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The Struggle for Sephardic-Mizrahi Autonomy:

Racial Identities in Palestine-Israel,

1918–1948

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Culture & Performance

by

Yehuda Sharim

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Struggle for Sephardic-Mizrahi Autonomy:

Racial Identities in Palestine,

1918–1948

by

Yehuda Sharim

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Peter Nabokov, Co-Chair

Professor David N. Myers, Co-Chair

“The Struggle for Sephardic-Mizrahi Autonomy” chronicles the creation of a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity—literally, “Oriental” Jews—uncovering the ways that political and racial factors contributed to the emergence of this identity. My inquiry draws from an extensive body of archives located in Israel, New York, and Los Angeles. I have investigated immigration records of the Jewish community in Palestine from the 1920s, protocols of Sephardic-Mizrahi organizations and letters, and journalistic pieces to chart the crystallization of a unified

Sephardic-Mizrahi entity by 1918, the organizational forms it took in the 1920s, and the way in which it became the subject of careful scholarly scrutiny in the 1930s and 1940s.

In tandem with tracing the political strengthening of the Sephardic-Mizrahi federation, my dissertation throws into sharp relief the multiple studies undertaken by Jewish social scientists and medical professionals in the mid-1930s and into the 1940s. These studies invariably concluded that Sephardim-Mizrahim were intellectually impaired and predisposed to criminality, ascribing their imputed inferiority to biological differences. Ironically, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders not only accepted such “scientific evidence” of their inferiority, but also leveraged this imposed racialized identity to highlight their invisible histories and marginal status. Previous scholarship has theorized Sephardim-Mizrahim ahistorically within a framework of passivity and victimization. My work, by contrast, identifies narratives of Sephardic-Mizrahi agency. By such agency, however, I am referring to the complicity of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in reifying racial hierarchies, which enlarged the trope of “Oriental backwardness” beyond Sephardim-Mizrahim to include Palestinian-Arabs as a national “problem” in the formative years leading up to the creation of the Israeli State.

The first chapter delineates the separate chronologies of the Sephardic and Mizrahi ethnic categories, as well as the political context in the Yishuv under which Sephardic leaders were interested in conflating the two terms and their histories. This chapter explores the role of this leadership in attempting to unify the varied Sephardic and Mediterranean communities into an independent political and economic entity in the 1910s. The second chapter focuses on the folkloristic, literary, and scientific work of three self-identified Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders. It charts their contribution to the emergence of Sephardic-Mizrahi institutions in the 1920s that

gradually turned a porous understanding of Sephardim-Mizrahim into a standardized ethnic identity carefully catalogued in immigration records and demographic surveys in the Yishuv.

The third chapter explores the political context and tensions that led Sephardic-Mizrahi community leaders to establish a global federation with its own economic and settler network by 1925, independent from the Zionist Organization. The chapter contends that Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders chose to mobilize and capitalize on their “Oriental” identity by reaching out to Diasporic communities abroad. The fourth chapter considers the consistent exclusion of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders from the Ashkenazi-dominated Zionist Organization, which drove Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to strategically leverage the resulting isolation. This sense of alienation had two effects. On the one hand, it further extended their own economic and settler network to resist their subjugation. On the other hand, it promoted the internalization of inferiority. The final chapter traces the work of Israeli social scientists from such disciplines as anthropology and education conducted in the 1940s and 1950s, and the impact of their studies concerning a Sephardic-Mizrahi biological “type,” associated with irreparable intellectual inferiority and criminalization.

The dissertation of Yehuda Sharim is approved.

Susan Foster

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University of California, Los Angeles

2013

To those who have been working under the luminous sun

and kept working throughout endless nights

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scholars that reshapes ideas of writing history and Sephardic-Mizrahi histories in particular. She has also inspired me to think more about Sephardic-Mizrahi agents, guiding me in directions that neither she nor I could have predicted. Todd Presner reviewed my project at different stages, always approaching my work with genuine interest, intelligence, and kindness. He also introduced me to readings about Jewish masculinity and proposed a cogent critique about bodily practices in relation to the national project. Additionally, I also had the privilege to be learning from and working with Todd, moments of exchange that marked my teaching and ideas animating this dissertation. Many thanks also to Susan Foster and Janet O'Shea for pointing me in directions that I would not have necessarily followed had it not been for their assiduous comments.

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Introduction

Sephardim-Mizrahim: A Matter of Life and Death

I thereby request to be listed as a member in your most cherished [Sephardic] Organization, primarily for us, *Hararri* Jews [Jews from Caucasus],¹ who are in need of one Organization in the land [*Eretz Yisrael*] . . .

As an honorable and reliable person, recognized by all my *Hararri* friends who reside at the Sephardic settlement in Kfar-Baruch,² I am positive you will approve my request. With all due respect and humble gratitude,
Yochannaof Shmulitz, of Rishon Le-Tzion.³

This dissertation begins by analyzing the attempts of diverse North African, Persian, Syrian, Moroccan, Yemenite, and Babylonian [Iraqi] Jewish individuals to unite ethnically and turn the concept of “Sephardim-Mizrahim” to their own advantage. For them, the Zionist discourse of a distinct “Mizrahi backwardness” turned out to be a means to define a self and a weapon in the struggle to demand equal rights from the Zionist establishment. Three letters, including the excerpt above, exemplify how the claiming of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity not merely constituted an ethnic allegiance but also conceived an ethnic-political bloc that competed with Zionist institutions and resisted oppression.

¹ The Hebrew reads “Harrari” (הררי). The word Harrari would ordinarily be translated “the mountain dweller” or “those who come from the mountains,” but in this context the clear implication is a reference to the Jewish communities that resided in the Caucasus region (southern Russia and the northern parts of Georgia and Azerbaijan of today). I have chosen to keep the term “Harrari” to highlight the sense of ethnic belonging that transgressed national borderlines. Shmulitz’s choice may reflect the influence of national and colonial tensions, particularly in the early years of the British Mandate, from 1917 to 1924, in formulating racial and ethnic identities that claimed competing notions of entitlement to Palestine.

² Kfar Baruch was one of the first Sephardic settlements in Palestine. Founded in November 1926 in the *Emek-Yizra’el* valley, an inland valley south of the lower Galilee region, Kfar-Baruch consisted of six families.

³ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Sephardic Settlement in Kfar-Baruch, May 27, 1927*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5.

In 1927, thirty-nine-year-old Yochannaof Shmulitz petitioned for membership in the two-year old Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization. Assessing his resources, Shmulitz realized he had none for himself, his thirty-year-old wife, five sons and young daughter.⁴ Three years after his arrival, he had “no cash savings,” as he was “moving from one settlement to another,” hoping to find random employment.⁵ He had no stable income, no property and practiced no specific profession. But Shmulitz was dissatisfied with how Zionist institutions and communal institutions had assisted him in finding employment or improving his dire economic condition. In requesting membership with the Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization, Shmulitz anticipated a solution to his economic and political anxieties in the Yishuv.⁶

This dissertation investigates the invention of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity in Palestine from 1918 to 1948. The aim is to examine the political, ethnic, and racial factors that contributed to the construction of this identity, and to delineate its historical forms. The following chapters excavate Sephardic-Mizrahi political expressions and expose the underlying presuppositions and personal motivations that went into efforts to establish this Sephardic-Mizrahi identity.

In the mid-1920s the activities of the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc, independent from the Zionist Organization, attracted many settlers like Shmulitz as well as indigenous Sephardic-

⁴ According to Shmulitz’s letter, his family consisted of “[Self], Age 39, [his] wife, Avishag age 30, Shlomo my son age 17, Rephael age 15, Mordechai age 4, David age 1.5, and Rivkah age 9.” Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Historically, the term Yishuv [community] was used to signal the Jewish population of Palestine. In the context of Zionist history, however, it refers to the settlers affiliated with the Zionist project, identified as member of the “New Yishuv.” The population of the “Old Yishuv” centered around four urban hubs across Palestine: Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, and Safed. Immigration, as an extensive body of scholarship has demonstrated, was a crucial factor in the ethnic, cultural, and economical schisms that befell the Jewish Palestine (Parfitt 1987; Levy 1992; Halpern and Reinhartz 2000). Immigration appeared crucial in the growth of the Jewish community, primarily since this diverse Jewish community largely depended on immigration rather than natural growth (Parfitt 1987: 1–3; Bartal 1992). If by the early-eighteenth-century the Jewish community numbered between 6,000-7,000 residents, in 1880 the Jewish community in Palestine numbered 35,000 of the 400,000 Jews of the Ottoman Empire; and they also represented out of a total of the 584,000, residents of Palestine. Immigrants to the Palestinian Jewish hub arrived from various European or Middle Eastern countries and from within the Ottoman Empire.

Mizrahi inhabitants of Palestine.⁷ This Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc coalesced out of political necessity. Two years after the establishment of the World Sephardic Federation (1925),⁸ with its promise to establish for the first time “a strong [Sephardic] institution . . . that [would] guide the [Sephardic] community and [would] demand what it deserves from the Zionist organization,”⁹ the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition in Palestine had advanced dramatically with the establishment of four settlements in Palestine and the development of a global Sephardic-Mizrahi economic network that stretched from Manchester, England, to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This increasing political strength drew a growing number of Mediterranean residents across the Yishuv, especially from Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements in Beit-Shean, Be’er Yacob, Kfar Baruch, and Petach Tiqvah. It represented a community that was excluded from political decision-making, suffered from an uneven distribution of resources, and felt ignored by the Zionist project.

To expand on the motivating factors that compelled Shmulitz and others to affiliate with this movement, I propose the term “Sephardim-Mizrahim” to describe the identification that individuals such as Shmulitz attempted to claim. The hyphenation emphasizes how diverse members of North African, Moroccan, Persian, Yemenite, and Babylonian (Iraqi) communities consciously co-identified their social and political affiliation as a strategy to expose their invisible histories and marginal status in the Yishuv. When I use this fused designation, I also

⁷ The precise number of applicants to the Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization remains unclear. Given that from 1924 to 1925, during the Fourth Aliyah, only 4,700 Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants arrived to Palestine (1 percent out of the total-sum of 47,000 Jewish immigrants), one may assume that the number of new members did not exceed a few thousands.

⁸ The World Sephardic Federation was established in August 1925, following an assembly that gathered more than fifty Sephardic and Mediterranean-Jewish delegates in Vienna (see Chapter 3). The Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewish community in Palestine was the central driving force behind the creation of a World Sephardic Federation. One of the central goals of the federation was to emphasize the centrality of the Palestine as the pinnacle of Sephardic activities and culture.

⁹ “The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925,” general box, file 1268, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 19.

refer to those who claimed political solidarity with an ethno-political group, and not simply those who descended from Jews in Spain,¹⁰ Portugal, Middle East, and North Africa.¹¹ For such individuals, this entity, both the global World Sephardic Organization and its local factions in Palestine, highlighted their subaltern status, asserted their “suffering,” as noted by Esther Benbassa,¹² and were driven by unparalleled construction of activism. Additionally, the hyphen hints at the firm belief of subjects, among them individuals like Yochannaof Shmulitz, that their realities appeared to traverse single definitions, crossed ethnic and religious boundaries, and exceeded a single racial or national category.¹³

Shmulitz’s application exposes the mechanisms that gave rise to Sephardic-Mizrahi consciousness and a “Sephardic-Mizrahi space.”¹⁴ In asking for social and economic support,

¹⁰ Imperative in the re-modification and the re-charging of the category of Sephardim was the secular study of Jewish history by German-Jewish *maskilim* (followers of Jewish “enlightenment,” or *Haskalah*) that began in the second part of the nineteenth-century, also known as *Wissenschaft des Judentums* [the science of Judaism]. According to their discourse, Spanish Jews was linked to the “Golden-Age” of twelfth-century Muslim-Spain and, through that, to the paragon of the ancient, racially pure, and authentic Israelites. On the relationship between Sephardic intellectuals and the *Haskalah*, see Aron Rodrigue, “Jewish Enlightenment and Nationalism in the Ottoman Balkans: Barukh Mitrani in Edirne in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Minorities in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Molly Greene (Princeton, New Jersey: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005), 73–88; Ammiel Alcalay, “Intellectual Life,” in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reguer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Sephardic Scholarly Worlds: Toward a Novel Geography of Modern Jewish History,” in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 100, No. 3 (Summer, 2010): 349–384. On the intersection of Sephardic scholarship and rabbinic authors, see Matthias Lehmann, *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Jonathan Schorsch, “Disappearing Origins: Sephardic Autobiography Today,” in *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, Vol. 27, No. 1, (Winter, 2007): 84–86.

¹² Esther Benbassa, *Suffering as Identity: The Jewish Paradigm*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian, (New York: Verso, 2007).

¹³ Contrary to what various scholars, including Ella Habiba Shohat (1988) and Yehouda Shenhav (2006), I argue that the notion of the Arab-Jew was not common among the Mediterranean Jewish communities in the Yishuv. The term “Mizrahim” first appeared in the popular discourse of the Yishuv primarily to distinguish Palestinian-Jews from European-Jewish immigrants who arrived in Palestine during the late 1910s (see Chapter 1).

¹⁴ Recent studies examine Palestinian geography during the Mandate period through the Arab-Jewish binary (Shafir 1993; Yacobi 2009). I claim that creation of Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements became a central factor in producing a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity between 1918 and 1948. In most cases, “Sephardic-Mizrahi space” was segregated from the Ashkenazi-dominated settler network. Additionally, to build on what Oren Yiftachel (2006) has defined as “ethnocracy”—the dominance and production of an ethno-national entity—the expansion of “Sephardic-Mizrahi

Shmulitz and others perceived that a Sephardic-Mizrahi ethnic bloc could be a pivotal factor in the reallocation of political power and economic resources. I will demonstrate that identification with the Sephardic-Mizrahi group was intended to be inherently a political act of protest against inequitable distribution of resources and ethnic segregation in settlements and workforces. As long as Ashkenazi-Zionist activists preserved their sense of cultural superiority through political exclusion, such protests and petitions for a discriminatory Sephardic-Mizrahi identity continued to increase.

We now arrive at the second document authored by the spokesman for an Iraqi migrant settlement in Beit-Shean. In 1927, Yaakov Ovadia wrote to the Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization on behalf of eighty settlers who were not fluent in Hebrew. His letter expressed their anguish over their working conditions in Palestine and their communal isolation, particularly in relation to the unequal distribution of resources in the Yishuv.¹⁵ Ovadia's application sheds light on the conditions under which these settlers attempted to construct their Sephardic-Mizrahi identities. It also throws into sharp relief the consolation they found in joining the Sephardic-Mizrahi faction.¹⁶ Addressed to the "Working Committee of the World Sephardic Federation in Jerusalem,"¹⁷ Ovadia's appeal read:

space" exposes the investment of Zionist authorities in forming a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity (Yacobi 2009; Nitzan-Shiftan 2000).

¹⁵ On April 7, 1927, Yaakov Ovadia wrote his first letter to the offices of the World Sephardic Federation in Jerusalem, notifying the Federation of the dire condition of his fellow Iraqi immigrants, and their difficulties in speaking and writing the Hebrew language. The primary reason these immigrants contacted the Federation was their wish, as *o'vdei adamah* [agricultural laborers], to own land with financial support from the Federation. The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Sephardic Settlement in Beit-Shean, April 7, 1927*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 14.

¹⁶ Yaakov's application might seem in direct relation with what Cornel West characterizes as the universal wish of marginalized groups for protection and security: see Cornel West, "Identity: A Matter of Life & Death." *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism*, (Monroe, Main: Common Courage Press, 1993), 163–169.

¹⁷ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Sephardic Settlement in Beit-Shean, November 9, 1927*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 14 (emphasis, mine).

We approach you because it is only you, as a Sephardic Organization, that can support us. As such an [Sephardic] Organization, you will put all the necessary efforts to assist us in settling in the land. Aside from our Sephardic brethren, *there is no one who will take our issues or ambitions seriously*. Alas, we do not wish to have any other occupation [beside agricultural labor], and because we already worked the land in *Aram Nahariym* [Iraq] we came to *Eretz Yisrael* to live here as workers of the land.

I write to you on behalf of twenty-two families [in Beit Shean], with the hope that you will heed our request. The Sephardic Organization must stand guard and not allow the members of its [Sephardic-Mizrahi] community to wait for too long. The Sephardic Organization must provide its members with the possibility of national creativity.¹⁸

For both Ovadia and Shmulitz, to approach the Sephardic Organization seemed to mean more than simply joining a political party. They could not accept the fact that the Zionist project had ignored their struggle to survive. They were confronted with ethnic segregation and hoped to find a new advocate with the Sephardic Organization: “It is only you . . . that can support us.”¹⁹ Negotiating Sephardic-Mizrahi identity implied “stand[ing] on guard,” attempting “to make themselves recognized”²⁰ against what they perceived to be Ashkenazi-Zionist dominance and neglect.

But Ovadia’s appeal also reveals a certain resignation regarding this alienation, reminding us of the concept of “double-consciousness” articulated in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*.²¹ Ovadia’s recognition of a “Sephardic-Mizrahi self” entailed what I propose to read

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, [1952] 1967), 207.

²¹ For Du Bois, the alienation in the American context yields the division in the psychology of the Negro, who attained “no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two irreconciled strivings” (215).

as a “contradictory consciousness.” His agricultural labor supported the Zionist project yet he was excluded from it as an active member. Ovadia and his fellow workers sought to join the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc in recognition of their rights and their contributions to the effort of “creating a nation.”²²

To understand the motivations for requesting membership in the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition, this dissertation emphasizes the distinctive colonial setting in the Yishuv. The Sephardic-Mizrahi colonial subject negotiated his/her identity and activism in relation to two sources of power. These were the colonial British Mandate authorities, on the one hand, and the Ashkenazi-dominated Zionist Organization, on the other hand. Sephardic-Mizrahi identity also developed in response to the inability of various Mediterranean and North African Jewish individuals to access positions of political and economic privilege. These positions were held by members of the Zionist Organization and led by European-Jews (Ashkenazim). As a result, colonial and national pressures relegated Sephardic-Mizrahi Jews to what Diana Fuss calls “a position other than the Other.”²³ With access to Zionist institutions blocked, Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects had to capitalize on a sense of exclusion to unite and, consequently, further segregate themselves from Ashkenazim.

The third document focuses on this predicament. In 1925, a one-page letter suggests the processes involved in the embodiment of marginalized Sephardic-Mizrahi identities. In the first of a lengthy correspondence between members of the Sephardic Federation and the “community

²² The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Sephardic Settlement in Beit-Shean, November 9, 1927*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 14.

²³ Diana Fuss, “Interior Colonies: Franz Fanon and the Politics of Identification,” in *Dialectics 24*, (Summer-Fall 1994): 21.

of Mizrahi workers” [*Kibbutz o’vdim haklaium mibeney ha –Mizrah*]²⁴ located in Zikhron Ya’akov, the issues of racial, religious, and ethnic identity were seen as the bases for an emergent political solidarity. On behalf of a group of twenty-five agricultural workers, Abraham Ben-Tzur notified the “Working Committee of the World Sephardic Federation in Jerusalem”:²⁵

We, the community of Mizrahi workers in Zikhron Ya’akov, have followed your activities in the recent months and would like to express our gratitude and satisfaction in regard to the progress [*kidmah*] your Federation promoted [in our community]. [We would also like to thank you for] creating a national committee, advocating for the formation of a nation, and raising the question of Sephardic settlement during the fourteenth Zionist Congress.

We thereby would like to express our unanimous consent, a decision that we made on September 30, 1925, to become members of your Federation.²⁶

Like Shmulitz’s and Ovadia’s requests, this petition reveals how the intersection of class, race, and gender contributed to how Sephardic-Mizrahi identity emerged as the foundation for political amalgamation. “Sephardim” and “Mizrahim” became markers of ethnicity²⁷ that mobilized Sephardic-Mizrahi political activity.²⁸ Drawing on hegemonic colonial discourse, they

²⁴ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Sephardic Settlement in Zikhron Ya’akov*, undisclosed date (soon after September 30), 1925, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 7.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ In addition to Abraham Ben-Tzur six other men signed the petition on behalf of the Sephardic-Mizrahi settlers in Zikhron Ya’akov: Tzadkiel Tzadikashov, Moyshe Penu, Joseph Jourdezi, Nesniv Murpet, and Amnon Gabriel. Ibid.

²⁷ Studies on the production of ethnic boundaries analyze ethnicity in three ways. One approach maintains that collective ethnic demarcations appeared as a fixed definition: (Shils 1957; Geertz 1963; Issacs 1975). Another groups of scholars examine it as a construct: Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1986). Third highlights the malleability of ethnic identity, as a shifting boundary that depends on shifting social circumstances and historical context: Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969); Stephen Cornell & Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press, 1998); Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Andreas Wimmer, “Elementary Strategies of Ethnic Boundary Making,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, 2008: 1025–1055). The last definition best describes the shifting understanding of the ethnic parameters of Sephardim-Mizrahim.

²⁸ Considerable work has been done on the specific social structure that yielded ethnic inequality and, consequently, triggered political unification and mobilization on behalf of marginalized groups: Michael Banton, *Rational Choice:*

claimed “Oriental-Mizrahi” primordial ancestry in the Holy Land to advance their resistance against Ashkenazi domination.²⁹

We cannot, to begin with, divorce these letters from the story of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity, shaped also by what was not articulated. The unspoken experiences and sentiments that lie between the sentences of these three documents would convey what Dipesh Chakrabarty identifies as the “minority histories” which are too often excluded from mainstream historical narratives of the Zionist project, the creation of the Israeli state, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.³⁰ Yet a chronicle of a distinct Sephardic-Mizrahi identity provokes a critical questioning of the specific historical setting that prompted the claiming of these identities. That is why recasting their story as one governed by political, national, and economic choices rather than by biological determinism demands that we go beyond the factual and look for answers in the

A Theory of Racial and Ethnic Relations (Bristol: Research Unit on Ethnic Relations, 1983); Michael Omi & Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1994); Eduardo Bonilla Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996); Andreas Wimmer, “Elementary Strategies of Ethnic Boundary Making,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, 2008: 1025–1055. Specifically, scholars contend that economic interests appeared central in triggering ethno-political organization, including the level of interethnic competition: Michael Banton, *Racial and Ethnic Competition* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Paul Brass, *Ethnic Groups and the State* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1985); Susan Olzak, *The Dynamics of Ethnic Competition and Conflict* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992).

²⁹ Scholars have discussed the problematic connotations of concepts such as nativity and purity in various colonial and postcolonial studies. I use this term according to the way it was deployed by various Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects during the British Mandate period, as a way to emphasize their indigenous Palestinian position (vis-à-vis Ashkenazi immigrants). My interest is in tracing how the investment in the concept of Mizrahim reflected a growing interest in questions of originality and purity in the Yishuv. On purity and nativity central to the colonial context, see Parama Roy, *Indian Traffic*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge 1994); Jenny Sharpe, “Figures of Colonial Resistance,” in *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35(Spring 1989); Stuart Hall, “When Was the ‘Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1996); Arjun Appadurai, “Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Violence,” in *Public Culture*, 10 (Winter, 1998).

³⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts,” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, No. 9 (February–March, 1998): 473.

conceptual realm. My endeavor is to present the creation of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity not merely as a story of “triumph” or “adversity” but more as fluctuating narratives of negotiation, pushing to the fore competing identities, national anxieties, and shifting political allegiances.

This Research

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.
James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village” (1951)

In order to acknowledge the scope and concerns of working class subjects in affiliating with the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition, this study must engage with the ethnic divisions and cultural hierarchies that surfaced with the onset of the British Mandate period in 1917. Specifically, it must focus on the vacillating fortunes and overlapping histories of underrepresented, diverse immigrant and indigenous communities, which are often characterized as a single “Oriental” and “Mediterranean” Jewish racial/ethnic group.

Through five research trips to Israel and New York, as well as archival work conducted in Los Angeles, over 2008–2013, I have investigated immigration records of the Jewish community of the Yishuv in Palestine during the 1920s, Sephardic-Mizrahi meeting protocols and letters, and personal archives, in order to explicate how a unified Sephardic-Mizrahi (id)entity came into being in Jewish popular discourse in Palestine in 1918. From 1918 to 1921, “Sephardim-Mizrahim” emerged as a signifier of an ethnic identity suggesting commonality of descent and character that was co-opted by Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to demand access to Zionist privilege and power. This leadership included a wide-ranging group of professionals of diverse ethnic and national backgrounds, who all resided in Jerusalem from 1910 onward, including educators Joseph Bern Meyuhas (1868–1942) and Moshe David Gaon (1899–1958), writers Yehuda Burla (1886–1969), political activists Eliyahu Elishar (1899–1981), and Moshe

Pichotto (1868–1947), and journalists like Moshe Attias (1898–1973) and Abraham Elmaliah (1885–1967). Exile (as in the case of Pichotto who left Palestine to Paris, France, in the mid-1930s), immigration (as in the story of Gaon who arrived to Palestine in 1908), varying use of Hebrew, Ladino, and Arabic, and the crossing of ethnic boundaries (Elmaliah, for example, acted as the head of Ma’aravi Organization while leading the Sephardic Organization), provide us with new identity narratives that transgress the racially and nationally construct of a singular, settled, and “tribal” identity.³¹

In response to exclusion from the Ashkenazi-dominated Zionist Organization, their attempts to form a distinct political faction had greater repercussions beyond the borders of Palestine, as this leadership sought to establish a global Sephardic-Mizrahi federation with its own economic and settler network. My work documents the development of their global effort. Spearheaded by Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders, this international organization spread transnationally from 1925 to 1930.

In tandem with tracing the political strengthening of this federation, my dissertation also throws into sharp relief the multiple projects undertaken by Jewish social scientists and medical professionals during the mid-1930s and into 40s which concluded that Sephardim-Mizrahim were intellectually impaired, predestined to criminality, with their imputed inferiority associated to biological difference.

Ironically, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders not only accepted this “scientific evidence” of their inferiority, but leveraged it as a strategy to expose their invisible histories and marginalized status. To paraphrase Fabian Johannes, who has examined how racial knowledge gained from

³¹ Arjun Appadurai, “The Heart of Whiteness,” *Public Culture* 5.3 (Spring 1993).

German travelers in Africa “changed the knower,”³² my project shifts the balance, focusing on Sephardim-Mizrahim, as objects of and contributors to racial, demographic, and social inquiry. I ask how such scientific studies informed their discourse and interpretation of their experience of being “Sephardic and Mizrahi.”

Previous scholarship has theorized Sephardim-Mizrahim within an ahistorical framework of passivity and victimization. My work, by contrast, utilizes narratives of Sephardic-Mizrahi agency. In examining Sephardic-Mizrahi efforts to organize politically and socially by negotiating a discourse that presumed their inferiority, I follow Dipesh Chakrabarty’s comment and “return the gaze” to Sephardic-Mizrahi actors.³³ I show the resourcefulness of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in using their imposed identity in new ways, as they expanded their ethnic-political group to affirm physical and biological difference of an “Oriental” body. Building on Edward Said’s “highly humanized”³⁴ pioneering work, I argue that in the case of Sephardim-Mizrahim identity, Orientalism emerged not only as a dynamic discourse of power,³⁵ or “a network of aesthetic, economic, and political relationship.”³⁶ Rather, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders co-opted this Orientalist discourse—a case of mimicry, which Homi Bhabha explored its potential destabilizing impact on the colonizer’s self-absorbed interests.³⁷ They did so as means to claim,

³² Johannes Fabian, *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays* (New York: Stanford University Press, 2002).

³³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?” *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992): 3.

³⁴ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Class, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).

³⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1979).

³⁶ Ali Behdad, “Orientalism Matters.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Winter 2010): 710–711.

³⁷ Homi Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

politicize, and perform, their marginalized identity, indispensable in Sephardic-Mizrahi attempts to assert political power in Palestine and to reach out to Diasporic Jewish communities.

At the same time, I recognize the complicity of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in reifying racial hierarchies. Their broadening the concept of an “Oriental backwardness” beyond Sephardim-Mizrahim to include Palestinian-Arabs was instrumental in the construction of Mizrahim-Orientals as a national “problem” in the formative years leading up to the creation of the Israeli State. I contend that these characterizations about an “inferior Oriental body,” along with encouraging jingoistic and xenophobic tendencies, had ethical and political repercussions, some of which still impact Israeli-Palestinian and Jewish-Arab relations today.

State of the Art:

Decoupling Sephardim-Mizrahim

But we must inquire what differentiates Sephardim from Mizrahim? Should each of these categories stand alone as an ethnic, cultural, or political identity? What did *Mizrahi* or *Sephardi* mean, if anything, in the world from which these Mediterranean immigrants sprung? Did they themselves use these terms only upon their arrival to Palestine? The ambivalence surrounding them stems in part from the fact that these terms designate too many things, an inflation that signifies a variety of historical and cultural contexts. For our present purposes, it will be useful to summarize the various theoretical and historical underpinnings that make up this field of study.

In comparison to burgeoning scholarship that focuses on Ladino-speaking Jewish experiences in France, Italy, the Balkans, the Netherlands, and the larger Ottoman context, regarding the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine for the 1918 to 1948 period, is surprisingly limited. For scholars who take part in studies of Sephardic history, such as Aron

Rodrigue (1990, 1992, 1993, 1995, 2005), Esther Benbassa (1990, 1992), Avigdor Levy (1992, 1994), Michelle Campos (2003, 2005), Abigail Jacobson (2004, 2005, 2008, 2012), and Sarah Abrevaya Stein (2004, 2008, 2010), these histories seem distinct, disconnected, and discontinuous.

In general, the scholars cited above examine Sephardic Jewish communities since the expulsion of the Jews from Spain (1492), the evolution of these communities under Ottoman rule, and negotiation of these communities with social, political, and economic strains with the Ottoman Empire until 1918. This overlooks the watershed moment when, in the eyes of Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects, the term *Mizrahim* became synonymous with *Sephardim* and fails to address how race was constructed across the Old Yishuv to the Yishuv period. Scant attention has been paid to the works of Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi intellectuals and their project of amalgamation, mobilization, and standardization of Sephardic-Mizrahi categories. Individuals as Abraham Elmaliah (1875–1967), Moshe David Gaon (1889–1958), Yehuda Burla (1886–1969), Eliyahu Elishar (1899–1981), Joseph Meyuhas (1868–1942), and Bechor Schetrit (1895–1967), to name a few, are left unexamined.

For one prominent Sephardic scholar, the historian Aron Rodrigue and co-author with Esther Benbassa of the magisterial study *Sephardi Jewry*, 1993,³⁸ *Mizrahim* are uncoupled from Sephardic history(ies). In telling the unexamined story of “Judeo-Spanish cultures,” located primarily in the Iberian Peninsula, Rodrigue asserts that: 1) “Sephardim” refers to a specific place of origin: the Iberian Peninsula; 2) it is a result of “contemporary confusion” that Jews of

³⁸ Aron Rodrigue and Esther Benbassa, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

North Africa are called *Sephardim*,³⁹ and 3) with the decline of the Ottoman Empire (1908–18) and the Holocaust of the Second World War, this culture came to an end: “This book . . . tells the story of the constitution, evolution, fragmentation, and *death* of a specific Judeo-Spanish civilization that existed in the Levant for four and a half centuries.”⁴⁰

But I maintain that what Rodrigue calls “confusion” was the result of a conscious and deliberate strategic move. Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership conflated Sephardic history and culture with Mizrahi identities to highlight their historical and political claim to the Zionist project. He also ignores the works of Sephardic intellectuals in Palestine of the 1920s and their negotiation of Sephardic identity. For him, Sephardic culture and community were anchored in the Ottoman world and, thus, became part of “a world that we have lost.”⁴¹ Rodrigue and Benbassa’s text located the cultural heartland of the Sephardic world in the Balkan and Anatolian contexts, while Palestine was marginal to the Ladino cultural center (*Kulturbereich*). However, the shifting understanding of Sephardic identities and their conflation with Mizrahi consciousness, primarily in relation to the national project in Palestine, reveals how a world that was lost was also found through and against various national and racial dynamics in the Yishuv.

Rodrigue’s “loss” implies for a Sephardic inability to adapt, change, transform, and advance beyond the Ottoman (Eastern) domain. His portrayal of the Sephardic world, although historically compelling and informative, inconsequentially reiterates the Orientalist view of a static culture that exists only in a glorified but removed past. Had he considered the Palestinian Sephardic community of the 1920s in his study, Rodrigue would have had to interweave

³⁹ Rodrigue & Benbassa 2000: 192.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 (emphasis, mine).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

narratives of cultural continuity and transformation into his story of Sephardic demise.⁴² That is perhaps why Sephardim, according to Rodrigue’s narrative, come to be viewed as “victims” of circumstances and changing national, cultural, and economic power relations in the Middle East of the early twentieth century.

Historian Michelle U. Campos gives a concise and important description of Palestine’s Sephardi Jews (circa 1908–1918).⁴³ It is a community tangled between a lasting loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and adherence to the developing Zionist project (Campos 2004, 2005; Jacobson 2004, 2008, 2011). Building on what Campos acknowledges as the ongoing political and cultural activities of this community, I investigate their role in reshaping Sephardi identity into Mizrahi. Her narration focuses on the failure of Ottoman Sephardic culture to develop and change. By way of conclusion, she views the “activities and commitments”⁴⁴ of the Palestine’s Sephardic Jews [after the 1920s] as having “ever-diminishing significance” in the growing Palestinian Jewish community and later Israel.⁴⁵ In this regard, writings of Sephardic histories mark a division from Mizrahi histories. This dissertation contends that new modes of Sephardic-Mizrahi identities emerged from the early twentieth century in Palestine-Israel, exposing how “Sephardim” and “Mizrahim” changed meaning over time.



⁴² I would like to express my appreciation to the groundbreaking historical work by Rodrigue and Benbassa who viewed Palestine as culturally (not to mention, demographically) marginal to the Ladino cultural world that existed in its heyday. It seems to me that with the emergence of the Zionist project in the Palestinian context the political center moved to that area, primarily with the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the arrival of the British Mandate in Palestine. It is important to recognize this transformation because one of the problems in the invention and mobilization of the Sephardic-Mizrahi categories is the belief in the myth of a Sephardic glorious past that always remains, not without some melancholy, in an untouched space in time, unable to be shift.

⁴³ Michelle U. Campos, "Between “Beloved Ottomania” and “The Land of Israel”: The Struggle over Ottomanism and Zionism among Palestine’s Sephardi Jews, 1908–1913." *Middle East Studies* 37(2005): 461–483.

⁴⁴ Campos 2005: 480.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Questions concerning locality (“authenticity”) and national identity are also germane to recent studies on Mizrahim. As an extensive literature on Orientalism has demonstrated, led by the pioneering work of Edward Said’s study (1978), nineteenth-century Europe was fascinated with the “East.”⁴⁶ In this discourse, the Holy Land was the center of the “Mizrah” [in Hebrew, east]. The colonial imaginary of this land as exotic and religious territory played a central role in occupying and settling there. The contribution of European-Jewish scholars to this Orientalist discourse and the imagery of Palestine were central within the Zionist framework, where Palestine was key to the emergence of the Jewish national project. According to this Zionist-Eurocentric imaginary, the “East” and specifically Palestine appeared as both the cradle of various visions of Hebraic purity and backwardness.⁴⁷

According to recent scholarship, the term “Mizrahim” came to view as the “invention,” product, and “victim” of the Zionist “Europeanized” project (Shohat 1988, 1989, 1999, 2003; Shenhav 2007; Khazzoom 1999, 2003, 2008; Massad 1998; Madmoni-Gerber 2009; Chetrit 2010). According to this scholarship, this “invention” pays attention to the turning of heterogeneous Asian, North African, and Palestine’s Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewry communities into a single ethnicity in need of modernization. Against this fiction of Mizrahi backwardness, the cultural and ideological superiority of the “civilized” European Jew (*Ashkenazim*) was repeatedly asserted.

⁴⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1979). On the role of Palestine in the Orientalist discourse see Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, *The Rediscovery of the Holy Land in the Nineteenth-Century* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979); Naomi Shepherd, *The Zealous Intruders: The Western Rediscovery of Palestine* (London: Collins, 1987); Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880–1930* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Arieh Bruce Saposnik, *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of a Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); John M. Mackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts*, (New York, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁴⁷ See in particular Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar (Eds.), *Orientalism and the Jews* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2004). See also Jonathan M. Hess, “Johann David Michaelis and the Colonial Imaginary: Orientalism and the Emergence of Racial Antisemitism in Eighteenth century Germany,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6(2) (Winter 2000): 56–101; and Michael Prior, *Colonialism and the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

However, research into the history of the idea of “Mizrahim,” its use by the 1920s Palestinian Mediterranean communities, the ways and reason its fusion with the Sephardic category, and its transformation into a racial category, is also meager. Scholars on “Mizrahim,” such as Shohat, Shenhav, Massad, Madmoni-Gerber, Chetrit, Khazzoom, and Alcalay (cited above), use these terms interchangeably and, thus, invite an excavation of the term. Their scholarship emphasizes the lengthy history of discrimination of Jews from Arab lands since their arrival in the Israeli state (from the late-1940s to the mid-1950s). For them, the Sephardic-Mizrahi category emerges primarily as a product of (mis)“representation.”⁴⁸

As this body of scholarship suggests, Mizrahim have been the “oppressed,” and have become the “internal” “victims” of a “Eurocentric”-Zionist project” (Massad 1998; Shohat 1988, 2003; Raz-Krakotzkin 2005; Chetrit 2004). Sources for these works focus on how Mizrahim, as a collective entity, were perceived from an Ashkenazi perspective. Hence, constructions of Mizrahi-self, or Mizrahi-histories, are mostly one-sided. The irony behind such constitutions become all the greater because they are told from the very voices that Mizrahi scholarship attempts to debunk.

To track the origins of this scholarship, I turn to pioneering work of Ella Habiba Shohat. She recognizes the transparent history of Mizrahim, one which, “is presumed to begin with the coming of Sephardi Jews to Israel,” mainly since, “Oriental Jews had to be taught to see the Arabs, and themselves, as other” (1988: 8, 25). Like other scholars on Mizrahim, such as Chetrit (2004, 2010), Shenhav (2006, 2008), Madmoni-Gerber (2009), Shabi (2008), Rejwan (1999),

⁴⁸ Contrary to assumptions of various scholars (Shohat (1988, 1989, 1999, 2003), Shenhav (2007, 2008, 2010), Khazzoom (1999, 2003, 2008), Massad (1998), Madmoni-Gerber (2004, 2009), and Chetrit (2010)), the notion of a “Arab-Jewish” identity was not common among the Mediterranean and North African Jewish communities in the Yishuv.

Khazzoom (2008), her work is connected to her experience of “displacement” when immigrating to Israel from Iraq in the early 1950s, and to honor her Mizrahi/Arab-Jew/Iraqi origin.⁴⁹

But what is striking is that, with the exception of Shohat’s voice, the only voices we encounter in her writings are precisely those “Eurocentric and Zionist” authorities, which, Shohat argues, have silenced and victimized Mizrahim (Shohat 1988, 2004). Her portrayal of Mizrahi studies depends on how Mizrahim were represented by Zionist and European Jews, such as articles of Arye Gelblum in the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha’aretz* [*The Land*] (1949), and the writings of Zionist ideologists such as Theodor Herzl, and Israeli political leaders, including David Ben-Gurion, and Golda Meir (Shohat 1988, 2003, 2004). Shohat’s language focuses on historical specificity to the fused concept of Mizrahim-Sephardim, to their experiences, and to notions of Mizrahi and Sephardic agency. She coalesces these categories with the building of the Israeli state. “Mizrahim in Israel,” she writes, “were made to feel ashamed of their dark, olive skin, of their guttural language, of the winding quarter tones of their music, even of their traditions of hospitality” (1999: 15). As such, they “are a Zionist invention” (13). Amplifying Shohat’s important work, this dissertation examines the contribution of community leaders such as Gaon, Elmaliah, and Burla to what she called the “invention” of Sephardim-Mizrahim.

Shohat’s narrative is, therefore, equally an “invention” of Mizrahim. This, of course, does not make her narrative less appealing or not “valid,” but it does imply that Mizrahim should not be framed only in relation to the Zionist project. This dissertation proposes that histories of

⁴⁹ In an interview with Evelyn Alsultany, in *Arab & Arab American Feminisms* (2011), Shohat gives voice to the specific circumstances that triggered her scholarship and her insistence in using the Arab-Jew acronym. She writes, “In the early 1950s, my parents had to depart from Iraq . . . The Iraqi Jews descended into a whole new world, a world that had its own lexicon and repertoires, and that aggressively shaped a new collective identity, which Arab Jew were supposed to join.” See Ella Shohat and Evelyn Alsultany, “Arab Jews, Diasporas, and Multicultural Feminism: An Interview with Ella Shohat.” *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*. Ed. Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 46.

Sephardim-Mizrahim should be read or written along all lines of historical processes—connected with class, social space, religion, and gender, ethnicity and race, and xenophobia and bigotry, which were at work in all Jewish communities, European and non-European, prior as well as following the emergence of the Israeli state.

For new generations of scholars, such as the literary academic, Lital Levy (2004, 2006, 2008), the passive role of Sephardic-Mizrahi victims that Shohat and others produce and reproduce is taken to task. In her “Self and the City: Literary Representations of Jewish Baghdad” (2006),⁵⁰ she attempts to give voice to Iraqi-Jews, their memories, self-construction, and “experience of the [Baghdadi] city.”⁵¹ Drawing on Iraqi-Jewish writers, such as Ronny Someck, Nissim Rejwan, and Naim Kattan, she anchors Arab-Jewish, or Mizrahi identity in a specific, fixed locales. Unlike Shohat, she does not examine the Mizrahi narrative in relation to the Israeli national project at all, thereby overlooking the implications of the Zionist project and the later inception of Israel.

Like Rodrigue’s narrative of the Sephardic-Jewish demise, Levy lumps the writings of Iraqi Jews as a “literature of exile” that comes to terms with a “lost past,” a “lost world,” and a “lost life.”⁵² By fixing Baghdad as their only home, Levy avoids the contradictions and negotiation of competing identities. Her focus on “loss,” much like Shohat’s emphasis on “victimization,” constitutes Mizrahi identity in an ahistorical framework. To put it differently, according to Levy’s interpretation, Mizrahim had no ideological or political involvement with changing power relations occurring at the time, including but not limited to the Zionist project.

⁵⁰ Lital Levy, “Self and the City: Literary Representations of Jewish Baghdad,” *Prooftexts*, Vol. 26, No. 1&2(Winter/Spring 2006): 163–211.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 166–167.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 190, 196.

To explore how one becomes Mizrahi or Sephardic, while moving away from the anthropological and biological idea stressing the fact that one is born Mizrahi, or Sephardic, or Arab, we must talk about racialization and the constructions of ethnic and racial hierarchies in the Palestinian context.

The Cauldron of Race

As for questions of race and its centrality in the formation of the Israeli state, they remain hardly discussed, perhaps even forbidden topics.⁵³ Contemporary studies on race and ethnicity ultimately overlook the construction of a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity. When questions of race and racism do arise, the Arab-Jewish conflict becomes the sole lens for shaping the Arab-Jewish racial division. Aziza Khazzomm deploys “Orientalization” to uncover the racial dynamics that contributed to shifting notions of the Orient. Likewise, David Theo Goldberg uses “Palestinization” to discuss the racial construction of the Palestinian-Arab population (Goldberg 2011: 4–6). Khazzomm and Goldberg’s theoretical frameworks extend the historical scope of questions of race in the larger Jewish and Israeli context, calling attention to victim focused Oriental-Mizrahi identity (Khazzomm 2002: 223; Bloom 2003: 3–5; Gilman 1986: 293). Their totalizing paradigms deny the possibility of Sephardic-Mizrahi agency, accountability, or even

⁵³ Note that as early as 1762, in “An Apology for the Jewish Nation,” the Portuguese-Jewish philosopher and economist Isaac de Pinto (1717–1787) shed light on an early incarnation of ethnic tensions and division between “Portuguese and Spanish” Jews and “German and Polish” Jews. For de Pinto, whose “apology” responded to Voltaire’s (François-Marie Arouet) anti-Semitic attacks of the “idolaters” and “vagabond” Jews in Europe, the separation between “Portuguese” and European Jews highlighted the “progressive” manners and cultural superiority of those expelled from Spain. While De Pinto identified Spanish Jews as being higher intellectual and cultural level, he described German and Polish Jews as “ignorant, savage, [and] vulgar.” De Pinto found them responsible for the “destruction” of the reputation of the Jewish people. Thus, de-Pinto’s apology suggest a delineation between the Jewish communities: see Isaac De Pinto, “An Apology for the Jewish Nation.” In *The Jew in the Modern World*, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995: 305–307.

complicity in shaping the Sephardic-Mizrahi concept or the expanded “Oriental” category (or even the Eurocentric model of the new Zionism man).

This dissertation seeks to intervene in this obsessive interest in victimhood that shaped Sephardic-Mizrahi identity. To do this, I throw light on the emergence of a global Sephardic Federation; the unwritten role of Sephardic-Mizrahi efforts, during the crucial twenty-year time frame before the formal creation of the Israeli state, to forge effective ethno-political lobbies; and the segregated ethnic/racial hamlets as Seydoon and Har-Tuv, two Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements that flourished in 1925-26 within the jurisdiction of Jerusalem. Some are gone almost without a trace, nearly all are ignored in the historical record.

To shift the prevailing paradigms of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity, a novel theoretical and historical approach is needed in studies concerning Jewish ethnicity, the Jewish race, and the Jewish body.⁵⁴ Critics have assessed the role of European Jewish scholars in studying, ranking and ordering the Jewish race. Academics of Jewish history and sexuality, such as John Efron (1994, 2001, 2005), Mitchell B. Hart (2000, 2007, 2011), Sander Gilman (1982, 1986, 1993, 1996, 2000), and George L. Mosse (1964, 1971, 1975, 2000), have investigated the logic and

⁵⁴ Consider, for example, how race dominate recent scholarship on the Jewish body, sexuality, and masculinity. Theorists of Jewish history and culture such as Daniel Boyarin (1997), Todd Presner (2007), Sander Gilman (1986, 1991), Oz Almog (2000), Michael Gluzman (2007), Mikhal Dekel (2010), George L. Mosse (1996) and David Biale (1986, 1992), have traced representations of Jewish male bodies solely in European (mainly German) culture, interrogating anti-Semitic ideas of the Jewish body as feminine and emasculated. These authors also have investigated Zionist "regenerations" of Jewish masculinity which frame Jewish manhood primarily in terms of European aesthetics. In the eyes of designers of the regenerated Jewish male, the Zionist enterprise in Israel/Palestine offered an opportunity to transform the “small and dwindling Jews, thin and malnourished, those Jews who are the product of the ghetto who have no image of their body [*tmunat guf*]” into “a big man filled with strength and vitality” (Ravnitzky 1896 in Peled 2002: 19).

motivation behind the preoccupation of European Jewish scholars with Jewish ethnicity in the European context from the mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century.⁵⁵

Efron, for example, has questioned the general understanding concerning the use of race science by Jewish European scholars as one that retrieved a sense of Jewish identity during the late nineteenth century in Germany. According to Efron, Zionist race scientists deployed their findings in Palestine in order to establish “Jewish self-definition,” while advocating harmony with other races.⁵⁶ Hart (2000),⁵⁷ moreover, tracks the research and career of Zionist race scientists, such as German-Jewish sociologist and Zionist activist Arthur Ruppin (1876–1943). Ruppin, who was the director of the Bureau for Jewish Statistics and Demography (1902–1907) in Berlin prior to his immigration to Palestine by 1908, perceived Jews as a *Volk*, meaning a distinct race.⁵⁸

But these scholars of Jewish racial science have been mute on the emergence and construction of Sephardic-Mizrahi as a distinct type. The turn of Jewish racial science into classifying other Jews such as Oriental Jewry (to use a generic term), so as to “regenerate” the image of European Jewry, receives no mention in either Efron or Hart’s recent surveys of Jewish racial science. They emphasize the preoccupation of Jews and Zionists with issues of race for the

⁵⁵ As a number of scholars have noted, the question of the Jewish race is often tightly related to studies concerning anti-Semitism and Holocaust studies. See Bauman 1989; Gross 2006; Burleigh and Wippermann 1991; Cohn 1970; Hutton 2005; Rose 1990; Proctor 1998.

⁵⁶ John Efron, *Defenders of Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-De-Siecle Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994): 29.

⁵⁷ Mitchell Bryan Hart, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000). His insistence to perceive Jewish identity and its relation to issues of race merely through European lens persist also in his most recent publication: *Jews and Race: Writing on Identity and Difference, 1880-1940* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2011).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 56. See also Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel* (London; New York: Verso, 2008): 83–84.

purpose of Jewish self-definition, self-affirmation, and self-demarcation, without acknowledging how this also hierarchized the Jewish population in the Yishuv and the rest of the Palestinian population. It also must be said, as this dissertation seeks to demonstrate, that the process of constructing Jewish identity through racial criteria meant initiating new racial doctrines within the Zionist project.

Despite the claims that Zionism was a “westernization project,”⁵⁹ there has been no study examining the emergence of a racial “scientific” discourse and its influence in policy making of the Israeli state. Martin Kramer (1999) rightly points out the centrality of scholars, including Joseph Horovitz (1874–1931), Leo A. Mayer (1895–1959), and David Hartwig (Zvi) Baneth (1893–1973), in forming the school of Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University. But Kramer does not consider the racial implications of their research, nor does he examine their role in the classification and hierarchization of Oriental bodies through racial “scientific” discourse.⁶⁰ Scholarship such as that of the German-Jewish anthropologist Erich Brauer (1895–1942), who depicted various “Oriental types” and catalogued the Sephardic-Mizrahi type according to their “average height,” “black eyes and skin,” shape of their skull and other physiques,⁶¹ is missing from Kramer’s research.⁶²

⁵⁹ Aziza Khazzoom, *Shifting Ethnic Boundaries and Inequality in Israel* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008): 121; Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, “The Zionist Return to the West and the Mizrahi Jewish Perspective,” in *Orientalism and the Jews*, ed. Ivan Davidson Klammer & Derek J. Penslar, (London: University Press of New England, 2005), 165.

⁶⁰ Martin Kramer ed., *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1999).

⁶¹ Erich Brauer, *The Land: To Know Eretz Yisrael* [Palestine] (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1927).

⁶² See Abuhav 2003, 2003, 2010, 2011; Schrire 2009, 2010 for a discussion of the emergence of the discipline of Anthropology during the 1920s and 30s. None of their various writings take issue with the contribution of Israeli anthropologists and folklorists, such as Erich Brauer and Raphael Patai, to the racialization of Sephardim-Mizrahim in the Yishuv.

With the absence of Sephardic-Mizrahi histories, and omission in the record of fifty percent of the Jewish population in the Yishuv in 1918,⁶³ [35 percent in 1926, forty percent during the 1940s, and fifty percent in contemporary Israel], encourages a failure to imagine Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects and agents. Absence of such narratives, of course, does not imply their non-existence. It does mean, however, that Sephardim and Mizrahim acquired singular representation as romanticized view of passive victims, ahistorical and apolitical objects, and a stagnant category that did not shift or evolve across time. This dissertation focuses on how the emergence of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity in the name of shifting political and social ambitions, enabled an opportunity to advance political or economic interests, imagine an independent Sephardic-Mizrahi institution, or as a way to express dissent against the Zionist Organization.

Overview of the Dissertation

Each chapter of *The Struggle for Sephardic-Mizrahi Autonomy* highlights a different dimension of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity while pushing to the fore different notion of “Sephardic-Mizrahi activism.” The early chapters provide broad historical context by tracing the demographic, economic, and national shifts that shaped the emergence of the Sephardic-Mizrahi ethno-bloc, along with the creation of Palestinian-Arab identity, influencing the entire Yishuv. The later chapters examine how ideas about Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority traveled within and beyond the Yishuv and their construction of a racial body. The central concern of this

⁶³ The elimination of Sephardic-Mizrahi voices in recent literature about the Yishuv in negotiating the Zionist project is striking. Scholarship discussing the creation of the Israeli state, the evolution of the Zionist project, and the complex relationship of the Jewish and Arab communities in Palestine (from the early years of the twentieth century to this day), focus primarily on the binary between European-Jewish immigrants and indigenous Palestinian-Arab population. See Gideon Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology* (Hanover: Published by University Press of New England [for] Brandeis University Press, 1995); Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976); Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz, *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society* (The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series. Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000); Ben Halpern, *The Idea of the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969).

dissertation is with the ways Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects have textualized, mediated, and mobilized their identity. It asks what anxieties and hopes, visions and divisions, utopias and dystopias, were provoked by Sephardic-Mizrahi experiences, particularly in relation to words such as “Zionism,” “Arab,” “Ashkenazi,” “race,” “discrimination,” “privilege,” “assimilation,” and “inferiority.”

Chapter 1, “Unapologetically Ourselves: Sephardic-Mizrahi Subjects in Palestine, 1918–1921,” enters directly into the political and social turmoil in Palestine of 1918 with the arrival of the British Mandate to the area. In this chapter, I reveal the unexamined genealogy of the concept of Mizrahim as well as the process that led to the conflation of the Sephardic and Mizrahi categories. I excavate the creation of Sephardic and Mizrahi identities in 1918, and chronicle how Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders united their respective communities into an independent political and economic entity. These processes of unification around sets of Sephardic-Mizrahi mythologies enabled this multicultural population to view itself as a distinct indigenous group, different from the new European-Jewish (Ashkenazim) immigrants and Palestinian-Arabs.

Chapter 2, “More Mizrahi Than Thou: The Politics of Nativity, 1921–1923,” focuses on the writings of three self-identified Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders and their contribution to a standardization of Sephardim-Mizrahim in immigration records and demographic studies between 1919 and 1923. I examine the works of three Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders of the early 1920s, such as Joseph Bern Meyuhas, Abraham Elmaliah, and Moshe David Gaon, to illuminate the shifting meaning of Sephardim-Mizrahim. This chapter reveals their overriding dilemma: whether or not they should identify as a political entity separate from the growing Zionist enterprise in Palestine.

Chapter 3, “Sephardim-Mizrahim in Transnational Perspective: Organizing the World Federation (1925)” explores the political context and tensions that led Sephardic-Mizrahi community leaders to establish a global federation with its own economic and settler network by 1925, independent from the Zionist Organization. Here I contend that Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders chose to mobilize and capitalize on their “Oriental” status by reaching out to Diasporic communities abroad. In response, from 1925 to 1928, the Zionist Organization took advantage of insider reports about Sephardic Federation activities to stifle the economic and political expansion of a global Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition.

Chapter 4, “To Be or Not to Be Sephardim-Mizrahim: The Rise and Fall of an Autonomy in Palestine, 1926–1936,” traces why and how Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders attempted to establish a Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy with its own dense-web of cultural institutions and economic resources, which spread across the globe. To explain this, I consider the consistent exclusion of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders from the Zionist Organization, which drove Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to leverage the imposed notion actual alienation. This exclusion had two effects. On the one hand, it further withheld them to their own economic and settler network to resist their subjugation. On the other hand, it promoted the internalization of self-inferiority.

Lastly, chapter 5, “Inferior Jews: Racializing Sephardim-Mizrahim, 1936–1948,” explicates the racialization of the Sephardic-Mizrahi category through various “scientific” studies of Sephardim-Mizrahim from such disciplines as Anthropology and Education conducted by Israeli social scientists in the 1940s and 1950s. In this chapter, I track the contribution of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to the racialization of a Sephardic-Mizrahi biological type, associated with irreparable intellectual inferiority and criminalization. Specifically, I expose how the works of the Orientalist Raphael Patai and his Institute of Folklore Ethnology defined Sephardim-

Mizrahim as an inferior biological “type” and cultural breed. With growing publications about the inherited inferiority of Sephardim-Mizrahim Jews, I throw light on the reasons that led Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders not only to contribute to these projects of racial profiling but also use these ideologies to divide the Sephardic-Mizrahi alliance.

The Struggle for Sephardic-Mizrahi Autonomy historicizes the cultural, political, and ethnic formation of a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity, in Eliyahu Elishar phrase, oscillating between “self-inferiority [*nechitut*],” “struggle,” and “endless attempts to imitate our new [Ashkenazi] brothers in our speech and behavior.”⁶⁴ This dissertation is about how confessions admitting betrayal of “our organic Mizrahi character” came about,⁶⁵ what are the components of an “organic Mizrahi” identity, how was this identity negotiated, and how it functioned within the history of race in the years leading to the formation of the Israeli state. As I expose how Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders resisted and reconfigured ethnic and racial ideologies, I confront the ways “Sephardim-Mizrahim” became a code-word to talk about unacknowledged and unaccepted histories: the ways the politics of race, property and labor, inequality and privilege influenced the Jewish community as well as the entire Palestinian population.

⁶⁴ See Eliyahu Elishar’s Speech. “The Problem of Education in the Land [Eretz Yisrael].” In the Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of Eretz Yisrael in the Menorah Club in Jerusalem,” December 22–23, 1946 in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box: 38.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Unapologetically Ourselves:

Sephardic-Mizrahi Subjects in Palestine, 1918–1921

In 1917, after more than four hundred years of Ottoman rule in Palestine, the British army under General Edmund Allenby was now marching in the streets.⁶⁶ This shift triggered a complex web of national and communal anxieties among the growing Jewish community in Palestine. Central in the renewed belief in the Zionist project was the Balfour Declaration, which stipulated the creation of a “national home” for Jews in Palestine,⁶⁷ who now numbered around 60,000.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ In December 1917, the British Army established the British Military Administration in Palestine under the leadership of Sir Edmund Allenby. It was only in July 1920 that the Military Administration would be replaced by a civilian administration, headed by the First High Commissioner, Sir Herbert Samuel. From the perspective of the Jerusalemite Sephardim, this change was anticipated with great expectation and hope. See Naomi Shepherd, *Ploughing Sand: British Rule in Palestine 1917–1948* (London: John Murray, 1999), 20–74; Doreen Ingrams, *Palestine Papers, 1917–1922: seeds of conflict* (London: John Murray, 1972), 7–19; Ronald Sanders, *The High Walls of Jerusalem: a history of the Balfour Declaration and the birth of the British mandate for Palestine* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983); Mordechai Eliav (ed.), *Siege and Distress: Eretz Israel during the First World War* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1991), 248–261.

⁶⁷ The Balfour Declaration was published a few weeks before the inception of the British Military Administration in Palestine (April 1917). It committed Britain to the creation of a Jewish “national home” in Palestine. According to the Declaration, the overwhelming majority of the residents in Palestine, the Palestinian-Arabs, were referred to merely as “non-Jews.” The allies formally approved the Balfour Declaration in February 1920, following the approval of the British Mandate in Palestine in the context of the St. Remo Conference. See Ben Halpern and Jehuda Reinharz, *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society* (London: University Press of New England, 2000), 202, 210; Ben Halpern, *The Idea of the Jewish State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 29–31, 164–175; Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 134, 171, 177–178; Aharon Cohen, *Israel and the Arab World* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1964), 77, 149–150; Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10–11; Moshe Lissak, *Studies in Israeli Social History* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2009), 40–55; Phillip Margulies (ed.), *The Creation of Israel* (Detroit, Michigan: Greenhaven Press, 2005), 66–78; Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: the construction of modern national consciousness* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1997), 119, 159; Gideon Shimoni, *The Zionist Ideology* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1995), 243–244; Jonathan Schneer, *The Balfour Declaration: the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict* (New York : Bloomsbury, 2010).

⁶⁸ The demography of the 1920 Jewish community of Palestine varies depending on sources. With the advent of the Jewish Mandate, the Jewish community in Palestine numbered approximately 55,000 to 60,000. See Mordechai Eliav (ed.), *Siege and Distress: Eretz Israel during the First World War* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, 1991); Tom

It was during those turbulent years of political transition that the term “Mizrahim” (singular, Mizrahi) surfaced in the popular discourse of the Yishuv (Jewish community in Palestine). Amid the growing dominance of European-Jewish settlers in Palestine, the word’s appearance in 1919 functioned in two ways. It emerged as an organizing principle in social, ethnic, and cultural relations in the Yishuv and, at the same time, was claimed by a *mélange* of North African, Sephardic, and Mediterranean communities who identified as Mizrahim. These two functions would soon be at odds with one another.

This chapter traces the speed and intensity with which diverse communities of North Africans, Persians, Yemenites, and Babylonians [Iraqis] were involved in the creation of Sephardic-Mizrahi political institutions in tandem with their claiming of this cultural and ethnic identity in the period from 1918 to 1921. I explore how Sephardic and Mediterranean leaders used a mythic Sephardic past to establish a new cultural and more politicized notion of Sephardim-Mizrahim. Additionally, I explain how and why this leadership redefined the term “Sephardim” in order to self-promote Palestinian nativity as the nucleus of their Sephardic identity. These processes of “idealizing” Sephardic elements and unifying a collective around a Sephardic mythology enabled this multicultural population to view themselves as a distinct Sephardic-Mizrahi entity, apart from the new European-Jewish (*Ashkenazim*) immigrants and Palestinian-Arabs.

