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Yehoudah Shenhav, *Ha-yehudim-‘Aravim: Leumiyut, Dat, Etniyut* (The Arab-Jews: Nationalism, Religion, Ethnicity, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003, 291 pp. [Hebrew]).

With his new book Yehouda Shenhav has made a most important contribution to our understanding of the complexities of Israeli society and politics, as well of the fragility of Zionism. Any discussion of this book, however, must begin with few words about the term “Arab Jews” and its appearance in a book’s title. In the gallery of hyphenated modern Jewish identities, the term “Arab-Jew” occupies a non-place. Unlike such collectives as “German-Jews,” “American-Jews,” “French-Jews,” “Russian/Soviet-Jews,” etc, “Arab-Jews” sounds more like an impossible oxymoron than a representation of a specific cultural and social reality. Indeed, the existence of a Jewish state that has been at war with the “Arab world” for almost sixty years, along with the strong European/Western cultural and political orientation of that state, have not only in practical demographic terms helped dismantle Arab-Jewish communities, but also conceptually eliminated their very possibility. The rich terminology referring to Middle Eastern Arabic speaking Jews which emerged since their mass immigrations to Israel after Israel’s establishment (which effectively destroyed them) does not include the term. We speak, for instance, of ‘Edot Ha-Mizrah (“Communities of the East”), Mizrahim (“Easterners,” or “Oriental Jews”), “Sephardim,” “Jews from Arab Countries” and the like, but we never speak of “Arab Jews” – as if there could be nothing more threatening than the word “Arab” next to the word “Jew” connected by a hyphen (Arab-Jew) rather than separated by a slash (Arab/Jew). It is noteworthy that, by and large, the Arab world and its intellectuals have been equally silent about the Arab-Jewish question. While we hear of Arab-Muslims and Arab-Christians, we do not, as a rule, hear about Arab-Jews. Only very recently, amidst Mizrahi critics of Israel and Zionism who insist on being identified as Arab-Jews, has the term appear in print, first in English, in the writings of Ella Shohat, eventually translated into Hebrew and published in Israel.¹ It is within this context that Yehouda Shenhav offers his scholarly intervention.

Shenhav’s book is a set “of four independent essays,” each of which “focuses on one particular question in the social history of the Arab Jews and Zionism.” Nevertheless, as the author stresses, all four essays relate to each other “chronologically, analogically, and theoretically” (p. 15). This specific definition of the book is important since this book is not a history of the Arab Jews as such—such a history, if at all possible, has yet to be written. Instead, the author offers what he calls “a genealogical analysis” which is designed “to undo the teleological order of history” and to “undermine the [assumed] connection between a Jewish identity and Zionist identity.” Simply put, while the Zionist grand narrative typically presupposes that the “Jewishness” of the Arab Jews is identical to and coterminous with their “Zionism,” this study undercuts this presupposition and aims to “expose its social constructedness” (p. 14). Shenhav effectively and convincingly delivers on this promise by unpacking the (unholy) trinity of “ethnicity, religion, [and] nationalism,” upon which Zionism rests. In this respect, if this book deals with the “Arabness” of Middle Eastern Jews, it does so mostly through examining the way in

which Zionism constructs (permits) and understands it. Even more so, this book deals with the “Jewishness,” filtered through Zionist prisms, of these people. This point is crucial, for it directs the way in which this book should be read.

The first chapter of the book presents the “discovery” of the Arab-Jews by Zionism. In 1942 a group of several hundred men, all employed by the flagship construction company of the Zionist movement, “Solel Bone,” began working on a major project in Abadan, Iran. The men of “Solel Bone” came to Abadan under the auspices of British Imperialism, as sub-contractors of an Anglo-Iranian company. In this respect the “colony” in Abadan was a quintessential example of the convergence of British colonial interests and Zionist goals. However, as Shenhav points out, it was also an encounter between Zionists and Arab-Jews. The presence of Solel Bone’s men in the region enabled the “illegal entrance” of Zionist emissaries to “Baghdad, Teheran, Mosul, Choramshar, Basra, Kirkuk, and other cities...” (p.26). The lumping together of Iranian Jews who are Middle Eastern, but non-Arab, with Iraqi Jews is a serious weakness of this book. It seems the author was sometimes not careful enough to re-work the Zionist blind eye to such differences, to his narrative without replicating it. On page 44 he does mention the appearance of “an autonomous Zionist network of activity...between Basra, Mosul, Choramshar, Kirkuk, and Baghdad,” caused by the “presence” of Solel Bone people “in the region.” An historical inquiry into the specifics of this network might have produced a more fine-tuned analysis sensitive to differences between Iraq and Iran. Here is, to my mind, one central weakness of the author’s “genealogical analysis” of the Abadan Project.

