

# Analyzing Jewish History Text Books

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**A**s part of the project on education in Israel initiated by The Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow Coalition, Prof. Yehuda Shenhav made an initial study of Jewish History text books used in Israel. In this study he examines the manner in which the Mizrahi Jews in Israel are represented, and on the techniques, both textual and essential, which form the narrative about the Mizrahim. He presented his findings at a conference organized by the Rainbow Coalition in March, focusing on three criteria: 1) The degree of representation (or lack thereof), 2) The appropriateness of language and style, and the manner of representation, 3) The context of representation. The following is Professor Shenhav's presentation regarding the third criterion.

## The Context of Representation

At the most fundamental level, one can speak not only about the degree of representation and the appropriateness of language and style, but also about the context of the representation (or the character of the historical narrative). Thus, for example, one of the main components in the description of the history of the Jews in Islamic countries is their humiliation. The relations between Jews and Moslems are depicted as antagonistic, even though the relations between Judaism and Islam were far more harmonious than the relations between Judaism and Christianity. In addition, Yemen and Persia are represented as "the two darkest corners of Islam." (Ron, p.82) The history of the Jews in Islamic countries, as it is depicted in this book and others, is better off not being written about at all.(1)

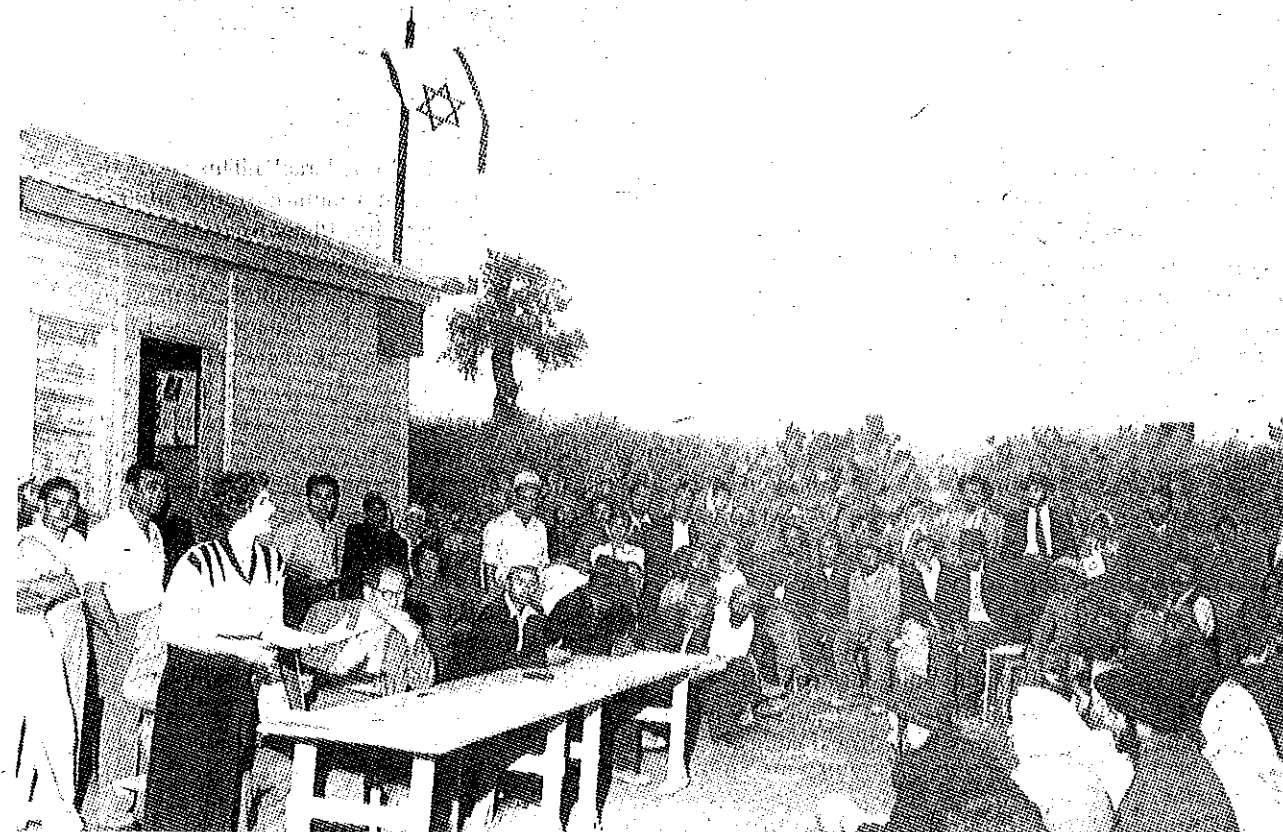
These examples, as well as others, provide the basis for understanding of the framework that determines the historical discourse. I would like to make three comments on this, as follows:

