

The Bond of Silence

Yehouda Shenhav



Photo: Spraying D.D.T on head of a mizrahi immigrant in Kision Maabara (G.P.O)

Professor Yehouda Shenhav is head of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University. The following article originally appeared in Ha'aretz week-end supplement, 27-12-96 (translation supplied by the author). The article aroused strong reactions in the media, which was full of articles and letters - from both Right and Left - for weeks. Some of the comment was vehement. The letter of Moshe Behar, which follows Shenhav's article, is a reflection on these reactions.

Why do the new historians in Israel love dealing with the oppression of the Palestinians, while neglecting the case of the disappearance of the Yemenite children? Why is there no real Left in Israel, and any mention of ethnic gaps is labeled as incitement?

The new historians are deserving of praise: they helped unburden us of the vacuous rhetoric produced by Zionism's political activists, they taught us about the crimes of generations of order-takers, of techniques of forced expatriation, of so-called retaliatory actions by the IDF, of the ambivalent attitude of the Zionist pioneers towards the massacre of European Jewry, and of the ideology of (false) equality which served as a nation-building myth.

But these historians have a blind spot as well, and therefore an additional bond has not yet been severed: the inter-generational bond of silence between the ideological commissars of the formative years of Zionism ("the salt of the earth") and the contemporary intellectuals of the Israeli Left (also "salt of the earth"). These two generations of Ashkenazi hegemony concur in their silence toward the "Mizrahi problem."

On this issue the young generation of Ashkenazi intellectuals, including the new historians, has remained loyal to the generation of its parents. The Israeli Zionist "Left" is willing to invest its all in exposing the injustices which were inflicted, and are still inflicted, on the Palestinians, but is not willing to take a stand in denouncing the racism of its parents' generation toward the Mizrahi Jews. More importantly: this generation is not prepared at all to acknowledge the urgency and centrality of the Mizrahi question. Neither the intellectuals nor the politicians, such as Dedi Zucker, Yossi Sarid and their friends, show any inclination on behalf of those groups which are not at the top of their list. They flaunt "Leftist" emblems just as the generation of their parents used the term "equality." Just as their parents were not truly egalitarians, so they are not Leftists. The result is that lower class Mizrahis, neighborhood activists and even Mizrahi intellectuals harbor animosity toward the traditional "Avoda" (labor) movement as well as its heirs.

Why is the Left so eager to deal with the Palestinian question, and why does it ignore the Mizrahi issue, even while participating in its exacerbation? The very fact that the young generation of the Israeli "Left" does not identify the salient common denominator of these two communities - Palestinians and Mizrahis - is cause for suspicion and wonder. But the fact is readily explicable: denouncing the injustice done to the Palestinians does not endanger the status of our contemporary Ashkenazi intellectuals. It does not endanger their position as a hegemonic cultural group in Israeli society or as an economic class. It does not endanger their self-definition as representatives of western culture in the Arab orient (or the "Mediterranean" region, as it is euphemized for the sake of those troubled by the term "Arab").

Dealing with the injustices inflicted on the Palestinians earns them laurels of humanism, the esteemed roles of slaughterers of sacred cows and seekers of peace, the badge of the rebel, and a catharsis in light of the crime of their parents' generation. That is, the Orient - unfamiliar, threatening, irrational - is accepted by the "radicals" as long as it remains on the

other side of the fence - like the Palestinians. The Orient is digestible as long as it can be marked as an "other," and kept at arms' length. In such a manner one can also understand why the Israeli Left supports separation and the two-state solution. Due to the same fear of the East, many Israelis, including Meretz-style Leftists, have developed a denial of the "Mizrahi-ness" of Mizrahi Jews, since Mizrahi Jews cannot be turned into an "other," nor can they be cast beyond the fence; at most, one can construct detours to bypass development towns and poverty neighborhoods.

The denial is a method of defense: if Leftists are to recognize the injustices done to the Mizrahis and to try to redress them, they will have to change themselves as well. They will have to relinquish their hegemonic position, to divide the national cake, and to fit into the region as partners, not patrons. They will have to change school curricula, beginning with higher education and ending with kindergartens. They will be obliged to erect an academy for classical Arab music, to teach the roots of Arab culture, to learn and teach Arab poetry and language. They will have to give up their exclusive identification with Europe and North America, which they have perceived as universal. Amidst all these dangers the effective weapon is silence: recognition of Mizrahi-ness as a phenomenon internal to Israel is taboo.