I argue that through this initiative, they sought to defend Sephardic-Mizrahi political rights and intervene in what they perceived as growing Zionist control, then dominated by European-immigrants. For them, Orientalism, steeped in colonial language of the Zionist discourse, turned out to be a means to define their identity. Sephardim-Mizrahim embraced this concept and used it to organize political movement that exercised resistance to Zionist institutions through the creation of a dense web of political, cultural, and social institutions in the Yishuv.

Segev, *Palestine Under the British* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1999); Moshe Lissak, *Studies in Israeli Social History* (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2009).

As explication, in this chapter, I discuss the historical context that formed different understandings of Mizrahi space and cultures, even prior to the reclaiming of Mizrahim as an identity by Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders. Then, I describe how the appearance of Sephardic-Mizrahi subjectivity did not emerge in isolation, but rather functioned as part of a broader and forceful system of division across intersections of religion, class, and race that led to the emergence of Palestinian-Arab political identity and consciousness. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a close examination of the Sephardic-Mizrahi faction and their campaign to the 1919 First Elected Assembly, throwing light on the complex causes and consequences that shaped their political solidarity.

Mizrahi Style

On August 8, 1919, in the first issue of the Yishuv's popular daily, *Do 'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], a caption in the very first page read: "Artistic Bezalel Workshops in Jerusalem—Based on Mizrahi style and European Progress [*shiklul*]: We now accept various work orders."⁶⁹ This seemingly trivial reference to Mizrahim in the rhetoric of Jewish public discourse,⁷⁰ addressing the intellectual and cultural interests of the 60,000 Jews among a population of 618,000 Muslims and 70,000 Christians,⁷¹ suggested that the starting point of Mizrahi was found at the juncture of complex ideas and images about Mizrahi and Palestinian-Arab space and culture that served the Zionist movement that depended on migration and settlement in Palestine. This web of colonial imaginary had a clear aesthetic and cultural

⁶⁹ Advertisement, "Artistic Bezalel Workshops in Jerusalem." In *Do 'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], August 10 1919, Vol. 1, No. 2: 1.

⁷⁰ It seems that the widespread use of "Mizrahim" was also as a result of the translation of the English word "Orient." With the onset of the British Mandate, this act of translation could explain the spread of the term "Orient" in association with Palestine, including the culture and merchandise that claimed to originate in the Palestinian space. More often than not, the Hebrew translation of "Orient" to "Mizrahim" hints at the ways the colonial gaze had such a central role in questioning Palestinian nativity about those who have the rights to the land.

⁷¹ To compare, 657,000 Muslims, 81,000 Christians, and 60,000 Jews inhabited the Palestinian area in 1914. Note that the Palestinian population—of the various religions, if we to use religious affiliation, a criteria which by no means reflects the only way we can learn about the population in the area—decreased in number from 1914 to 1918 after the First World War due to various epidemics and food shortages that affected the area.

facet that gave room to multiple understandings of Mizrahim, as a dynamic conceptual framework that went beyond demarcations of identities, to include a distinct artistic technique.

From its initial appearance, “Mizrahi style” concealed specific power relations embedded in European colonial expansion and Zionist immigration to Palestine. Advertisements in *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*] or in the other popular daily, *Hadashot Haaretz* [*The Palestine News*],⁷² both founded by the second half of 1919 in the Yishuv, referred to “Mizrahi” in relation to particular aesthetics, visuals, and artistic expression. Mizrahi style signified “virgin” and authentic style that was reminiscent of pristine biblical times. This particular idea of style alluded to Mizrahi culture, magnifying what Homi Bhabha aptly observed as “binary oppositions or polarities through which we think of cultural difference.”⁷³ Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, early Zionist immigrants who had arrived to Palestine beginning in numbers 1882, represented native Palestinianness as both redemptive and debased, allowing European-Jewry to project their repressed sentiments and desires for equality and free expression onto this foreign land.⁷⁴

The composition of “Mizrahi-style” had cultural as well as factual consequences, structuring feelings and promoting Zionist immigration to the “uninhabited land.” From the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century, Mizrahi-Oriental culture located in Palestine had attracted various Zionist immigrants, British anthropologists, and other travelers to Palestine. For Edward Said, who reminds us about the role of discourse in representing and reshaping a reality, “without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to

⁷² Advertisements highlighting Mizrahi style in reference to “Artistic Bezalel Workshops in Jerusalem” also appeared in the second issue of *Hadashot Haaretz* [*The Palestine News*]. I emphasize the spread of Mizrahi style in order to focus attention on the appeal and use of “Mizrahi” as a category to locate division through aesthetics and the ways these means of exclusion would later apply to colonist oppression, and ethnic and racial division. See “Artistic Bezalel Workshops in Jerusalem.” In *Hadashot Haaretz* [*The Palestine News*], June 19, 1919, Vol.1, No. 2: 1.

⁷³ See further Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 182.

⁷⁴ See Goren 1983: 35–37; Shenfeld 1986: 27–30; Hirschfeld 1998: 14–21, Zalmona 1998, 2006; Peleg 2005; Almog 1997; Zerubavel 1995, 2002, 2008; Hirsch 2008; Saposnik 2006, 2008.

manage—and even produce—the Orient.”⁷⁵ In the Palestinian case, the “production of the Orient” was primarily in the hands of Zionist settlers and thinkers. These also included painters and artists such as Boris Schatz (the founder of the Jewish art school, Betzalel, in 1906) and other Betzalel artists such as Abel Pann, who tried to envisage biblical imagery while relying on the Oriental sights and people of Palestine.⁷⁶ Beginning in 1906, with the emphasis on Mizrahi style, the Betzalel artists employed Kurdish, Persian, Yemenite, and Turkish workers to produce relics such as “Damascus steel silver pieces,” carpets and baskets, and Yemenite-influenced silver objects.⁷⁷ Directors of the Betzalel School traveled to Damascus (1908) and Istanbul (1911) to get first-hand experience with the production of Mizrahi artifacts. The “cultural circulation” of Mizrahi style was also a facet of attempts to justify Zionist settlement in the Yishuv,⁷⁸ what Eric Hobsbawm identified as the “invention” of “historical continuity,”⁷⁹ and to justify colonial and imperial oppression of the Middle East. The term *Mizrahi* signified an authentic cultural identity. This romantic vision of the old Hebraic tradition preserved its biblical nature through a state of cultural paralysis that originated in a specific space, the so-called Orient.

At the same time, the use of Mizrahi-style in the seemingly innocuous daily advertisements of 1919 implied something greater than an aesthetic zest: it meant objectification of the inhabitants of Palestine and the Middle East. As a style, it seemed to suggest a sense of passivity imposed by Western immigrants, romanticizing and othering an Oriental body and space through aesthetics. With an economy of images in play, inviting Western-Zionist (but not exclusively Western) imagery, shaping acts of consumption, and/or reconstructing the experience of those already inhabiting and living in Palestine,

⁷⁵ Edward Said *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995), 3.

⁷⁶ About the connection between the Betzalel project and Zionism see Saposnik 2006: 112–113; Saposnik 2008: 130–133, 160–165; Zalmona and Shiloh-Cohen 1983; Olin 2001; Ezrahi 2002; Zalmona 2006.

⁷⁷ Advertisement, “Artistic Bezalel Workshops in Jerusalem.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [The Palestinian Daily], August 10, 1919, Vol. 1, No. 2: 1.

⁷⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, 1995), 122.

⁷⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, Ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 7.

Mizrahi paraphernalia became a valuable commodities. Aware of the growing need for Mizrahi objects, one advertisement by the Betzalel School sheds light on the intersectionality of imagination with the political and the economic, asking ex-soldiers, either in the service of the former Ottoman Empire or the British forces, to “Take Memorabilia [with them] from Eretz Israel.”⁸⁰ Soldiers were encouraged: “On Your Way to Freedom: Take a Souvenir from Jerusalem with You,” in the form of “artistic crafts from the Betzalel School . . . [including] artisan objects . . . glasses, boxes, tobacco, silverware and silver-spoons, and other artistic products of various kinds.”⁸¹

This association of Mizrahi-style with the Palestinian space also proved to be a determining factor in Zionist ideology and settlement in Palestine. The Zionist spatial imagination viewed Palestine primarily as a pure but degenerated space, or, as the future leader of the Zionist movement, David Ben Gurion, who was unimpressed during a visit to Jaffa in 1906, wrote “the streets, like any other Mizrahi city, are unpaved and narrow streets.”⁸²

The effect of this spatial imagination was to promote the purchase of the perceived “traditional and backward” Mizrahi area (Granovsky 1940; Kimmerling 1983; Ohana 1978, 1981). Beginning in 1882, which marked the onset of the agricultural settlement enterprise in Eretz-Israel, twenty *moshavot* (agricultural co-operatives) were founded and 303,000 *dunams* (75,700 acres) of land came under Jewish ownership.⁸³ As opposed to this time period, from the early years of the twentieth-century to 1914, Jewish settlement expanded greatly, as 27 more *moshavot* were created. The amount of Jewish owned property

⁸⁰ Advertisement, “On Your Way to Freedom: Take a Souvenir from Jerusalem with You.” *In Hadashot Haaretz [The Palestine News]*, June 18, 1919, Vol. 1, No. 2: 3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² See Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 52.

⁸³ Yossi Katz, “Private Zionist Initiative and Settlement,” in Ruth Kark (Ed.) *The Land That Became Israel: Studies in Historical Geography* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1989), 275–287. See also Morris 2003: 145–146.

dramatically increased with the acquirement of 184,000 *dunams* (45,000 acres).⁸⁴ Moreover, between 1920 and 1947, Jewish-Zionist ownership increased by an additional 1,700,000 *dunams* (420,000 acres), about 26 percent of the land.⁸⁵

The equation of “Mizrahi” with the Palestinian landscape also said a great deal about the Zionist spatial image of Palestine. In late-1919, among the hundreds of issues of the *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*] and *Hadashot Haaretz* [*The Palestine News*], particular use of Mizrahi went beyond aesthetics and attributed a cultural value to Palestine. References to the Mizrahi space invited readers to stay at “Mizrahi hotels,”⁸⁶ to travel on “Mizrahi transportation,” and to leave one’s belongings at “Mizrahi Storage Spaces.”⁸⁷ Additionally, the “Mizrahi Publication Company” offered its services, spreading advertisements in Alexandria, Haifa, and Beirut.⁸⁸ And other advertisements suggested smoking “Mizrahi tobacco,” or drinking Mizrahi wine. The appellation “Mizrahi” was designed to unify and standardize the entire Palestinian space. It also promulgated a whole set of romanticized notions and visual expectations that mark a specific locale primarily to transform imagination into financial and political gain.

This particular set of expectations put the Mediterranean communities of Palestine in a unique space, pun intended. For them, much was at stake in the use of “Mizrahi”: it implicated their bodies, histories, and even their existence.⁸⁹ In a 1919 series of articles discussing “Our Role as a Political Party,”

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁸⁵ Note that 1,000,000 *dunams* (250,000 acres) were acquired (or expropriated) between 1920 and 1930 (Abdo-Zubi 1989). Also, drawing on various sources, figures on the total cultivable land of Palestine have ranged between 6,544,000 *dunams* and 12,233,000 *dunams* (Gozansky 1986; Saed 1985; Gannot 1937).

⁸⁶ Advertisement, “Hotel Ha-Mizrah.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], August 8, 1919, Vol. 1: 6. Located next to the Mea Shearim neighborhood, the hotel offered “clean and spacious rooms, efficient service, and quality dining services.”

⁸⁷ Advertisement, “Mizrahi Storage Spaces [*Machsanei ha-Mizrah*].” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], September 9, 1919, Vol. 1 No. 28: 1.

⁸⁸ Advertisement, “Mizrahi Publication Company [*Ha-Hevra Ha-Mizrahit Lepirsum*].” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], September 7, 1919, Vol. 1: 1.

⁸⁹ Taking into consideration that imagination is not something one reads about in a book, but is, rather, the various ways one experiences one’s life, the action of marking a Mizrahi-style does not reveal anything about Palestine, but

Abraham Elmaliah, a key member of the Mediterranean, Sephardic, and Middle Eastern communities, embraced the Orientalist discourse, describing his community as “the people of the Mizrah” (*anshei ha-Mizrah*).⁹⁰ While the competing *Hadashot Haaretz* [*The Palestine News*] presented the Zionist project as a tool of “progress” and, with the new immigrants, an emblem of advancement,⁹¹ “the people of the Mizrah” presented Sephardim as the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine.⁹² On the basis of their Mizrahi purity and history, they demanded a role in the national (progressive) Zionist project. This vocabulary of purity mimicked and, at the same time, destabilized Zionist discourse of Mizrahi style, dividing and contesting the unified Zionist view of the Jewish community of the Yishuv, shedding light on a society saturated with colonial settlers acting on behalf of Zionist imagery and defensive localism (which also advocated the Zionist enterprise).

Sephardic and Mediterranean writers used the idea of the “Mizrah” to give voice to their experiences in a complex colonial setting. In their writing, they paid attention to possible efforts needed for “Recovering Our Mizrah” [*letakanat Mizrahunu*],⁹³ or their “affection for the Mizrah” [*hibat ha-Mizrah*],⁹⁴ or the problems with the exaggerated “Mizrahi imagination” [*dimyon Mizrahi*].⁹⁵ This shift from external imagination of Mizrahi style and aesthetics to a self-imposed recognition of Sephardim and other Mediterranean communities as “the people of the Mizrah,” accomplished two things: first, turning

more about expectations and anxieties of the European-Jewish immigrants who arrived to Palestine in great numbers after 1892.

⁹⁰ Abraham Elmaliah, “Our Role as a Political Party: To My Sephardic Brethren in the Land [Palestine].” In *Do 'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol.1, No.7, August 15, 1919: 1–2.

⁹¹ See A. M. Borochoy’s “To the Condition of the Jews and Judaism.” In *Hadashot Ha'aretz* [*The Palestine News*], Vol. 1, No. 1, June 18, 1919: 1.

⁹² Abraham Elmaliah, “Our Role as a Political Party: to My Sephardic Brethren in the Land [Palestine].” In *Do 'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol.1, No.7, August 15, 1919: 1–2.

⁹³ Yitzhak Abadi, “To Recover Our Mizrah [*Mizrahunu*].” In *Do 'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol.1, No.11, August 20, 1919: 7.

⁹⁴ Yitzhak Abadi, “1919 in Our History [*Mizrahunu*].” In *Do 'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol.2, No. 4, October 2, 1919: 2.

⁹⁵ Abraham Elmaliah, “About the Rabbinic Jerusalemite Office”. In *Do 'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol.1, No.15, August 25, 1919: 1–2.

an imposed objectification into a self-imposed category to define a self; and second, using Oriental-Mizrahi notions of (Hebraic) purity to claim a self, and in so doing, dividing the Yishuv and the larger Palestinian space on the basis of Palestinian and Mizrahi nativity. But, it was one thing to use Mizrahim to define a self, and, as we will encounter next, another to politicize and unify around this term.

Mizrahi Subjects

One of the first indicators for the connection between the idea of Mizrahim and the shaping of a community is found in the “Declaration Statement” of *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], written by its founder and editor (together with Moshe Attias and Abraham Elmaliah), Itamar Ben-Avi. In his statement, titled “Our Plan,” Ben-Avi, the son of the renowned advocate of the Hebrew language, Eliazer Ben-Yehuda, and himself a prolific journalist and editor for several Palestinian newspapers, gave voice to the earliest expressions of the political construction of the Mizrahi collective. He termed that faction “Mizrahim.”⁹⁶

As the editor of *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*] and the mouthpiece of the second-generation of “native” residents of Palestine, Ben-Avi asserted that the time was ripe for declaring belongingness,

For the time has come for the youth of Eretz Yisrael, and primarily for the natives of the land [*Yelideu ha-Eretz*] who grew and matured, to declare their ambitions to the world . . . for we also wish to live our lives fulfilled, free from any external burden and liberated from foreign influence [*haspeah galutit*] that devours our flesh even here in the land of the forefathers.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Itamar Ben-Avi, Declaration Statement: “Our Plan.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol.1, No.1, August 8, 1919: 1.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

In his instantiation of Mizrahim, Ben-Avi insisted Mizrahim was not so much the basis of an ephemeral idea of ethnicity or race. Rather, for him, the emergence of Mizrahim was the main expression of the people of the Palestinian land who share this notion of Palestinian insiders and purity. In other words, according to Ben-Avi, Mizrahim was a result of the politicization of nativity in relation to the Palestinian soil. This politicization of the land and its people—or better, Ben-Avi’s claim of the land as its “native”—could be read in tandem with the spreading of national ideologies. In many respects, this claiming of nativity promoted and affirmed Jewish national ideology by justifying the Zionist immigration to the land inhabited by Jews since antiquity. At the time, Ben-Avi applied Mizrahim to differentiate between the local-Jewish inhabitants and the immigrating Jewish population.

Indeed, with mounting enthusiasm, Ben-Avi declared the content of a collective formulation of Mizrahim contained:

We are the Sons of the new Eretz Yisrael – here we are!

And as such, we cannot agree any longer with the myriad of foreign views concerning the question of the Yishuv, work arrangement, the future of [the Hebraic] language. . . it is our mission to give [these foreign influences and ideas] our own meanings. We wish Mizrahim to remain wherever we will go and in whatever will happen to us . . . Mizrahim with all the positive aspects of this loved term and despite its faults.⁹⁸

Mizrahim, according to Ben-Avi, transcended questions of religion, becoming more akin to a regional claim of an inherent identity shared among the people of the geography of the *Mizrah* [East]. His understanding and deployment of the Mizrahim category also affirmed the belongingness of the long-standing populace in Palestine/Israel. By the same token, Ben-Avi’s claims of belonging meant resisting, yet, at the same time joining and co-opting, Jewish national ideology. The focus on locating Sephardic-Mizrahi notions of agency could play a crucial role in expanding debates about intra-ethnic societies in

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Mandatory Palestine beyond the simplistic registers of national and religious binaries: Israel and Palestine, Jew and Muslim.⁹⁹

That said, Ben-Avi's fiery prose should not allow us to forget that for Ben-Avi—the son of Russian immigrants (Belarus, today)—the embodiment of the Mizrah, and, hence, claiming Mizrahim, was a way to promote his own interests. It seemed convenient for him to separate himself from Zionist-European immigrants and to join his “Mediterranean brothers,” as it were, by accentuating Mizrahi shared belongingness to Palestine. In reality, Ben-Avi's Mizrahi mask was a device for conveying and capturing a valuable, otherwise unattainable, sense of Palestinian belongingness. His experience of Mizrahi self was based on a deep sense of privilege that allowed him to take pride in the Hebraic past and current Palestinian purity. In that sense, the formation of a Mizrahi community helps us understand the often invisible splinters among the Yishuv, and the way Mizrahim appeared to demarcate an interior (antiquated) space and (biblical) time of “Hebraic” identity, a space invaded by competing claims of entitlement that Ben-Avi and other confronted. As he continued,

And Hebraic we are supposed to become, Hebraic without a taint of exilic doubt, even though this exile will be poised with gold, arranged and stable. Hebraic as Yeshusah and Ezekiel, as the Maccabis and Bar-Cochva, and as Akiva and Dvorah.¹⁰⁰

Along with setting his sights on the present and the past, Ben-Avi turned next to the future of the Jewish community of Palestine,

And as Westerners [we need to] unite. . . Bring us light and electricity, airplanes and phone lines, bring to us all that men dared to produce and with open arms we will accept it. . . and the day will come, and this day is very near, that again the East will benefit the

⁹⁹ In particular, the emphasis on Sephardic-Mizrahi's agency could also appear corrective in relation to scholarship on the Yishuv and the Middle East that for decades had portrayed Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects as passive and subordinate subjects who were at the absolute mercies of a dominant Zionist structure of representation and control.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

West even more than it did in the times of Yehuda and Arab—which will perhaps attain full equilibrium.¹⁰¹

Although appearing definitive on what the future would bring, what the present requires, and how the past should be interpreted, Ben-Avi's assertions disclosed more fissures than certainties. My question is simple. To what extent was this particular interest with Palestinian nativity part of complicated spatial, national, and even racial practices of division beyond the Jewish community of the Yishuv?

Essentially, this growing concern with Palestinian and national nativeness and purity, reflected in the deployment of Mizrahim, appeared to be a political device used by Jewish leaders of the Old Yishuv to reorganize ethnic and cultural hierarchy among the Jewish community of Palestine. Given the growing national tensions, I contend that the use of Mizrahim to define an exclusive community of the Jewish natives of Palestine was a strategy that did not exclusively shift in the Yishuv. As a matter of fact, the construction of a system of hierarchy, based on caveats of purity, or lack of originality, was more central beyond the borders of Palestine's Jewish community. One effect of these processes of classification among the non-Jewish residents of Palestine at large and the Palestinian-Arab population in particular, as historian Rashid Khalidi reminds us, was the emergence of the Palestinian-Arab identity in 1918.¹⁰² The emphasis on Palestinian purity evident in the appearance of the Mizrahi category, I argue next, must be examined in tandem with the rise of multiple national identities, dividing Mizrahi and European Jews, and Palestinian-Jews and Palestinian-Arabs.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² See Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1997.

Changing Codes of Palestinian Nativity:

The Relationship between Mizrahim (Palestinian Jews) and Palestinian-Arab Categories

If nativity was the core essence of the idea of Mizrahim, the question quickly arises: Why and how did Ben-Avi differentiate the category of Mizrahim from the other natives of Palestine, primarily Palestinian-Arabs? To put it bluntly, why was this concept limited only to Jews? For the moment, I am concentrating on how the formulation of Mizrahim was a means to claim group identity—or national allegiance to Palestine in accordance with Zionist ideology—a tool to conceive the rupture between the Jewish and the Arab indigenous residents of Palestine.

To trace and analyze the dialectics involved and the politics intermeshed in the recognition of Mizrahim, I suggest we return to Ben-Avi's insistence from 1913 on the creation of a new Hebraic type, spoken merely five years before his instantiation of the mantle of Mizrahim.¹⁰³ Ben-Avi was one who took pride in his "Hebraic" history, descended from biblical figures such as Ezra, David, and others (Ben-Avi 1918; Presner 2008). In the early 1910s, while asserting Palestine's large contribution to the "Hebrews," Ben-Avi argued for the creation of a new Palestinian-Jewish type that stood in contrast to the exilic European-Jewish body.

Following earlier claims of first-generation native-born Palestinian-Jews during the early years of the twentieth century, Ben-Avi also believed that the Palestinian-Jewish youth represented the more "authentic national life" in comparison with exilic (Diaspora) Jews.¹⁰⁴ In 1907, Ben-Avi confronted his

¹⁰³ Ben-Avi romanticized and professed the category of the Arab but he was not alone. As scholars have advocated on that issue: see Eyal 2008; Saposnik 2006, 2010; Anidjar 2009; Morris 1995; Bloom 2008; Jacobson 2008, 2012. In the turbulent political climate during the First World War in Palestine, whereas the alleged Arabs were known for their cultural difference, Ben-Avi, among other veteran inhabitants of Palestine, was able to see himself as an Arab (i.e., Semite), or a Palestinian, if you will (Campos 2005).

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Saposnik 2003:154.

readers, challenged them to “[g]o out to the colonies and the cities”¹⁰⁵ and “look at the people, who were your brothers yesterday, whom you meet along your way. Are they familiar to you? Surely they are not!”¹⁰⁶ He went on to describe this new racial and physical brand of Palestinian-Jewry: “Their skin has darkened, their bones have stretched, their appearance has grown clear, their demeanor has grown self-confident.”¹⁰⁷ Those Palestinian-“Hebrews,” part of this new breed, “who bravely ride the horse and handle the plow,” are “little Arabs, nice savages. Look in their eyes and ask yourself: did you not recoil from their open, vital look?” What distinguished this new breed of “Hebrews,” according to Ben-Avi, was their response to the intricate process of *indigenization*—becoming the natives of the Palestinian territory and antiquated culture—through which these “Hebrews” became “Arabs” in their mentality, looks, and behavior.¹⁰⁸

While tracking this change from the idealization of “little Arabs” (1913) to claiming the Mizrahi category (1918), two central approaches permeate the question of indigeneity: (1) using Mizrahim to separate the indigenous Jewish from the other Arab-Jewish residents of Palestine; and (2) returning to issues of purity (in the sense of time, space, and race) to justify Zionist immigration to Palestine, while, at the same time, differentiating between the old Jewish residents of Palestine, whom Ben-Avi initially named as “little Arabs” (1913) and then “Mizrahim” (1918), and the new European-Zionist (Ashkenazi) immigrants. To assess the greater ramifications of the question of indigeneity in relation to the Mizrahi

¹⁰⁵ Itamar Ben-Avi, “What Did Eretz Israel Give Us?” *Hashkafa [Point of View]* 9(18), November 19, 1907: 2. Quoted in Arieh Bruce Saposnik, *Becoming Hebrew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 94–95.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ We must also remember that this Arabic discourse was not limited only to the idealization of the Palestinian-Arab residents of Palestine (Khalidi 1997; Eyal 2006). Growing scholarship paid attention to the appearance of native-born Palestinian-Jews generation (Shapira 1997; Almog 1997; Zerubavel 1995; Saposnik 2003, 2008). The emergence of contesting indigenized discourses said a great deal about the changing view of the Palestinian-Arab communities, on the one hand, romanticizing the Arabic figure, yet, on the other hand, highlighting Arabic “primitiveness,” “ignorance,” and “backwardness.” As Edward Said and other scholars pinpoint, this Orientalist pendulum “was followed by a counter-response: the Orient suddenly appeared lamentably under-humanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric and so forth” (Said 1978: 150).

category requires a more careful analysis of *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*].¹⁰⁹ I refer here to a series of articles by multiple veteran Jewish residents of Palestine who claimed to be natives of Palestine. I am interested in the extent to which “indigeneity” was deployed to demarcate a native “us” and an indigenous “we” that stood against an exilic immigrant (primarily European-Jews) “them.” One such writers who spoke on behalf of the “indigenous we” was David Yellin (1864–1942). To Yellin, a central political figure in the Old and New Yishuv, nativeness was used to assert cultural difference and to highlight a particular congenital knowledge.

As one who grew up in Jerusalem and was regarded as “Mizrahi by birth and Jewish belief and Western by his education,” Yellin highlighted the issue of nativity (Meitlis 2009). From the outset, Yellin’s “To the Youth of Eretz Yisrael” [*La'Tzeirium ha-Eretz Yisraelium*],¹¹⁰ addressed the founders of the *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], “Bnei ha-Eretz” [“natives of the land”], with whom he identified. He went on to criticize the Jewish natives, or *bnei ha-Eretz*, of Palestine during the Ottoman rule for their ideological and economical “decline.” While he deployed the inclusive “we” to emphasize a wholesome collective of natives, Yellin underscored the merits of these Palestinian-Jews locals. He asserted that “staying in the land [Palestine] for a whole lifetime guarantees its locals the knowledge of the place [*yedihat ha-eretz*], the experience of knowing what succeeds and what fails, expertise in several kinds of crafts and works,” as well as “understanding of the land’s inhabitants.”¹¹¹ The claiming of indigenous knowledge, unique attributes, and distinct skills, moreover, allowed Yellin to draw historical and cultural lines between indigenous residents and immigrants to Palestine. It promoted Zionist claims of the Palestinian land, and made Mizrahim the central concentration in justifying the Zionist enterprise. This claim led Yellin to make the next, and perhaps his most daring, allegation.

¹⁰⁹ As I discuss in the next chapter, the question of “indigeneity” not only arose among the Jewish populace but of the other native inhabitants of Palestine and primarily the Arabs, who perceived themselves as the natives of the land along with the old Jewish residents of Palestine prior to 1882.

¹¹⁰ David Yellin, “To the Youth of Eretz Yisrael.” *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol. 2, August 19, 1919: 1.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

“It is now the holy duty of our youth,” Yellin urged the youth of *bnei ha-Eretz*, “to join forces and unite [*lehitaged agudah ahat*] in order to be of help to the newcomers.”¹¹² He then clarified that *bnei ha-Eretz* should merge “in order to find ways and means to unify with the other sons of truth, join together to work, and fight against those who viciously separate, differentiate, and degrade them for being *bnei ha-Eretz*.”¹¹³ What we begin to notice here is the ways in which Palestinian locality is equated with superior and pure Jewish culture, a superiority presumably shared exclusively among the Jewish natives of Palestine.

The claiming of “Palestinian locality,” however, ought to be read beyond the Jewish nexus and along the lines of differentiation between “we,” the Semite-Jews, and the “other,” Semite-Arabs, and as a way of coping with growing colonial and national tensions. With the conflict between the two national streams of Zionists and Arabs rapidly reaching new heights (or lows) of national conflict, the politicization as well as the ranking of indigeneity challenged, complicated, and, at times, approved these racial and national polarities. The question of Jewish indigeneity, which appeared at the heart of the term of *Mizrahim*, became a labeling and coalescing device for the Palestinian-Muslim natives of Palestine.

That is why the construction of Jewish indigeneity and the creation and politicization of *Mizrahim* must be read in tandem with the formation of the Palestinian-Arab collective identity.¹¹⁴ Consider, for example, the establishment of the Palestinian association of *al-Nadi al-‘Arabi* (the Arab Club) in Damascus in 1918. Consider also the creation of the Palestinian Arab Congress held in Jerusalem in September 1919, followed by the formation of other Palestinian political institutions such as the Arab Bank (1930) and the Arab National Fund (1931). More importantly, the politicization of Palestinian nativity in the Jewish and non-Jewish locales tell us about the significance of the British Colonial state in giving the country and its inhabitants their name (“Palestine,” in contrast to its previous name *Surya al-*

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ For further readings on the creation of Palestinian collective identity, distinct from “Arab” identities, see Porath 1974, 1977, 1986; Kimmerling 2000; Muslih 1988; Khalidi 1997; Lesch 1979.

Janubiyya [southern Syria]), as well as reshaping cultural and social demarcations of identity. That said, with the British Mandate providing the political and social administrative umbrella, several Sephardic and Mediterranean leaders called for the amalgamation of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities in 1919, demonstrating their ability to adapt to and, at the same time, disrupt a new colonial and political climate.

Overlapping Sephardic-Mizrahi Genealogies

At the end of 1919, several Sephardic and Mediterranean leaders thought they knew the future of the Sephardic and Mediterranean communities in Palestine under the British Mandate. This leadership included a diverse group of professionals, such as educators Bern Meyuhas and M. D. Gaon, writers Yehuda Burla, political activists Joseph Elishar and Meir Gino, and journalists like Moshe Attias and Abraham Elmaliah. According to their widespread views, the future meant embracing two contradictory threads: first, declaring their full support to the Zionist enterprise, while, at the same time, unifying Sephardic and Middle Eastern communities into a separate political and cultural faction within the Zionist national project. That is, under the collective umbrella of Sephardim-Mizrahim and through the semantic interchange of the Sephardic and Mizrahi categories, this leadership viewed their Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition not as part of a national-Zionist effort, but, rather, as a politically and culturally distinct group.

In the eyes of these leaders, such as the renowned writer and educator, Yehuda Burla, the times demanded an unmistakable step: “assimilation” of Sephardi and Mediterranean Jewish communities into one homogeneous community that would stand side by side with its Ashkenazi (European-Jewish) counterpart.¹¹⁵ By referring to assimilation, Burla meant to counter what he considered the “original standpoint” of ethnic and cultural diversity, which suggested that “there will be Sephardim [of different kinds] in their cultural traits, such as Halebi Jews [Jews from Halab (Aleppo), Syria], Bukhari Jews [Jews

¹¹⁵ Yehuda Burla, “Sephardim and Our National Revival” [*Sepahrdim ve-Tchiuatenu ha-leumit*]. In *Mizrah U-Marav* [*East and West*], Vol. 2, 1919: 163–171.

from Bukhara, Uzbekistan], etc.”¹¹⁶ Instead, Burla, among other leaders, was certain that the “creation of Hebrew and solely Hebrew life” would be achieved through processes of consolidation and amalgamation of Mediterranean and Sephardic communities.¹¹⁷

Simultaneously, as declared Zionists, their patriotic attachment also raised tensions between their deep fervor about the Zionist project and their suspicion of it. In 1918, the Sephardic Council (1918), among a variety of Sephardic institutions and publications that emerged at the time, used the category of “Sephardim” to demarcate the boundaries of their Sephardic-Mizrahi “tribe.”¹¹⁸ To justify their claims for Sephardic subjectivity, they concluded that two (often unequal) tribes can exist “within one [Jewish] nation,”¹¹⁹ and thus began to donate physical and intellectual distinctiveness to the Sephardic-Mizrahi character. Among the characteristics of the Sephardic-Mizrahi self/other were his “religious intellectual abilities” [*hochmat ha-pilpul*], alongside his interior knowledge of the East and its population.¹²⁰ Moreover, they expanded the meaning of “Sephardim,” beyond a world that was left behind (either Spain or the Ottoman Empire) to refer to an image of an Oriental-Mizrahi other: “*anshei ha-Mizrah*” [“the people of the Mizrah”].¹²¹ From 1918 onwards, therefore, we must talk about the Sephardic leadership’s organized and strategic attempts to co-opt the national project to subvert and mobilize the meaning of Sephardim and, thus, implicitly use “natural” factors such as blood, language, and race to justify their revitalized and highly politicized Sephardic selves.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Burla’s plea for “assimilation,” published in the first issue of the Sephardic journal, *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [*East and West*] (1919), refers specifically to Sephardim and their role in the collective effort of “national revival,” as he writes: “we have to assimilate, all of us must assimilate into one unit. To assimilate—not Sephardim in Ashkenazim or vice versa, but we have to assimilate among ourselves [Sephardim and Mizrahim]. We need to bring all the beautiful and positive aspects of our character, qualities, and knowledge and all that is among us close together. This principle of assimilation is one-of-a-kind and stands as a blessing for us. The principle implies: creation of Hebrew and solely Hebrew life [*yetzirat hayim Ivrium, rak Ivrium*].”

¹¹⁸ Anonymous, “The Sephardic Council of Sephardic Jewry.” In *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [*East and West*], Vol.2, 1919: 174–177.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

From the Sephardic stance, these processes of cultural homogenization and the amalgamation of political interests among the multi-cultural and ethnically heterogeneous Yishuv, including the advocacy of the Hebrew language (Saposnik 2008), had two major goals. The first focused on cultural and political consolidation only at the level of the Sephardic and Mediterranean communities. The second suggested national unification of the whole Jewish populace of Palestine in 1918. While national unification was still negotiated and questioned among the Sephardic-Mizrahi members, the trial amalgamation, and thus the solidification of internal means of ethnic (and later racist) exclusion, won unbounded support from all realms of the political map in the Yishuv. In other words, the colonial context of 1918 promoted a hierarchized view of self that depended on questions of purity that set the indigenous ethnic boundaries¹²² of the Sephardic and other Middle Eastern communities in Palestine.

Varying motivations advanced the various calls for unification among Mediterranean and Sephardic communities in 1919 Palestine. Some leaders of the Mediterranean and Sephardi Jewish populace of Palestine, such as Burla, believed that homogenizing these communities would enhance the creation of the Jewish nation. “All of us must assimilate [*le'hitboloe'l*] into one unit,” Burla asserted time and again in various Sephardic journals.¹²³ For others, such as the prominent Sephardi Zionist activist Abraham Elmaliah, the creation of a Sephardic and Mediterranean union appeared crucial to the development of the Zionist idea: “[T]here are many tasks that we, the Sephardim, as the populace of the

¹²² I borrow the phrase “indigenous inhabitants of Palestine” from the chronologies of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by James Gelvin (2005). I do so primarily to acknowledge the existence of multiple indigenous communities in Palestine and the crucial impact of the Colonial British control on the political and social consciousness of these groups (Jews as well as non-Jews). Moreover, I am also aware that applying the concept of ethnicity to indigenous people, particularly with the imposition of Western colonial systems of ethnic categorization (Cohen 1978), is questionable and, therefore, also constitutes an empirical question to be answered. In the Palestinian context, the German-Jewish sociologist, Arthur Ruppin, was among the first who attempted to analyze the demographics of the area. As the director of the Jewish Bureau of Statistics in Germany (1904–1908) and later the head of the Palestine’s Institute of Economic Research, in addition to authoring his sociological study *The Jews in the Modern World* (1904), it is evident that both projects of enumeration and indigenization overlapped. Given this, we might want to talk about two forces acting in this project of “colonialism,” producing specific impositions of political and economic hierarchies and perpetuating the standardization of categories and bodies in the Palestinian context of the early twentieth century (Fieldhouse 1981).

¹²³ Anonymous, “The Sephardic Council of Sephardic Jewry.” In *Mizrah u-Ma’arav [East and West]*, Vol. 2, 1919: 174–177.

East [*anshei ha-Mizrah*], are qualified to do.”¹²⁴ For other prominent members of the Sephardic community, such as Joseph (Hey) Feingil, one of the elders of the Old Yishuv, the importance of Sephardic-Mizrahi political solidarity would call for equal standing with, as well as representation in, Zionist organizations.¹²⁵

Indeed, although there was disagreement over the vision of a Sephardic and Mediterranean union, demands for its creation persisted. In the early years of the British Mandate, Sephardic leadership was in agreement in its call to “reclaim” the mythic glories of the Sephardic Golden Age. The goal was to “awaken” the Sephardic national spirit by referencing its “shared” history, to promote Sephardic activity in the Zionist project, and to “regenerate” the Sephardic body and mind,¹²⁶ including the utilization of “proper” Hebrew as opposed to Yiddish or Ladino. Other Sephardic delegates also called for the revival and fusion of Sephardi and Mediterranean communities into “one Hebrew public, with one education, by a singular character.”¹²⁷ This anachronistic appropriation of dominant views of Sephardic myth granted this leadership certain political privilege and national agency, constantly alluding to the mythic Sephardic past. Of course, this making of a collective memory depended on suppression of *unfit and inappropriate narratives* in order to present the most ideal and unified image of Sephardim, similar to what David Roach coined as *selective amnesia* to describe the tension between memory and forgetfulness among marginalized groups.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Abaraham Elmaliah, “Our Role as a Living Party: To my Sephardi brethren in Palestine.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], August 15, 1919.

¹²⁵ Joseph (Hey) Feingil, “The Sephardim with the Work of Revival.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], September 7, 1919.

¹²⁶ Yehuda Burla, “Sephardim and Our National Revival” [*Sepahrdim ve-Tchiuatenu ha-leumit*]. In *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [*East and West*], Vol.2, No.1, 1919: 163–171.

¹²⁷ Abraham Elmaliah, 1919. “Declaration Statement of *Mizrah u-Ma’arav*.” In *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [*East and West*], Vol.1, No. 1: 1–7.

¹²⁸ See David Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

That being said, we must not rule out the possibility that these Sephardic leaders, such as Feingil, Elmaliah, and Burla, questioned how they could form a Sephardic coalition. They had doubts regarding how they would define themselves collectively in relation to the growing Zionist project. Some of them, as veteran residents in Palestine who had strong commercial and personal links with the other Christian and Muslim residents of Palestine, called into question their relationship with the two national and cultural oppositions that emerged at the time: on the one hand, the Zionist, and, on the other, the Palestinian-Arabs. They were ambivalent about Sephardic leadership's work with the Zionist project and suggested that the Sephardim should work separately and independently on their mission of national revival.¹²⁹ Other Sephardic leaders, however, as one anonymous Sephardic activist wrote, declared Sephardic loyalty to the Zionist project and considered those who remained in doubt "degenerates" [*Mefagrim*] and "blind" to the Sephardim's new role of cooperation with the Zionist organizations in Palestine.¹³⁰ Letters were exchanged, meetings were held, profanities were hurled, and contrasting prophecies invoked to map out the future course of the Sephardic coalition.

This Sephardic and Mediterranean leadership's attempts to bring in contact, coalesce, and create the outward appearance of political solidarity comprised of a diverse Middle Eastern and Sephardic public involved several processes of self-essentialization by members of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership. The creation of a Sephardic coalition, therefore, worked on multiple levels: it rapidly transformed the social relevance and meaning of the term Sephardim and made it synonymous to *Mizrahim*, and it also proved to be a basis for political (including national) mobilization. What still remains in question, however, is what were the criteria to become a member in the Sephardic-Mizrahi faction? To what extent did membership in the newly defined Sephardic-Mizrahi body hinge on adherence to Zionist ideology or on intra-ethnic lines?

¹²⁹ Joseph (Hey) Feingil, "The Sephardim with the Work of Revival." In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], September 7, 1919.

¹³⁰ Anonymous, "To the Degenerate" [*El ha-Mefagrim*]. In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], September 12, 1919, No. 31: 4.

Forming a Sephardic-Mizrahi Bloc: The Story of the First Elected Assembly in the Yishuv

Facing the First Elected Assembly in 1919, the Sephardic-Mizrahi faction chose to politicize the category of Sephardim in order to attract more voters. This endorsement of a Sephardic faction provided the leadership with an opportunity to appear as legitimate contributors to the Zionist project. For that political purpose, the Sephardic campaign shifted to the more exclusive Sephardic term to speak on behalf of larger Mediterranean and North African communities.

Anticipation was high across the Yishuv because of the election, which would determine the political, cultural, and social cornerstones of the growing Jewish community in the Yishuv. If, thus far, the Zionist Organization had operated primarily out of England, this election was intended to create a Zionist leadership in the Yishuv that “would unify the Yishuv within a single framework” (Tzahor in Shapira and Reinharz 1996).¹³¹ Many burning issues had to be resolved in order to chart the economic and cultural growth of the Yishuv: how to facilitate and encourage immigration to Palestine, how to distribute funding, and how to create a Hebrew-based education system. The election would also determine crucial decisions concerning possible ways to support *Avoda Ivrit* (Hebrew labor, primarily in terms of agricultural work) as well as various *Moshavot* (agricultural cooperatives).

The story of this election reflects the intricate political and cultural conditions within the Jewish community of the Yishuv, in particular, and Palestine, at large. The official regulations for the First Elected Assembly were based on four criteria: 1) the right to vote was based on equality across gender and class lines; 2) voters had to be above the age of twenty and residents of Palestine for more than half a year, while candidates had to be above the age of twenty-five and were also expected to be fluent in Hebrew; 3) voters had to speak Hebrew while candidates had to also write the language; and 4) a position in the Elected Assembly required a minimum of twenty votes out of the possible eighty.¹³²

¹³¹ This was particularly true with the arrival of the Zionist Commission [*Va'ad ha-Tzirim*] to Palestine. Under the leadership of Chaim Weizmann, the commission was supposed to apply the policy of the Balfour Declaration and to assist the Jewish population of Palestine.

¹³² See Attias 1963; Morag-Talon 1980; Lissak 1984; Herzog 1986; Kanner 2004.

Some twenty parties participated in the election. The leaders of the political parties were, for the most part, Zionist immigrants (Ben-Avram 1978). Most parties declared their support for the Zionist project. Scholars tend to divide the participating parties into three central groupings (Lissak 1984; Herzog 1986). The first grouping consisted of the labor Zionist parties, such as the socialist Labor party [*Mifleget Ahdut ha-Avoda*], the most popular party at the time,¹³³ influenced by the ideology of Ber Borochov¹³⁴— who died just one year prior the election (1917).

The second grouping consisted of other secular parties with various interests, such as the Farmers Council [*Hitachdut ha-Ikarim*] or the Women’s Community [*Agudat ha-nashim*].¹³⁵ The third group was a mix of religious parties, including those with Zionist inclinations, such as *ha-Mizrahi*, or *HaPoel ha-Mizrahi*, and those with an anti-Zionist outlook, such as *Agudath Yisrael*. These groups illustrate the conflicting tendencies and divisions across lines of gender, ethnicity, religiosity, and ideology within the Jewish community in Palestine in the late-1910s.

Sephardic leaders responded to this highly political and divisive climate with the decision to participate as an independent body. The Sephardic Council, the dominant Sephardic organization, was an amalgamation of representatives of Sephardic communities from Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Haifa.¹³⁶ It included the elders of the so-called Old Yishuv, as well as representatives of Mediterranean communities, such as the *Ma’aravi*, (also known as *Maghrebi*) community, which was the largest and most dominant at

¹³³ The top four leading political groups that participated in the election reserved 216 seats. The Labor Party was the leading political group at the election. Out of 314 possible seats, they reserved 70 seats. The second in order, the Sephardic Council, which I will discuss in depth later in this chapter, reserved 54 seats. Just behind, the Orthodox Party secured 51 seats, and the Young Workers Party [*ha-Poel ha-Tzahir*] took hold of 41 seats. The additional political groups did not surpass 20 seats.

¹³⁴ Dov Ber Borochov was born in Russia (currently Poltava, in the Ukraine) in 1881. He was a leading member of *Poale Zion* [Workers of Zion] that was active first in Russia, Poland, and later in Palestine. At the heart of Borochov thought was one clear idea: “an integration of Jewish nationalism and orthodox Marxist doctrine” (Avineri 1981: 141).

¹³⁵ It is important to note that at the time of the election in Palestine (1920s), woman did not have the right to vote. The participation of woman in the election caused major turmoil among the Jewish community at the time, and was the reason for many debates, arguments, and controversies.

¹³⁶ These cities were also central hubs for Sephardim and Mediterranean Jews of Palestine.

the time. Dr. Yitzchak Levy (1866–1950) was a Sephardic activist from Jerusalem, who earned his PhD in agronomy in Germany. Levy, known for his anti-Zionist views, headed the Sephardic Council. Other prominent candidates were Shmuel Lupo (1860–1941), who was the president of the Sephardic Council at the time (1918–1926), and Rabbi Nisim Elishar (1853–1934).

The top ten candidates were allocated in the following way: four seats to rabbis, three seats to Sephardic leaders from the Old Yishuv, one seat to the representative of the *Ma'aravi* community (Abraham Elmaliah), and another to the representative of the *Halutzei Ha-Mizrah* [Pioneers of the East] (David Avishar). The other delegates from the Oriental-Mizrahi communities, except the Yemenite community, appeared further down the list: representing the Persian community was Hananua Mizrahi (twelfth on the list), representing the Bukharian community was Massiach Bochorof (thirteenth on the list), and representing the Georgian community was Joseph Hachemshvili (in the sixteenth spot). It is worth emphasizing here that in forming the political coalition that took hold in 1918, the Sephardim adopted a *mélange* of identities, ethnicities, and allegiances to acquire a legitimate foothold on political power.

The politicization of Sephardim had cultural as well as social consequences. Structuring Sephardim as a consciousness of a subaltern body that transgressed clear ethnic demarcations, it attempted to solve social problems through the promotion of Sephardic diversity. It is no surprise that the central candidates on the Sephardic list did not adhere to the notion of Sephardim as an ethnicity or a history. Take, for example, the two candidates who were elected to the seventeenth and eighteenth spots. The first was Itamar Ben Avi (1882–1943), the son of the celebrated reviver of the Hebrew language Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, who was hardly Sephardi. The second was Asher Sapir, one of the editors of the *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*]. The question remains, however, what did “Sephardim” mean at the time and how was it used in the election?



After six unsuccessful attempts, the election was finally held in 1920.¹³⁷ One of the main reasons for postponing the election was the issue of women's suffrage (Kanner 2004), which says a great deal about the particular political agenda proclaimed by the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition. The Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders were cautious in taking sides in this debate. Although their rabbis did not forbid women's participation in the election, Sephardic leaders preferred to "give up on this question for now." They declared, "It is not that we [Sephardim] oppose the participation of women in the elections, an issue that we agree with whole-heartedly." Rather, the reason is that they preferred to maintain "internal peace," as asserted Abraham Elmaliah, who became the most vocal prominent Sephardic leaders of the time.¹³⁸

As is often the case when cloaking political gain in the guise of a neutral stance, the Sephardic leaders were, in fact, interested in ensuring the place of the religious parties in the new institutions of the Yishuv. The religious parties, also named *Mizrahi* [religious Zionists] or *Agudat Yisrael* [the Union of Israel], were closely aligned with the Sephardic leadership in terms of their religious adherence. Additionally, what primarily alarmed the Sephardic leadership were the possible repercussions of women's suffrage that could lead to a political breakup between the Jewish groups in the Yishuv. The fear of a division in the Jewish community between the secular Zionist labor movement and the religious groups stimulated a very particular response by the Sephardic leadership: "oh, for God's sake," proclaimed Abraham Elmaliah, on behalf of the Sephardic and Mediterranean leadership, "no, we don't need two [separate] General Assemblies that will ridicule us in front of the enlightened world."¹³⁹

Therefore, while the religious parties vetoed the idea of women's suffrage and, in contrast, the labor movement supported the women's participation in the election, the Sephardim poised in the middle,

¹³⁷ The elections were postponed six times for multiple reasons, including a conflict with the Palestinian-Arab population. Originally, the elections were scheduled for April 19 1920, but took place in Jerusalem only on May 3, 1920. See more on the election in Moshe Attias, *Sefer ha-te'udot shel ha-Va'ad ha-Le'umi li-Kneset Yisrael be-Eretz Y'israel, 1910–1948* (Jerusalem: Defus R. H. Hakohen, 1963); Hannah Herzog, *Political Ethnicity: sociological analysis of the "Ethnic" lists to the delegates assembly and the Kneset* (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Meuhad, 1986).

¹³⁸ Abraham Elmaliah, "The Burning Question." In *Do'ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, No. 12, Vol. 2, October 22, 1919: 1.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

preferring to defer their decision. A bold statement was postponed in favor of strategic thinking that would benefit the larger Jewish community. In hindsight, this condition—in which Sephardim are betwixt and between, pacifiers on demand, or mediators for hire—reflected how the Sephardic leaders perceived their role in the community. Situated between two extremes, secular and religious, they would emerge as religious, national, cultural, and social “middlemen.”

In their role as pacifiers, however, more pertinent perspectives of Sephardim were at work, for, at the same time, Sephardim were also seen as the forefathers, or the “natives,” of the Jewish community in Palestine. As such, for the Sephardic and Mediterranean leadership, the elections were a moment of recapturing past, and perhaps bygone, political and cultural antiquity. In other words, the politicization of Sephardim stretched the term semantically, but also asked this group to readjust and continuously alter their past to advance their political aspirations. The inception of the British Mandate alongside the emergence of a new political and bureaucratic order, changes in demographics, and the rise of the Zionist movement all challenged the role of the Sephardic leaders.

Leading up to the election, political propaganda in the Yishuv was in full steam. Advertisements filled newspapers and plastered street corners, while pamphlets were distributed in various political and cultural centers as well as at synagogues. Lectures and talks were delivered to encourage the public to vote. Against a backdrop of increasing news reports of discrimination of Sephardic and Mediterranean Jews, primarily in Haifa, in Jerusalem, and a new cinema space, the *Halutzei Hamizrah* [Pioneers of the East] met to discuss their activities and future plans.¹⁴⁰ The *Agudat ha-nashim* [Women Community] assembled to provide its members with a clarification of the difference between equal rights for women

¹⁴⁰ Advertisement. “*Halutzei ha-Mizrah*” [*Pioneers of the East*]. In *Do-ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 69, Vol. 2, December 28, 1919: 3.

and their right to vote.¹⁴¹ At the same time, there was great significance in the *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [Pioneers of the East] mobilizing the Sephardic category during the election.

By 1919, the inception of *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*] (known during its first year as the Sephardic Youth Council, 1918–1929) was especially paramount in denoting the category of Sephardim with revitalized political currency and national agency. Led by a group of Sephardic intellectuals including David Avishar (chair from 1918–24), Eliyhau Elishar (chair 1925–29), and M. D. Gaon, who were all educated in Western countries and affiliated with the Alliance educational system, their aims conformed to Zionist ideology, calling for the “building of the nation and the land.”¹⁴² As a matter of fact, the reclamation of dominant Zionist vocabulary of *halutziut* [pioneers] in order to define a Sephardic self is striking in many levels, reminiscent of what Jenny Sharpe termed “the mimic man,”¹⁴³ articulating the strategies of colonial subjects such as the members of *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*] in embracing dominant Zionist narratives in claiming *halutziut*. At the same time, using the same *halutziut* to promote distinct Sephardic-Mizrahi politics and disrupt Zionist position of power. This contradictory-consciousness appeared then to be part of the Sephardic-Mizrahi ideology.

On the one hand, this Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership identified themselves as pioneers because they saw themselves, working, thinking, and taking part in the Jewish national project: “carry[ing] another brick in the founding of this wonderful building [*ha-binuan ha-nehedar*] that was announced and was to become an example to the nation and its surroundings.”¹⁴⁴ On the other hand, they used the Zionist trope of pioneers to elevate their status and to separate themselves from what they saw as Sephardic

¹⁴¹ Advertisement. “The Hebrew Women’s Council for Equal Rights in Eretz Yisrael.” In *Do-ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 132, Vol. 2, March 14, 1919: 3.

¹⁴² Anonymous, “About the Early Years of Our Formation – Pioneers of the East,” 1923, pamphlet: 5–9.

¹⁴³ Jenny Sharpe, “Figures of Colonial Resistance” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35(1), Spring, 1989.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

“slumber,” “narrow mindlessness,” and “lack of content.”¹⁴⁵ To escape this ideological slump, they agreed on the following, as disclosed in their earliest pamphlet: “first and foremost [the Sephardic *Halutzim* and youth] needs to organize itself to penetrate the broader Sephardic spheres in order to spread education [*haskala*] and culture [*tarbut*].”¹⁴⁶ Additionally, in their pamphlet, they no longer referred to a Sephardic community, but to a “Sephardic race” that needed to be “regenerated.” By “regeneration,” they called for “a complete [Sephardic] revival in all aspects for its own benefit and of the whole [Jewish] nation.” Though the evocation of “natural” means of division—such as blood, race, soil, and language—are often associated with the means of exclusion, in the case of the Sephardic pioneers we must be aware of the accentuation and appropriation of Sephardic otherness to promote political interests and power. Keeping in mind the reconstruction of a unified Sephardic community, unity that hinges on the illusion of Oriental exclusiveness, we now return to the election in order to examine how the unified and racialized understanding of Sephardim was deployed in the political sphere.

Amidst the election commotion, the inclusive definitions of a united Sephardic and Mediterranean entity were reconsidered and reiterated time and again. For these Sephardic advocates of the Zionist project, political potency meant the co-option of Sephardim as a category that could advance their political goals: first in attracting a larger crowd of Mediterranean voters and, at the same time, the term “Sephardim” became part of a rhetoric highlighting their Sephardic-historical role within the Zionist project. For example, an advertisement in *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*] publicly addressed the extended ethnic definition of the Sephardic faction, including a *mélange* of Mediterranean and North African communities:

To the Sephardim

Ourpeli, Buchari, Georzi, Gemurkili, Ma’aravi, Persian, Zuwrikili,
Yemenite,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Sephardi, your brothers have been wandering in exile [*artzot ha-galut*] and their hearts are seized by fear from future days to come. They put their trust in their brothers who stand in the land of their forefathers [*admat ha-avot*] and expect that a foundation for the house would be bestowed for the restoration of a decayed and splintered home, which would become a shelter and a safe haven to all your weary brothers.¹⁴⁷

Here, we must note how “the myth of Sephardic supremacy”¹⁴⁸ was internalized in Sephardic consciousness, appropriated to create a collective-self that extends beyond ethnic boundaries, and then idealized to promote Sephardic political ambitions. Sephardim, and later the category of Mizrahim, emerged as an amalgamation of Middle Eastern communities, “who stand in the land of their forefathers,” and as such carry with them the seeds of the Zionist project.¹⁴⁹

What is evident in the politicization of “Sephardim” is that the term Sephardim was influenced but not limited to the ethnicity of Jews who arrived from a specific geography, or alternatively, shared certain cultural traits, history, or a specific dialect. Sephardim must be seen more through its broader, malleable, and inclusive definitions that were shaped and reshaped in tandem with political power (or powerlessness) dynamics that had been continually shifting in the Palestine of the 1920s. Next, we will examine how, and for what purpose, these processes of ethnic and political reconfigurations materialized.

¹⁴⁷ Advertisement to the First General Assembly. “To the Sephardim.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 168, Vol. 2, April 28, 1920: 4.

¹⁴⁸ See Ismar Schorsch, “The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 34 (1989): 47–66. See also John M. Efron, “Scientific Racism and the Mystique of Sephardic Racial Superiority,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book*, 38 (1993): 75–96.

¹⁴⁹ This advertisement, moreover, was met with enthusiasm, reflecting on the high voting turnout of more than 70 percent among Sephardim-Mizrahim community of Palestine. Out of 28,765 eligible voters, 20,160 participated in the election.

The Creation of the Sephardic-Ethnic Bloc:

The Solidification of the Ethnic, Communal, and the National

The malleable understanding of Sephardim is highlighted by the emergence of the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc. Although negotiations and discussions about a unified political and cultural grouping began prior to the election, the merger of the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc came to fruition soon after the election. Six political parties were about to join and form what would later be named *Histadrut ha-Sephardim* [“The Sephardic Council”]. The greatest and most popular contributor to the Sephardic Council was the Sephardic party, which won fifty-four seats in the Assembly.

The other political parties were the Bukhari Community (five seats), the Georgian Community (one), Yemenites (twelve), the Council of Israeli Youth [*Histadrut Tzeiri Yisrael*] (four), and the Council of Mizrahi Youth [*Histadrut halutzei ha-Mizrah*] (two).¹⁵⁰ In total, the Sephardic coalition garnered around twenty-five percent of the seats in the Assembly. Moreover, if we take into consideration that the Sephardic community was nineteen percent of the Jewish population in the Yishuv, it is evident that a substantial percentage of the Sephardic community participated in the election (close to ninety percent).

Yet, to return to the questions posed at the end of the last section, how do people amalgamate? What were the practical ramifications of this unification? How did it affect communities and individuals? What were the specific ideas that allowed and even propelled the advent of this coalition? Here, we examine the connection between the ethnic reconfiguration of Sephardim with its national and political redrawing. To put it another way, to what extent was the expansion and amalgamation of the Sephardic-

¹⁵⁰ The emphasis on Sephardic-Mizrahi youth movement could be explained by the concerns of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders with demonstrating the deep involvement of the entire Sephardic-Mizrahi community in the Zionist project. Like other Zionists, the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc was interested in creating the “new Israeli man,” and thus established various organizations and community based movements to educate the Sephardic-Mizrahi youth, beyond the old educational institutions associated with the Old Yishuv. Moreover, the emphasis on Sephardic-Mizrahi youth reveals how conscious were the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders regarding their sole responsibility in educating their community, regardless to other attempts led by the Zionist Organization.

Mizrahi entity a strategy of a leadership interested in claiming political power and national foothold. How did this leadership advance their strategy and to what ends?

As a way of entry in to these queries, I draw on a series of gatherings of Sephardic Council members in and outside Palestine during the late-1919 shaped and instigated political (Zionist) activism among the Sephardic and Mediterranean population before the election. These Sephardic-Mizrahi gatherings took place in Jerusalem, Hebron, Haifa, Halab (Aleppo, in Syria), and other Sephardic centers within and beyond Palestine.¹⁵¹ The moving force behind these public events was the leaders of the Sephardic Council, including Abraham Elmaliah, Rabbi Ouziel, and Joseph Meyuhas. These leaders exchanged their political strategies to attract and recruit their Middle Eastern and North African populace to the Zionist vision. I propose to pay attention to their contradictory-consciousness as public advocates of a Zionist project that excluded them.

On August 15, 1919, about half a year prior to the election in the Yishuv, a lucid articulation of the Sephardic political strategy was published. In “The Sephardic Party as a Living Force – To My Sephardic Brothers,”¹⁵² Abraham Elmaliah gave voice to the specific role Sephardim has within the national Zionist project in Palestine. His language was fiery. His anger was evident. And his view of the Ottoman past was clear: “The iron walls that imprisoned us for many years have finally been shattered; the metal shackles that held us back for decades have finally been cracked; the land [Israel/Palestine] is free now from its treacherous past owners, who strangled our spirits. . . .”¹⁵³ Elmaliah’s implication was that the essence of Sephardic “imprisonment” was a result of Eastern influences and undeveloped

¹⁵¹ See the following reports about the movement of the Sephardic-Mizrahi campaign, including Anonymous, “Everyday in Jerusalem – in the Sephardic Jewish Council.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, November 3, 1919, No. 22, Vol. 2: 3; Anonymous, “The Sephardic Council in Hebron.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, November 11, 1919, No. 29, Vol. 2: 3; Anonymous, “Everyday in Jerusalem – in the Sephardic Council.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, November 17, 1919, No. 34, Vol. 2: 4.

¹⁵² Abraham Elmaliah, “The Sephardic Party as a Living Force–To My Sephardic Brothers.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, No. 7, Vol. 2, August 15, 1919: 1–2.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

traditions. And indeed, as we further follow his writing, he put his finger on the vehicle that might mobilize the Sephardic (antiquated) collective from their Oriental negligence: Zionist ideology.

