The Palestinian Nakba and the Arab-Jewish Melancholy: An Essay on Sovereignty and Translation

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A tank and a heavy bulldozer made their way into the village, and started plowing the soil, until they arrived at the mosque where the old imam was waiting. A man in his seventies—blind and hunchbacked—who spoke classical Arabic with noticeable eloquence. The soldiers broke into the mosque and ordered the imam to raise his hands and surrender. After a quick search, they asked him to leave the mosque. He refused. The officer approached the man and yelled at him with all his might, until the mosque's walls started to tremble. He then shot a bullet in the air, and thick dust dropped off the ceiling. The blind man grabbed the officer's arm, pushed it down, and spit on his face. The officer wiped off his face, and ordered the soldiers to serve him "dinner." They carried him out and left. The bulldozer started uprooting the mosque's ramparts. The old Sheikh disappeared after that "dinner." The village of Um al-Zinat was wiped off the surface of the earth. Only the olive tree remained deeply rooted in the soil, awaiting the return of its landlords. The burning sun scorched the olive tree's trunk, and the dew drops snuggled among its leaves. It was undeniable evidence of the renewal of life.

—SALMAN NATOUR, *The Life and Death of the Wrinkled-Face Sheikh*

The tale of Um al-Zinat (and for that matter of al-Ramla, al-Majdal, al-Lud, al-Birwe, Ein Koud, Safuri, Mi'ar, Ein Ghazal, Jaba, Ajzam, al-Hdt'ha, Bir alsba, Askalan—approximately five hundred Palestinian towns and villages that were wiped out in 1948) is a story that Hebrew culture and Israeli historiography prefer to conceal and forget. Despite partial democratization of Israeli historiography in recent decades, the majority of Israelis still deny the Nakba and subscribe to anachronistic myths—perpetuated by politicians, military personnel, historians, and self-appointed citizens— such as the ostensibly voluntary exodus of the Palestinians.[1] For many years Israelis treated the stories of the Nakba as top secret, hiding them as

skeletons in the closet. They have refused to look at their past courageously and continue to believe that they live in a free and open society.

But now, following the adoption of a reckless but useful piece of legislation known as the Nakba Law (March 2011)—which imposes sanctions on organizations that mention the Palestinian tragedy—almost every household in Israel has become acquainted with the Arabic word: al-Nakba. By banning, sanctioning, and erasing, the Israeli legislature succeeded in achieving the exact opposite. This may be a perfect example of Max Weber's "unexpected consequence of human action." An editorial in the daily *Ha'aretz*, which usually focuses only on the injustices of the occupation beyond the Green Line, turned its gaze "inward" to the question of 1948: "Stop rewriting history. Without recognizing the Palestinian Nakba it is impossible to understand the sources of the Israeli-Arab conflict." *Ha'aretz* reprimanded the Israeli government for its feverish efforts to eliminate and remove the history of the Nakba from Israeli textbooks.[2] This editorial is no trivial matter given the depth of denial, organized silencing, and taboo on opening the Pandora's Box of 1948.

It is hard to grapple with the drama that took place in Palestine three years after the end of World War II. The exile of 750,000 people from their homes, while in the background the image (even if not a mirror image) of Jews being deported from Europe. Frantic children, women, and men embarking on boats and ships at the seaports of Haifa, Acre, and Jaffa— leaving their belongings and families behind. It is now clear that expulsions and massacres took place all over Palestine, not only in Dir Yasin, al-Lod, and al-Tantura. The ethnic cleansing of Palestine included the abolition of hundreds of Palestinian towns and villages, some immediately repopulated by Jews (and sometimes even other Palestinians) to prevent return. Add to that the confiscation of lands, houses, and property by the state, and the looting of removable objects by Jewish citizens—without any shame or disgrace.

To be sure, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine did not begin or end in 1948. It started back in the 1920s, with an aggressive acquisition and takeover of lands that reached a peak in 1948 and again in 1967. The ethnic cleansing continues in the present day by other means: the silent transfer in Jerusalem; the settlements and the expropriation of land in the West Bank; the communal settlements in the Galilee for Jews only; the new Citizenship decree (which bans Palestinian citizens from bringing their Palestinian spouses into Israel, thanks to the emergency laws); the "unrecognized Palestinian villages" constantly under the threat of destruction; the incessant demolition of Bedouin houses in the south; the omission of Arabic on

road signs; the prohibition on importing literature from Arab countries, and many others. One telling example is the fact that not one Arab town or village has been established in Israel since 1948.

