lagging behind. The ideology of modernization thrives on a binarist demarcation of opposed concepts - modernity versus tradition, underdevelopment versus development, science versus superstition, and technology versus backwardness. In this sense, modernization functions as a bridge between two opposite temporal poles within a stagist narrative that paradoxically assumes the essential "developedness" of one community over another, while also generating programs to transform the "underdeveloped" into modernity.

In the case of Israel, modernization has been a central mechanism of policy-making as well as of identity shaping within the formation of the nation-state. The modernization narrative has projected a Western national identity for a state geographically located in the Middle East and populated by Eastern-European Jews as well as by a Middle-Eastern majority - both Palestinians and non-Ashkenazi Jews. The dominant discourse of Euro-Israeli policymakers and scholars has suggested that Asian and African Jews come from "primitive", "backward", "underdeveloped", "pre-modern" societies and, therefore, unlike Ashkenazim, require modernization.²⁶ But here modernization can also be seen at best as a euphemism, for breaking away from Arab Levantine culture. Over the years Euro-Israeli political leaders, writers and scholars have frequently advanced the historiographically suspect idea that "Jews of the Orient", prior to their "ingathering" into Israel, were somehow "outside of" history. This discourse ironically echoes 19th century assessments, such as those of Hegel, that Jews, like Blacks, lived outside of the progressively unfolding spirit of Western Civilization. In the early fifties, some of Israel's most celebrated intellectuals from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem wrote essays addressing the "ethnic problem", and in the process recycled a number of the tropes typically projected onto colonized and non-European people. For Karl Frankenstein, for example, "the primitive mentality of many of the immigrants from backward countries", might be profitably compared to "the primitive expression of children, the retarded, or the mentally disturbed".²⁷ And in 1964, Kalman Katznelson

²⁶ For other critical approaches to the dominant Israeli sociology see Shlomo Swirski, *Israel: The Oriental Majority* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1989); Uri Ram, ed. *Israeli Society: Critical Perspectives* (Tel Aviv: Breirot Publishers, 1993) (Hebrew). Over the years, Mizrahim have argued against the dominant explanation of the "gap" between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. Naeim Giladi, Yossef Dahoh-Halevi, Ya'acov Elazar, Louise Cohen, Meir Yossef, Sa'adia Martziano, Charlie Bitton, Samy Michael, Shimon Ballas, Moni Yakim, Gavriel Ben-Simhon, Vicky Shiran, Nahum Menahem, Shlomo Elbaz, Shelly Elkayam, Asher Idan, Meir Amor, David Hemo, Benny Zada, Yonit Mansour, Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Eli Hamo, Tikva Levi, Dudi Mahlev, Sami Shalom-Chetrit, Hani Kim, Yossi Dahan, Yossi Yona, Ilana Sugbeker, Yael Tzadok, Eli Avraham, Meir Bouzaglo, Yosi Ohana, Klara Yona, Zvi Ben-Dor, Shiko Behar, Rafi Ben-Chetrit, Shosh Gabai, Shosh Madmoni, Shula Keshet, Neta Amar, Yehuda Shenhav, Pnina Mutzafi-Heller-to name only a few of the prominent voices in such newspapers and magazines as *Afikim*, *Hapanter haShahor*, *Apirion*, *Yated*, *Hapa'amon*, *Hapatish*, *Iton Aher*, *Iton Hila*, *Iton Tzah*, and *Mitzad Sheni*.

²⁷ Another scholar, Yosef Gross, saw the immigrants as suffering from "mental regression" and a "lack of development of the ego". Quotations are taken from Tom Segev, 1949: *The First*

published his openly racist book *The Ashkenazi Revolution* where he argued the essential, irreversible genetic inferiority of the Sephardim, warning against mixed marriage as tainting of the Ashkenazi race and calling for the Ashkenazim to protect their interests against a burgeoning Sephardi majority.²⁸

