Israel's Mizrahim: "Other" Victims of Zionism or a Bridge to Regional Reconciliation?

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It may come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with Israeli society, and especially those who have been led to believe it primarily composed of European Jews who settled in the Middle East, that roughly half of Israel's Jewish population is made up of Jews who for millennia were deeply rooted in the region and summarily expelled from Arab states after Israel was founded in 1948. In fact, this Arab Jewish population exceeds in number those Palestinians who were displaced, and it possessed substantially greater property that was confiscated without compensation upon expulsion.[1]

The purpose of this essay is not to illuminate the so-called "silent exodus" that went largely unnoticed in the West and remains stubbornly unrecognized by Arab nationalists today insofar as they focus only on the legitimate rights of the Palestinians, neglecting the Jews, an organic part of Arab communities, who suffered a similar fate at their own hands. I seek neither to compare nor equivocate between competing victimizations, nor still less to suggest that mistreatment of one group in any way normatively justifies mistreatment of the other. By now, such arguments strike me as futile, although obviously the two cases cannot be historically severed, one from the other, as they unfolded in the same region and at the same time. My focus rather will be on the relationship of the Arab Jews, or *Mizrahim*, to Zionism and to the future of the Middle East.

I seek to explore a certain orientalist, anti-Arab blindness embedded in Zionism, a blindness which Mizrahi Jews may help rectify, while at

the same time opening up at least the imaginative possibility of recognition[2] and reconciliation between Arabs and Jews in the region and throughout the world. To date, Zionism seems to have come to a dead-end. Despite a robust economy, world-class universities, and a democratic polity that, although imperfect, is incomparably better than any other in the region, Israel more and more has become a joyless security state, neither at peace with itself, the Palestinians, nor neighboring states in the region.

Arab nationalism, by all measures, has been an even greater failure, having produced, for the most part, stagnant economies and corrupt, autocratic polities, incapable of meeting the basic economic, social, and educational needs of their citizens. Embedded in Arab nationalism is a parallel anti-Zionist blindness that often manifests itself in a crude form of anti-Semitism readily apparent in public discourse and in the Arab media. The region, once a flourishing space of commerce, culture, and ethnic tolerance, clearly deserves better, but remains crippled by irreconcilable nationalisms and the closed, hostile borders they have produced.

Perhaps the Mizrahim, themselves both Arab and Jew, might help bridge the great divide. It should be clear that this essay departs neither from a narrow empirical assessment of the facts on the ground, nor is it burdened by a realist's cautious assessment of proximate possibilities for peace. Rather, through an examination of the Mizrahim, I try to open up a discursive space from which one might imagine alternative possibilities for mutual recognition.

The terms Mizrahim, "Orientals," or "Easterners" refer to Jews who came from the Arab world, as opposed to *Ashkenazim*, those who came to Israel from Europe. Not merely a demographic term, it came to be used only during the early 1990s by leftist non-Ashkenazi activists[3] in contradistinction to what Ella Shohat calls the "unmarked norm of 'Ashkenaziness' or Euro-Israeli 'Sabraness.'"[4] It gradually replaced the older term *Sephardim* (literally, "those of Spanish origin"), not merely because most non-Ashkenazi issued from Jewish communities in the Arab world older than and relatively autonomous from Iberian Jewry, but, in the usage of Mizrahi activists, it took on an oppositional, resistant connotation about Ashkenazi hegemony. As Shohat puts it, "Mizrahim, I would argue, condenses a number of connotations: it celebrates the Jewish past in the Eastern world; it affirms the pan-Oriental communities developed in Israel itself; and it invokes a future of revived cohabitation with the Arab Muslim East."[5] In contemporary Israel, *Mizrahim* has gained broad currency in the press and scholarly

literature, largely as a substitute for *Sephardim*, sometimes with, sometimes without, these additional ideological connotations.

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Most Mizrahim arrived after 1948, dispossessed and expelled from Arab states as a direct consequence of the founding of Israel. Few indeed came as committed Zionists, a political movement that had little salience among Jews in the Arab world. As one would phrase it in immigration theory today, the *push* factors clearly outweighed the *pull* factors. Compared to the Ashkenazi who had arrived earlier and established a significant Jewish presence in Palestine, Mizrahim, generally speaking, were less modern, less educated, more observant, and had larger families. That they experienced discrimination and cultural marginalization is a fact that virtually no one in contemporary Israel any longer contests, though there is a lively debate among and between Mizrahi and Ashekenazi communities concerning the degree to which this can be read into a so-called "Zionist meta-narrative," if not the very essence of the Israeli state.