The materialization of an exclusively Jewish territorial sovereignty over 80 percent of historical Palestine would not have been possible without the enduring ethnic cleansing of the space. Rather than a state of its citizens in which Jews make a home for themselves, the State of Israel acts as an apparatus of granting privileges to Jews who are willing and able to accept the definition of the Zionist identity that the state wishes to impose. The Zionist decision to pursue a mono-ethnic Jewish state that monopolizes and controls territorial sovereignty (as opposed to bi-national or shared models of sovereignty) was first made in 1942 at the Biltmore Conference in New York and was ratified in Europe in 1946.[3] It was based on the seventeenth-century Westphalian model, which was founded on a politico-theological perspective, and state of exception.[4]

State of exception was developed in Roman law, in revolutionary and modern France, in the Weimar Republic and the Nazi regime, in Switzerland, Italy, England, and the United States. A typical historical example of scholarly thinking in this tradition is provided by Benjamin Constant, who already at the beginning of the nineteenth century recognized the menace associated with exceptions to the law, which he identified as more dangerous than overt despotism.[5] Whereas in traditional political theology the exception was defined in relation to temporality, in the case of Israel we observe a spatial dimension of emergency, which does not necessitate an expiration date.[6] The state uses emergency measures against its non-Jewish inhabitants and hence the absurd request to condition citizenship on loyalty to the Jewish nation.

The Westphalian form of sovereignty and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine were in part the realization on the ground of the "negation of the exile" ideology, developed in European Zionism. This is rather ironic: Jews who had just fled totalitarian emergency regimes in Europe accepted the same colonial emergency model in the Middle East, in order to distinguish between homeland and exile, and ostensibly protect the rights of the Jews. Thus, the emancipation of the Jews and protection of their rights are secured by these emergency legislations. On paper, Israel can turn in no time into one big Guantanamo Bay detention camp. Israeli law is anomalous, as are the territories under its control. Emergency regulations in Israel define exceptions to the law (martial law, curfews, preventive arrests, administrative detainees, political prisoners) that work effectively under the auspices of the law.[7]

Since its inception, the State of Israel has never ceased using emergency regulations to rule the Palestinians. Until December 1966 Israeli Palestinians lived under martial law, whereby they needed permits to move from one village to another, let alone to visit the big city. Economic activity was curtailed, fear was at its height, and the state waged demographic and spatial wars against its own Palestinian citizens. The system was abolished in December 1966, only to be reestablished in June 1967 to rule the West Bank and Gaza and to allow for Jewish settlements there. Israel inherited those emergency regulations from the British Empire, and renewed them without setting an expiration date. These measures enable an exclusively Jewish state cleansed of Arabs: a European state for European Zionist Jews outside of Europe—by denying the national rights of Israeli Palestinians and ignoring its Arab surrounding. Because the Israeli state has been unable to grant any cultural legitimacy to Arab culture and language, for Jews or others, Arab Jews can be regarded as inferior (or even disloyal to the Zionist project) for relying on inherited strengths. This state of suspicion stands in contrast to the relative willingness of contemporary society to accept the rejection of much "Israeli identity" by many immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Although I believe that Jews are entitled to live freely in the Middle East, their current presence is based on colonial relations with the Palestinians. It is startling and amazing that there is hardly any political thought today on the legitimacy of the Jewish existence in the Middle East beyond and outside these colonial emergency regulations.[8]

The denial of the Arab surrounding is manifested in various forms, and in this essay I mainly focus on language. From inception, and despite close etymology, the modern Hebrew language missed the opportunity to develop a close relationship with Arabic. There is ample evidence that modern Hebrew was constructed in contradistinction to Arabic, raising obstacles to communication and reconciliation between the two languages.[9] To be sure, language and sovereignty are tightly coupled. Language maps the cultural territory of the sovereign and construes its sources of legitimation. The sovereign is the one who speaks, dominates the discourse, and is able to conceal its violent roots. For this reason language also offers the opportunity to identify the fissures and fractures of sovereignty. This is best mirrored in the act of translation. At the etymological level the Arabic language resonates well with Hebrew, much more so than with English. Yet the rivalry that developed in the course of the last century between Arabic and Hebrew resulted in substantial linguistic and cultural barriers to moving between them. For such barriers Paul Ricoeur coined the term "the untranslatable."[10] In this context, the "untranslatable" is also a

symptom of sovereignty barriers between languages.[11] Referring to the rivalry between Hebrew and Arabic, the late Muhammad Hamza Ghanaim described translation between Arabic and Hebrew as sitting on a sizzling tin roof. Rivalry shapes translation between the languages that grew apart despite their close linguistic affinity. This shapes translation between the two languages.