In ethnographic films and folklore books Eurocentric discourse takes a more patronizing "humane" form. For example, the book *One People: The Story of the Eastern Jews* (Dvora and Rabbi Menachem Hacohen, with an introduction by Abba Eban)²⁹ foregrounds "traditional garb", "charming folkways", pre-modern "craftsmanship", cobblers and coppersmiths, and women "weaving on primitive looms" as representative of the Eastern Jew's way of life. An entire chapter is devoted to "The Jewish Cave-Dwellers". The historical record, however, suggests that most Jews in the region lived in cities and towns. Moreover, the prevalent hierarchy between dwelling in houses and caves is itself a subject of deep philosophical debate about the meaning of "Progress". The problem of this discourse, then, lies in its substratal axioms. Yet, what is striking here is a kind of "desire for primitivism", a miserabilism that feels compelled to paint the Mizrahim as innocent of technology and modernity. This discourse informs a broader national export industry of Sephardi "folklore", an industry which circulates the often expropriated goods e.g. dresses, jewelry, liturgical objects, photos, among Western Jewish institutions eager for Jewish exotica. The pictures of Oriental misery are then often contrasted with the luminous faces of the Orientals in Israel itself, learning to read and mastering the modern technology of tractors and combines.

In this sense, from the perspective of official Zionism, the "Aliya" to Israel signifies leaving behind pre-modernity. Jews from Arab and Muslim countries enter modernity only when they appear on the map of the Hebrew state, just as the modern history of Palestine is seen as beginning with the Zionist renewal of the Biblical mandate. In Israeli history textbooks, Middle Eastern Jewish history has been presumed to begin with the arrival of Jews to Israel, with the "Magic Carpet" or "Ali Baba" operations which transported them from countries such as Yemen and Iraq. Borrowed from *A Thousand and One Nights*, the names themselves foregrounded the putative technological naivete of the Arab-Jews, for whom modern airplanes were "magic carpets" transporting them to the Promised Land. Contemporary museological projects reproduce this teleological vision of history. The Babylon Jewish Museum in Or Yehuda (Israel), despite its name, is largely dedicated to the triumph of Zionism in Iraq.³⁰

Israelis (Jerusalem: Domino Publications, 1984) p.157 (Hebrew) The extended symposium concerning the "Sephardi problem" was framed as a debate concerning the "essence of primitivism". Only a strong infusion of European cultural values, the scholars concluded, would rescue Oriental Jews from their "backwardness."

²⁸ Tel Aviv: Anach Publishers, 1964.

²⁹ New York: Adama Books, 1986.

³⁰ Located in Or Yehuda, the Museum was founded by Iraqi Jews who were among the leaders of the Zionist movement.

The exhibition creates a disproportionate spatial gap between life in Babylon/Iraq prior to and after the arrival of Zionism. The walls dramatically expand on the few decades of Zionist activism in Iraq but minimally condense the millennia of Jewish history lived between the rivers the *Dijla* and the *Furat*. This linear narrative naturalizes the transition into the "modern nation".

The converging discourses of the enlightenment, progress and modernization are central to the Zionist master-narrative. A series of mutually reinforcing equations between modernity, science, technology and the West has legitimized Zionism as an extension of *La Mission Civilisatrice* applied both to Palestine and to Arab-Jews. Discourses of Progress were crucial to the colonization of Palestine, while later playing a central role toward Mizrahim in the process of incorporating them into the Jewish Nation. The mystique of modernizing Palestine by "making the desert bloom" provided a claim to a land in an argument that was not exclusively based on Biblical conviction; it was buttressed by archeological evidence and was also based on a secular scientific notion of Progress. This mystique, discursively grounded the ingathering project not only on a biblical messianic vision, but also on the idea of modernization of the "ancient land" and of the "traditional Jews". The projection of Levantine Jews as arriving in the "land of milk and honey" from desolate backwater societies lacking all contact with scientific-technological civilization replayed a Eurocentric rescue trope.³¹ A redemption narrative already informed the discourses concerning the removal of the Cairo Geniza.³² Its dispersal to European and American universities and institutions was deemed a heroic act of rescue. Zionist discourse portrayed Levantine Jewish culture prior to Zionism as static and passive and like the virgin land of Palestine, lying in wait for the impregnating infusion of European dynamism. While presenting Palestine as an empty land to be transformed by Jewish labor, the Zionist "Founding Fathers" presented Arab-Jews as passive vessels to be shaped by the revivifying spirit of Zionism.

