

By Dalia Karpel  
Photos by Adi Mazan

In November 1942, at the height of the war and the annihilation of the Jews of Europe, David Ben-Gurion, then head of the Yishuv, the pre-State Jewish community in Palestine, presented a plan to bring a million Jews to the country immediately. The potential target was Jews from Islamic countries, "the present absentees of the Zionist enterprise," claims Prof. Yehouda Shenhav, in the refreshing opening of his new book, "The Arab Jews: Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity" (Am Oved).

Refreshing, since we are talking about the early 1940s. In the foreword to the book – soon to be published in Arabic and English – Shenhav presents major way stations in his own biography (he was born in Israel to Iraqi-born parents), and investigates the issue of ethnicity in Israel by examining who the "Arab Jews" are, and how they became "Mizrahim" in Israel. In other words, Shenhav examines why the combination "Arab Jew" became impossible, while "European Jew" was and still is entirely legitimate, and analyzes the encounter between Mizrahim (Jews of Middle Eastern descent) and Zionism, and an Israeli identity. In so doing, he seeks to examine the nature of the connection between the Arab Jews and the national struggle of the Palestinians. By transferring the discussion to the 1940s, even before the Jews from Arab countries arrived in Israel, he diverts it for the first time from its usual jumping-off point: the 1950s and the encounter between the *olim* (Jews who immigrated to Israel) from the Arab countries – whom Shenhav prefers to call "mebagrim" (a term that applies to all immigrants in general) – and the young State of Israel. The foreword adds perspective to the discussion.

"I looked for the meeting point between Mizrahi Jews and Ashkenazic Zionism" (that is, the Zionism of the Jews of Eastern European origin), he says, "and I found that after Ben-Gurion's 1942 declaration in reference to the 1 million [olim], which identified the Mizrahim as a demographic potential, a group from the Solel Boneh construction company left for the Arab world for a period of three-and-a-half years. Not all of them were *shlichim* [emissaries sent to encourage immigration], and some worked in the refineries in Abadan, Iran, which is about 1,500 kilometers from Tel Aviv. They wrote a great deal – diaries, minutes, newspapers and letters – about their first encounter with the Jews from Arab countries. This was an important encounter, from which we can learn about the nature of the connection that developed between the emissaries and the Jews from Arab countries, far from Palestine, in a kind of interim space."

You write that the emissaries from Solel Boneh who made the effort to preach Zionism to the Arab Jews were actually working under the sponsorship of British colonialism.

Shenhav: "There have already been scholars like Gershon Shafir and Ella Shohat who have claimed that Zionism was colonialist. I avoid saying that in the book, but I do say that colonialism is an important paradigm in the understanding of the Mizrahi question. First of all, the emissaries arrive there under the sponsorship of the colonial state, and live in whites-only areas. When they meet the Arab Jews, they have a white racist mentality, and they talk about it in their writings.

"These emissaries," he continues, "who are modern liberal socialists, are actually living in conditions of Western colonialism in the Third World. On the one hand, they are emissaries who really want to recruit Jews, and on the other hand, they claim in their writings that these Arab Jews are like their coolies and their Iranian servants, and that's already Jewish orientalism that identifies the potential olim as inferior people, not European and therefore not compatible with the model of the new, productive Jew. In the book, I examine the emissaries themselves, and show how they were created in relation to the Mizrahim and how their Zionism was formed. We have to remember that in the 1940s, because of the Holocaust in Europe and because of the story of Mizrahi immigration, this is the time and the place in which the political policy of Zionism vis-a-vis immigration came into being."

### 'All that glitters ...'

This is where the definition of "Arab Jews" comes in: "The Pesach Haggadah that was read for years in my parents' home was written in 'Hebrew Arabic.' There were Jewish intellectuals in the world, such as writer Albert Memmi, who defined themselves as Arab Jews. Writer Shimon Ballas defines himself as an Arab Jew even today. I'm a Mizrahi Israeli, and in the book I examine how Jewish-Arab communities became 'Mizrahi.' The emissaries in the 1940s called the Jews 'Arab Jews.'