Similarly, Elmaliah identified modernity and progress with Zionism. Sephardic culture, somewhat similar to Arabic culture, stood at the other extreme: “passive” and lacking in national ideology.¹⁵⁴ The implications of adopting the Zionist perspective to value Sephardic selves led to those confessions of Sephardic self-degeneration, as demonstrated in Elmaliah’s ongoing self-criticism: “Only in one corner of the globe does everything still remain unchanged; only one community [*edah*] has not experienced a change, as if nothing has happened around us.”¹⁵⁵ Evident here is the reading of Sephardic history from the perspective of a Zionist point of view, mythic and advanced in the medieval period but stagnant and undeveloped ever since. This approach was to become more prominent in the following years (see Chapter 2). But Elmaliah did not stop there.

Next, he went on to question “Sephardic passivity,” asking, “What was our relationship to all these urgent questions that hovered in our world?”¹⁵⁶ His questioning, relentless and confrontational, mingled with self-flagellation as well as self-doubt, continued: “What did we do in order to facilitate and assist the immigration of Sephardim from various countries? What did we do to foster the land for this [Sephardic] immigration? Which institutions did we create for these immigrants to find their material and spiritual advice? What help, if any, did we offer to existing Zionist organizations? Have we ever assembled to reconsider this new time period while our brothers arrived, their language similar to ours, their customs and traditions the same as ours?”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Tom Segev, *Palestine under the British* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1999), 152.

¹⁵⁵ Abraham Elmaliah, “The Sephardic Party as a Living Force—To My Sephardic Brothers.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 7, Vol. 2, August 15, 1919: 2.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Finally, after leaving no stone unturned in a performance of Zionist dominance over Sephardic-Mizrahi backwardness and passivity, Elmaliah found some solace. With his gaze focused on the growing Zionist enterprise in Palestine, he concluded: “The times we are facing are perhaps the most significant in the history of Zionism. The [political] situation that emerged in Eretz Yisrael leaves us at this crossroad, where we need to choose what would be the right path for us. In this hour we need to bring together [*lerakez*] all the labor forces for one clear endeavor, guided by one complete ideology.”¹⁵⁸ Although he did not specify the exact role of what he considered to be the Sephardic collective in the Zionist endeavor, Elmaliah stressed what needed to happen to mobilize this collective. “The Sephardic Jews could become a great support for the Zionist project and our future in Eretz Yisrael only if they would become nationalists and accept the idea of national revival in this land of our future [Palestine].”¹⁵⁹ Yet, at the same time, he was also aware that this Sephardic collective “could become a great hurdle if they resist us.”¹⁶⁰ What might forestall the emergence of Zionist ideology among the large Sephardic populace is “[t]he emergence of *national assimilation* [*hitbolelut leumit*] among various Sephardic Jews [that] goes against the Zionist idea . . . [and it is our duty] to prevent this misdeed before it escalates, we who are familiar with their language and habits and know how to approach them.”¹⁶¹ In other words, the amalgamation of a diversified Mediterranean and Sephardic collective could be achieved solely through the Zionist enterprise. Or better still, the point here is that Elmaliah’s interest in and attempts to remake Sephardim was paralleled, layered, and overlaid with his motivation in advancing and serving Zionist ideology. More often than not, Elmaliah co-opted the category of Sephardim and then used it as a vehicle to constitute Sephardic-subjectivity only according to its suitability to the national project. Elmaliah’s authority as a Sephardic leader depended on his manipulation of the term “Sephardim.” The efforts and repercussions of his forceful interpretation of Sephardim were crucial.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

Taking into consideration the problems of unifying a whole Sephardic collective under the Zionist mantle, Elmaliah proposed the following strategies for encouraging and manipulating Sephardim to follow the Zionist agenda. He wrote, “It is their [the Sephardic population’s] religious sentiment that we might use in order to achieve our goals.”¹⁶² Elmaliah’s strategy unfolded. His aims were clear and simple, using “religious sentiment” to draw these communities to Palestine to avoid “national assimilation” that would keep the Middle Eastern population outside Palestine and,¹⁶³ consequently, weaken the role of the Sephardic party in the Zionist project.

The accentuation of “religious sentiment” in constructing the Sephardic narrative, moreover, was not solely Elmaliah’s strategy, but was also used by other members of the Sephardic leadership. In fact, the emphasis on “religious sentiment” was one of the central reasons for the inception of the Sephardic organization, *Al Hamishmar* [*On Guard*]. Founded in 1918, this organization focused on the Sephardic and Mediterranean communities in Jerusalem. Five goals guided its work: (1) “spreading the religious-national idea [*ha’raayon ha-dati-leumi*] among the members of the Sephardic community [*Edah Sephardit*]”;¹⁶⁴ (2) “protecting the religious interests in the Sephardic community together [with the protection] of other institutions that follow a similar mindset”;¹⁶⁵ (3) “‘improving’ the physical and spiritual conditions of the Sephardic community in Jerusalem”;¹⁶⁶ (4) “organizing all the other communities [that work within] the Sephardic community in accordance to the religious-national idea [*ha’raayon ha-dati-leumi*]”;¹⁶⁷ and (5) assisting other members of the Sephardic community. It was evident from these goals that the Sephardic institutional efforts were invested in imagining Sephardim as

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ M. D. Gaon Archives. *Declaration Statement and Regulations of Al Hamishmar in 1918* [*On Guard*]. In the National Library Archives, File 97.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

a category that needed to be reassembled and filled with what Elmaliah's called "religious [and national] sentiment."¹⁶⁸

By accentuating, "protecting," and promulgating Sephardic religious zeal, in tandem with the Oriental thrust of religious (later followed with libidinous and insolent) excess, these Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders and institutions imagined themselves according to the Zionist and colonial model of the authentic Sephardic, the indigenous Israelite, and the fervid Palestinian native. To a certain extent, Elmaliah and others tried to discursively control the idea of Sephardim by following the pre-conceived codes of "the Sephardic image facilitated [by] a religious posture, based on the ideas of the late-nineteenth century Haskalah thinkers."¹⁶⁹ But to a greater extent, these Sephardic leaders and institutions accentuated Sephardic religious sentiment while suppressing other secular or less "authentic" aspects, to establish an ontological difference between the Sephardic "type" and Palestinian-Arab, as well as Jewish-Ashkenazi, types.¹⁷⁰

Religious sentiment, however, was only one factor in Elmaliah's grand scheme to make Sephardim a homogenous collective and, as such, a central factor in the Zionist project. His other suggestions, moreover, addressed the spread of Sephardic-Zionist ideology within and outside Palestine:

Our aims will be: a) the conquering of our [Sephardic] communities, for they are the core essence of our national project; b) the facilitation of immigration from each and every city; c) the full support of each national and cultural institution in each city; d) the teaching of the Hebraic language among the new generation . . . ; e) the sending of preachers of various kinds that would awaken the love for Zion [*hibat Zion*] as well as the love to the Hebraic language, and that will explain the national significance of practical Zionism (*tziunut ma'asit*) as well as cultural work in Eretz Israel. Oral propaganda is of great importance [to us]. And lastly, f) increased

¹⁶⁸ Abraham Elmaliah, "The Sephardic Party as a Living Force—To My Sephardic Brothers." In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 7, Vol. 2, August 15, 1919: 1–2.

¹⁶⁹ Schorsch 1989: 47.

¹⁷⁰ What I am describing here is a phenomenon that will characterize Sephardic-Jewish political leadership and institutions up to the present, with the Shas political party as the most obvious example.

propaganda. We will need to support various publications in multiple languages that focus on Eretz Israel.¹⁷¹

At the heart of Elmaliah's suggestion was a focus on cultural propagation, as well as political awakening, through immigration and propaganda within and outside Palestine. It would not take long for his plan to materialize. A week after the publication of Elmaliah's words, and following a fiery exchange with other Sephardic leaders about whether this leadership should promote Zionist ideology separately from the Zionist organizations,¹⁷² we learn of gatherings of various Sephardic communities in multiple Sephardic hubs. Indeed, although the debate among the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders did not reach a final conclusion, the propagation of Jewish national revival gradually became an independent Sephardic project that was not supported or controlled by the Zionist organizations.

On August 20, 1919, a special report on an assembly in Aleppo, Syria, appeared in *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*].¹⁷³ At the center of the Sephardic-Mizrahi meeting was a lecture, during which the speaker, Abraham Elmaliah, discussed "the works of the Zionist abroad . . . its awakening in Eretz Israel . . . and the fact that the Sephardim did not contribute to all these [cultural and political] transformations."¹⁷⁴ Elmaliah's comments, the reporter informs us, "were utterly new to the audience,"¹⁷⁵ and as such, Elmaliah's speech attracted much attention and extended applause. Yet, after Elmaliah ended his talk, collected some contributions, and made his way back to Palestine, "these moments of excitement died away and the Halabi¹⁷⁶-Jews went back to their old ways. . . . They returned to their old habits,

¹⁷¹ Abraham Elmaliah, "The Sephardic Party as a Living Force—To My Sephardic Brothers." In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 7, Vol. 2, August 15, 1919: 2.

¹⁷² I refer here primarily to Joseph Hay Feingil's response article, "The Sephardim in the Revival Project." In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], September 17, 1919, No. 26, Vol. 1: 3.

¹⁷³ Bouhbot Ben-Zion, "The National Movement in Haleb [Syria]." In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 12, Vol. 2, August 20, 1919: 4.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ By "Halabi Jews" I refer to the Jewish community in Halab (Aleppo), Syria.

careless about national matters.”¹⁷⁷ The article ends with the author claiming that “only a new external force could awaken this populace out of their [national] indifference,” hinting at the importance of the Sephardic Council and Zionism in Sephardic centers outside Palestine.¹⁷⁸

Aside from national awakening, cultural awakening was also emphasized, according to European standards of high culture. On September 15, 1919, some two hundred men and women attended the “Tchernichovsky Soiree” in Jerusalem, a cultural event promoted by the Sephardic Council.¹⁷⁹ The highlight of this “literary festival,” besides a public speech by the Sephardic Rabbi Ouziel, and some literary readings that were colored by “the exquisite Sephardic articulation,”¹⁸⁰ was a talk about two prominent (East-European) Jewish poets of the time: Hayim Nahman Bialik and Shaul Tchernichovsky. Then, as the night advanced, and the lights dimmed, musical notes replaced formal talks and “the dancing lasted until late at night.”¹⁸¹

About a month later, on October 21, 1919, various Sephardic leaders from Jaffa, Jerusalem, and Cairo met in Jerusalem to promote the newly formed Sephardic Council in Eretz Yisrael. Their aim was “to mobilize Sephardim in Palestine and abroad, while encouraging these Sephardic communities to take part in the revival project and the building of the nation.”¹⁸² Their call was infused with a sense of urgency for “it [is] of great importance for us to come together, to contribute to the extensive national work, to welcome the coming immigrants, and to create better civic infrastructure.”¹⁸³ To do so, they held

¹⁷⁷ Bouhbot Ben-Zion, “The National Movement in Haleb [Syria].” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, No. 12, Vol. 2, August 20, 1919: 4.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Anonymous, “In the Council of the Young Sephardim.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, September 17, 1919, No. 35, Vol. 1: 5.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Anonymous, “The General Council of the Sephardim in Eretz Israel.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, October 22, 1919, No. 13, Vol. 1: 3.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

preliminary elections. In the internal elections, Abraham Elmaliah and Dr. Yitzchak Levi were elected, first and second, respectively. By November 2, the Sephardic Council had already arranged several talks to promote voting for their Sephardic party. Their representatives were to leave soon for Hebron, Tiberia, Haifa, and France, to monitor the emergence of Sephardic organizations. Ultimately, the chief goal of the Sephardic Council was to create an institution that would bring together all the Sephardic hubs that existed outside of Palestine.¹⁸⁴ The seeds of a World Sephardic Federation, which was formally established five years later in 1924-5, are found in these attempts to organize Sephardim in 1919.

At a meeting of the Sephardic Council in Hebron on November 15, 1919, Elmaliah reiterated the points he had made in earlier speeches. He argued for the significance of a unified Sephardic party in the building of the Zionist nation.¹⁸⁵ A week later, on November 16, the campaign of the Sephardic Council returned to Jerusalem. This time, the Bukharan residents of Ohel Moshe were in the crowd. On stage were the leaders of the Sephardic Council, including Joseph Feingil, Dr. Levi, and our very own Elmaliah. When it was his turn to speak to the crowd, Elmaliah followed his former strategy of evoking notions of “religious sentiment,” conflating it with Zionist ideology, while claiming that the Bukharan community was “the real” and “the true Zionists.”¹⁸⁶ The conflation of Zionist and Sephardic identities, suggested here by Elmaliah, emphasized Sephardic history as the origin of Zionist ideology. But what this reference also revealed was the ongoing efforts of Sephardim to view themselves and write their histories solely from a Zionist perspective, or better still, *Halutzim* [pioneers of the Zionist enterprise] in the East.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Anonymous, “Everyday in Jerusalem—in the Sephardic Jewish Council.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], November 3, 1919, No. 22, Vol. 2: 3.

¹⁸⁵ Anonymous, “The Sephardic Council in Hebron.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], November 11, 1919, No. 29, Vol. 2: 3.

¹⁸⁶ Anonymous, “Everyday in Jerusalem – in the Sephardic Council.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], November 17, 1919, No. 34, Vol. 2: 4.

¹⁸⁷ It is imperative to consider the use of similar tropes of “purity” in the broader Jewish context of Palestine in 1918. In the case of the Sephardic leadership, however, it seems that the evocation of Sephardic purity involved more than looking for all sorts of phenomena as the sources of Zionism. The reference to Sephardic purity had larger racial and cultural repercussions.

In the next few months prior to the election, the leading members of the Sephardic Council had multiple meetings in various Sephardic hubs, such as Haifa,¹⁸⁸ Hebron,¹⁸⁹ and Jaffa.¹⁹⁰ What is important for us is that during these Sephardic-Mizrahi efforts of unification, the imagining of the term “Sephardim” went far beyond the invention of a collective that hinged on Zionist ideology. Gradually, by the time the election took place, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership had attached another component to this construction of Sephardim: Sephardim as a distinct Jewish type.

As iterated before, these assertions about a Sephardic type must be enriched and complicated by the fact that during the nineteenth-century *maskilim* (German-Jewish adherents of the Jewish “Enlightenment,” or *haskalah*) had already made similar claims about Sephardic racial purity.¹⁹¹ The point is that the *haskalah* discourse, which perceived Sephardic Jewry as racially purer and culturally related to the antiquated Israelites, materialized in 1918 as the way the Sephardic leadership understood and imagined their histories and selves. In other words, and as demonstrated above, the term “Sephardim” shifted from demarcating notions of racial and cultural difference throughout the nineteenth century, to legitimizing racial selves in Palestine of 1918. Moreover, to fully claim the “Sephardic-type” that was initially advanced by the *haskalah* movement, the Sephardic leadership advanced the notion of Sephardism a step further. They became active agents in mythologizing and idealizing Sephardic purity, religiosity, antiquity, and authenticity, primarily in order to promote their political interests and national allegiance.

¹⁸⁸ Anonymous, “The Sephardic Community in Haifa.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], March 2, 1920, No. 123, Vol. 2: 1.

¹⁸⁹ Anonymous, “Everyday in Jerusalem—in the Sephardic Jewish Council.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], March 10, 1919, No. 129, Vol. 2: 3.

¹⁹⁰ Anonymous, “A Special Issue.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], November 28, 1919, No. 44, Vol. 2: 2.

¹⁹¹ See Efron 2006, 2004, 1993: 75–96; Saposnik 2006: 116–18; Hart 2000.

Through various pamphlets, speeches, and articles, members of the Sephardic Council tried to deliver their own idea of self and their alleged (but not less real) Sephardism. Such attempts to define and redefine a collective entity named Sephardim were to be found in a series of articles by a surprisingly quiet Sephardic activist, Y. Abadi, entitled “About the Sephardic-Jewish Council.”¹⁹² In the protocols of the Sephardic Organization, Abadi is hardly mentioned, and when he does appear, his role in the organization appeared very limited, and without much political and social weight. Suddenly, however, he emerged with a solid political agenda in popular discourse of the Yishuv. First, for Abadi, Sephardim was a distinct religious tradition: “By the name ‘Sephardic Jews’ [*ha-Yehudim haSephardim*] we refer to all those Jews who pray in a Sephardic dialect (*nosach Sepharad*) and whose mother tongue is not German or any European language.”¹⁹³ But then, Abadi admitted his definition was too general, imprecise. He paused. And as he assessed his failing, he commented: “Perhaps, this is not the most precise definition [of Sephardim], since scholars might find that some Orthodox Jews who are not Sephardim pray using a Sephardic rite, which is more similar to Salonikan Jews than to Ashkenazi Jews.”¹⁹⁴ Once Abadi found that the term “Sephardim” is not a precise marker of a religious identity or practice, he made another attempt to create a solid base for a unified Sephardic identity.

Abadi’s second attempt was no less vague than his first. His second effort in demarcating Sephardism now rested on the belief that Sephardim refers to a specific geographical space of origin,

The core essence [of the term Sephardim] is that all Jews who reside in Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, Egypt, Syria, Aram Nahariym, the Balkans, Persia, Buchara, India, and some Jewish communities in England and Italy (a population of about 1 to 1.5 million) have better and stronger traditional ties [*kesharim mesortiyim*] among themselves than the connections they have with Eastern European Jews, or the Jews who are called Ashkenazim.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Y. Abadi, “About the Sephardic-Jewish Council.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], December 15, 1919, No. 58, Vol. 2: 1.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

Here again, we are reminded of the lack of finality, the continuous imprecision, and the inability to establish a set of geographical, cultural, and religious boundaries to Sephardim. In fact, its complexity and its variability are resolved only when Abadi defined Sephardim in contrast to what and who they are not: Ashkenazim. In that sense Sephardim was not only being defined “from the position of the Other,”¹⁹⁶ but also depended on ongoing processes of comparison, contrast, and equation of some sort. Sephardim, then, might not be read as an entity with a clear historical lineage and cultural value. Quite the reverse: Sephardim ought to be read as a pre-determined term that has been constantly appropriated and re-appropriated in order to create various senses of self and other (and, of course, each appropriation demanded suppression or accentuation of different historical elements).

This brings us face-to-face with Abadi’s further efforts to discern the Sephardic-self through negation: “The Sephardic Jew is not similar to his Ashkenazi brother in his language, his daily customs, his traditions, and family relations, etc.”¹⁹⁷ To take this statement a step further, if one were to ask Abadi about the ways one becomes Sephardi, Abadi’s answer would be: to be Sephardi is not to be Ashkenazi. Then, after answering our question, he would remind us, as he did in his writing, “these differences, which are not unnoticeable, need to come to an end. We should diminish these differences, and bring new positive values to replace the old ones. We should not ‘inject new blood in these crumbling bones,’ as those who ignore the reality profess, but gradually erase all these divisions that separate [us] and allow new values to emerge.”¹⁹⁸ Abadi’s last claim did not base the remaking of Sephardim on negation. Instead, his insistent craving to bring the differences between Sephardim and Ashkenazim “to an end” only re-enforced the idea that Sephardism could not simply be resolved internally but must be part of a whole (or an extended) power equation.

¹⁹⁶ Hall 2000: 147.

¹⁹⁷ Y. Abadi, “About the Sephardic-Jewish Council.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, December 15, 1919, No. 58, Vol. 2: 1.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

Recognizing these failures in defining and demarcating Sephardim compels us to look closely at the task of becoming Sephardic in the particular political and national context of Palestine of 1918–1919. We must remember that becoming Sephardic was not merely an internal issue within a specific ethnic community or geography, but was more part of a reciprocal process, which was closely related to the growing communal and national tensions between Zionists and Palestinian-Arabs. The next quote from Abadi's article examined his construction of Sephardim as a marginalized group within the growing Zionist project. Facing discrimination, Abadi insinuates Sephardim into the place and voice of the subaltern. Abadi first created a new set of binaries, based on categories of majority or minority,

We should put it in simple words: The majority of our people [Jewish community in Palestine] come from Eastern Europe, primarily Russia, and it is this group that will build all that is ruined in the land. Essentially, these Russian immigrants will be at the center of the future Jewish community in Eretz Israel, which will attract the attention of all Israel, and that will give them [these immigrants] the power to handle our problems and stay in the land. This does not mean the cancellation of “the [Jewish] minorities” [*ha-miutim*], coming from this or that country, such as the Sephardim.¹⁹⁹

His second move, however, was to speak about these minorities in terms of political powerlessness, as he asserted,

Admittedly, I have observed that the common opinion among the Sephardic public is that they are (I will use popular jargon although it may not be totally precise) “discriminated” [*mekupahim*] against the Ashkenazim is true. Even though certain actions will try to camouflage these discrepancies, including the election of one Sephardic rabbi to the city council, or the way some “important” [Sephardic] families are treated, everything is still done according to your “orders” [*bifkudethem*] – and this is another truth. Most Sephardim are discriminated against and a few exceptions will not change this reality.²⁰⁰

To this point, we have discussed Sephardim in reference to religious adherence, geographical specificity, ethnic affinity, and political allegiance. Now, it is important to notice a shift in the understanding and use

¹⁹⁹ Y. Abadi, “About the Sephardic-Jewish Council [part 2].” In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], December 31, 1919, No. 72, Vol. 2: 3.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

of the category: By “Sephardism,” I now refer to a sentiment that was deployed by this Sephardic leadership to amalgamate and enfranchise various Mediterranean Jewish groups that have been politically marginalized. For Abadi and his allies, Sephardim was a sentiment of alienation that was manipulated in order to unify the “discriminated” Middle Eastern groups.

Before I return to the election and its result, one more question must be posed: so, who was Abadi and what was his influence in the Sephardic Council? The answer is both surprising and revealing: Abadi was indeed a prominent member of the Sephardic Council, but in “his” article, another member of the Sephardic Council used his name, making Abadi the *nom de plume* of our Abraham Elmaliah.

To hypothesize why Elmaliah felt a need to camouflage his name, we need to situate Elmaliah’s evasiveness in the specific political climate in which he appeared and reappeared in different guises and tones. The Zionist Commission [*Va’ad ha-Tzirim*] had just arrived in Palestine, hoping to have a Jewish land in Palestine. The leaders of the Sephardic Council, Elmaliah among them, expected to have a role within the Zionist project. They awaited the election results with considerable expectation.

As the final election results of the elections were announced, there was celebration in the Sephardic coalition, which in hindsight appeared somewhat predictable. Taking their cue from the election, the Sephardic leadership celebrated because of the unexpected triumph of their nascent political party. They celebrated because there were always doubts among the larger Jewish community about the national relevance and political potency of the Sephardi and Mediterranean communities. And they debated, because there were those within the Sephardic bloc who questioned the present and future aspirations of the Sephardic coalition. This demonstration of political vigor was of great importance, in light of Palestine’s changing social and political climate.

Not many in the Yishuv foresaw the winning of thirty percent of the votes. Out of 314 possible seats in the First Elected Assembly, seventy-eight seats were reserved for Sephardic leaders. Euphoria, mingled with anticipation and expectation ran high among the Sephardic community and its leaders. For

the next eighty years, both prior to and after the inception of the Jewish state, the Sephardic community would not achieve again such major political and cultural success.

Mizrahim: Born out of Exclusion

After the election results were announced, the headlines had a tone of exultation: “This is a veritable victory that even the leaders of the Sephardic Council had failed to anticipate a few days before the election.”²⁰¹ The election was perceived to be a watershed event for the Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization. Articles were preoccupied with negotiating, evaluating, re-evaluating, and even doubting the political bounty that was now in the hands of Sephardim.

Facing a promising political reality, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership had an agenda of urgent questions to answer. “What conclusions should we draw from the election?”²⁰² What might be our next steps? How and for what purpose are we to use our political power? What would be the political stance of the Sephardic bloc?

For Joseph Meyuhas (Ben-Rahamim Nathan, 1868–1942), this political success was an opportunity to reexamine the character of Sephardim and their possible contribution to the Elected Assembly. Known for his formal attire, Meyuhas, an educator, an independent scholar of Sephardic-Mizrahi folklore, and leading member of various Sephardic organizations, expressed his satisfaction in an interview soon after the election. Proud of a bloodline that went back several generations in Palestine, he testified to the “patient,” “productive,” yet “somber temper” typical of Sephardim (himself included).²⁰³

²⁰¹ Abraham Elmaliyah, “After the Elections for the General Assembly.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 179, Vol. 1, 1920: 1.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Joseph Meyuhas, “Around the Election: an Interview with Joseph Meyuhas.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], May 7, 1919, No. 176, Vol. 12: 3.

To him, these Sephardic qualities as well as what he characterized as Sephardic “familiarity with the [Palestinian] surroundings,” would be of great value in the Elected Assembly.

For one such as Elmaliah, who had a central role in the election, the political victory was a fine opportunity to emphasize ongoing collective efforts toward unity. He proposed four central aims for the Sephardic bloc.

His first and second aims focused on the Sephardic bloc’s organization and the political order. His third point stressed that control over Sephardim immigration from the Balkans, North Africa, or the Near East, should be handed to the Sephardic bloc and their institutions, which were “more than familiar with the character of these immigrants, their customs, ways of life, and their daily order.”²⁰⁴ His fourth and last point emphasized the role of Sephardim in “improving” relations between the Jewish population in Palestine and its Palestinian-Arab neighbors. According to Elmaliah, Sephardim, as the “residents of the land,” who are familiar with the lives and customs of the other [Arabic] residents of the land, were the most qualified to “improve relations between us and our neighbors.”²⁰⁵

Meanwhile, we must remember that the convergence of various Mediterranean and Sephardic identities had material and corporeal implications, as demonstrated by a mysterious disease that spread in the Yishuv: “The Sephardic Malady,” which was known worldwide as the “Spanish flu.”

The “Sephardic Malady” spread fast in Palestine during the early days of 1920. Entries in *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*] warned against the Sephardic menace. Articles pointed to the long-standing residents of Palestine, both the “Sephardic and [the] Muslim communities of the old-quarters of Jerusalem,” as the source of this disease. Both the Palestinian-Sephardim, and the Palestinian-Arabs—each an amalgamation of a whole array of Mediterranean identities—cultures, and bodies, were also the victims of this Oriental disease due to their alleged “negligent of hygiene and sanitary conditions.” As for

²⁰⁴ Abraham Elmaliah, “After the Elections for the General Assembly.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], No. 179, Vol. 1, 1920: 1

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

remedies, one advertisement suggested: “anyone who wants to remain alive has to smell tobacco.” A more detailed antidote specified the following: “Organized daily routine, healthy food that is not too complex and that is served in a timely manner, and walks on sunny days that will not cause exhaustion, will be very good [for the patients].”

In tandem with this pseudo-scientific news, which identified a whole population as the carriers of an Oriental malady, the Sephardic and Mediterranean leadership was busy deciding the nature of their mosaic of Middle Eastern collective. This raises the question as to what extent we might understand their focus on the election as the “antidote” to the hearsay of Sephardic affliction? Might we read their Sephardic-Zionist zeal as a way of separating the Sephardic and Mediterranean collective from the other Orientals of Palestine, namely the Palestinian-Arab populations of Palestine?

To answer these questions, we must be reminded of the evolution of the Mizrahi category and the ways certain members of the Sephardic leadership used this term to differentiate their themselves from the other “authentic” residents of Palestine: the Palestinian-Arab. While “Sephardim” was used by the Sephardic entity to unify, or at least declare collective needs for “assimilation,” the term “Mizrahim” was to do the opposite. That is, “Mizrahim” is used to define the position of the subaltern, political powerlessness, a strategic maneuver of the weak.



Specific political shifts affected and, indeed, cultivated the essentializing projects that led to the emergence of Mizrahim as constructs of personal and collective self. In 1920, a few months after the enthusiastic declarations of the Sephardic leadership in favor of the Zionist national project, the fervor of the Sephardic leadership intensified. The first meeting of the First General Election took place on October 19, 1920. Despite the optimism of the Sephardic and Mediterranean delegates, when given the

opportunity to speak in the assembly, they publicly questioned their role within the Zionist project.²⁰⁶ “Why are *Bnei ha-Mizrah* not part of the immigration [to Eretz Yisrael]?” asked one of the Sephardic delegates. Ignoring the clamor his inquiries provoked, he persisted, “Are the Jews from the *Mizrah* [East] . . . Persia and Algeria not qualified enough for *Eretz Yisrael*? . . . There are many Sephardim—one million and a half of Mizrahim, [who could be] a healthy element for our [Jewish] community.”²⁰⁷ Growing national tensions caused them to feel excluded from the Zionist enterprise.²⁰⁸ This tension, colored with the great doubt, was suffused with suspicion toward their Zionist counterparts.

This suspicion was primarily due to the fact that the political significance of the Sephardic delegates in the Zionist project was limited to the minimum. When asked why these Sephardic figures had not joined the *Va'ad ha-Tzirim*, the head of the assembly, Menahem Ussishkin²⁰⁹ replied, “the Zionist Assembly wishes that its work in *Ha'arets* [*The land of Palestine*] will agree with those who know the Yishuv [the Jewish community] and speak on its behalf.” At the same time, Ussishkin categorized “those who know *Ha'arets* [*The land of Palestine*]” as those who were not officially elected. As such, he added, “they might participate in planning but will not take part in making decisions.”²¹⁰ Here, we must take note of the growing effects that this experience of being *outside*,²¹¹ of being a “minority within a minority,”

²⁰⁶ See, for one example, the speech of the Yemenite delegate, Zecharya Gelouska on “The Protocols of the First General Assembly, 07/10/1920, Meeting.” In the Central Zionist Archives 7203/1J: 3.

²⁰⁷ From the speech of Ben-Zion Yedidua, in the Protocols of the First General Assembly, 07/10/1920, Meeting.” In the Central Zionist Archives 7203/1J: 8.

²⁰⁸ The only two who were given entry into the Zionist organization were the two representatives of the General Assembly [*Va'ad Leumi*]. They were Meyuhas and Hayim Korliski.

²⁰⁹ Menahem (Avraham Mendel) Ussishkin (1863–1941) was born in Russia in 1863. As an advocate of Zionist ideology he was a member of the “Lovers of Zion” (*Hovevi Zion*), who insisted on abandoning of the Uganda plan. He immigrated to Palestine in 1919.

²¹⁰ From the early beginning, and in contrast to growing objections, Ussishkin did not want to allow members of the *Va'ad Leumi* to participate in the voting of *Va'ad ha-Tzirim*. See the protocols from November 13, 1921, The Central Zionist Archives, file S100/1b: 34.

²¹¹ One effect could be found with the emergence of the following doubts and questions: Do we exist merely because of our exclusion? If so, what proof do we have that we exist as a unified collective? When and how did we become a people? In what sense is there Mizrahi history, Mizrahi behavior, or a Mizrahi race? What do these

and of being excluded from the Zionist national project (either in terms of decision making or in policies of immigration) had on Sephardic and Mediterranean subjects. If by 1918, Mizrahim originated as a style and a culture, and then in 1919 as a sense of purity shared among the local inhabitants of Palestine, from the 1920s, a growing sense of exclusion dominated the meaning of the Mizrahi category. This *notion of exclusion* made the idea of Mizrahi with its purity as a source of demoralization and unification evident in the various national and communal anxieties in play in the emergence of the Mizrahi category.

Conclusion

Ultimately, two central goals directed this chapter: (1) the examination of the increasing amalgamation of Middle Eastern (Oriental) identities, cultures, and languages; and (2) the analysis of the amalgamation of Sephardi and Mediterranean interests as a pretext to forming a new ethnic political faction in the First General Assembly election in Palestine in 1918. This chapter answered some of the following questions: What resulted from the political consolidation of the varied Mediterranean communities? Why were they politicized in the first place? To what extent did this unification and politicization hinge on the continuous self-alteration – either semantically, historically, or thematically – of Sephardim and Mizrahim? Might we read what some saw as Sephardic “confusion”²¹² as a conscious and strategic act of epistemic reconfiguration, fabrication of self, or even as a falsification? What is the relation between the formation of each aspect Mizrahim as a category of epistemic, culture and community? How was each dimension of the concepts of Sephardim and Mizrahim practically used and then utilized as a tool? What purposes did this tool achieve? And in what ways was this multifunctional

questions have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others? Attempts were made to answer such daunting questions through the rewriting of Mizrahi histories and cultures or by classifying and counting their own bodies–Mizrahi bodies–and by arguing for distinct Mizrahi racial, historical, and cultural experience.

²¹² By “confusion,” I allude to the pioneering work of Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue claiming that as a result of “confusion” the meaning of Sephardim became an inclusive term to “All Jews born in Muslim countries are now called Sephardim” (Benbassa and Rodrigue 2000: 194–5). According to Benbassa and Rodrigue, the “proper application” of the term Sephardim refers solely to “Jews originating from the Iberian Peninsula [Southern Europe including Spain and Portugal]” (194).

construction of Mizrahim a way of obtaining legitimacy within the growing national-Zionist project? Why was their legitimacy questioned in the first place? And to what degree was their particular undertaking of the category of Mizrahim epistemic a manipulation, or even an appropriation, attempting to instill a hierarchical ranking in the Yishuv and the larger Palestinian population?

Indeed, some of these questions were discussed in this chapter, primarily in order to contextualize the emergence of the Sephardic-Mizrahi category and other plaintive cravings that express personal and public desires for individual, communal, or national stability in the Yishuv's public discourse. At the same time, I illustrated how these ideas pushed to sharp relief notions of belongingness to some kind of nostalgic vision of Palestine that was constantly disappearing, reappearing, and ever-fleeting. I did so by analyzing multiple discursive narratives of an entity named "Sephardim" in addition to discussing how ideas about Sephardim came to be, and later emerged as a way through which a new collective identified its religious traditions, its histories, and its political stance.

Moreover, it becomes clearer that the Sephardim category was inverted and subverted for political reasons by the Sephardic leaders, but not only limited to them only as they *idealized*, and at other times *devalued*, its religious, cultural, and historical bearings. As a term, "Sephardim" became a way for the diversified Mediterranean and Sephardic leadership to define the undefined, to stabilize the destabilized, and to batter down what remained in constant movement. But, for them, it also became an intersection of different categories, modes of consciousness, and conflating realities, which did not necessarily adhere to binaries such as Zionist/anti-Zionist, Europeans/Orientals, natives/immigrants, religious/secular, etc. Still, we must be reminded that in this historical moment, multiple Sephardic identities emerged, at times overlapping, at times contradicting, and at others splintering; some highlight historical and religious value; some come to identify the politically powerless and economically deprived; some emphasize a more porous nationalism in terms of the Palestinian-Arab population of the Jewish national project and, thus, opened up to other categories of identity; and for others Sephardim stood for indigeneity shared among the "authentic" residents of Eretz Yisrael and their Palestinian-Arab population.

What allowed this leadership to borrow the nineteenth-century *Haskalah* notion of Sephardism to constitute a revitalized notion of Sephardic selves, and thereby to deploy the name of a specific ethnicity with particular historical myths beyond a reference to a place or a historical narrative, was a conscious intention to gain political agency and to keep the national engine running smoothly. It is important to underline, however, that “Sephardim” was also used by various Zionists to enunciate an “authentic” yet stagnant Hebraic culture and society in Palestine. What is at issue here, therefore, is that against this backdrop, the Sephardic and Mediterranean leadership made the idea of Sephardim a reality and a consciousness that were constantly pendulous, swaying without (or beyond) a clear semantic construction, oscillating between multi-faceted political, economic, epistemic, and ethical consequences arising from the conflation of various Middle Eastern identities.

After a few preliminary attempts to unify the infused Sephardic and Mizrahi categories, as I illustrated above, their unified vision materialized, not without doubt or resistance, to deploy “Sephardim-Mizrahim” to name their Middle Eastern collective. But even more importantly, as I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the idea of indigeneity appeared central among the rapidly growing Sephardic institutions and publications that undergirded the consolidation of the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc in Palestine. These, I argue in Chapter 2, shaped the shifting perceptions and standardization of Sephardim and Mizrahim.

More Mizrahi Than Thou:

The Politics of Palestinian Nativity, 1921–1923

Between 1919 and 1923, hundreds of residents of the Yishuv became actively involved in numerous, often conflicting, political aspirations. During this four-year period, a Sephardic-Mizrahi political consciousness emerged, and a growing number of Sephardic-Mizrahi institutions were established, including the journal *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [*East and West*] and the political organization *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*]. Three Sephardic-Mizrahi activists based in Jerusalem played a key role in institutionalizing and standardizing the fused definition of “Sephardim-Mizrahim” in the popular discourse of the Yishuv. They were Joseph Meyuhas (1868–1942), Abraham Elmaliah (1885–1967), and Moshe David Gaon (1889–1958). This Sephardic-Mizrahi trio, I demonstrate in this chapter, played a central role in turning a porous Sephardic-Mizrahi idea into a standard ethnic category extensively used in bureaucratic and social discourse.

I focus on this Sephardic-Mizrahi trio—two folklorists and one bureaucrat—and their attempts to expose how a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity was associated with what Yael Zerubavel termed “native Jewish identity.”²¹³ I explore how the concept of Sephardim-Mizrahim was

²¹³ Zerubavel, among other scholars, analyses the “revival of a native Jewish identity” in the Yishuv (Zerubavel 2002: 117). In exploring the historical processes that led to this “revival” she examines the emergence of a new native Jewish man, also known as the “New Jew,” and “Sabra.” For Zerubavel, “the mythological Sabra” (a term originally coined by Amnon Rubenstein, *To Be a Free People* (Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1977, 101–39 [H])) is the product of European-Jewish thought and immigration to Palestine-Israel. The Sephardic-Mizrahi community, 50 percent of the Jewish population in 1918, had no role in shaping (or even resisting) the image the new Jewish man. To extend her cogent contribution, I argue that in the case of Sephardic-Mizrahi inhabitants of Palestine, we ought to

recognized equally during the 1920s, but was subjectively understood in three intersecting ways. The first was marked by the fact that Sephardic-Mizrahi subjectivity was exclusively defined vis-à-vis Palestinian-Arab identity. The second emphasized the cultural particularity of a “Mizrahi element.”²¹⁴ These first two produced a sense of Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewish superiority over neighboring Arab communities. The third mode was based on statistics and demographic studies that identified a Sephardic-Mizrahi ethnic group identity in the Yishuv.

To reveal how Sephardic-Mizrahi identity became exclusively identified with Palestinian nativity between 1919 and 1923, I examine the writing of the above-mentioned Sephardic-Mizrahi trio. Folklorist and educator Meyuhas was a Sephardic leader of the veteran Jewish community in Palestine (known as the Old Yishuv) who wrote extensively about the indigenous Palestinian-Arab peasantry. Elmaliah, one of the most vocal public leaders of the emerging Sephardi coalition, was editor and founder of the Sephardic affiliated quarterly, *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [East and West]. Lastly, Gaon was the architect of numerous demographic studies, including the first “Mizrahi census,” and studies on the exclusive history of the Sephardic-Mizrahi community in Palestine. As prominent leaders of the Sephardic-Mizrahi faction, this trio associated Sephardic-Mizrahi identity primarily with Palestine.

pay attention to their reclaiming, recognition, and performance of nativity. On the relationship between nativity and the emergence of the new Jewish man, see Yael Zerubavel, “The ‘Mythological Sabra’ and Jewish Past: Trauma, Memory, and Contested Identities.” *Israel Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (Summer, 2002), 115–144; Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000); Avraham Shapira, “On the Spiritual Rootlessness and Circumscription to the ‘Here and Now’ in the Sabra World View,” in Dan Urian and Ephraim Karsh, eds. *In Search of Identity: Jewish Aspects in Israeli Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 103–131. On the intersection of gender and racial implications in the creation of the Jewish new man see Todd Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Rina Peled, *The New Man of the Zionist Revolution* (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 2002) [H].

²¹⁴ Ze’ev Jabotinsky, “The Jews of the East” [*Yehudi ha-Mizrah*]. In *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [East and West], Vol.1: 59-61.

By “Palestinian nativity,” I emphasize the significance of national belonging in the production of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity and thus its alignment with the Zionist project. Reminded of Anthony Appiah’s cogent understanding of “identification” as the culmination of individual choices that shapes one’s life,²¹⁵ I examine “the politics of recognition” palpable in the works of Meyuhas, Elmaliah, and Gaon.²¹⁶ I illuminate how the category of Sephardim-Mizrahim was used by leaders to claim entitlement (what are your rights in the national project?), belonging (what political/ethnic group do you belong to?), and knowledge of Palestine, including its geography, history, and people (either of Jews or Arabs).

“I am a Palestinian”: The Works of Yosef Baran Meyuhas

Yosef Baran Meyuhas (ben Rahamin Natan) was a man proud of the Sephardic past of his people in Palestine. Born in 1868 in Jerusalem, Meyuhas was raised in a religious Sephardic family, a descendant of a rabbinical lineage that had begun in the early nineteenth century.²¹⁷ Like many of his generation, Meyuhas attended the France-based global educational organization *Alliance Israélite Universelle* [*All Israel are Friends*], which was found in 1860 to “educate,”

²¹⁵ Exploring the social effects of racial labels, Appiah uses “identification” to explain “the process through which an individual intentionally shapes her projects—including her plans for her own life and her conception of good—by reference to available labels, available identities” (2009: 670). Taking into consideration that one is not born Sephardic or Mizrahi, including the fact that these terms gained popularity only in the first twenty years of the twentieth-century (see chapter 1), my challenge is to identify the historical context and personal strategies that promoted the claiming and the different uses of Sephardim-Mizrahim. See Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Racial Identity and Racial Identification.” In *Theories of Race and Racism*, edited by Les Back and John Solomos, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 669–678.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 676.

²¹⁷ Moshe David Gaon, *Mizrahi Jews in Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Self-published 1928).

“regenerate,” and “emancipate” Jewish communities “far removed from European civilization.”²¹⁸

From his early teens, Zionist ideology was central in shaping his identity and education.²¹⁹ Meyuhas’s family was among the first to follow Eliezer Ben-Yehuda’s example of “Jewish culture” for the Jewish residents of Palestine by speaking Hebrew in addition to French, English, and Arabic. Meyuhas’s education earned him various teaching and political positions. He was an Arabic and Hebrew instructor in various schools and was appointed headmaster of the Ezra Teachers Seminary and the municipal school for boys in 1884. Meyuhas’s teaching career was complemented by his influential leadership in the Jewish community under the Ottoman rule and in the Jerusalemite Sephardic Federation between 1918 and the late-1930s.²²⁰ Meyuhas also had a key role in Jewish civic life, acting as president of the city council of Jews in Jerusalem from 1920 to 1931.

The fact that Meyuhas carried his Sephardic past with him like a trophy at every political stage of his life says a great deal about the meaning applied to this label by the old and new

²¹⁸ Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israelite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey 1860-1925 (The Modern Jewish Experience)*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), Introduction, 6. On the teachers of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, see Aron Rodrigue, *Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition: The Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, 1860-1939* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).

²¹⁹ A growing number of studies focus on the cultural and linguistic aspects of the Zionist movement in the Jewish community of Palestine of the early twentieth century. These studies, however, focus primarily on Zionist-European immigrants and do not capture the complex character of the Jewish community of Palestine, including the Sephardic-Mizrahi community. See Saposnik 2006, 2008; Halperin 2010, 2011.

²²⁰ It is important to note that Meyuhas was also one of the first Eretz Yisraeli Sephardim to marry an Ashkenazi wife, Margalit Pines, the daughter of Y. M. Pines (the other son-in-law of Pines was David Yellin). Rabbi Yehiel Michael Pines (1824–1912) was a writer, thinker, and an early advocate of religious Zionism in old and new Yishuv period. Born in Ruzhany, Belorussia, Pines arrived to Palestine in 1878 on behalf the Moses Montefiore sponsorship. He was a passionate exponent of the Hebrew language and as such edited multiple papers such as *Ha-Zevi* (1886) and *Ha-Havazzelet* (1892). Meyuhas’s marriage to Margalit was considered to be a “meddle in the divided Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities,” and as such, helped to “promote the understanding between the two communities.” In the editorial [author is anonymous], “Yosef Baran Meyuhas.” In *Mizrah u-Ma’arav [East and West]*. Vol. 2, No. 2, 1918: 14.

residents of the Yishuv. In his writings, Meyuhas stressed the fact that he was part of “the first Sephardic family to move outside the old city of Jerusalem.”²²¹ Additionally, he revealed his father to be “the first man of nature among the Sephardim.”²²² As a matter of fact, it would not be wrong to say that Meyuhas boasted of his longstanding Sephardic historical roots in Palestine and with its Arabic residents to present himself as native to Palestine-Israel.²²³ His emphasis on being the “first” especially grants him particular authority over biblical and Palestinian matters.²²⁴ This Sephardic heritage and his established class background entitled Meyuhas to certain social privileges and communal responsibilities. What is more, it enabled Meyuhas to represent himself as an “expert” on Sephardic and Palestinian matters. From the 1910s, Meyuhas contributed to the Hebrew and Ladino press on matters of culture, folklore, education, and literature.

But being Sephardic was not the only way Meyuhas recognized his identity. Meyuhas’s testimonies concealed two levels of understandings: presenting himself as a Palestinian and then as Sephardic. His Sephardic-Palestinian claims implied the issue of purity to the Palestinian context, and explain why the question of purity was at the center of his accounts. Depending on political and personal factors, Meyuhas identified as Palestinian or Sephardic, or claimed both simultaneously.

²²¹ Meyuhas 1918; 1937: 5.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ On purity and nativity paramount to the colonial context, see Parama Roy, *Indian Traffic*, (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1998); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge 1994); Stuart Hall, “When Was the ‘Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit.” In *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1996). Roy pointed out the problematic meaning of “native” as a concept; I nonetheless use the term here as it reflects the views of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders.

²²⁴ Meyuhas 1937: 5.

This strategic use of Sephardic-Palestinian identification was evident when Meyuhas acted as the representative of the Sephardi community in Jerusalem for the King-Crane Commission that took place between June to August 1919.²²⁵ In his testimony, Meyuhas claimed his indigenous status to mark his identity in relation to history, power, and class. He saw himself part of an inclusive Jewish and Arab indigenous collective of Palestine:

I am a Palestinian, born here and the son of a family who have lived here for 250 years. I know all the categories of the inhabitants in the land, the villagers, as well as the townsmen. Many of the Arab townsmen learned Arabic with me; I have been through my long teaching of the Arabic language in close relations with the Arabs, and I can bear witness with a full knowledge of the situation . . . there are many points of junction between Arabs and Jews.²²⁶

Meyuhas fully embraced the Palestinian category to essentialize and unify the Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine. It was important for him to notify his listeners that he was capable of “bear[ing] witness” to the full Palestinian experience. His claim had a strong political edge, stressing the inclusive and shared aspect of the Palestinian population beyond religious, national, or ethnic demarcations. He used this essentialized apprehension of Palestinian identity to separate the unified Palestinian population from the Zionist-European immigrants. In contrast to the Western-British members participating in the Commission and the Zionist-European immigrants, Meyuhas strategically deployed his “Palestinian” background to highlight his long historical connection to the land. In his own eyes, his deep roots validated his role as an “expert” on all things Palestinian.

²²⁵ The King-Crane Commission was the American Inter-Allied Commission on Mandates in Turkey, which visited Palestine and Syria, as well as other former territories of the Ottoman Empire, between June and August 1919. Its mission was to determine the wishes of the inhabitants as to a future mandatory power in the region. Two Americans headed the Commission: Charles Crane and Henry King. As part of its investigation in Palestine, the Commission met various delegations that represented different ethnic, religious, and national groups in the country.

²²⁶ “The Representative of the Sephardim before the American Commission of Inquiry,” CZA, L3/426.

Moreover, Meyuhas's Sephardic identity also signaled a sense of privileged indigenous character that was used to distinguish Palestinian-Jews from the Palestinian-Arab. As Mehuhas went on with his testimony to the commission, his Palestinian identity intersected with class factors that differentiated Palestinian-Jews from the other Palestinian inhabitants. Although "Palestinian," Meyuhas presented himself not only as a Palestinian, but put on his "Sephardic" mask to reposition his role in colonial Palestine. His words suggest the emergence of Sephardic identity as an "advanced" breed of the indigenous inhabitant of Palestine:

The Sephardim, the old local element, will serve as a link between the Arabs and the newcomers. And is there a better instrument of entente than the knowledge of the reciprocal languages? We are now walking on this path of entente.²²⁷

Meyuhas used the category of "Sephardim" to separate himself and his community from the Palestinian-Arab category. The impact of this shift in focus, deploying "Sephardim" rather than "Palestinian," deferred to a hierarchy of those who were capable to serving as a link (Sephardim) and those who needed to be linked (Arabs). Meyuhas's emphasis on "the old and local element"²²⁸ to present his Sephardic identity exposes the strategic use of Palestinian "native-ness" in constructing a hierarchy of Palestinian communities and cultures. The same hierarchy meant the fortification of purity to claim the role of Sephardim as translators of Palestinian-Arab culture and customs. On the other hand, it implied the subjugation of "things indigenous" and presenting them as elements that cannot stand on their own but must be constantly translated, mediated, and deciphered.



²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

Although not associated with major academic or research institutions, by using his indigenous knowledge, Meyuhas became an authority on Sephardi and Arabic folklore, Oriental communities, the Arabs of Palestine, and the history of the Jews in Palestine. Meyuhas's affinity for things "indigenous" in the Palestinian context was also present in his folkloric works, such as *From the Life of the Residents in Eretz-Yisrael* (1918), *Biblical Tales in Arab Folklore* (1928), and *Fellahim*, (in Arabic *fallâhîn*; *fallâh* in singular, literally, Arabic Peasantry) (1937). At the heart of Meyuhas' folkloristic studies of the Orient, which were published in 1918 and then republished throughout the 1930s and 1940s, was a thorough examination of the practices, folktales, and habits of the residents of Palestine. For him, the Palestinian-Arab population constituted the "pure" residents of the area, and as such they emerged as the primary object of his investigation. So profound was the effect of his works that they were published both in English and Hebrew, in both England and Palestine, respectively. He drew attention to this mystifying and enigmatic population of "living fossils," asserting that "antiques are a dead matter, while *Fellahim* [Arabic peasantry] are a living matter."²²⁹

Unlike early examinations of inhabitants of Palestine by European-Zionist between 1917 and 1921, including David Ben-Gurion's 1917 study of "pure Arabs,"²³⁰ Meyuhas took advantage of his self-serving notion of Sephardic purity to conduct a folkloric research of the Palestinian-Arab, focusing on the Arabic population of Palestine. Meyuhas observed their lives, crafts, kinship, material culture, dress, and architecture.

²²⁹ Joseph Meyuhas, *Fellahim* (Tel Aviv, Palestine: Dvir Publication, 1937), 6.

²³⁰ Like Meyuhas, Ben-Gurion also emphasized the notion of "purity" when describing the Palestinian-Arab residents of Palestine: "By origin and race they are all one unit without any foreign elements mixed into them." David Ben-Gurion, "For a Clarification of the Origin of the Fellahin." In *Our Neighbors and Us*, 13 [H] Translated in Eyal 2008: 42–45. See also Zerubavel 2008.

In his examination of *Fellahim*, he emphasized their “overcrowded” lodgings,²³¹ “dull” belongings,²³² and “unadorned” costumes.²³³ Similarly, their unhygienic surrounding appeared to be the reason why “from their early childhood newly born *Fellahim* are tortured by flies and other insects.”²³⁴ In describing the poor hygienic environment of the newborn *Fellahim*, Meyuhas paid particular attention to their malnutrition and filthy milieu. The undeveloped *Fellah* medicine and remedies did not seem to improve the increasing number of maladies that attacked the younger *Fellahim*, who, like his parents, “did not acknowledge the value of water and soap to his health.”²³⁵ As a result, “the faces of the [Fellah] babies remain covered with dirt and mud,” to the point that “flies cover their faces, nostrils and eyes.”²³⁶ The *Fellah* child, according to Meyuhas, gradually got used to his/her condition, “he stops crying,” and continually suffers from “eye infection that [would later] lead to his blindness,”²³⁷ implying that every *Fellah* child went blind eventually. Meyuhas described at length the “burdensome” labor of the Arabic women,²³⁸ their endless duties and victimization at the hands of an oppressive ideology.²³⁹ But Arabic peasantry was not portrayed merely as a crowd of violent brutes. Members of the Arab peasantry also appeared alluring and exotic, particularly when Meyuhas explored their folk-tales and superstitious rituals.

²³¹ Joseph Meyuhas, *From the Life of the Residents in Eretz-Yisrael* (Jaffa: Wiesel Print in Cairo, 1918), 5–9.

²³² *Ibid.*, 10–12.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 76–77.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 29–44.

Emphasis on “the rich oral culture” of the *Fellahim* allowed Meyuhas to be viewed not merely as an “expert” who located ailments in the Fella’h’s body and environment. Instead, he was a man of discoveries. As he maintained: “one of the richest people in the world in their fables and tales are the Arabic people.”²⁴⁰ His ability to penetrate the corporeal and spot “rich culture” among “the Arabic people,”²⁴¹ gave evidence to his appearance of intellectual virtuoso, as well as his deep knowledge of the *Fellahim*. Such mastery allowed Meyuhas to assert that analyzing the fables and tales of those “Mizrahi People,” one can better learn “about the cultural level and views of the [Arabic] people.”²⁴²

This interest with Arab peasantry, including their hygiene, habits, tales, rituals, and myths, went hand-in-hand with his recollections of his own childhood years. In his writing, the Arabic peasantry is portrayed as a prototype of innocence and purity. It was during this nostalgic childhood time, when Meyuhas “used to visit” his friends: “Muhamad, Fatama, Ali, and Hidgeah.”²⁴³ He “ate of their bread.”²⁴⁴ He “drank from their waters” and stayed at their marketplaces and their homes.²⁴⁵ Years later, Meyuhas savored these encounters: “up to this day I love them [those days].”²⁴⁶ Arabic peasantry, then, became a permanent component of an idyllically remembered childhood, associated with his “memories of the good childhood” and his

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 125.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid., 125–126.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., preface 5–6.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Meyuhas 1937: 6.

private idea of “the more natural and simplest days.”²⁴⁷ More importantly, Arabic peasantry stood in for an ephemeral historical and political climate, a nostalgic world that did not last.

Meyuhas’s work, particularly *From the Life of the Residents of Eretz Yisrael* (1918) [*Me’have ha-Ezrahim be Eretz Yisrael*], posited double if not multiple meanings in understanding nativity. On the one hand, there was the author, Meyuhas: A Sephardi Jew who considered himself a native of Palestine, and thus a Palestinian. To him, it was his Sephardic indigenous status that gave him not only the right but also the intimate knowledge to study, define, and become the mouthpiece for the other residents of Palestine, such as the *Fellahim*.

On the other hand, however, there were the objects of Meyuhas’s study: the *Fellahim* themselves. Meyuhas gave them voice. Or, as he declared in the preface of his investigation, “The central object of my book is to introduce my readers with *The life of the residents in Eretz Yisrael* as they are without doubt or ambiguity.”²⁴⁸ As such, Meyuhas presented himself as an “Orientalist” par excellence, hinting at the dependence of Palestinian-Arab population on the work of the scholar, scientist, and Islamist, to push *Fellahim* histories and cultural practices to the fore. But then again, one must raise the question: Why did Meyuhas not focus on the life of the Sephardic community? Or to put it differently, what made him actually differentiate one indigenous population from another? It must be remembered that Meyuhas’s scholarly scrutiny of *Fellahim* was in service for redefining or ignoring his own Sephardic identity.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Meyuhas 1918: 3.

The Politics of Palestinian Indigeneity

Responses to these questions appeared in Meyuhas's rhetoric and in his reference to the Palestinian-Arab as the indigenous inhabitants of Palestine. In discussing why he wished readers to "be familiar with the life of the Arabs in *Eretz Yisrael*,"²⁴⁹ Meyuhas revealed how his "realistic and concrete" interest had actually a greater historical aim.²⁵⁰ Additionally, he highlighted why Jews might find *Fellahim* valuable, as if a whole community could contain a single meaning, asserting that they "could be used as an animated translation to our enlivened book, the old testament."²⁵¹ For him, *Fellahim* remained undeveloped since biblical times. Arguing that the *Fellahim* would "Europeanize" in the very near future,²⁵² especially with the increasing immigration of European-Jewish immigrants to the Yishuv, Meyuhas explained how timely and pressing his project was.

The stagnant, undeveloped, and biblical-like life of the *Fellahim* became the prototype of the Semite, whether Jewish or non-Jewish. This reference to the biblical Semite was used as a way to construct a romantic, authentic, and idyllic Arabic-Palestinian population. Thus, the correlation of purity and stagnation enabled Meyuhas to read the biblical tales of antiquity through an Orientalist investigation of the lives of Palestinian-Arab.

Biblical reference, however, was a coded tactic to assert the inferior status of the Palestinian-Arab in contrast to the Palestinian-Jew and the Jewish community as a whole. That did not mean that the Palestinian-Arab population was of no sentimental value or intellectual

²⁴⁹ Ibid., in Preface 9.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Meyuhas 1918: in Preface 12–13; Meyuhas 1928: in Preface 1–2.

²⁵² Meyuhas 1918: in Preface 13.

importance to Meyuhas. He viewed them as the old and undeveloped biblical Hebrews. Meyuhas associated them with the “most plain and obvious tales of the forefathers, for they [these tales] are straightforward, they are in need of *pirhus hay* [material translation] from the life of the *Fellahim*.”²⁵³ Another way to read Palestinian-Arabic “nativeness” was as an undeveloped, and thus inferior caste, so to speak, which constantly needed moderators such as Meyuhas, who were preoccupied with deciphering, studying, and controlling them. Or, better still, Palestinian “nativeness” came into view as an Oriental foil that reflected the image of the Jewish antiquity that only experts such as Meyuhas were able to decipher. This act of imagination that included the projection (or re-projection) of nativity was deeply suffused with power and racial differentials.

In that sense it is important to read Meyuhas’s work side by side with the work of other Jewish intellectuals with their distinct and separate constructions of Sephardi and Mediterranean Jews as the paragon Jewish-Semitic authenticity. Meyuhas deployed similar Orientalist language and tropes to demarcate the lives of the “biblical” Palestinian-Arab population as those used by European-Jewish social scientists, including Erich Baruer (1918) or members of the Betzalel School, to describe the Sephardic-Mizrahi community. In so doing, apart from dividing Palestinian-Sephardim from Palestinian-Arabs, he projected of a sense embedded inferiority into the latter. This process of “Orientalization” enabled the understanding of Sephardim beyond the rubric of the stagnant and undeveloped Semite.²⁵⁴ The centrality of knowledge production in redefining Sephardim is evident here—as if were saying, “we [Sephardim] know them [Arabs] and our knowledge of them differentiates us from them.”

²⁵³ Ibid., 5–6.

²⁵⁴ Aziza Khazzoom, “The Great Chain of Orientalism.” *American Sociological Review* 68(2003): 481–511.

Moreover, Meyuhas's work says a great deal about his motivation in questioning indigenous provenance in the Palestinian context in the first place. Understanding what foreshadowed Meyuhas's ambition to study of the *Fellahim* demands a closer look at the sources that inspired his folkloristic project. His investigation was mainly informed by two sources: his memories and observations, as well as the works of a number of British and German Orientalists, including that of the renowned German theologian, Gustaf Hermann Dalmann, who wrote *Palaestinensischer Diwan* [Palestinian Folklore] (1901); the British Orientalist Rev. G. Robinson Lee, author of *Village Life in Palestine* (1905); and Colonel Rev. Charles Thomas Wilson, who penned *Peasant Life in the "Holy Land"* (1906).

Meyuhas agreed with these Orientalists that the Palestinian-Arab *Fellahim* were undeveloped mentally and physically stagnant. He concurred with Wilson's claims, for example, that the study of *Fellahim*, described as the "descendants of the pagan," revealed "the cradle of our holy religion,"²⁵⁵ and illuminated, "the manners and customs which obtained there [the holy land] in olden days."²⁵⁶ Additionally, Meyuhas adopted Wilson's hypothesis that "[t]o the *Fellahim* (or peasants of Palestine) it is to whom we must chiefly go to-day to elucidate those [ancient] manners and customs, and not to the Jews."²⁵⁷ Meyuhas quoted Wilson as stating that Jews "are, for the most part, strangers in their own land, immigrants from Europe or other continents, who bring with them the tongue, garb, and ideas of the countries where they have been domiciled."²⁵⁸ Meyuhas, however, disputed Wilson's claim that considered Palestinian-Arabs as the only native inhabitants of Palestine. Meyuhas maintained that the Palestinian-Arabs

²⁵⁵ Charles Thomas Wilson, *Peasant Life in the Holy Land* (London: J. Murray, 1906), 2.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Meyuhas 1937: 8.

were transitory inhabitants of the land. Indeed, he extended Wilson's assertion and called for a hurried examination of Arabic peasantry before the latter could "Europeanize" [*yitarpu*],²⁵⁹ a process that would blur their biblical authentic origin. But, in fact, Meyuhas disallowed Palestinian-Arabs claims of belonging to Palestine.