The Nakba according to the Wrinkled-Face Sheikh

I borrowed the short tale on the old sheikh at the outset from Salman Natour's novel: *The Life and Death of the Wrinkled-Face Sheikh*, which I translated from Arabic. The wrinkled-face Sheikh is a storyteller. He lays out a string of short fragments that describe the Nakba and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine from the point of view of its victims. In the early 1980s Salman Natour interviewed dozens of Palestinians who became refugees in their own lands. At first they refused to talk. Although the military regime had ended, fear still resided in their hearts. But once they talked, no one could have stopped them; they expressed pain and laughter. Stories are dried, condensed, pendulous, and often in the form of stream of consciousness. One story follows another; tragedy after tragedy, a chain of convoluted accounts of the Palestinian catastrophe.

While translating, I was swept up in the accumulation of testimonies, the distant and remote authorial voice, and the porous boundaries between literature and history that expand and shrink away, like the porous boundaries between Hebrew and Arabic.

Toward the end of translation I asked Natour about footnotes. Would he be interested in adding footnotes for Hebrew readers on the location of sites, chronology, and timetables, or references to events documented in historiography? Natour objected: "This is a novel and not a history book." True, but this is literature written as history. And history written as literature. Or a literary revisionist version of history. As Natalia Ginsburg put it in the preface to her *Family Lexicon*: "All places, events and characters in this novel are real. I did not invent anything. . . . [Yet] even though it is based on reality, I think that one needs to read it as a novel, without requiring anything more than what a novel can offer."[12]

The Wrinkled-Face Sheikh is a novel based on dozens of testimonies and autobiographies written and told by the victims. These testimonies and documents are absent in official historiography. Why? First, because testimonies are inferior to archival documents in the writing of history, and the defeated hardly ever have documents. Second, these testimonies

were offered and written in Arabic, rather than Hebrew or English. These Arabic sources are hardly known to Israeli historians of the Nakba (e.g., Benny Morris wrote his major works on the Palestinian exodus without reading Arabic). Third, testimonies were given and written as literature in the Arabic language. This kind of evidence belongs to the bottom of the historiographical food chain. In contrast, revisionist Israeli historians took seriously—at least as a starting point—literary prose written in Hebrew on the Nakba, such as that by S. Izhar, Haim Guri, and Yoram Kaniuk. In an anthology titled *Tell Not in Gat*, Hannan Hever compiled representations of the Nakba in Hebrew poetry. He recites, for example, the famous poem by Natan Alterman who in the *Seventh Column* refers to war crimes perpetrated by Israeli soldiers five months after the massacre at Lod. This and other poems compiled in the anthology demonstrate how strong is the power of "fictional" poetry, and how it sheds light on the violent history that historiography tends to conceal.[13]

Melancholy

It is well known that no translation reaches completion. The translator faces untranslatable texts and incommensurable meanings, which are finally adjudicated arbitrarily. As literature on translation shows, it never reaches a satisfactory stopping point. Every stopping point is artificial, such as when the translation is published, and the translator knows deep down that the work is incomplete.

The untranslatable has enormous implications for the relationship between (Arabic) source and (Hebrew) destination. Add to that the changing states (both linguistically and ideologically) of the two languages between the time of writing and the time of translation, and not least the identity gaps between the author and the translator. The untranslatable is known to appear in every translation, but given the ideological war between Hebrew and Arabic, the untranslatable space breeds, increases, and expands. The translator knows that he or she was not really true to the original. This is the main reason behind the guilt and sense of betrayal among translators. This is where I was first introduced to the translator's melancholy.

For the translation of the *Life and Death of the Wrinkled-Face Sheikh* engulfed me with a familiar feeling of loss and betrayal, as Hebrew and Arabic did not agree in all respects. But this time, it was accompanied with something else: an obsessive urge to write and rewrite the text. Thankfully, Salman Natour has excellent command of Hebrew, and when he read the translation he gently defied my interventions. In the absence of a different name,

I call it melancholy. First, because it was impossible to put a finger on the lost object. Second, because I could not get rid of it. I was completely engulfed with the stories, walking around with moist eyes, telling everybody, those who wanted and those who did not, about my staggering experience. Indeed melancholia is about nameless loss. Indeed? What did I lose?

At the basic level there was sadness, sympathy with the victims, and possibly the attempt to cope with my guilt feelings. All these are clearly understood: morality, humanity, human rights, and the rights of minorities. I also have political reasons: I believe that no reconciliation or peace can be reached without a return to the 1948 tragedy.[14] No Jew can escape such a return. There is also the issue of Jewish property in Arab countries, which served as justification to confiscate Palestinian property. This is a long story, but disturbing enough to infuse one with a sense of depression.[15]

Then Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin posed a question to me: You spend most of your time translating literature on the Palestinian Nakba, which is important. Did you ask yourself why? Why aren't you working, for example, on Jewish Baghdadi texts written in Arabic at the beginning of the last century? Where does your urge come from? Here's the rub. Back to the story.