# 'It could have been paradise here'

Who are the 'Arab Jews' and how have they come to be known today as 'Mizrahim'? On the backdrop of his own experiences, Prof. Yehouda Shenhav analyzes in his new book the complex and painful encounter between Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent, and Israeli identity

"In an interview that then Israeli prime minister Golda Meir granted Italian journalist Oriana Falacci in 1972, she was asked if she felt sorry about the Palestinian refugees from 1948. Meir replied in the affirmative, and emphasized that responsibility for them lies with the Arab countries. 'We in Israel have absorbed about 1,400,000 Arab Jews' – she uses that expression – 'from Iraq, from Yemen, from Egypt, from Syria, from North African countries like Morocco. People who, when they got here, were full of diseases and did not know how to do anything ... And still we took them, and built hospitals for them, and took care of them, we educated them, put them in clean houses, and turned them into farmers, doctors, engineers, teachers.'

"And she goes on to the Iraqi olim: 'Among the 150,000 Jews who came here from Iraq, there was only a very small group of intellectuals, and yet today their children go to the university. Of course, we have problems with them – all that glitters is not gold – but the fact remains that we accepted and helped them.'"

You claim in the book that the story of the Mizrahi immigration is different from that of the European immigration, because the Israelis marked the Arab Jews as religious, and even enhanced their religiosity.

"Had they not been religious, that would have caused problems for Zionism. Liberal Ashkenazi secular Zionism needs the Mizrahim to be religious – a definition that turned them into Zionists. The emissaries report to the institutions of the Yishuv that these are Arab Jews, and that they aren't sufficiently religious, and the emissaries try to imbue them with religious fervor and teach them religious customs."

So what does that say about Zionism?

"Zionism cannot be secular. Zionism is a triangle of nationality, religion and ethnicity, with these three categories inseparable from one another. There is no secular Zionism. Zionism is a kind of political theology. Therefore, when Justice Minister Tommy Lapid says he is willing to have a Jewish state, when he tries to propose legislation that defines a Jewish democratic state, when he says 'Jewish,' he means nationality rather than religion – and I claim that these are inseparable.

able. The moment you want a Jewish state as a nation, you are also defining it as a Jewish state in its religion. The entire business of secularism is a kind of joke, because if you want to separate religion from the state, you have to separate nationality from the state, and the nationality is Jewish, after all. When the emissaries made Arab Jews religious, they turned them into Zionists. The question is why today, when immigrants come from Russia, it doesn't bother us that they aren't Jewish, whereas when the Ethiopians came, they underwent a symbolic form of circumcision [although they had already been circumcised] to become complete Jews."

