

Waters of Babylon

Reviewed by Yitzhak Dahan

The Arab-Jews: Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity
by Yehouda Shenhav
Am Oved, 2003, 291 pages, Hebrew.

The tension between Israel's Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities has been the subject of a new wave of scholarly literature in the last few years. Recent books like *Forbidden Reminiscences: A Collection of Essays* (2001) by Ella Shohat, *Mizrahim in Israel: A Critical Observation into Israel's Ethnicity* (2002) edited by Yehouda Shenhav, Pnina Motzafi-Haller, and Hannan Hever, and *Mizrahi Struggle in Israel: Between Oppression and Liberation, Identification and Alternative, 1948-2003* (2004) by Sami Shalom Chetrit share a radical critique of the predominantly Ashkenazi Zionist leadership in the country's early years, who stand accused of oppressing the immigrants from Arab lands. According to this approach, the Sephardim were Zionism's Jewish victims, and remain so to this day.

The Arab-Jews: Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity, by Yehouda Shenhav, is the latest addition to the field. Shenhav, a sociologist at Tel Aviv University and senior research fellow at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem, is a familiar name in Israel's academic circles. A sharp-witted and enthusiastic spokesman for the radical Sephardi cause, Shenhav is associated with the radical social activist Keshet movement, formally known as the Democratic Sephardic Rainbow; and is editor of *Theory and Criticism*, the country's preeminent forum for post-Zionist research and thought.

In his newest work, Shenhav takes aim at the standard Zionist claim that Iraqi Jews immigrated to Israel in the 1940s and 1950s of their own volition, and in reaction to widespread persecution in their native country. This claim, Shenhav maintains, was fabricated by the Zionist movement in an effort to lionize its leaders for "providing a safe haven in time of need." The facts, he argues, were altogether different: Iraqi Jews were never really Zionists, and the Ashkenazi establishment never really had their best interests in mind by bringing them to Israel. Instead, "an entire community was ruthlessly uprooted as the right of community members to determine their own fate was taken away from them."

Shenhav backs up his claim with numerous quotations and an extensive bibliography, all of which give the impression of a serious challenge to Zionist historiography. Yet his arguments are shaky at best. As has become a pattern among the more fashionable scholarly work in Israel, the book is so riddled with factual and theoretical flaws that

it ends up undermining the credibility of Shenhav's whole effort—and calling into question the integrity of his scholarly quest.

Shenhav weaves a thick narrative of exploitation, dispossession, and cultural coercion. In his telling, the Jews of Iraq had, into the middle of the twentieth century, enjoyed their own authentic, “natural,” Jewish-Arab identity. But under increasing pressure from the newly established Jewish state, Iraqi Jews were forced to adopt a foreign identity from which they have never been able to free themselves. The relatively marginal position of today's Iraqi and Sephardi Jews in Israel, Shenhav argues, is the result of this largely ignored story.

According to Shenhav, Iraq's Jews felt themselves to be part of the larger Arab culture, and thus felt little loyalty to the Zionist enterprise. He reports that the affluent, educated segment of the community (which, unlike other Jewish communities in the Middle East, was quite large) was especially wary of Zionism, fearing “the extent of the damage that Zionism could cause to their social, economic, and political status.” Moreover, a number of the community's youth were communists, and some were involved in the Anti-Zionist League. With rare exception, Shenhav concludes, Iraqi Jews did not, at least before the establishment of Israel, identify with the Zionist cause or share in the belief that they were participating in an ingathering of exiles.

How, then, did they end up in Israel and come to identify so strongly with Jewish nationalism? The bulk of Shenhav's effort is dedicated to showing how the Zionist establishment gradually chipped away at the Iraqi Jews' original identity and reshaped it to its own advantage. This was no easy task, since Iraqi Jews did not experience the nationalist awakening in Europe, and felt little, if any, of the European Zionist fervor. Entrusted with the difficult task of bringing about a parallel awakening, emissaries like Shmuel Yavnieli and Enzo Sireni, who traveled to Iraq in the 1940s, employed a tactic which Shenhav calls “religionization” (*hadata*).

Put simply, Zionist emissaries used the religious character of Iraqi Jews as a means of reinforcing their national identity as Jews rather than Arabs. “Zionism,” writes Shenhav, “used religion in its colonial interpretation (i.e., as an element that distinguishes Jews from Arabs) as a tool for recruiting Sephardi Jews for Jewish nationalism.” By strengthening and then appropriating Iraqi Jews' religiosity, a basis was created for the eventual exchange between the religious and national elements of their identities. Shenhav, of course, does not try to argue that religious identity was alien to Iraqi Jews. Rather, his argument is that this religious tradition was now reshaped via a “national metaphysic.” In order to find their place in the Zionist narrative, Sephardi Jews had to be identified as *religious* Jews; there was no room in the Ashkenazi-Zionist mindset for any other, secular type. But it is precisely this latter

type, the secular Sephardi, which Shenhav seeks to reestablish in the Israeli public debate.