This is a story about the ethnic cleansing of Palestine from the perspective of its Palestinian victims. Hebrew culture denies the story because it raises questions about the morality of the Jewish state. One way or another, the cleansing of space and the establishment of homogeneous sovereignty enabled the binary distinction between the Jewish homeland and Arab exile. If the Nakba bestowed upon the Zionist European Jews a homeland, at the same time it destroyed the Arab-Jewish option in language and space. Admittedly, Zionism rejected all exilic life, but the legacy and memories of exilic Arab-Jewish life impeded the political and symbolic establishment of the "Jewish homeland" in quite specific and acute ways.

The ethnic cleansing of Palestine entailed the elimination of the Jewish-Arabic space and the rejection of a Jewish-Arab option of hybrid life. Yet there is no recognition in Israeli discourse for this loss, even if utopian. Perhaps this was the source of my melancholy. The striving for recognition of the Arab Jews was behind the urge to rewrite the story, as well as this (somewhat personal) essay.

Homeland/Exile

As in other cases (e.g., religion and secularism), the relationship between exile and homeland is mediated by an east/west dichotomy. It cuts one meaning "here" in the Middle East and another "there" in the West. For

the European Zionist Jew there is a binary tension between exile and homeland: Exile is in Europe, and homeland is in the Middle East.[16] Yet although for the Zionist European Jew the distinction is binary, for the Arab Jew it is a sequel of spatial, linguistic, religious, and cultural fragments. Raz-Krakotzkin defined it as "exile within sovereignty," as it was materialized in the major Jewish centers in Safed, Tiberius, and Hebron, blurring the artificial distinction between exile and homeland.[17] I respond now to my urge to rewrite the story of the wrinkled-face sheikh from an Arab-Jewish point of view.

Saleh Shahrabani, my paternal grandfather, was an Arab Jew. He was a merchant who sold Iraqi dates in Palestine during the 1930s and 1940s. He made the trip four times a year, traveling from Baghdad via Syria to Northern Palestine: Haifa, Nazareth, and then to Jaffa. In Palestine he felt at home. He met with other Jews and donated to synagogues and other religious causes. In Haifa he unloaded the truck, spent a few days in town while the truck was circling around the Galilee, and then rode south to Jaffa, where he uploaded boxes of Jaffa oranges and shipped them to Baghdad and its vicinities. Apart from agricultural produce, he managed a business renting chairs for weddings in Baghdad. My grandfather was dark, lean, modest, God-fearing, allured by the holy land and its sanctity. He is not well known since the Arab Jews and the Arab-Jewish option were edited out of the Zionist lexicon. He was an ardent Jew who did not participate in any Zionist enterprise.

Saleh Shahrabani traveled throughout the Arab-Jewish space. He spoke Arabic there/here as it was common here/there. Each time he came to Palestine he stopped and met with the old sheikh under the olive tree in Um al-Zinat located on the way from Haifa to Jaffa. He even did business with people in the village. According to family stories he met the sheikh in March 1934 in the office building of Arab Agriculture Ltd. to sign an agreement for cooperation. Not between the Jew and the Arab, but between Palestine and Baghdad.

> He right away identified the place which lay on the western side of the entangled road that linked Ein Khoud with Ein Ghazal. All three sites were inscribed with dashed lines and black spots on the map of Palestine. Palestine of those days. When the buildings in Almaluk Street were owned by the Tbrawi family. When the building that now houses the police headquarters used to be the office building of Arab Agriculture Ltd., which was bordered on one side with Yafa Street and with the intersection of al-Salam Street on the other side.[18]

Saleh Shahrabani spoke the tongue of the old sheikh and loved his Arabic literary enunciation. The sheikh, for his part, liked the heavy Iraqi accent emanating from my grandfather's throat, and especially the deep guttural "Q" which was the custom in the desert. Once on the staircase, leaving the office building and led by his young assistant, the old sheikh turned to Saleh Shahrabani:

> A young guy from Um al-Zinat is heading to Baghdad to study engineering. Can he get a ride with you? Is it possible to get him a part-time job in your business in Baghdad? That would sustain him during the school year. He occasionally could come with you in your trips to Palestine, to visit his family. You'll love him. He is industrious and pious like you.

The Jewish merchant from Baghdad promised to take care of the young Palestinian student.