Paradoxically, Meyuhas's Sephardic identity was informed by using a contradictory framework of nativity. To differentiate between the Jewish and the Arab indigenous inhabitants of Palestine, Sephardim presented themselves as a progressive group in contrast to the perpetual backwardness of the Palestinian-Arab population. Additionally, Sephardi claims to indigenous knowledge of Palestine staked their own territory in opposition to the European Jewish immigrants to Palestine. While putting Arabic peasantry on the pedestal of the biblical Semite, unchanged yet authentic, intellectually stagnant yet rooted in a long-established tradition, Meyuhas consciously chose to claim Arabic peasantry to be "carriers of tradition," to use Amnon Raz Krakotzkin's argument.²⁶⁰

Meyuhas, however, held such ambivalent understanding of his indigenous identity for multiple reasons. Aside from Orientalizing and idealizing the Semite, he pushed to the fore a bold critique of the growing Jewish community in Palestine. He wrote:

And here is the place to comment on one general inadequacy that prevails among us, variety of Jews, in relation to the land and as we make our way to settle here. We do our utter best to live our Jewish life here [in Palestine] without being considerate enough with the residents that live in the land [*hayi ha-ezrahim hayium be'toacha*] . . . with all the qualities we have enriched

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "The Zionist Return to the West and the Mizrahi Jewish Perspective." *Orientalism and the Jews*, eds., Ivan Davidson Klammer and Derek Penslar (London University Press of New England, 2005), 162–181.

ourselves while being in exile, at the same time we have claimed many habits and values that carry the stamp of exile, and which truly keep us far from our Jewish – Mizrahi characteristics [*misgulatenu ha-Yehudiuot ha-Mizrahiuot*].²⁶¹

“Mizrahi,” then, for Meyuhas, became as means to measure authenticity not only in relation to the residents of Palestine, the Semite Arab peasantry population, but also concerning the pure origins of the Jewish culture and tradition that went beyond Palestine. Here, he uses “Mizrahim” to emphasize the relationship between geographical nativity and religious authenticity. He represents himself not only as an expert on Palestinian matters (space and population), but also establishes himself as a religious authority, recognizing the right path of the Jewish tradition and the life of the Yishuv. Meyuhas, moreover, had a clear idea about the ways the Jewish community of the Yishuv might restore and retrieve a pure Mizrahi sense of the Jewish culture:

And we may return and reclaim these [Mizrahi and Jewish] characteristics by approaching the residents of the land from all time and by examining them and their values. It is only by this that we might reconnect the new with the old, the beneficial Occident with the good Orient [*ha-tov ha-Mizrahi*], and what we inherited from outside with that is owned to us from within.²⁶²

The Arab and the Mizrahi Jew, according to him, shared the same traditional roots, and thus appeared to be part of the so-called Mizrahi culture.²⁶³ If Palestinian-Arab were the biblical representations of humanity, Mizrahim then appeared as modern archetypes of biblical purity. As conflicting national aspirations among the Jewish and the Arab population from the late-1910s to the mid-1920s, the division between the two populations deepened. What is of greater

²⁶¹ Meyuhas 1937: 15.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Note that it took seven years from the first publication of Meyuhas for the division in the Yishuv between Oriental and Jewish studies to become a fixed schism, primarily with the inception of the School of Oriental Studies within the newly built the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1924). See Anidjar 2008; Myers 1995.

importance is the effect of this national schism on other Sephardic-Mizrahi writers and the ways they negotiated their Mizrahi identity, among a number of competing political and cultural affiliations.

Journalist and activist Abraham Elmaliah, for example, transformed the notion of Sephardi-Mizrahi from a category that emphasized geography to a definition of distinct culture. This shift and construction of Mizrahi imagination was also an attempt to distinguish Sephardim-Mizrahim for their inherited and particular internal world. In other words, place of origin would become a signifier of culture that marked all the inhabitants of Palestine in a way that it had not previously.

Abraham Elmaliah and the “Mizrahi-element”

In an effort to provide an understanding of the leverage and stature of Elmaliah’s work, I must first put forward a brief summary of his publications. As a prolific journalist, scholar, and editor, Elmaliah presented his opinions on various platforms popular among the Jewish community. He was a regular contributor to the Israeli weekly *ha-Haskafa* [*Outlook*] (1897–1908), the founder and editor in chief of the daily *Ha-Herut* [*Freedom*] (1909–1910), served on the editorial board of *Do’ar Ha-Yom* (1919–1936) [*The Palestinian Daily*], and edited the magazine *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [*East and West*] (1918–1932). In addition to publishing popular works on the history of Palestine and Syria during the First World War and on Oriental, Syrian and Salonikian Jewry, including his ten-volume overview focusing on the Jewish community of Palestine, from 1910 to 1918, Elmaliah translated many works of fiction such as A. H. Navon’s *Yosef Peretz: A Novel from the Mizrahi Ghetto* (Elmaliah Abraham 1926).

Abraham Elmaliah was the most vocal and passionate spokesman of the Sephardi community from the early-1910s to the early-1950s. He was a key member in shaping the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition in the 1920s. The reasons and motivations that led Elmaliah to claim Sephardic-Mizrahi identity were particularly interesting, considering his shifting understanding of these terms. Like Meyuhas, Elmaliah was a Sephardi and not (only) a Sephardi, at the same time.

Born in Jerusalem to a Maghrebi family in 1885, Elmaliah first received rabbinic education at a religious institution in the Old City of Jerusalem. Then, like Meyuhas, he attended the Jerusalemite Alliance School and became fluent in Hebrew, Arabic, and French. Trained as a journalist and educator, during his early career he served as an Arabic and Hebrew teacher. As an adult, Elmaliah had a number of educational positions, but political activity appeared to be his central vocation. As early as 1903, he established *Tze'irei Yerushalayim* [Jerusalem Youth] in order to spread Hebrew education across the city.²⁶⁴ In 1916, his activity on behalf of the Zionist enterprise led to his expulsion to Damascus. His passionate support for the Hebrew and Arabic languages reflected his investment in editing the following dictionaries: Hebrew-French (1923, 1925, 1947), French-Hebrew (1935, and eight other editions), Hebrew-Arabic (1929), Arabic-Hebrew (1930), and Hebrew-French dictionary in five volumes (1950–1957).

Throughout his many books and articles published in numerous newspapers, Elmaliah presented himself as a Sephardic subject. He was one of the influential leaders of Sephardic organizations and publications during three major political shifts: the Ottoman rule, the British Mandate, and the emergence of the Israeli state. And he was also a man who held competing

²⁶⁴ Michelle U. Campos, “Between “Beloved Ottomania” And “The Land of Israel”: The Struggle over Ottomanism and Zionism among Palestine's Sephardi Jews, 1908-13.” *Middle East Studies* 37 (2005): 461–483.

personal and public identities, oscillating between opposing political identities and views, and supporting multiple Sephardic and Mizrahi organizations. While Elmaliah was a representative of the Sephardi organization, he was also the head of the Ma'aravi community. This alone compelled him to slip in and out of opinions and allegiances.

Like Meyuhas, Elmaliah used Sephardism strategically to claim multiple (and even contradicting) political allegiances. But unlike Meyuhas, who expanded notions of Sephardism to accentuate aspects of his identity and history apart from Ashkenazi Jewry, Elmaliah “became” Sephardic when he wished to claim his Zionist roots. Simultaneously, Elmaliah declared himself Mizrahi when he wished to unify Mediterranean Jews in order to advance his political agenda.

His political passions, moreover, suggested equal support for both the Arabic and Jewish residents of Palestine. A co-founder of *ha-Magen* [The Shield], a Sephardic initiative to defend the Zionist project of Palestine during the early 1910s, Elmaliah offered a more inclusive vision of both Jews and Arabs, speaking of their shared rights to work “their homeland and ours.”²⁶⁵ In thinking about the Zionist project, in 1909 Elmaliah stated, “The Zionists do not want to overcome or to conquer,” they were merely “searching for a shawl, a coat, a place for rest.”²⁶⁶ Nine years later (1918), however, as an editor of *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [East and West], he called for a “national awakening” among Sephardim-Mizrahim and the deployment of the Hebrew language in place of Arabic, Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), or French.²⁶⁷ Analyzing the various publications of this journal will throw light not only on Elmaliah’s shifting allegiances, but also

²⁶⁵ Tel-Aviv Municipal Archive (TAMA), file 8, folder 729. See also: Campos, Michelle. “Between Beloved Ottomania” and “The Land of Israel”: The Struggle Over Ottomanism and Zionism among Palestine’s Sephardi Jews, 1908–1913.” *Middle East Studies* 37: 461–483.

²⁶⁶ *El Liberal*, February 5, 1909.

²⁶⁷ *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* 1918: 5–8.

on his movement in and out of categories of belongingness. More importantly, it will illuminate the extent to which “Mizrahim” and “Sephardim” were used as categories that coalesce similar cultural otherness.

Cultural Demarcations of Sephardim-Mizrahim

Founded and single-handedly edited by Elmaliah, *Mizrah u-Ma'arav [East and West]* was perhaps among his greatest and most influential literary achievements. Elmaliah used the journal to publicly promote the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition that was running during the 1918 elections. The term “Sephardim-Mizrahim” signified a homogenized cultural identity in the various issues of the journal. In contrast to Meyuhas’ idea of Sephardim that signaled indigenous Sephardic inhabitants of Palestine, as we shall see, Elmaliah coupled “Sephardim” with “Mizrahim.” This unification attempted to claim greater political power by co-opting and merging the histories and cultures of various Mediterranean communities.

Mizrah u-Ma'arav [East and West] was published four times a year at a time when Jewish journalism reached its lowest points. The journal emerged as a kind of side effect of economical distress that resulted in the meager publication of either daily or monthly newspapers in Palestine. Sponsored by the Sephardic Organization, including the Sephardic Council in Jerusalem, Elmaliah’s quarterly was distributed across miscellaneous hubs of Sephardic communities, including Jerusalem, Haifa, Jaffa, Damascus, Beirut, Alexandria, Salonika, Paris and New York. The bulk (95 percent) of its articles were devoted to the history, literature, and traditions of Mizrahi and Sephardic Jewry. Aside from Elmaliah, other contributors to the journal included such Ashkenazi (European-Jewish) writers as the Zionist leader Ze’ev Jabotinsky; the

historians Hans Cohen, Yoseph Klauzner, and Avinoam Yellin; and Sephardic intellectuals from Jerusalem as M. D. Gaon, Yehuda Burla, and Joseph Meyuhas.

The boundaries of Mizrahi and Sephardi cultures were established from the opening pages of the quarterly. According to the journal's mission statement, written by Elmaliah, the journal's main goal was: "To collect, investigate, and make public" knowledge about "*Toldotenu ha-Sepharadit Ve-haMizrahit* [our Sephardic and Mizrahi history]."²⁶⁸ "It is about time," the declaration asserted, "to pay attention to the great works amidst our Mizrahi fields of antiquity [*Sde Toldoteunu ha-Mizrahit*]."²⁶⁹ In stating the aims of the journal, attention was paid particularly "to educate towards a national revival among the Sephardim" and "to throw light on the history and evolution of the Sephardim." Clearly, the journal demarcated a whole new set of perimeters of "Mizrahi fields." Sephardim was deployed to satisfy Zionist needs primarily in order to recall the glorious cultural and national past [twelfth-century "golden-age" in Spain] that only needed to be awakened. At the same time, the category of "Mizrahim" followed the discourse of Orientalism and, therefore, emerged as confluence of multiple Mediterranean ethnicities, histories, and cultures of antiquity. Both, however, were ways to make inroads into the pre-state Jewish consciousness by organizing individuals and their histories around the idea of essentialized communities (tied to the idea of locality).

Throughout the various issues of the quarterly, an array of voices from academics to politicians, from Sephardi to Ashkenazi writers, and old and new Jewish immigrants contributed to the journal's documentation of Sephardic-Mizrahi culture. Collectively, the articles alluding to Sephardim-Mizrahim interlaced a tapestry of a so-called distinct Oriental type across lines of

²⁶⁸ Abraham Elmaliah, "Declaration Statement." *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [East and West], August 8, 1919, Vol. 1: 1, 4.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

time and space. The first essay on the topic of “Sephardim-Mizrahim” explored Yemenite poetry from the sixth century.²⁷⁰ The second concentrated on *Madah Mizrahi* [Oriental science] from Spain of the tenth century,²⁷¹ and the third article focused on past and present religious customs of Jews in Damascus, Syria.²⁷² Yet again, attempts by these writes to define and historicize Sephardic-Mizrahi cultures were at work here. To better comprehend the commonalities among these studies regarding Mizrahim, I turn to Yitzhaq (Ishaq) Shami’s article “On the Arabic Theatre,” which also appeared in the first issue of Elmaliah’s quarterly.²⁷³

Shami (1888–1949) was a native of Hebron and a writer of fiction who wrote in Hebrew about the life of the Arabs in Palestine of the early twentieth century. Recent scholarship on Shami’s work tagged him as “one of the reviving buds of Mizrahi Judaism in *Eretz Yisrael*” whose fiction was “striving to construct an Arabic voice and a Mizrahi voice.”²⁷⁴ In his article “On the Arabic Theater,” Shami analyzed the evolution of Arabic theatre and its characteristics as he introduces us to *teveah ha-Mizrah* [the Mizrahi nature].²⁷⁵ Theatre, where performing what one is not reaches its zenith, became a space to interrogate who the Mizrahi really was.

One of the primary qualities of this “Mizrahi nature” was the *dimyon Mizrahi nilhav* [enthusiastic Mizrahi imagination].²⁷⁶ The correlation between “Mizrahi nature” and “Mizrahi

²⁷⁰ Eidelson, A. C. “The Yemenite Poet Rabbi Shalom Shabbazi and His Hebraic Poetry.” *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [East and West], 1919, Vol.1: 8–17.

²⁷¹ Anonymous, “The Philosophical Value of Ibn-Gvirol.” Shami, Yitzhaq. “The Arabic Theater.” *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [East and West], 1919, Vol. 1: 7–19.

²⁷² Avinoam Yellin, “About the “Crowns” in Damascus.” *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [East and West], 1919, Vol.1: 19–26.

²⁷³ Yitzhaq Shami, “The Arabic Theater.” *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [East and West], 1919, Vol. 1: 41–45.

²⁷⁴ See Shami 1951; Tamari 2004; Hever 2006; Tamari 2009.

²⁷⁵ Yitzhaq Shami, “The Arabic Theater.” *Mizrah u-Ma’arav* [East and West], 1919, Vol. 1: 41–45.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

imagination,”²⁷⁷ both excessive in this case, contributed to the construction of a Mizrahi subject and his/her distinct behavior and thinking. More pointedly, as an adjective, Mizrahi was used to describe the internal world, as if to explain the Mizrahi way of doing things, of the inhabitants of the East, and to analyze their tempered and frivolous characters. For example, Elmaliah himself deployed Mizrahi imagination to describe the Ottoman rule and its tendency toward corruption.²⁷⁸ Mizrahi imagination was also at the center in Meyuhas study of Sephardic-Mizrahi humor (1934), and of Arabic folktales (1918). Their rational and “scientific” interrogation separated them from the rest of the Mizrahi population (especially the non-Jewish population). Additionally, according to these writers, including Shami, the degree of Mizrahi cultural difference became elevated to extreme otherness. The question remains, however, what did the “Mizrahi nature” entail, and to what degree was the so-called “Mizrahi nature” limited merely to intellectual backwardness or emotional excess and not to a pathological deficiency?

Another entry published in *Mizrah u-Ma'arav's* [*East and West*] first edition, Russian-Jewish Zionist leader Ze'ev Jabotinsky's *Yehudi ha-Mizrach* [*The Jews of the East*], articulated what Mizrahi Jewry should and could do within the Zionist project, from the Ashkenazi perspective. The article claimed in a paternalistic tone what any Mizrahi Jews needs to do: 1) to understand that they have to fight for their place within the growing Jewish community; 2) to organize a Sephardi institute that will help them to claim their particular place; and 3) to remember that this was a *Milhemet-Ahva* [friendly-struggle] and not a *Milhemet-Eyva* [hateful-

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Abraham Elmaliah, *Eretz Yisrael Ve-Suriya Beymey Milhemet Ha-Olam* [*Israel and Syria During the War*] (Jerusalem: Ha-Solel, 1927), 5.

struggle].²⁷⁹ This Mizrahi to-do-list was also followed by assurances concerning the pivotal role and imperative migration of Mizrahi Jews to *Eretz Yisrael*. Embedded in these confirmations, suggestions and recommendations to Mizrahi Jews was the resurrection of an unchanging Mizrahi culture that has to be guided into modernism, democracy, and national aspirations.

Specifically, what appears of greater importance for our investigation was Jabotinsky's emphasis on a distinct "Mizrahi element," which seemed as a common pattern of behavior among all the residents of the Middle East.²⁸⁰ For him, there was a correlation between the "Mizrahi element" and the "Sephardi and Yemenite elements."²⁸¹ Although he was aware of the diversity that constructs each of his East/West, Ashkenazi/Mizrahi binaries, he deployed this division in order to argue that the two should remain separated, for they should inform and feed one another. Together, these constituents of the "Mizrahi element," he asserted, would have a great impetus in the "revival of the Hebrew language" as well as other aspects of public life within the Jewish community.²⁸² To him, Sephardi, Yemenite, or Mediterranean Jews emerged part of a homogeneous Mizrahi culture. Dozens of societies and languages were meshed into a Mizrahi category or element. Through the deployment of the "Mizrahi element," Jabotinsky conflated Sephardic and Mediterranean cultures, and insisted these are all "one" that should be differentiated from European-Ashkenazi culture.

Moreover, in this article, Jabotinsky foreshadowed yet another purported facet of a unified Sephardic-Mizrahi culture, illustrating the ways both Ashkenazi and Sephardic-Mizrahi

²⁷⁹ Ze'ev Jabotinsky, "The Jews of the East" [*Yehudi ha-Mizrach*]. *Mizrah u-Ma'arav [East and West]*, Vol.1: 59–61.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

Jews were involved in the using the Mizrahi category to decipher their realities. It should be remembered that Jabotinsky's claims were not rare at the time. Others, such as Rabbi A. H. Kook maintained that the existence of a distinct Ashkenazi "meticulous" type versus a less Sephardic "critical" mind upheld similar cultural division.²⁸³ Additionally, the Lithuanian-born historian Joseph Klauzner argued for an undeveloped Mizrahi culture as a result of *Mizrhiut Kitzonit* [extreme Orientalism]. Klauzner affirmed similar ethnic divisions that Jabotinsky's article hinged on, as he maintained that Sephardic-Mizrahi culture had been "lost in foolish imagination and lacked logic."²⁸⁴ But the newness of Elmaliah's journal was not in fact that these derogatory and divisive claims were given an honorable space in a Sephardi journal, though it was quite striking in that regard. Nor was its newness in its audacious efforts to culturally unite the various Yemenite, Sephardic, and Mediterranean Jewry into a rigid "Mizrahi element." And nor was it to be found in the effort to produce legitimization to those of the Mizrahi element "to organize as a Sephardi and demand his own unique place . . . through which he will aid the advancement of the nation, to finalize its structure, and fill its spiritual character."²⁸⁵

Important repercussion of these studies was their circulation and endorsement among Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders. This leadership was interested in confirming and reaffirming the distinctiveness of the Mizrahi element, whether it would emphasize their intellectual or ideological deficiencies or their historical and religious grassroots in the *Mizrah* [East] at large, and Palestine in particular. It seemed that the acceptance of Mizrahi cultural distinctiveness was of such depth that it led to the positioning of Jabotinsky, who was the second Ashkenazi

²⁸³ A. H Kook, "To the Two Houses of Israel." *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [East and West], Vol. 1. No. 3, 1920: 201–205.

²⁸⁴ Joseph Klauzner, "The Infinite Virtue of the Sephardic Period." *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [East and West], Vol. 1, No. 4, 1920: 310.

²⁸⁵ Ze'ev Jabotinsky, "The Jews of the East" [*Yehudi ha-Mizrach*]. *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [East and West], Vol. 1: 60.

candidate, in the Sephardi list for the General Elected Assembly that would take place a year later (1920).

Still, concurrence with such seemingly clear ethnic, racial, and cultural Mizrahi boundaries to Sephardi and Mediterranean Jewry did not render Sephardim-Mizrahim to be permanently immune from slipping in and out of categories, affiliations, resistances, and agreements. More than anything, these ambiguities propelled even greater efforts by Sephardi and Mediterranean leaders, such as Elmaliah, Meyuhas, and M. D. Gaon, as we will examine in the next segment, to self-study, to self-interrogate, and self-pathologize their Mizrahi habits, customs, and language. They were the colonizer and the colonized, the active and the passive, the participant and the viewer, and all that lies amid these categories. For some, such as the Sephardic administrator and bureaucrat, Moshe David Gaon, the categorization and exoticization of Mizrahi culture became tightly related with statistics of the Yishuv, immigration records, and other acts of enumeration and classification.

Counting Sephardic-Mizrahi Bodies

Since his arrival in Palestine in 1908, Moshe David Gaon had attempted to narrate the history of “his Mizrahi people.” While Meyuhas and Elmaliah were interested in aspects of Sephardi and Mizrahi nativity and culture, Gaon was preoccupied with empirical data, demographics and immigration records. His interest in enumerating and categorizing Mizrahi bodies and histories centered on maintaining the significance of this specific group to the Zionist project. From the vantage point of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization, Gaon desired Zionist recognition by claiming a narrative that advanced a very particular perspective: locating the

antique roots of an invented Mizrahi people in the land of Palestine. To promote this desire, Gaon understood his mission was defending the category of Mizrahim through the construction demographics and selective chronologies. In that sense, Gaon thought of himself as a *defender* of the Mizrahi race.²⁸⁶

Whereas Meyuhas and Elmaliah came to their study of Mizrahi culture and history out of folkloristic curiosity, Gaon came to his investigation out of personal sense of exclusion that later developed into a deep craving for “scientific” quantification of the subaltern Mizrahim. Born in Bosnia in 1889, Gaon immigrated to Palestine in 1908, which, retrospectively, appeared to him as a pivotal moment, a realization of great disillusionment. Upon his arrival, Gaon comprehended that he was part of a distinct Jewish race, “those that Spain expelled.”²⁸⁷ Only then, for the first time, did he painfully recognize his imposed Mizrahi identity.²⁸⁸ That Gaon was a born-and-bred product of Travnik (Bosnia)—the most strategic city in the Ottoman province of Bosnia with its active Jewish community second only to Sarajevo—did not prevent him from feeling Mizrahi (a negative sentiment at the time) to his fingertips. This seeing himself

²⁸⁶ I borrow here from John Efron’s *Defenders of the Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.). Efron uses this terminology to emphasize the active role of the German-Jewish scientists of the mid- and late- nineteenth century had in fighting against anti-Semitic sentiments as well as Jewish orthodoxy. Indeed, the metaphor of defending can be a limiting metaphor for it belies the question: who are they/he is defending against? In other words, agency here is more reactionary, a set of conditions that asks one to respond in a very particular way. I use the trope of defense to highlight two aspects in Gaon’s work: first, the mere fact that Gaon constructed the Zionist-Ashkenazi Jews as a dominant-minority that made him recognize his Mizrahi status (and, at the same time, they also were his co-dreamers of the national project), so to speak; and second, to take note of Gaon’s sense of intellectual heroism in making visible the history and numbers of the marginalized Mizrahim.

²⁸⁷ Moshe David Gaon, *Mizrahi Jews in Eretz Yisrael* [Mizrahim/Oriental Jews in Israel-Palestine] (Jerusalem: Self-Published, 1928), 1.

²⁸⁸ Interestingly enough, although Gaon considered himself to be the descendant of those expelled from Spain (1492), at least during his first twenty years in Palestine, he saw himself part of a larger Mizrahi population. It is only by the 1940s that Gaon became more Sephardi and less Mizrahi. I will explore this point, its repercussions, and possible motives for this shift in the Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

as Mizrahi with no clear definition of this strange concept resulted in new pressures and alienation into his life.

Unlike Meyuhas and Elmaliah, Gaon gained his education in central Europe. Gaon's entire life experience, and in particular the years spent in Austria at Vienna University endowed him with the values of a European *fin-de-siècle* intellectual, educator, poet, and scholar who was also attracted to the emerging Zionist project in Palestine. Gaon grew up in the setting of "enlightened" and educated European Jewry and, again, became aware of his Mizrahiness or Mizrhi identity only upon his arrival to Palestine. Gaon disclosed the reasons that steered the historical writing of the people of the Mizrach and his own understanding of his Mizrahiness thus, "Prior to my arrival in *Eretz Yisrael* [1909] from Bosnia, my past residency, I was not acquainted with the meaning of the term *Yehudi ha'Mizrah* [Eastern Jews]."²⁸⁹ Gaon continued to reveal his discoveries about his new Mizrahi identity: "It was only upon my arrival to the holy city of Jerusalem, which beforehand I had foreseen as the place destined for *Kibbutz-Galouot* [communal gathering of the exiled] and their assimilation, that incited my awakening from my premature naiveté."²⁹⁰ To be sure, whether the process of Gaon becoming Mizrahi builds slowly or strikes like a thunderclap, the effect is unmistakable. Gaon wrote, "As time passed I began to realize that I do not belong to the whole [Jewish] nation . . . but to one small community

²⁸⁹ Moshe David Gaon, *Mizrahi Jews in Eretz Yisrael* [Mizrahim/Oriental Jews in Israel-Palestine] (Jerusalem: Self-Published, 1928), 1.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

[*Edah*].”²⁹¹ Underlying the meaning of the term “Mizrahim” in Gaon’s writing was the uncontested political potential of the Mizrahim as a subaltern group.²⁹²

Through processes of enumeration and classification the Sephardic-Mizrahi population, the *imagination* and invention of the very same population became possible.²⁹³ From 1921 to the official Israeli census in 1948, it was the thirty-one-year-old Gaon who in 1923 took upon himself the responsibility of creating charts and tables of numerical data that would facilitate and expand the clearly demarcated borderlines of his alleged Mizrahi “tribe.” He became the official expert on Mizrahim.

By 1923, as a secretary to the Zionist council and, at the same time, a central member of the young Sephardic organization *Halutzei ha-Mizrah [Pioneers of the East]*,²⁹⁴ Gaon believed his task was to make this “discriminated” and “frustrated”²⁹⁵ Mizrahi collective visible historically and politically.²⁹⁶ His personal sentiments of exclusion transformed into a solid

²⁹¹ Ibid.

²⁹² While ambitious to be “knowledgeable,” or at least to appear as such, Gaon’s vision led to him to espouse a romantic and strenuous idea of what history as well as education is. Even in his treatment of his children, he had continued to develop the characteristics of a pedant. A letter he sent to his son’s teacher, Gaon writes, “the achievements of my son in his third grade are totally unacceptable. My heart quivers every time I look into his notebooks . . . I have the impression my son cheats in his studies . . . my hope is that the school will help me to his education and that the fear of the public will guide him.”

²⁹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

²⁹⁴ The inception of the Sephardic Youth Council, by 1919 also known as *Halutzei ha-Mizrah [Pioneers of the East]* (1918–1929), was paramount in denoting the category of Sephardim with revitalized political currency and national agency. Led by a group of Sephardic intellectuals educated in Western countries and affiliated with the Alliance educational system, such as David Avihar (chair from 1918–1924), Eliyhau Elishar (chair 1925–1929), and M. D. Gaon, their aims confirmed with Zionist ideology.

²⁹⁵ Moshe David Gaon, *Mizrahi Jews in Eretz Yisrael [Mizrahim/Oriental Jews in Israel-Palestine]* (Jerusalem: Self-Published, 1928), 3.

²⁹⁶ Explaining the reasons that steered the writing of his book, Gaon notes, “Prior to my arrival to Eretz Yisrael [1909] from Bosnia, my past residency, I was not acquainted with the meaning of the term Yehudai ha’Mizrah [“Eastern Jews”].” Gaon continues to redefine his identity: “It was only upon my arrival to the holy city of Jerusalem, which beforehand I had foreseen and envisaged as the place destined for Kibbutz-Galout [“communal

understanding of what did the Mizrahi collective stand for. Gaon fully identified with the strong critique the *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*] had of the Zionist project, primarily the Zionists exclusionary immigration and economical policies: “it is impossible to find any settlers of Mizrahi families.”²⁹⁷ In addition to their aggravated complaints against the (racist) Zionist immigration policy, they revolted against the harsh repercussions of these discriminatory policies, because “there is growing frustration among the Jews from the Mizrah [East] which make them realize that they are not given any active role in the building of our country.”²⁹⁸ In this political climate that precluded Sephardic and Mediterranean Jews in the Zionist organizations, Gaon’s political stance was about working within the Zionist system for equal rights of Mizrahim, including immigration policies, distribution of land and labor, and education. His benign activism, taking the form of statistics, complemented this critique.

Initially, Gaon’s experience in the Zionist Organization as well as the *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*] gave him not only the official “authority,” as it were, to decide about the size and shape of Mizrahim. But, more importantly, it gave him the access to empirical tools, official records, and numerical knowledge in order to better study and enumerate Mizrahim. Holding such a strategic position—on the one hand, his official allegiance with the dominant Zionist organization, and, on the other, his appointment in the marginalized *Eastern Pioneers* party—he used these multiple (some will say contradictory) allegiances to take account of who

gathering of the exiled”] and their assimilation, that incited my awakening from my premature naiveté . . . and [there] I got acquainted with the misery of my people who are torn and diverged to shreds, one Shevet [“tribe” or “community”] after another and their distinct flag, one family after another and their individual purposes, leaders, customs, traditions, and aspirations.” Gaon, Moshe David. *Mizrahi Jews in Eretz Yisrael* [Mizrahim/Oriental Jews in Israel-Palestine]. Jerusalem: Self-Published, 1928: 1.

²⁹⁷ Handbook, “The *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*] — Review [from 1918] to 1923,” Jerusalem, 1923: 17–19.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

could and who should become a member of the Mizrahi ethnic group and political organization. That is, he took advantage of his Zionist and Sephardic political power to advance an opposite cause that linked Sephardim with other minority groups in the guise of “the marginalized Mizrahi.” His motivation was to correct the negative (mis)representation of Mizrahim.

As part of this defensive strategy, over the course of 1923–1928, Gaon repeatedly tried to pair the statistical data and historical evolution of Mizrahim with the materialization of the Jewish national revival in Palestine. As a result of his defensive strategy, the picture that emerged from the highly mediated number and biographies collected by Gaon was a highly panoptical and itemized view of Mizrahi selves and bodies with palpable racial repercussions. Using the data he gathered, primarily based on interviews with his Mizrahi informants, Gaon produced two different methods of knowing the community of Mizrahim. One consisted of empirical and statistical study of the Mizrahi population, while the other was in the form of semi-biographical confessions that consisted of a selective collection of historical monologues of Mizrahi individuals.

To be sure, Gaon was not alone in his craving for numbers, although he was a central figure in attributing specific meaning and content to the Mizrahi collective body. The Mandatory authorities as well as the Zionist Organization were also busy in various projects of enumeration and classification of Palestine and its residents. From 1921 to 1931, the British Mandate authorities, following the Ottoman methods practice of codification that tended to view the Palestinian residents according to their religious affiliation, divided the Palestinian population into “Christians,” “Jews,” and “Muslims.”²⁹⁹ At the same time, a number of Jewish scholars and

²⁹⁹ On the various projects of enumeration during the Mandate period, see Fishbach 2011; Dov 2005.

institutions, such as Avraham Granott of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and Arthur Ruppin of the Jewish Agency (JA), meticulously gathered data on the land of Palestine and its population. In both cases of data collection in Palestine during the early years of the Mandate, no clear sign of Mizrahim appeared in their data collection.

The first official enumeration of the so-called Mizrahi grouping ever to be made appeared in 1923 in the protocols of the *Halutzei Hamizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*], which was supposed to tell the truth about those who were ignored by the Zionist project at the time.³⁰⁰ Gaon had a central role in producing such an entry of a Mizrahi bio-political system. To represent the marginalized Mizrahi immigrants who were not supported by the Zionist enterprise, Gaon co-opted the language and politics of statistics, often associated with colonial thought and nationalism, including the Zionist national project. The statistical table reviewed the immigration rate of *benei ha-Mizrah* [sons of the East] in 1922–1923 and specified who was entitled to be part of this grouping.

Under the rubric of Mizrahim, a striking number of communities, ethnicities, and sub-ethnicities were named and numbered: Persians (548 subjects), Kurds (446), Ma'aravim (362), Baghdadim (162), Halebim (100), Sephardim (177), Yemenites (102), Georgzim (57), Krimeim (27), Bukharim (2), Tripolitanian (24), Anatolim (31), and Surkelim (31). The process through which the category of “Mizrahim” developed into the primary mode of collective identification was very much related to the rise of nationalism and the appearance of a new set of political and ideological conditions. It is, thus, the identification of “Mizrahim” was a project of *auto-essentialism* that borrowed Orientalist tropes and depended on multiple processes of internal

³⁰⁰ Although there is no much archival material to tell us more about the specific role Gaon had in the *Pioneers of the East*, Gaon’s personal archive contains more content about specific numbers, tables, and data about the project of enumeration (either within the Sephardic party or outside it).

colonization. At the core of this Mizrahi auto-essentialization was a contradictory consciousness, self-unifying under the Zionist guise, self-typifying and thus separating oneself in the Jewish community (while claiming epistemic privilege). Although the idea of “Mizrahim” was long in the making, it is only at this time (1923) that Mizrahi subjects gained access to their own definitions of selfhood as Mizrahim—as a category steeped with political and racial nuance.

Additionally, in the following pages of the *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*], more tables enumerated and classified the Mizrahi immigrants according to their age, size of their families, and their particular occupation. The esteem of the bureaucratic operation and its level of specificity attempted to be very detailed and scrupulous, as in the case of the quantification of Mizrahi trades that counted Mizrahi tailors, bakers, builders, carriage drivers, painters, gardeners, electricians, cantors, printers, glaziers, train conductors, watch makers, teachers, shoe-shiners, jewelers, maidens, hat makers, drivers, socks weavers, carpenters, sandal makers, soap makers, plumbers, merchants, and even candy and wine makers. The pattern that was set in 1923 was extended a year later and included a calculation of the land that was owned by Mizrahim in the Palestinian territory.

The result of Gaon’s classificatory concerns, however, did not end in counting Mediterranean bodies and constructing a visible Mizrahi community. These concerns, which internalized the Orientalizing *modus operandi* of the Zionist project and thus undermined his original intentions and constituted the marginalized as a Mizrahi Other, were not satisfied merely with statistics to demarcate the people of the East. Beyond conducting a Mizrahi census, Gaon began collecting Mizrahi testimonies of various Mizrahi communities and leading Mizrahi individuals. The transition from Mizrahi numbers to Mizrahi (Zionist) monologues seems to signal a negative shift toward self-justification of the Mizrahi collective.

Gaon began sending letters to communities that suited his political appropriation of Mizrahim. In his missive to the *Ma'aravi* community (July 1923),³⁰¹ Gaon inquired about their cities of origin in Morocco, their occupation, size of the Mizrahi population, religious awareness, and understanding of Zionism.³⁰² In reply, it was explained to Gaon that Moroccan-Jews “are aware of the Zionist community,” yet associated Zionists activists with *Apikrosim* [nonbelievers].³⁰³ In another letter, this time to the Ma'aravi community in Jerusalem, Gaon inquired about their reasons for moving to Palestine, as well as about the names of the central streets where members of the community resided.³⁰⁴ Letters were also sent to other communities, such as the Yemenite, Persian, and Syrian communities.

Gaon posed scores of questions to each community that he considered sufficiently Mizrahi. He wanted to know about their conditions of living: “Do you live in a separate ghetto?” He called into question the number of educated and non-educated men in each community and the amount of lawyers, beggars, farmers, and labor workers. He questioned not only the number of Zionist delegates but also the number of synagogues of each community. What is more, his “internal Mizrahi census” was concerned with the biographies of various members of the Mizrahi collective as well.

But Gaon was not satisfied with the role of numbers in this complex information gathering of Mizrahim. His analytical lens went deeper, asking for more than numerical tables, figures, and charts. During the same years, from 1923 to 1928, extending his epistolary project, he began

³⁰¹ As already introduced in the first chapter, by the term Ma'aravi I refer to North African Jews, also known as *Maghrebi* community.

³⁰² M. D. Gaon Archives, in the National Library, File 4-795, Packet No. 30.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ M. D. Gaon Archives, *The Ma'aravi Community in Jerusalem*, in the National Library, File 4-795, Packet No. 30.

collecting short biographies of members of the Mizrahi community. The biographies were arranged according the occupation of each informant, stressing the fact that Gaon was influenced by a very particular discourse: where certain bodies are only good for certain labor and that why occupation became a methodological tool in sorting the Mizrahi population.³⁰⁵ Gaon writes about Mizrahi jewelers:

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Ezra David | —Born in Bagdad and currently studies painting and jewelry making in the Betzalel School. |
| Ben Avraham Moshe | —Yemenite. Studied for one year in the Betzalel School but then left his studies and went to the United States. |
| Tziona Tag'hir | —Born in Israel and reside in Tel-Aviv. She studied for two years in Betzalel School. Then she had an intern in Paris. Her works resemble the modernist. She mostly paints portraits. |
| Shalom Ratzbi | —Born and reside in Jerusalem. [He is a] [s]tudent in the Betzlalel School. He is now studying the craft of making signs. |
| Yehuda Cohen | —Born in Salonika and is a student in the Betzlalel School. Currently, he is an intern in Italy . . . He has been gifted with great talent in painting the land and its landscape. ³⁰⁶ |

Many names, personal interests, place of birth, and biographical detours were listed in Gaon's enumeration project. The numbers and trajectories of each Mizrahi individual, who belonged the Mizrahi collective, were listed, tracked, and traced in his panopticon-like-registers. In fine, Gaon added the following conclusive remark to his list of Mizrahi jewelers:

Jewelers	—It is important to note that all the jewelers of gold and silver that are in Jerusalem are <i>benei Edoth ha-Mizrah</i>
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³⁰⁵ I will further interrogate Gaon's relation to this discourse of ability and productivity, when I will talk about Arthur Ruppin. As for now, it is important to pinpoint that occupation and not an alphabetic order of the Mizrahi population was for Gaon a dominant factor in constructing the Mizrahi collective and their possible contribution to the Zionist project.

³⁰⁶ M. D. Gaon Archives, in the National Library, File 4-795, Packet No. 30.

[sons of the Mizrahi community] and this artistic craft is a tool in their hands . . . all of them earn their living in this work.³⁰⁷

The transparent vocabulary Gaon utilized to classify and typify his Mizrahim was based on *their necessity, their usefulness, and their possible effectiveness* to the Zionist national project.³⁰⁸ The motivation for judging and interrogating these bodies into Mizrahi subjects was to define their capacity to contribute to the Zionist project and, thus, revolved merely around the territory of Israel. The central way of thinking about a genealogy of the Mizrahi-self was its relationship to the Zionist project, whether as an alternative, at times an agreement with, and at other times a reproach to it.

Next, this dependence on the national project could explain why Gaon's politics of numbers and biographies were interested in examining the roots of his Mizrahi people from a Zionist angle. Gaon sent more letters to several Mizrahi leaders, asking them for their Mizrahi biographies. An interrogation was needed to produce lengthy confessions of Mizrahi-self, or better, soliloquies of Mizrahi selves and their accordance with the national or the pre-national Jewish project. In 1928, in a letter to Eliyahu Elishar, Gaon writes:

I will be more than thankful if you could answer the following as soon as you will receive this letter with the attached questions:

1. Where were you born?
2. What [is your] year—European or Hebrew—date?
3. Were your parents immigrants or natives to the land [Palestine]?
4. Your education. Where did you study and what?
5. Have you graduated any school and in which year?
6. Did you have a job, how many and for how long?
7. Were you part of any public institutions?

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 20.

8. Did you work in the creation [*yesod*] of . . .
9. Today you are part of which institution . . . community . . . Histadrut . . .
10. Did you work in any newspapers . . . in which languages . . .³⁰⁹

Similar Mizrahi surveys were sent to other Sephardic and Mediterranean leaders in the Yishuv, including Shmuel Lupo, Meir Ginio, Abraham Tzarum and others. These surveys, along with the enumeration and quantification of *mélange* Mizrahi bodies and communities, provided a shared language of information about Mizrahim, their activities, and, most importantly, their contribution to the project of nationalism. Gaon's surveys and numbers were thus part of "the enterprise of translating" the Mizrahi experience into a vocabulary intelligible to the large Zionist venture, a vocabulary based on the notions provided by various orientalist discourses. This file of Mizrahi entitlement to the nationalist project, however, would never be closed, as the *endless interrogation* of Mizrahi usefulness will surface continuously even to Israel of today.³¹⁰

By incorporating numbers and semi-biographies, Gaon's hope was to formulate a lucid understanding of "the people of my race, the carriers of past seeds, the heroes of the past that are left in the shade as the time pass by."³¹¹ As a defender of the Mizrahi race, Gaon tried to push to the fore the "glorious monuments" of his race.³¹² Moreover, he defined the idea of Mizrahim as a specific ethnic community and made them *visible* only in relation to Palestine-Israel. Mizrahim, therefore, became noticeable only in relation to the Zionist project that puts the land of Israel at the center. Gaon's rhetoric of Mizrahi census—which like most census projects were "shaped by evolving national interests," as Dominique Arel observes—appeared also as a Mizrahi

³⁰⁹ M. D. Gaon Archives, in the National Library, File 4-795, Packet No. 30.

³¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 227.

³¹¹ Moshe David Gaon, *Mizrahi Jews in Eretz Yisrael* [Mizrahim/Oriental Jews in Israel-Palestine]. Vol. 2. (Jerusalem: Self-Published, 1938), 1.

³¹² *Ibid.*

surveillance method.³¹³ While scholars extended Richard Saumarez Smith's (1996) often used phrase "rule by records," to the way "questions of identity are central to surveillance,"³¹⁴ Gaon's example stands as surveillance and confirmation of Mizrahi-self.³¹⁵

We have to be very clear about what we mean when we talk about the relationship between Mizrahi identity and demographics. What is the relation between Mizrahi identity and a desire for recognition? Recognition by whom and for what motivations? What was the point of reference to Gaon's project? To what extent, the sign and mark of Mizrahim was its predisposition to suspicion?

Gaon's data of Mizrahi numbers and political selection of Mizrahi-biographies viewed them as potential Zionist settlers but not as citizen of any other country, and every survey inspected their *effective and useful* contribution solely to the emerging nation. On the other hand, the need to mark and measure, from within, "how Zionist we are," or alternatively, "how modern we are," led to the normalization and objectification of the so-called "Mizrahim." In either case, one can notice how Gaon's project of classification carried the seeds of anxiety concerning the question of nationalist productivity which made Mizrahim appear dangerous, suspicious, marginalized, and, at the same time, a way for many like Gaon to identify their histories and personalities as Mizrahim.

³¹³ David Kertzer and Arel Dominique eds., *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 823.

³¹⁴ Richard Saumarez Smith, *Rule by Records: Land Registration and Village Custom in Early British Punjab* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³¹⁵ On the relationship between the census and national identity, see Lyon 2003: 3; Dandeker 1990: 37-40; Giddens 1991; Lyon 2007; Appadurai 1996; Zuriek, Lyon and Abu-Laban 2011.

The Algebra of Sephardic-Mizrahi Bodies

If Gaon's motivation for studying the demographic and immigration records of the Sephardic-Mizrahi population was his own, the materials and concept out of which his project derived from were based on the work of Jewish and non-Jewish social scientists working in Palestine from the early days of the twentieth century.³¹⁶ Among a galaxy of Jewish intellectuals and scientists who contributed to Gaon's acceptance of the Sephardic-Mizrahi category was the German-Jewish³¹⁷ sociologist and Zionist activist, Dr. Arthur Ruppin (1876–1943). Around the same time that Gaon made his way to Palestine in 1908, Ruppin also arrived in Palestine. As the former director of the Bureau for Jewish Statistics and Demography (1902–1907) in Berlin, Ruppin was a central figure in the evolution of Jewish “agriculture” and *Avodah Ivrit* [Hebrew labor] in the growing Zionist community in Palestine.³¹⁸

In his 1913 empirical study on the *Jewish Population in Palestine* (1913), Ruppin asserted that Jews represented a *Volk*,³¹⁹ a distinct and a “well defined race” (Ruppin 1913: 216).³²⁰ From

³¹⁶ See, for example, M. D. Gaon Archives, in the National Library, File 4-795, Packet No. 31. Aside from the fact that Gaon had read Ruppin's *Die Bevölkerung Palästinas* [“the population of Palestine”] (1927), my interest in more in the ways Gaon used Ruppin East-West or Arab-Jewish racial paradigms to formulate the Mizrahi category as Jews who preserved a high level of racial unity throughout time.

³¹⁷ The absence of the contribution of German scholars and German-Jewish scholars, in particular Said's *Orientalism* (1979) has been addressed by various scholars, such as Martin Kramer (1999), Bernard Lewis (1993), John Efron (2003, 2005), Eitan Bloom (2008), Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (2005), Aziza Khazzoom (2008), Gil Eyal (2006), Yaron Tsur (2005), Gabriel Piterberg (2008), Aijaz Ahmad (1992), Gyan Prakash (1995), and Susannah Heschel (1998), to name a few. Kramer, for example, contends that German Jewish scholars expressed a more refined view of Orientalism as “their approaches rested upon a heightened empathy and sympathy for Islam” (1999: 3). Like other scholars, he emphasizes the fact that Jews themselves were the victims of Orientalism in mid nineteenth century Germany.

³¹⁸ Extended scholarship paid great attention to Ruppin and his contribution to the Zionist project. See Hart 2000: 56; Piterberg 2008: 83–84; Morris-Reich 2006; Bloom 2008.

³¹⁹ Ruppin's assertion that the Jews were a composition of race was based on the investigations of one of his teachers, Felix von Luschan (1854–1924). As an anthropologist, Luschan was fascinated with what he conceived to be the “labyrinth of types” ([1911] 1915: 555). As for the race of the Jews, Luschan argued that that the Jew was a composition of various races, a claim that Ruppin adopted to his own research. What is more germane to our work is Luschan's racial understanding of Oriental Jews and Sephardim. In his lecture “The Early Inhabitants of Western

the early beginning of his work until his death in 1942, Ruppin differentiated between (Ashkenazi) Jews and the Semite, which included the “Arabian Jews” (Jews from Arab lands), Sephardim, and the Bedouins (Ruppin 1904).³²¹ Four categories are used to demarcate the Jewish population: Sephardim, Old Ashkenazi immigrants, New Ashkenazi immigrants, and Immigrants from Asia and Africa. The meaning of “Sephardim,” here, is vague, as it stands for the non-Ashkenazi long-standing residents of Palestine. But what is more germane to our investigation is that Ruppin established a racial hierarchy across the four categories where the new Ashkenazi immigrants emerged as the “fittest” and the more appropriate immigrants in order to bring “European standards of life into an Asiatic environment” ([1925] 1936: 62).

This emphasis on the physical fit and less productive bodies appeared to be central framework in Gaon’s classification system of Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects (1923, 1928). The question of Mizrahi productivity which we encountered in Gaon’s work must be viewed in relation to Ruppin’s project of eugenics, defining and finding the “fittest” Jews—based on occupation and physical selection, including the “elimination of anti-social types” (Ruppin 1919:

Asia” (1911), Luschan differentiated between Oriental Jews and Sephardim. About the race of the Oriental Jews he writes: “As the oriental Jews practically never mix with the other Orientals, and so do not contribute in any way to the physical qualities of their oriental neighbors, they would be of no interest for this paper if we could not trace them back to very early times” (1911: 559). While the oriental Jews are associated with the antiquated (or even, biblical) past, for him, the Sephardim relate to a nearest past, as he defines Sephardim as, “speaking an early Spanish dialect, and descended chiefly from Jews expelled from Spain . . . They have contributed not a little to the intellectual and economic development of the Ottoman Empire” (560). Additionally, he pays attention to the tension between Sephardim and Ashkenazim that “are holding themselves rigidly apart” and although “he could not learn if there were also difference in creed [between the two groups],” he could only assert that, “these two groups are like different sects” (560-561). It is interesting to note that ten years after his lecture, Gaon among other Sephardic leaders would not only use Sephardim and Mizrahim interchangeably but would later view Sephardim as a sub-ethnic category within the Mizrahi collective.

³²⁰ Scholars have assessed the role of European Jewish scholars in studying, ranking and ordering the Jewish race. Academics of Jewish history, gender, and sexuality such as John Efron (1994, 2001, 2003, 2005), Mitchell B. Hart (2000, 2007), Sander Gilman (1982, 1986, 1993, 1996, 2000), and George L. Mosse (1964, 1971, 1975, 2000), to name a few, have provided us with a clearer view of the logic and motivation behind the preoccupation of European Jewish scholars with Jewish ethnicity in the European context from mid-nineteenth to the early-twentieth century.

³²¹ Already in *The Jews of Today* (1904), Ruppin uses the term “Arabian Jews” to identify the Jews from Arab lands (a term that is not inclusive to the category of Sephardim).

79)—to draw them toward the growing Jewish community in Palestine. The questions that revolved around issues of labor and productivity enabled both Ruppin and Gaon to make general assertions about the quality of an entire Sephardic-Mizrahi population and evaluate their contribution, or lack thereof, to the Zionist project.

In the statistics from 1914, the seeds of a homogeneous Sephardic-Mizrahi collective are to be found where Sephardim and Kurds are put under the same heading. The unification of Sephardim-Mizrahim, opposing Ashkenazim, served two central causes. First, Gaon accentuated the racial link between Ashkenazi Jews and the other European Indo-Germanic races.³²² At the same time, however, Ruppin wanted to find proof about linking between the Arab and the Jewish Semite (also known as the Oriental, *orientalische*), an inclusive category that represented the Sephardim, the Bedouins, and the “Arabian Jews.” Gradually, for Ruppin, the term “Sephardim” was taken out of its historical context and became a way to erase the differences between the Jewish and non-Jewish residents of Palestine (or the so-called Orient) and represent them as one.

To affirm this Ashkenazi-Sephardi division, according to Ruppin, the factors that differentiated between the Semite-Sephardim and the Aryan-Ashkenazim were their language, environment, hygiene, and race. Sephardic inferiority was scientifically proven for “their processes of adaptation and selection were not so sharp.”³²³ In addition, since the “declining” Sephardim lived “in the last two hundred years in bad sanitary conditions,” the results were

³²² Bloom 2008: 107.

³²³ Ruppin 1933: 29.

“severe level of morality and frequent plagues,” which also contributed to their decline in number.³²⁴

In contrast to Ruppin’s view of the superior Jewish-Aryan (Ashkenazi) group,³²⁵ Semite Jews, carrying signs of biological degeneration, appeared to be the ideal workers of the land (also known as *Fellahim*). With the debate over the use of Arab labor in 1907, Ruppin finds a solution in Semite Jews, “Through attracting Yemenite Jews, who were used to a hot climate and had a lower standard of living,” the problem would be resolved (Ruppin 1971: 190; Nini 1996: 18-30; Massad 1996: 54). In the view of the Zionist European leadership of the time, the Yemenites, along the other Semites were to fulfill the Zionist’s need for Jewish workers who would work for Arab wages. To put it crudely, the corporeal abilities of the Semite were accentuated, as they appeared suitable only for physical labor (substituting the Arabs) but still lacking in their intellectual abilities.

We must now return to Gaon and Ruppin, and to the ways the question of Mizrahi abilities illuminates the direct lineage between them and their motivation to use numbers to justify their opposing agendas. Like Ruppin, Gaon conducted these projects of enumeration in order to better classify the Jewish population of Palestine and the broader Jewish world. Following Ruppin’s ethnic and racial distinctions between Ashkenazi (Western) and Semite (Eastern) Jews, Gaon’s “internal Mizrahi census” reconstructed the same racial equation that Ruppin drew on. According to Gaon, to be Mizrahi meant to be part of a distinct sub-ethnic Jewish breed. The biographies that Gaon deliberately *selected* interweaved Mizrahi biographies

³²⁴ Ruppin 1931: 61; 1930: 83.

³²⁵ To be sure, Ruppin’s assertion on the superiority of Ashkenazim was part of the general knowledge of that era. Although he offered no discussion of racial hierarchy, Ruppin was central in providing pseudo-scientific to prove ideas of superiority and inferiority.

with the national project, while consciously overlooking other so-called Mizrahi individuals who were not aligned with the national project, at times, in favor of creating a separate Sephardic/Mizrahi state. More pointedly, like Ruppin's study of Mizrahi "types," Gaon constructed micro-biographies of the same Mizrahim, providing a background and Oriental context for these Mizrahi types.

In contrast to Ruppin, however, Gaon redefined the Mizrahi category, offering more specificity to the porous "Mizrahi" term, insisting on the common ethnic Mizrahi dominator among the newly merged Sephardi and Mizrahi subdivisions. Similar to Meyuhas and Elmaliah, Gaon used the "Mizrahi" category to rupture Ruppin's racial correlation between the categories of Arab-Jew and the Arab. The insistence of our protagonists on a Mizrahi category and its productivity should be viewed as ways to distance Mizrahim from their "degenerate" local and the Arab-Semite (Hochberg 2007; Shohat 2003).

Additionally, we must assess how different Gaon's motivation was from that of Ruppin for these projects of enumeration. Under the influence of German racial science, Ruppin, the director of the *Eretz Yisrael* Office and the engineer of Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, believed in 1913 in the validity of the concept of race to support Jewish nationalism, primarily in order to distinguish between the Jew and the Arab in Palestine (Morris-Erich 2006: 14; Bloom 2008).³²⁶

From the early 1920s to the mid 1930s, however, Ruppin used racial logic to fix Mizrahi and

³²⁶ Ruppin's idea of the Palestinian population was lucid: "Zionism has only recently started work in its own field, Palestine. The present Jewish population of Palestine is made up of three different sections of immigrants: first, the Spaniolisch-speaking Jews, who directly or indirectly came to Palestine after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain; second, the Ashkenazi Jews, who came from religious motives, emigrated from Eastern Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and settled in Jerusalem, Hebron, Safed and Tiberias; third, the Ashkenazi Jews, who, during the last thirty years, have gone out as labourers and small traders under the influence of the Jewish Agricultural Colonisation Societies and of Zionism" (1913: 282–283). As for his idea of Zionism and the possible relationships with the Arabic population, Ruppin writes, "Zionism does not wish to have Palestine exclusively for the Jews; it only seeks to create, by a steady immigration, a large, coherent, united population of Jews which will be protected from the dangers of assimilation. And the backward state of culture of the native population nullifies the danger at the outset" (1913: 290–291).

Sephardi logical and intellectual inferiority: “since we desire to develop our Jewish side in Palestine, it would naturally be desirable to have only ‘racially pure’ Jews entering Palestine.”³²⁷ In sum, Ruppin used racist logic, primarily in the form of eugenics, in order to better organize and control “healthy immigration” to Palestine.³²⁸

Gaon shared Ruppin’s nationalist aspirations, but created his Mizrahi census to change Ruppin’s racist immigration policy. Following other voices from the *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*] and of the Sephardic Council, Gaon suspected that the discriminatory policy with which the Zionist organization handled the issue of immigration of Jews from Arab lands. Yet, the irony of Gaon’s project was that he himself internalized a similar racial logic, including an orientalist thrust, and regarded the ambiguous idea of Mizrahim as a category to define a racial self and a racialized collective.

Like the other protagonists of this chapter, Meyuhas and Elmaliah, Gaon did not contest these racial binaries, or question them. In his project of enumeration, Gaon affirmed, co-opted, and appropriated them for various political and national motivations. He did so primarily to highlight Mizrahi productivity and, as such, was able to show how Mizrahim were significantly active within the Zionist project. Additionally, Gaon’s bureaucratic knowledge about Mizrahim provided an efficient tool of surveillance, supported by racist policies and legislation. His type of sociological analysis of Mizrahim, characterized by a complexity of categories and sub-categories, must also be read as expression of administrative response to the struggles between capital and labor motivations within the emerging (pre-state) Yishuv (Dandeker 1990).

³²⁷ Ruppin 1936: 78–79.

³²⁸ While stressing that “the general type in Palestine will probably be more strongly Jewish of the general type in Europe, for it is to be expected that the more strongly Jewish types will be the ones that are most generally discriminated against in Europe, and it is they who feel themselves drawn toward a Jewish community in Palestine” (1933: 79).

Conclusion

The nexus between bureaucratic surveillance and projects of enumeration, cultural ways of knowing, and scientific discoveries—threads the protagonists of this chapter interweave—enabled a whole population to identify itself as Mizrahim. Exclusion, of course, was another way of knowing one’s Mizrahiness.³²⁹ If Said talked about “clichés” about the Orient between various pseudo-scientific and philosophical theories,³³⁰ in the case of Mizrahim we must complicate these processes and talk also about the role the so-called Orient had in forming and informing itself about its own Mizrahi persona and body. Here one must talk about the alliance of the same beliefs through which our protagonists claimed, defined, and defended their Mizrahiness. They remained in the paradoxical phase, where they continuously resisted the terminology, and, yet, they took advantage of it, appropriated it for various causes, and recharged it according to their changing needs.

What is more, attention ought to be given to the ways these figures co-opted, appropriated, and accentuated “Mizrahim” as a way to justify cultural political expediency at a time of high national tensions, as evidence of Otherness, as an instrument of belonging, as proof of their Zionist adherence, and as a tool to demonstrate their non-Arabness. An important caveat is in line here: Mizrahim must be examined as a product of very specific power dynamics that depended on gender, class, and geographic factors. A more nuanced reading of Mizrahim ought to take note of the particular patriarchal voices that try to construct and define “the sons of the *Mizrah*” and the different way this precluded or included “the daughters or the queer of the *Mizrah*.” We must also remember that Mizrahim was a class-based construction, where access to

³²⁹ Foucault 1978.

³³⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 205–206.

its public articulation and political claiming were given to a few, and depended on language and political affluence. Those who did not write or read in Hebrew were not able to determine its logo-centric formation.

The transformative power of Mizrahim was first and foremost located in a very specific locale of Jerusalem. While, at the same time, the construction of Mizrahi-self was also an invention of individuals and personalities, Gaon, Elmaliah, and Meyuhas were also related to a larger society of Jerusalem. What this chapter tried to analyze is the very intricate phenomenon that made this Sephardic trio—a reflection of a whole society—react and think about themselves and their histories as Mizrahim. Another way to look at it is as colonization of minds and imaginations in order to offer a powerful vantage point for intervention and change. All the narratives and dialogues in “From Sephardim to Mizrahim and The Politics of Palestinian Nativity, 1921–1923” emerge from historical perspective defined on the edge of the national project. These narratives push the limits of the Zionist project, disturb the conventional and acceptable view of the Mizrahi as a victim, the product and sum of political, national, and racial constraints.

Each of the three protagonists of this chapter developed a commitment to Mizrahim, whether as a notion of nativity, a cultural “type,” racial category, or all of the above. This chapter tried to track and examine changes and evolution of the idea of Mizrahim, not so much to find the material causes of this category but to show the various incentives that were at work in the shaping of Mizrahi-selves. All three of them had a significant contribution in presenting “Mizrahim” not only as the illusion of Mizrahim with a clear history and concreteness: Meyuhas provided the folkloristic foundations that enabled the division between the Jewish from the Arab residents of Palestine; Elmaliah devoted impressive efforts to steep Mizrahim with cultural

currency; Gaon enumerated, marked, and ranked the people he understood to be part of the Mizrahi public in a series of both internal protocols and public reports that circulated in mainstream Sephardic and Zionist venues.

Although each of our protagonists reacted in a different way to the idea of Mizrahim, what appeared beyond evident is their motivation to accentuate and idealize the so-called Mizrahi element. Without the creation of the Mizrahi illusion—ideal yet degenerate, Hebraic yet unprogressive—these individuals would not have been able to enter into their roles as leaders of an essentialized and marginalized Mizrahi community. In many ways, the propagation of the illusion of Mizrahim ensured and protected their authority and official roles. At the same time, although convergent, we must recognize that these multiple models of Mizrahim suppressed other deviant voices.

By deviants, I refer to certain individuals that did not agree with Zionist ideology and, thus, refused to accept their Mizrahimness. I also allude to other individuals that refused to see themselves as part of a unified Mizrahi group. Additionally, I take note of other individuals who perceived “Mizrahim” as term that was constantly in motion even as this idea has become normative, self-evident, a kind of universal truth. Some of these deviants are the focus of the next chapter.

Before Mizrahim became an accepted category for part of the broader Jewish world, Mizrahim was contingent to changing political, national, and social conditions in Palestine. As the next chapter will show, our protagonists realized that “Mizrahim” must not be limited to certain geographical and national frontiers. Indeed, they took it upon themselves to propagate the

notion of Mizrahi “exclusiveness” outside the geographical borderlines of Palestine, creating a World Federation in 1925.