Some would attribute the subordinate position of Mizrahis primarily to the fact that they arrived after the Ashkenazi already were established, or to their relative disadvantages in education and occupational skills, or their limited competence in Hebrew. Nevertheless, studies in stratification and social mobility by Sammy Smooha, Yinon Cohen, and others demonstrate that discriminatory patterns have persisted for more than forty years, and that the pattern of discrimination experienced by the Mizrahim was later replicated in the case of "Europeans," as opposed to "Asians" and Russians, as well as with the Ethiopians.

On the other hand, some argue that this discrimination from the outset was quite deliberate; it was deeply embedded in a European Zionist project and promoted as a matter of state policy which viewed the Mizrahim instrumentally; that is, the Mizrahim were seen as little more than an ample source of cheap labor to replace displaced Arabs and, at the same time, a means by which to rapidly double the number of Jews in Israel and help secure its borders against hostile Arab states.

Such an ungenerous view neglects the fact that predominantly Ashkenazi Israel transported and welcomed the Mizharim at a time when, as victims of Arab nationalist expulsion and dispossession, they had few other options. Not to be overlooked in this regard is the difficult objective situation in which the newly founded state of Israel found itself, having to confront, simultaneously, the manifold tasks of state-

building while also absorbing a new population literally as large as the existing one. As badly as it might have been done, tremendous expenditures nevertheless were devoted to meeting the pressing health, housing, educational, and occupational needs of the new arrivals, none of who indefinitely languished idle and hopeless in refugee camps. It is sometimes forgotten that a strict austerity regime was enacted. To obtain full employment and provide for an expanded range of social services, state expenditures were directed to sectors that did not substantially increase production or exports. Consequently, the national standard of living initially fell.[6] Though an ideological commitment to equality was hardly realized, no honest analysis can deny the sacrifices and solidarity of the established Ashkenazi community with respect to the new Mizrahi arrivals (something rarely extended by Arab states to the Palestinians similarly dispossessed and expelled by Israel, most of whom were tolerated only as an unwelcome presence or became wards of the United Nations, languishing interminably in refugee camps).

Obviously, we are dealing with a complex and thorny question, especially as it relates to the present. First of all, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim are not hermetic categories that should be essentialized and reified. Both groups, different from one another, are themselves heterogeneous and amazingly diverse. Just as one might have asked, before the Holocaust, what an urbanized, sophisticated Jew of Paris or Berlin had in common with his rural counterpart in an eastern *shtetl*, the same holds for urban Jews of Baghdad and Cairo, as opposed to those from rural Yemen, Libya, or Morocco. Furthermore, there is a fluidity to Ashkenazi and Mizrahi categories that defies fixation, not only because there is an intermarriage rate that has varied from 22–28%, but also because what these categories actually signify today bears little resemblance to what they did earlier, especially during the 1930s or 1940s. Young Ashkenazi do not speak Yiddish, nor do most of them eat gefilte fish or other typically East European dishes. And young Mizrahi, as a rule, do not learn to read and write in Arabic or know very much about the contemporary Arab world, other than music, film, and food. This does not mean that identity traces have all but disappeared, and equally so for both groups. According to an expert on Ashkenazi identity, Orna Sasson-Levy, a sociologist at Tel Aviv University, Ashkenazi youth generally self-identify simply as Israeli or "Western," and sometimes express envy of their Mizrahi counterparts who they feel still maintain a distinctive sense of community and ethnic particularity.[7] For them, *Ashkenazi* is a relational category, not an affirmative one, much like *whiteness* in the United States, perceived by most American whites only