There is no doubt that Saleh Shahrabani yearned for Eretz Israel. This was the main reason he visited regularly in Palestine. In 1936, he even immigrated with his family to Palestine, but after nine months they returned to Baghdad. Is Baghdad homeland or exile? Is Palestine homeland or exile? I am doubtful whether these concepts were part of my grandfather's vocabulary. But when he thought about the space, he certainly did not envision a monopolistic territorial sovereignty with sealed borders. He certainly did not think about living in a Jewish ghetto with closed fences and barriers. He envisioned an open space where he did not have to choose between here/there there/here. A space that does not require the denial of the Arab surrounding. This was the option that allowed Saleh Shahrabani to visit Palestine, to immigrate to Palestine, to emigrate from Palestine, and to revisit time and again—as a never-ending multidirectional journey. As is the case with translation.

But Palestine was cleansed of Arabs and the Arabic language, and although Saleh Shahrabani lived in Israel at the end of his life, when he already had dozens of grandchildren, he felt like a stranger in the Jewish city, just like the wrinkled-face sheikh:

> A staircase dressed with chiseled stones separates Haifa of today from Haifa of yesterday. The past resides in downtown and the vibrant present takes place uptown. The sea retreated. The surrounding verdant mountains' peaks are growing balder, year after year. Haifa has turned pale, shrouded in the thick smoke of industry, and upset by the long cries of outgoing and incoming ships to the port. The Sheikh wakes up at sunrise and leaves home, wandering alone around the city's new

> streets: YL Peretz, The Prophets, Mendele the Bookseller, Father Abraham, Mother Sarah. Names and expressions that did not exist in the Arabic language. Even the soles of his shoes were barely accustomed to the city's new streets.[19]

Similar to the sheikh, Saleh Shahrabani woke up at sunrise and left home. He wandered alone in the streets and did not adapt to the new city. He encountered names and expressions whose meaning he did not understand. He sat down on a wooden bench and held in his fingers a white beaded string. After a short rest, he went to the town hall where none of the officials understood Arabic. He walked down to Wadi al-Nissnas, and found it empty and abandoned. He turned to Wadi al-Salib where he met David Ben Harush who spoke Moroccan Arabic. Finally, he headed to the Iraqi synagogue in the Hadar neighborhood, where everyone spoke Arabic with a deep accent.

Did I go too far with nostalgia? Certainly. First, my grandfather did not know the old sheikh. Second, the Arab-Jewish option is not without disagreements and conflicts. Is it possible that my grandfather left Palestine out of fear when the Arab Revolt started in 1936? There were enduring conflicts between Jews and Muslims, as there were between Sunnis and Shiites and between Druze and Christians. But nostalgia is not just popular folklore, however important. Nostalgia can turn into a cultural and political horizon. I believe that this is the only way available to Jews to settle in the region and even protect their rights. This is an option in which all Jews living in the region become Arab Jews.[20] It requires an alternative model of sovereignty.

Sovereignty is perhaps the only central concept in modern state theory that has not yet undergone serious deconstruction.[21] Sovereignty is a multifaceted phenomenon, heterogeneous and unstable in nature. It is always a perforated practice that contains ambiguous territorial and heterogeneous populations that cannot be integrated under the banner of one sovereignty. The Arab-Jewish option is not based on a monopolized or homogenized territory. It is founded on a pierced and porous space, without a sharp distinction between exile and homeland, at least not in the same manner as it is constructed in European Zionism. As Hannan Hever shows in his discussion of Hebrew literature, Jewish immigration from Arab countries was less ridden with utopian narratives as compared to Jewish immigration from Europe.[22] It is worth recalling the vocabulary of the Jewish Iraqi writer Shimon Balas, describing his account of the transition from Baghdad to Tel Aviv in 1950: "I never changed my native soil

or homeland. I only moved from one place to another within the region. I am not in conflict with the Arab surrounding. I came from an Arab region, and remained in constant dialogue with it."[23]

Balas traveled in the region. Like my grandfather. Like my father. Like many Arab Jews. They have traveled on trucks, donkeys, or camels. Whatever was the routine movement from Baghdad to Palestine, and back. Saleh Shahrabani drove an old military truck from the leftovers of the British army. He traveled in a space where there was no sharp distinction between homeland and Diaspora. The Palestinian Nakba is therefore also the liquidation of the Arab-Jewish model. My urge to re-write the text, my melancholic urge to intervene, derived in part from this loss.

The Arab-Jewish Option

Elimination of the Arab-Jewish option and the shrinkage of the Arab space began years before the Nakba. The State of Israel has developed a phobia toward its Arab surroundings and toward the Arabic language. This phobia recently received a grotesque expression, when Israel banned entry of the Arabic translation of Amos Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, since it was printed in Beirut. One of the signs for this phobia is the tiny percentage of Jews who have a good command of Arabic. While approximately 92 percent of the Palestinians in Israel have a good command of Hebrew, only 2 percent of the Jews speak or understand Arabic (if we subtract the older generation of Arab Jews who were born in Arab countries). These scandalous differential rates attest primarily to the colonial relations between the languages and the phobia Israelis developed toward Arabic. The slim rate of Arabic speakers among the Jewish Israelis is a voluntary acceptance of the cleansing practices of the state.