### First: Mizrahi Structural Inferiority in Zionist Historiography

The books we are dealing with chose from the very beginning (so it seems) to describe the history of the Jewish people and not the history of the Land of Israel (*Eretz Israel*), as the latter would have compelled the authors to include the

Arab inhabitant in the land. As Dr. Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin has shown, the history of 'Eretz Israel' from the second temple to the beginning of the Jewish settlement at the end of the 19th century is hardly ever taught. This is part of an ideological system that attempts to establish a direct link between the destruction of the temple and the Return to Zion. The transition from the history of the land of Israel to the history of the People of Israel, (i.e. the Jewish people) leaves the children of Israel in an intentional state of ignorance. However, after analyzing these texts, it becomes clear that these are not textbooks of Jewish history; rather, they teach Zionism. They do not tell the story of the various Jewish communities throughout the generations, but instead choose these aspects of Jewish history that are relevant to the chronological development of the Zionist movement.(2) Jewish communities are referred to in these texts only when their history intersects with the history of Zionism. From the very beginning, Mizrahi Jews have little to offer in such a genre, since Zionism was mainly a European movement, and, as such, was used to achieve goals of the Jewish, European elite, from the end of the 19th century. Any attempt to argue that the Mizrahi Jews advanced the goals of the Zionist movement as much as European Jews, is doomed to failure.

From the outset such an attempt forces the Mizrahi Jews into a framework of an hierarchical discourse which dwarfs their place in it. In such a



A guest singer entertaining Yeminite inhabitants of Olva Ma'abara, a transition camp for Jews of Arab origin on Israeli Independence day, 1951, shortly after their arrival in Israel. (GPO)

framework, they may be presented as equals and declared as such, but, in practice they will forever be unequal, (equal but not quite). Similarly, the Mizrahi Jews cannot 'compete' with European Jews as far as the scope of massacre and murder committed by the Nazi machine.

Any attempt to include Mizrahim in the framework of this narrative (which has become a civil religion and an inclusive framework in Israeli society), is doomed from the very beginning to subordinate the Mizrahim into a hierarchy in which they are 'inferior' *a-priori*.

Thus, for example, in David Shahar's popular book, "From Diaspora to National Revival", the chapter on the First *Aliya* (the first wave of Jewish immigration which lasted from 1882 to 1903) refers only to the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe, (pp.126-127), and only later the immigration of Jews from Yemen in 1882 is mentioned incidentally, in a way that clearly marks it as falling outside the classic Zionist periodization. (p.135) The same thing occurs in Eli Bar-Navi's book, "The 20th Century - The History of the Jewish People in Recent Generations". The Yemenite immigration is not mentioned in the chapter on the First *Aliya*; but only in passing, elsewhere in another chapter. The Mizrahim have

no chance of being heard, as long as they are tied in a structural straight-jacket that illuminates Jewish history through the perspective of the Zionist consensus.