in relation to minorities, and especially to affirmative claims made by minorities. Of course, this is also a manifestation of cultural hegemony, as it is a marker of "normality," if not the national norm, despite the fact that Ashkenazi identity has lost almost all of its intrinsic meaning. Then again, many Mizrahim also self-identify simply as Israeli and some, such as the Hebrew University political scientist Avraham Sela, and Sasson Somekh, one of Israel's most distinguished experts of Arab literature, both born in Baghdad, summarily reject the very term *Mizrahim* as meaningless and unnecessarily contentious, a category that certainly has no significance for their children born in Israel. Sela and Somekh, native Arabic speakers, see themselves as Arab Jews or, more to the point, as Iraqi Jews, orphans of a world and a hybrid cultural space that no longer exists.[8] For Somekh, who aspired to be an Arabic poet before he was forced into exile, an Arab Jew is one who is fluent in Arabic, immersed in Arab culture, and part of a community deeply rooted in an Arab land. In this sense, the so-called Mizrahim in today's Israel are no longer, strictly speaking, Arab Jews, especially those born after the 1950s.

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Although leftist intellectuals like Ella Shohat and Yehouda Shenhav (both also of Iraqi origin)[9] speak of a growing sense of separate identity among their fellow Mizrahim, and occasionally deploy such hyperbolic terms as "resistance" and "revolt," in fact no durable Mizrahi mass movement ever developed, apart from sporadic demonstrations, such as the Wadi-Salib street riots in 1959, and Black Panther activities in the early 1970s. Significantly, these localized and short-lived movements were programmatically integrationist, not separatist in orientation. According to Sammy Smooha, another Iraqi Jew himself and perhaps Israel's leading scholar of stratification, there has never arisen a Mizrahi protest movement of any scale, and "protest has remained non-violent and largely unorganized."[10] Politically, most Mizrahi line up behind parties of the right, first Likud, then Shas. As opposed to an earlier period when there was little or no Mizrahi presence in cultural and political life, a growing number of Mizrahi professors (though by no means proportionate to their percentage of the population) teach in Israeli universities, including some of national prominence, mirrored by a similarly growing number of Mizrahi political leaders.[11] The Mizrahim, in short, now have a critical mass of intellectuals and politicians

with which to articulate, together with dissident Ashkenazi, a different concept of Zionism and a different vision of the future.

Empirically, the claims made by Shohat and Shenhav strike many Israelis as exaggerated and overstated, but their critique of Zionism and Israeli policy by no means is insignificant or without important consequences. The heart of their critique centers on a process of "othering," whereby Arabness was placed in binary opposition to Jewishness, an expansive opposition that was at once religious, cultural, political, and moral. "Arabs" were now constructed as the historical enemy of an undifferentiated and unified "Jewish nation," and anything Arabic became *a priori* negative and suspect, if not pathological (Shenhav[12] refers to this as a process of thoroughgoing "de-Arabization"). Jewish history, in the Zionist meta-narrative, became one-sidedly the history of European Jews into which Mizrahi Jews were supposed to assimilate retrospectively, though they were deeply embedded in Arab culture and had been an enduring part of the Middle East, not Europe, since biblical times, their communities substantially antedating the birth and expansion of Islam and Christianity. Mizrahim had never known the Ashkenazi world of Sholem Aleichem and *Fiddler on the Roof*, nor, more importantly, the distinctive European experience of anti-Semitism, or, for that matter, the Holocaust itself, which was so central both to the impulse for founding a Jewish state in Palestine as well as its legitimation. Mizrahi identity, in this view, was thus "hijacked" and "kidnapped," in a process that, as Shohat puts it, undermined "the hyphenated, syncretic culture of actually existing Jews, rendering the non-Jewish side of the hyphen not pertinent. This unidimensional categorization, with all Jews being defined as closer to each other than to the cultures of which they had been a part, is tantamount to dismembering a community's identity."[13]