Arabic speakers in Israel know how hard it is to exercise the right to language in the swelling Jewish space. Because it is perceived as inferior, there is no inclination to know and learn the language. It is specifically grim among the second and third generation Mizrahi Jews when Arabic is a source of ambivalence and conflict. Israel's policy on the issue is more than puzzling. It certainly does not suggest any intention or desire to accept and win acceptance from the Arab surrounding. It is the behavior of a stranger who comes to visit a region for a short spell. Someone called it a "villa in the jungle." Others have compared this to the behavior of the Crusaders. They too did not come to settle into the region, did not make an effort to integrate, did not speak Arabic, and developed a phobia toward Arabs. They eventually left.

By comparison, with the Arab conquests in the seventh century, Arabic Jewish language replaced Aramaic as the language of the Jews. Famous Jewish writers, among them Musa Ibn Maimon (Maimonides), Ibn Said Joseph Alafiomi (Saadia Gaon), and Abu al-Hassan Allawi (Yehuda Ha'Levi) wrote in this language. For this reason, intellectuals such as David Yellin, Joseph Meyuchas, and Shalom Yahuda begged in the early parts of the twentieth century to resume Hebrew in the medieval tradition, in the form of a symbiotic relationship with Arabic.

The meeting points between Hebrew and Arabic in the early days of Islam were based in part on theological dialogue between Judaism and Islam. The Muslims hardly betrayed the Jews as the European Christians did. However, in the context of Palestine/Israel, the renewal of the Hebrew language tagged along the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Protestant return to the Bible. It meant denial of the Arab-Jewish tradition, erasure of the history of the land from biblical time to the present, and the denial of Palestinian existence. The coupling of Jewish identity and Arabic identity became taboo in Hebrew, and the renewal of Jewish Arabic language (تعريب) was overlooked as a serious option in the revival of modern Hebrew.

Despite the closeness between the languages, Hebrew rejected the Arabic language, and saw in it a filthy remnant of exilic life. Initially Eliezer Ben-Yehuda understood the proximity between the languages and believed in its generative productivity, expanding the rather lean Hebrew vocabulary. He offered to import words not only from literary Arabic but also from the spoken language.[24] In so doing he offered an alternative to the model of enmity between the two languages. But apart from a handful of supporters, these recommendations were met with resistance, and the Arabic language was perceived as the language of the enemy and a hump on Hebrew's back.[25]

From its inception, the Hebrew Language Academy held discussions on the sources of the Hebrew language. A bone of contention was whether the Bible is the sole source of Hebrew, or whether they should rely on other sources such as the Talmud, Mishnah, Midrash, or Agada. This is how one question was formulated: "[Was] the Mishnah a natural living language [. . . or] an artificial jargon . . . which took upon itself a look of Hebrew but in fact is only broken Aramaic?"[26]

The return to the Bible was a theological act that implied the negation of Arabic and Arabs. The revival of Hebrew biblical language sought to purify these Arabic and Aramaic remains in Hebrew, and return to the language of the Holy enunciation. Arab and Arabic are seen as hunchbacks that developed after the destruction of the commonwealth. The

Jewish philosopher Gershom Scholem understood early on the power of the inevitable sacralization of the supposedly secular revived Hebrew language. In 1926, during the great cultural war for Hebrew as a spoken language in mandatory Palestine, Scholem wrote to fellow philosopher Franz Rosenzweig:

> The people here [in Palestine] do not understand the implications of their actions. . . . They think they have turned Hebrew into a secular language, that they have removed its apocalyptic sting. But this is not the case. . . . Every word that is not created randomly anew, but is taken from the "good old" lexicon, is filled to overflowing with explosives. . . . God will not remain mute in the language in which he has been entreated thousands of times to return to our lives.[27]

In 1929, when my grandfather Saleh Shahrabani traveled from Baghdad to Haifa and Jaffa, Ze'ev Jabotinsky explained to the committee for the renewal of the Hebrew language, that their Europeanness does not allow them to adapt an Eastern or Arabic accent: "There is no reason to believe that the ancient accent of the ק, ע, ט, ח should carry Arab pronunciation.[28] In renewing our language, we must determine the appropriate ringing which fits our musical taste, which is first and foremost European and not Eastern."[29]

Likewise, the committee for the renewal of the Hebrew language stated: "We recently arrived from Europe and our throats are unable to pronounce difficult Arab letters. How would we express the Arabic ט or ק in Arabic from the cavity of our throats?[30] The committee was completely oblivious to my grandfather and other Arab Jews.