Sephardim-Mizrahim in Transnational Perspective:

Organizing the World Federation (1925)

On the night of August 15, 1925, the Sephardic synagogue on Tzirkus Street in Vienna hosted a celebration brimming with unusual guests. Among those invited were sixty-two members of the Sephardic Assembly, representing a number of nations, including Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, Palestine, Bulgaria, Serbia, and England. For the next three days, they would meet in order to come to an agreement about the inception of the World Sephardic Federation, a new global entity that would unite the international Sephardic-Mizrahi community. The Palestinian-Sephardic delegates, the originators of this assembly, could not foresee the political conflicts, personal enmities, and national anxieties that this short-time gathering would breed.

This chapter explores how the assembly in Vienna transformed from an optimistic event to a barren platform for Palestinian Sephardim to advocate for the creation of the World Sephardic Federation. The goal of the Palestinian Sephardim, this chapter contends, was to demonstrate their marginalization in Palestine and to justify the need for a World Sephardic Federation centered in Jerusalem. In the process, they would essentialize and standardize the political constituency of Sephardim, and privilege Sephardim over the category of Mizrahim, on the basis of its ties with the glorious epoch of Jews in medieval Spain. Whereas the first chapter investigated the politicization of this term within the Palestinian context of 1918, and the second interrogated the ethnic specificity that the concept Sephardim gradually acquired in Palestine from 1921 to 1923, this chapter traces the emergence of new meanings of Sephardim in the broader pan-Jewish world outside of Palestine. Moreover, this chapter examines how Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders such as Abraham Elmaliah, Eliyahu Elishar, and Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Ouziel,

imitated and internalized Zionist logic and, at the same time, challenged this logic in order to gain access to positions of power in the Jewish national movement in Palestine.

To accomplish this examination, this chapter focuses on four trends that nurtured and later dominated the debates in Vienna. It begins with examining how and why the term “Sephardim” was favored by Palestinian-Sephardim in preparing for the international consolidation of a mélange of North-African, Middle-Eastern, and East European Jewish subjects. Second, it traces the invocation of Sephardic mythology and its legendary overtones by Federation delegates from Palestine (circa, 1923–1925), who wanted to cultivate a sense of Sephardic commonality and strategic alignment with European Jewry at the Vienna Conference. Third, it focuses on the resistance of the Bulgarian and Yugoslavian delegates who conspicuously viewed themselves as Ashkenazim in order to stress their “European” cultural and educational heritage and distinguish themselves from “the Moroccan-Jew and the Yemenite-Jew.”³³¹ Lastly, it argues that the construction of the Sephardic Assembly reflects the level of internalization of Zionist concepts and logic in order to enable political access to Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to the Zionist Organization. With the growth in stature of the assembly, however, Zionist institutions perceived in the Sephardic Federation a threat to Jewish “unity.” In light of that perception, this chapter also reveals Zionist attempts to limit the global growth of the Sephardic Federation, which led in 1926 to the recruitment of a Sephardic insider, Moshe David Gaon, who reported to the Palestine Zionist Organization about the Sephardic Assembly and its outcome.

Contextualizing the Creation of a Separate Sephardic-Mizrahi Entity in Palestine, 1921–1923

The vision of a Sephardic-Mizrahi alliance was first conceived within the confines of Palestine in 1918, and later spread abroad during the early and mid-1920s. As narrated in the first two chapters, one motivation for this alliance was the deep sense of separation from, disaffection with, and inferiority

³³¹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 16.

toward the Zionist Organization by Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders. This sense of exclusion had profound economic, demographic, and political consequences on the ways in which Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects imagined themselves. These sentiments intensified in the period from 1921 to 1923 and became an issue, along with the Palestinian-Arab question, for both the Zionists and the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to resolve.

From 1921 to 1923, the deliberate exclusion of Sephardic and Mizrahi delegates from leading positions in the Zionist organization affected their communities on multiple levels. First, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders realized that their lack of representation was most keenly felt in the distribution of financial support. Due to discrepancies in the allocation of funding, Sephardic and Mizrahi immigrants received scant material support.³³² Given the recurring tension over the issue of Sephardic-Mizrahi immigration, the Palestinian Assembly appointed a leading Sephardic activist, Moshe Attias, in March 1922 to oversee “Sephardic matters,” primarily in relation to issues of immigration to Palestine.³³³

Against a backdrop of Zionist indifference concerning the dire situation of Mizrahi-Sephardic settlers in Palestine, Attias realized the urgency in his mission, given that “Mizrahi communities are lacking in clear information concerning immigration . . . [while the Zionist organization] provides certificates [of immigration] but not much more than that.”³³⁴ Additionally, Attias’s appointment suggests the degree to which “Sephardic-Mizrahi” matters were not part of the general Zionist agenda, and thus

³³² See the multiple statistical data published by the Sephardic-Mizrahi party journal, *Pioneers of the East*, assembled by Moshe David Gaon, who documented and criticized the limited access of Mizrahi immigrants to Palestine in 1920-1924. In M. D. Gaon Archives, *Mizrahi Aliyah -1921-1923*, Packet No. 83, 1–3.

³³³ In between 1921 and 1923, the total number of 25,154 immigrants arrived to Israel-Palestine from Asia, North Africa, and primarily from Eastern-Europe. According the reports of the Jewish Agency and the Sephardic Council, 20,466 of the immigrants were Ashkenazi and only 4,688 were Sephardic-Mizrahi (less than twenty percent of the total number of immigrant during these years). This percentage would decrease in the coming years leading to the creation of the Israeli State (see Lissak 2009: 68–70; Boher 2002: 34–39; Giladi & Naor 1990: 462–463).

³³⁴ General Assembly Meeting from October 18, 1922, *The National Zionist Archives*, File 136/J1. Attias made these claims concerning a report by Abraham Elmaliyah about twenty families that came from Morocco and Iraq to Palestine without any permits and were therefore sent back to their home countries. Additionally, Elmaliyah informed the other members of the Assembly that it was the Sephardic Jews of Haifa that informed him about the affair “according to them, if they were *halutzim* [settlers] their issues would have been resolved.”

required a distinct entity to deal with this group. In other words, the Zionist dream was at the expense of Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects. Or, to put it another way, the Zionist project was being realized without regard to Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects.

Moreover, the denial of access to decision-making by the Zionist movement reached all levels of the Sephardic activists and institutions. While the years from 1918 to 1921 were marked by multiple models of coalition building by the *mélange* of Yemenite, Persian, Sephardic, and other North-African Jewish communities in the interest of supporting, imitating, and dismantling a sense of Zionist supremacy, by 1923 a growing number of inner conflicts had eroded the Sephardic-Mizrahi political bonding. In addition to the nationalist tensions between Zionists and Palestinians, which escalated after the violence in May 1921, and the countless skirmishes between Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities in Palestine/Israel,³³⁵ a number of conflicts erupted among various groups within the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition.

On August 21, 1923, the tensions between the young and secular leadership of the Sephardic Youth and the older and more orthodox leaders of the Sephardic Council expanded. Internal debates jeopardized the Sephardic-Mizrahi alliance to the point that, two months later,³³⁶ reports described further disagreements among the various members of the Sephardic coalition in Jerusalem.³³⁷ The grave implications of this internal strife made some fear that it could lead to the fragmentation of the Sephardic-Mizrahi union. The point was that the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition was rife with tensions, despite its efforts to project a unified front.

Because in the years leading up to 1925, internal as well as external tensions grew among the Sephardic-Mizrahi groups, its leaders called for an international organization that would globally unify

³³⁵ Additional details about these events are located in the *Central Zionist Archives*, File J1/137, Box J1/136.

³³⁶ Anonymous, "About the Sephardic Community in Haifa." In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], August 21, 1923, 4.

³³⁷ In the *Central Zionist Archives* file J1/135 (10.24.1923).

the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities within and beyond Palestine. Thus, attention must be given to the continuous efforts of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to impose a sense of unification of Sephardim-Mizrahim as a political strategy. For this leadership to access political privilege in relation to Zionist Organization meant the internalization of an exclusionary logic and establish political organizations that would present the Sephardic-Mizrahi divided entity. It is in this context that the rationale for the formation of the World Sephardic Federation must be analyzed.

Envisaging a World Sephardic-Mizrahi Federation

The construction of the Sephardic-Mizrahi faction had central consequences in the Yishuv but primarily in the broader Jewish world. The desire to form a distinct and unified Sephardic-Mizrahi World Federation was first publicly expressed on August 6, 1923, at the Thirteenth Zionist Congress in Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia. On the agenda were three austere ideas: 1) to increase and spread Jewish settlement in *Eretz Yisrael*; 2) to prepare for the opening of Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which was founded in 1925; and 3) to plan the establishment of the Jewish Agency as “a sovereign body directly representing the [Jewish] people as an integral body.”³³⁸ Yet, while this agenda is well-known, Jewish/Israel studies scholars have overlooked the more specific call to form a “strong” World Federation of “Mizrahi Jewry” [*ha-yahdut haMizrahit*]³³⁹ by David Avishar, a Sephardic political activist from Hebron and the pioneering figure of the *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*].³⁴⁰

³³⁸ Halpern 1969: 190.

³³⁹ “Notes and Remarks from the Thirteenth Zionist Congress.” In *1923/4 Report of the Pioneers of the East*. Jerusalem: 19–23.

³⁴⁰ Born in Hebron in 1887, David Avishar (originally David Agbebah) was a son of Babylonian (Iraqi) immigrants. He was first educated in religious schools in Hebron and then left to Beirut and then to Kusta to expand his learning. From his early teens, Avishar became a vocal Zionist activist, among a group of Sephardic-Zionist leaders such as Yehuda Burla, and Yitzchak Shemi. Like them, he advocated ideas of unity among the old and new Yishuv, while being affiliated with the Babylonian (Iraqi) Organization and the Sephardic Organization. Fluent in Arabic, French, Ladino, and Hebrew, Avishar published articles in multiple newspapers in Salonika, Cairo, and Jerusalem. From 1918 to 1924, Avishar was appointed the president of *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*]. In 1923, he

For the period of the twelve-day Zionist Congress, a number of representatives of the Sephardic coalition from Palestine met with other world Sephardic delegates, including H. Ardit (Bulgaria), D. Florentin (Salonika), S. Kelmi (London), to promote Avishar's vision of a unified World Mizrahim. During the Congress, Avishar addressed the Assembly of Sephardic delegates [*Asefat ha-Tzirim haSfardim*] and responded to questions about the meaning and condition of "Mizrahi Jewry" in Palestine.³⁴¹ In his speech, he expressed concerns that the national (Zionist) treatment of Mizrahi Jewish communities in Palestine and abroad, primarily in providing a solid financial support, was already diminishing "their [Mizrahi Jews] greater contribution to the building of *Eretz Yisrael*."³⁴² The idea of a World Mizrahi institution was a means to confront Zionist discrimination. Among his numerous proposals to the Zionists to accommodate and support Mizrahi immigrants to Palestine,³⁴³ Avishar expressed dissatisfaction with the ways the Zionist Organization refused to promote Mizrahi immigration to Palestine.

Avishar urged his Sephardic and Mizrahi counterparts "to take care of the Mizrahi immigrants [that were making their way to Palestine in small numbers]," because the Zionist organizations would not do so. Avishar's vocalization of the distress of Mizrahi and Sephardic Jewish communities in relation to the Zionist project enabled the mobilization of the Mizrahi category beyond the Palestinian context. Other leaders of the Sephardic and Mizrahi communities of Palestine such as the Chief Sephardic Rabbi, Yacov Meir, echoed Avishar's demands. Meir asserted that "although it is not comfortable at this moment to

was one of the key figures in envisaging and promoting the idea of a global Sephardic Federation. See Gaon 1937: 19–21; Haim 2000: 343.

³⁴¹ "Notes and Remarks from the Thirteenth Zionist Congress." In *1923/4 Report of the Pioneers of the East*. Jerusalem: 19–23.

³⁴² Ibid .

³⁴³ Avishar demanded, in the name of the Sephardic and Mizrahi coalition of Palestine, the following amendments to the Zionist relationship with Mizrahi Jewry. Ibid., 19.

awaken the treatment of Sephardic Jews by the Zionist leaders and organizations.”³⁴⁴ He refused to stifle his “frustration” [*hitmarmert*] with the Zionist organization.³⁴⁵ The rhetoric of “awakening” implies a Sephardic-Mizrahi sense of urgency and agency in “reliving” the honorable heritage of past golden age Spain. This semantic selection must not be read as an arbitrary decision. It would prove crucial in favoring the category of “Sephardim,” because its reference to a glorified past over “Mizrahim” as the heading of the World Sephardic Federation. Publicly, the Sephardic and Mizrahi representatives pledged their loyalty to the Zionist enterprise. At the same time, by suggesting the need for that a new Sephardic institution that would assume responsibility for materially supporting the neglected Mizrahi immigrants, they destabilized the Zionist (Ashkenazi) center.

The premise underlying Avishar and Levi’s proposals was that the problematic situation of the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine could only be resolved with aid from Sephardic-Mizrahi from outside Palestine. In other words, claims of marginalization and discrimination prompted the call for a World Sephardic Federation, primarily because the Zionists had repeatedly demonstrated their unwillingness to address, let alone recognize, the problem. To enforce this argument, in his report on the condition of the Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants to Palestine, a number of Sephardic leaders publicly acknowledged the dire material condition and lack of Zionist assistance of various Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements, including the Sephardic community in Haifa, Jaffa, and Petach-Tiqva.

Other communities beyond the Palestinian context would identify themselves as part of this Sephardic/Mizrahi group in order to “promote the condition of Sephardic Jews in Palestine as well as other Zionist communities in Palestine, the lands of the Mizrah [*artzot ha-Mizrah*], the Balkans, Bulgaria, Italy, Belgium, Syria, North Africa, and Egypt.”³⁴⁶ At this time, they were not sure whether their unified organization would promote Sephardic or Mizrahi ideas. These tensions between the categories of

³⁴⁴ The Text of Jacob Meir’s Speech during the Thirteenth Zionist Congress. In *1923/1924 Report of the Pioneers of the East*. Jerusalem: 31.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

“Sephardim” or/and “Mizrahim” were rooted in the admitted call to claim a glorious past and culture that needed to be “reawakened,” rather than be satisfied with the stagnation located in Mizrahi [*Eastern*] lands.

On the face of it, Zionists officials expressed their satisfaction with the initiatives of the Sephardic and Mizrahi leaders. According to the Sephardic report, Zionist leaders such as Nahum Sokolow and Dr. Chaim Weizmann met with Avishar and “paid close attention” to his requests.³⁴⁷ Yet after hearing the demands of the Sephardic leaders during the congress, Weizmann addressed the Sephardic issue only when referring to the Arab public: “enlightening the [Jewish] public about the Arabic population is the duty to which we must devote special attention and most of our efforts and energies. In order to do so we should involve the Sephardic Jews in the [Zionist] work, in a greater amount than we did in the past.”³⁴⁸ Weizmann thus responded to the matter of Zionist discrimination against Mizrahi and Sephardic settlers (primarily in relation to immigration issues) by trivializing Mizrahi frustration and demands of equality and, at the same time, linking one Eastern group to another: Mizrahi Jews as the carriers of inside knowledge and of the other Mizrahi non-Jews (Mizrahi Arabs).

The significance of Weizmann’s reply was in identifying Sephardic-Mizrahi population as insiders (Eyal 2006). The paradox—and a fearful paradox it was—was that the Sephardic-Mizrahi subject could have no future in the Zionist project because of his Mizrahi past. To claim this sense of Mizrahi history implied underlining the shared common Mizrahi culture (and race) of the Jewish and non-Jewish Mizrahi community in Palestine, thus asserting the limited role of Sephardim-Mizrahim within the Zionist project. Perhaps this could explain why a number of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders insisted on inventing and clinging to a glorified Sephardic past in order to set down at a Zionist’s door and be used by Zionist organizations.

³⁴⁷ In *1923/4 Report of the Pioneers of the East*. Jerusalem: 30.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

Moreover, by refusing to acknowledge Sephardic-Mizrahi over exclusion and grant greater representation, Weizmann and others perpetuated a sense of entitlement as well as dismissal of Mizrahi-Sephardic complaints. Nevertheless, the dismissive attitude toward Sephardic-Mizrahi concerns did not deter the Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates from acting on their ambition to form a World Sephardic-Mizrahi Federation. Their vision of a unified advocacy that would act as a welfare advocacy would generate many great conundrums upon the arrival of the Palestinian-Sephardic representatives to Palestine by the end of the Thirteenth Zionist Congress.

Privileging Sephardim over Mizrahim:

Final Preparations for the World Sephardic Federation

Following the Zionist Congress in August 1923, the Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership took the initiative and responsibility of promoting the vision of a unified Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewry with operation headquartered in Jerusalem. They saw themselves as Zionists who worked outside of the official Zionist Organization. After the Congress, a “Preparation Committee” [*Ha'misrad hamechin*] was convened to promote the optimistic vision of this coalition. Twelve members of the committee were elected from Palestine, including Sephardic-Mizrahi political activists, such as Abraham Elmaliah, Moshe David Gaon, Moshe Attias, and Rabbi Ouziel.

For the next two years, until the formation of the World Sephardic Federation, the members of the Preparation Committee met a number of times to mobilize their international coalition. Four developments are of special interest. First, they accepted the Zionist thinking that regarded Palestine/Israel as the center of world Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewry and the broader Jewish world. Second, Ladino emerged as the privileged language over Arabic or Hebrew. Third, a list of honorary presidents for the Federation was prearranged. Fourth, led by the statistical data of Sephardic-Mizrahi communities by Gaon, the committee sent inviting letters to various Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Italy, Greece,

Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Belgium, Morocco, Algeria, Tunis, Libya, Syria, Egypt and Iraq. These locations demonstrated their desire to amalgamate all *Mizrahi* [Eastern] communities, which could be represented by the new organization.

Perhaps because of their lack of communication with North African and Middle-Eastern Jewish communities, or simply as a maneuver to gain more access to economic resources in the face of European donors, the Preparation Committee made another crucial decision, to change the name of the federation from “World Mizrahi Federation” to “World Sephardic Federation.” Much remains unclear about this change—was this a unanimous vote? Was this change made only among the Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders? What were the political strategies that motivated this decision? Who led this shift? And how did it come about? Written correspondence between the Sephardic and Mizrahi delegates reveals deep concern about the implications of this semantic shift. On June 28 1924, Meir Gino, the Jerusalem-born Sephardic activist, cautioned the other members of the Sephardic party, *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*], about the possible division that the use of the term “Sephardim” might produce in their movement. He writes, “Our party might lose its support and the Ashkenazi followers that joined us would leave.”³⁴⁹ It was the fear of “*hitbadlut*” [isolation] that the category of “Sephardim” might yield that alarmed him.³⁵⁰ Instead of “World Sephardic Federation,” Gino suggested that the new organization be called the “Office of *Aliyah* and Immigration [to *Eretz Israel*],”³⁵¹ a name that could persuade various Sephardic as well as Ashkenazi donors to contribute to the “awakening” of the needed communities.³⁵²

³⁴⁹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Letter of Meir Gino to the Preparation Committee of the Zionist Communities in the Mizrahi Countries*, in the Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322, File 321, 1–2.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁵¹ The term *Aliyah* [ascending] implies the immigration of Jewish communities in the Diaspora to Eretz Yisrael. Gino’s suggestion to name the global Sephardic-Mizrahi center as an “Office of *Aliyah* nad Immigration” comes to show the centrality of Zionist ideology and political activism in the creation of the World Sephardic Federation. At the same time, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders claimed that the Zionist Organization did not encourage the immigration of Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants to Eretz Yisrael. As a result, Sephardic-Mizrahi activists, such as Gino, found themselves representing a national project that they constantly felt they were excluded from.

³⁵² The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Letter of Meir Gino to the Preparation Committee of the Zionist Communities in the Mizrahi Countries*, in the Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322, File 321, 1–2.

Gino's fear of isolation proved prescient. To foster the illusion of a homogenized political and cultural entity, the Preparation Committee of the World Sephardic Federation was interested in engendering and promoting a sense of Sephardic distinctiveness. It was a conscious strategic maneuver by the Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership to construct the category of "Sephardim" through a lens of exclusion and particularity (or even tribalism). The protocols of the Preparation Committee reveal the determination of its members "to veto any financial aid from the Zionist organization" toward the establishment of financially independent World Sephardic Federation.³⁵³ Their contradictory relationship with the Zionist organization stemmed from a desire for "economical clout" that would enable them to "demand their portion from the [Zionist] general campaign."³⁵⁴ Thus, when it came to electing an honorary president, the members of the "Preparation Committee" intensely fought over the language the candidate spoke. One important factor in selecting the "right" candidate was their fluency in Ladino language, especially in considering Moshe Pichotto for the position.³⁵⁵ Notwithstanding his lack of fluency in Ladino, Pichotto was eventually elected. A crucial deciding factor was his "popular" status and acquaintance with Sephardic-Mizrahi communities across Europe, which would translate into using his popularity to collecting a great amount of donations to the global Sephardic organization.³⁵⁶

In 1924, the Preparation Committee issued a number of pamphlets in various languages (French, English, Arabic, and Hebrew) that spanned various Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Eastern and

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Moshe (Daniel De) Pichotto was born in Halab (Syria) in 1868. He was a student at the Alliance school where he became fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, English, and French. In his early teens and following the death of his father, Pichotto was adopted by his uncle, Raphael Pichotto, who originally came from Livorno until his appointment as a counselor in Austria. From the age of eighteen, Pichotto used his family ties, and began to trade in textile all across Europe, including Austria, Germany, Belgium, and France. After a short sojourn in Brussels (Belgium) from 1900 to 1907, he moved to Manchester (England) and stayed there until 1923. During his stay in England, he became a key figure in the Zionist enterprise and a close friend to Chaim Weizmann. In 1923, Pichotto immigrated to Eretz Yisrael. As a result of growing disagreements with Zionist leaders, he met with Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders from Jerusalem and offered an "organizational plan of a Sephardic-Mizrahi institution that would prevent Zionist discrimination against Mizrahi Jews" (Gaon 1937: 546; Haim 2000: 356).

³⁵⁶ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Protocols of the Electing Committee and Possible Candidates to the World Sephardic Organization*, in the Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322, File 320, 1.

Central Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. One of these pamphlets stated the Palestinian Sephardim wish to “unite all Mizrahi-Jewry to increase their participation in the living work” of nation-building.³⁵⁷ Elsewhere, they announced the need “to institutionalize Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewry.”³⁵⁸ On February 11, 1924, six months before to the World Sephardic Federation meeting, a (Palestinian) Mizrahi Federation assembled in Jerusalem. Thirty-two Mizrahi delegates representing Persian, Iraqi, Kurd, and Yemenite communities from various locales in Palestine attended the gathering to hear the Preparation Committee and celebrate the fledging alliance. Given the optimism surrounding the establishment of the World Sephardic Federation, we should not view the organization simply as the elitist enterprise of a select number of Sephardic-Mizrahi representatives, but rather as an ambitious project that endeavored to incorporate and represent the 40,000-strong Sephardic community from Hebron, Jaffa, Jerusalem, Har-Tuv, Petach-Tiqva, Haifa, and Tiberias.³⁵⁹

The Meeting:

Taking the Unified Vision of Palestinian-Sephardim Beyond Palestine

The convention in Vienna’s “Turkish Prayer House”³⁶⁰ in August 1925 marked the first time that representatives of this constituency met for an exclusively Sephardic event. It was also the first time that Sephardic leaders publicly conversed about the possibility of creating an official organization uniting all Sephardim. A number of Sephardic representatives were invited,

³⁵⁷ Pamphlet. “The Report of the Preparation Committee – Arranging the World Sephardic Federation, 1924–1925.” Raphael Haim Cohen Print: Jerusalem, 1.

³⁵⁸ Pamphlet. “Second Report of the Preparation Committee – Arranging the World Sephardic Federation, 1924.” Azriel Print: Jerusalem, 4.

³⁵⁹ “The Protocols of the National Assembly of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem on February 11, 1925.” In *The Election Affair* (Azriel Print: Jerusalem, 1925), 1–40.

³⁶⁰ The site of this World Sephardic gathering was the Sephardic synagogue in Vienna, destroyed years later during the Second World War.

primarily from central and eastern Europe. The sixty-two delegates hailed from various communities, including Vienna, Belgrade, Korfu, Salonika, Sarajevo, Lisbon, and Jerusalem. Apart from Palestine, representatives from Jewish communities in North Africa and the Middle East did not attend the meeting. Whether through long and exhausting voyages from Jaffa to Vienna,³⁶¹ or brief train trips across central Europe, most of the invited delegates arrived on time. Instrumental to this punctuality was the fact that the Fourteenth Zionist Congress was also taking place in Vienna—from August 18 to August 21—two days after the world Sephardic meeting.

Three primary sources document this event. The first is the official protocol of the assembly, which is at the center of this analysis. The second is the supplemental protocol of the assembly, which includes comments and speeches effaced from the official version. The third source, released a few months later in January 1926, appears in the reports by Gaon, *the Sephardic Informer*, about this event. Together, these three documents demonstrate the emotional and political investment of the different factions of Sephardim in maintaining a particular meaning of *Sephardim*. All three primary documents begin their reporting on the Sephardic assembly with an emphasis on the words of Rabbi Ouziel.

Rabbi Ouziel opened with a greeting.³⁶² Known for his enthusiastic public appearances, Ouziel employed biblical idioms to emphasize the historical importance of this event. Thus, according to his logic, providence made the Zionist project of nation-building synonymous with the awakening of a Sephardic national consciousness. Like a prophet on a mountaintop, he announced: “The legend says that in the morning of atonement day . . . with the rise of the sun

³⁶¹ Abraham Elmaliah, “From Jerusalem to Vienna.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol. 1, August 10, 1925, 4.

³⁶² One may assume, like most of the discussions during the gathering, was in Ladino (the Judaeo-Spanish dialect).

the leader of the work commanded . . . unite and gather all the people to one national body.”³⁶³

This reference to divine intervention persisted throughout his address. By the will of God, he suggested, the formation of the assembly was inevitable. “And I believe that God’s blessing and advice will serve our assembly.”³⁶⁴ He informed his listeners that, “with deepest craving and longing I always anticipated that God’s redemption would give rise to a spirit of awakening among us [Sephardim] that would assemble the broken pieces of the nation.”³⁶⁵ Ouziel’s reference to an ultimate authority necessarily sacralized the national Jewish project and the declaration of a “Sephardic reawakening.”³⁶⁶

He stated clearly the evolution of the present crisis within Sephardic communities. “Brothers and Teachers, in the last few years I was highly impressed by the biblical knowledge and wisdom of our great forefathers, the leaders of our communities in Babylon and [our] wise authors in Spain, in a sharp eye I have observed our spiritual decline in our exilic Mizrahi nations.”³⁶⁷ Spain, for him, stood in contrast to Mizrah. Spain appeared the locus of an enlightened Jewish heritage, while the Mizrah seemed the reason for Jewish backwardness and intellectual stagnation. In this perpetual process of separation, Ouziel identified himself and his crowd with a Sephardic idealized past, conceived (European) culture against “the exilic Mizrahi nations,” and he asked his audience to think of Sephardim as a distinctive ethnic entity. He went on to compare the transition between these two historical moments and geographies with the

³⁶³ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in the Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 1. It is also important to note that the Official Protocols of the Assembly could be found in M. D. Gaon Archives, located in The National Library, Jerusalem, Israel.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

movement between a “glorious past” and “bleak present.”³⁶⁸ While the past instilled “a sense of national pride,” the current condition of Sephardim evoked in Ouziel a “notion of shame and agony.”³⁶⁹

Ouziel used Sephardic mythology to project onto the current “bleak reality” of Sephardim in Palestine an ideal standard of intellectual and national prosperity that many believed had flourished in medieval Spain. In his mind, and perhaps for many listeners, following their expulsion and dispersion to “Mizrahi countries and culture,” this population did not progress, either intellectually or culturally or in terms of developing national consciousness. Thus, the myth of Sephardic enlightenment was replaced with another myth of Sephardic decline. In his narrative, a semantic emphasis on the fiction of *Sepharad* (Spain) anchored his vision of a World Sephardic Federation. To announce the global existence of Sephardim meant retrieving an ancient identity rooted in antiquity though an unsustainable past. This retrieval and intimation of the Sephardic past implied an insistence on the illusion of a distinctive Sephardic history, ethnicity, and consciousness, which could be savored and even revisited.

At the end of the first day, Ouziel was elected as the yet unformed federation’s honorary president. Delegates from Salonika, Belgrade, Vienna, Salonika, and Manchester were also appointed to leading positions. In a matter of hours, officials were elected to an organization that had not yet even come into existence. No reason was given for the appointments, and no description of their roles and obligations. The first day concluded at 11 p.m. with remarks about the significance of an active Sephardic settlement in Palestine.

³⁶⁸ Ibid.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

Presenting the Hopes of the Palestinian-Sephardim

On Sunday, August 16, a detailed plan was presented by a Planning Committee³⁷⁰ to discuss issues related to Sephardic immigration and settlement in Palestine. Starting at 10 a.m., the opening formalities shed light on the various politics and motivations of the Palestinian-Sephardim organizations. Letters and telegrams written by absent Sephardic leaders that championed the inception of the Federation were read. The head of the Jerusalem Preparation Committee Dr. Yitzchak Levi, who was not present at the assembly, demanded shared responsibility for the Sephardic-Jewish community in the Yishuv. His directive was direct and uncompromising: “Delegates! This great hour asks from us to invest great efforts and power, as I hope that your honorable assembly will result in creating in Palestine [*Eretz Yisrael*] the much needed institutions and infrastructure that will aid the immigrants arriving to our holy-land.”³⁷¹ Similar to Ouziel’s opening speech, Levi extolled the glorious Sephardic past as the ideal model for a Sephardic present and future: “I believe that with consistent work and by uniting our efforts [we] will help Sephardic Jewry retrieve its days of glory and golden age [*tkufat ha-zahav*].”³⁷² Levi was not alone in hailing Palestine as the site of a new pinnacle of Sephardic culture, a vision deeply conditioned by past mythologies.

A letter sent from the leadership of the *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*], the Sephardic political group based in Jerusalem, stated, “Representatives! All the eyes of Israel rest on you. May this first federation in relation to our nation achieve greatness, may our people be

³⁷⁰ The Preparation Committee consisted of Palestinian representatives, including Rabbi Ouziel, Abraham Elmaliah, and Eliyahu Elishar. The work of the committee began in mid-August 1923 and after the thirteenth Zionist Congress ended in Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia. In the period from 1923 to 1925, the Committee sent out various pamphlets and questioners, and organized multiple preliminary conferences in order to better prepare for the creation of the World Sephardic Federation.

³⁷¹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 6.

³⁷² Ibid.

awakened, as the hour of redemption has arrived!”³⁷³ Meanwhile, an additional missive, mailed from *ha-Va’ad Leumi* [*The General Assembly*], expressed hope that the federation would “bring a blessing to Sephardic Jewry and to the idea of revival [*hithadshut*] as a free and liberated nation in our country.”³⁷⁴ This two-fold emphasis, reconfiguring Sephardic authenticity in Palestine ideologically aligned with Jewish national revival, and reclaiming an idealized Sephardic past to affirm contemporaneous ethnic division, was further amplified in the two speeches that followed.

In the first speech, Abraham Elmaliah, prominent advocate for the World Sephardic Federation, discussed the past and current condition of Sephardim. In the second speech, the president of the Preparation Committee, Meir Lagnado, building on Elmaliah’s narrative of the Sephardic past, acknowledged the lack of “Zionism among the Sephardic element,”³⁷⁵ and discussed the possibility of a Sephardic sense of “self-liberation.”³⁷⁶ His speech, moreover, emphasized the communal and national implications of the creation of an exclusive Sephardic party.

Lagnado was concerned with “[t]hose who disapproved of the idea of our [Sephardic] coalition.”³⁷⁷ Their disapproval, perhaps referring to an essentialized Ashkenazi/Zionist entity, was based on the fact that “[they] wrongfully blamed us [Sephardim] for separating ourselves [*hitbadlut*].”³⁷⁸ Although he did not reveal the personalities or organizations that dismissed the

³⁷³ Ibid., 7.

³⁷⁴ Ibid.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 8.

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

³⁷⁷ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 11.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

idea of an independent Sephardic organization, he urged his audience that “we [Sephardim] perceive ourselves as a political party [*miflaga*], and whereas each party may insist on its demands and its selfish agendas without apologizing for it, that should be allowed to us, for our demands do not intend to ruin but only to replenish.”³⁷⁹ The insistence “to perceive of ourselves as a party” was imperative, for it was a tactical proposition that enabled access to economical and political power. The central aim of this Sephardic party would be to “collect money.”³⁸⁰ The work of this party would concentrate its efforts on generating support “among Sephardic communities outside Palestine/Israel.”³⁸¹

Lagnado’s declaration about the formation of a Sephardic party, its motivation, and strategy, received reinforcement from Rabbi Ouziel at the day’s concluding remarks. Ouziel words read as a concise list of expectations by the Palestinian-Sephardim of the Sephardic party, and outlined the significance of the Sephardim outside Palestine in founding and funding this Sephardic organization. Ouziel reminded his listeners that “the center that would be created in Israel and which would center the work in Palestine [*Eretz Yisrael*] and abroad”³⁸² would need the aid of the World Federation and its members. Additionally, he defined the specific role of the Sephardic party. First, the party would “provide material as well as mental support for Sephardic immigrants [to Palestine-Israel].”³⁸³ Second, it would “aid the [Sephardic] immigrants [primarily from East Europe and North Africa] in finding employment, whether in settlement or daily

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Ibid.

³⁸² The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 12.

³⁸³ Ibid.

labor.”³⁸⁴ Third, while reclaiming Palestine-Israel as the center of Sephardic progress and awakening, Ouziel envisaged the role of the Sephardic party that would be to provide “Hebrew teachers and educators to the exile [*golah*] [the nations outside of Israel].”³⁸⁵ In other words, Ouziel and his fellow Palestinian-Sephardic delegates used the term “Sephardim” and its history and mythology tactically, to win ideological and financial support from Sephardic communities outside Palestine. Of course, to have the term “Sephardim” resonate and attract political and economical support in the Jewish world outside Palestine, multiple historical and cultural narratives were strategically constructed and intrinsically sustained by the Sephardic leaders from Palestine. In the platform of the World Sephardic Federation these narratives became a space of cultivation, instruction, and manipulation about and of Sephardim. With Ouziel’s words, the first meeting ended. However, not many could have anticipated the controversy that his proposition would stir.

“We Are More Ashkenazi than Sephardic”:

Resisting the Vision of the Palestinian Sephardim

Unlike the first meeting, led by the Palestinian-Sephardic leadership, the second session of the assembly gave voice to responses of Sephardim outside of Palestine. Nine delegates from Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Serbia spoke during the second meeting. According to the official protocol, each speaker had an opportunity to express his thoughts and doubts without interruption. In comparison to the first meeting of the first day that continued for three hours, the second meeting lasted for six hours. Although the protocols do not capture the tone or urgency of each speaker’s passions and interaction with one another, these performances can be imagined

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

based on the consistent refutations to the understanding of the term *Sephardim* proposed by the Palestinian-Sephardim. During this assembly, the Eastern European Sephardic speakers posed three overriding arguments against the necessity of establishing a Sephardic political party in Palestine, its ethnic roots, and its possible relationship with the various Zionist organizations.

For a number of delegates the mere idea of a (world) Sephardic Organization was simply unacceptable for multiple reasons. Abraham Recanati from Salonika (Greece), for instance, viewed the term “Sephardim” as an ethnicity that did not necessarily entail a common political ground. He rejected the politicization of the Palestinian-Sephardic representatives, arguing that “political parties are created when they hold widely known ideologies, while among us, Sephardim, no such ideologies apply for we include members from all across the political spectrum, from the right to the extreme left.”³⁸⁶ Recanati was not alone in his rejection of the politicization of Sephardic ethnicity.

Dr. Bertzo Poluokin, the Sephardic representative from Yugoslavia, concurred with Recanati: “Each part has to have a clear ideology that justifies its existence and, at the same time, provides an ideological foundation, which was not provided by the speakers from *Eretz Yisrael*.”³⁸⁷ Thus, because Sephardim had no political foundation or “ideology,” it should remain as a modifier, a signifier, of an identity or an ethnicity. Other speakers elaborated on the implied dangers on forming such a Sephardic faction. David Farhi, the Sephardic delegate from Bulgaria, stated, “we Sephardim cannot present ourselves as political party.”³⁸⁸ Farhi’s explanation was slightly different from Recanati’s argument, as he asserted that, “Political parties are based on ideological agendas and not on the basis of technical differences such as language and a lower

³⁸⁶ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 13.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

cultural condition [*matzav tarbuti namuch*].”³⁸⁹ But beyond his doubts about the feasibility of a Sephardic political agenda, Farhi feared the impact of the Sephardic Federation on the Zionist organizations. His reasoning was direct and blunt, “I am afraid that one day we will declare that the World [Sephardic] Federation is not attached to the Zionist organizations.”³⁹⁰ Thus, Farhi doubted the wisdom of a unified World Sephardic Federation, not only because of the lack of a shared ideology but also because of the political threat this federation might exhibit on Zionist authority. This leads to the second counterargument, concern over the Sephardic federation breaking away from the Zionist organization in Palestine.

Other Sephardic delegates echoed Farhi’s concerns. They were also apprehensive about the repercussions of forming a World Sephardic federation and the extent to which this entity might endanger, destabilize, or even oppose Zionist authority. Although we must remember that Zionist movement contained multiple perspectives and voices, the Sephardic delegates perceived Zionism as a unified and homogenized entity. Dr. Shaul Mezan, who like Farhi represented the Sephardic community from Bulgaria, expressed that he was already alarmed by the activities of the Preparation Committee. Using the plural “we” to highlight the fact that he spoke in the name of all Bulgarian-Sephardim, Mezan claimed, “[w]e already noticed . . . in multiple pamphlets of the “Preparation Committee” a particular sense of partition [*hitbadlut*].”³⁹¹ Mezan, a poet and journalist, who during the same year formulated a study of the history of Bulgarian Jewry in

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 18.

French, argued against the approach of the Palestinian-Sephardim, which prompted an internal divide within the international Sephardic bloc.³⁹²

To his audience, Mezan disclosed the following occurrences: “When we [Bulgarian-Jewry] approached the question of founding a Bulgarian-Jewish settlement [in Palestine], then many have asked us—why should you give your money to the Keren hayesod . . . [and various Zionist organizations], why would you give your money to the Ashkenazim, [instead] you should give your money to establish a community for our [Sephardic] sons.”³⁹³ To be sure, a growing rift based on ethnic division loomed and disturbed other Sephardic delegates. While Mezan and other members of Bulgarian-Sephardim expressed a clear stance, still others appeared perplexed and torn between their Sephardic-ethnic and their national-Zionist inclinations. Dr. Moritz Levy, the Sephardic representative from Bulgaria, addressed his uncertainty, “And now that the question of the World Sephardic Federation arises we don’t know how to treat it. If we will stop our work with the Ashkenazim, from a national standpoint it will not be considered as a separation, but from a local point of view it will be part of partition. We are clueless [*ovdei-etzot*] and we don’t know what decision to make.”³⁹⁴ To resolve this national and ethnic dilemma, a number of Sephardic delegates began questioning the ethnic and cultural Sephardic/Ashkenazi binary that was promoted by the Palestinian-Sephardim.

Third, a number of Sephardic delegates from Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were now dismissing the federation on grounds that it also included the diverse Mizrahi community, but the Palestinian-Sephardim had decided to exclude Mizrahim from their name, perhaps anticipating

³⁹² Julia Phillips Cohen & Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Sephardic Scholarly Worlds: Toward a Novel Geography of Modern Jewish History.” In *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 100, No. 3 (Summer 2010): 362.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 17.

this sort of behavior from the European Sephardim. The European Sephardim challenged the Sephardic/Ashkenazi paradigm by arguing for their Bulgarian-Ashkenazi allegiance. At the same time, they accentuated their cultural and ideological detachment from Mizrahi Jews, such as Yemenite, Moroccan, or Persian Jewish communities. In other words, they used the term “Sephardim” to emphasize their ties with “European” culture. Farhi, for example, asserted that Bulgarian-Sephardim could not be separated from their Ashkenazi neighbors: “Among us the Sephardim and Ashkenazim stand on the same cultural level [*niv tarbuti ehad*]”.³⁹⁵ His opposition to the Sephardic Federation was unequivocal: “We cannot agree with the creation of a distinct Sephardic federation.”³⁹⁶ Other representatives from Bulgaria made similar claims. For Mezan, Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria were more “familiar with the Ashkenazi-Jews who reside nearby” than with “Jews from Morocco, Manchester, or Yemen.”³⁹⁷ But this assertion was not limited to the Sephardic delegates from the Balkans, and primarily from Bulgaria.

Dr. Itzhak (Isaac) Alkalay, the Sephardic delegate from Yugoslavia, made a similar assertion, arguing that, “in Yugoslavia the Sephardim and Ashkenazim have strong and everlasting relationship.”³⁹⁸ Both the Bulgarian and Yugoslavian Sephardic delegates agreed on two issues. On the one hand, deploying the category of Sephardim as their European and cultural alibi, they were reluctant to agree to form a Sephardic faction that might undermine the Zionist organization. On the other hand, they consciously insisted on breaking the ethnic link between the Mizrahi and Sephardic narratives forged by the Palestinian-Sephardim. While recognizing the shared cultural values between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, the Bulgarian and Yugoslavian

³⁹⁵ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 15.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 16.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 17.

representatives argued at length on behalf of “the neglected condition of a number of Mizrahi communities [*kehilot Mizrahiyot*], including [the Jewish communities] in North Africa, Syria, and more.”³⁹⁹ This insistence on division between Mizrahim and Sephardim is particularly interesting because of the participation of the Palestinian-Yemenite representative in the second assembly, who recognized himself part of the Sephardic Organization.

H. Z. Galuska, the head of the Yemenite council in Palestine and a member of the Sephardic Council in Palestine, did not address the argumentative havoc or any of the points the delegates raised. As a matter of fact, he was not even able to decipher the Ladino dialect in which the discussions were conducted. This reminds us that the language politics demarcated clear means of exclusion, where non-Ladino speakers were not able to take part in the World Sephardic Federation. Linguistically isolated, Galuska described in Hebrew-language his “delight in these moments where his Sephardic brethren gathered here from their exilic lands in order to think together about how and through which means they might protect the rights of Sephardic Jews in particular and of Mizrahi Jews in general.”⁴⁰⁰ He then apologized for not attending the rest of the meetings due to his “busy schedule concerning the Yemenite Committee in the Zionist Congress that will open in two days.”⁴⁰¹ He also excused his early departure because of his “unfamiliarity with the Ladino language,” noting that, “for most of your delegates are not familiar with the Hebrew language.”⁴⁰² He ended his short speech by affirming the value of the convention, saying, “I think it is about time that we unite in order to protect our rights that

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁰⁰ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 15.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

have been denied thus far.”⁴⁰³ Galuska saw himself representing the Sephardic community for a very particular cause: to unite with and empower a larger marginalized entity, of which he was part in 1920s Palestine.

As the debates outlined above indicate, the negotiation of the concept of Sephardim was not a one-sided affair. While examining the second assembly, we must take note of the cultivation of the term “Sephardim,” and how various delegates used it to consolidate entities, histories, and ethnicities on the basis of equality or inequality, the result of a political reality. And it was for this reality that the idea of Sephardim must be reexamined as a strategy that would have racial implications in the coming years. In the first day and the first assembly of the second day, we see how the Palestinian-Sephardic delegates, led by Rabbi Ouziel, thought about the idea of “Sephardim” in terms of isolation and conflict between Ashkenazim and Sephardim within the Palestinian context. Throughout the second assembly of the second day, however, Bulgarian and Yugoslavian representatives deployed the term “Sephardim” to accentuate the division between Mizrahim and Sephardim and, at the same time, to align the Sephardic discourse with European/Ashkenazi culture.

Negotiating Various Notions of European-Sephardim

The third and last assembly of the day began at a late-night hour. The agenda for the third assembly simply read: “The continuation of discussion about the question of the world [Sephardic] federation.”⁴⁰⁴ But one can imagine the arguments were heated, because this meeting lasted for more than three hours, past midnight. The two ideological camps, as we have already

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 18.

tracked during the second assembly, continued to contend with each other throughout the final meeting of the second day. While different speakers approached the speaking podium, they were constantly dealing with ideological patterns, trying to isolate, reinvent, and separate the concept of Sephardim from ethnic or cultural categories.

The first argumentative position followed in the footsteps of the Bulgarian and Yugoslavian representatives, stating that Sephardic culture is aligned with Ashkenazi/European culture, and, therefore the Mizrahi and the Sephardic narratives must remain separated. Moreover, the inception of an independent Sephardic federation, which might compete with Zionist organizations, must not happen. Such was also the argument of the first speaker of the third assembly, Joseph Levy, another Sephardic-Bulgarian delegate to the assembly.

Although Levy insisted that he did “not intend to talk as the representative of the whole Bulgarian-Jewry, as his other two friends,”⁴⁰⁵ he did highlight the fact that Bulgarian-Sephardim were, as a matter of fact, Ashkenazim. To Levy, the Sephardic Jewish community in Bulgaria “internalized” the “Ashkenazi element.”⁴⁰⁶ By referencing the incorporation of the “Ashkenazi element” into the “Sephardic element,” he explained why “we do not understand the reasons and motivation that propel the inception of a World Sephardic Federation.”⁴⁰⁷ Instead of a political and economic emphasis, Levy envisaged a Sephardic organization that would work under the guidance of the World Zionist Organization, focusing more on the aspect of “cultural work” in various Sephardic communities.

The opposing stance tried to accentuate the difference between Sephardim and Ashkenazim and to highlight the need for a separate Sephardic organization that would support

⁴⁰⁵ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 18.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

Sephardic/Mizrahi immigrants and residents in Palestine. After Levy, four speakers attempted to persuade the various delegates, and primarily the Bulgarian-Sephardic speakers, about the necessity of creating a World Sephardic Federation.

The first task was to demarcate a common sense of Sephardim from the “Ashkenazi element.” David Florentine, the Salonikan-Sephardic representative to the assembly, attempted to cultivate an internal as well as outward sense of Sephardic-particularity:

A Sephardic man who will enter a café will instinctively sit next to another Sephardic and will prefer to speak to him rather than with the one who is not Sephardic. A Jew from Salonika who will arrive to *Eretz Yisrael* will prefer to invest in mercantile together with another Salonikan-Jew rather than with a Jew from Warsaw or elsewhere. This phenomenon, influencing individuals as well as communities, is also prevalent among us, Sephardim, as a large collective of individuals that share some common characteristics.⁴⁰⁸

Highlighting “common” Sephardic characteristics and patriotism, was a strategy to advance Florentine’s central claim concerning “the decreasing number of Sephardic farmers [in Palestine].”⁴⁰⁹ His concluded by claiming that “A strong [Sephardic] institution is needed that will guide the [Sephardic] community and will demand what it deserves from the Zionist organization.”⁴¹⁰ Moreover, like others, he insisted that the Sephardic Federation should work with the Zionist Assembly. He also stressed the fact that the Sephardic Federation “does not need to report back about its activities and work.”⁴¹¹ He asked the other Sephardic delegates to “stand guard,” perhaps insinuating the threat of and the response by the Zionist organization to the inception of a Sephardic Federation. Florentine ended his words with threatening remarks

⁴⁰⁸ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 19.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 20.

directed at the Bulgarian-Sephardic delegates: he would like a consensus among the delegates, but it should be clear to them that even if “they insist on opposing” the work toward the creation of the Sephardic Federation, it would nevertheless proceed.⁴¹²

The next speaker continued to pressure in the Bulgarian delegates. Eliyahu Elishar, the Sephardic delegate from Palestine (Jerusalem), emphasized the difference between the Sephardic immigrants and the Ashkenazi immigrants in Palestine. While the latter were supported by various organizations and institutions, in his view, the Sephardic immigrants did “not find any support when arriving to Palestine/Israel.”⁴¹³ As a result, Elishar asserted, “in many cases the Sephardic immigrant returned to their land, not before they denounced our land [Palestine/Israel].”⁴¹⁴ Having reviewed the condition of Sephardic immigrants upon their arrival to Palestine/Israel, Elishar designated the arrival of Bulgarian-Sephardim to Palestine as the responsibility of the Bulgarian delegates.

He bluntly addressed the Bulgarian-Sephardic delegates, challenging their comprehension of “whether they really do not comprehend the importance in forming a Sephardic organization.” Elishar asked, “Why did they appoint Mr. Ben-Yosef in order to aid the five-hundred Bulgarian that arrived during the last year [to Palestine] and didn’t rely on the Zionist Assembly?”⁴¹⁵ Additionally, by invoking the paradigm of the powerless Sephardic victim against the powerful Ashkenazi victimizer, Elishar insisted again on the division between the two ethnic groups. This emphasis on marginalization enabled him to return to the Mizrahi category,

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

insisting that, “The Mizrahi immigrant could benefit [the nation] greatly.”⁴¹⁶ The shift from the Sephardic to the Mizrahi narrative, or even the integration of them, was primarily to admonish diaspora Sephardim about their responsibility to unite as a homogeneous community, a unification based on abjection in the Palestinian context.

Elishar’s attack did not offer a solution, and Rabbi Ouziel tried to take advantage of Elishar’s polemic argument. Ouziel asked the Sephardic delegates to vote on the creation of a central Sephardic organization that would have various representatives in the Diaspora. As the protocols of the assembly laconically read, “Uziel’s request was rejected.”⁴¹⁷ The gulf between the two sides appeared unbridgeable. The last two speakers, Mr. Moshe Lulu, the Palestinian-Sephardic representative (originally from Tiberias) and Dr. Mark Romano, the Bulgarian-Sephardic delegate, rehashed the competing arguments, with their speeches perpetuating the fracture. It seemed that a resolution was out of reach. At twenty minutes after midnight, the last speaker finished. Each side made its way out, perhaps with the hope that the final day of the assembly would offer some resolution to this ideological impasse.

Travesty in the Making:

Compromising the Palestinian-Sephardic Vision

The protocols for the last day of the Sephardic assembly include many corrections: both content-based revisions and editorial corrections interrupt the record of events. Although the editor is unknown, it is evident that various Sephardic delegates had made some “unaccepted” declarations against the Zionist project. Before examining what made those assertions

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 21.

inappropriate, why they were effaced, and even before questioning the reasons, individuals and motivations in self-censoring, we must first compare the “palimpsest” with the “official account” of the events that occurred on the decisive final day.

On Monday, August 18, 1925, the Sephardic delegates reconvened in the morning to make final decision about the inception of the World Sephardic Federation. The two sides were about to confront each other, and the fear of division among the Sephardim loomed large. With the Fourteenth Zionist Congress two days away, both sides were interested in a resolution—whether temporary, fleeting, or falsified—in order to present a unified Sephardic front at the Zionist Congress.

The Palestinian-Sephardic delegates dominated the last assembly. Rabbi Uziel, Eliyahu Elishar, Abraham Elmaliah, and Meir Ginio, among other prominent Sephardic political activists in Palestine, stressed the urgency of establishing a Sephardic organization that would primarily support the Zionist endeavors of Sephardic immigrants and residents in Palestine. To achieve this, they endeavored to re-present the concept of “Sephardim,” its history, and the population’s current condition in Palestine.

Meir Ginio, the delegate from Jerusalem, was the first to rise to the challenge. Ginio believed himself responsible for enlightening his audience about the substance of the term “Sephardim.” Employing crude essentialism, he contrasted the “Sephardic element” against the Ashkenazi and Zionist elements, while deploying this binary division to retell Sephardic history in Palestine. “We need to decide now about how we might fulfill the vision we have in mind for seven years,” Ginio proceeded to narrate the evolution of the Sephardic-community.⁴¹⁸

After the [British] occupation, in Jerusalem a group of fifty young Sephardic intellectuals were determined to support the nation, and so they

⁴¹⁸ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 24.

began their work among the Sephardic element. At that time [1917–1918] the Balfour Declaration was announced, [some] voluntarily joined the Hebraic forces [*Ha'gdud Ha'ivri*] to liberate *Eretz Yisrael*, as the general climate among the Jews suggested the necessity for working for the nation.⁴¹⁹

The essential factor needed to construct and advance the Sephardic discourse was rooted in a sense of national revival and the need conform by taking sides and joining this discourse of awakening. From a Sephardic standpoint, that meant a serious recognition of Sephardic “death,” for “revival” does not reawaken a living thing,⁴²⁰ but only an expired entity. However, after consulting the unofficial protocols about Ginio’s speech, we see that it was in the Palestinian-Sephardim’s self-interest to present the Sephardic-Ashkenazi duality as the bedrock of the Sephardic category and, at the same time, to rethink (and constantly edit) any deviant remarks that interfered with an essentialist construction of Sephardim from the protocol. The following excerpt includes remarks that were struck from Ginio’s speech in the official protocols:

In no time rumors spread among the Sephardim . . . about the difference in the aid between what Ashkenazi-Jews and Sephardic-Jews receive . . . and from every corner [one could hear] about “discrimination of [Sephardic] rights” [*kipuach zekhuyot*], “the Sephardic-Jews have been discriminated,” and the danger was that the Jewish community in *Eretz Yisrael* would divide. *In addition, Sephardim themselves were divided among multiple communities [Edoth] and each community sent its messengers abroad, and each community became self-reliant and unconstrained without general sovereignty to control it.*⁴²¹

From this quote, we understand that behind the desire for a Sephardic Federation was an eagerness for economic gain and political power. As part of the effort to set forth an illusion of

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Debates concerning the possibility of Sephardic “awakening” and revival” were not precluded only to the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc. Other emerging national groups also questioned how they might “awaken” their national aspirations (see my discussion about the emergence of Palestinian-Arab identity in Chapter 1).

⁴²¹ The Sephardic Council Archives, [*The UnOfficial*] *Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 24, italicized part erased.

Sephardic wholeness, particular kinds of comments and sentences were effaced from the protocols of the assembly. These included Ginio's warnings against the "Ashkenazi element," in which he declared, "we will not agree to cancel ourselves in the face of it [the Zionist-Ashkenazi organization]."⁴²² Ginio's generalizing language emphasizes the state of conflict: attempting to persuade his listeners to view themselves according to this binary opposition. He repeatedly voiced concern about "the loss of trust in our own [Sephardic] power."⁴²³ Ginio's concluding remarks, hoping that "in the near future we will no longer be Sephardic-Jews or Ashkenazi-Jews but only Hebraic,"⁴²⁴ were removed by the anonymous Sephardic editor, perhaps because with the blurring of the Sephardic-Ashkenazi concepts, the Sephardic Federation would become irrelevant. The cultivation of an isolated, victimized, marginalized, and passive Sephardic discourse was thus used by Palestinian-Sephardim to promote their political interests on a broader stage, beyond the Palestinian context.

The other Palestinian-Sephardic speaker, Abraham Elmaliah, followed in Ginio's ideological footsteps, using rhetoric of empathy and citing a series of specific events to prove the "discrimination of Sephardic rights."⁴²⁵ First, Elmaliah recalled the "inappropriate treatment of Sephardic Jews," referring to the Bulgarian settlers near Acre, who were not protected by any organization. Second, he spoke of a group of Moroccan Jews, who returned to their homeland, again without proper support and aid. Third, he told the story of fifty families from Salonika, who had faced hunger upon their arrival in Palestine. The litany continued, with Elmaliah

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ The Sephardic Council Archives, [*The UnOfficial*] *Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 25. Parts effaced from the Official protocols of the assembly.

⁴²⁵ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 27.

suggesting that the Zionist organization was “controlled by small people and without the guidance of great people.”⁴²⁶ Elmaliah ended with a warning to the Bulgarian opposition: “We will be happy if the Bulgarian-Jewry will join our effort, but if not, with sadness we will need to continue our work without them.”⁴²⁷ Elmaliah and his Palestinian colleagues made use of facts and data to bring together and reconcile Sephardic opposing views.

In response to the mounting pressure and ongoing threats of internal division, the fourteen Bulgarian and Yugoslavian Sephardic representatives marshaled a defense.

David Farhi, the spokesman of the opposition offered four counterarguments: 1) The Southern-European Sephardim insisted that, “they don’t find any difference between Sephardic Jews and Ashkenazi Jews”;⁴²⁸ 2) because of the apparent similarity between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, they “don’t think there is any need to form a distinct [Sephardic] organization”;⁴²⁹ 3) that said, although “formally against the creation of a [Sephardic] organization,”⁴³⁰ Farhi offered a compromise. The Bulgarian and Sephardic delegates would support the founding of a Sephardic organization only if “its goal and aim would be cultural and intellectual awakening amongst the Sephardic element”,⁴³¹ and 4) Farhi named an additional condition, which sent an unequivocal message concerning the relationships and power dynamics between the Sephardic federation and the Zionist organization: “It [The Sephardic organization] must not conceive its own currency or a new education system and etc. It must remain loyal, disciplined, and obedient

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁴²⁹ Ibid.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 29.

⁴³¹ Ibid.

to the administration of the World Zionist Organization.”⁴³² Farhi’s stipulations insisted on an apolitical Sephardic stance that would turn the Sephardic Federation into a cultural institute, which might not even be located in Palestine. His suggestions met with great resistance by the Palestinian delegates. Gaon, the *Sephardic Insider*, took note of a number of Bulgarian representatives who exited the assembly in anger. The protocols record great tension between the two sides. A five-minute break was requested.⁴³³ Then, somewhat artificially, the protocols read: after seven hours of “fiery arguments,” doubting between the two conflicting narratives, the Assembly put the matter of forming a World Sephardic Federation to vote at last.⁴³⁴



At 5 p.m., the Palestinian delegates announced the results: “We need to organize [together] in order to contribute to the building of our national home in *Eretz Yisrael* and to uplift the condition of Sephardim in the exile [i.e. in countries outside Palestine/Israel].”⁴³⁵ After a brief “spiritual uplift,”⁴³⁶ which included singing the national anthem [*ha-tikvah*] [the national anthem of the Israeli State],⁴³⁷ the assembly elected a general committee for the federation, composed of twelve representatives from Palestine/Israel, Bulgaria, Greece, and Austria.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 28.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

Later that night, several concurrent meetings were held to examine various issues, including the condition of the “Mizrahi immigrant” in Palestine.⁴³⁸ Around 10 p.m., the mission statement of the World Sephardic Organization was read aloud. It declared the following aims: “To work for the national, religious and cultural development of the Sephardic element as well as to increase its significant contribution in the building of *Eretz Israel*.”⁴³⁹ To increase the profile of Sephardim, the Sephardic Federation intended to: “1. Publish an official pamphlet. 2. Publish various books about the spiritual, religious, social and cultural life of Sephardic-Jews in the past and present. 3. [Organize] propaganda. 4. Improve the educational work in Hebrew and nourish Hebraic educators and spiritual leaders. 5. Form much needed institutions in *Eretz Yisrael* to improve the immigration and settlement in *Eretz Yisrael*. 6. [Use] the influence of Sephardic sources among Zionist officials in relation to all questions that are of interest to the Sephardic federation.”⁴⁴⁰

The outcomes of the first World Sephardic Federation emphasize the fact that no practical decision was actually made, primarily in light of the original initiative of Palestinian-Sephardim to have an exclusive Sephardic faction. The political activities and its global mobilization of the federation depended solely on the Palestinian-Sephardim. It was not clear whether the World Sephardic Federation would function as a viable political group or as a cultural organization. Behind the confetti of pamphlets and propaganda initiatives, the role of the federation and the unclear relationship to the Zionist organization remained loose and vague. However, the global aspirations of the federation must be read as a space for reinvention and resistance of Palestinian-Sephardim against the Zionist Organization, or as a sort of hesitation

⁴³⁸ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268, 31–32.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

that might breed ongoing confusion, cooperation, or complacency. Their fear of fully contesting the Zionist movement can be interpreted not only as a state of intellectual paralysis, but also as their difficulty in coming to terms with their exclusion within the Zionist project.

The World Sephardic Federation soon established chapters among the Jewish communities in various countries. Reading the original and the revised protocols in tandem reveals the opinions, anxieties, and doubts that were not recorded in the official version, to present a unified front. While the unofficial protocols offer valuable insight into the process by which the federation was established, the existence of an additional source provides an insider's perspective on the tensions generated by the assembly: the correspondence of one Sephardic delegate who attended the Sephardic Federation but remained silent throughout and unnamed in the written protocols. This delegate was entrusted with the task of reporting on the assembly to the Zionist organization.

Grappling With Zionism:

The Sephardic Insider

Two months after the assembly, Moshe David Gaon, a man of erudition returned to his desk in Jerusalem. Gaon held several, and at times conflicting, secretarial positions in the Sephardic political party, *Halutzei ha-Mizrah [Pioneers of the East]*, and the Preparation Committee of the World Sephardic Federation. In addition, he had served as secretary for the Zionist Organization of Palestine. As one who skillfully juggled different ethnic allegiances and internal political positions, Gaon assumed the responsibility of keeping an eye on the Sephardic movement and the Zionist Organization.