In sociological and anthropological studies the dispossession of Levantine Jews of their culture has been justified by the concept of "the inevitable march of western progress",³³ i.e. those who have been living in a

³¹ I have discussed this concept within what I referred to in the mid-1980s as "the Zionist masternarrative" and its concomitant "rescue fantasies". See Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*; "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims"; "Masternarrative/Counter Readings" in *Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History*, Robert Sklar & Charles Musser (eds.) Temple University Press, 1990. pp. 251-278. See also Sami Shalom Chetrit, "Castrated Mizrahi Identity" in *The Ashkenazi Revolution is Dead* (Tel Aviv: Kedem Publishing, 1999) pp. 57-60.

³² I further discuss this point in my essay, "Taboo Memories, Diasporic Visions: Columbus, Palestine and Arab-Jews" in *Performing Hybridity*, May Joseph & Jennifer Fink eds., University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp. 131-156.

³³ Leftist writings are also not exempt from the Eurocentric narrative of Progress. Although Marx turned Hegel on his head in some respects, in others he prolonged the Eurocentrism of Hegelian philosophy with his view of Africa as characterized by, "unhistorical and undeveloped

historically condemned temporality would inevitably disappear before the productive march of modernity. Within traditional anthropology one detects a desire to project the Mizrahim as living "allochronically",³⁴ in another time, often associated with earlier periods of individual life (childhood) or of human history (primitivism). As within colonialist discourse, metaphors and tropes played a constitutive role in "figuring" Euro-Israeli superiority. The trope of infantilization has projected the colonized as embodying an earlier stage of individual human or broad cultural development.³⁵ The infantilization trope posited the political immaturity of colonized or formerly colonized peoples, seen as Calibans suffering from what Octave Mannoni called a "Prospero Complex", i.e. an inbred dependency on European leadership.³⁶ The *in loco parentis* ideology of paternalistic gradualism assumed the necessity of white trusteeship; for colonialist discourse, whole peoples and entire continents were not "ready" for democracy. Terms like "underdeveloped", as diplomatic synonyms for "childlike", project the infantilizing trope on a global scale. Within this stagist narrative, when Euro-Israelis reach the stage of postmodernism, the Mizrahim hobble along toward modernism. In the Israeli modernization discourse, Mizrahim always seem to lag behind not only economically, but also culturally, condemned to a perpetual game of catch-up, in which they can only repeat on another register the history of the "advanced" Euro-Israeli world.³⁷

Such discourses are puzzling, especially given the history of colonialism. They ignore the fact that the colonized regions of the world have been crucial to the production of western modernity and postmodernity through their resources, labor, and knowledge - a fact in excess of the teleological narrative of Progress. The notion of non-European cultures untouched by modernity is often subliminally imbricated with the view of Asia and Africa as living in another time zone, apart from the global system of capitalism. Thus, the modernization discourse concerning Mizrahim entails a questionable temporality rendered as repetition. Cultures, however, condense traces of multiple temporalities; they are shaped within uneven development of multifaceted transactions within and across borders. A more adequate formulation of culture, in other words, would not chart any world as either "ahead" or "behind". Instead, it would map an

spirit" and Asia by "natural vegetative existence", an essence which, therefore, must be subjugated to Europeans.

³⁴ The term "allochronic" is borrowed from Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

³⁵ Renan speaks of the "everlasting infancy of [the] non-perfectable races". Ernst Renan, *The Future of Science* (Boston: Roberts Roberts, 1891).

³⁶ For a critique of Octave Mannoni see Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (NY: Grove Press, 1967).

³⁷ I should clarify that I am not using any of these temporal designations ("traditional", "modern" or "postmodern") as signifying either an honorific or a denigration. I am calling into question the very usage of such unproductive dichotomies.

analytical framework of the entire world as coeval, interlinked, living the *same* historical moment, but under diverse modalities of subordination, domination and hybridization.

Dissonance: Methodology as Discursive Rupture

The rupture shaping the lives of Arab-Jews, particularly since the partition of Palestine, has resulted in a scholarship that delineates their lives “before and after their arrival” to Israel. Much of the hegemonic scholarship, as we have seen, has described the “before” and “after” within a Eurocentric narrative. While one might argue about the validity of the facts described in sociological, anthropological or historical accounts, I want here to focus on what I see as a discursive oscillation, a conceptual, or even methodological, schizophrenia permeating such scholarship. Rather than a mere coincidence, this disjuncture of paradigms is virtually necessitated by the subliminal privileging of a Zionist vantagepoint.