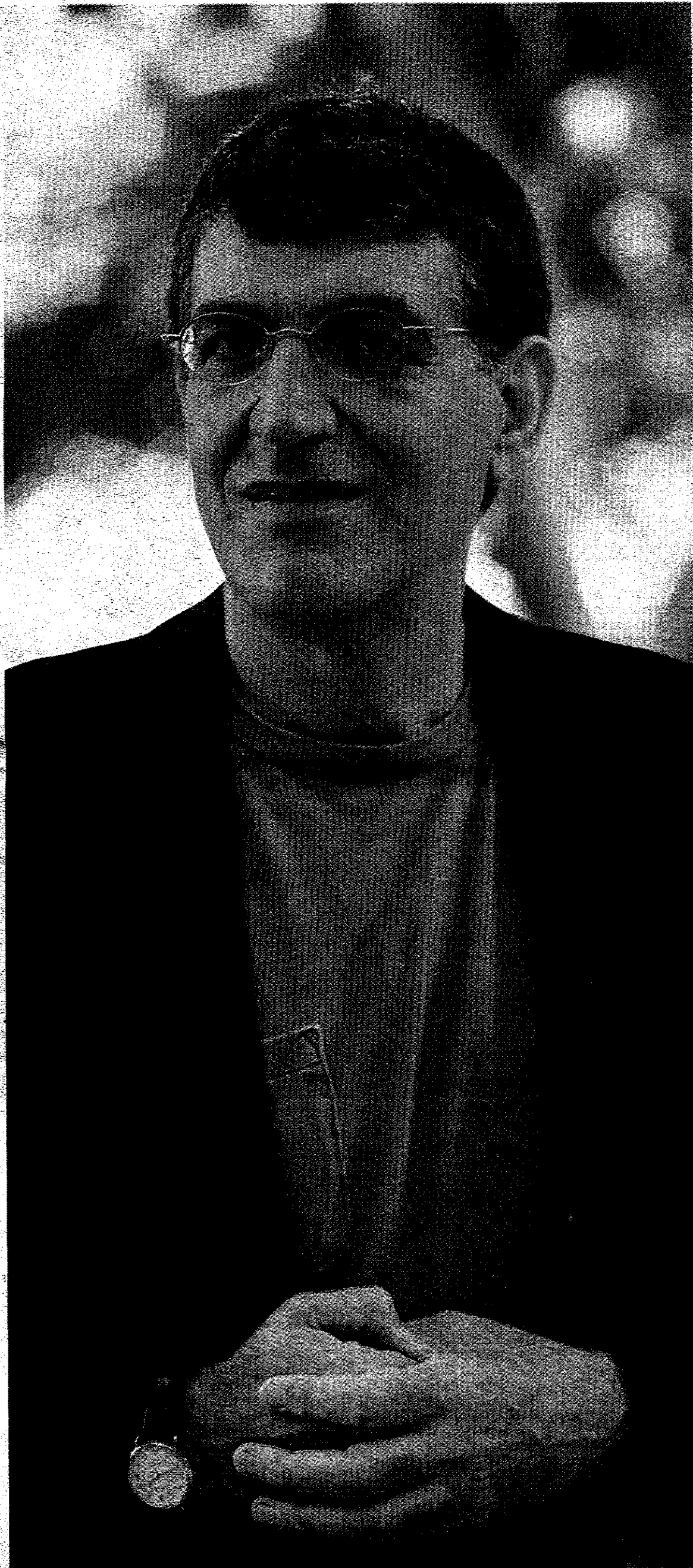
### Shas' growth

Shenhav claims this "religionizing" of Arab Jews was carried out in their native countries in order to bring them to Israel, whereas here, an attempt was made to secularize them in order to suit them to the model of the new Jew.

"The claim of the emissaries that the Arab Jews weren't religious enough is a colonialist understanding, because the emissaries came with the European view of what constitutes religion. When my grandmother came here from Iraq, they asked her if she was religious or secular. She didn't understand the question. Our people didn't know what to do with this distinction, and said it was 'traditionalism' – something in the middle. But it's not something in the middle, it's an entirely different category. Therefore, when these Jews come to Israel, they become Mizrahim as a general definition, and their country of origin is no longer important. The term 'Mizrahi' cancels the identity of a person and constitutes a classification by culture and status. That's why Shas is the wet dream of secular Zionism."

Why?

"There are many explanations as to why Shas grew ... Some claim that it's a protest against the Ashkenazic establishment, and mention the charismatic leadership of Shas. These explanations miss the



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cultural pattern of the place of Mizrahim within Zionism: secular Zionism that marked the Mizrahim as religious in order to define them as Zionists."

While showing how secular nationalism created religion among the Mizrahim, Shenhav also mentions the Israeli-Palestinian context.

"There are scholars who discuss the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as [historian] Benny Morris, for example, who deals with the question of the refugees and with Israel wars of revenge, and in all his books there isn't a word about Mizrahim," says Shenhav. "After all, there was an entire debate here about a population exchange between Palestinians and Jews from Arab countries. There are sociologists and anthropologists who have studied and are studying Mizrahim in the villages for oil, or the protest in Wadi Salib in Haifa [a slum area inhabited mainly by Moroccan Jews], and these studies don't contain a word about the conflict and the Palestinian problem. There's a 'distribution of labor' in the study of Israeli society, and it isn't a coincidence."

Shenhav is trying to do away with the dichotomy between these two research issues. "The moment you bring the Mizrahim together with the Arab context, that crosses the boundaries of nationalism. Ask why the Black Panthers [second-generation Mizrahim who demanded equal rights] posed a threat in the 1970s? Because of the link between them and Matzpen [an anti-Israel communist organization]. In meetings between members of the two groups, the Panthers heard about Marxist theories, in other words, about the connection between a radical left, involvement with Arabs and Arabism, and Mizrahim. This connection is what I call 'cultural pollution,' because it crosses the boundaries of nationalism. You can talk about Mizrahim as much as you like. There's no taboo and it's even legitimate, but only within the boundaries of na-

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tionism. The moment you link Mizrahim with Arabs, even in the eyes of the Mizrahim themselves, it's not only cultural pollution, it's dynamite."