Gaon addressed a memo to the Zionist Organization in Palestine, delivered in the early days of January 1926 and referred to it as a “discrete” [*sodi*] letter.⁴⁴¹ This letter, part of his ongoing correspondence with the Zionist organization, sheds important light on the complex strains within the Sephardic organization, and it also reveals the suspicion and anxieties that permeated the various Zionist institutions as a result of the formation of a distinct Sephardic Federation. Dated January 3, 1926, the letter read:

To the Zionist Assembly in Eretz Israel

Jerusalem

... I submit to you an overview of the events that took place during the World Sephardic Federation. This report focuses on central ways of action of this organization from the day it was established, as well as its work in the present.

But since I am an active member in this [Sephardic] organization, I have to voice my solidarity with its actions, and I don't have the permission to speak on its behalf or to disclose its affairs in a direct way. That is why I want to emphasize that this material is of absolute confidentiality, primarily because there are certain details that should not be revealed to the members of the aforementioned organization [the World Sephardic Federation].

That is why I ask you to be considerate with my request and to classify the content of this letter to those interested in this material. With respect,
M. D. Gaon.⁴⁴²

Although it is unclear whether the Zionist Assembly in Palestine requested that Gaon provide such information or whether he divulged those details on his own initiative, his letter suggests that the Sephardim had become perceived as a threat to Zionist authority. In using the term “threat,” I do not assume that all members active in the Zionist movement perceived Sephardic organizations as dangerous. However, Gaon's request that the Zionist Assembly treat his report with “absolute confidentiality” conveys the sensitive nature of his assessment and seems to be a

⁴⁴¹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

request motivated by fear. On the one hand, it was Gaon who was afraid of being denounced as a double agent. On the other hand, it was the Zionist Assembly that was afraid of being undermined by the emergence of Sephardic factions, including the creation of the World Sephardic Federation.

Gaon's "confidential" overview of the Sephardic assembly in Vienna, titled "The Essence of the World Sephardic Federation and its Activities,"⁴⁴³ differs greatly from the narrative captured by the protocols examined in the previous section. The attacks of Palestinian-Sephardim on Ashkenazi-Zionist discrimination did not deserve a mention in Gaon's summary. Instead, he characterizes Sephardic-Palestinian views as advocating "pure Zionism" [*tziyonut tehora*].⁴⁴⁴ In Gaon's interpretation, the category of *Sephardim* emerges as a projection of Zionist expectation. In erasing the polemics of the assembly, he tailored his report to suit the position of the Zionist organization. As for the purpose of the Sephardic Federation, Gaon claimed that, "This Federation expressed the wishes of exilic-Sephardim to liberate themselves in favor of working and immigrating to *Eretz Israel*."⁴⁴⁵ This association with Zionist objectives dominated Gaon's analysis of the Bulgarian-Sephardim position. In other words, Gaon's confidential report tell us more about the level of complacency and conformation with Zionist ideals than about Gaon's position and role as a *Sephardic Insider*.

For Gaon, the Bulgarian-Sephardic delegates merely expressed their concerns about "isolation" from the rest of the Zionist movement.⁴⁴⁶ He explained that eventually it was decided that, "the Sephardic federation would accommodate its activities to the order of the Zionist

⁴⁴³ M. D. Gaon Archives, *The Essence of the World Sephardic Federation and its Activities*, File 4-795, Packet No. 86, 1.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

organization.”⁴⁴⁷ Understandably, Gaon did not dare to mention the vociferous resistance of various Palestinian-Sephardic representatives to working jointly with the Zionist organization. Put differently, in reading Gaon’s description of the Sephardic assembly, we continue to understand that Gaon did not act so much as an insider but as a moderator, whose report was heavily dependent on conforming the Sephardic Federation stance. One of the difficulties about being a Sephardic spy-moderator is that your reports might be read with certain misgiving. Palestinian and Zionist officials, however, considered Gaon’s reports to be “objective” and “discrete” knowledge that could help the Zionist organizations in “understand[ing] the current condition of the Sephardic Federation.”⁴⁴⁸ Moreover, Gaon’s information proved to be of such value that in a correspondence on February 19, 1926, Zionist officials further discussed the possibility of using Gaon’s “confidential” sources relating to other Sephardic issues in the immediate future.⁴⁴⁹

It is important to note the ways that Gaon conditioned the category of “Sephardim” to suit certain nationalistic demands. In conditioning the term “Sephardim,” Gaon highlighted Sephardic-Mizrahi advocacy and compliance to Zionist authority even if that meant silencing protests of Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates against economic segregation in the Yishuv. But as we already saw in examining the Sephardic assembly’s protocols, the actual concept of Sephardim was (and perhaps still is) a result of comparison between what was and what should be, what is awakened and what should be awakened, and what is Zionist and what needs to prove its “pure” Zionist inclinations. That is, aside from the construction of the mythic and legendary Sephardic identity primarily through negation (“what was and what is not”), Sephardim defines the

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Correspondence between the Zionist Assembly in Eretz Israel and the World Zionist Organization*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

marginalized, the “discriminated,” and all the other descriptions that cultivate what is not. What this archive demonstrates is two central modules of identifying with Sephardim. For the Sephardic representatives from the Balkans, the term “Sephardim” retained its past glories, and thus maintained intellectual and ideological qualities. In contrast, for the Palestinian Sephardim, “Sephardim” is defined through via negatives—that is, as not-European, not nationally awakened, not culturally advanced, not Zionist enough, not politically active enough, and not equally represented. Being caught in negation or confirmation, the term enabled various individuals, societies, and organizations to modify the category of Sephardim according to their changing political and economic needs, national fears, and personal expedience.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages I developed a number of arguments regarding and part of the inception of the World Sephardic Federation. In formulating my analysis, I emphasized how the federation became a platform for Palestinian representatives in order to essentialize the category of “Sephardim,” and, thus, charge it with political currency within and beyond Palestine. In formulating this analysis, I constructed a multi-layered plot. Protocols, revised evidence, and “confidential” reports attest to the central role of the Palestinian delegates in leveraging the category of “Sephardim,” and its association with glorified Sephardic past, on the one hand, and marginalization, discrimination, and intellectual and cultural decline, on the other hand. Thus, the concept of Sephardim, I maintain, became a tool by the Palestinian Sephardic leaders to entice economic and political power from global Jewish communities (not without opposition) and, at the same time, to historicize and validate an “abject” community.

More importantly, the Sephardic position appeared compatible with the idea of Jewish national revival, but was incompatible with the authority of the Zionist organization. Self-censorship and self-conformation proved an essential tool for the Palestinian delegates in order to come to terms with the various national, political, and communal strains. The tension between the need to conform nationally and the need to remain alert communally and ethnically was constantly present during the assembly. In essence, to be a Sephardic political and activist in this tenuous climate meant occupying the role of an insider, and an outsider, of ever oscillating between the two positions.

In the next chapter, I will develop an internal analysis of the Sephardic community in Palestine, from 1925–1936, and hypothesize about the development of the World Sephardic Federation, including the rise of a Sephardic economic and political global network. I will begin by reviewing the inception of the Sephardic Liberal Party (1928–1936), which insisted on the erasure of ethnic borderlines. With this historical background in place, I will pursue three lines of investigation. First, I examine how the party’s confession or lament over Sephardic stagnation functioned in terms of “hierarchizing” the larger Sephardic community. Next, I discuss how this discourse fixed Sephardic identity in the minds of other ethnic communities in Palestine, enabled the preservation of ethnic boundaries, and maintained power division. I demonstrate how it provided various members of the Sephardic community with an ideological doctrine that characterized them as relatively superior to other Middle Eastern communities during the late-1920s and the mid-1930s in Palestine.

“To Be or Not To Be Sephardim-Mizrahi”:⁴⁵⁰

The Rise and Fall of an Ethnic Autonomy from 1926 to 1936

During the World Sephardic Federation meeting held in Vienna in August 1925, prominent Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders questioned the role of a Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition in the Yishuv. Their dilemma revolved around a doubt articulated by many Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in 1926 and 1931: “to be or not to be” (“*lehiyot oh lachdol*”)⁴⁵¹ presented two options—that is, whether to be identified as a political entity separate from the growing Zionist enterprise in Palestine. Throughout the decade, and more intensely from 1926 to 1929, to ask this question was to invite accusations by Yishuv members of being seditious and anti-Zionist, of “promoting mistrust and division,” and of diverting “foreign” donations intended for the Zionist project.⁴⁵² Yet, the idea and hope of Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy persisted in the minds of key Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders. For them, it not only highlighted their subaltern status, or claiming an identity to lay claims to one’s “suffering,” as noted by Esther Benbassa,⁴⁵³ but also promoted notions of Sephardic-Mizrahi agency and activism.

⁴⁵⁰ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation, December 24, 1931*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, p. 1. The same question - “*lehiyot oh lachdol*” - was asked first in 1926. See: M. D. Gaon Archives, *Correspondence between Pioneers of the East and the World Sephardic Federation, October 31, 1926*. In the National Library Archives, File 83.

⁴⁵¹ “Protocols of the Central Working Committee of the World Sephardic Federation,” December 24, 1931, general box, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1. The same question—“*lehiyot oh lachdol*”—was asked first in 1926. See the correspondence between Pioneers of the East and the World Sephardic Federation, October 31, 1926, file 83, M. D. Gaon Papers, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. Please note, all translations are mine, unless otherwise noted.

⁴⁵² Anonymous, “Bulgarian-Zionist Against ‘The Sephardic Federation,’” *Davar [Word]*, November 15, 1928, 1.

⁴⁵³ Esther Benbassa, *Suffering as Identity: The Jewish Paradigm*, Trans. by G. M. Goshgarian, (New York: Verso, 2007).

This chapter examines how Sephardic-Mizrahi groups envisaged and fought for an autonomous entity in Palestine from 1926 to 1936. It then illuminates how their political aspirations to resist an “abusive” Zionist organization ultimately yielded a discourse of self-inferiority, associating Sephardic-Mizrahi ethnicity with cultural backwardness and ideological stagnation.⁴⁵⁴ As a result, the once-united Sephardic-Mizrahi community split between an “enlightened European Sephardim” and the “uncultured Mizrahim.”⁴⁵⁵ This internal divide allowed the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership in Jerusalem to invent its own identity as “Sephardic intelligentsia,” in contrast to the Mizrahi “simple masses” (*ha’amon hapashut*).⁴⁵⁶ Hence, I contend, the division between the Sephardic and Mizrahi categories was born from various economic and political strategies, as well as from the ethnic and intellectual hierarchy that structured the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity. It was Sephardic-Mizrahi failure to obtain political power and being denied access to position of privilege that gave rise to Sephardic-Mizrahi self-doubt and a discourse of inferiority.

I begin by exploring the decoupling of Sephardic and Mizrahi identities in the 1920s and 1930s and examining the region’s political and social climate. I then investigate how the work of Sephardic-Mizrahi activists within and beyond Palestine led to the formation of an independent World Sephardic Federation, which spread internationally from 1927 to 1930. I argue that an Orientalist discourse,⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁴ “Protocols of the Central Working Committee of the World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem,” January 7, 1930, general box, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–2.

⁴⁵⁵ World Federation of Sephardic Jews, *Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, Iyar 5684–Eloul 5686* [1925–1927], (Manchester: Massels, 1925), 3.

⁴⁵⁶ Meir Lagnado (speech), “The Ways To Create One [Ethnic] Community in Eretz Israel,” or, “Why Did we Create the Liberal Party?” general box, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 3.

⁴⁵⁷ We must remember that this Orientalist discourse was not limited to the idealization of the Sephardic-Mizrahi inhabitants of Palestine. A growing body of scholarship has explored the dual modes of this Orientalist discourse and its influence on constructing the Palestinian-Arab subject (Khalidi 1997; Eyal 2006): on the one hand, romanticizing the Arabic figure, yet, on the other, highlighting Arabic “primitiveness,” “ignorance,” and “backwardness.” As Edward Said and other scholars assert, Orientalist approbation “was followed by a counter-response: the Orient suddenly appeared lamentably under-humanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric and so forth” (Said 1978: 150). On the creation of Palestinian collective identity, distinct from “Arab” identities, see Abu-Lughod 1967, 1999; Gelvin 1997, 2005; Khalidi 1997, 2006; Kimmerling 2000; Lesch 1979; Muslih 1988; Porath 1974, 1977, 1986.

following Edward Said's "highly humanized"⁴⁵⁸ pioneering work, emerged not only as a dynamic discourse of power,⁴⁵⁹ or "a network of aesthetic, economic, and political relationship."⁴⁶⁰ Instead, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders co-opted this Orientalist discourse to establish a global federation that provided a distinct economic and social network, which led to the emergence of an unparalleled number of Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements in Palestine. They did so as means to claim, politicize, and perform their identity, indispensable in Sephardic-Mizrahi attempts to assert political power in Palestine and to reach out to international communities. Finally, as this chapter reveals the attempts of the Zionist Organization to strangle the economic and the political expansion of a global Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition with the help of the "Sephardic Insider," Moshe David Gaon, this research also shows how scrutinizes the shift in Sephardic-Mizrahi consciousness, from 1931 to 1936, with the establishment of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine in 1936, to the point that Sephardim became in the eyes of its leaders a "tragic matter"⁴⁶¹.

Becoming Sephardim-Mizrahim: Palestine, 1925–1926

From 1925 to 1926, demographic changes transformed the political and social fabric of the Yishuv and, by extension, influenced the Sephardic-Mizrahi political faction. In 1926, five interrelated factors shaped the consolidation of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity. First was the Fourth major wave (*Aliyah*)

⁴⁵⁸ Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Class, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).

⁴⁵⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, [1979] 2003). About the role of Palestine in the Orientalist discourse, see Yehoshua Ben-Arieh, *The Rediscovery of the Holy Land in the Nineteenth-Century* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979); Naomi Shepherd, *The Zealous Intruders: The Western Rediscovery of Palestine* (London: Collins, 1987); Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880–1930* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Arieh Bruce Saposnik, *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of a Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); John M. Mackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁴⁶⁰ Ali Behdad, "Orientalism Matters" *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Winter 2010): 710–711.

⁴⁶¹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine, September 7, 1936*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 3.

of Jewish immigration to Palestine, which doubled the Jewish population.⁴⁶² Second was the concentration of Jewish residents in the urban areas of Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem. Third, the global economic depression at the end of 1925 sharply reduced the influx of capital from international Jewish communities to Palestine and curtailed the activities of the Sephardic-Mizrahi community. A fourth component was the political division between left and right Zionist parties in the Yishuv made Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders further emphasize the need for distinct ethnic boundaries to secure voting for the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition, primarily following the 1925 founding of the Revisionist Party.⁴⁶³ Finally, nationalist tensions between Palestine's Jewish and Arab populations yielded a new Sephardic-Mizrahi awareness about its vulnerable minority status within the growing Jewish settlement.

To understand how these factors influenced the Sephardic-Mizrahi community in Palestine, one must analyze these factors one by one. Among the Jewish immigrants who arrived during that fourth wave, more than half were middle- or upper-class Polish Jews (forty percent and twenty-five percent, respectively). These arrivals were known as the "Bourgeois Aliyah" or "Polish Aliyah."⁴⁶⁴ Mostly shopkeepers and small business owners, more than 50 percent of these immigrants settled in Tel Aviv and other urban areas.⁴⁶⁵ Faced with the arrival of still more European-Jewish immigrants, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders questioned why their kinfolk remained such insignificant part of the total Jewish immigrant

⁴⁶² Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine in such large numbers due to, in part, the United States' 1924 immigration laws, which restricted Jewish migrants from entering. Another central reason that Polish Jews settled in Palestine was that the Polish government, headed by Władysław Grabski began to tax private organizations, in order to turn them over to the Polish government (Giladi 1973, 40–44; Naor and Giladi 1990, 154–166).

⁴⁶³ The Revisionist Party was founded in 1925. The prominent leader of this Zionist faction was Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky (1880–1940), a Russian intellectual who was a vocal supporter of Sephardic awakening (1921). During the mid-1920s, the Revisionist Party grew rapidly; it went from achieving 10 mandates in the fifteenth Zionist Congress in Basel (1927) to achieving 21 mandates in the following Zionist Congress in Zurich (1929). The Revisionist Party appealed to the 3,000 Sephardic-Mizrahi activists who joined the party by 1929 because of its criticism of influential Zionist organizations and parties (Shavit 1978, 40–80; Naor and Giladi 1990, 192–193; Giladi 1973, 239–244; Halpern and Reinharz 2000, 227–228, 300–301; Tzahor 1987, 71–83).

⁴⁶⁴ Although it is difficult to determine the exact percentage of the diverse groups' representation in the Fourth *Aliyah*, records indicate that between 50 to 60 percent were Polish Jews, 20 percent were Russian Jews, 5 percent were Romanian Jews, 5 percent were Lithuanian Jews, 2.8 percent were American Jews, and 1 percent were North African Jews (Giladi 1973, 282).

⁴⁶⁵ As a matter of fact, the Jewish population in Tel-Aviv drastically increased from 21,500 inhabitants in 1924 to about 40,000 by the end of 1925. This migration affected other cities, such as Haifa and Jerusalem, in similar ways.

population in Palestine:⁴⁶⁶



This population surge impacted Sephardic-Mizrahi communities' perceptions of themselves. For the first time, as a result of the small percentage of Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants, they had become now a minority within Palestine. This further challenged their ability to gain political power and, more pointedly, claim a more active role within the Zionist enterprise. From records on Jewish immigration between 1919 and 1930, we learn that 80 percent of those immigrants came from European countries and self-identified as Ashkenazim. By contrast, the percentage of Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants during the same years was 2 percent, while Yemenite immigrants added another 2 percent. Whereas the Sephardic-

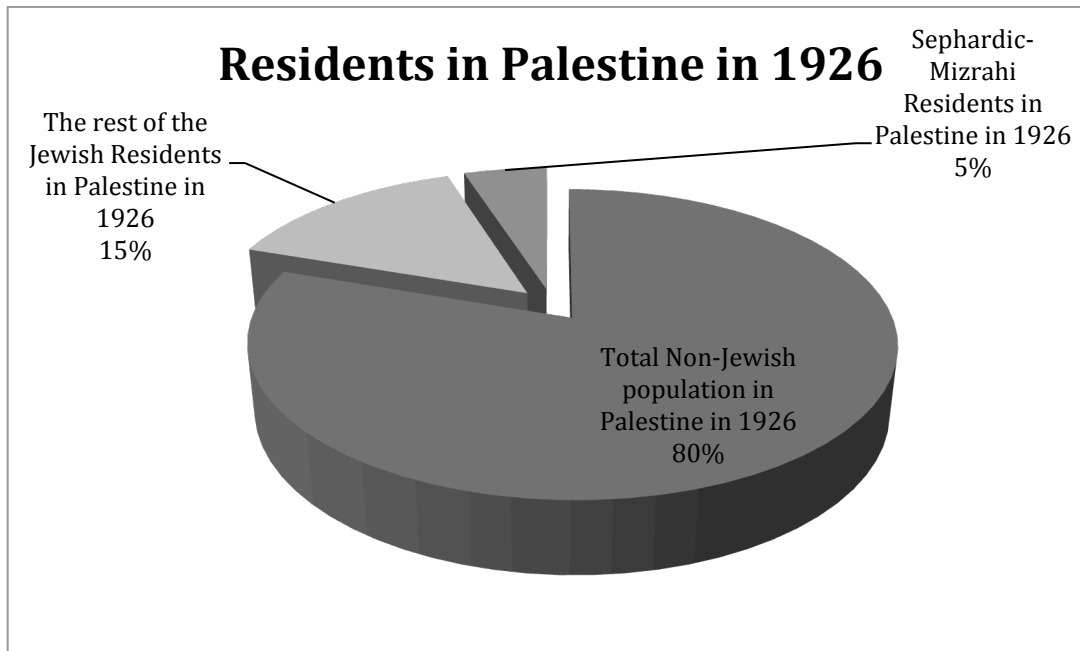
⁴⁶⁶ In Hanna Herzog, *Political Ethnicity—the Image and the Reality: Sociological Analysis of The "Ethnic" Lists to the Delegates Assembly and the Knesset (1920-1984)* (Tel-Aviv: Kibbutz Meuhad, 1986).

Mizrahi population constituted 50 percent of the Jewish population in 1918 and 1919, by 1926 they constituted only 33 percent of the Jewish population and 5 percent of the total population of Palestine.⁴⁶⁷

The Total Jewish Population in Palestine (in thousands)

Year	Overall Population	Jewish Residents	Percentage of Jewish Residents
1924	710K	95K	13.5%
1925	757K	122K	16.0%
1926	811K	149K	18.4%
1927	834K	150K	18.0%
1928	857K	152K	17.7%
1929	883K	157K	17.7%

⁴⁶⁷ It should be noted that by 1916 the percentage of the Mizrahi-Sephardic population among the Jewish population was 41% percent.



During 1925 and 1926, the number of new Jewish settlements doubled in Palestine. Nine settlements were created alone in that year but not one of them was associated with Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants, perhaps owing to the small numbers of Sephardic-Mizrahi arrivals in the Fourth *Aliyah*. Related to the marginalized status of the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities, the most recent Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements were Kfar Har-Tuv (originally an Arabic village, *Artuf*, which became a Jewish settlement by 1897), Kiryat Shaul (1922), and the nascent Village of Seydoon (1925, originally an Arabic village, *Seydoon*). Located in the western outskirts of Jerusalem, in the early months of 1925, Seydoon was bought from Arab peasant by twenty families from Izmir, Bulgaria, Salonika, and Iraq, who settled in the area.⁴⁶⁸ Protocols of the Sephardic Federation reveal the immigrants' dire economic condition, primarily because "they belong to the group who do not know how to settle," and for their inability to "adopt" and "bargain well enough" with the Arabic owners and thus paying more than the true value of

⁴⁶⁸ The M. D. Gaon Archives, *About the Settlers in Kfar Seydoon – A report after a visit in the Kfar*, October 7 1925, in the National Library, File 38.

the land⁴⁶⁹. The size of Seydoon was 435 dunams (about 110 acres),⁴⁷⁰ and they had to purchase water from their Arab neighbors. To work their land, they hired about twenty Palestinian-Arab workers to grow tobacco, a popular crop at the time.⁴⁷¹ The village of Seydoon has hitherto not been documented in any historical or sociological studies of Israel/Palestine, demonstrating not only overlooked Sephardic-Mizrahi history, but also revealing the in-depth split between the activities and settlement projects of the Zionist Organization and the Sephardic Federation. The other Sephardic-Mizrahi settlement was Kfar Har-Tuv, which was established in 1897 by Bulgarian-Jewish settlers. Located in the foothills of Jerusalem (21 kilometers west of Jerusalem), by 1925 it included twenty-one Sephardic-Mizrahi families and eighty-nine members.⁴⁷² A common feature of Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements was their close geographical proximity to Arab-Muslim villages, primarily because, in the eyes of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership, the Arab-Muslim population was not considered as an enemy per se, a stance that consequently led to the demise of the Sephardic settlements in the violent riots of 1929. Apart from these neighborhoods, most Sephardic-Mizrahi Jews lived in four centers. Of them all, Jerusalem was the central enclave of Sephardic-Mizrahi life in Palestine:

Number of Sephardic-Mizrahi Jews in Palestine in 1926⁴⁷³

Jerusalem:	23,014
Jaffa & Tel-Aviv:	4,806

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² An examination of the Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements and settlers is lacking. Recent studies examine Palestinian geography during the Mandate period through the Arab-Jewish binary (Shafir 1993; Yacobi 2009). I claim that the creation of a “Mizrahi-Sephardic place” was central in producing a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity between 1918 and 1948. To build on what Oren Yiftachel (2006) identified as “ethnocracy”—the dominance and production of an ethno-national entity—the expansion of “Sephardic-Mizrahi space” tells us a great deal about the relationship between geography and political strategy by Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in forming a Sephardic-Mizrahi identity (Yacobi 2009; Nitzan-Shifran 2000). Specifically, only a few sources shed more light on the general history of Artuf, including Ben-Bassat 2008; Bachar 1919; Bachar 1973.

⁴⁷³ M. D. Gaon Archives, *Report on Sephardic-Mizrahi Population*, October 1, 1926. In the National Library Archives, File 83.

Tiberias:	5,000
Haifa:	2,032
Zafed:	1,010
Hebron:	800
Acre:	120
Yemenites in various cities:	10,580
<u>Yemenites outside cities:</u>	<u>3,300</u>
Total:	50,662

Because 50 percent of the Fourth *Aliyah* settled in Tel-Aviv and other urban centers, a full 83 percent of the Jewish population resided in cities rather than the countryside by the end of 1925. The Sephardic-Mizrahi population reflected this trend, where the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities centered in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv (but in much smaller numbers; see table above). Ethnic and communal “segregation” dominated the surfacing of “ethnic spaces” of the neighborhoods and also characterized the Yishuv.⁴⁷⁴ Within the Yishuv, ethnically exclusive settlements were created to fit the ideological needs and cultural interests of the various immigrants such as the communal interests of the German-Jews, Austrian-Jews, or the Orthodox Jews which led to the formation of Kfar Gideon [Gidon] (1923), Kfar Bialik (1934), and Kfar Shmaryahu (1933), to name a few.⁴⁷⁵

On the heels of this drastic demographic change came the worldwide Great Depression. By the close of 1925, Jewish newspapers were reporting on its influence in Palestine-Israel. Whereas the newspapers did not mention unemployment in January 1925, they estimated that, by October 1925, 1,000 people were unemployed in the Yishuv. Two months later, the jobless rate doubled. By the end of 1926,

⁴⁷⁴ See Lissak, 2009: 45.

⁴⁷⁵ Located in Northern Israel/Palestine, *Kfar Gideon* was founded in 1923 by a group of orthodox Jews from Romania. *Kfar Bialik*, also located in Northern Israel/Palestine, was founded in 1934 by Jewish immigrants from Germany. *Kfar Shmaryahu* was founded in 1933 by a group of Austrian-Jewish immigrants, who settled in the extended Tel-Aviv area.

there were 8,000 unemployed workers, and a domino effect hit the Palestinian/Israeli market. Land purchases and construction slowed. Fewer immigrants with capital arrived in Eretz Yisrael. Major national industries ceased operation, including the national cooperative of Construction and Public Works (*Solel Boneh*), which ended its work in 1927. An increasing number of Jewish residents left Palestine for the United States (see graph 1, in p.5, this volume).

More pointedly, the downturn of the economy affected Zionist and Sephardic organizations, since both depended on foreign capital, usually in the form of donations.⁴⁷⁶ As funding from abroad dwindled, land investments by Zionist settlers reached a new low. Like the rest of the Yishuv, Sephardic-Mizrahi communities were hurt by this loss of capital. With unemployment and poverty increasing, social tensions became a prominent issue on the political stage. Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders had to adapt to new political needs.

During the elections to the Second General Assembly in the Yishuv in January 1926, a lengthy debate about the reasons that led to the economic depression was at the center of the discussions in the Assembly. At this moment, the Zionist work in Palestine was under a serious threat and political opinions debated about the reasons for the sense of crisis. The popular *Ahdut Ha'avodah* [The Unity of Labor],⁴⁷⁷ established in 1919 and led by David Ben-Gurion, put the responsibility on the character of the Fourth *Aliyah*, and their sense of entrepreneurial “free spirit,” and the new immigrants’ desire to settle in cities rather than take up agricultural work in various settlements.⁴⁷⁸

⁴⁷⁶ On the complex economic conditions in Palestine under the Mandate, see Giladi 1973: 94–95; Abdo-Zubi 1989: 210–214; Giladi and Naor 1990: 122–150; Halpern 1969: 320–329; Lockman 1997.

⁴⁷⁷ Founded in 1919, *Ahdut Ha'avodah* [The Unity of Labor] was a socialist party that advocated new forms of settlement and agricultural based units. Joining other parties in 1930 it became part of Mapai party. Among its leaders were David Ben-Gurion, Yizhak Ben-Zvi, and Yitzhak Tabenkin. In 1968, after multiple transformations, it merged again to form the Israeli Labor Party (Tzahor 1987: 37–50).

⁴⁷⁸ In the speech of the member of the Zionist Action Committee, Haim Arlozorov (1899–1933), in “The Second General Assembly to *Eretz Yisraeli* Jews — Fifth Meeting.” In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol. 1, January 18, 1926, 2. For more articles about the Second Assembly see “The Decisions of [the Second] General Assembly.” In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol. 1, January 19, 1926, 2.

Emerging right-wing parties, such as the nascent Revisionist Party, blamed Zionist organizations and the British Mandate for not reining in the economic market.⁴⁷⁹ More Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects aligned themselves with these new political parties, which included the Unity of Labor Party. The Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership responded to this competitive political landscape and its destabilizing effects on their coalition. A multi-layered approach—whether economic, political, and cultural aspects—was needed to maintain a sense of unification in a Sephardic-Mizrahi community that depended on ethnic factors to unite its political agenda.

These factors caused the Sephardic-Mizrahi Federation to recognize its current position as a minority group within the Jewish settlement. Their awareness was confirmed during the elections of the Second General Assembly in November 1925, which illuminated the weakening political influence of the Sephardic and Mizrahi faction. In the First General Assembly in 1920, the Sephardic faction had reached its full voting potential by winning 17.3 percent of the votes—thus gaining 54 representatives in the Assembly and constituting 19 percent of the Jewish population. But by the end of 1925, only 19 Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates were part of the Second General Assembly, a loss of 60 percent. With that loss, the globally unified umbrella of the World Sephardic Federation responded decisively, initiating the identity politics of a united Sephardim-Mizrahim, globally implying the need to “stand on guard,” and “make themselves recognized”⁴⁸⁰ against what they perceived to be Ashkenazi-Zionist dominance and neglect. Their newly claimed identity exposes an acceptance of alienation, reminding us of the concept of “double-consciousness” exposed in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk*.⁴⁸¹ This doubled-self in the

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁰ Franz Fanon *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, [1952] 1967), 207.

⁴⁸¹ For Du Bois, the alienation in the American context yields the division in the thought of the Negro, who “no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two irreconciled strivings” (215). Of course, I am not attempting to compare the histories of African-American and Sephardic-Mizrahi communities. But I do try to shed light on the shared

context of 1920s Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine meant what I propose to read as a “contradictory-consciousness,” supporting the Zionist project but being excluded from it, and needing to join the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc to protect their rights and contribution to the national effort. I turn to Du Bois to emphasize not only the “contradiction of double aims” but also the levels of anxiety that influences, or even harms, a state of awareness and vulnerability of a marginalized Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership at this complex historical moment.⁴⁸²

Early Struggles: the World Sephardic Federation, 1925–26

When Sephardic delegates from the World Sephardic Meeting in Vienna (August 15–18, 1925) returned to Palestine, some in the Yishuv tried to establish for the first time “a strong [Sephardic] institution . . . that [would] guide the [Sephardic] community and [would] demand what it deserves from the Zionist organization.”⁴⁸³ Given the growing unemployment and declining foreign capital, independence from the Zionist organization required achieving financial autonomy. The World Sephardic Federation dedicated its initial efforts to the search for funding to sustain its existence.

With its president, Moshe Pichotto collecting donations in Brussels, Federation members back home were uncertain about their next move. Financial issues hampered the work of the federation from the start. Two months after the federation’s establishment, its Jerusalemite Palestinian center wrote Pichotto about their small staff. “[I]f the workforce will not expand,” they complained, “we will feel inclined to submit our resignation.”⁴⁸⁴

experiences of minorities, who struggled against inequality and exclusion, and the ways these experiences shaped a particular awareness.

⁴⁸² W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Classic, [1903] 2005), 5.

⁴⁸³ “The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925,” general box, file 1268, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 19.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Pichotto's search for funding yielded only a small sum from the Sephardic community in Manchester, England. But his ambition to establish multiple Sephardic Federation branches around the world, including a central office in Jerusalem, stalled. Two other goals remained vital to the federation's work: first, maintaining financial support for Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewish settlements and settlers and, second, cultivating new outside funding sources and donations to the Federation by sending Sephardic-Mizrahi representatives abroad.⁴⁸⁵

Meanwhile, anxiety turned into anguish as activists reacted to reports on the global economic meltdown. Out of desperation, the Sephardic-Mizrahi advocates of the federation wrote to the Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi Ouziel, in early November,⁴⁸⁶ notifying him of the difficulty of sustaining their work with the modest funds allocated to Palestine.⁴⁸⁷ Rabbi Ouziel's response, dated November 11, disclosed his personal frustration with the dire economic condition of the federation and appeared of little help in solving their financial crisis.⁴⁸⁸

The federation's appeal to the Sephardic activist, Elazar Elishar, appointed in 1926 as the executive of the first Sephardic bank, illustrates the extent of their outreach. "Since our work could not be based solely on unwaged efforts as it [has been] so far," they wrote, "we decided to create other committees."⁴⁸⁹ As a result, Palestinian Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates were assigned to visit Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Salonika, Alexandria, and New York in order to seek financial support for their

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁶ "World Sephardic Federation to Rabbi Haim Ouziel," November 2, 1925, box 239, file 44, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸ "Rabbi Haim Ouziel to Members of the World Sephardic Federation," 11 November 1925, box 239, file 13, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1.

⁴⁸⁹ "World Sephardic Federation to Elazar Elishar," November 12, 1925, box 6322, file 13, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1-2.

settlers.⁴⁹⁰ One such representative was Yitzhak (Issac) Abadi, Jerusalem native and a loyal Sephardic activist who had worked as an English translator for the British Mandate. Abadi traveled to the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in New York at the beginning of April 1926. To prepare Abadi for his assignment, the federation sent him supplemental instructions, dated March 31 1926, on how to “spread our idea among the Sephardic communities in America.”⁴⁹¹ In their letter to Abadi, members of the federation stressed “the need to widen Zionist activities among the various Sephardic communities.”⁴⁹² To explain “the negligence [or the lack of consideration] of the Zionist organization,” they emphasized that the Zionists were only interested in Sephardim as donors.⁴⁹³ The letter also articulated the relationship between the terms “Mizrahim” and “Sephardim” within the federation’s discourse. The leaders wrote to Abadi, “The reality shows us that Yehude ha-Mizrach [Eastern Jews, or Mizrahim] have divided while in exile to various communities [*edoth*] such as Sephardim, Persians, Yemenites, Bukharim, and more.”⁴⁹⁴ Confronting this state of tribal division, the role of the World Sephardic Federation was to “establish a unified entity of all Yehude ha-Mizrach [Eastern Jews].”⁴⁹⁵ The category of Sephardim, however, was the only ethnic identity that the leadership regarded as capable of producing unification and respectability and, at the same time, it functioned as a historical reference to a glorious epoch that, they believed, had to be revisited and reclaimed.

⁴⁹⁰ “Protocols of the Working Committee of the Sephardic Federation,” February 25, 1926, box 6322, file 201, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–2.

⁴⁹¹ “Sephardic Federation to Yitzhak Abadi,” March 3, 1926, box 6322, file 31, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

Members of the federation stressed “the need to widen Zionist activities among the various Sephardic communities.”⁴⁹⁶ To explain “the negligence [or the lack of consideration] of the Zionist organization,” they emphasized that the Zionists were only interested in Sephardim as donors. Second, the letter articulated the relationship between the terms Mizrahim and Sephardim within the Federation’s discourse. The leaders write to Abadi, “The reality shows us that *Yehudie ha-Mizrach* [Eastern Jews or Mizrahim] have been separated through their years in exile to various communities [*edoth*] such as Sephardim, Persians, Yemenites, Bukharim and more.”⁴⁹⁷ Amongst this state of tribal division, the role of the World Sephardic Federation was to “establish a unified entity of all *Yehudie ha-Mizrach*.”⁴⁹⁸ The category of Sephardim, however, was the only ethnic identity that the leadership regarded as capable of producing a unified and respectable identity and, at the same time, functioned as a historical reference to a glorious epoch that must be revisited and reclaimed.

The letter to Abadi registers the emergence of a clear double-standard when deploying the categories of Sephardim and Mizrahim. On the one hand, the Federation used “Sephardim” to demarcate an ethnic group situated under the auspices of Mizrahim and the Jews of the East (*Yehude ha-Mizrach*). On the other hand, they used “Sephardim” to allude to a cultured ethnic group that “for a significant time period was the intellectual and religious center for the whole Jewish world.”⁴⁹⁹ Inevitably, according to this logic, the Sephardim were divorced from and, at the same time, part and parcel of Mizrahi collectivity. But why was there no discourse on the Yemenite or Mizrahi “intellectual” past? Why, and to whom, was it important to accentuate the existence of a Sephardic *cultured past* in an effort to politically unify and culturally amalgamate the diverse population of *Yehude ha-Mizrach*?

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ The Sephardic Council Archives, *A Letter from the World Sephardic Federation to Yitzhak Abadi, March 3 1926*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322, File 31, 2.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 1.

Answers to these questions can be found in the federation's variable means of alternating between distinguishing and conflating the Sephardic and Mizrahi categories. They used the term "Sephardim" to warn possible Sephardic-Mizrahi donors from the Diaspora, for their "financial contributions to the building of the nation [*Eretz Yisrael*], included large assistance and support to the communities of [our] Ashkenazi brothers."⁵⁰⁰ Abadi was asked to caution such Sephardic donors in New York that their donations to Zionist organizations were "swallowed by it [Zionist-Ashkenazi activity] without any allocation of funding for the Sephardic community."⁵⁰¹ Abadi's aim, therefore, was not only to increase the funding from Sephardic donors, but also to establish Sephardim as an entity distinct from the Zionist and Ashkenazi dominated enterprise. To further emphasize this sense of division and maldistribution of sources, the federation highlighted the great need of the separate settlements and settlers of Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine.-For that reason, the Sephardic Federation highlighted the separate settlements of Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine such as Har-Tuv, Seydoon Village, and the eighty Sephardic subjects who by 1925 had a separate settlement next to Be'er-Yacob (1925).⁵⁰²

Whereas the category of "Sephardim" was used to attract donors who could help reclaim their mythic Sephardic condition by providing financial assistance, the term "Sons of the East" [*Bene ha-Mizrach*, or "Mizrahim"] was used to refer to destitute settlers in need of urgent relief. Identifying Mizrahi settlements was crucial to securing funding. "Among the hundred settlements that sprang up in the land," the federation claimed, "there is almost no location that was established for and by *Bene ha-Mizrach* aside from the lousy village in Har-Tuv and two or three new settlements that miraculously survive."⁵⁰³ As the federation presented it to Abadi, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership needed donations from international Sephardic-Mizrahi communities beyond Palestine to establish Mizrahi settlements and

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁰¹ Ibid.

⁵⁰² The Sephardic Council Archives, *A Letter from the World Sephardic Federation to Rabbi Haim Ouziel, November 2 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 239, File 44, 1.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

to assist “the neglected Mizrahi settlers” in their agricultural work.⁵⁰⁴ Of course, the federation did not mention what its members already knew; in Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements like Seydoon and Har-Tuv, the Sephardic-Mizrahi landowners hired Arab peasants to work the land.⁵⁰⁵

Lastly, amid wishes for his safe journey and return, the federation asked Abadi to stress the organization’s apolitical mission: “It is needless to say that there is no political element in the work of the World Sephardic Federation aside from its pure [*tehora*] intention to develop the culture and nation of the forefathers.”⁵⁰⁶ Again, Sephardic identification was used to discuss cultural identity, apart from political concerns. In contrast, the term “Mizrahim” connoted the subjectivity of a victim of political and economic circumstances.⁵⁰⁷ Thus, the division between the Sephardic and Mizrahi categories was born from various economic and political strategies, as well as from the ethnic and intellectual hierarchy that structured the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity.

Set to leave for New York, Abadi negotiated competing Sephardic-Mizrahi identities. In the Sephardic sense, he appeared apolitical, part of the Sephardic intelligentsia. In contrast, his Mizrahi mask presented him as highly political, ready to resist his disenfranchised status.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 2, 4.

⁵⁰⁵ “About the Settlers in Kfar Seydoon—A report after a visit in the Kfar,” October 7, 1925, file 38, M.D. Gaon Archives, National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. For more reports about *Kfar Seydoon*, see “Sephardic Settlers,” *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, June 27, 1926, 3.

⁵⁰⁶ “World Sephardic Federation to Yitzhak Abadi,” March 3, 1926, box 6322, file 31, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 4.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁰⁸ In that sense, the distinction between Mizrahim and Sephardim parallels a contradictory position where the gap between what is announced and what is being acted upon might be the very essence of Sephardic and Mizrahi identities.

Political Activism Concealed in Cultural Work, 1926–1927

In June 1926, two months after his return, Abadi reported to the World Sephardic Federation about his New York experience. In a three-page letter, he stressed the size and ethnic diversity of his audience at the Spanish and Portuguese She'erit Israel Synagogue in New York, and the “more material than intellectual dullness” of New York’s Sephardic community.⁵⁰⁹ Abadi estimated that the donations pledged would total \$7,500 and, most importantly, he received the consent of the American Sephardic community to speak on their behalf to the World Sephardic Federation. Although there are no records that his financial estimate ultimately materialized, Abadi’s apparently successful mission motivated the Sephardic federation to send more representatives to Sephardic-Mizrahi communities abroad, as well as to increase their activities in Palestine to secure possible funding. Within Palestine, a first group of officials, consisting of Joseph Meyuhas, Meir Lagnado, and Eliyhaou Elishar, went on a three-day tour of Tiberias, Haifa, and Safed. Before long, a second cluster of representatives, consisting of Dr. Yitzhak Levy, Abraham Elmaliah, and Eliyahou Elishar, visited the various Sephardic-Mizrahi neighborhoods in Tel-Aviv.⁵¹⁰ Thus, the federation expanded their solicitations to Sephardic-Mizrahi communities within—as well as outside of—Palestine over the ensuing six months. These propaganda trips aimed to strengthen the relationship between the federation’s Jerusalemite leadership and the various communities across the country and “to prepare the ground for the coming General Assembly.”⁵¹¹ Other delegates went abroad, including trips to North America and Egypt, to find ways to fortify the economic constitution of the Sephardic Federation.

⁵⁰⁹ “World Sephardic Federation to Yitzhak Abadi,” June 6, 1926, box 6322, file 26, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–3.

⁵¹⁰ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Report Prepared by the Working Committee of the Federation to the President of the World Sephardic Federation, Moshe Pichotto, September 6, 1926*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322, File 8, 1. See also: The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Working Committee of the Sephardic Federation, February 25, 1926*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322, File 201, 1–2.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*

In the interim, with economic assistance becoming scarce, the federation was concerned with several pressing issues: the condition of the Sephardic-Mizrahi settlers in the village of Seydoon had deteriorated by June 1926, Sephardic-Mizrahi farmers requested material support from the Federation, a group of fisherman from Salonika that arrived in Acre who sought financial backing to prepare for the upcoming shipping season, and the new Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements in Petah-Tiqwa and the Emek-Yizr'ael Valley area, for which the federation had to postpone its plans until enough funding could be allocated. The Sephardic village of Kfar-Baruch, in this Emek-Yizr'ael Valley area, was founded only in 1927.⁵¹²

It is also important to note the federation's imposed sense of segregation, which had clear economic repercussions, to the point of creating blunt hostility between the Sephardic-Mizrahi organization and the Zionist organizations. The federation's sense of conflict was based on deep notions of marginalization within the Zionist Organization. As early as in 1926, at the dawn of the economic crisis, the Sephardic Federation failed to feed its 9,000 to 10,000 poor, Sephardic-Mizrahi members during Passover. The Sephardic Federation and the Zionists exchanged public accusations; the Sephardic Federation faulted Zionists for being a "strong obstacle" to Palestinian-Sephardic activities.⁵¹³ "The Zionist Organization approached Mizrahi communities abroad to ask them to provide unleavened bread for the poor among the Sephardim," the Sephardic Federation asserted, "and indeed they provided some funding for those in need, but then they put that responsibility on the shoulders of the Sephardic organizations."⁵¹⁴ The Zionist response, in which organizations asserted their limited support for struggling Sephardic-Mizrahi communities, did not resolve the tensions. According to the federation, Zionist organizations in Palestine and abroad opportunistically appropriated Sephardic-Mizrahi donations for their own means, rather than as means of providing for the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in

⁵¹² "Report Prepared by the Federation Working Committee to the President of the World Sephardic Federation, Moshe Pichotto," September 6, 1926, box 6322, file 8, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–4.

⁵¹³ "The Distribution of *Matza-Bread* in the Passover Holiday during 1926–7." Published by the Sephardic *Edah* [community] in Jerusalem. Azriel Print: Jerusalem, 1–2.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Palestine, on whose behalf they solicited contributions. Moreover, the Zionists exhausted the pool of Sephardic-Mizrahi potential donors abroad, making it almost impossible for institutions like the World Sephardic Federation to secure funding.

So divergent were the aspirations of the Sephardic Federation from those of the Zionists that Sephardic leaders initiated multiple strategic moves to assert the federation's distinct identity. These moves attested to aspirations of the Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy and included the opening of a Sephardic-Mizrahi credit bank (1927), which assisted Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements, and the allocation of funding to Sephardic cultural and educational activities. Beginning in 1926, the federation circulated a number of annual pamphlets on Sephardic-Mizrahi history, as well as on the Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrant communities' current political and economic situation in Palestine, in order to increase its public influence.⁵¹⁵ Published in Hebrew, Spanish, English, and French, and edited by the erudite Moshe David Gaon, who also acted as a Sephardic "spy" for the Zionist Organization, these bulletins reported on the federation's economic and political activities and asked for financial support. Although they announced that the Sephardic Federation was concerned "primarily with the cultural mission," their activities reflected an ardent political, economic and nationalist agenda.⁵¹⁶ Political strategies to regain Sephardic political power masked the federation's declared attempts to restore mythic Sephardic culture to prominence in the Promised Land.

Reports from the Sephardic Federation suggest that, from 1926 to 1928, it expanded its work far beyond Palestinian borders. Among its branches across the world were Sephardic centers in Damascus (Syria), Santiago (Chile), Montevideo (Uruguay), Havana (Cuba), Cairo (Egypt), Lima (Peru), New York (U.S.A), Cordova (Spain), Buenos Aires (Argentina), Manchester (England), and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil).

⁵¹⁵ "Report Prepared by the Federation Working Committee to the President of the World Sephardic Federation, Moshe Pichotto," September 6, 1926, box 6322, file 8, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 5–6.

⁵¹⁶ "World Sephardic Federation [signed by the President of the federation, Moshe Pichotto] to Menahem Ussishkin," November 30, 1926, box 6322, file 275, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1–2.

These centers succeeded in soliciting philanthropic aid, especially in the Americas.⁵¹⁷ From 1925 to 1927, the Sephardic Federation solicited a total of £1,230 from Sephardic communities in Jerusalem, Belgrade, Manchester, Cairo, and Alexandria.⁵¹⁸ In 1927 to 1928 alone, the sum budget of the federation almost doubled to £2,085, due to donations from Sephardic communities in Manchester, Rio de Janeiro, Cordova, Santa Fe, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, to name a few.⁵¹⁹ Using the donations received, the federation founded a credit bank in November 1927 that “put at their disposal small sums of money, to renew their desire for work and personal effort.”⁵²⁰ Additionally, the federation increased its support to Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine and succeeded in establishing more Sephardic settlements between 1925 and 1928 than it ever had in the past. If the first Sephardic village was Har-Tuv [*Artuf*] in 1897, which consisted of 114 members (including the farm workers),⁵²¹ other Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements were created, including *Kfar Seydoon* founded by February 1925 and which consisted of twenty families,⁵²² *Kfar-Baruch* founded in November 1926 in the *Emek-Yizra’el* valley and which consisted of six families. Likewise, in 1927, the Sephardic Federation was able to provide economic support to the group of fishermen from Salonika, who joined the settlement of Be’er Yacob—the settlement of Caucasian Jewish immigrants that by 1907 purchased this area of 8,500 dunams in central Israel-Palestine.

⁵¹⁷ For more information about the global efforts of the Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates, see World Sephardic Federation, *World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, Iyar 5684–Eloul 5686 [1925–1927]* (Massels: Manchester, 1926).

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ World Sephardic Federation, *World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, 1927*, 14–75.

⁵²⁰ World Sephardic Federation, *World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, Iyar 5684–Eloul 5686 [1925–1927]* (Massels: Manchester, 1925), 6–7.

⁵²¹ See Ben-Bassat 2008: 354.

⁵²² The M. D. Gaon Archives, *About the Settlers in Kfar Seydoon – A report after a visit in the Kfar, October 7 1925*, in the National Library, File 38.

Yet, alongside these attempts to resist the Zionist organization and establish a separate, active political entity, the federation also propagated a notion of Mizrahi inferiority among the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership and among the communities both in the Yishuv and around the world. However, rather than modify the established characterizations of Sephardim as cultured intellectuals and Mizrahim as destitute laborers, the bulletins and protocols of the federation during those years preserved and promoted a hierarchy of Jewish subjects in Palestine. At the bottom of its scale were the “Oriental Jew” and the “Eastern immigrant,” who “have . . . not yet reached that state of culture to understand the necessity of belonging to a political party or to a union.”⁵²³ The Federation’s discourse surrounding “Oriental” Mizrahi immigrants, which described them as being inhibited by their “uncultured” conditions, while hailing them for their “physical endurance . . . [more] suitable for agricultural settlement than other elements,” condemned them to poverty and demise.⁵²⁴

As the Eastern immigrants belong to no organized society it is difficult for them to find work quickly and to settle down. Deprived of resources, the strongest amongst them are forced to do debasing work and become porters and scavengers, whilst their children, instead of going to school, become vagabonds. The weaker amongst them either throw themselves upon our charitable organizations or become beggars.⁵²⁵

In contrast to the Mizrahim—who the federation perceived as “unenlightened” immigrants who lacked history and refined culture—was “the enlightened European Sephardic element.”⁵²⁶ If poverty was associated with the “undeveloped Oriental Jew,” the “enlightened” Sephardic immigrant was destined to experience disillusionment that might lead to two possible extremes: reawakening or ultimate discontent. The federation explained:

⁵²³ Ibid., 4.

⁵²⁴ “Universal Confederation of Sephardic Jews—Executive Committee of Jerusalem Financial Report, General Administrative Report For the Year 5687 (1926–1927),” 6.

⁵²⁵ World Sephardic Federation, *World Federation of Sephardic Jews, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, Iyar 5684–Eloul 5686 [1925–1927]* (Massels: Manchester, 1925), 3.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

As to the enlightened European Sephardic element who enter Palestine with the permission of the Zionist Executive, they come out of national enthusiasm, and many of them suffer great disillusionment. Those who possess small means to go in for the purchase of land, industry, commerce, etc., and for want of disinterested advice, often fall into the traps laid by brokers and suffer a great deal materially. Often bearing their loss in silence, many of them leave the country quietly.⁵²⁷

Sephardic Federation leaders used these “scales of enlightenment” to assess the various constituencies that made up the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition. At the same time, and somewhat ironically, they used the term “Sephardim” interchangeably with “Oriental” or “Mizrahi” Jews, chiefly in demarcating and defining “Ashkenazim.” The model category of “Ashkenazim” was recognized as the desired level of education and cultural progress in the Yishuv. It was also used as a mean to situate Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority.

Federation leaders invoked this notion of cultural hierarchy, erasing the differences between the categories of “Sephardim” and “Mizrahim,” but upholding of it unity elsewhere, while extolling the superior category of “Ashkenazim.” Indeed, within the discourse surrounding the problems within the Sephardic-Mizrahi population, they identified education as “[a]nother sphere in which there is much help to be given to our Sephardi brethren.”⁵²⁸ This cultural problem emerged as a way to rank, set apart, and divide the Jewish community and the Sephardic-Mizrahi population; the Sephardic-Mizrahi asserted, “Their level of culture is certainly in parts of the Diaspora much inferior to that of our Ashkenazi brethren, therefore, it is our duty to raise them intellectually.”⁵²⁹

Hence, the discourse surrounding Sephardic-Mizrahi identity emphasized subservient cultural status and a separate sense of self, which was in many ways in direct relation to class and economic

⁵²⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁵²⁸ “Universal Confederation of Sephardic Jews—Executive Committee of Jerusalem Financial Report, General Administrative Report For the Year 5687 (1926–1927),” 4–5.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 5.

factors. As a matter of fact, in the name of cultural and intellectual enlightenment, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders promulgated and supported other initiatives that further spread this discourse of Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority.⁵³⁰ One influential source that contributed to this notion of a subjugated Sephardic-Mizrahi self was a series of lectures given in Jerusalem in 1927 that the Sephardic leadership (with the help of the Sephardic party, Pioneers of the East) initiated and presented to its community.

Among its prestigious speakers was the poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, who was asked by Sephardic leaders to openly put forward ways to resolve the problem of Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority. The Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders handed the task of “rescuing” and educating their community to the “superior” and “cultured” Ashkenazim. This leadership felt that the Sephardim were not capable of rescuing themselves from their indigent present, and an ascending series of claims of inferiority followed: “We Sephardim feel the frailty of our power . . . Bialik and Ussishkin, please provide us with the inspiration to handle the task you pass on to us.”⁵³¹ As another member of the Sephardim confessed, “We, the Sephardim, recognize the feebleness of our strength: [we are] like a prisoner who cannot rescue himself out of his prison without help.”⁵³² Could the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders had known that when they asked for “help” they have unleashed an incubus?

⁵³⁰ Note that from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Mizrahi-Oriental culture located in Palestine had attracted various Zionist immigrants, British anthropologists, and other travelers to Palestine. Among Zionist settlers and thinkers, these also included painters and artists such as Boris Schatz (the founder of the Jewish art school, Betzalel, in 1906) and other Betzalel artists such as Abel Pann, who tried to envisage biblical imagery while relying on the Oriental sights and people of Palestine. Concerning the ways the territory of the Mizrach came to hold an exotic and religious distinction that played a central in colonial imagination and settlement: see Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Penslar (Eds.), *Orientalism and the Jews*, (Hanover: University Press of New England 2004); Jonathan M. Hess, “Johann David Michaelis and the Colonial Imaginary: Orientalism and the Emergence of Racial Antisemitism in Eighteenth-century Germany,” *Jewish Social Studies* 6(2) (Winter 2000): 56–101; and Michael Prior, *Colonialism and the Bible*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic P, 1997).

⁵³¹ “Bialik in *Halutzei ha-Mizrah’s Hall*,” *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, February 28, 1927, 4. See also the articles in *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, February 27, 1927, 1, 4.

⁵³² *Ibid.*

Everyone Is Impressed:

Crippling the Sephardic Federation and Reviving a Sephardic Spirit, 1927–1928

On February 24, 1927, in Jerusalem, Bialik delivered his lecture “The Cultural Work [*Avodah Tarbutit*] among Sephardic Jewry” to federation activists and members of the Jerusalemite Sephardic-Mizrahi community. Menahem Ussishkin, the Zionist leader who gave some preliminary words, introduced Bialik as a prominent member of the “Ashkenazi intellectuals.” Before Bialik’s lecture began, Ussishkin and members of the Sephardic Federation asked Bialik “to contribute to Sephardic life” by assisting in “the development of Sephardic intellectual culture.”⁵³³

Addressing “the Sephardic tribe,” Bialik asked, “[H]ow could that be that since their glorious days, they [the Sephardic tribe] became diminished in the materialistic and cultural aspects, to the point that they [Sephardim] had distanced themselves from Hebrew creativity?”⁵³⁴ Then Bialik concentrated on the diminished status of the larger Sephardic tribe in the Yishuv: “Sephardic Jewry became inferior in national ideology in all fields of life to Russian-Polish Jewry, which is named *Ashkenazit* [Ashkenazim].”⁵³⁵ For him, Sephardic-Mizrahi stagnation resulted in an “undeveloped” culture that showed in the community’s lack of national ideology.

Bialik proposed a three-step solution: “the revival . . . of their [the Sephardic] mythic past,” “[the organization of] educational and literary material,” and “the solidification of Sephardic peoplehood [*amamiut*].”⁵³⁶ In short, Bialik called for a renewal of the “Sephardic spirit” by emphasizing the educational and cultural aspects. However, he tacitly ignored the possibility of any political or national issue. As the greatest Hebrew poet of his generation and a Zionist, Bialik was actually promoting a

⁵³³ “Protocols of Bialik’s Speech,” box 6322, Sephardic Council Archives, Jerusalem City Hall, 1.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2–5.

⁵³⁶ Bialik’s reference to *amamiut*—עממיות—could also imply a calling for a Sephardic national character.

Zionist agenda, as he had at the twelfth and thirteenth Zionist Congresses in Carlsbad (1921 and 1923).⁵³⁷

In his view, the revival of this “Sephardic spirit” meant Sephardic acceptance of Ashkenazi superiority and authority and maintaining the cultural and national distance of the dominated Zionist-Ashkenazi leadership from the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities.

In response to Sephardic audience members who expressed doubt whether “Sephardim [are able] to revive their Sephardic culture of the past, and, at the same time, to formulate a specific educational system,”⁵³⁸ Bialik identified the Sephardic-Palestinian leaders who should be involved in the reawakening of the Sephardic spirit. It seemed clear to him that only the Sephardic center in Palestine was equipped to foster the Sephardic renaissance, since “there are various wealthy Sephardic Jewish communities in other places but they have no hope.”⁵³⁹ Bialik considered the Sephardic communities outside Palestine not Zionist enough and, thus, hopeless. His attitude had political consequences for the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership. Hence, along with the de-politicization of Sephardim, Bialik promoted the isolation of an indigenous⁵⁴⁰ Sephardic Palestinian community from any position of power located outside of Palestine.

⁵³⁷ See Laqueur 1972: 461–462.

⁵³⁸ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of Bialik’s Speech*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322, 5-9.

⁵³⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ Scholars have aptly discussed the problematic meaning of such concepts as nativity and purity in various colonial and postcolonial studies. I, however, use this term according to the way it was deployed by various members of the Yishuv and Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects during the Mandate period. I pay particular attention to the way imposed notions of nativity were claimed by Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects and how the investment in the concept of Sephardim-Mizrahim reflected a growing interest in questions of originality and purity in the Yishuv and the larger Palestinian region. For a sample of literature that discusses the relationship between issues of authenticity and the Zionist enterprise, see Goren 1983: 35–37; Shenfeld 1986: 27–30; Hirschfeld 1998: 14–21, Zalmona 1998, 2006; Peleg 2005; Almog 1997; Zerubavel 1995, 2002, 2008; Hirsch 2008; Saposnik 2006, 2008. For a greater discussion on purity and nativity central to the colonial context, see Parama Roy, *Indian Traffic*, (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1998); Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Fisher 1986; Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Butler 1990; Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge 1994); Jenny Sharpe, “Figures of Colonial Resistance,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 35(Spring 1989); Stuart Hall, “When Was the ‘Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit.” In *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1996); Arjun Appadurai, “Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Violence,” *Public Culture*, 10(Winter 1998).

Bialik's speech characterized the dilemma of Sephardic leaders in asking whether Sephardim should emerge as a political party or only as a cultural community. However, it also reflected the general response of Zionist organizations toward the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities. His strategy of "divide-and-conquer" first de-politicized the Sephardim, and then isolated the Palestinian-Sephardim leaders from support within, and outside of, the Yishuv.⁵⁴¹ This approach presented the Sephardic-Mizrahi case as merely a local concern or an internal affair. Bialik's lecture underscored the Zionist organization's concern about growing initiatives and, thus, the possibility of political resistance by the Sephardic Federation and not attempting to resolve the question of ethnic inequality in the Yishuv.

The correspondence between Zionist officials and the *Sephardic Insider*, Moshe David Gaon, on January 3, 1926, signaled the growing interest of Zionist officials in the growth of the Sephardic party⁵⁴². Based on the "discreet" accounts Gaon submitted, a month after, on February 19, 1926, a growing Zionist concern informed the correspondence between the Zionist organization in Palestine and the director of the Organization Department of the World Zionist Organization in London, Dr. Leo Lauterbach. The letter provided Lauterbach with an analysis of the global spread of the federation for better "understanding the Sephardic Federation."⁵⁴³ The expansion of Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements and transnational development plans from 1925 to 1928 aroused a great deal of suspicion among Zionist leaders, primarily because the two were competing about similar economic sources. As a way to survey the World Sephardic Federation's growth, Zionist officials provided Lauterbach with an overview of the possible economic resources that could be tapped by the federation through the efforts of the federation's president, Pichotto in Yugoslavia and England, among other countries. With the expansion of the Sephardic Federation within and outside of Palestine, "discreet" knowledge soon led to acts designed to impede the progress of the federation.

⁵⁴¹ See Herzog 1986: 89; Haim 2000: 193.

⁵⁴² The Sephardic Council Archives, *The Official Protocols of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna 1925*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6322.

⁵⁴³ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Correspondence between the Zionist Assembly in Eretz Israel and the World Zionist Organization, February 19, 1926*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 1268.