Studies of the Jews of Yemen, for example, detail their oppression at Muslim hands, relaying the kidnapping of young Jewish women, their forced conversion to Islam and imposed marriage to Muslim men. When these same Yemeni Jews are studied within the Israeli framework, however, the writers abandon the historical account of victimization, and shift into an anthropological account of folklore and tradition. A mixture of history and anthropology, Herbert S. Lewis’s *After The Eagles Landed: The Yemenites of Israel* begins by addressing Muslim persecution in Yemen, but then moves into detailing polygamy and gat chewing in Israel.³⁸ The book mentions the 17th century Decree of Orphans, which forced fatherless Jewish children to be taken away from their family and community and converted into Islam. Yet, the text deploys a selective tale of kidnapping. Although *After The Eagles Landed* is written in the mid-nineties, it fails to mention one of the most traumatic kidnappings to afflict the Yemeni-Jewish community between the late 1940s and the 1960s, taking place **not** in a Muslim country, but rather in the Jewish State.

Disoriented by the new reality in Israel, Yemenis, as well as other Jews from Arab and Muslim countries, fell prey to doctors, nurses and social workers on the state payroll. These representatives of the state’s welfare institutions were involved in providing Yemeni babies for adoption by Ashkenazi parents largely in Israel and in the U.S., while telling the biological parents that the baby had died. The conspiracy was extensive enough to include the systematic issuance of fraudulent death certificates for the adopted babies and at times even fake burial sites for the babies who presumably had died, although the parents were never presented with the proof - a body. (The lack of proper burial contrasts sharply with Judaic Law that requires that even a miscarried fetus must be properly buried according to the Halakha). Over several decades, the government attempted to silence Mizrahi demands for investigation, actively hiding and manipulating information. The act of kidnapping was not simply a result of the

³⁸ Waveland Press, 1994.

state's financial interests in increasing revenues; it was also a result of a deeply ingrained belief in the inferiority of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries, seen as careless breeders possessing little sense of responsibility towards their own children. Doctors, nurses and social workers, in this sense, saw themselves as missionaries of Western Science and Progress, faithful to their duty of carrying out the vision of Modernity.³⁹ Transferring babies from the space of "pre-modernity" to that of "modernity", where they would be raised according to "nuclear family values" and "western behavioral norms", was perceived to be logical, rational and scientific. Within this discursive framework, literally tearing babies away from the arms of their mothers seemed only natural, even redemptive. The act of kidnapping babies, therefore, operated on a continuum with the reigning academic discourses of the time. In this intersection of race, gender and class, the displaced Jews from Muslim countries became victims of the logic of Progress; bearing the marks of its pathologies on their own bodies.

A severe Human Rights violation – kidnapping – was subjected to systematic silencing and censorship.⁴⁰ The continuous scholarly elision of this central experience has been complicitous with the institutional silencing. Most studies concerning the Mizrahim have privileged the family as the focus of analysis. Anthropological books, for example, tend to be typically organized around such concepts as kinship, marriage, attitudes, rituals, and values, religious and social attitudes. The scholarly orientalist framing of Mizrahi familial "structure" and "values", however, have not shown the traces of the devastation wrought by the kidnappings on Mizrahi families. Studies such as *After the Eagle Landed*, do not necessarily speak about Yemeni Jews within the sociology of modernization. Rather, they participate in the Eurocentric anthropology of Romanticization, longing for the exotic authenticity of its object of study. The author, Herbert S. Lewis, for example, praises Yemeni culture for its

³⁹ The State Administrator of Baby Centers at the Olim Camps, Ahuva Goldfarb, and the Head of Nurses at the Ein Shemer Camp, Sonia Milstein, have maintained their belief that removing children from their biological parents was "doing these children a favor." See Shosh Madmoni, *Noga* # 30 (Summer, 1996). A young nurse at the time, Rouja Kushinski, admitted that she witnessed the kidnappings shown

in a report on Israeli television for the program *Oovda* (Channel 2, 1996), directed by Uri Rozenweig, with research prepared by Shosh Madmoni.