### Second: "Mizrahim"- A Product of Israeli Culture, Economics and Politics

The typical analysis of Jewish history contains no political history of Mizrahi Jews whatsoever. Let's take for example the discussion of the question "What is *Mizrahism*?" Historians and social scientists tend to look for nomenclature - namely, a method of defining and classifying - for *Mizrahism*. For example, the anthropologist Harvey Goldberg, in his book "Sepharadi and Middle Eastern Jews"(3) finds that one of the main characteristics of Mizrahi Jews is the influence of Spanish language and culture, which continues to exist for many generations after the Jews left Spain. He uses this characteristic as a tool with which he follows the history of the Sepharadi Jewry in America, Central Asia, the Far East, Australia and even in Palestine in the 19th and 20th centuries. He examines the religiousness of the Sepharadi Jews, their customs, traditions, educational systems, family life and patterns of

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modernization in comparison to Ashkenazi Jews. Though such a discussion is surely important and interesting, it misses the essential point of the issue; by presupposing homologous relationships between 'Jews of Spanish Origin' and Mizrahi Jews, he leads the search for identity from some kind of past which he sees as relevant to the present, as though Mizrahi identity was the natural and legitimate heir to the "Sepharadi" identity.

In the analysis of history, such a method of chronological narrative, focusing on a single, seemingly natural historical route, is derived from essentialist assumptions and is bound to produce an a-political discussion. The 'past', we should remind ourselves, is not a neutral entity, but a processed image used for the political needs of the present. Constructing *Mizrahism* within the 'Sepharadi narrative' distorts its political status

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and its unique relevance to the understanding of Israeli society. Such construction is stuck in a discourse locked between folklore and denial, a discourse which is mostly apolitical.

In order to follow the political history of the Mizrahim, we must reverse the order and place them first and foremost, in the political sphere, for example, in the historical encounter (or a series of encounters) between Mizrahim and political Zionism. Such encounters could serve as an Archimedean fulcrum, enabling us to illuminate the development of the *Mizrahism* as a political issue and not as a folkloristic one. The phenomenon of the Mizrahi Jews is distinct from Spanish culture. It is not a liturgical characteristic, neither is it a form of folkloristic apparel. It is a political phenomenon created in a politico-cultural context in which Zionism and Israeli nationalism has played a very important role.

As one of the many available illustrations, we could take Ben Gurion's "Program of a Million" as our starting point when we relate the political history of the Mizrahi Jews in Israel. In November, 1942, at the town of Rehovot, and in front of experts, Ben Gurion presented a plan to

bring one million Jews to 'Eretz Israel'. This was a hefty document based on a meta-narrative of demography and productivity. Plans for a mass immigration of Jews from Europe had been in the Zionist consciousness since the beginning of the century. Already in 1919 Max Nordau mentioned a number of 600,000. Jabotinski had conceived a plan for Jews to leave Europe in the year 1938.(4) The Jews in Islamic countries were hardly considered in that context. However, in the 40s, as the facts of the mass extermination in Europe were revealed, the focus shifted towards the Jews in Islamic countries. The head of the Immigration Department in the Jewish Agency, Eliyahu Dobkin, explained the indispensability of that population, estimated to be about three quarters of a million, "Many of the European Jews will be exterminated in the Holocaust, and the Jews of Russia are behind lock and bar, and this is why these three

quarters of a million Jews have become a valuable political factor."(5) This was when the added value of the Mizrahim increased in the eyes of the Ashkenazi community in Palestine.

Right then and there, at that historical moment, a spotlight was turned towards the Jews of Islamic countries for the first time in a serious manner. That was the very first time that Mizrahi / Ashkenazi relations were taken out of a symmetrical framework and were set in the political-colonial power matrix. The plan to bring Mizrahim to Israel was executed only after the foundation of the state, when immigrants came to Israel from Islamic countries, but their identification as "Mizrahim" has not stemmed from this very fact. Their being Mizrahim was formed as a product of Israeli culture, politics and economics. The connection between Egyptian Jews and Yemenite Jews, between Iraqi Jews and Moroccan Jews was formed only here in Israel. It was the army, the educational system, the tracks of vocational schools and the intentional dispersing of the population into development towns (where 70% of the population were Jews from Islamic countries), with labor intensive

industrial centers - all these factors determined a shared life experience for these immigrants and formed them as an imaginary community of Mizrahi Jewish Israelis. That is how it should be represented.