From all this one can also understand the superficiality of the Left's stance towards Palestinians. The Left is pro-Palestinian as long as the Palestinians do not demand the right of return, as long as there is a division, as long as there exists a separation, as long as Palestinians relinquish their houses in Talbiye and in Jaffa, as long as the state remains Jewish (and western), and as long as those known as the "Israeli Arab" Palestinians remain "present absentees."

If the intellectuals of the Left were truly emancipated from the myths of their parents' generation they would expose Zionism as an anti-Mizrahi European movement which arrived in the East (whether for justified or unjustified reasons), where it did not notice the presence of a political entity but only a desert in need of fertilization. If the parents and the children - the Ashkenazis - would recognize the Orient as a political entity, they would also discern a common denominator between Jewish Mizrahi-ness and Muslim and

Christian Mizrahi-ness. They would understand that the many-years' antagonism between Mizrahi Jews and Arabs is in part a result of the European partition between Mizrahis and Mizrahis. But the Israeli Left continues its conservative parents' policy of blindness and condescension.

It is clear, therefore, why Israeli society dealt all these years in the de-politicization of the Mizrahi question. The orient was presented as a local curiosity, as a collection of cultural artifacts such as wild-mint, humus, Yemenite crafts or *moufleta* [a Moroccan delicacy]. Any attempt to turn it into a political question faced delegitimation and denial, as would any other social taboo. On the one hand the big parties encouraged Mizrahi-ness at the ideological level. Any ethnic agenda was presented as contradicting the principles of reintegrating the exiles and national unity. In the fifties, Mizrahi political movements were dismissed as subversive, and in the 70s the militant Mizrahi movement known as Black Panthers was presented as a national danger.

These processes of de-politicization influenced the new historians as well. Despite

their ostensible radicalism, they do not deal in any depth with the historiography of the Middle Eastern Jews, though issues which are crying for attention are lying at their feet. Two small examples, quite familiar ones: there has never been a comprehensive, authoritative study of the Zionist manipulation of the immigration of Yemenite Jews. For some reason, the new historians do not address this issue. None of our contemporary intellectuals deal with analogies between Yemenites refusal to surrender to Moshav land-owners and their refusal to surrender in the Uzi Meshullam¹ affair. In the Ashkenazi folklorist conception, the Yemenites remained clean, obedient, Zionist labor-lovers.

None of the new historians - the fighters for citizens' rights - were stirred to deal with the atrocious affair of the abduction of Yemenite children. Did any of them demand the establishment of investigation committees? Similarly, not one of the new historians deals seriously with any of the testimonies regarding the Zionist movement's provocation in Iraq in the early

Fifties, which was meant to expedite immigration to Israel. Barely any of them asks how the Zionist movement agreed to the appropriation of the Iraqi immigrants property, and whether it was not a result of concern that the affluent Iraqis' meeting with the *Ma'abarot* [the pitiful transitional "caravans" for immigrants] would send them, in their multitudes, back to Iraq.

Those who experienced Mizrahi action can tell to what extent the Ashkenazis fret with each intensification of the Mizrahis' quest for a unique identity. This fear usually receives several typical Ashkenazi reactions. Conspicuous among them are two: the claim that there is no point in dealing with the historical injustices, seeing that other small ethnic groups, such as the Poles, the Hungarians or the Romanians suffered absorption problems, humiliation and rejection. An additional claim is that the problem is gradually diminishing, that the gaps are closing, that there are inter-ethnic marriages, that there are Mizrahis in politics and that an "Israeli" culture is developing. Whoever dares to claim otherwise is discredited, is named "a professional Mizrahi," is accused of attempting to turn an insult into personal capital and of damaging national unity (national unity and consensus were always a recruiting myth and a system for silencing minorities). But even more absurd: every time Mizrahi intellectuals claim that there is racism in Israel, they are accused of racism towards Ashkenazis and is labeled extremist.

However, to all these claims there are persuasive answers. First, there is no doubt that the Europeans suffered during immigration, and some were exposed to the condescension of the local settlers, but the difference between these experiences and the humiliation of the Mizrahis is significant and decisive. There was no doubt that East European immigrants would fit in nicely as the founders of the national culture, and a typical middle class in Israeli society, just as there was no doubt that the new immigrants from Russia in the Seventies (and the Nineties) would settle into the center of society. On the other hand, there is no doubt that the Ethiopians will settle in as "feeble," "needy citizens," "a developing class." The Mizrahi immigrants were channeled to the margins of the economy and were discriminated against by the absorption agencies in the distribution of water, land, housing and employment.