⁴⁰ On June 30, 1986, for example, The Public Committee for the Discovery of the Missing Yemenite Children held a massive protest rally. The rally, like many Mizrahi protests and demonstrations, was completely ignored by the dominant media. A few months later, however, Israeli television produced a documentary on the subject, blaming the bureaucratic chaos of the period for unfortunate "rumors", and perpetuating the myth of Oriental parents as careless breeders with little sense of responsibility towards their own children. The same discourse was replayed in the mid-90s, when a forceful protest led by Rabbi Uzi Meshulam overwhelmed the country. Meshulam was de-legitimized and portrayed in the media as another David Koresh. He is still serving prison time for his campaign demanding access to government files of the case. The Mizrahi struggle to shed light on what exactly took place during those years and most importantly, to give the families a chance to meet their kidnapped children, is still a major rallying factor for Mizrahim of diverse persuasions.

“simplicity” and “colorfulness”, partially it seems, as a rebuff to the elitist attitude toward Yemeni Jews. In this sense, romanticizing ethnography differs from modernization sociology whose Eurocentrism has informed the ideology behind the kidnapping. Yet, both the romanticization and the modernization narratives share the discursive production of the Mizrahi family as a site of deviance from an implicit cultural normativity. Therefore, the orientalist emphasis on the Mizrahi extended family structure (the *hamula*) in both disciplines is unable to contain a narrative of devastation caused by the kidnappings. Both hegemonic narratives, in this sense, have kidnapped a Mizrahi subjectivity by eliding the perspective of Jews-from-Muslim-countries who could have never expected or predicted an act of kidnapping in the “Jewish State”.

Deploying modernizing sociology and romanticizing ethnography to write about Mizrahim within Israel while, at the same time, applying political Zionist historiography to write about Jews within Islam, produces a selective tale of kidnapping contingent on a political geography. This dichotomous narrativization frames the act of kidnapping in one space as paradigmatic and defamatory, while in the other, the **same** act is either ignored or seen as an aberration from the norm. Every negative experience in the Arab world is amplified, allegorized, made synecdochic; it becomes the center of the historical narrative. Every negative experience in Israel, meanwhile, is downplayed within an exoticizing ethnographic account. At a time when both activism and academic research on the issue have entered the public sphere,⁴¹ the structuring-absence of the kidnapping case produces the scholarly equivalent of kidnapping, i.e. the sequestering of Mizrahi intellectual agency in their own self-historicizing.

The ideological rupture characteristic of Zionist discourse, then, is reflected in much of hegemonic scholarship. The rupture is reproduced not only in the themes, but also in the analytical modes, resulting in a kind of a methodological disjuncture or schizophrenia. Moshe Gat’s book *A Jewish Community in Crisis: The Exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951*,⁴² for example, analyzes the Iraqi political and economic interests in at first refusing and then permitting Iraqi Jews to leave (only upon giving up their citizenship). The book also characterizes the active opposition to Zionism on the part of the Iraqi Jewish leadership of Baghdad, depicting Hakham⁴³ Sasson Khdhuri as simply fearing the loss of his status and position to the Zionists. Yet this dissection of motives, interest and power is abandoned once the author moves to examine the activities

⁴¹ See Dov Levitan, *The Aliya of the “Magic Carpet” as a Historical Continuation of the Earlier Yemenite Aliyas*. M.A. thesis written in the Political Science Department at Bar Ilan University (Israel), 1983 (Hebrew); and investigative articles written by the journalists Shosh Madmoni (in the magazine *Shishi* and the daily *Yedioth Ahronot*); and by Yigal Mashiah (in the daily *Ha’Aretz*) in 1996. See also, Shosh Madmoni, “The Missing Yemenite Children: Sometimes Truth is Stranger than Fiction”, *News from Within*, February 1996.

⁴² Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1989.

⁴³ The term “Hakham” is the Sephardi equivalent of Rabbi.

of the Zionist movement in Iraq as well as the position of the Israeli establishment. Here, the author shifts into a benign and idealistic official discourse of "concern" for the Iraqi Jews, the very community being uprooted largely to benefit the Israeli State apparatus in terms of its political, demographic and economic necessities: settling the country with Jews, securing the borders, obtaining cheap labor, and getting useful military personnel. As with any history writing, it is not simply the issue of "facts" that is at stake, but also the question of narrative structure - its tropes, characterizations and points-of-view. The studies of Arab-Jews tend to be organized around the agency of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel; the reader is sutured into a privileged point-of-view, as well as into an implicit "norms-of-the-text".⁴⁴ Thus, despite the methodological/discursive rupture, the historical tale remains coherent through the persistence of a hierarchical narrative structure.