### Battle against occupation

Yehouda Shenhav currently teaches in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University and headed the department from 1995-1998. He has a master's degree from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa and a doctorate from Stanford University in California. He has taught at a number of foreign universities, including Stanford and Princeton, and today is also the editor of the Hebrew-language journal *Theory and Criticism*. In addition, he is assistant editor of the European-American journal *Organization Studies*.

Aside from his work at TAU, he serves as a senior research fellow at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, where he edits a series of books about society and culture in Israel. He has published dozens of articles in prestigious journals all over the world, as well as a number of books: "The Organization Machine," (1995, Schocken, Hebrew), "Manufacturing Rationality: The Engineering Foundations of the Managerial Revolution" (1999, Oxford University Press), and "Managerial Ideologies in the Age of Rationality" (1991, Broadcasted University Series, Hebrew). In his books he shatters myths related to the culture of management, and shows how the profession of management "invented" itself.

Outside of the academic world, Shenhav attracted attention when he helped found the Sephardi Democratic Rainbow advocacy movement, established by second-generation Israelis from Islamic countries to promote social and cultural justice in Israeli society. The movement helps in the advancement of rights of residents living in public housing, in the battle for the democratization of land allocations, in the field of education, and in matters concerning Jewish property in Arab countries. The movement has had its ups and downs, but "the Rainbow continues to be a social-political movement," Shenhav says. "For my taste it is not sufficiently involved in the battle against the occupation, but it plays an important role in Israeli life. There is no doubt that the

Continued on page 27

# It could have been paradise

Continued from page 11

Rainbow has changed the attitude to Mizrahim in the past decade."

He was born in Petah Tikva in 1952 as Yehouda Shaharabani, the eldest child in the family. His mother, Esperant Mualem, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, arrived in Israel at the age of 18, in 1950, from Baghdad. She came with her parents as part of Operation Ezra and Nehemiah, which brought about 120,000 Iraqi Jews to Israel between March 1950 and July 1951. At the Sha'ar Aliyah immigrant absorption camp and the transit camp where the new immigrants were brought, Esperant met Eliyahu Shaharabani, and the couple married in 1951 and went to live at an army intelligence base in Be'er Sheva.

Eliyahu was the youngest of 10 children of Rivka and Salah Shaharabani, whose name comes from the city of Shaharabani in northern Iraq. Salah was a merchant who came to Israel regularly on business, and even bought a plot of land in the moshava (farming community) of Petah Tikva. In 1936 the Shaharabanis tried to settle in Petah Tikva, but after nine months they returned to Baghdad. Shlomo, the eldest son, remained in Israel and eventually became a wealthy factory owner. During one of Salah's trips to Palestine, in 1942, his youngest son Eliyahu, then 13, decided to remain in Israel, despite his father's opposition.

## Integration paradox

Shenhav: "My father was an adventurer. At first he worked in construction in Petah Tikva, and in 1946 he went to Kibbutz Alonim and joined the 'Babylonian' group of the Kibbutz Hameuhad movement, most of whose members, about 40, came from various kibbutzim. Together with them my father, at 17, went to become a settler in Kibbutz Beeri in the western Negev, which was built on the ruins of an Arab village. Several months later my father disappeared from the kibbutz and joined the ranks of the Haganah [the pre-state army], but the kibbutz members were sure that he was a member of the Etzel [a right-wing paramilitary group] who had been planted in the kibbutz. His disappearance led to a wave of suspicion toward his friends who, although they weren't spies, within a short time became the spies of the state, like my father."

Shenhav writes in his book that the person who recruited the young Israelis in Beeri was Avshalom Shmuely, a member of Kibbutz Kedma, who contacted these young people because "they were ambitious, loyal to the state, fluent speakers of Arabic who looked like Arabs."

Shenhav's father was by then no longer in Beeri, because he had been recruited to Military Intelligence already in 1950, a detail that his son discovered by chance: One day an elderly man with a heavy Iraqi accent came over to him in a Tel Aviv cafe and introduced himself as Avner Yaron, and told Shenhav that he had recruited his father into the intelligence community. He left the evidence a few days later in the cafe in a brown envelope: two pictures of his father with other young people, "all in their early twenties, some in khaki shirts and some in white shirts. All were 'Mizrahim,'" Shenhav writes. "I recognized him immediately by the flowing mane of hair that looks like that of Kramer on [the TV show] 'Seinfeld'"

His father spoke little, especially about himself. He worked hard and was often absent from home for long stretches, traveling to many African countries. "These absences added to his reputation in my childhood neighborhood; Father had earned the entry ticket to Israeliness, and I wanted him to impart some of it to me," writes Shenhav. But this integration was born out of a paradox, he emphasizes. "The recruits were state-sanctioned Arabs, which is the paradoxical part of the story. During

those years, when the state is trying to erase the 'Arabness' from the olim from Arab countries, it allows several Jews to live as Arab Jews with official permission. Father's friends lived in a 'nature preserve.' They spoke Arabic and read newspapers in Arabic and listened to the Arab radio broadcasts. They were consumers of Arab culture and admired its heroes."