The next step in Shenhav's account of the erasure and reconstruction of Iraqi Jewish identity centers around the abandoned property of those who moved to Israel in the early 1950s. In March 1951, the Iraqi government froze assets of Jews who had moved to Israel. According to Shenhav, this decision proved a windfall to the Israeli government, which could now see itself relieved of its debt to Palestinians who had abandoned their property during the War of Independence. By creating an equivalence between Palestinian and Jewish property, and seeing its debt as having been effectively transferred to the Iraqi state, the Israeli government in effect nationalized the seized property of Iraqi Jews. By this logic, Shenhav surmises, the Israeli establishment actually inflicted a double injustice on Iraqi Jews: Not only did it abrogate the state's moral obligation to compensate the Jewish immigrants for their lost property, it also created a conflict of interest between Iraqi Jews and Iraqi Arabs, further alienating the former from their original, "Arab" identity.

How did the Iraqi immigrants to Israel react to this injustice? Shenhav's answer is not surprising: Whereas Iraqi Jews in Israel did initiate some political activity, they were ultimately taken in by Zionist propaganda. For example, Shenhav analyzes the activity of the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) since its founding in 1975, and finds that its policies consistently conformed to the founding ideologies of the Zionist establishment—to the detriment of the Sephardi public it purported to represent. Particularly distasteful to Shenhav was its decision, made with the active support of then-chairman Mordechai Ben-Porat, determining that Palestinian refugees should not be allowed to return to Israel, since a de facto forced population exchange had already taken place. Shenhav is bothered that WOJAC accepted "the state's logic" on this, considering that Israel refused to recognize the organization and viewed it, according to Shenhav, as exceedingly narrow-minded. While conceding that there were some voices of dissent within the organization, he nevertheless insists that, at the end of the day, WOJAC "betrayed the trust of Iraqi emigrants by collaborating with the political theory of the Israeli government."

The final blow to an authentic "Jewish-Arab" identity, however, was the institutionalization of new categories of identification by the Zionist establishment. After all, Shenhav wonders, why could Jews from Islamic countries not be classified in official documents simply as "Jewish Arabs?" He concludes that the classification of immigrants from Middle Eastern countries as "Sephardi Jews" rather than as "Jewish Arabs" was motivated by the Ashkenazi establishment's concern about a potential alliance between the Jewish and Arab communities in the region. The new vocabulary, then, was aimed at driving a wedge between Jewish and Muslim Arabs, in order to force Iraqi Jews to join the Israeli side. In Shenhav's account, the scheme succeeded. Jewish Arabs became trapped in an alien identity, and remain so to this day.

To get a sense of just how flawed Shenhav's work is, one need only look at Hayyim J. Cohen's classic work from 1969, *The Zionist Activity in Iraq*, a comprehensive and fascinating study which is bizarrely absent from Shenhav's bibliography. It is useful to compare the accounts presented by the two authors. Shenhav cites the many examples of Iraqi Jews voicing public opposition to Zionism; what he does not mention, which Cohen describes in extensive detail, is the harsh sanctions, including outright violence, which the Iraqi government and population used against expressions of Zionism in their country. Cohen shows, for example, how a number of anti-Zionist statements published by Iraqi Jews in 1929 were written purely out of fear. "Our Jews were frightened and have lost hope," wrote one Zionist activist from Basra who had moved to London. "We were forced to publish a declaration opposed to Zionism and the Balfour Declaration to avoid being massacred by the Muslims."

Cohen further reveals that Iraqi Jews were forced to give "donations" in support of Arabs injured during the 1929 hostilities in Palestine; and that although there were indeed almost no active Zionist clubs in Baghdad during the early 1930s, the existence of such clubs was made nearly impossible by the Iraqi government. Letters and newspapers from Palestine or worldwide Zionist institutions were either confiscated or censored, and Zionist activists were constantly under threat of deportation. Finally, while Cohen confirms that a number of key figures in the Jewish community expressed opposition to Zionism, including Iraqi Finance Minister Sassoon Heskell, he also shows compellingly that this opposition originated in the fear "that the hate Arabs feel towards the Jews would increase."

Shenhav ignores this aspect of the history completely, as well as the long line of scholars and former-Iraqi Jewish writers who have drawn a direct connection between their oppression in Iraq and their acceptance of Zionism. He is aware of this lacuna and even justifies it, but not in the way one would expect from a high-ranking scholar. In his view, it is generally a bad idea to give too much weight to anecdotal evidence, which is always subject to manipulation—and he even suggests, bizarrely, that history should be written without too much dependence on historical fact. "I suggest that we should free ourselves from the attempt to empirically examine constructions of reality," Shenhav explains. "I do not intend to investigate historical facts... of interest to us are the frameworks of the debate and type of narrative that is carried within the rhetorical toolbox of the nation." But by preferring "rhetorical constructs" to "historical facts," Shenhav merely ends up indulging in precisely the kind of manipulation and self-referential theoretical construct against which he cautions, and reaching his own predetermined conclusions regardless of their correspondence with what really happened.