The majority of these exclusionary and formational practices are directly or indirectly created by state institutions and their satellites: the Education System, the Settlement Foundations, the Housing office, the Ministry of Finance, in collaboration with the industrialists, the central office of Statistics, the universities and the Research Institutions. That is how *Mizrahism* was created here. Now we can go back, as Harvey Goldberg does, and search for the historical roots of the Mizrahi Jews. He would, no doubt, find quite a few similar essentialist characteristics among Jews from Islamic countries. But only now can the distinction be made between essentialist categories on the one hand, and *Mizrahism* as a political phenomenon on the other. This is how it is possible to create a political discussion about the *Mizrahism* without denial.

### Third: Interrelationship between *Mizrahism* and Palestinian Nationalism

As a reflection of Israeli society, the textbooks are based on a banal division between foreign affairs, (the conflict with the Palestinians) and internal affairs, (the rift between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim). Connections between these two arenas, which creates one integral reality, is neither shown in the textbooks, nor does it hardly appear in research books. For example, Benny Morris' important book, does not deal with the role

### References

1. We should remember that Mizrahi institutions are as guilty of producing such texts as part of their attempt to become full members in the national collective. One of such slightly pathetic efforts is the attempt to write compositions in the genre of 'From Holocaust to National Revival', although that same genre is now controversial even in the European context. About such an attempt see: Mode Shmuel and Tzvi Yehuda (1992) "Hatred of Jews and Riots in Iraq" (Hebrew)
2. The main reason for this is the negation of the Diaspora, as described in Amnon Raz Krakotzkin's book (1993) "Diaspora within Sovereignty - A Critic Of The Negation Of The Diaspora in Israeli Culture" Theory and Criticism, 4:23-55, 5: 113=132
3. Goldbeg F. Harvey (1996) Bloomington: Indiana University
4. For a rare counter example, see: Zeev Jabotibski's article in the first issue of "East and West", 1919
5. Devora Hacothen, The Plan of a Million: David Ben Gurion's Plan For Mass Immigration in the Years 1942-1945. Tel Aviv, *Misrad Habitachon*, p.212.
6. Benny Morris (1991) Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem 1947-1949. Tel Aviv; Am Oved
7. Yosef Meir (1983) The Zionist Movement and the Yemenite Jews, Tel Aviv, Afikim Press
8. Eliyashar was one of the "old Sephardi" families who lived in Palestine since the 15th century when Jews were expelled from Spain. Eliyahu Elyashar(1975/1997) Living With Palestinians, Jerusalem; Misgav

of the Mizrahi immigration to Israel and its role in creating the Palestinian refugees problem.(6) The converse is also true- books dealing with the Mizrahi immigration (even from a Mizrahi point of view) do not show the connection between them and the Palestinians.(7) Such a division contributes to the de-politicization of the Mizrahi problem.

A new analysis of *Mizrahism*, might connect it with Palestinian nationalism and place them both in a mutual relationship within the political history of the Middle East. Such multi-faceted analyses open up wider options and enable us to say something new about the strategies that were adopted in order to construct Israeli nationalism. Eliyahu Elyashar has already touched upon this issue when he proposed examining the relationships among Arabs, Mizrahi Jews, and Ashkenazi Jews in an integrative manner; not as separate categories, but as mutually dependent ones. He warned against the illusionary conceptual split and even joined the Israel-Palestine Peace Council, which strove to achieve mutual recognition between Israel and the P.L.O. In contrast to the Israeli Left, which regarded the returning of the Occupied Territories merely as a means of getting rid of the Palestinian problem, Elyashar (8) saw in the Palestinian problem a reflection of a much more complicated picture, that included also the Mizrahi Jews. Separating Palestinians from Israelis (as the liberal Left suggests today) contains the seeds for future separation between the Ashkenazi identity and the Mizrahi identity of Jews living in this geographical area. ■