Needless to add, this "othering" led to the total exclusion of resident Palestinians, while admitting as full-fledged Israelis only those Mizrahim who, as fellow Jews, had purged the primordial stain of their Arabness. It is important to note that this particular critique originated only during the 1990s, developed by second- or third-generation Mizrahis who experienced neither the violent expulsion of their parents and grandparents from Arab lands nor the cultural shock of arriving in Israel where Arabs, who initially seemed more familiar than Ashkenazi Jews, now were to be regarded as the mortal enemy. Two further observations should be made regarding the new Mizrahi critique. Theoretically, it draws explicitly from Edward Said's innovative critique of orientalism,[14] as well as from then emergent post-colonial

scholars such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, in contrast with the more structuralist and/or positivist inclinations of older Mizrahi scholars, especially in the social sciences. Secondly, unlike the generation of Arab Jews who arrived during the formative 1948–1952 period, they were born and raised in Israel. Products of Israeli socialization, they were separated linguistically, culturally, and geographically from the Arab world while, at the same time, they were marginalized from an unproblematic Sabra identity by their residual Arabness, a component of their identity never fully erased. The few biographical accounts one encounters in the midst of the Mazrahi post-colonial theorizing speak of painful emotional turmoil and internal conflicts. An outrage repressed during childhood exploded with maturity, especially in coming to grips with having been made to feel ashamed of their parents and of their distinctive origins, a "profound and visceral schizophrenia, mingling stubborn self-pride with an imposed self-rejection, typical products of colonial ambivalence."[15]

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The question here is whether this anti-Arabism was essentially conjunctural and contingent, on the one hand (that is, a defensive, post-1948 reflex to confront a humiliated and hostile Arab world, hell-bent on destroying the so-called "Zionist entity"), or, on the other, whether this orientalist "othering" had deeper historical and cultural roots that anteceded the European Zionist settlement in Palestine and hostile interaction with the Arab world. My thesis is that it was a product of *both*, a concatenation of contradictions stemming from the orientalist terms under which European Jews first experienced emancipation and modernization, well before arriving in Palestine, as well as from the objective exigencies of national survival, however distasteful, in the face of the unrelenting Arab hostility, warfare, and terror that marked the founding and formation of Israel. Toward the conclusion of this essay, I will return to the rather nasty side of nationalism in the Middle East (Arabs against Israelis; Israelis against Arabs, and particularly the Palestinians). It has become increasingly clear to me how much blood and hatred towards the other stains both sides of the Israeli-Arab impasse, as well as the degree to which one-sided and auto-exculpatory affirmations of victimhood must give way to mutual recognition.

In a brilliant essay, "The Great Chain of Orientalism," Aziza Khazzoom[16] argues that the pattern of ethnic exclusion in Israel can be seen as the last phase of a series of orientalizations experienced first

by European Jews, regarded as "Asiatics" during the course of the European Enlightenment. As is commonly known, resistance to Jewish emancipation and full incorporation into modernizing European states was justified on the basis of their distinctive group backwardness: their unusual appearance (beards, side locks, dress), ugly guttural language (Yiddish), irrational religious fanaticism, and Asiatic roots. Jews were understood to be backward because of their origins in Asia. Voltaire was not alone in voicing sentiments such that "the [ancient] Jews were vagrant Arabs infested with leprosy," and many believed that "Jews operated as a fifth column for the Muslim enemy."[17] According to Khazzoom, Jews internalized this stigma, seeing themselves through the orientalizer's eyes, "modernizing" as they grappled with assimilation. They did this so successfully that they soon tended to outperform others in prestigious professions, academia, culture, and commerce. "As they moved into the Western European world, German and French Jews began organizing their identities around the east/west dichotomy, evaluating themselves and others according to conformity with the western cultural model."[18]

The more they became "new" and "modern" Jews, the greater their discomfort with an oriental past, a discomfort that "became particularly important when they were placed in direct contact with the other, unwesternized Jewish populations." As Khazzoom suggests, "for German Jews, East European (particularly Polish) Jewish communities became an orientalized 'other' against which the Germans measured their own advancing westernization." A short time later, French Jews orientalized Jews in Arab lands, in the form of missionary-style projects aimed at Westernizing the oriental Jewish population. A celebrated example is the Alliance Israélite Universelle school system, which throughout the southern and eastern Mediterranean provided Jewish children with unrivaled education, French linguistic competence, and exposure to Western norms. Khazzoom argues that this European orientalism, internalized by European Jews, was carried over into Zionism, particularly in its modernist aspirations (again, the creation of a "new Jew"):

> Once a group had internalized the oriental stigma, identity projects—whether advocating retention, transformation, or rejection of Jewish tradition—and relations with groups perceived as less western—whether vilifying them as culturally backward, romanticizing them as carriers of unspoiled culture, or both simultaneously—were organized around the diametric opposition of a new, modern, secular west and an old, traditional, religious east.[19]