The designation of the “Abadan Project” as the “ground zero” of the complicated relationship between Arab-Jews and Zionists is also problematic but is actually still more useful from a historical point of view. Shenhav is well aware that they were earlier encounters between the Zionist movement and Middle Eastern Jews—most notably Yemenites and North Africans. However, 1942 is the first encounter between the Zionist movement and the Arab-Jews when at the “backdrop were concrete plans to bring them to Palestine/Eretz Yisrael” (this in reference to Ben-Gurion’s “One Million Program,” p. 26).

In other words, this is the first encounter of Zionists and Arab Jews when the latter were understood by the former to have a specific role to play within the evolving Zionist agenda. As Shenhav tells this story, this encounter was shaped by two equally dominant and not mutually exclusive paradigms: the colonial (British/European), and the national (Zionist/Jewish). That is to say, “Abadan” was the site where Eurocentric attitudes branded the Middle Eastern Jews as inferior Others (as “Arabs”), and at the same time Zionist sentiments wished to incorporate them with the National Jewish project (as “Jews”). Shenhav demonstrates throughout the chapter that this fusion between the colonial and national paradigms was not at all smooth; it produced a fraught and frustratingly elusive image of Middle Eastern Jewry that kept escaping stable definition.

This elusiveness comes also in Shenhav’s second chapter, which deals with the “religionization” of the Arab-Jews, what Shenhav calls their “Hadata” (as in “Dat” or “Datiut”, namely religious and religiosity). Here the author traces the origins of the bizarre insistence of the Zionist movement, a secular and secularizing movement, that the Arab Jews were at once “religious” and “nationalist.” Interestingly, Shenhav’s reading of

reports by emissaries of the Zionist Yishuv to Iraq shows that these personae, all “secular,” had complaints about the “failed” religiosity of the Jews they encountered there. They described these Iraqi Jews as either not religious enough, or as subscribing to a Judaism that was “not authentic.” Furthermore, the emissaries’ lack of “tolerance” and non-nuanced assessment of the religiosity of the Arab-Jews, claims Shenhav, derived also from European notions of religion that posit it in a binary opposition to the “secular.” As Shenhav points out, this uncanny discourse concerning the religiosity of the Arab Jews was important and necessary, because of the place of Judaism as Zionism understands it: as the source of the passion to return to and claim Zion. That is, a religious passion that Zionism converts into a nationalist/political and secular fervor for Palestine. As another scholar, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, brilliantly put it: “There is no God but He promised us the Land.”ⁱⁱ Shenhav’s uncovering of this specific slice of discourse shows that for Zionists, so it seems, Arab-Jews lacked both passions or were unable to convert their religious passion for Zion into a nationalist one.

Within this framework, Shenhav shows how Zionism’s emissaries, unable to understand Arab-Jewish religiosity, had instead to “invent it.” Better yet, Zionism had to “invent” the Arab-Jews as religious Jews so they could at least share with their European brethren the “proto-Zionist” phase of having a religious passion for Zion. Shenhav wraps up the chapter by showing how this peculiar attitude towards Arab-Jewish religiosity shaped the discourse concerning Mizrahim in today’s Israel: they are forever labeled as “religious” and “traditional” (pp. 117-120).

While Shenhav’s first and second chapters deal mostly with situations preceding the establishment of Israel, the third and fourth reveal episodes from the period after 1948. Chapter Three shows how the Israeli government attempted retroactively to claim Iraqi Jewish property. After Iraqi Jews immigrated to Israel, in 1951 Israeli officials “confiscated” their property once again (after many cases of the Iraqi authorities having done so), by claiming it as part of the national (Israeli) property. This maneuver was an attempt to block Palestinian demands for reparation for property left in Palestine after the *Nakba*. That is, the threat of an Israeli “national” claim to Iraqi Jewish property was intended to stall movement on the question of Israeli reparations for Palestinian national property. Property restitution has surfaced time and again since the 1950s, always in response to the question of Palestinian property.