A rupture of a different nature operates in Amitav Ghosh's book *In an Antique Land*. A hybrid of anthropology and history, the book interweaves ethnographic narratives concerning present-day Egyptian Muslims with historiographical accounts of the lives of Arab-Jews in the 12th century. Ghosh chronicles a Judeo-Islamic world largely through the travels of Ben-Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish merchant whose existence is conjured up from the shreds of the Geniza archive. The book vividly captures a geo-cultural Muslim space stretching from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean where Jews lived, traveled and exchanged goods and ideas. Within this Muslim space the existence of Jewishness was not perceived in exclusionary terms, as a philosophical and cultural contradiction. Ghosh's anthropology, however, focuses on his 1980's visits to an Egyptian village, dealing exclusively with the lives of contemporary Muslim-Egyptians. The book produces a fascinating silence about the lives of present-day Egyptian, Tunisian and other Arab-Jews. In this fashion, *In an Antique Land* splits the subjects of his ethnography (Muslim-Arabs) and his historiography (Jewish-Arabs). On Ghosh's final trip to Egypt he learns that pilgrims from Israel are on their way to visit the tomb of the cabbalist mystic Sidi Abu-Haseira - a site holy for both Muslims and Sephardic Jews. Yet, for one prosaic reason or another, the anthropologist, Ghosh, ends up never meeting them. At the closure of his historiographical and anthropological Odyssey, the author somehow ends his narrative at the very point where the subject of his historiography could have turned into a subject of his anthropology.

Perhaps Ghosh's missed rendezvous, his packing up and leaving Egypt precisely as the (Sephardic/Mizrahi) Arab-Jews visit Abu-Haseira's holy site, is revelatory of deeper contemporary representational crisis or paralysis. In the hegemonic narrative, the continuity of Jewishness means rupture from the Arab-Muslim world. At the same time, in the contemporary Arab-Muslim world, the millennia of Jewish existence is at best an unconscious memory, traces left in the

⁴⁴ The term, "norms of the text" is borrowed from Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

footnotes of anti-Zionist ideology. In such discourses, Arab-Jews continue to "travel" in the pages of historical texts as imbricated within a legendary Islamic civilization. Yet, as the postcolonial story began to unfold over the past decades, Arab-Jews, suddenly cease to exist. This split narrative seems to suggest that once in Israel, Arab-Jews have reached their final destination - the State of Israel - and nothing more remains to be said about their Arabness. Even the more critical narratives, in their unguarded moments, reproduce the *fait accompli* of violent displacements. In this sense, alliances and conflicts between communities (such as Muslims and Jews) not only evolve historically but also produce narratives linked to the ideologies of the present. And as certain strands in a cultural fabric become taboo (e.g. the Arabness of Jews), this narrativization involves blurring connections that once existed.

Disciplining: Mizrahi Studies as a Relational Inquiry

The hegemonic study of Mizrahim today is neatly parceled out among the disciplines in a narrative whose terminus lies within the territory of Zionism and Israel, as though there were only rupture without continuities with the Arab-Muslim world. In this sense, geopolitical borders are superimposed on cultural paradigms; once within the borders of the State of Israel, contemporary Mizrahi culture is discursively dismembered from the complex Arab cultural space. Performed within the paradigms of development and modernization, the study of Mizrahim (and particularly of Mizrahi women and populations in development town and neighborhoods) reproduces Eurocentric notions of temporality and spatiality. Mizrahim have provided sociologists, criminologists and anthropologists with an opportunity to study "the oriental essence". Such studies frame Mizrahi as "exotic" in rituals and traditions, often fetishistically detached from history and politics. Within the paradigms that inform the sociology of modernization, the economics of development studies, and the aesthetics of postmodernism, Eurocentric versions of the study of Mizrahim assume Israeliness as a telos. In the present, Mizrahi culture tends to be narrated reductively, within the framework of a political geography - the State of Israel - lacking the wider perspective of a border-crossing analysis.