If, at one level, Zionism was a rejection of Europe, at another it could be understood as a transformational Jewish move directed toward Europe, "a final bid for acceptance as equals in the European family."[20] Herzl spoke of a "rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism." Similarly, Ben Gurion stated, "We do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant." And Abba Eban argued, "The object should be to infuse the Sephardim with an Occidental spirit, rather than allow them to drag us into an unnatural Orientalism."[21] Accordingly, Israel could be as Western (i.e., non-oriental) as Europe—of course, minus the Christian anti-Semitism that gave impulse to modern Zionism in the first place.

Khazzoom offers a compelling, if one-sided, argument, foregrounding a distinctive European orientalism embedded from the outset in modern Zionism, indeed stressing it to the total exclusion of a more contingent anti-Arabism that issued more immediately from violent Arab opposition, in word and deed, to the founding of Israel. At its root, this Zionist orientalism lies at the core of the new Mizrahi critique and accounts, not surprisingly, for its principled and rather remarkable anti-Zionism. While Israeli nationalism is one-sidedly excoriated, Arab nationalism is treated with an understanding rarely articulated among Israelis or, for that matter, Jews more generally. For them, Arab nationalism, unlike Zionism, was a response not immediately to Jews, but rather to European colonialism. In this sense, it enjoys the same privileged status as all Third World anti-imperialist struggles. Second, for them, whatever the excesses of Arab nationalism, it nevertheless is rooted in and emerges from the same Arab civilization that also was created by Jews (that is, their very ancestors) as well as other non-Muslim minorities. It is with this imagined or ideal Arab world, not its contemporary form, that they identify and aspire to reconnect. For Shohat, Arab nationalism "failed to make a distinction between Jews and Zionists and did little to secure a place for Jews." The incredible cultural hybridity that once characterized the Levant[22] was largely eviscerated by a narrow nationalism that recognized only the Muslim majority, transforming the Middle East into a space that become evermore monocultural and obsessively homogeneous. In its response to Zionism, the Arab world evicted one of its most important constituent elements, the Jews. As Shohat recognizes in a particularly lucid passage:

> The Arab-versus-Jew binarism has placed Arab Jews outside the Arab world and has called up some historical memories of Arab Muslim hostility to Jews-as-Jews. The fears, anxiety, and even trauma provoked by chants of 'idhbah al-yahud' ('slaughter the Jews') are still a burning memory for my parents' generation, who lived the anti-Zionist struggle not as Zionist occupiers in Palestine but as Iraqi Jews in Iraq and as Egyptian Jews in Egypt. And while those chants can be seen as directed at 'the Zionists,' one cannot overlook the way they marked the psyche of Jews in Egypt, Iraq and Syria.
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> At the same time, with the pressure of waves of Ashkenazi Zionist immigration and the swelling power of its institutions, the distinction between Jews and Zionists was becoming ever more tenuous, to the benefit of European Zionism. The situation led the Palestinian Arabs to see all Jews as at least potential accomplices of Zionism. Had the Arab nationalist movements maintained the distinction between "Jew" and "Zionist," as even some Zionist historians have recognized, it might have won Arab Jewish support for the anti-Zionist cause. The idea of a homogenous "Jewish Nation," even when articulated by Arabs from a presumably anti-Zionist perspective, ironically ends up reproducing the very Zionist discourses that it opposes, specifically the Zionist claim to speak on behalf of all Jews.[23]

Even current Arab anti-Zionist critiques informed by the work of the "new historians," as well as the Mizrahi critics, rarely make the distinction between Jews and Zionists, or recognize, without equivocation, that Arab nationalism led to the dispossession and expulsion of Arab Jews, just as Zionism led to the dispossession and expulsion of Palestinian Arabs.[24] Outside of isolated Arab intellectuals and marginalized Arab groups, Mizrahi intellectuals at the moment have no significant interlocutors. The Arab world of their imagination remains a relic of the past or a project yet to be fulfilled, without a critical consciousness or a critical mass on both sides of the impasse that is willing and capable of bringing it to fruition.