The claim that gaps are gradually closing has been sounded since the Fifties. The reality is the opposite, and the correlation between origin and achievement is becoming more and more pronounced. The gaps are not the lot of the Desert Generation [the generation of immigrants], they are extant amongst the second generation and growing yet. In a study of the situation of Israeli-born children of Mizrahi parents as compared to those of Ashkenazi parents, it was found that in 1975, Mizrahi men made approximately 79% of the Ashkenazis' wages. In 1992 the proportion was about 68%. The researchers attribute about a third of the gap to discrimination. They also focused on the younger stratum (25-29 year olds) which improved its condition to a certain extent between 1975 and 1992. The proportion of university graduates amongst Mizrahis was 3.3% in '75, and rose to 7.7% in '92. among Ashkenazis - 23.8 in '75, 21.1% in '92. Here, then, the trend is positive. If the trend in the percentage of university graduates continues to change at this rate, note the authors, Yinon Cohen and Itzhak Haberfeld, the gap in education will be gone in 94 years time. The generation to attain this has not yet been born.

One of the bitter results of the denial of Mizrahi-ness is that the second and the third generations of Mizrahis understand their Mizrahi identity (if at all) as an antagonism towards Ashkenazi-ness. They are Mizrahi not through a real cultural link to their parent's land of origin, but as a particular Israeli identity associated with anger and frustration. This is a new "Mizrah" (East), of Israeli Mizrahis alone.

The new Israeli Left is not worthy of its name. It is essentially composed of Ashkenazis who have no connection to social issues. *Peace Now* activists, various activists of Meretz and condescending intellectuals from the social science and humanities faculties, are not stirred by the ugly injustices of the oppression of the masses of poor, "the marginal," "the weak strata," "the developing classes." The main part of the "Left" activists is affluent bourgeois, members of the business communities, professors of business management and economics. When they speak of peace or of returning the territories they tie it to economic growth, to the information revolution and to the cultivation of excellence. Economists identified with Meretz and *Peace Now* unequivocally support privatization and economic growth ("a new Middle East"), and Israeli governments enlarge the inequality, in the interest

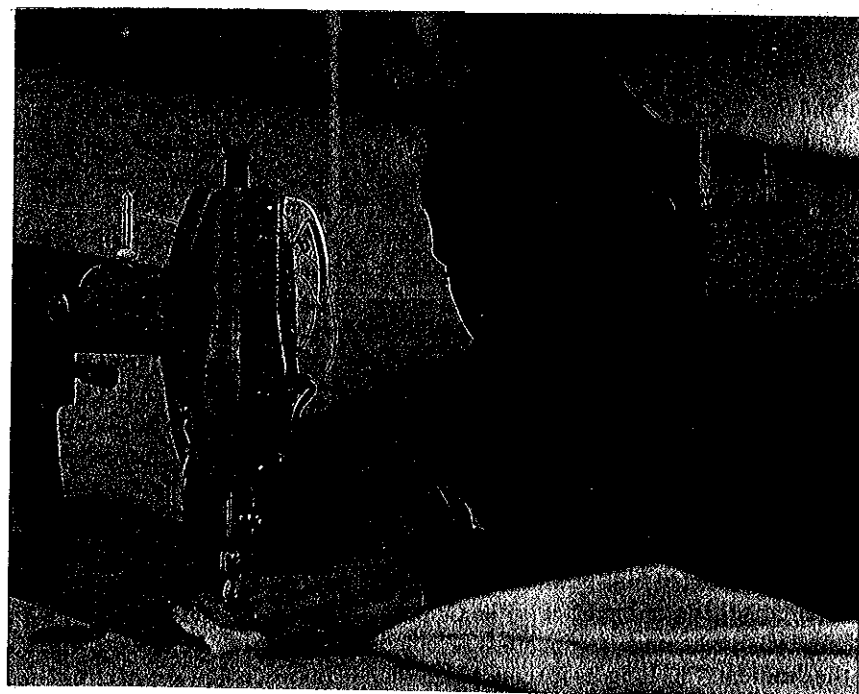


Photo: Educating Mizrahim in non-academic tracks in Sderot, 1972 (G.P.O)

of economic growth according to the best supply-side economy tradition. They enable capital to exploit the state for its own needs.