That same paradox is evident elsewhere, in the case of his maternal grandmother, "who didn't consider Jews and Arabs two mutually exclusive categories. She continued to live in Israel as a pious Jew, but never denied her Arab identity and culture," he recounts, adding how, in his youth, he tried to find excuses for turning off the radio when the family listened to popular Egyptian singers Umm Kulthum and Farid al-Atrash.

After being discharged from Military Intelligence, Eliyahu worked as a security guard in a supermarket. He died at the age of 62, when an Iraqi missile fell. How ironic, says Shenhav, that his father was among the local casualties of the strange Gulf War.

## Collective denial

Thirty years ago, Shenhav and his younger brother Ofer, who was born in 1959 and works in computers, did everything possible to convince their parents to change their name from Shaharabani to Shenhav. Years passed until Yehouda understood that this personal denial, and that of others of his generation, was the product of a collective denial, and that the time had come to repudiate it.

His first years at the university were devoted to the study of managerial capitalism; his involvement in this field also gave him insight into the denial of the relevance of Mizrahim. He had already aroused acrimonious debates on the issue. In his article "A conspiracy of silence" (*Haaretz* Magazine, December 1996, Hebrew edition), he claimed that the Israeli left dealt mainly with the Palestinian question, and used it in order to deny the ethnic issue. He claimed that the left had solved the "Palestinian problem" by removing it beyond the fence (via the idea of two states for two nations), but chose to deny the "Mizrahi problem" because the left could neither deal with nor remove it.

In another article, "The Perfect Robbery" (*Haaretz* Magazine, April 1998, English edition), he described how the Israeli establishment had deceived the Jews of Iraq and used their assets, which were frozen in Baghdad, in order to evade responsibility for compensating Palestinians who were refugees of the 1948 Israeli War of Independence. Like its predecessor, this article also led to an outbreak of harsh reactions.

But harsh reactions don't faze him — he has been arousing them since childhood. "People talk about a happy childhood, and I don't know what that is. They threw me out of school, not only because I was a terrible student, but also because I was disturbed. My father also used to beat me mercilessly, and often used various accessories. I was the only one he hit; it isn't clear why. He took out all his anger only on me at every opportunity, and I had a hard time running away because he was fast on his feet."

Where and when did your the transformation take place?

"I knew that I wasn't only disturbed, but clever as well. I had a teacher in elementary school who thought that I was an excellent student, one reason being that I read a great deal. The change for the worse came when I started high school, but I remembered the good times in elementary school, and that gave me self-confidence."

After high school Shenhav was drafted into Military Intelligence, and in 1972 he started to study sociology at TAU. He did his master's degree in the Department of Industrial Engineering and Management at the Technion, and in 1983 he went to do a doctorate in the sociology of information at Stanford.

"The turning point came in 1975," says Shenhav, "when I married Rina, whom I had met in the army. I turned into an Ashkenazi during that marriage. It caused me to escape the stereotype in which I had been living as Shaharabani, the crazy teenager who sets fire to youth hostels. I turned into Shenhav who was studying for a master's degree and who was a 'shvigerzon,' as they used to say to me in the street in Yiddish: the son of the mother-in-law through his marriage, and I rather liked that. The marriage, characterized by total incompatibility, lasted about 10 years, but I was blessed with Inbar (26, a lawyer) and Noa (22, an assistant stage director)."

What do you mean when you say "I turned into an Ashkenazi"?