Both nationalisms have committed original sins of exclusion. Both have blood on their hands, as fierce nationalisms always do in the quest to create purified identities and monopolized spaces against demonized others. It remains beyond this essay to suggest what reconstitution of Arab nationalism would be necessary to recognize and accommodate Israel. Obviously, the past informs the present, and here it should be clear that the former greatness of Arab civilization (its commerce, culture, and science) was built not upon turning inward, but rather upon robust hybridity and boundary-crossing, both inter-

nally as a regional unit, and externally in its relationship with the West, especially the Greco-Roman inheritance.

Regarding Israeli nationalism, Zionism simply has to confront and come to terms with its own blindness. Though an exclusionary element, perhaps built upon what Khazzoom has called "the great chain of orientalism," emerged as dominant, from the very beginning there were other Zionist elements that recognized Arabs as full-fledged neighbors and called for the creation of a common home, a multicultural society, and even a highly decentralized unitary state modeled on Switzerland. In a 1907 essay, "The Hidden Question," Yitzhak Epstein condemned the emergent myth of Palestine as an empty, depopulated desert, and underscored the importance of collaboration with the Arab residents whose customs and rights had to be respected. From the ashes of Ottoman dominance a new country could be developed for all.[25] Similar positions were advanced by Martin Buber as well as Judah Magnes, the first President of Hebrew University, who in 1948 intervened with United Nations officials, cautioning that a partition leading to the creation of separate Jewish and Arab states would lead to a bloodbath. Not to be forgotten as well is Brit Shalom, founded in 1925, which argued that politically, as well as morally, the Jewish-Arab question was central to Zionism. Led by Magnes, they formed a small political party, the Ihud, in 1942, and presented their ideas for a bi-national state first to the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry in 1946 and then to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine in 1947. Marginalized by the Jewish Agency and the "governing" Yishuv, Brit Shalom found no Arab counterparts, nor any receptivity on the part of Palestinian leadership toward cooperation. By no means was Zionism simply a monolithic movement, or an unbroken line running from Hertzl to Ben Gurion to Sharon. Alternative ideas and programs could be recovered and adapted to contemporary circumstances. Recently, an attempt was made on the life of Zev Sternhell, the famous historian and left-wing critic, himself a survivor of the Holocaust. Based upon a leaflet left at the scene, those responsible presumably are the very same West Bank settler groups notoriously confiscating land and abusing Palestinians; those groups who have threatened any Israeli promoting a peaceful solution and returning Palestinian land. The fact that Sternhell could denounce such zealots as "anti-Zionists"[26] itself signals an alternative Zionism, one which, after Israel's sixtieth anniversary, could act with greater generosity and self-assurance than the Zionism which marked the state's uncertain founding in 1948.

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There is a central paradox to orthodox Zionism: Jews returning to the Middle East, their land of origin, while seeming to reject virtually everything that marks the Middle East as a distinct region, including Arab Jews, who remain an enduring part of the cultural landscape. If Israel sees itself simply as a Jewish "Western enclave" in the region, an enduring peace and bountiful collaboration with Arab states is highly unlikely. Moreover, its legitimacy and recognition in the international community will gradually erode, even among Jews in the Diaspora. In his classic 1981 study of Zionism, Shlomo Aveniri warned that Israel must not become only a mirror-image of Western Diaspora life. He contends:

> if it becomes, for example, just another Western consumer society, then it will lose its unique identification for world Jewry. If an American or French Jew discovers in Israel only those qualities which he already possesses (and cherishes) in his own society, then he will not be able to raise Israel to that normative pedestal with which he would identify. An Israel that is a Mediterranean Brooklyn or Los Angeles or Golders Green can not serve as a focus of identification and self-definition for Jewish people from Brooklyn or Los Angels or Golders Green.[27]

Alternatively, if bridges are to be built, the Mizrahim obviously have a strategic role to play, and the promotion of Mizrahi Studies, as Shenhav argues,[28] would be a necessary starting point. However, the unrelenting anti-Zionist position he advocates has no future for the simple reason that anti-Zionism as such will never be embraced by a majority of Israeli Jews, including Mizrahim (not even Shenhav's own Iraqi Jewish family accepts his anti-Zionist politics). Rather, a reconstituted Zionism, one that embraces Mizrahi as well as European roots, could begin to repair two related problems.