Chapter Four shows how the Israeli state ultimately relegated the “struggle” to recover lost property to the Arab-Jews themselves; that is, to governmental officials of Arab Jewish decent and other self-appointed representatives of the community, mostly rich Arab Jews residing in the West, outside of Israel and the national framework altogether. The main focus of this chapter is WOJAC—the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries, established in 1975. On the face of it, there is nothing more logical than the creation of an organization of Arab Jews in support of Israeli diplomatic efforts in the struggle against Arab diplomacy and the claims of Palestinian refugees. Yet Shenhav’s analysis of WOJAC shows how all the paradoxes produced by Zionism’s encounter with the Arab-Jews conceptually explode within it. WOJAC could no more than could the Israeli government control and monitor a discourse that at once referred to Arab Jews as Zionists who had immigrated to Israel out of their own volition and passion, and at the same time framed them as “refugees” who had fled their (Arab) homelands leaving everything. In this fascinating chapter Shenhav shows how the organization’s

attempts to reassert the primeval connection between Arab-Jews and their previous homelands paradoxically challenged and indeed threatened Zionist notions according to which all Jews primordially belonged to Palestine. He also shows how Israeli and non-Israeli members of WOJAC began speaking in increasingly divergent voices, with the eventual result that the organization found itself in conflict with the government of Israel. The latter kept trying to dictate how members of WOJAC should best remember their past as Arab citizens and kept clashing with its members, particularly the non-Israeli ones. WOJAC was not only unable to develop a coherent view of the Arab-Jewish past; its Israeli members were not able to “articulate a consistent and not self-contradictory thesis concerning the circumstances of their own arrival to Israel” (p. 183).

These case studies are fascinating. Nevertheless, one could object that Shenhav’s almost exclusive focus on Iraqi Jews undercuts somewhat the claim to be illustrating something generalizable about “Arab Jews” as a broader category. Other Arab-Jewish communities appear only fleetingly in the background. The dilemmas and paradoxes of Arab Jewish identity as Shenhav so trenchantly details them are, indeed, to some extent characteristic of a broader swath of Arab Jewry. Yet many of their features derive from the specific historical experiences of Zionism’s encounter with the Jews of Iraq (and, again, in part, the Jews of Iran, who are not Arabs). One should also be wary of the usage of them “Arabs” in this context, since the book does not offer a nuanced discussion of “Arabness” as such or an historical overview of the term. Since this is a genealogy of “Arab-Jews” as a Zionist construction, one should not expect or demand to find a history of Arabness in this book. However, perhaps the term “Arabized Jews”—as opposed to the un-historical “Arab-Jews” imagined by Zionism—would be more fitting when the author does discuss the concrete people living in Iraq since the “Arab” national/ethnic identity of this country, and the region as a whole, is in itself a rather recent development.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus Shenhav’s book will best be taken as a critical point of departure for studying the meaning of the Arab-Jew, and the greater attempt to understand whether an Arab Jewish history is possible. From a theoretical point of view one could ask whether the category of “race” should also occupy a place next to the categories of “nation,” “ethnicity” and “religion.”

The book is well written and lucid. The author deserves praise also for skillfully subduing the jargon that has colonized many other post-colonial texts written in Hebrew. Finally, this reader, also an Iraqi Jew (to be honest), found the semi-autobiographical introduction to the book a moving document. It seems that many other Iraqis of our generation in Israel could have written the exact same words about their experiences.

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ⁱ For a recent collection of essays see Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

ⁱⁱ Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “Ein Elohim Aval hu Hivtiach Lanu et HaAretz, (*MiTa’am* 3, September, 2005): pp. 71-76.

ⁱⁱⁱ I borrow the term “Arabize Jews” from Moshe Behar’s discussion of this particular problematic. See, “Nationalism at its edges: Arabized-Jews and the unintended consequences of Arab and Jewish

nationalism, 1917-1967” (Ph.D. Dissertation prepared for the Department of Political Science, Columbia University, 2001).