On February 14, 1928, a letter from the Zionist organization in Jerusalem to Colonel Frederick Kisch,⁵⁴⁴ the Palestine Zionist executive chairman, questioned the Sephardic Federation's loyalty to the Zionist project.⁵⁴⁵ The anonymous writer acknowledged the support that Zionist leaders, such as Menahem Ussishkin and Chaim Weizmann, had given to the Sephardic Federation. But he doubted the extent to which the federation truly identified with the Zionist project. The author proposed that Bulgarian and Italian Sephardic groups should be encouraged to resist the World Sephardic Federation and support the Zionist goals instead. At the same time, the writer suggested that a sympathetic approach to the Sephardim might change their opinions about the Ashkenazim, especially since, as he acknowledged "there is no way [we] could prevent their assemblies, particularly because they are not part of *Histadrut*⁵⁴⁶ [General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel]."⁵⁴⁷ It seemed that with the resistance of Sephardic-Mizrahi communities to join in large numbers to the worker's organization aroused further suspicion by the Zionist leaders. "Sympathy" to the "Sephardic spirit" was to camouflage the obstacles that the Sephardic Federation faced in Palestine, especially with the enlistment of Sephardic-Mizrahi (ethnic-based) coalitions to the political parties of the Labor movement and the Revisionist group. But how long could such strategic sympathy last?

The end of 1928 marked the start of the World Sephardic Federation's erosion as an effective autonomy. The existence of a competing political party to challenge the Zionist organization endangered the Zionists' aspiration to represent Jewish interests abroad and in Palestine. From London, Lauterbach,

⁵⁴⁴ General Frederick Kisch (1888–1943) was a British Army General and a Zionist leader. Among his various military positions he served as the head of the Zionist Commission in the Jerusalem region from 1924 to 1931.

⁵⁴⁵ The National Zionist Archives. *Correspondence between an Anonymous Author and General Kisch, February 14, 1928*. File S25/9982.

⁵⁴⁶ Established in December 1920, the General Federation of Laborers in the Land of Israel [*Histadrut*] attempted to take responsibility for all the activities in the Yishuv, including issues of settlement, health, education, culture, and welfare. During the 1920s a large number of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, Poland, and Romania were affiliated with the *Histadrut* (Lissak 2009: 92, 104–108). Sephardic-Mizrahi communities did not join the *Histadrut* in large number and often even resisted its actions (Giladi 1973: 118–119; Tzahor 1981: 148–149, 161).

⁵⁴⁷ The National Zionist Archives. *Correspondence between an Anonymous Author and General Kisch, February 14, 1928*. File S25/9982. See also in Hanna Hertzog, *Political Ethnicity – The Image and the Reality* (Jerusalem: Yad Tabenkin, 1986): 88–89.

the Zionist Organization secretary, sent letters to other Zionist leaders about the danger of a separate Sephardic entity.⁵⁴⁸ Lauterbach secretly urged the Sephardic-Zionist leaders from Bulgaria and Italy to refuse to recognize the authority of the World Sephardic Federation. Both the Bulgarian and the Italian Sephardic-Zionist leaders agreed to his request and would not allow any other institution besides the Zionist organization to deal with issues of discrimination or inequality among the Jewish community in Palestine.

The existence of a competing political party to the Zionist organization appeared to endanger its aspiration to present Jewish interests abroad and in Palestine. The Bulgarian-Sephardic leaders seemed to have heeded Lauterbach's warning. In the last months of 1929, Bulgarian-Sephardic leaders published a letter of protest in the popular daily newspaper, *Davar* [*Word*], which spoke out against the World Sephardic Federation, its "rare cultural work," and its radical political activities.⁵⁴⁹ The letter concluded that the Palestinian-Sephardic leaders were to blame for "damag[ing] the national effort . . . by advancing what appeared as Sephardic interests that go beyond the national efforts and only creating mistrust and division among the Zionist organization."⁵⁵⁰

Although the Sephardic Federation responded with evidence of how the Zionist organizations in Eretz Yisrael consistently privileged Ashkenazi immigrants over Mizrahi-Sephardic immigrants, the Bulgarian and Italian leaders joined the Zionists in sanctioning the validity of a Sephardic-Mizrahi political identity. Faced with such resistance from within their own community as well as the Zionists, it

⁵⁴⁸ The National Zionist Archives, "Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and the Zionist Organization," June 5, 1928. File J30/2673. See also The National Zionist Archives, "Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and Rosenblit," October 18, 1928. File Z4/3579. The National Zionist Archives, "Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and Ariab," November 20, 1928. File J30/2364. The National Zionist Archives, "Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and Zionist Organization in Eretz Yisrael," April 16, 1928. File J30/2365. The National Zionist Archives, "Correspondence between Dr. Leo Lauterbach and Zionist Organization in Bucharest," May 19, 1930. File Z4/3579.

⁵⁴⁹ Anonymous, "Bulgarian-Zionist Against 'The Sephardic Federation,'" *Davar* [*Word*], November 15, 1928, 1.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

remained questionable where and how Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders could continue their domestic and global political work.

“Wake Up and Act”:⁵⁵¹

Sephardic-Mizrahi Struggle Against the Zionists, 1928–1929

Sephardic-Mizrahi activities in 1929 were rooted in a response to ongoing discriminatory acts by the Zionist organizations. A low-key conflict turned verbal and vocal between the two sides, triggered by a sequence of events. Beside the “discreet” Zionist acts deployed behind the scene, the year 1929 proved even more significant to the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in Palestine because of growing internal and national tensions in the region.

From 1926 to 1928, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership strategically deployed the categories of Mizrahim and Sephardim. But in 1929, a confluence of political and national events further drew out the tensions embedded in their use. The opening months marked the end of the recession that had adversely impacted the Palestinian population. The Great Depression would not hit Palestine until two years later. The resolutions in the Zionist congress at the end of 1927, asserting that Sephardic-Mizrahi representatives should be “secured in Knesset Israel,”⁵⁵² had appeased a number of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders at the time. But by 1929, bitterness and disillusionment over the unresponsive Zionist organizations led to the proposal of unprecedented thoughts and acts. One such idea was the call for a separate “Sephardic-Mizrahi state.”

⁵⁵¹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Correspondence about the Condition of the World Sephardic Federation (signed by Yitzhak Levy), March 15, 1929*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

⁵⁵² Protocols. The National Zionist Archives, *Protocols of the General Assembly, May 15, 1928*, in Jerusalem, File J1/7231.

From the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership's perspective, they had entered an unofficial war against the Zionist organizations. One report of federation in 1929 reveals their level of disillusionment and anger in facing their Ashkenazi-Zionist acts of exclusion. A deep sense of grievance prompted the vision of an intra-ethnic Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy:

Our general condition has not changed. The known "agreement"⁵⁵³ with the Zionist organization did not give us anything but merely silenced our justified demands. Our bitterness is beyond words. There is no doubt that we should not allow this state to go on. We inspected the Zionist organization for the past six-months during which they had the opportunity to prove their positive concern to Sephardic. Between us and other national [Zionist] organizations and *Keren Hayesod*⁵⁵⁴ lies a deep silence. But we must not interpret this silence as an oath of peace; perhaps, the next few days will bring with them a change in our relationship.⁵⁵⁵

Conscious of the widening rift between the Zionist organization and themselves, the federation sent telegrams to Sephardic-Mizrahi communities abroad and within Palestine, protesting against "the problem of [Zionist] discrimination against Mizrahi Jewry" [*shealat kipuach zchuoteya shel ha-yahdut haMizrahit*].⁵⁵⁶ Once again, federation leaders invoked the category of "Mizrahim" in conjunction with their experience of political and cultural victimization, calling in an unequivocal tone for political activism. On March 15, 1929, a pamphlet exhorted its readers to awaken to the plight in the Yishuv:

Dear Brothers,

After ten years of exhaustive work by the various Sephardic organizations . . . [we] ask you to wake up and act! With each day we witness the weakening of our

⁵⁵³ On August 12, 1928, the Sephardic Federation reached an agreement with the Zionist organization and *Keren Hayesod* about securing position to Sephardic members in the General Assembly. After various negotiations and ultimatums from both sides and with the counsel of the Sephardic Rabbi of Tel-Aviv, Rabbi Ouziel, representation of the Sephardic list was protected in order to maintain a sense of unity in the Yishuv. See the Zionist National Archives. August 12, 1928. File S25/9882.

⁵⁵⁴ *Keren Hayesod* was Zionist monetary fund established at the Zionist Congress in London in 1920. Its goal was to support emigration to Palestine and the establishment of agricultural settlements.

⁵⁵⁵ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Correspondence about the Condition of the World Sephardic Federation (signed by Yitzhak Levy), March 15, 1929*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

position. No one addresses our humble and justified demands although we are attached to the land in all our veins.⁵⁵⁷

The accusations of the Zionist indifference describe “the poor settlements of *bnei edoth ha-Mizrahi*” [Eastern Jews], their dire economic condition, the absence of Mizrahi-Sephardic representatives within the Zionist structure, and “the lack of an organized immigration effort.”⁵⁵⁸ The leaders concluded, “we have no remedy [for our distress] but to look to our power and population in the land [*Eretz Yisrael*].”⁵⁵⁹ Hence, the call to action: “we should protest all across the country that a nation cannot be based on the discrimination of certain people, and we must unite all the communities of Mizrahi Jewry.”⁵⁶⁰ The pamphlet ended with a request that could also be read as a threat, “No one should be missing in this act of defense [*haganah*]!”⁵⁶¹ By resorting to “public protest”—whether in the form of spreading pamphlets in Palestine or telegrams to Sephardic communities abroad—the federation evidently regarded its relations with the Zionist organizations beyond repair.⁵⁶² However, the Sephardic Federation took the idea of “public protest” one step further.

Looking for an opportunity to make visible their “protest,” the approaching Sixteenth Zionist Congress that convened in Zurich, Switzerland, on July 28, 1929, with the participation of 322 Zionist delegates from all parts of the world, appeared an ideal platform to circulate a ten-page pamphlet attacking the Zionist institution on multiple levels. Published in English and Hebrew, and directed Zionist delegates from all around the world, the tone of the Sephardic demands was nothing less than combative. The Sephardic leaders used the crude binary opposition: it was Sephardim who included all the “Oriental”

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² The Sephardic Council Archives, *Correspondence between the President of World Sephardic Federation, Moshe Pichotto, and M. D. Gaon, March 28, 1929*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

Jewish communities, which the Zionist organization excluded. Their decision to assert a separate identity and establish an independent organization that would be more responsive than the Zionists underlined their harsh attack on the Zionist organization. Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders charged:

The Zionist Organization has absolutely neglected the Sephardi Jews, has not undertaken propaganda activity for the benefit of Zionism among their communities, has not arranged for their immigration to the Land . . . Moreover, only about a hundred Sephardim have been able to be part of the work in *Eretz-Yisrael* from which thousands upon thousands of people [Ashkenazim] have earned their livelihood. This indifferent attitude towards Sephardi Jewry has lasted for the past ten years . . . The World Sephardic Federation has raised its voice on more than one occasion and made known its protests and demands at Zionist Congresses; but perceiving that none of its complaints has borne fruit, it has decided this time to appeal directly to all delegates in the hope that there may be some to whom its words will strike home and who will give heed to its question.⁵⁶³

Statistics accompanied the fiery language, primarily concerning the distribution of immigrant certificates.⁵⁶⁴ Among the evidence of six hundred certificates to Palestine, only a few were given to Sephardic Jews (about 2 to 3 percent).⁵⁶⁵ The letter raised questions about the lack of employment of Sephardim in national institutions and Zionist organizations and the strange failure to cultivate commerce with Sephardic centers in Baghdad and Salonika.⁵⁶⁶

“Give attention to the Sephardim,” demanded the World Sephardic Federation, “to this important [Sephardic] element, which until now has been neglected.” A sentimental voice, emphasizing the passivity of Sephardim in contrast to the active (and masculine) Zionist body, urged Zionist

⁵⁶³ Report. *Universal Confederation of Sephardic Jews – Report to the Sixteenth Zionist Congress, July 1929*, (Jerusalem: R. H. Cohen’s Press, 1929) 5–6.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁵ Certificates were permissions to immigrate to Palestine, which were granted by the authorities of the Palestinian British Mandate to the Jewish Agency. The Jewish Agency distributed the permissions according to the strength of the Zionist movement and the situation of the Jews in a given country.

⁵⁶⁶ Report. *Universal Confederation of Sephardic Jews – Report to the Sixteenth Zionist Congress, July 1929*, (Jerusalem: R. H. Cohen’s Press, 1929), 6–8.

representatives to “draw them [Sephardim] into the movement of the country,” for “it is in this way that your will introduce a new form of Zionist work which will favorably engender the development and rapid flowering of *Eretz-Yisrael!*”⁵⁶⁷ Voicing their protest in various forms through multiple public outlets, the federation waited for a change to unfold. Meanwhile, clashes known as the “Western Wall Riots” erupted between Palestinian-Arab and the Jewish population in August 1929, and the current Sephardic-Mizrahi state of affairs took yet another turn.

“Abused Sephardic Matters:”⁵⁶⁸ The Influence of the Western Wall Riots on the Sephardic-Mizrahi Leadership, 1929–1930

The 1929 “Western Wall Riots” widened the political, nationalist, and spatial division between Jews (Israelis) and Muslim (Palestinians). Tensions between the two groups intensified when Palestinian-Arabs declared the Western Wall to be part of their holiest places and began to build around the wall. Encouraged by right wing parties’ call to “wake up and unite,”⁵⁶⁹ on August 15, 1929, a group of several hundred Jews marched around the Western Wall, claiming ownership to the place. In response, two thousand Palestinian-Arabs arranged a counter-demonstration at the wall, while burning a few prayer books. The helpless British police suggested in vain that a phone (perhaps in anticipation of more

⁵⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁶⁸ I paraphrase here Abraham Elmaliah’s original quote: “I feel that all Sephardic matters are abused.” The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem, January 7, 1930*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 2–3.

⁵⁶⁹ In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, August 12, 1929, 2. For greater details about the Wailing Wall Riots see the following reports: “The Uprisings Around the Wailing Wall Riots.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, August 19, 1929, 1; “In the Presence of the [British] Police.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, August 20, 1929, 1. “The Riots in Jerusalem Persist.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, August 21, 1929, 1; “Burial of Blood.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, August 22, 1929, 1; “Violence of the British-Arab Police During a Jewish Funeral.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, August 22, 1929, 3.

bloodshed) should be located next to wall in order to prevent unrest.⁵⁷⁰ Two days later, out in the streets of the Bukharan Quarter [*Sh'hunat HaBucharim*], situated north to the city center of Jerusalem, a young Sephardic Jew named, Abraham Mizrachi, was stabbed to death by Palestinian-Arabs. The cause of the quarrel that led to his death was a soccer ball that fell into an Arab tomato garden.

On August 20, 1929, a mixed crowd of about three thousand people, primarily Sephardic-Mizrahi Jews, attended the funeral of Abraham Mizrachi. The angry mourners “refused to follow the orders of the British police” and confronted the Palestinian-Arab communities.⁵⁷¹ Both sides called for revenge. The British Police, which consisted of only 292 officers and 110 soldiers, lost control of the escalating state of affairs.⁵⁷² In the next three days, seventeen Jews were killed in Jerusalem as a result of ongoing riots.

On August 23, extensive waves of rioting that would last for a week stretched out beyond the Jerusalem area. The riots primarily harmed cities of mixed Jewish-Muslim populations such as Hebron, Safed, Haifa, and Jerusalem, all of which were centers of the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities at the time. The Shaw Report of 1930, produced by the British Mandate to analyze the events, presented the conflict as a clash of two distinct groups: in the aftermath of the week of riots, from August 23 to August 29, 116 Arabs and 133 Jews were killed, while 232 Arabs and 198 were injured. The responsibility for the riots that extended from Jerusalem to the rest of the country was perceived by the British to be “an attack of the Arabs on the Jews.”⁵⁷³

Histories of the ongoing Jewish-Muslim, or Israeli-Palestinian, conflict find the 1929 riots as a “watershed moment,” a nationalist escalation in Israeli-Palestinian relations. But this approach

⁵⁷⁰ Anonymous, “The Uprisings Around the Wailing Wall Riots.” In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol. 1, August 19, 1929, 1.

⁵⁷¹ Anonymous, “Burial of Blood.” In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], Vol. 1, August 22, 1929, 1.

⁵⁷² See Morris 2003: 113–114.

⁵⁷³ Chaired by Sir Walter Shaw, the British Commission reported on the Palestinian uprising, also known as the “Wailing Wall” riots. Published on March 1930, the Shaw Report investigated both sides for the reasons to the riots.

overlooked its significance in the evolution of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity.⁵⁷⁴ However, this segment is the first detailed exploration of the impact of the Wailing Wall Riots on the identity formation of a particular Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewish mélange of ethnic-cultural communities. The escalation between Palestinian-Arab and Jewish residents that led to the Wailing Wall Riots, from August 19 to August 29, caused Sephardic-Mizrahi communities to question their amicable and cooperative relationship with their Palestinian-Arab neighbors. Nonetheless, it also heightened their sense of isolation within the Yishuv and the Zionist organization.

The Sephardic-Mizrahi communities suffered severe casualties (relative to the other Jewish communities) and damage to property, but the attacks by Palestinian-Arabs hastened the demise of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership, as central Sephardic-Mizrahi enclaves were severely hurt by the riots. On the local level, the riots found the Jewish population surprised and unprepared. Given the destruction of Jewish (primarily Sephardic-Mizrahi) centers in the old city of Jerusalem, Hebron, Har-Tuv, and Safed, these communities found themselves particularly vulnerable. In Hebron, for instance, where six hundred Jews resided (mostly Sephardic-Mizrahi communities), sixty-two Jews died and the city was abandoned. In Safed, populated by 10,000 Palestinian-Muslim and 3,000 Jews, the Jewish community appeared defenseless. Eventually, eighteen Jews were killed, and eighty were injured. Har-Tuv, the Sephardic-Mizrahi community, which had been defended by the neighboring Palestinian-Arab villages,⁵⁷⁵ was left in ruins. From the perspective of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders, they were attacked by their supposed neighbors, the Palestinian-Arab natives, and left consistently without allies in the Zionist organization. Despite their material ruin they suffered, they had no representative in the Zionist Organization willing to advocate on their behalf or even express their anguish. Three months after the riots, Sephardic-Mizrahi

⁵⁷⁴ For an extended body of scholarship that examines the “Wailing Wall” riots of 1929 as turning point in the Jewish-Palestinian relations, while overlooking the nuanced perspective of the Palestinian Sephardim-Mizrahim. See Caplan 2010: 79–87; Segev 1999: 295–313; Porath 1971: 210–223; Naor & Giladi 1990: 208–218; Lesch 1979: 102–131; Laqueur 1972: 255–260.

⁵⁷⁵ See Ben-Bassat 2010: 137–140.

leaders met to reorganize and discuss their initiatives, now burdened with a keen sense of injustice and inequality.

On January 7, 1930, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership reconvened. At the start of their meeting, sixty-two-year-old Joseph Meyuhas, a veteran Sephardic activist and the only Sephardic representative in the *Va'ad Leumi* [*General Assembly*], reviewed the impact of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership and communities. Meyuhas described the assembly's recent election process and the amendments to the constitution by various Zionist members in order to increase the number of Ashkenazi representatives in the assembly.⁵⁷⁶ His numerous requests both formal and informal, in meetings and through letters, that the assembly "review the position and role of the Mizrahi communities," had been consistently denied.⁵⁷⁷ Forty-year-old Abraham Elmaliah, the opinionated leader of the Sephardic Federation and editor of two papers affiliated with the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities, *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*] and *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [*East and West*], refused to be a passive and helpless victim. He declared that the General Assembly's longstanding ignorance of the Sephardic-Mizrahi population had even greater consequence for their aims to recover from the riots.

Given the disproportionate losses suffered by the Sephardic-Mizrahi population, which constituted 80 percent of total casualties, the leaders were aghast that their community continued to be ignored by the predominately Zionist General Assembly. "I feel that all Sephardic matters are abused," Elmaliah concluded following the failure by the Zionist organization to assist Sephardic settlements such as Har-Tuv, Hebron, and Safed, which were devastated by the riots.⁵⁷⁸ He suggested some "practical acts"

⁵⁷⁶ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem, January 7, 1930*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1–2.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem, January 7, 1930*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 2–3.

to counter “the humiliations that [they] insult us with.”⁵⁷⁹ Consequently, it was Elmaliah who introduced the resolution to leave the central Zionist assembly, the *Knesset*,⁵⁸⁰ a proposition that opened a Sephardic-Mizrahi Pandora’s box, out of which emerged a serious and contradictory course of actions.

The first approach to secession favored a hardline position that had been discussed in Sephardic-Mizrahi assemblies since 1926: “to object to all Zionist organizations.”⁵⁸¹ The advocates of this proposition “to leave the Zionist assembly and create our own [Sephardic] Assembly” included Joseph Elishar, Yedidia Baruch, and Meir Lagnado.⁵⁸² For the thirty-two-year-old Lagnado, attorney by profession and an active member of the World Sephardic Federation, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership must follow the admirable Revisionist Party. The Sephardim should emulate the model of the Revisionist Party: “at every occasion the Revisionist are abashed but they don’t retreat. We have to choose a path and follow it.”⁵⁸³ Baruch, often a silent contributor to the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership, offered a more contentious strategy that included “demands” and an “ultimatum to the Zionist organization.”⁵⁸⁴ In the event that these were rejected, the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership should throw its lot in with other radical groups, such as the *Agudah*,⁵⁸⁵ and create a greater force outside the Zionist organization that would demand consideration. At the heart of this approach was the leaders’ fear of the innate intellectual and

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Knesset [in Hebrew: gathering place] was and still is the assembly of representatives from the Jewish community and later the Israeli state.

⁵⁸¹ Protocols. The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem, January 7, 1930*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 4.

⁵⁸² Ibid.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Protocols. The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem, January 7, 1930*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 5.

⁵⁸⁵ Founded in Poland in 1912, the *Agudah*, also know as *Agudath Yisrael* [the community of Israel], was a political faction of ultra-Orthodox Jews. It was established as a political party in the Yishuv in 1912 against a growing secular Zionist majority and became a fundamental center to Ultra-Orthodox Jews [*haredim*] in Palestine and established particular settlements for its members such as, Kfar Gideon established in 1923.

political inadequacy of the Sephardic-Mizrahi character. “Unfortunately,” admitted Lagnado, “we are not talented in anything.” Baruch admitted, “Our problem is that we are bad politicians.” Consequently, Baruch and Lagnado urged the leadership to prove their worthiness by opposing Ashkenazi-Zionist organizations.

A second approach doubted Sephardic-Mizrahi’s ability to be held accountable about their future. This sense of insecurity was followed by a diagnosis of the inherent inferiority of the Sephardic-Mizrahi character. For Moshe Attias, the failure of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to effectively improve their community’s political voice confirmed their need to be led by the Ashkenazi-Zionist organization. An active member of the World Sephardic Federation and a secretary in the Zionist organization responsible for issues of Sephardic-Mizrahi immigration to Palestine, Attias expressed surprise at the claims and suggestions of his fellow representatives. He argued that “the Zionist organizations could show us some numbers and facts,” proving that “there is no discrimination” against the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities.⁵⁸⁶ He also paradoxically asserted, “Discrimination comes as a result of our own acts.”⁵⁸⁷ Attias went to explain and even justify the existing inequality in three ways: First, the Sephardic leadership was passive; second, this leadership had thus far been unable to productively “choose its path.” Lastly, reiterating the common theme in the assembly, Attias pointed out “the inherent inferiority of the Sephardim.” Attias’ speech was supposed to close the assembly but instead created “great confusion” among the representatives.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁸ Protocols. The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem, January 7, 1930*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 8–9.

Although some assembly members viewed Attias's claims as biased, considering his affiliation with the Zionist organization,⁵⁸⁹ it was the striking internalization of Sephardic inferiority that allowed Attias to defend the approach of the Zionist Organization and criticize his party that is of concern here. The Sephardic leaders felt victimized, but tragically attributed their neglect by the Zionists to their inherent inferiority, inappropriateness, and inadequacy. This discourse of inferiority turned into a haunting story: rather than pursuing their radical idea about a separate Zionist project, the leaders left the meeting defeated and resigned. Attias's criticism dominated not only the Assembly but also the initiatives of Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership in the coming years.

“Our Miserable Existence”:⁵⁹⁰

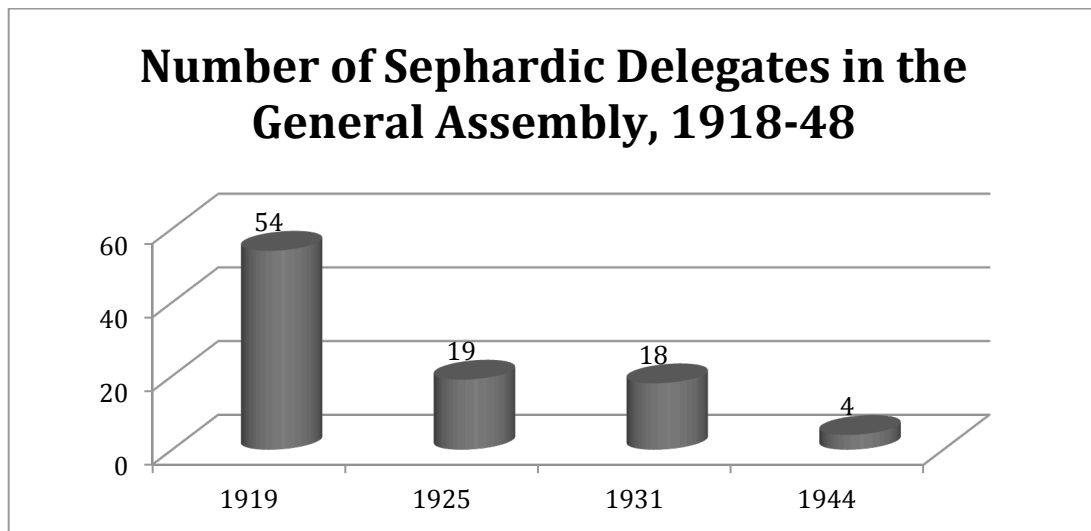
A Sephardic-Mizrahi Tragedy, 1931–1935

Over the next five years, from 1931 to 1936, the political demise of the World Sephardic Federation and its Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership failed to change its course. As the federation underwent what its own leadership termed a slow “burial” and other Sephardic groups folded, in the Yishuv and primarily in the eyes of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership, the category of Sephardim would become a marker of an apolitical and an inferior group with a mythological past. What triggered those changes were the decline of various Sephardic-Mizrahi activities, including the closure of the Sephardic party *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*Pioneers of the East*] (1929), the ending of the Sephardic journal, *Mizrah U-Marav* [*East and West*] (1932), and the lack of financial support from abroad. Additionally, Sephardic-Mizrahi political

⁵⁸⁹ Protocols. The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation and Representatives of the Mizrahi Communities in Jerusalem, January 7, 1930*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1–2.

⁵⁹⁰ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation, December 24, 1931*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

power diminished further in the 1931 elections to the General Assembly, the Sephardic faction won only eighteen delegates (fifteen Sephardic and three Yemenite):⁵⁹¹



Changes within the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership and the emergence of rival political entities in Palestine and abroad began to take a toll on the Sephardic Federation. In addition to the decline in Sephardic-Mizrahi initiatives in Palestine, in 1931, Moshe Pichotto, the first president of the World Sephardic Federation, moved to Paris. There he began to establish an alternate center to the World Sephardic Federation. Pichotto's ambition was to link Sephardic matters (and not Mizrahi) with culture rather than political identity and, in so doing, undermined the Palestinian-Sephardic mission of uniting Sephardim-Mizrahim around the globe around issues of nationalism. Recognized as a highly effective fundraiser, Pichotto focused on promoting cultural activities outside of Palestine from 1931 onward. He was involved in the publication of a journal in French *Le Judaisme Sephardi* [*Sephardic Jewry*], and the organization of Sephardic Assemblies in Belgrade (1930), London (1935), and Amsterdam (1938). In contrast to the opening meeting of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna in 1925, in the European assemblies, the representation of Palestinian Sephardim was restricted to one or two delegates.

⁵⁹¹ See Herzog 1986.

Meanwhile, in Jerusalem, in the period from 1931 to 1936, meetings of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership became less frequent. At the same time, however, various nascent groups of leaders from multiple communities emerged in Haifa and Tel-Aviv, claiming to be the new mouthpiece of the Sephardic-Mizrahi population. To increase their power, the main efforts of the Jerusalemite Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders were invested in rebuilding Sephardic-Jewish communities in Hebron, Safed, and Har-Tuv. At the same time, however, with the cut in economic assistance from Sephardic communities outside Palestine, the budget became minimal.⁵⁹² The debates in the federation became bleak and pessimistic, encapsulated in Gaon's words on February 22, 1931, that "if we bury the federation than we should bury it with some respect."⁵⁹³

On November 2, 1931, in a meeting that seemed to take the "burial" of the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity underway, new glimpses of hope reemerged among its members. Initiatives concerning the growth of the Sephardic Federation were put forward, but on the ground level no changes were made. Fewer and fewer members of the old leadership attended the meetings. In the following assembly, on November 20, a shortage of funding and a lack of participation by various members of the leadership prompted Dr. Yizchak Levy, one of the founders of Sephardic organizations in 1918, to express his frustration: "without economic support and without people we cannot work."⁵⁹⁴ The burial proceeded, with Elmaliah asserting in anguish, "we should not continue with our miserable existence."⁵⁹⁵ Members reiterated old ideas, including the old advice to break away from the Zionist organization. But no practical moves were taken to advance this idea or another. The existence of the federation appeared uncertain. Since Pichotto's departure—it remains unclear whether he resigned and left or whether was he no longer the President when

⁵⁹² See the acknowledgement of a number of letters that the World Sephardic Federation received regarding the difficult economic condition of Sephardic communities in Belgrade and Buenos Aires in The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation, February 22, 1931*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, File 6, 4.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation Concerning the Issue of "Herut," November 2, 1931*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

he immigrated—the Palestinian Sephardic community appeared hopeless, primarily in securing donations for their federation. “To be or not to be” [*lehiyot oh lachdol*] was the question that preoccupied Elmaliah and other participants during their upcoming assembly on December 24, 1931.⁵⁹⁶

Efforts to resolve this dilemma, whether the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders should follow the radical vision of some of its members and establish an ethnic autonomy while departing from the Zionist project, was followed now a by growing financial concerns. To alleviate the leadership’s ongoing economic distress, Yedidia Baruch, a pharmacist by profession who previously demanded an ultimatum to the Zionist Organization,⁵⁹⁷ suggested again that the Sephardic Federation divorce itself from the Zionist Organization “on the economic level and not on the cultural level.”⁵⁹⁸ In response, Gaon, known by now among the Sephardic members as the “pessimist,” maintained that “leaving the Zionist organization would lead to the destruction of the federation.”⁵⁹⁹ His reply sheds light on his close affiliation and interest with the Zionist Organization. It also reminds us about the relationship between the maldistribution of economic resources by the Zionist Organization and its influence in sustaining the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity. Gaon went on to criticize the federation: “Bulgarian Jewry resists our initiatives; everyone rejects us.”⁶⁰⁰ Considering the scarce budget of the federation, Gaon supported the termination of the federation or any remains of Sephardic-Mizrahi activity. Although the Sephardic-Mizrahi representatives resolved to disband the Federation, once again the assembly ended without a clear decision. This discourse of doubt and hesitation in making a decision and the ambivalence in relation to

⁵⁹⁶ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation, December 24, 1931*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

⁵⁹⁷ About Yedidia Baruch and his activity as a pharmacist please see “The Annual Meeting of the Pharmacist Association in *Eretz Yisrael*.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, Vol. 1, December 5, 1920, 3.

⁵⁹⁸ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Central Working Committee of World Sephardic Federation, December 24, 1931*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1–2.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

the Zionist Organization lingered until 1936, when the leadership sought to answer the Shakespearean conundrum by favoring the option of “not being” as a way of being Sephardim-Mizrahim.

“To Purify Ourselves From The [Sephardic-Mizrahi] Ethnic Filth”:⁶⁰¹

The Establishment of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine, 1936

On November 1, 1936,⁶⁰² a group of fifteen Sephardic-Mizrahi Palestinian leaders gathered at 12 Ben-Yehuda Street, Jerusalem. Among them were some of the protagonists of this chapter and dissertation, including Meir Lagnado, Abraham Elmaliah, Moshe David Gaon and Moshe Attias. The clock read 3 p.m. as they convened at the antiquated Amdursky Hotel, situated next to the bustling Jaffa Gate and facing King David’s Tower. During their two-day symposium, they planned to declare the establishment of a new political party, The Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine. At the heart of the Jewish Liberal Party was an ironic resolution: rejection of all existing Sephardic-Mizrahi political and ethnic organizations.

The idea of a Jewish Liberal Party had been conceived over the previous three months through several correspondences and preliminary meetings, starting in early August. The protocols chronicling the establishment of the Liberal party describe the efforts to acquire financial backing⁶⁰³ and discussions about circulating a monthly or weekly pamphlet about the Jewish as well as Arab people of the *Mizrach*

⁶⁰¹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Meir Lagnado’s speech: “The Ways To Create One [Ethnic] Community in Eretz Israel,”* or, “*Why Did we Create the Liberal Party?*” in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 3–4.

⁶⁰² The Protocols of the debates at the first assembly of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine tell us about the progression of the assembly and about the meeting that proceeded and followed this assembly. That said, apart from the protocols (and letter exchange), I was not able to locate any evidence in daily newspapers about whether the assembly took place. Moreover, newspapers at the time also do not mention anything relating to or in reference to the assembly. It seems to me that whether the meeting did take place or not, the creation of the Liberal party and its agenda are of greater importance than the actualization of the assembly on November 1, 1936.

⁶⁰³ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine, October 7, 1936,* in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 2.

(the Orient or the East) both in Arabic and Hebrew.⁶⁰⁴ Additionally, these protocols document the intricate and complex ideas that these leaders of the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities developed regarding such categories as Sephardim and Mizrahim.

The Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders believed it was their task to untangle (as opposed to emerging Sephardic-Mizrahi groups working outside Jerusalem) the relationship between communal ethnicity and political affiliation.⁶⁰⁵ As they discussed on August 5, 1936, the founding principles of the party revolved around the demand for “equal rights,” “freedom of speech,” and “the implantation of liberal and moral foundations in all the [Israeli/Palestinian] walks of life.”⁶⁰⁶ More precisely, the primary role of the Liberal party was to “free” and “liberate” its initiators from any communal [*edatiuth*] affiliation with the Sephardic or Mizrahi communities.⁶⁰⁷

Ironically, it was the same Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders, who, in 1925, had insisted on the establishment of an ethnic party and a global federation, and who, now in 1936, called for the creation of a Liberal party not based on ethnic or communal affiliation. According to Yitzhak Raphael Molho, and the veteran leader, Abraham Elmaliah, “the Liberal party must include each individual regardless of his communal [or ethnic] affiliation, and not a limited group of Sephardim that would work along Sephardic lines.”⁶⁰⁸ The rhetoric of the Liberal party rejected the exclusive Sephardic-Mizrahi ethnic, racial, and political demarcations in favor of an inclusive political approach. Their view presupposed that Sephardim-Mizrahim were not a distinct ethnic, racial, or political community or concept. This project of

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁵ This correlation of politics and ethnicity, it must be stressed, was made by Sephardic political parties and communal organization primarily from 1918 Palestine and was later celebrated ten years ago during the establishment of the World Sephardic Federation in Vienna of 1925.

⁶⁰⁶ Memorandum. The Sephardic Council Archives, “The Principal Aims of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine, August 5, 1926,” in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

⁶⁰⁷ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine, September 5, 1936*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1–2.

⁶⁰⁸ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine, September 5, 1936*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

ethnic liberation from a notion of Sephardism or Mizrahiness was a candid recognition of what some of the party's leading activists such as Moshe David Gaon identified as "Sephardic stagnation."⁶⁰⁹ This conscious realization of Sephardic cultural paralysis resulted in the calling for a party that would explicitly erase a distinct Sephardic-Mizrahi political identity.

Following this line of critique, in a meeting held on September 5, 1936, other activists discussed the consequences of the undeveloped condition of Sephardim-Mizrahim. One member of the party was "frustrated with some Sephardim who are not comfortable with their Sephardic identity."⁶¹⁰ Others, however, such as Meir Lagnado, one of the originators of the party, disclosed his frustration with the historical ineffectiveness of Sephardic groups: "Now, after fifteen years of hard work to the point of exhaustion [*afishat kochot*], without remorse I suggest we close up the organizations of the Sephardic community."⁶¹¹ Lagnado's explanation was simple: "As I reached this conclusion . . . I realized that there is no need for these institution/s."⁶¹² The failure to access political power and position of privilege gave rise to Sephardic-Mizrahi self-doubt and a discourse of inferiority. The implications of these notions of Sephardic-Mizrahi self-doubt, marginalization, and political abnegation were numerous.

During another meeting on September 7, 1936, this frustration with Sephardic-Mizrahi organizations and communities led to a specific political strategy. In his talk, Gaon referred to the Sephardic-Mizrahi situation as "tragic."⁶¹³ He blamed the Sephardic-Mizrahi populace, not the leadership of which he was part, for the community's lack of progress:

We are the same unvaried limited number of participants, apparently young, who since the 1920s went through various experiences, rising and falling without

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

⁶¹² Ibid.

⁶¹³ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine, September 7, 1936*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 3.

successfully creating a living environment [*svivah haya*] . . . Those [Sephardic activists] followed their dreams and worked night and day in favor of the public, the same public that did not progress. Those [Sephardic activists] . . . who awake periodically and look at the tremendous neglect in our camp, their bodies filled with anger and gloom, have tried to rouse the stagnant [Sephardic-Mizrahi collective] body that is not aware of its disastrous condition.⁶¹⁴

Gaon's dramatic language was infused with pathos and melancholy, and it criticized the "stagnant" populace but admired the elitist Sephardic leaders who "worked night and night" for the undeveloped masses. In his speech, Gaon applied the binary paradigm of Ashkenazim versus Sephardim/Mizrahim to divide the active and insightful Sephardic leadership from the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities. However, unlike earlier attempts to apply a cultural hierarchy to this mixed crowd, Gaon tended to be more fatalistic in his ranking. Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority became eternal, unchangeable, and "disastrous." To explain how "disastrous" the condition of the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities was, Gaon went on to enumerate the contribution to Sephardic leaders to their community since the start of the British Mandate in 1918:

As in a play, the performances proceed: love and devotion, the Federation of Sephardic Youth, the Pioneers of the East, the Sephardic Federation, the City Committee, the Temporary Committee to the Jews in Eretz Israel, the Preparing Committee to the World Federation, the Sephardic Committee . . . In all these organizations the leaders of the [Sephardic] party played a pivotal role . . . if they devoted such efforts to another community their work would bear fruit . . . but here a deluding circle of magic surround them.⁶¹⁵

Again, as in Lagnado's speech, the failure to access political power was a key indicator of the destitute state of the Sephardic-Mizrahi community. For Gaon, the "deluding circle of magic"⁶¹⁶ revealed the deficient Sephardic-Mizrahi character and its inferiority. "There is something wrong with us and our ongoing past efforts from which we have to learn . . . I am afraid to admit that we are all frustrated as a result of a number of failures, but perhaps those disappointments could lead to a creative act [*peulah*

⁶¹⁴ Ibid.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

yotzseret].”⁶¹⁷ The question remained: Could the same leadership that oversaw multiple failures continue leading this deficient Sephardic-Mizrahi community? How could this “tragedy”⁶¹⁸ be resolved, if at all?

According to Gaon, their best hope lay outside the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership and community. Now that that it was agreed and proven that the Sephardic-Mizrahi population could not solve or redeem its eternal “tragic” condition, hopes of redemption rested elsewhere: on Ashkenazi leaders.

The Sephardi has become in recent years a static element. In contrast to his Ashkenazi brother, who is active, the more the latter becomes active it is as if the former continues declining. Perhaps by blending the two elements [the Sephardic and the Ashkenazi] or by pulling Ashkenazim to the Sephardic group the futile land will change and *Benei Edot ha-Mizrach* [sons of the Mizrahi communities], who are lost now, will benefit from this.⁶¹⁹

In order to move up in the cultural and national ladder, the “passive” Sephardic-Mizrahi group must imitate, and thus follow, “active” Ashkenazi leadership.⁶²⁰ The ongoing political failure was used to catalyze the sluggish Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects and community. In Gaon’s estimation, only an Ashkenazi savior could rescue the declining Sephardic-Mizrahi community. In Gaon’s discourse as well as that of others, Sephardic-Mizrahi “failure” and “passivity” emerged as a sign of inferiority, and suggested the internalization of various Orientalist ideas used to define a deficient self. Denial of Sephardic-Mizrahi agency and the internalization of partial notions of Ashkenazi superiority were, in fact, also at the very center of the Jewish Liberal Party Palestine and its desires to diminish the role of the Sephardic-Mizrahi political and communal organizations.



Returning to the declaration statement of the Liberal party on November 1, 1936, a mixed crowd of seventy to eighty Ashkenazi as well as Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects, mostly bankers, lawyers, doctors,

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ Ibid.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid.

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

and educators, were invited to the event. On the agenda were opening speeches by Abraham Elmaliah, discussing “The Condition of Political Parties in Palestine” and Issac (Yitzhak) Molho, evaluating “The Liberal Idea within the National Framework.” The liberal party political plan was concerned with national as well as Sephardic- Mizrahi local issues within the Yishuv.

Focusing on national ideology, M. H. Gino,⁶²¹ a lawyer who had passionately advocated for the formation of the World Sephardic Federation in 1925, articulated the reasons for establishing the party. Religious and prophetic visions, Gino suggested, must be at the center of the creation of *Eretz Yisrael*. This land would be “sacred to all religions that believe in the virtue and progress [*kidma*] of the Old Testament.”⁶²² Thus, Gino averred that, “*Eretz Yisrael* should not be recognized as a Jewish state” but based more on a spiritual “dissemination of peaceful ideas of the Prophets in the world.”⁶²³ This future state would not insist on Jewish sovereignty. Instead, “the non-Jewish communities [primarily the Christian and Muslim religions] would enjoy religious and civic freedom” as they “will need to accept this [particular] nationalism in *Eretz Yisrael*,” as well as to assume an active role in spreading the idea of peace and equality among the three religions.⁶²⁴ This utopian idea of the multi-religious state was followed by another equally hopeful vision of the amicable relations between the various ethnic communities in the Yishuv.

Meir Lagnado, a key architect in creating the party, addressed the means by which such a state might be realized. In his speech, revealingly titled “The Ways To Create One [Ethnic] Community in *Eretz Yisrael*,” Lagnado agreed with critical voices such as Gaon and Gino. He declared Sephardic-

⁶²¹ Ginio’s speech was titled “The Needs and Ambitions of the Liberal Party: The National Ideology of the Liberal Party.”

⁶²² The Sephardic Council Archives, *Meir Ginio’s Speech: “The Needs and Ambitions of the Liberal Party: The National Ideology of the Liberal Party,”* in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1–6.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Ibid.

Mizrahi affiliation and organizations as “bad for us”⁶²⁵ and “bad to our community.”⁶²⁶ One of the characterizations of the party’s attempts to dissociate itself from past failures in order to envisage a new state with a new beginning was the internal assumption that to be Sephardic-Mizrahi involved some intrinsic inadequacy and misfortune. In contrast to those who cannot be released from their Sephardism stood those whose “good fortune [*mazalam ha'tov*] did not make them Sephardim”—namely Ashkenazim.⁶²⁷ The same leadership who had promoted the discourse of Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority tried to bend this discourse to their own ends to establish a Liberal party. Granted, it seems that Lagnado and others were sincerely trying to change their situation. But they did not seem aware of the irony or inconsistency of their discursive strategies. Founding the Liberal party represented another attempt to alter the fatalistic vocabulary that resigned itself to Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority and the discourse of ethnic identity that condemned the Sephardic-Mizrahi to “misfortune.”

Lagnado outlined practical actions to dismantle existing self-imposed definitions of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity. He questioned the political efforts of the *Askanim Edathium* [communal/ethnic leaders] in Palestine for the last eighteen years and attributed to them the responsibility for sustaining a false sense of Sephardic-Mizrahi ethnic group. The end result of this leadership, including his participation in it, Lagnado perceived, was the creation of a “narrow and limited framework that we willingly embraced and restricted ourselves to.”⁶²⁸ He explained:

. . . in our wish to awaken this community we produced in it a sense of solitude and separateness, we developed in it a sense of local patriotism in an ethnic sense, we fortified in it a sense of bitterness. At times, even hatred, we divided it and pushed it afar from any possible influence in national issues.⁶²⁹

⁶²⁵ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Meir Lagnado's speech: "The Ways To Create One [Ethnic] Community in Eretz Yisrael,"* or, “*Why Did we Create the Liberal Party?*” in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 2.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Ibid.

⁶²⁸ Ibid.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

Because of its reflexivity, this quote throws light on a degree of self-awareness by Lagnado. The question of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity, including its characteristics of “isolation,” “bitterness,” and “local patriotism,” are recognized here as a false construction that was consciously maneuvered by a selective leadership. The same leadership, as represented by Lagnado, however, now admitted that, “our contribution to the communal and ethnic framework has been detrimental to us and to our community [Edah].”⁶³⁰ Such a change in the leadership’s perception of what was politically beneficial and detrimental resulted in a new attempt to redefine Sephardic-Mizrahi identities and politics.

Lagnado outlined two possible courses of actions.⁶³¹ His first proposal emphasized “evolution,”⁶³² anticipating “national amalgamation” that would result in “the eradication of Sephardim or Ashkenazim.”⁶³³ However, he estimated that it would take at least fifty years for these categories to dissolve. Thus, Lagnado favored the second option: “revolution.”⁶³⁴

Lagnado called for Sephardim to be “the first revolutionary group” to dismantle the model that led the Sephardic community to cultural and political “bankruptcy.”⁶³⁵ He envisaged that the transformation would begin among the “intelligentsia” and then progress to the “simple masses” [*ha-amon ha’pashut*]:⁶³⁶

We [Sephardic intelligentsia] must fight against any ambition to create any organization that would be based on any ethnic principal. We must immediately

⁶³⁰ Ibid.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 3.

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Ibid., 2.

⁶³⁴ Ibid.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

establish within [our] community parties and institutions for workers, merchants, conservatives, liberals, and etc.⁶³⁷

The Sephardic intelligentsia, of which Lagnado regarded himself a member, would be responsible for the closing of the Sephardic Council in Jerusalem, and any other organizations founded on the notion of ethnic identity. Effacing Sephardic-Mizrahi organizations was one thing, but Lagnado was not satisfied only with only this aim. As his speech progressed, his tone grew more combative. Next, Lagnado articulated the specific objectives for the Sephardic intelligentsia:

In order for us to succeed in our work we must purify ourselves from the ethnic filth [*chel'aah adatit*] and organize ourselves around fundamentals of shared ideology that will uplift the human spirit and refine our morals. We must unshackle the iron chains of ethnicity that forced us to limit our share rather than being interested in national questions of the land, other general issues of the people, ways of democracy in the world . . . This we could pursue only [in forming] a group with more political orientation and not as an ethnic community.⁶³⁸

Unlike various conflicted claims of passivity by the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership, Lagnado declared responsibility for the self-imposed ethnic discourse. His argument presented Sephardim-Mizrahim as agents and not as hapless victims of Zionist-Ashkenazi organizations.

Three motifs can be traced in Lagnado's speech. The plural "we" referred primarily to an elitist, self-selected group of Sephardic leaders. Once again, we encounter the omission of Mizrahim—perhaps indicative of a failure to imagine the possibility of an educated Mizrahi counterpart. Lagnado's speech on the creation of the Liberal party must be read as the declaration of a Sephardic intelligentsia, struggling to distinguish and distance itself from other ethnic and communal organizations. At the same time, Lagnado

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 3–4.

recognized a scale of enlightenment and inferiority. He wished to abandon such terms as “Sephardic” and “Ashkenazi,” while clinging to their old hierarchical connotations in order to assert the authority and intellectual superiority of a Sephardic elite. Lagnado declared: “We established the Liberal party in order to bring a new spirit among the Sephardic intelligentsia.”⁶³⁹ Lagnado’s “revolution” became the articulation of a divide between “Sephardic intelligentsia” and the “masses,” a move that repudiated the previous efforts of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to produce a monolithic political entity. For him, the Liberal party was also intended to chart a middle course between the left Labor party and the right Revisionist party. After a decade during which the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders used “Sephardic” and “Mizrahi” categories to demarcate ethnic discursive enclaves, by 1936 they rejected any connection to Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects. Lagnado concluded with his vision of a unified and homogenized European-Zionist identity in the Yishuv.

Despite the plea of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders to gain support within the Ashkenazi community for their party, the Liberal party remained led only by Sephardic-Mizrahi members. The protocols from the November 18 meeting indicate the chief obstacle: “the word *Sephardiut* is mentioned too often by our members.”⁶⁴⁰ As the attempt to break away from ethnic and racial deployment of Sephardim and Mizrahim appeared fruitless, another suggestion gained greater appeal: “The members of the party would gather every now and then and they would express their views about current events without assuming to represent or speak on behalf of a political party.”⁶⁴¹ Only a mere two weeks after its declaration, the Liberal party formally devolved into a “social gathering,” a political initiative dressed in an apolitical fabric, a veil for internal anxieties.

Grappling with these anxieties, the members of the Liberal party cum social gathering [*chuug*] began to question their own initiative to break away from their ethnic, racial, and communal allegiances.

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the Jewish Liberal Party of Palestine, November 18, 1936*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

The tension of being Sephardic-Mizrahi on the one hand, while on the other hand wishing to reverse or suppress the ethnic distinctions in order to attain political power, reached a decisive moment for these subjects. The fight for the establishment of the Liberal party was about to reach its final phase.

The meeting on November 18 did not resolve tensions among the Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders. A short epistolary correspondence between Lagnado and other Sephardic officials lasted for another month.⁶⁴² The suggestions to reconvene a new assembly of a Liberal group proved half-hearted. By and by, the Liberal party dissolved and faded from existence. But its rise and fall offer insights into the consciousness of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership in 1936.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to explicate the political and social context that prompted the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership's efforts *to be* an independent organization. These included the formation of separate Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements and communities, inception of a distinct Sephardic bank, and establishment of an independent federation with its own economic resources that spread across the globe. It narrated how Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders originated the idea of Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy, chiefly as a result of growing sense of discrimination within the Jewish community of Palestine. Sephardic-Mizrahi political initiatives, I argued, evolved in tandem with internalizing a sense of Sephardic-Mizrahi timeless inferiority. Finally, this chapter has demonstrated how the Zionist organizations attempted to sabotage the economic and political expansion of a larger, global Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition.

This chapter's also examined the perception of Zionist marginalization by Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders. It pushed to the fore the notions of inferiority that members of this leadership consequently internalized, in the context of growing nationalist tensions between Jews and Arabs from 1929 to 1931.

⁶⁴² The Sephardic Council Archives, *Correspondence between Meir Lagnado and Y. Kasuto, December 21, 1936*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

Additionally, with the acceptance of notions of Sephardic-Mizrahi “uselessness” and “passivity,”⁶⁴³ the chapter also investigated the creation of a complementary ideology by Sephardim and Mizrahim who felt excluded from positions of political power in the Yishuv: the myth of competent Zionist-Ashkenazi leadership and activity.

Lastly, I focused on the growing economic and racial divisions during this time frame between a range of communities that tried to amalgamate themselves under the umbrella category of “Sephardim” and “Mizrahim.” I also examined how and why these terms gained a sense of backwardness that resulted in multiple attempts to deny and even reject them. This chapter investigated how these hierarchical divisions affected the Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition, which separated into the more enlightened “Sephardic intelligentsia” and the less developed Mizrahi masses. By exploring the inception of the Jewish Liberal Party by Sephardic-Mizrahi activists in 1936, this chapter analyzed the intent and motivation of its founding members to reject ethnic notions of Sephardim or Mizrahim. Their discourse revealed the sense of marginalization, inequity, and even tragedy that the identity of “Sephardim” and “Mizrahim” carried in their minds.

Now we come to the racial construction of the category of Sephardim-Mizrahim that arose in Palestine from 1936 to the creation of the Israeli state in 1948. To contextualize my work, in Chapter 5, I will focus on the inception of the Palestine Institute of Folklore and Ethnology (1945), and the “scientific” works of its founder, the Hungarian-born Orientalist Raphael Patai (1910–1996), which produced a new understanding of Mizrahim as a distinct inter-Jewish biological caste. At the same time, I will explore the contribution of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership to Patai’s project. In this chapter, we followed the decline of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Federation and leadership. Next, we excavate their attempts to racialize and divorce the category of Mizrahim from Sephardic intelligentsia.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

Inferior Jews:

Racializing the Sephardic-Mizrahi Category, 1936–1948

During the 1930s, a stereotype concerning the Sephardic-Mizrahi community entered popular discourse in the Yishuv.⁶⁴⁴ It suggested that to be Sephardic-Mizrahi in those formative years meant to be excessively violent. The identification of criminality with Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects quickly solidified upon the establishment of the Mizrahi Youth Movement in 1934 and its Sephardic-Mizrahi soccer team, *Degel Zion* [*Flag of Zion*], sponsored by Tel Aviv's Sephardic Organization.

In 1937, borrowing its name from the Mizrahi Youth Movement, the *Degel Zion* team played in the B division of the Palestinian league. Its members included Sephardic-Mizrahi activists such as Arie Turgemman and Eliezer Matalon, among other immigrants from Salonika and Turkey who had arrived in Palestine during the early and mid-1930s. The team achieved a high ranking in the 1937–1938 season, and during its second year, support for the team grew among the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities.⁶⁴⁵ This large fan-base helped foster additional athletic teams for Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in basketball⁶⁴⁶ and table tennis.⁶⁴⁷ The *Degel Zion* soccer games, however, were notorious. Newspaper accounts

⁶⁴⁴ Specifically, I focus on two central journals to discuss the popular discourse in the Yishuv during the mid-1930s. Although the circulation numbers of *Haaretz* [*The Land*] and *Davar* [*Word*] are hard to estimate, according to the government census, both papers sold 31,500 copies at the time.

⁶⁴⁵ The Israeli/Palestinian Soccer league was founded in 1931–1932. In its opening season, the winning team was the British Police. The Sephardic-Mizrahi soccer team first appeared in the Palestinian league in the 1937–1938 season, and was ranked first in the league that year. See. S. D. Levi, “The Progress of Our Soccer Team.” In “Degel Zion – The Sephardic Jewish Council in Tel Aviv.” [estimated publication date: 1939–1940] *Haaretz* [*The Land*]: Tel Aviv, 14.

⁶⁴⁶ Anonymous, “Dubek Trophy in Basketball.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 7, 1939: 6.

⁶⁴⁷ David Ramon, “About Athletic Clubs [in Palestine].” In *Davar* [*Word*], June 26, 1938: 5.

emphasized how the team's matches ended with acts of violence, perpetrated either by the Sephardic-Mizrahi players or the team's fans.

On October 23, 1938, after one match ended in a draw against *Eged* [United], a reporter wrote that “the wild game has not reached its end”⁶⁴⁸ because of what appeared to be the violent behavior of the Sephardic-Mizrahi fans. A year later, the team's supporters attacked a referee with “insults, punches, and fists,”⁶⁴⁹ and on May 26, 1939, after being invited to celebrate the Jewish Union, the team lost to *Hapoel Tel Aviv* [The Workers of Tel Aviv]. The loss was followed by a long and bloody fistfight resulting in a number of injured supporters ending the night at the emergency room.⁶⁵⁰ The Palestinian Soccer Association condemned this behavior, opining that this crowd might “scare other spectators,” and, therefore, should be restricted in the future.⁶⁵¹ A few months later, the Sephardic-Mizrahi crowd again reacted to another loss with “shameful” aggression,⁶⁵² and days after that, the Sephardic-Mizrahi team reached a new low when some team players were found guilty of stealing shoes and were sent to prison.⁶⁵³ These “objective” narratives of frightening Sephardic-Mizrahi brutality, using a language reminiscent of what Roland Barthes described as one that “has no value as communication, but only as intimidation,” were not made on a tabula rasa.⁶⁵⁴

In this chapter, I examine how and why pseudo-“scientific” scholarship by Israel scientists in the 1930s and 1940s turned Sephardic-Mizrahi subjects into threatening objects, reducing them to parasitical

⁶⁴⁸ Anonymous, “Competitions on Sabbath.” In *Davar* [Word], October 23, 1938: 4.

⁶⁴⁹ Anonymous, (but the writer represents himself/herself as “An Athlete”), “Against Bullies.” In *Davar* [Word], April 23, 1939: 6.

⁶⁵⁰ Anonymous, “They, too, Are Athletes.” In *Davar* [Word], May 26, 1939: 5. See also, Articl. A. Baer, “About Athletic Clubs [in Palestine].” In *Davar* [Word], May 26, 1939: 5.

⁶⁵¹ Hayim Globinsky, “Indeed, A Scorned Character?.” In *Davar* [Word], June 25, 1939: 6.

⁶⁵² Anonymous, ““Degel Zion” Tel Aviv versus “Hapoel” Ramat Gan.” In *Davar* [Word], November 26, 1939: 4.

⁶⁵³ To clarify, the two players who were sent to prison were” Shlomo Mizrahi (age 20), Maimon Ben-Yoseph (age 22), both members of *Degel Zion* soccer team. Anonymous, “Athletes.” In *Davar* [Word], October 13, 1939: 8.

⁶⁵⁴ Roland Barthes, “African Grammar.” *Anatomy of Racism*. Ed. David Theo Goldberg, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 130.

function in the Jewish community of the Yishuv. These studies by Israeli social scientists and medical professionals, in sync with public opinion in the Yishuv and the Jewish Diaspora, invariably concluded that Sephardim-Mizrahim were emotionally unstable, intellectually impaired, and predestined to criminality. To explore the ways this racial discourse ascribed Sephardic-Mizrahi imputed inferiority to biological difference, I analyze the work of Israeli sociologists and demographers such as Roberto Bachi, Moshe Brill, Raphael Patai, and Carl Frankenstein. Finally, I expose the typology of Sephardic-Mizrahi “type,” as I review the inception of the Palestine Institute of Folklore and Ethnology (1945) and its promotion of a new understanding of Mizrahim as an inferior intra-Jewish biological caste.

I contend that Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders not only accepted such “scientific evidence” of their inferiority, but also leveraged this imposed racialized identity as a strategy to highlight their invisible histories and marginal status. This racialization of Sephardim-Mizrahim was promoted not only by those who identified themselves as “European” or “Ashkenazi,” but also by certain “Sephardim” or “Mizrahim,” including prominent intellectuals such as Moshe Attias, Abraham Elmaliah, and Moshe David Gaon. This chapter concludes by stating the complicity of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in reifying racial hierarchies, which enlarged the trope of “Oriental backwardness” beyond Sephardim-Mizrahim to include Palestinian-Arabs as a national “problem” in the formative years leading up the creation of the Israeli State.

Sephardic-Mizrahi Inadequacy

From 1935 to 1939, Sephardic-Mizrahi communities, along with the rest of the inhabitants of Palestine, faced dramatic demographic, political, and national shifts that transformed their life. During this time, the entire Jewish community of the Yishuv was preoccupied with a number of issues. One was the upsurge in population. Jews constituted 18 percent of the population in Palestine in 1931 due to the arrival of 175,000 Jewish immigrants up to that date. Within five years, 472,000 immigrants of middle-

class Jews from Germany, part of the Fifth *Aliyah*, increased the Jewish population to 31 percent.⁶⁵⁵ As this Ashkenazi-dominated Jewish population burgeoned, nationalist tensions between Arab and Jews intensified, riots erupted, and daily fatal attacks between Jewish and Arab residents increased across Palestine.⁶⁵⁶ Along with these riots, the Palestinian-Arab leadership declared a strike among all Arabs engaged in labor and commerce with the Jewish residents of Palestine, which had serious economic implications on both sides. Fourth, news about Nazi Germany's rise to power was viewed as threat to Jewish communities and the flow of capital to support the Zionist project. But, amid these international and national anxieties, what especially disquieted the Yishuv was that *Edoth ha'Mizrah* [Mizrahi communities].⁶⁵⁷ They were viewed as the "problem" for members and institutions in the Yishuv.⁶⁵⁸ This overriding concern intensified over the following decades, particularly with the increasing number of various scientific studies by Ashkenazi social scientists that maintained Mizrahi imputed inferiority associated to biological difference.⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁵ Naor and Giladi, 1990: 230–235.

⁶⁵⁶ On April 19, 1936, a national uprising by Palestinian Arabs in Mandatory Palestine began against the Jewish community of the Yishuv. The first wave of riots was limited to Tel Aviv and Jaffa, where Arab protestors attacked Jewish property and citizens. At the end of the first day, nine Jews were dead and 54 injured. In the following day, as the riots spread across Palestine, another seven Jews were killed. Additionally, on April 25, 1936, in an urgent meeting of the nascent Higher Arab Committee (HAC), a general strike was declared among the Palestinian-Arab workers. The HAC requested the fulfillment of three issues: (1) The prohibition of Jewish immigration; (2) The prohibition of granting the Arab land to Jews; and (3) The establishment of a National Government to a representative council of Palestinian Arabs. The strike lasted for 175 days. In contrast to the Palestinian-Arab's expectation, the strike strengthened the Jewish community of the Yishuv, who became more independent financially (Naor and Giladi 1990: 282–283; Morris 2003: 128–140; Arnon-Ohanna 1981: 251–253).