"If we return to the 'Arab Jews,' the book is composed of a genealogy in which Arab Jews turn into Mizrahim in Israel. I was already born as a Mizrahi who underwent the Mizrahi experiences of the generation of native-born Israelis. Went through the steamroller of the Zionist experience, internalized the dominant values of 'Israeliness' and afterward rose up and rebelled

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against it, joined the Sephardi Democratic Rainbow movement and wrote this book. If you ask Yehouda the man, then I have a private story involving falling in love and getting married. Yehouda the sociologist will say that this story has a context, and is also a sociological story. There are many such marriages that meet the standard of what is called upward mobility, in other words, social and class mobility that has to be shed afterward. I'm the first to admit that I wanted to belong."

And today?

"I don't know to what I have to belong. I'm very fond of Tel Aviv, and I prefer it to any other city in the world. I'm not familiar with a concept called Israeli society. In political terms, I feel very alienated. It hurts to see how the Zionist collective is in the process of suicide. The present chapter is another chapter in the march of folly, and that's what it will be called in retrospect. There is a great deal of racism, to an extent that's hard to find in other societies. Formal racism, which is embedded in the laws and the political administration. A policy of apartheid. There is also a 'new' latent racism ... directed against immigrants — Russians, foreign workers, Mizrahim and Palestinians. And there's also the prevailing attitude toward women."

"It's very sad, because it could have been paradise here. All the possible phobias have piled up here. Phobias about anti-Semitism, about homosexuals, about Palestinians and about Mizrahim. It's sad to see how all the Mizrahi politicians in all the parties, instead of being sensitive to these questions, and instead of being sensitive to questions of suffering and social justice, have themselves become oppressors. Young members of the government speak and behave as politicians did 50 years ago. This political ideology duplicates itself without any connection to whether the person is a man or a woman. They turn into carriers of this xenophobic ideology. They are its consumers as well as its victims. There's no mercy at all."

Now of all times, the poor treatment of the weaker classes, who are considered Likud voters, is coming from the Likud itself.

"It's true that the fact that there is no peace, and that we are in a fanatic ideology of settlements, undermines education, health, culture and the economic ability of many families. But make no mistake, the ideology of liberalization — the policy of privatization and the harm done to the weaker classes by giving preference to market forces — is an independent ideology. Even if there were money and even without the settlements, this is an ideology that would be implemented, because it's one that believes that it's preferable to invest in capital rather than in work and in workers, in order for capital to accumulate and move the economy forward. [Benjamin] Netanyahu as finance minister is promoting the big money and relying on the forgetfulness of the weaker classes, who will continue to believe that the Labor Party screwed their parents for generations to come."

## If she directs it

Continued from page 15

poster. There have been plays that I've taken out of the director's hands and finished myself."

Is this feminine management or centralist management?

"I'm a centralist. Some people can't live with that and some have learned to live with it."

Do you have a specific taste that is reflected in your choice of plays?

"I think the role of the theater is to communicate with the audience. And I'd also like to see experimental and esoteric things. I won't do them, because I think that public theater has to answer the audience's taste. It doesn't have the right to fail and it doesn't have the budget to fail. I don't have enough money to fail, though I'd like to have the right to fail like others have. The need to succeed in everything is basically what has guided me."

Yet Pines appears to have a clear preference for female playwrights and for plays about women. She explains that when it comes to theater, "women are the ones who bring men to see plays. Maybe because I'm a woman, I intuitively select material that speaks to women, and it's no coincidence that most of the main roles for me are women's roles: Philomena, Virginia Woolf, Piaf. Almost always the choicest role is for women and the world that is presented is a women's world."

Which isn't to say that she isn't interested in male actors, too, says Pines. "But there's historic justice here. Until a decade ago, casts were usually two-thirds men and one-third women. Now there has been a turnaround. In writing, too. Because the new writing is more feminine. There are more young female playwrights than young male playwrights. I admire the work of Edna Mazya and Anat Gov, Miriam Kainy and Goren Agmon. I think that female playwriting is more complex."

## 'I'm aggressive'

Some say that you're intimidating. Why do you think that is so?

"I don't know. Maybe because I'm aggressive. I'm not afraid to say what I want and I get what I want."

Why aren't there any other women theater directors?

"I don't know. But I want to say something — the people who choose directors are men. At meetings, I was always the only woman surrounded by men."

And how do they treat you?

"Now? They've gotten used to me. Before, they used to treat me like the director's secretary. I was petite."

Why is the charge leveled against you that you do commercial theater?

"What is commercial theater? What does someone who says that mean — that if a play is a success, that's a sign that it's bad? If a best-seller succeeds, does that mean that it's bad? No. It

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