Hegemonic paradigms in the Humanities and Social Sciences entail a paradoxical relation to the Arab cultural geography of the Mizrahim, manifested within a disciplinary division of labor. While for the purpose of the nationalist telos Mizrahim are detached from the Arab-Muslim geography of their belonging, for the purpose of explaining their positioning within Israeli society a re-attachment to that geography also occurs. On the one hand, Zionist historiography and literary criticism have dismantled and erased any prior Judeo-Arab identity. On the other, sociology and criminology have posited Mizrahim as a maladjusted group in Israel. This ruptured discourse extracted Mizrahim from their Arab history, but that history returns in the form of explaining Mizrahi social pathologies. Mizrahim inhabit the pages of Euro-Israeli sociological, criminological and anthropological texts that provide explanations for the

problem of the “gap”. This scholarship has relied on development and modernization theories that produced myriad forms of essential oriental “deviance”. Here the Arab-Muslim past looms as deformed vestiges in the lives of Israelis of Asian and African origins. Sociology and Anthropology detect traces of underdevelopment, while hegemonic historiography and literary criticism tell the story of the past as a moral tale full of national purpose. The scholarly bifurcation of cultural geography cannot possibly capture the complex and traumatic rupture, the complex transformation of an Arab-Jewish/Mizrahi identity that is at once past and present, here and there—a palimpsestic identity inhabiting the dissonant, interstitial spaces between citizenship, religion, ethnicity, race, nation and culture.

Conclusion

In this essay I have critiqued any study of Mizrahim that encodes the Eurocentric and nationalist operations typifying Zionist discourse. A critical Mizrahi scholarship must disengage from the Zionized modes of generating monolithic knowledge about “Jewish History” within ghettoized and geographically defined discursive spaces. I have argued for a relational understanding of the multiple histories of Jews - histories that stretched over thousands of years, spread over diverse geographies, and lived within different ideological regimes. Eurocentric definitions of the history of Jews in Islam cast them into a fixed role, playing passive victims devoid of any form of agency. Thus, within standard Zionist writing, ambivalence toward or even refusal of the Zionist gesture of *Aliya* (such as on the part of Communist Arab-Jews) remains marginal to canonical historiography. Recognizing invisible histories works against the Eurocentric legacies of Zionized Jewish Studies. Such scholarship would rearticulate the spaces, moments and subjects of Mizrahi studies.

Critical Mizrahi writings face the challenge of transgressing the legacies of what might be labeled a “sponge/additive” approach that has produced a special form of scholarly lacuna. Paradigms generated from a Euro-Zionist perspective are extended onto “others” whose lives and practices become absorbed into a homogenizing, overarching Jewish master-narrative. This kind of facile additive operation merely piles up increasingly differentiated groups of ethnicities from different regions and countries - all of whom are presumed to form a coherent entity yet easily demarcated as “difference”. However, the relational multicultural analysis goes beyond an isolationist rendering of discrete regions and identities. It transcends the additive approach which simply parades the Jews of the world in a Jewish Agency style “family of Jews” pageant. A non-essentialist articulation of a Mizrahi culture after the advent of Zionism requires also a non-finalized and conjunctural definition of Jewish identities. It is in this context, then, that I have resisted the temptation of asserting Jewishness as a unified category of analysis in which the expert intellectual is expected to produce knowledge that adds an “other” culture to a preexisting nucleus. Thus, imagining an intellectual space for critical Mizrahi work necessitates the

pluralization and de-essentialization of **all** identities.

Producing a Mizrahi epistemology, we have seen, requires challenging a number of disciplinary assumptions, going against the grain of multiple normative political discourses: it critiques the founding premises of orientalist representation and Eurocentric discourse; it demystifies the rescue narrative from the Arab-Muslim world; it challenges the socialist as well as the capitalist Zionist narrative of modernization; it deconstructs the folklorization of Mizrahim that has displayed “exotic” rituals and traditions, often fetishistically detached from history and politics; it re-articulates the syncretic space Mizrahim currently inhabit between Euro-Israeli and Arab-Muslim cultures. Such critical studies interrupt diverse interdisciplinary narratives in which anthropology renders Mizrahim as living “allochronically” in “another time”; in which sociology otherizes Mizrahim as “ethnicity” in contradistinction to an unmarked Ashkenazi-Sabra normativity; in which criminology forges an essentialist understanding of oriental corruption; in which historiography fails to discern the political, economic and discursive links between the question of Palestine and the Arab-Jewish question, both in Palestine as well as in the rest of Arab world; and in which Political Science assumes Mizrahi and Palestinian issues as an “internal” versus an “external” problem. Critical scholarship, in the wake of the various “post” theories, has to deconstruct the notion of an “inside” and “outside”. The interdisciplinary work of the kind I am arguing for here, questions the production of segregated intellectual spaces, relocating the issues in a much wider and denser geographic imaginary and historical mapping.