First, it could begin the process of reconciliation with the Palestinians through serious intercultural programs of the sort never before initiated by the Israeli state, programs that in most cases would be beyond the competence and sensitivity of most Ashkenazi. The exclusion of Palestinians from full participation in Israeli life, particularly those Palestinian citizens of Israel, can find no justification either in Jewish ethics or in the eyes of the democratic community of nations (including many Jews in the Diaspora). Israeli identity must finally be redefined in a way that recognizes all of its citizens; rarely has the founding

identity of any nation been unalterably binding on future generations, immune to changes in demography, culture, or the increasingly globalized environment. A moderated Zionism, or post-Zionism, could certainly make space for non-Jews without relinquishing all that Israel has accomplished, in the same way as Western multicultural societies, despite wrenching challenges and tensions, have come to recognize others among them who were not part of the formative moment or the so-called historical nation.

The second issue concerns regional relations with the Arab world that are not simply a function of the Israeli-Palestinian impasse, as much as these issues are inexorably bound. Led by the Saudis, who advanced a plan for full normalization of relations with Israel based upon a just settlement of the Palestinian question, at least some Arab states have begun to imagine a Middle East in which Israel is no longer a transitory "Zionist entity," but a legitimate and enduring member. In January 2008, Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former Saudi ambassador to the United States and the United Kingdom, argued that a comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace would be rewarded by the Arabs with normalization, at which point the Arabs "will start thinking of Israelis as *Arab Jews* rather than simply as Israelis."[29] Despite the obvious conceptual gap between authentic cultural recognition and diplomatic normalization, as well as a lamentable history of anti-Semitism embedded in Wahhabi Islam and evident still today in Saudi textbooks, Prince Turki's statement nevertheless is indicative of a path by which thinking of Israelis as "Arab Jews" might be an intermediate step toward ultimately thinking of Israelis simply as Israelis. Who would be better positioned in Israel to encourage this transformation than its own Arab Jews, the Mizrahim, as enduring remnants of a pre-nationalist age in the Middle East, when Arab and Jew had yet to become binary opposites, when collaboration—sometimes good, sometimes not so good—had been a living reality? ◉

Notes

1. Of the 940,000 Jews expelled from Arab states, roughly 800,000 settled in Israel. See M.H. Shulewitz, ed., *The Forgotten Millions* (New York: Continuum, 2000); Moïse Rahmani, *L'exode oublié, Juifs des pays arabes* (Paris: Editions Raphael, 2003); and Shmuel Trigano, ed., *L'exclusion des Juifs des pays arabes* (Paris: Pardès, 2003).

2. On the hermeneutics of recognition, I have written several essays on xenologica, critically situated between xenophobia and xenophilia. See Franklin Hugh Adler, "Difference, Antiracism and Xenologica," in *Cultural Value* 3, no. 4 (1999); "La xenologica, incontro critico con l'altro," *Il Ponte*, April 1996; and "Différence, antiracisme, et xenologique," in *L'homme et la société*, No. 125, 1997/3.

3. For the purposes of this essay, I draw primarily from the work of Ella Shohat and Yehuda Shenhav, who, in my view, are the most theoretically sophisticated Mizrahi critics.

4. Ella Shohat, "The Invention of the Mizrahim," *Journal of Palestine Studies* XXIX: 3 (Autumn 1999): 13.

5. Ibid., p. 14.

6. For relevant data and details, see Yehuda Dominitz, "Immigration and Absorption of Jews from Arab Countries," in M.H. Shulewitz, ed., *The Forgotten Millions*, pp. 155–184.

7. Interview, 5 June 2008.

8. For a richly nuanced portrait of the Baghdadi Jewish community before 1948, see Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday: The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2007). Somekh had been interviewed for *Forget Baghdad*, the controversial documentary on Iraqi Jewish writers who settled in Israel, but later asked to be withdrawn because of differences related to the ideological slant of the film. Interview with Sasson Somekh, June 4, 2008.

9. The notable prominence of Iraqis, and especially the urban Baghdadi, among Mizrahi intellectuals is striking and can be attributed to the higher educational level Iraqi Jews in general brought with them to Israel, relative to other Mizrahi groups. They also arrived earlier and, more than others, formed vibrant urban communities in Israel's major cities, especially Tel Aviv, rather than having been sent off to so-called "development towns" in remote parts of Israel.