Nor is his efficiency with facts the only flaw in Shenhav's book. Another problem is theoretical and methodological. Like most other radical Sephardi theorists, Shenhav is

inspired by post-colonial theory, which attempts to expose the structures of oppression employed by Western societies. To be sure, he rejects the “essential approach” to cultural studies identified with anthropologists like Moshe Shokeid and Shlomo A. Deshen, since it “ignores the political and cultural context within which Sephardi identity is manufactured.” He also distances himself from the class-conscious, neo-Marxist approach of scholars like Shlomo Swirski and Deborah Bernstein, since it “ignores and even obliterates the Arab history of Jewish Arabs.” But like other “new” historiographers and sociologists, he exchanges the conceptual system unique to a specific context for a ready-made theoretical apparatus—one that he is determined to apply no matter the cost. Inspired by the work of Benedict Anderson, Shenhav claims that Zionism created an “imagined community” and invented its history, tradition, and national identity. In this respect, his arguments echo the academic attacks on the traditional Zionist narrative that have become so common in the past decade:

Bringing Jews to Palestine/the land of Israel was not necessarily the result of an ancient longing for Zion by Jewish communities in various diasporas, as Zionist historiography asserts, but of the activity of Zionist activists and intellectuals who performed “national engineering” and “invented” for that purpose a historical tradition as an inseparable part of the national meta-narrative. Pre-existing religious motifs of longing for Zion were added to the same narrative retroactively and were given a national meaning in the context of the narrative.

But the construction of Jewish nationalism did not, according to Shenhav, make Sephardi Jews full partners in the Zionist enterprise. Shenhav employs post-colonial terminology to emphasize what he sees as an ethnic “otherness,” which fixes Middle Eastern Jews in a position of inferiority with regard to their European counterparts. “The colonial site is the locus from which the Sephardi discussion should begin,” he writes. “As post-colonial theory suggests, the remnants of a colonial exchange continue to exist within Israeli culture and politics.” By attempting to use a theoretical model applied more successfully to colonial experiences in Europe, Asia, and South America, Shenhav flattens all the complexities of the Jewish experience in the Middle East. Ironically, while Shenhav protests against the erasure of Middle Eastern Jewish history, he himself denies the reality of the Sephardi Jews’ unique relationship to Zionism and the State of Israel.

It is hardly surprising that Shenhav’s denial of Sephardi history is paralleled by a similar denial of the Sephardipresent. For starters, he rejects any religious component of Sephardi identity. “On a social and psychological level,” he asserts, “it is common to encounter Sephardi Jews who wear the *kippa* in order to set themselves apart from Muslim Arabs.” In other words, Sephardim who wear a *kippa*

do so not as an expression of religious belief, but as a means of denying their Arab nationality. With a wave of his pen, Shenhav dismisses a central form of religious expression as little more than Zionist brainwashing, and those who wear the *kippa* as bearers of a false Zionist consciousness.

Beyond the religious denial, however, Shenhav delegitimizes Sephardi forms of political expression, as well. This is seen most clearly from his accusation that WOJAC betrayed Jewish-Iraqi interests. He neglects, however, to explain just what these “Jewish-Iraqi interests” might be, and ignores the possibility that the interests of the Israeli government and those of WOJAC members coincided. At the end of the day, Shenhav treats the Sephardim of WOJAC with the same patronizing attitude he reserves for the policies of the Zionist establishment. He hints (and, at some points, makes plain) that the political representation of Sephardim is compromised by their lack of social and political consciousness. Yet this charge places him in precisely the same position of superiority and blanket insensitivity of which he accuses classic “Orientalist” Zionism. He even goes so far as to refer to the Sephardim as “passive people, led unaware, and conscious only in retrospect.”

Shenhav criticizes Israeli scholars for losing sight of the complexity of Sephardi identity. “Sephardiness, much like Ashkenaziness,” he writes, “is a place with wide margins, a lack of consistency and continuity, and many different faces.” But it is precisely this lack of consistency that characterizes his own book. He sets out to explore the “specific cultural context” within which Sephardi identity is manufactured, but applies imported theoretical models with universal pretensions. He complains about the passive image the Zionist establishment has attached to Sephardi Jews, but ultimately describes them in the same way. Finally, he claims to speak for the voiceless Sephardim, but rejects all those Sephardi voices with which he does not agree. For a work that tries so hard to uncover narratives of oppression, Shenhav’s book reveals much of the same “oppressive” arrogance it means to expose.

Yitzhak Dahan is a doctoral student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His thesis explores the political culture of development towns in Israel.