The renewal of the Hebrew language was based in many cases on ideological contrast with Arabic, which was perceived as inferior and filthy compared to the biblical lexicon. This was realized in the rejection of words and expressions that were too close to Arabic. In so doing, European Zionism adopted a Christian doctrine that sought to renew the Bible in isolation from the Jewish tradition in exile, and in particular its proximity to the Arabic language. The rejection of Arabic added enormous impediments to the possibility of reconciliation between the languages.

Reconciliation between languages is the task of the translator. Translation as a cultural phenomenon undercuts the exclusivity of ethnic sovereignty. Translation develops from a mere technical esthetic artifact into a mode of existence. Translation of this kind does not have "source" or "destination." They co-develop as in shared sovereignty.

Reconciliation between Languages

In his essay "Task of the Translator" Walter Benjamin argued that the role of the translator is to bring us to an "ancient promised place, hitherto uninhabited by human beings, a place where reconciliation between languages is fully realized."[31] Perfect translation is a messianic act, since reconciliation between languages resides outside human history and lies in the realm of apocalyptic eschatology. According to Benjamin, reconciliation between the tongues means return. Return of "exile within sovereignty." A bilingual return that tolerates reunion between Arabic and Hebrew. It requires a new thought on sovereignty. A model which would be flexible enough to accommodate both languages, as in both people. Sovereignty which is based on sharing (לחלוק) rather than dividing (לחלק).[32] The first step is recognition of the Nakba.

In recent years, historiography has abandoned the old question that sought to clarify how many Palestinians were expelled and how many of them fled on their own initiative or at the initiative of their leaders. This has been futile and removed from the center of historiography. Today many historians, Jews and Palestinians, provide a revisionist formulation in which the Nakba is not just the expulsion and displacement of 1948, but especially the ban on return to homes and families immediately after the war and in fact to this date. According to this interpretation, the sovereign decision of the Israeli government to prevent the return of hundreds of thousands of people to their homes after the war is a formal act of ethnic cleansing.

Thus, the Nakba is not an event that ended in 1948, but a trauma that continues into the present as shown in the following brief episode, again from the *Life and Death of the Wrinkled-face Sheikh*. It deals with the skeletons that Israel keeps in the closet and with the return of the repressed. It also attests to the melancholy of the Jew, but this time, the European Jew. It suggests that the Arab-Jewish option is not a biological artifact and is not peculiar to Arab Jews. It is offered to every Jew who desires to live here in peace.

The Artists' Village

The village of Ayn Houd was transformed into a Jewish artists' colony known as Ein-Hod.[33] In the old days, there was there a grand mosque whose spire rose to several feet above the ground. In the artists' colony the mosque was converted into a highbrow restaurant. At the entrance stands a female host who caters to the artists' needs and their respectable guests.

A few years ago, a man arrived at the artists' colony from Siris, a village located in the Jennin district. He headed to a house inhabited by an artist who immigrated from Europe or America. The artist's wife who opened the door was startled at first, seeing the strange "rouge-head" staring at her. The man was silent as a stone, as he had never seen a half-naked woman opening the door of his house. The woman recovered quickly and gently invited the man inside. She summoned her husband, the artist, who was also apprehensive at first, seeing the Keffiyeh and the thick mustache of the visitor. But the artist also recovered quickly, particularly after he saw a smile spread across the visitor's face.

He asked the Arab man:

—What brings you here?

The Arab man answered without hesitation: I was born here. This is my home.

—This is your home?

His voice expressed great amazement, and he promptly invited the man to enter.

—What do you mean? Tell me what happened!

The guest seated himself on a comfortable armchair and told him the story from beginning to end. The artist welcomed him lavishly and served him a cup of coffee. He even offered him a glass of whiskey. He then apologized, sat down next to him and begged to hear the story. The artist believed every single word he heard. The Sheikh we are talking about sealed off the story:

—The Arab man went back to his village in the West Bank. The artist, however, was seized by guilt, sadness and irritability. He decided to leave the house and moved to another. But the ghosts kept pursuing him to the new home. Every day he woke up waiting for another Arab man who would come to visit the house where he was born. Nightmares and ghosts never vanished and followed him everywhere, until he decided to leave the country altogether.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Shay Hazkani, "Catastrophic Thinking: Did Ben-Gurion Try to Rewrite History?" *Ha'aretz Magazine*, May 16, 2013. Hazkani shows how Ben Gurion asked the best Israeli orientalists to supply him with evidence the Palestinians were not expelled, but escaped from Palestine.

2. "Stop Rewriting History," *Ha'aretz* Editorial, May 19, 2013.