The Left of Meretz is a fake Left; a Left of "liberty" (economically), and not a Left of equality and solidarity. Even the citizen's-rights legalists of Meretz deal to a great extent with human rights according to the liberal tradition, but they do not deal with other rights, such as claims for housing, land and education, or with rights for developing ethnic culture. Demands for such rights they leave to Shas, to the Orthodox, and to other interest groups. In such a context, Shimon Peres could indeed claim that the problem of the poor is that they are poor.

To be historically accurate: not only the Left and the Labor Party are guilty in their distance from Mizrahis. Part of the guilt one must direct towards the success of the Right in using Mizrahis and infusing them with its nationalistic and anti-Arab symbols. In the last two decades, one of the greatest enemies of social justice has been David Levy, who monopolized the "discrimination card" and turned it into vacuous rhetoric. One must direct the same blame towards the generations of Mizrahi political activists - Moshe Shahal, Sholomo Hillel, Shimon Shitrit, Itzhak Navon, Shoshana Arbeli-Almozino, Moshe Katzav, Mordechai Ben-Porat and many others - Mizrahis from birth, but not in consciousness, who delegitimized Mizrahi-ness as a political issue.

In the present Knesset there is a significant number of Mizrahi politicians. Amongst them, there is not even one who has laid out an ordered Mizrahi social ideology. All play with the instruments, within the field and language of Ashkenazi hegemony. There is no true Left which will present a democratic social agenda, who will reject the liberal discourse of Meretz and the fascist discourse of the Right. There is no Left which will enable the Mizrahi Jews as well to be reconciled with their Arab origins, without apology or denial, and will enable Israeli Ashkenazis to recognize the Mizrahi-ness of the Israeli Mizrahis. There is no Left that will enable the establishment of a Mizrahi identity not out of conflict but out of cultural liberty. Such a Left can probably only be initiated by Mizrahis ■

note

1 Leader of a militant group which demands an investigation of the kidnapped Yemenite children's affair (children of Yemenite and other Mizrahi immigrants who disappeared in the 1950's; many believe they were given for adoption to Ashkenazi parents). He and his closest followers are now imprisoned, following a violent police attack on the compound where he and his followers were holed-up, allegedly with a large cache of weapons.

Response to "The Bond of Silence"

Moshe Behar-N.Y

In the last four months many reactions to Professor Yehouda Shenhav's "The Bond of Silence" (27-12-96) have appeared in the *Ha'aretz* weekend supplement. This article presented a caustic Mizrahi criticism of the Israeli Left, and was followed by twenty-five follow-ups: two retaliation articles (Prof. Amnon Rubinstein and Prof. Saul Mishal), a shorter article in the "People in the Front-Line" column (Meir Gal from New York) and twenty-two readers' letters (four of them written by women). Of these, fourteen were pro Shenhav and seven - con. Not since 1948 has such a broad panel on the Mizrahi debate appeared in an Israeli newspaper.

Shenhav will be the first to admit that most of the theses he raised had been sounded before in Mizrahi periodicals from the Eighties, such as *Iton Aher*, *Hadashot Hila*, or *Pa'amom*, which were generally ignored by Israelis identified with the Left. Dedi Zucker claimed that "after so much mud, Shenhav had no room to deal with the true failures of the Left, such as representing the economically weak." Zucker was right, since one central question came up in the debate: what will happen between the Left and the Mizrahis in the elections of 2000?

Ever since 1984, a large group of politically-homeless Mizrahis convene every election eve; they carefully cut out paper squares, then paint them all black. The following day, each one of them walks up to the voting station, drops the black ballot and thus fulfills his civil obligation. The election system having been altered in 1996, they can now each drop two black ballots.

The deluge of reactions following Shenhav's article belied any hallucination that the so-called "Ethnic Problem" is well behind us. Indeed, *Ha'aretz*, the sole democratic-pluralist daily paper in Israel, which serves as a hospice not only for liberal and social-democratic Leftists, but also for journalists identified with the Right-most edges of Israeli politics, has not yet found it fitting to erect a permanent platform for a single man or woman of those thousands who are identified with the Mizrahi Left. I mean a permanent platform for a Leftist person, whether man or woman, who are Mizrahi in their socio-political consciousness (such as Shenhav, or his fourteen supportive writers), not a platform for Mizrahis by birth alone, such as David Levy, Ran Cohen or Saul Mishal.

And the same applies to all Israeli power centers, whether economic, educational, cultural, academic, business-oriented or artistic. As long as this change of representation does not take place even in the press, one can safely predict that in 2004 the Left will once again clasp its pale pate and wonder "why didn't the Mizrahis vote for us?" ■