10. Sammy Smooha, *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 77–78, 235.

11. By the mid-1980s, Mizrahis who held important governmental posts included Moshe Levy, Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army; Shlomo Hillel, Speaker of the Knesset; Israel Keisar, Secretary General of the Histadrut; David Levy, Deputy Prime Minister; Moshe Nissim, Minister of Justice, then Minister of Finance; Moshe Shahal, Minister of Energy; and Shoshana Arbeli-Almozlino, Minister of Health. More recently, within the ruling Kadima Party, Shaul Mofaz was Tzipi Livni's major rival for leadership.

12. Yehouda Shenhav and Hannan Hever, "'Arab Jews' after Post-structuralism: Zionist Discourse and the (de)formation of an Ethnic Identity," unpublished manuscript. Yehouda Shenhav interview, June 11, 2008.

13. Shohat 1999, p. 6.

14. This is made particularly clear in the very title of Shohat's seminal essay, itself a critical response to one of Said's most famous essays on Zionism, "Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," in *Social Text* (Fall 1988).

15. Shohat 1999, p. 15.

16. Aziza Khazzoom, "The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel," in *American Sociological Review* 68 (August 2003): 481–510. Unlike Said, who conceptualizes orientalism on a macro level, Khazzoom focuses on the micro level and stresses agency, rather than the consequences of domination on subaltern populations:

> I historicize orientalism and its effect on group relations by asking how it becomes anchored in identity. I focus on a specific set of actors: members of a group that was classified as eastern by the orientalist discourse but was given a chance to

westernize. That 'transformation option,' I argue, is what caused Jews to both accept their own negative evaluation and use the east/west dichotomy to classify others. Jews were participating in their own domination when they imagined new selves based on a discourse that was used to classify them as inferior, and the categorization and exclusion of others was an integral part of this self domination. (p. 484).

17. Ibid., p. 491.

18. Ibid., p. 494.

19. Ibid., p. 495.

20. Ibid., p. 499.

21. Ibid., pp. 499–500. For still more orientalist statements of this nature by prominent Israeli leaders, see Smooha, *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict*.

22. On this vision of the Levant, see Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

23. Shohat 1999, pp. 12–13.

24. See the article "Sixty years old, through Arab eyes," in *Haaretz* (11 May 2008), that focuses on three essays which appeared in the London-based newspaper *Al Hayat*, dealing with Israel's sixtieth anniversary and the Palestinian Nakba. Predictably, these were familiar recitations of all the wrongs Israel committed. Yet they introduce, at the same time, Israeli self-criticism, both those of the "new historians," as well as critics such as Shenhav. It was thus not surprising that a reader (Sami) responded on the *Al Hayat* web site: "My dear brother, instead of this research in which you have wasted time trying to find the flaws of the Jews and Israel, write something useful about the flaws of ours, the Muslims. After all, Allah has already said, 'We created you nations and tribes so that you will come to know one another,' and not so that you will eat one another's flesh."

25. The full text may be found in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 558–562.

26. *Haaretz* (29 September 2008).

27. Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 223.

28. Yehouda Shenhav, "The Bonds of Silence," *Haaretz* (27 December 1996).

29. Originally a Reuters story, the Prince Turki al-Faisal statement was widely published in such newspapers as *Haaretz* and the *International Herald Tribune*. "The Arab world, by the Arab peace initiative, has crossed the Rubicon from hostility towards Israel to peace with Israel and has extended the hand of peace to Israel, and we await the Israelis picking up our hand and joining us in what inevitably will be beneficial for Israel and for the Arab world." One can imagine, he said, "the integration of Israel into the Arab geographical entity." The statement received mixed reaction in Israel, in part because Israel integrated into "the Arab geographical entity," and Israelis reduced simply to "Arab Jews" connoted a one-sided recognition wherein a distinctive Israeli Jewish identity, different from but not necessarily hostile to an Arab one, would be *a priori* sacrificed. Yet another way of reading Turki's statement might suggest a readiness to begin a dialogical process whose conclusion in no way is predetermined by initial claims that inevitably and necessarily would be revised and reinterpreted in the process of good-faith discussion.