3. See Hannan Hever, "The Post Zionist Condition," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (2012): 630–48.

4. See Shenhav Yehouda, "Imperialism, Exceptionalism and the Contemporary World," in *Agamben and Colonialism*, ed. Svirsky Marcelo and Simone Bignall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17–31.

5. B. Fontana, ed., *Constant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 143.

6. This territorial dimension is also backed up by the negation of rabbinic (exilic) tradition as consecrating time rather than space. This negation of exile is materialized by the "return" to the imagined biblical territory and time.

7. For elaboration see Yehouda Shenhav, Christopher Schmidt, and Shimshon Zelniker, eds., *State of Exception and State of Emergency* (Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009). Hebrew.

8. See Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "The Six-Day State: Israel, the Occupation and the Bi-National Position," *Mahsom*, June 26, 2007 [Hebrew]; Amnon Raz Krakotzkin (2007), *Exil et Souverainete* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2007) [French]. For a review see Yehouda Shenhav, *Beyond the Two-State Solution: A Jewish Political Essay* (London: Polity Press, 2012).

9. This was also in the case of Yiddish, but in the case of Arabic, contradictions are particularly interesting since they had to "overcome" etymological identity.

10. Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (New York: Routledge, 2006); but see also Barbara Cassin, ed., *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Cassin suggests that the untranslatable never ceases (not) being translated and thus refers to a process that is never complete.

11. Shenhav Yehouda, "Sovereignty Gaps, the Exception and State of Exception," *Theory & Criticism* 29 (2206): 205–18. Hebrew.

12. Natalia Ginzburg, *Family Lexicon* (Hakibutz Ha'Meuchad, 2012), 5 (from Italian to Hebrew: Miriam Shusterman-Podavno and Menahem Pery).

13. Hever Hannan, *Tell Not in Gat—The Naqba in Hebrew Poetry 1948–1958* (Tel Aviv: Pardess Press, Zochrot, 2010, 2nd ed., 2012). Hebrew.

14. Shenhav, *Beyond the Two-State Solution*. See also Jonathan Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

15. For detailed analysis see Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), chaps. 4–5.

16. See Haggai Ram, *Iranophobia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

17. See Amnon Raz Krakotzkin, "Exile within Sovereignty: Toward Criticism of the "Negation of Exile" in Israeli Culture," *Theory & Criticism* 3 (1993): 23–55 (Hebrew); Amnon Raz Krakotzkin, "Exile within Sovereignty Part B," *Theory & Criticism* 4 (1994): 113–39. Hebrew.

18. Salman Natour, *The Life and Death of the Wrinkled-Face Sheik* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2014). Translations from Arabic to Hebrew and English are mine. —YS.

19. Ibid.

20. See Shenhav, *Beyond the Two-State Solution*. Chapter 5 addresses the rights of the Jews.

21. For a few exceptions see Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Shenhav Yehouda, "Does Critical Theory Have a Color? Reflections on Post-Westphalian Sovereignty," in *Four Lectures on Critical Theory*, ed. Gil Eyal (Tel Aviv: Ha'kibbutz Ha'meuchad and the Vanleer Jerusalem Institute, 2012), 15–49 Hebrew.

22. See Hannan Hever, "'We Have Not Arrived from the Sea': A Mizrahi Literary Geography," *Social Identities* 10, no. 1 (2004): 31–51.

23. Ammiel Alcalay, "At Home in Exile: An Interview with Shimon Ballas," *Literary Review* 37, no. 2 (1994): 180–89.

24. Iair G. Or, "The Emergence of New Hebrew: Beliefs and Ideologies in the grammatical discussions of the Hebrew Language Committee, 1912–1928," Master's thesis (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2014). Hebrew.

25. Shenhav Yehouda, "The Politics and Theology of Translation: How Do We Translate Nakba from Arabic to Hebrew," *Israeli Sociology* (Hebrew), 14 (2012): 157–84.

26. The Committee for the Hebrew language, *Memories and Minutes* (Jerusalem, 1929), 50.

27. Gershom Scholem, *One More Thing: Chapters in Heritage and Revival*, vol. B, (Tel Aviv, Am Oved, 1989), 59. Hebrew.

28. Arabic transliteration: ḥ = ח/ṭ = ט/q = ק/' = ע

29. Zeev Jabotinsky, *Hebrew Pronunciation* (Tel Aviv, 1930), 25.

30. The Committee for the Hebrew language, *Memories and Minutes* (Jerusalem, 1929), 51.

31. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2000).

32. In *Beyond the Two-State Solution*, I provide a more elaborate discussion of this idea.

33. This passage is from Natour, *Life and Death of the Wrinkled-Face Sheik*.