I am critical of a gerrymandering of knowledge into categories of imagined spaces corresponding to regions and areas of the globe. Critical scholarship has to pay attention to the ways that educational institutions erect disciplinary borders to maintain conceptual boundaries that continue to reproduce the discursive quarantine of fields of inquiry. The subject of the Mizrahim tends to be found only in the margins of most curricula, fenced off into zones preserved for the “periphery”. Within the Bantustans of “Middle Eastern Studies”, meanwhile, the history of the Jews of Islam is largely recounted as part of the inevitable nationalist Zionist telos. The zoning of knowledge into diverse “area studies” (such as Middle East Studies, Latin American Studies) furthermore, erases the historical and discursive links between regions. These links are sometimes surprising. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that the “Americas” and the “Orient” are connected prior to the formation of contemporary geopolitics; that American colonial discourse did not add on orientalist discourse but rather was itself already constituted by it during the colonial era; that demonizing discourses about Jews and Muslims in Iberia “traveled” into the Americas; and that colonial discourse of the Americas, Sub-Saharan Africa and East and South Asia generated a specific form of orientalist discourse directed at North Africa and West Asia during the later part of the

imperial era.⁴⁵ My point in making such spatial and temporal links has been to re-imagine the study of regions and cultures in a way that transcends the conceptual borders inherent in the Eurocentric cartography of the globe.

The concept of relationality that I am calling for should not be confused with cultural relativism. Although the concept of relationality goes back to structuralism and post-structuralism, I have also been using the term in a translinguistic, dialogic, and historicized sense. The project of a relational multicultural analysis has to be situated historically and geographically as a set of contested practices. Thus, one of the challenges facing a relational study has to do with the translation of ideas from one context to another. For example, questions of race have historically been less central in the life of Jews within Islam prior to the arrival of colonialism to the region. And even after its arrival, the operative terms to evoke their identity have tended to concern religious difference within the Muslim-Arab fabric, even if racialized vis-à-vis French and British imperial regimes. Yet, within Israel, a full shift into a racialized ethnic identity took place. Thus, within the project of critical Mizrahi studies, the scholar has to negotiate these diverse contexts of reception to intervene in the interstices of conjunctural semantics. A relational multicultural analysis requires unearthing the operations informing received discourses about the Mizrahim—such as those disinterred here: nationalist teleology, rescue tropes, cultural homogenization, the disappearance of hyphens, unmarked normativity, Enlightenment progressivism, allochronic temporality, bifurcated spatiality, split narratives and disjunctured paradigms. It also requires a multi-perspectival translation of terms, tropes and narratives as they “travel” from one context to another.

My goal here has been to re-map the terrains of a critical Mizrahi scholarship within a multicultural relational approach that assumes a non-finalized and conjunctural definition of identity. A relational analysis has to begin from the premise that races, classes, genders, nations and even continents do not exist as hermetically sealed entities. Such a premise is especially relevant in a century that bears the scars of partitions and multiple cross-border movements of populations, along with the transnational “travel” of images, sounds, and goods. A relational analysis would also have to address the operative terms and axes of stratifications typical of specific contexts along with the ways these terms and stratifications are translated and reanimated as they travel from one context to another. Issues of class, nation, religion and gender all meet and contest at these intersections. But rather than lead the critic into immobility, such articulations of contradictions may help him/her chart the

⁴⁵ See, Ella Shohat, “Staging the Quincentenary: The Middle East and the Americas”, *Third Text* (London) (Special issue on “The Wake of Utopia”), (21, Winter 1992-93), pp. 95-105; and “American Orientalism”, *Suitcase* 2:1&2, 1997, pp. 56-61.

conflictual positioning of communities, such as the Mizrahim, in the contemporary world. A relational analysis must look for ways in which variegated pasts and presents parallel and intersect, overlap and contradict, analogize and allegorize one another. It places contested perspectives in dialogical relation within, between, and among cultures, ethnicities, and nations. In sum, my proposal for Mizrahi Studies is not meant to create yet another institutional and discursive ghetto; rather, it hopes to place often-segregated histories, geographies, discourses, and disciplines in relational synergy.