⁶⁵⁷ Note that the original Hebrew does not mention *Edoth ha'Sephardim* [Sephardic communities], perhaps to emphasize the influence of the Mizrah [the east/Orient] as a source of inherited backwardness.

⁶⁵⁸ *Edoth ha-Mizrah*—literally, Mizrahi communities—denotes to the various Mediterranean and North African Jewish communities, including the Yemenite, Moroccan, Persian, Syrian, and Iraqi groups, to name a few.

⁶⁵⁹ Note that only "Mizrahim" attracted the attention of social scientist and reporters at the time. This is where we begin to notice a division between in the fused concept of Sephardim-Mizrahim, an approach that also influenced the members of these communities. Today, "Mizrahim" include those who might be viewed or self-identify as "Sephardim": see Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Point of View of Its Jewish Victims" *Social Text* 7 (1988): 1–36.

Marked as “primitive” immigrants that only contributed to increased poverty, crime, and underemployment in Palestine,⁶⁶⁰ in 1936 alone, the popular daily of the Yishuv, *Davar* [*Word*],⁶⁶¹ published a series of more than ten articles by various writers and scientists under the series heading, “Among the Mizrahi Communities” [*be Edoth ha’Mizrah*]. These authors underscored the “primitiveness,” “poverty,” “lack of hygiene,” and “criminality” of the Mizrahi communities and, thus, constructed a “foreign element” within the Jewish community of the Yishuv.⁶⁶² From 1930 through 1936, concern over these communities had been a minor issue in the press.⁶⁶³ Newspaper account predominantly alluded to the World Sephardic Federation’s political activities in Jerusalem.⁶⁶⁴ But by 1936, Sephardic-Mizrahi communities emerged as a full-fledged problem associated with “delinquency.”⁶⁶⁵ The Mizrahi problem offered a compelling subject for social research and attracted the attention of scientists and academics, including the acclaimed Israeli ethnologist Shlomo Dov Goitein.⁶⁶⁶ In 1935, Goitein

⁶⁶⁰ I will pay greater attention the ways the Sephardic-Mizrahi population emerged as a “problem” in the coming pages. See Anonymous, “Turkish Neighborhood in Kfar-Saba.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 17, 1936: 3; Y. Nitzani, “Among My People: Notes from being among the Sephardic communities in Tel Aviv.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 17, 1936: 4; Anonymous, “Solving the Fugitive Question.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 18, 1936: 9; Anonymous, “In the Mizrahi Communities.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 28, 1936: 10; Anonymous, “Persian Immigrants in Need of Housing.” In *Davar* [*Word*], February 23, 1937: 3.

⁶⁶¹ Founded in 1925, *Davar* [*Word*] was the official newspaper of the *Histadrut* [Federation of Labor]. During the 1920s, its circulation reached 4,500 copies, exceeding the combined publication of the leading newspapers at the time: *Haaretz* [*The Land*] and *Do’ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*]. In 1939, the newspaper circulation tripled and reached 15,000 copies and thus played a central role in shaping Jewish public opinion in the Yishuv.

⁶⁶² Among a large number of reports concerned with the “Mizrahi problem” see: Moshe Zoltorobski, “Jewish from Turkey in *Eretz Yisrael*.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 17, 1936: 4; Anonymous, “Turkish Neighborhood in Kfar-Saba.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 17, 1936: 3; Y. Nitzani, “Among My People: Being among the Sephardic communities in Tel-Aviv.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 17, 1936: 4; Anonymous, “Solving the Fugitive Question.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 18, 1936: 9; Anonymous, “In the Mizrahi Communities.” In *Davar* [*Word*], May 28, 1936: 10; Anonymous, “Persian Immigrants in Need of Housing.” In *Davar* [*Word*], February 23, 1937: 3.

⁶⁶³ See the daily use of “Mizrahi Communities” to identify (and essentialize) six Jewish workers, who were accused of hitting Arab workers. Anonymous, “In Tel-Aviv.” In *Davar* [*Word*], October 24, 1934: 5.

⁶⁶⁴ Anonymous, “Who Will Represent the Mizrahi Communities in the Zionist Congress?” [referring the the nineteenth-Zionist Congress at Lucerne, Switzerland]. In *Davar* [*Word*], August 5, 1935: 7.

⁶⁶⁵ Doctor B. Wallman, “Delinquent Youth” [*Yeladim Avaryanim*]. In *Davar* [*Word*], January 30, 1936: 4.

⁶⁶⁶ Shlomo Dov Goitein (1900–1985) studied Arabic and Islam at the University of Frankfurt. In 1923 he arrived in Palestine and five years later was appointed professor of Islamic History and Islamic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Throughout his prolific academic career Goitein considered himself an Islamist. His

contended that these communities “have not been examined enough” and, therefore, must be studied before they “lose their special character.”⁶⁶⁷ Educators, politicians, and scientists joined forces to consult as to how this Mizrahi conundrum—on the one hand, violent and, on the other hand, losing their primitiveness due to the influences of the civilized Ashkenazi members—could be solved, if at all.

Although they made up only 5 percent of the transformative waves of immigration (and 30 percent of the total Jewish community in Palestine), through newspaper reports and scientific analysis Sephardic-Mizrahi communities became synonymous with delinquency and criminality, and came to view as racial and cultural outsiders. They were not considered fellow citizens entitled to justice, but a population that needed to be “cured” by people who thought of themselves “cultured” and “European.” What triggered these series of publications was the assembly of cultural and financial hierarchies in tandem with a wave of financial prosperity⁶⁶⁸ and clear domination of Ashkenazim in key political and public positions in the Jewish society.⁶⁶⁹ When discussions about Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants erupted in Zionist institutions, they were unwelcomed to the Europeanized Yishuv: in the words of the head of *Keren Hayesod* [The Foundation Fund], the Polish-born Yitzhak Gruenbaum (1879–1990), declaring that

scholarship focused on two central themes: first, Arab-Jewish relationship, including an in depth investigation about Yemenite Jews, and the Cairo geniza (Libson 1998: 163–199).

⁶⁶⁷ Shlomo Dov Goitein, “Mizrahi [Oriental] Studies at the Hebrew University.” In *Davar* [Word], April 10, 1935: 12.

⁶⁶⁸ See A. L. Gruenbaum (Gaathon), *National Income and Outlay in Palestine*. 2 ed. (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency for Palestine, [1936] 1978). Consider that in 1936 out of the 33 million (Israeli Lira) total annual-revenue of Israel-Palestine, 54 percent depended on the Yishuv. See Nadav Halevi, “The Economic Development of the Yishuv in Palestine, 1917–1947.” *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel since 1882: The Period of the British Mandate*. Ed. Moshe Lissak, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2007), 545-84.

⁶⁶⁹ Only five percent of Mizrahim held key positions in the various political parties in the Yishuv. Additionally, Mizrahim did not have any representation in the various leading Zionist institutions, including the Jewish Agency and the Zionist Committee. See Moshe Lissak, *Studies in Israeli Social History* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2009), 128 – 131.

“immigrant certificates are given only to those who the land needs,” explaining why certificates⁶⁷⁰ were not given to the “unneeded” Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants.⁶⁷¹

When these immigrants did arrive to Palestine, the Sephardic-Mizrahi community needed to reorganize, re-examine its old leadership, and aid their fellow immigrants with the establishment of a dense web of social and cultural institutions. The new arrivals placed additional social demands on the existing Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization. New Sephardic-Mizrahi institutions and settlements emerged in cities such as Tel Aviv, Tiberias, and Haifa, which tripled their Jewish population.⁶⁷² Moreover, the establishment of thirty-seven new settlements between 1933 and 1935, new hubs of Sephardic-Mizrahi communities outside Jerusalem rapidly emerged.⁶⁷³

With Sephardic-Mizrahi population centers extending beyond Jerusalem, a new generation of activists challenged the way the Jerusalemite Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership handled funding allocations. Members of the new guard identified the old Sephardic leadership in Jerusalem as the source for the deteriorating condition of the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity. A collection of essays titled, *The Decline of the Generation [Be-Dor Yored]* (1935),⁶⁷⁴ written on behalf of Mizrahi communities by unidentified authors,

⁶⁷⁰ On the influence of “selective” immigration in the Zionist enterprise see Avivah Halamish, “A Critical Analysis of the Term ‘Selective Immigration’ in Zionist Theory, Practice and Historiography.” *The Age of Zionism*. Ed. Anita Shapira, Jehuda Reinharz, Jay Harris. (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2000), 185–203.

⁶⁷¹ In response to Gruenbaum’s words, a number of furious responses appeared in *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, attempting to justify the value of Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants and their close attachment to the Zionist project: see Anonymous, “Protests of the Mizrahi Communities to Gruenbaum’s Declarations.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, December 16, 1934: 1; Anonymous [identified as “Sephardic Jew”], “An Open Letter to Mr. Gruenbaum.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, December 18, 1934: 5; Anonymous, “Protests of the Sephardic Council Against Gruenbaum’s Words.” In *Do’ar Ha-Yom [The Palestinian Daily]*, December 31, 1934: 5.

⁶⁷² Of the 37,337 Jewish immigrants arriving to Palestine in 1933, only 2679 (1117 from Greece and 1200 from Yemen) were Sephardim-Mizrahim; in 1934, of the 45,267 Jewish immigrants only 5370 (1598 from Greece, 1964 from Yemen, 496 from Turkey, and 527 from Iraq) were Sephardim-Mizrahim.⁶⁷² In addition, in 1935—a year when immigration to Palestine reached a record-high (including 49,000 immigrants from 1934 to 1938 who arrived in defiance of the British law (Morris 2003: 122))—of the 66,472 Jewish immigrants only 4901 (2105 from Greece, 755 from Turkey, 1339 from Yemen, and 380 from Bulgaria) were Sephardim-Mizrahim. See Anonymous, “The Aliyah of the Mizrahi Communities in Numbers.” In *Davar [Word]*, May 17, 1936: 3.

⁶⁷³ Moshe Lissak, *Studies in Israeli Social History* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2009), 67–70.

⁶⁷⁴ Anonymous author(s), *The Decline of the Generation* (Jerusalem: Private Investors, 1935).

sheds more light on the deep division between a new Sephardic-Mizrahi generation and the senior Jerusalemite control. To its anonymous authors, the older Jerusalemite Sephardic leadership was to blame for the *decline* of the generation. Its anger resonated: “All this time the Sephardic community proved its lack of ability and talent to do anything worthy for the Mizrahi communities.”⁶⁷⁵

Beyond its disapproval of the Jerusalemite Sephardic leadership, the authors of the essay collection actively advocated an intra-ethnic uprising that would change “the unfair treatment of the Sephardic Council in Jerusalem to the Mizrahi communities.”⁶⁷⁶ To respond to “pure Sephardim” [*Sfardim tehorim*] patronizing treatment of Mizrahi communities,⁶⁷⁷ the latter needed to found a separate organization.⁶⁷⁸ They should divorce themselves from the Sephardic Federation, unify, and “establish the General Organization of the Mizrahi communities that will uplift their status.”⁶⁷⁹ These authors accused the older Sephardim of accepting bribes from “Ashkenazim,” and creating a “disabled” Sephardic Organization that favored Sephardim over Mizrahim. Their outrage had a clear message: the Sephardic Organization, which was run by hypocritical elite, ought to be replaced.⁶⁸⁰

This criticism, similar in tone to that employed earlier by members of the Sephardic Organization in the 1920s to denounce the discriminatory acts of the Zionist Organization, highlighted how ethnic tensions and control over (already limited) economic resources created schism among the once united faction. Its tone combined a harsh critique of political and economic privilege with ethnic issues, which became pivotal in breeding strife between Sephardim and Mizrahim. The result was the emergence of a separate Mizrahi consciousness in the late 1930s. What is more, these communal anxieties generated the

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 16–17.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 108–110.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 64–5, 79, 82, 84.

establishment of a new web of Mizrahi political, cultural, and social institutions beyond Jerusalem, further dividing between Sephardi and Mizrahi communities.

Arieh Turgemman, a native of Tiberias and a member of the *Ma'aravi* [Moroccan] Organization had a key role in organizing the Mizrahi movements in Tel-Aviv. Mizrahi communities outside the influence of the Jerusalemite Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership demanded their political control and economic share. With the arrival of new immigrants from Salonika, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Yemen, Turgemman's critique became more vocal attempting to denounce the old Sephardic leadership. In his published articles, Turgemman led a harsh and relentless attack against the older Jerusalemite Sephardim. "Our [Sephardic-Mizrahi] organization is neglected," he proclaimed in 1934 in popular newspapers of the Yishuv.⁶⁸¹ "We [Mizrahi communities] are like sheep without a herder." Turgemman demanded political change.⁶⁸²

In point of fact, Turgemman's words of criticism generated significant social and institutional transformation. For the first time in years, two Sephardic-Mizrahi hubs in Tel-Aviv and Haifa centered their new cultural and social activities in the Yishuv. If the Sephardic Federation had prioritized political and national representation from the 1920s, throughout the mid and late-1930s, the new leaders outside Jerusalem addressed social justice issues. Between 1934 and 1939, seven Sephardic-Mizrahi institutions were established and four journals and newspapers. Among these institutions were the afore-mentioned *Degel Zion* soccer team (1934), the *Degel Zion* Youth Movement (1938), the Yehuda Ha-Levi Cultural Organization (1938), the Sephardic Workers Organization (1936), the National Sephardic Organization (1938), the Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization in Tel Aviv (1936), the Sephardic-Mizrahi National Organization in Haifa, and various newspapers such as *Hed Ha-Mizrah* [*The Orient*] (or its second issue,

⁶⁸¹ Arieh Turgemman, "The Awakening of Sephardim in Tel Aviv." In *Do'ar Ha-Yom* [*The Palestinian Daily*], December 30, 1934: 4.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

The Echo of the Orient) (1942–1944, 1949–1951), *Degel Zion Journal* (1939), and *Darkenu [Our Path]* (1941).

The response of the Jerusalemite Sephardim to these political and demographic changes was not long in coming. The schism between Sephardim and Mizrahim paralleled the growing national divide between Jews and Arabs, which was sanctioned by the British Peel Commission.⁶⁸³ An examination of the subsequent meetings of Jerusalemite Sephardim will clarify how a set of discourses of hierarchy and classification—including, in our case, Orientalism—helped the once unified Sephardim-Mizrahim to define their selfhood. The adoption of an Orientalist discourse had two main consequences: on the one hand, “hybrid” discourse of identity where Yemenite, Persian, Moroccan (Ma’aravi) subjects were not easily identified as “pure” Sephardim or Mizrahim, and on the other hand, a scientific discourse attempting to fix and counter such perversion that threatened forms of dominance.⁶⁸⁴

⁶⁸³ Formally known as the Palestine Royal Commission, the British government appointed this committee to examine the reasons for the riots and find a resolution that would satisfy both the Arab and Jewish sides. Led by Lord William Robert Peel, The Peel Commission met representatives of both groups in London and Jerusalem. Appearing before the commission was the Sephardic activist Eliyahu Elishar (1899–1981). Already known for questioning the Zionist approach to either Palestinian-Arabs or Sephardim-Mizrahim, Elishar’s speech attempted to offer hypothesize on the ways that both Arab and Jews could live together, including the teaching of Arabic to Jewish students (see The Sephardic Council Archives, *Eliyahu Elishar Personal Archive, 1936*, in Jerusalem City Hall).

On July 7, 1937, with the publication of the Peel Commission, a decision was made to divide the Palestinian land into a small Jewish state (composed of the coastal plain from south of Jaffa to the Lebanese border, the Jezreel Valley and the Galilee, overall 20 percent of the Palestinian territory) and a larger Arab state (that would be united with Trans-Jordan), and a British enclave. Moreover, in contrast to Zionist leaders, such as David Ben-Gurion and Hayim Weizman who accepted this partial idea of a Jewish state, the leaders of the Arab Higher Committee rejected the idea of partition and refused to even consider a small Jewish enclave that might be extended through the years. Among its suggestions in embracing the partition, the Committee asked the two sides to consider an exchange of population (225,000 Arabs for 1,250 Jews) in order to even the number of Jews and Arabs on each side (See Morris 2009: 136–40; Cohen 1987: 191–193; Gelvin 2007: 117–118; Shimoni 1995: 229; Laqueur 1971: 514–518; Halpern 1969: 204–205, 328–329).

⁶⁸⁴ On “hybridity” and the ways that colonial/postcolonial subjects attempted to define their selfhood through the same set of discourses that dominated them, see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995);

Excluding Mizrahim, Redefining Sephardim

On August 2, 1938, Sephardic Organization based in Jerusalem voted to expel all Mizrahi members.⁶⁸⁵ After watching in consternation as the Mizrahi communities took steps to secure economic and political independence, including the example of the Jerusalemite Iraqi community who dared to create their private institutions in Jerusalem,⁶⁸⁶ the Sephardic leadership decided to redefine the category of Sephardim. They used it to differentiate “pure” Sephardim from the rest of the *Edoth* [communities].⁶⁸⁷ In fact, under the guise of purity, economic and political motivations put members of the Ma’aravi community (among other communities), such as Elmaliah and Turgemman, against one another. As Mizrahi consciousness coalesced in the 1930s around dissatisfaction with the old Jerusalemite leadership and in response to social science research and media representations of Mizrahim, a distinct “pure” Sephardic consciousness simultaneously developed. It meant the internalization of cultural and racial hierarchies to view, evaluate, and exclude self and other.

But fearing loss of their “Sephardic hegemony,”⁶⁸⁸ the Jerusalemite members began to question their new and exclusive grouping. Three months later, The Sephardic Organization was ready to reword their earlier decision of excluding Mizrahim. Anxieties about becoming a “minority” within their own Sephardic Organization triggered their reconsideration.

During meetings in late 1938,⁶⁸⁹ growing numbers of activists decided the breakup was detrimental to their political clout in the Yishuv and now sought to renew their original alliance. Activists

⁶⁸⁵ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the General Committee of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, November 13, 1938*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 4.

⁶⁸⁶ “The Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, Financial Report–Statement of Accounts from the Activities of the Sephardic Organization, 1933–1935.” Unknown Publisher: Jerusalem, 7–8.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁸ See Abraham Franco’s speech in: The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the General Committee of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, November 13, 1938*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

⁶⁸⁹ See the following protocols: The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the General Committee of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, November 13, 1938*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box. The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the General Committee of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, December 12,*

such as David Abulafia and Moshe Attias attempted to alter this “delusional decision of the Sephardic Organization.”⁶⁹⁰ In Attias’s words at a Sephardic meeting in mid-November, 1938,

There is great value and significance [for us] to speak on behalf of a whole tribe rather than a small Sephardic population. Even if this will mean further economic investment [in Mizrahi communities], we need to reconsider and reexamine [our previous decision], for the new Mizrahi institutions were formed because the Sephardic Organization did not accommodate the needs of the Mizrahi communities. It is our fault if they grew and separated from us.⁶⁹¹

Facing dire economic straits, Sephardic “investment” in Mizrahi communities suddenly appeared necessary. Underpinning Attias’s motion to resume the ethnic coalition, which was accepted without objection, was a specific political strategy. The small size of the Sephardic Organization—reduced to less than one-third—left its leaders little chance of retaining present (or future) political influence in the Yishuv, either in approaching the Zionist Organization or international Sephardic-Mizrahi donors. Sephardic-Mizrahi unification, while a form of a compromise, was a political move, even if that meant suppressing the belief in Sephardic superiority and desire for maintaining racial purity among the Jerusalemite leadership. Moreover, a brief examination of the Sephardic Organization’s financial reveals a sense of resignation over this return to a Sephardic-Mizrahi coalition.

There was also a macro dimension to this emergence of Sephardic consciousness. Beginning in 1936, the federation confronted increasing economic straits that affected the rest of the Yishuv. Attempts to obtain financial support from Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Tunis, Algiers, Egypt, and Morocco,

1938, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box. The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the General Committee of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, December 26, 1938*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box.

⁶⁹⁰ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the General Committee of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, November 13, 1938*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 1.

⁶⁹¹ See Moshe Attias’s speech: The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the General Committee of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, November 13, 1938*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box, 2.

met with little success.⁶⁹² In the face of this “disastrous financial” condition, the federation “had to limit its activities” and “allocate new sources to sustain itself.”⁶⁹³ Although they approached private donors, such as Abraham Israel from Alexandria (Egypt), Yehuda Ezekiel from Calcutta (India), and Issac Vigma from Amsterdam (Holland), the organization only raised only 358,500 Israeli Lira, one-seventh of their annual allocation in previous years.⁶⁹⁴

This lack of funding affected the stature and activities of the Jerusalemite leadership. From December 1938, the Sephardic Organization asked its members to pay *mas ha-edah* [Community Tax].⁶⁹⁵ Presumably, without these fees, the Sephardic Organization could not exist.⁶⁹⁶ Soon, economic distress translated into political and social paralysis. The leadership, controlling the World Sephardic Federation and Sephardic institutions based in Jerusalem, had to cut its support to various educational and communal activities. More importantly, against the backdrop of the ongoing riots from 1936 to 1939, the Jerusalemite leadership was unable to support the Sephardic-Mizrahi population.

This economic paralysis, resulting in lack of social support, in tandem with growing cases of poverty, was translated now into a sense of shame, disclosed in the official pamphlet of the Sephardic community: “The Riots during the spring of 1936 have greatly embarrassed the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem.”⁶⁹⁷ Such anxieties could explain why members of the leadership applied “purity” to give significance to their inactive federation. This “embarrassment” also generated criticism by Jerusalemite

⁶⁹² See more information about the global efforts of the Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates, primarily with the help with various religious rabbis, in Report, 1935. “The Sephardic Council in Jerusalem—Statement of Accounts, [1934–1935].” Undeclared publisher: Jerusalem, 10.

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

⁶⁹⁴ See more information about the complete list of donors, in Report, 1939. “The Sephardic Council in Jerusalem, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, [1935–1939].” Undeclared publisher: Jerusalem, 10.

⁶⁹⁵ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Protocols of the General Committee of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, December 12, 1938*, in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box.

⁶⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁷ Report, 1939. “The Sephardic Council in Jerusalem, Financial Report—Statement of Accounts, [1935–1939].” Undeclared publisher: Jerusalem. 8.

activists toward the Zionist Organization, who did not offer sufficient support to the Sephardic-Mizrahi population:

When push came to shove, the leaders of the Sephardic Organization [in Jerusalem] had to approach the authorities, the Jewish Agency in *Eretz Yisrael*, [and] *Va'ad Leumi* [The General Assembly] . . . but without much luck. Donations and financial support from international Jewish communities to provide for those affected by the riots [between Jewish and Arab populations] went directly to the institutions listed above, while the Sephardic Organization had to provide to those [Sephardic and Mizrahi] in need, who apparently were the victims of the larger Jewish community of the Yishuv.⁶⁹⁸

Dire economic circumstances, along with the Sephardic Organization's continuous exclusion from positions of power and privilege in the Zionist Organization, gradually compromised their potential communal standing and political prowess (at least only within the Sephardic-Mizrahi community). Beyond the parameters of Jerusalem the Sephardic Organization became irrelevant. Although its Jerusalemite leaders continued to envisage the establishment of Sephardic Youth Movements in Jerusalem, similar to those emerging in Haifa and Tel-Aviv under the supervision of Mizrahi communities, the lack of an economic base doomed their plans.

By the end of 1939, the Jerusalemite leadership sent multiple letters, primarily to the Sephardic community in London (England), which had made a generous contribution in 1928, soliciting donations. Their tone was desperate, "we [the Sephardic community] suffer from an economic shortage that is unprecedented in the history of the Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem."⁶⁹⁹ However, with the increasing numbers of Sephardic and Mizrahi subjects in need of economic support (from 9,558 in 1926,

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁹ The Sephardic Council Archives, *Letter from The Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem to members of the Head of the Portuguese and Sephardic Community in London (England), October 26, 1939*, in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6208, 7.

to 13,237 in 1930, and 19,535 in 1938)⁷⁰⁰ a new chapter in this Sephardic-Mizrahi story was bound to unfold. Increasing press coverage reported on cases of poverty among Sephardic-Mizrahi communities, which attracted the attention of various Ashkenazi-Israeli social scientists working in the mid-1930s in the Yishuv. In their eyes, every “problem”—including the Sephardic-Mizrahi conundrum— must have a solution.

Jewish “Primitives”: Sephardim-Mizrahim to Social Scientists

Starting in 1936, popular newspapers in the Yishuv such as *Davar* [Word] and *Haaretz* [The Land] began to focus public attention on the growing problem of criminality in the Yishuv. Contributors included social scientists, such as Dr. Mordechai Berchiyahu (1882–1959),⁷⁰¹ a Lithuanian-born physician who was educated in Berlin and immigrated to Palestine in 1912. He opined in 1934 that the “delinquent Youth” in the Yishuv should stop going the cinema and gain a profession.⁷⁰² But, two years later, he specifically equated criminality and misconduct with the Mizrahi community, claiming that, “on average most youth criminals are from Mizrahi communities.”⁷⁰³ According to Berchiyahu, young Mizrahi criminals belonged to four groups: “the morally corrupt,” “psychopaths,” “the mentally degenerated,” and those who committed crime out of necessity.⁷⁰⁴

⁷⁰⁰ Statistics of those in need in Passover emphasized the increase in request of economic support from the Sephardic Organization. “The Sephardic Organization in Jerusalem, Financial Report–Statement of Accounts from the Activities of the Sephardic Organization, 1935–1938.” Unknown Publisher: Jerusalem, 11.

⁷⁰¹ Mordechai Berchiyahu was born in Lita in 1882. In 1919, seven years since his arrival to Palestine, he founded the Hadassah Institute. In the institute he was responsible to issues of hygiene in Jewish schools across the Yishuv. In 1937, he published two important studies about the Jewish-youth. His writing, including *About Delinquent Youth* (1937) and *Social and Education Problems in the Land* (1937), became central in initiating the sociological and methodological foundations to the study of hygiene, education, and crime in the Yishuv: (See Kabaliyon 2001: 129–31; Hirsch 2000).

⁷⁰² Anonymous, “National Meeting of Social Scientists.” In *Davar* [Word], June 18, 1935: 3.

⁷⁰³ Mordechai Berchiyahu, “Delinquent Youth [*Yeladim Avaryanim*].” In *Davar* [Word], January 30, 1936: 4.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid.

Drawing on contemporary works of German scholars on urban crime prevention, Berchiyahu maintained that compensatory social and educational assistance to Mizrahi communities was needed to prevent criminal cases (involving about 1,000 to 1,200 Mizrahi youths) and “restore the health of the [Jewish] race.”⁷⁰⁵ Berchiyahu used statistics to essentialize Mizrahim and present them as an “unhealthy” body. He identified them as an “unfit” lower Jewish type, as opposed to the “healthier” Jewish (Ashkenazi) type. Thus, Ashkenazi social scientists not only theorized Mizrahi inferiority, as biologically linked to excessive amorality, but also used scientific discourse to envision the ideal citizen of the future Jewish state. The model Jewish body and mind was identified as an Ashkenazi-European Jewish breed.

In May 1936, disproportionate reporting of seven articles in one day used the same scientific language to further examine on Mizrahi deficiency and their problematic contribution in the Yishuv. One article, for instance, this article concerned the twenty-five Mizrahi families in the northern part of Palestine, who occupied 17.3-acres parcel called Binyamina. It portrayed this group of Georgian, Bulgarian, and Greek immigrants (primarily Jews from Salonika, Greece), as physically unfit to work the land, a source of disease and poverty, and incapable of living peacefully alongside Ashkenazi-European immigrants.⁷⁰⁶

During the same time, another report followed the acculturation process of forty-five families mostly from Kusta, Turkey, in the burgeoning city of Tel-Aviv. Unlike European [Jewish] immigrants who had “ideological training,” the writer found that these immigrants required additional time to become familiar “with the goals and aims of the Yishuv.”⁷⁰⁷ A third newspaper account of Mizrahi difficulties in adoption to the life in the Yishuv, published in the same day, described what the writer, Y. Nitzani,

⁷⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁶ Am Emanuali, “Jasmin Neighborhood.” In *Davar [Word]*, May 17, 1936: 3.

⁷⁰⁷ Moshe Zoltorobski, “Jewish from Turkey in Eretz Yisrael.” In *Davar [Word]*, May 17, 1936: 4; Anonymous, “Turkish Neighborhood in Kfar-Saba.” In *Davar [Word]*, May 17, 1936: 3.

characterized as “concentration camps of [Sephardic] *plitilm* [refugees]” in Tel-Aviv.⁷⁰⁸ His account carried a tone of anthropological neutrality:

During the last month, with soaring unemployment rates, the number of unemployed Sephardic workers increased. Cafés were filled to capacity [with unemployed Sephardic workers] to the point that another café needed to be opened. They sit in those cafés, playing cards or Russian pool, drinking coffee or tea, with others even drinking alcohol, then smoking one cigarette after another or even a *nargila*, they sit and wait.⁷⁰⁹

After noting their unruly manners and laziness in their café, Nitzani emphasized the inferiority and helplessness of these immigrants compared to other ethnic groups:

Plitim [Refugees]

The “Commercial Center” has become a “Concentration Camp for Refugees.” Many Sephardim have arrived here. The “Center” is noisy, children whine, and mothers are in tears. This is a terrible image . . . Blessed will be those who acted on behalf of these communities. The poor of Israel thank them . . . Negligence must stop. Constructive support should be provided so that education will eradicate poverty.⁷¹⁰

To Nitzani and others, the “lazy” and unproductive” Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants were clearly ideologically and culturally unfit for the Zionist-European project. Much was at stake in labeling Sephardim-Mizrahim as immigrants, or better, “fugitives” [*refugees*], as opposed to Ashkenazi immigrants, who were “ideologically trained” and able to better assimilate to the life in the Yishuv.⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁸ Y. Nitzani, “Among My People: Notes from being among the Sephardic communities in Tel-Aviv.” In *Davar [Word]*, May 17, 1936: 4.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹¹ See Anonymous, “Solving the Fugitive Question.” In *Davar [Word]*, May 18, 1936: 9; Anonymous, “In the Mizrahi Communities.” In *Davar [Word]*, May 28, 1936: 10; Anonymous, “Persian Immigrants In Need of Housing.” In *Davar [Word]*, February 23, 1937: 3.

Here, we must be reminded that in tandem with the internal tensions and the growing divide among Sephardim and Mizrahim, the external view in newspapers still viewed them as interchangeable, an unassimilated element. In analyzing and evaluating Sephardim-Mizrahim as “primitive” and “degenerate,” their inferiority was used to alienate these communities from political, cultural, or national spheres in the Yishuv. While opinions divided as to whether the Mizrahi communities should be limited to “their own segregated communities,”⁷¹² the perceived inferior character of the Sephardic-Mizrahi subject turned them into outcasts of a different kind: an intra-Jewish racial type that in their bade and defective state posed a threat to the European-Zionist Yishuv.

Mounting media accounts concerning the adaptability of Sephardic-Mizrahi communities to life in the Yishuv corroborated with studies about the increasing number of Mizrahi criminals, most of which were identified as uneducated Mizrahi youth.⁷¹³ Reports (by an anonymous writer) from 1936 claimed that 3,000 teens from the Mizrahi communities lived on the streets, without access to education.⁷¹⁴ Identified as “retarded,” they appeared in need of placement in special classes and schools.⁷¹⁵ Mizrahi criminality, therefore, became one characteristic of “retarded” mentality and stagnant character.

Additionally, studies by Ashkenazi-Jewish social scientists on expanded and deepened the “Mizrahi problem,” analyzing unhygienic Mizrahi surroundings, malnutrition, low income, and high rates

⁷¹² Abraham Emanuelli, “Construction and Settlement.” In *Davar [Word]*, September 6, 1936: 4.

⁷¹³ Initially, the idea of “complementary education,” including the creation youth clubs and recreation centers, were initiated to directly address the Mizrahi youth “problem” of in the Yishuv. Those adolescents, who did not integrate in various youth movements and dropped school (18 percent), were the central reason behind the appointment of Meyuhas in 1935 to the position of “Youth Instructor.” Throughout the late 1930s, Meyuhas was responsible to developing additional “complementary” facilities as well as youth boarding schools. See Shimon Reshef and Yuval Dror, “Hebrew Education in the Years of the National Homeland (1919-1948).” *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel since 1882: The Period of the British Mandate* Ed. Moshe Lissak. Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2007), 134–135.

⁷¹⁴ Anonymous, “Children in the Streets.” In *Davar [Word]*, January 27, 1936: 3.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*

of infection (primarily with tuberculosis and trachoma).⁷¹⁶ Among these studies were Israel Kligler's *An Inquiry into the Nutritional Intake of Urban Families in Jerusalem* (1941), David Gurevich's "The Standard of Life of Jewish Urban and Rural Workers" (1939), and Sarah Bavly's *Nutritional Inquiry among the Jews of Jerusalem* (1943), maintaining that sanitary conditions as well as "nutrition have deteriorated . . . in lower middle classes" families, most of whom seemed to be Mizrahi.⁷¹⁷ Children of these families suffered the most. The lack of "substantial assistance [that was asked by scientists and Mizrahi leaders] from Government"⁷¹⁸ to support Mizrahi communities endanger the intellectual well-being and physical health of the larger Jewish community in the Yishuv.⁷¹⁹ Moreover, the newly appointed chief of the juvenile probation office in the British Mandate service (1937) and the pedagogic advisor to the Jewish National Council, Dr. Carl Frankenstein (1905–1990), would soon to become the most pronounced authority in articulating the threat the Mizrahi conundrum posed in the Yishuv.

A German-Jew who had studied psychology at Berlin University and immigrated to Palestine in 1935,⁷²⁰ Frankenstein maintained that Mizrahi communities represented "the primitive stratum of the Yishuv."⁷²¹ In his article "The Education of the Youth of Mizrahi Communities," published on June 9,

⁷¹⁶ On the relationship between hygiene and "civilized character and behavior," see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

⁷¹⁷ Sarah Bavly, *Nutritional Inquiry among the Jews of Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Hadassah Committee, 1943).

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁷¹⁹ Anonymous [identified only as A. Y, B], "It Is in Our Spirit." In *Davar [Word]*, April 16, 1937: 3. See also Doctor Carl Frankenstein, "In the Streets of Jerusalem." In *Davar [Word]*, May 18, 1937: 4.

⁷²⁰ During his study in Germany, Dr. Frankenstein focused on Jungian psychology. After Hitler's rise to power, Frankenstein arrived to Palestine in 1935. In Palestine, he became a towering figure in education and social sciences. Among his publications, from the late 1940s he edited *Megamot [Trends]*, a central Journal of social sciences. From 1951 to 1969, Frankenstein served as Professor for pedagogy and special education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His work received much acclaim during the 1950s and 60s, when he was awarded the Israeli prize in education in 1965. On Frankenstein and his contribution to development of social sciences in Israel see Uri Ram, *The Changing Agenda of Israeli Sociology: Theory, Ideology, and Identity* (New York: State University of New York, 1995), 34–40; Shlomo Swirski, *Politics and Education in Israel: Comparisons with the United States* (New York: Falmer Press, 1999), 162–165; Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (New York; London: Routledge, 2010), 38–41. See also The Carl Frankenstein Foundation, "Karl Frankenstein Heritage." <http://en.carl-frankenstein.com/HTMLs/Home.aspx>, 2013.

⁷²¹ Dr. Carl Frankenstein, "The Education of Our Abandoned [*azuvim*] Youth." In *Davar [Word]*, June 9, 1938: 3.

1938, Frankenstein identified Mizrahi communities as a “serious threat” to the “European” and “progressive” Jewish community.⁷²² They threatened to remain as “foreign elements” [*gufim zarim*], because they appeared incapable of assimilating into the European-Jewish culture and society of the Yishuv:

They [Sephardim-Mizrahim] endanger the economic and social structure of the land [*Eretz Yisrael*]. From an economic standpoint, they are an unproductive element that has not learned how to state their needs and thus have no role as consumers. From a political perspective, they are a barren field, as long as they are not part of the unified vision of the Jewish people. From a social perspective, they are a burden, for they might leave [the land, Palestine-Israel] as long as they stand outside and fail to make efforts to be part of the modern civilization and social life of *Eretz Yisrael*.⁷²³

Unlike social scientific studies about Mizrahim that we have encountered so far, Frankenstein highlighted the inability of the Mizrahi subject to integrate into an industrial economy.⁷²⁴ He associated them with agrarian societies that not aware to their role and “needs” as consumers/producers in a capitalist system.

⁷²² Engagement of Jews with attempts to identify themselves, primarily in response to anti-Semitic racial ideas about diseased, degenerated, and dangerous Jews has a long history that goes back to nineteenth century Germany and involved European Jewish racial scientists. Some Jewish scientists (among a group of rabbis, scholars, and public figures) acted as “defenders of the Jewish race.” Others, however, embraced data concerning the unhealthy and unfit Jewish body. See John Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-De-Siècle Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Mitchell Bryan Hart, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000). On the relationship between religion and race see Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008). On the influence of the discourse of degeneration shaping the Jewish body and the Zionist muscular body see Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007). For a detailed discussion about the preoccupation of Jews with questions of race prior to the nineteenth century see Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁷²³ Dr. Carl Frankenstein, “The Education of Our Abandoned [*azuvim*] Youth.” In *Davar [Word]*, June 9, 1938: 3.

⁷²⁴ Notice that the construction of this binary between the productive and unproductive citizen has a particular history that goes back to fin-de-siècle Germany. The physicist and Zionist activist, Max Simon Nordau, has been perhaps the most effective theorist of what he called the “degenerated” body: see Max Simon Nordau, *Degeneration* 9 ed. (London: W. Heinemann, 1896).

But, for him, their processes of assimilation were interrupted because of their refusal and not their inability to desegregate. They became a “burden” by their alleged decision to remain “outsiders.”⁷²⁵

Frankenstein’s assertion implied agency presented them as a greater danger to the European and “progressive” Yishuv and the future Jewish state. Like theoreticians of eugenics in the United States and of German racial hygiene in the 1920s and 30s,⁷²⁶ including Alfred Ploetz, Fritz Lenz, and Eugen Fischer,⁷²⁷ Frankenstein turned to “hereditary defects” to explain what he perceived to be Mizrahi mental

⁷²⁵ Dr. Carl Frankenstein, “The Education of Our Abandoned [azuvim] Youth.” In *Davar [Word]*, June 9, 1938: 3.

⁷²⁶ On the question of “eugenics” and “race science” during the 1920s and 30s in Germany, see the instrumental study of Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1988); Paul Weindling, *Health, Race and German Politics between National Unification and Nazism, 1870-1945* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). About the American context, see Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race* (Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) 311–358; Nicole Hahn Rafter, *White Trash: The Eugenic Family Studies, 1877–1919* (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1988). For General studies on eugenics, see Ruth Clifford Engs, *The Eugenics Movement: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2005); Pauline Mazumdar, ed. *The Eugenics Movement: An International Perspective* (London; New York: Routledge: Athena Press, 2007); Barkan Elazar, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing Concepts of Race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); John Glad, *Future Human Evolution: Eugenics in the Twenty-First Century* (Schuylkill Haven, PA: Hermitage Publishers, 2006).

⁷²⁷ It is worth noting that during his education Frankenstein concentrated on philosophical and mystical aspects of the Jewish tradition. His dissertation traced the writing of Franz Joseph Molitor (1779–1860). A native of Oberursel (near Mainz, Germany), Molitor was a Christian who was deeply interested with Jewish religion and mysticism. In 1804, he taught ethics, history, geography, and physics the in first modern (secondary) Jewish school—*Philanthropinum*—in Frankfurt. Molitor’s ambition was to integrate Jewish children into European society and culture. In 1908, Molitor published his *Über bürgerliche Erziehung: mit Beziehung auf die Organisation des jüdischen Schulwesens in Frankfurt am Main*, where he argued in favor of the acculturation of Jews (especially poor Jews) into the German society. More important to us, Frankenstein analyzed Molitor’s pedagogical philosophy and “was inspired by his character and personality.” He recognized him as “model educator” who “came to aid the delinquent (youth or immigrant), gained their trust, and assisted them with integrating to the unfamiliar and frustrating new reality” (The Carl Frankenstein Foundation, “Karl Frankenstein Heritage.” <http://en.carl-frankenstein.com/HTMLs/Home.aspx>, 2013). Clearly, Molitor’s discourse of assimilation and acculturation influenced Frankenstein’s work with Mizrahim. Frankenstein believed he held the solution to social problems in Israel and used techniques of reform and civilization that had a specific history in Germany of the nineteenth century. Ironically, Frankenstein associated with the Christian-German educator Molitor and targeted Mizrahim as the Jews that needed to be reformed. On the work and writing of Franz Joseph Molitor see Bram Mertens, *Dark Images, Secret Hints: Benjamin, Scholem, Molitor and the Jewish Tradition Studies in German Jewish History*. Vol. 7. (Bern; New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 67–75.

difference.⁷²⁸ It is worth remembering that Jewish medical professionals had already identified in 1924 that “The children of the Yemenites, and the other Oriental parts . . . are very different from our children,”⁷²⁹ maintaining that, “we, who came here armed with modern science and the knowledge of how to use it in order to heal our children, must come to the aid of other sectors of society.”⁷³⁰ The discourse of humanitarian mission and acculturation was also at the heart of Frankenstein’s work that believed he was rescuing and solving social problems in the Yishuv and later Israel. But Frankenstein shifted the question of “difference,” as he pushed to the fore the conundrum of biological and mental Mizrahi inferiority. They came to sight as a “barren field,” a “burden,” and an “unproductive” and “foreign” body in relation the “civilized” Zionist project.⁷³¹ Mizrahim were not associated with criminality, for Frankenstein, to be Mizrahi was an offense. And if the word *integration* meant anything, it implied forcing reform together with notions of unquestioned Ashkenazi domination and superiority.

As an educator, Frankenstein was invested in searching for solutions for the perceived infirm mental deficiencies of the Mizrahi youth and their impaired abilities that marred an intra-Jewish race. Two elements in particular confirmed for Frankenstein the genetic inferiority of Mizrahi students: their “intellectual paralysis”⁷³² and uncontrolled sentiment often marked with “pathos” and emotional excess.⁷³³ After Frankenstein traced the history of Mizrahi “imbecility and intellectual paralysis,”⁷³⁴ he suggested a new pedagogical solution to the Mizrahi “problem”. This included a new educational

⁷²⁸ Doctor Carl Frankenstein, “The Education of Our Abandoned [*azuvim*] Youth.” In *Davar [Word]*, June 9, 1938: 3.

⁷²⁹ D. Deutsch, “Shimru et ha-Yeladim [Take Care of the Children].” *Haaretz [The Land]*, November 23, 1924. In Dafna Hirsch, “‘We are Here to Bring the West, Not Only to Ourselves’: Zionist Occidentalism and the Discourse of Hygiene in Mandate Palestine.” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 41(2009): 577–594.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷³¹ Doctor Carl Frankenstein, “The Education of Our Abandoned [*azuvim*] Youth.” In *Davar [Word]*, June 9, 1938: 3.

⁷³² *Ibid.*

⁷³³ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁴ *Ibid.*

arrangement that would be limited only to those in a state of intellectual stagnation and provide these Mizrahi students vocational occupation without much intellectual study. This new educational system would direct these youths to agricultural work, where Frankenstein, somewhat uncharacteristically, pointed out their only talents.

Frankenstein's suggestion of racial segregation paralleled the work of a young educator, Doctor Moshe Brill (1910–1943), who examined the high percentage of “imbecility” among Persian youth in Jerusalem.⁷³⁵ In his study on the *Neglected Youth in Jerusalem* (1941),⁷³⁶ Brill investigated the mental inferiority of the Persian youth in Jerusalem and associated that to biological difference. Building on Frankenstein's conclusions, Brill called for a pedagogical separation between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi students.⁷³⁷ Less than ten years later, Frankenstein and Brill's vision developed into an instrumental standpoint in developing the Jewish educational system in the Yishuv and later Israel. According to Abraham Shumsky, school segregation between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi students was implemented in twenty-eight schools in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in Israel during the late 1940s and early 50s.⁷³⁸

When these recommendations from social scientists first gained publicity in the late 1930s, Sephardic and Mizrahi leaders convened in 1939 to discuss and promote, yet again, a unified vision and political solidarity. Given the tensions between the Sephardim and Mizrahim, it might be of no surprise that many Sephardim refused this call for unity—who would want to associate with Mizrahim?

⁷³⁵ Anonymous, “Moshe Brill's Obituary.” In *Davar* [Word], January 4, 1944: 2.

⁷³⁶ Moshe Brill, *The School Attendance of Jewish Children in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem, The Hebrew University, 1941). See also his earlier study “The Retarded and the Non Prompted Pupils,” *Hakhinuch* [Education], 1938.

⁷³⁷ Doctor Moshe Brill, “The Education of the Youth of the Mizrahi Communities.” In *Davar* [Word], May 30, 1939: 3. See also Moshe Brill, *Neglected Youth in Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1941).

⁷³⁸ Abraham Shumsky, “An Analysis of the Ethnic Group Problem in Israel with Implications for the Role of the School,” (Degree of Doctor of Education: Teachers College Columbia University, 1954), 113–124.

The National Sephardic-Mizrahi Assembly of 1939

For the last sixteen years meetings of the Sephardic Federation were held in Jerusalem or abroad. But on April 6, 1939, members of the fifteen Sephardic-Mizrahi institutions from three major cities (Jerusalem, Tel-Aviv, and Haifa) attended⁷³⁹ the first Sephardic National Assembly took place in the offices of the newly founded Sephardic-Mizrahi Organization in Tel-Aviv. Although this National Assembly, under the patronage of Rabbi Ouziel,⁷⁴⁰ attempted to unify the growing number of Sephardic and Mizrahi institutions throughout the Yishuv, it achieved the opposite. Because some members of the World Sephardic Federation believed this convention was undermining their political power, they boycotted the assembly and refused to attend the gathering.

According to Ouziel, the assembly was to present a unified Sephardic national front, one that “is not made of divided factions and institutions.”⁷⁴¹ If in the past the Jerusalemite activists had been in the majority, participation in this assembly was more representative of the Yishuv, as evident from the attendance sheet. Among the Sephardic-Mizrahi participants were seven delegates from Tel-Aviv, six from Jerusalem, three from Haifa, and one from Tiberias, Petah-Tiqva, and Safed.⁷⁴²

At this National Assembly, the old Jerusalemite leadership lost exclusive claim to the term “Sephardim.” New generation of leaders from Haifa and Tel Aviv began deploying it to advance their separate political strategy. First, they mobilized growing resentment against “discrimination” by the

⁷³⁹ Anonymous, “The Assembly of the Sephardic Organizations.” In *Davar [Word]*, April 7, 1939: 8.

⁷⁴⁰ Notice that the National Sephardic Assembly did not receive much attention in the central newspaper at the time, *Davar [Word]*. Among growing news about the advancement of Hitler in Europe (see *Davar [Word]*, April 5 and 7, 1939), or in depth articles about the Assembly of Zionist Workers (see *Davar [Word]*, April 7, 1939) that were covered in great detail and length, the National Sephardic Assembly earned only a minor acknowledgement on the back page of *Davar [Word]*. Therefore, not much could be learned from media coverage about the tensions and conflicts that led to the creation of the assembly or the debates throughout.

⁷⁴¹ Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel-Aviv,” April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 2.

⁷⁴² Aside from the Palestinian delegates, the honorary guest was Rabbi Fratto from Italy. *Ibid.*

Zionist Organization against the Sephardic-Mizrahi population.⁷⁴³ Second, it eroded Sephardic-Mizrahi political solidarity by pitting these communities against one another. One speaker, identified as Doctor Cohen from Haifa, insisted that “although the word ‘discrimination’ [*kipuach*] is unpleasant,” he felt obliged to “reiterate that the discrimination of Sephardic rights persists in every facet of life [in the Yishuv].”⁷⁴⁴ Cohen held the Zionists responsible for the belief that “the Sephardim have never been Zionist.”⁷⁴⁵ Alfred Levy, another Sephardic-Mizrahi delegate from Haifa, gave a more factual and persuasive account of marginalization:

The extent of discriminatory acts [against Sephardim-Mizrahim] in Haifa is unlike any other town. No one can deny the marginalization of the Sephardic community within the Community Council [of Haifa]. We did not want to divide the Community Council but we had to find a way to retrieve our rights. We tried to persuade them [Ashkenazim] that we will fight from within, but how can one fight from within if he is one against ten? Against our will, we had to leave the Community Council to recover our rights. The moment I was able to hire Sephardic workers, the National Assembly put out a flyer warning against me [Alfred Levy] . . . They even warned that they would persecute me from Haifa to Acre . . . Their threats did not frighten me; we will continue our fight until victory.⁷⁴⁶

In addition to the two speakers from Haifa, delegates from Jerusalem voiced similar concerns,⁷⁴⁷ casting a bleak light on the persistence of discriminatory treatment in the Yishuv. But Ashkenazi-Zionist hegemony over Sephardic-Mizrahi groups also led to continual discord. Due to competing claims of victimization, the term “Sephardim” became the perfect foil for younger Mizrahi leaders discontent with the old

⁷⁴³ Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel Aviv,” April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 9–10, 14, 17.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁴⁷ See Moshe Cohen’s speech, highlighting the lack of economic support from the Zionist Organization for Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements. In the Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel-Aviv,” April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 15.

Jerusalemite leadership. Disenfranchised Sephardic-Mizrahi communities were now pitted against one another, competing with each other for economic resources, political domination, and privileges of Zionist power.

With Arieh Turgemman emerging as the spokesperson of the new guard, representatives of a new generation—“new blood of youth”—appeared eager to fight against the Sephardic leadership.⁷⁴⁸ Turgemman, an activist from Tel-Aviv and a key figure in organizing the assembly, identified their political struggle against “the stupefying/disabling element” [*yesod mardim*], that is, “an element that presumed to follow Zionist ideals and hinder the active Sephardic element.”⁷⁴⁹ Turgemman pointed an accusing finger at the “World Sephardic Federation in Jerusalem,” who had ignored the requests to convene that the Sephardic-Mizrahi activists from Tel-Aviv made in 1933 regarding a Sephardic National Assembly.⁷⁵⁰

Moreover, the domination of the Jerusalemite leadership structure made Turgemman advocating overthrowing the old leadership.⁷⁵¹ With evident frustration, Turgemman proclaimed: “Who gave them the power to decide for us?”⁷⁵² His questioning revealed the implications of Sephardic-Mizrahi exclusion in Zionist institutions to the extent that it marked ongoing attempts to unify a diverse Sephardic-Mizrahi

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁷⁴⁹ See Arieh Turgemman’s speech. In the Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel-Aviv,” April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 11.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁵¹ As I stressed earlier, the reports about the preparation for the Assembly are limited. That being said, close examination of the arguments in the Assembly reveal the various tensions and even disagreement with the creation of a National Sephardic Assembly. In most cases, and although a number of activists from the World Sephardic Federation did attend the National Assembly, including Abraham Elmaliyah (while remaining unusually quiet throughout), it is clear from the words of various speakers that the National Assembly organized against the will and desire of the World Sephardic Federation. See Moshe Schlus and Abraham Franco’s speeches. In the Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel Aviv,” April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 16, 15.

⁷⁵² See Arieh Turgemman’s speech. In the Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel Aviv,” April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 11.

entity. Given the limited Zionist economic support to Sephardic-Mizrahi settlements and institutions,⁷⁵³ and the small number of Sephardic-Mizrahi representatives in the Zionist Organization (five percent).⁷⁵⁴ Turgemman's question also exposed the suspicion and rivalry between Sephardim and Mizrahim, an outcome of an ongoing marginalization where a few, if any, were given access to positions of Zionist power and privilege.

It is not without reason that one of the issues discussed at the National Sephardic Assembly was the widespread poverty among Sephardic-Mizrahi youth. "Hundreds and thousands of our people are starving for bread," declared Turgemman.⁷⁵⁵ At the backdrop of growing global depression, Yedida Baruch, a pharmacist and long-standing member of Sephardic activist from Jerusalem who was known for his support of a separate Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy, focused on the poverty of 3,000 Sephardic-Mizrahi youth in Jerusalem. Like Brill and Frankenstein, Baruch identified Mizrahi youth as a problem. He used scientific language to assert that Mizrahi youngsters suffered from "negligence" and poverty what made them approach "missionaries that would provide them with education and food at no charge."⁷⁵⁶

The assembly's conclusions reveal that the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership actually conceded the validity of Frankenstein and Brill's studies but not their conclusions. These leaders were deeply

⁷⁵³ See Shlomo Cohen's speech and his reference to the Sephardic community in Peki'in, a settlement in the Northern part of Palestine (in Arabic, *Buqei'a*). According to Cohen, the Sephardic-Mizrahi population, who accounted for about 10 percent of the total number of the inhabitants that included Muslims, Druze and Christians, did not receive no support from the Zionist Organization. As a matter of fact, on behalf of the Zionist Organization, Ben-Zvi asked the Sephardic-Mizrahi residents to leave the area so that new *Halutzim* [settlers] will inhabit the space. In the Protocols of the "National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of Eretz Yisrael, Tel Aviv," April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 15. That being said, recent research, although very limited in scope, tells us that only one family, the members of the Zinati family, returned to the village in 1940. See Eli Ashkenazi, "Researchers Race to Document Vanishing Jewish Heritage of Galilee Druze Village." In *Haaretz [The Land]*, July 25, 2012.

⁷⁵⁴ See Arie Turgemman's speech. In the Protocols of the "National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of Eretz Yisrael, Tel Aviv," April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 11.

⁷⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

⁷⁵⁶ See Yedidia Baruch's speech. In the Protocols of the "National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel-Aviv," April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 12.

concerned over the rising crime rate as a pressing internal Mizrahi-Sephardic issue. Thus, the assembly agreed that one of the top priorities should be furnishing Sephardic-Mizrahi youth organizations, such as *Yehuda Ha-Levy*, *Degel Zion* [*The Flag of Zion*], and *Al ha-Mishmar* [*On Guard*], with the means to provide food as well as education to the Jewish Sephardic-Mizrahi youth across all of Palestine.⁷⁵⁷

Inferior in Their Own Eyes: Adapting to an Excluded Self, 1939–1944

With Jewish Jews immigration to Palestine and land purchases restricted by the British Mandate,⁷⁵⁸ the new Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership in Tel-Aviv tried to establish a social web of institutions for Sephardic-Mizrahi communities. Over the next five years, branches of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Youth Movement were founded in Tiberias, Haifa, and Jerusalem.⁷⁵⁹ Their protocols tell us that response to these initiatives was high: an estimated 200–500 youth joined *Degel Zion* [*Flag of Zion*] in each city.⁷⁶⁰ Beyond the social-cultural benefits, the establishment of a Mizrahi Workers Organization in 1940,⁷⁶¹ the Organization of Sephardim and the Mizrahi Communities (founded in 1940) and newspapers

⁷⁵⁷ See Moshe Schlus' speech. In the Protocols of the "National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel-Aviv," April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 16.

⁷⁵⁸ Formally known as the MacDonald White Paper, the White Paper of 1939 officially rejected the recommendations of the Peel Commission (1937). The new policy was in favor of creating an independent Palestine that would be governed by Palestinian-Arabs and Jews in proportion to their numbers in population in 1939. Moreover, the capacity of Jewish immigrants was limited to 75,000 for the next five years (Smith 1992: 3; Morris 2009: 155–158).

⁷⁵⁹ See "Degel Zion—The Sephardic Jewish Council in Tel-Aviv." [estimated publication date: 1939–1940] Haaretz: Tel-Aviv. As for the specific implications of the creation of Degel Zion in Haifa and the attempts "to uplift the cultural, social, and physical condition of the Sephardic Youth," which by 1938–1939 had 200 registered members in Haifa alone, see the "Financial Report of the Sephardic Organization in Haifa—from June 1938 to July 1939." The Sephardic Council in Haifa: Haifa: 10–11, 18, 21.

⁷⁶⁰ See "Conclusion of the Sephardic National Assembly." In the Protocols of the "National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael*, Tel-Aviv," April 7, 1939 in Jerusalem City Hall, Box 6235, File 5: 18–19.

⁷⁶¹ For detailed analysis of the question of Arab and Jewish workers in the Yishuv, including the emergence of trade-unions and labor movements," see the commanding work of Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906-1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Zachary Lockman, "Exclusion and Solidarity: Labor Zionism and Arab Workers in Palestine, 1897-1929." *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* Ed. Gyan Prakash, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 211-240; Gershon Shafir, "Land, Labor, and Population in Zionist Colonization." *Israeli Society—a Critical*

such as *Hed Ha-Mizrah* [*The Orient*, later known as *The Echo of the Orient*] (1942–1952), or *Darkenu* [*Our Path*] (1940–41), demonstrated a deeper understanding among Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders of their excluded identity in the Yishuv.

Increasing reports about the “unproductivity” of 80 percent of Mizrahi workers (and only 50 percent of Sephardim and Yemenite workers),⁷⁶² paired with the high birthrate in Sephardic-Mizrahi families (double that of Ashkenazi families),⁷⁶³ formed the backdrop for the Sephardic-Mizrahi Worker Organization. Through the foundation of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization, the Organization of Sephardim and Mizrahi Communities, and its journal, *Darkenu* [*Our Path*], Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders tried to resolve what social scientists described as the Mizrahi “problem.” At the same time, they sought to maintain their ethnic and racial boundaries that were the bases of their “independent and reliable” Sephardic-Mizrahi community.⁷⁶⁴

Located in Tel-Aviv and run by Mizrahi leaders, including Moshe Chelouche,⁷⁶⁵ Bechor Schetrit, and Raphael Turgemman, from its inception the Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization was ready for

View. Ed. Uri Ram, (Tel-Aviv: Breirot Publishers 1993). Building on this scholarship that examined labor through the Arab-Jewish binary and overlook the organization of Sephardic Workers, the emergence of separate Sephardic Union Workers could offer an alternative narrative to the implications of Zionist discourse and its assertion of national/ethnic boundaries.

⁷⁶² See Article. Anonymous Author. “The Working Conditions and Functional Structure of Mizrahi Workers.” In *Davar* [*Word*], August 24, 1939: 3–8.

⁷⁶³ While the average birthrate among Ashkenazi families was 1.2 percent (children per family), among Sephardim it was 2.1 percent, among Yemenite 2.3 percent, and among the Mizrahi communities it was 2.5 percent. See Doctor Y. Schlezinger, “Birthrate Among Hebrew Laborers According to Age of Married Wives.” In *Davar* [*Word*], April 25, 1940: 3–7.

⁷⁶⁴ See Raphael Turgemman’s “Declaration Statement.” In *Darkenu* [*Our Path*]: *Financial Report of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization in Eretz Yisrael, Workers Council in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, from September 1, 1940, to September 30, 1941*. Tel Aviv: Fisherman Publications: 3–5.

⁷⁶⁵ About the Chelouche family and their varied activities in the old Yishuv and the Yishuv period in Jaffa, see Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche, *Reminiscences of My Life (1870-1930)* (Tel Aviv: Babel, [1928] 2009) [in Hebrew].

“war.”⁷⁶⁶ Their goal was to protect the “Sephardic-Mizrahi” laborers, primarily against discrimination by Zionist officials.⁷⁶⁷ The Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization defended “the Sephardic workers who have been forced out of their jobs.”⁷⁶⁸ They demanded political transparency and equal allocation of financial sources from the Zionist Organization in the Yishuv.⁷⁶⁹ According to the protocols of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization, seven thousand Sephardic-Mizrahi workers joined the organization in Tel-Aviv in its first year, as more than nine hundred Mizrahi city residents became unemployed during that time in Tel-Aviv.⁷⁷⁰

In addition to supporting Sephardic-Mizrahi youth movements across Palestine, the new leadership planned to establish a Sephardic-Mizrahi hospital and local clinics,⁷⁷¹ a Sephardic-Mizrahi loan fund,⁷⁷² as well as a school for Sephardic-Mizrahi teachers and educators.⁷⁷³ Envisaging autonomous Sephardic-Mizrahi social institutions shed light on the independent work of this leadership, who needed to act independently to support and protect its people. Considering that they did not have a steady source of funding, however, their plans appeared impressive, even ambitious, but unrealistic. Above all, in their

⁷⁶⁶ See Raphael Turgemman’s “Declaration Statement.” In *Darkenu [Our Path]: Financial Report of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization in Eretz Yisrael, Workers Council in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, from September 1, 1940, to September 30, 1941*. Tel Aviv: Fisherman Publications: 3–5.

⁷⁶⁷ Defending Sephardic-Mizrahi legal rights focused on various cases of “discrimination” in the municipality of Tel-Aviv and Haifa. If in the past, Sephardic-Mizrahi activism was more political in nature, to the extent of suggesting the creation of a Sephardic-Mizrahi autonomy, the aims of the new leadership was centered around the social and cultural unity of the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities. See In *Darkenu [Our Path]: Financial Report of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization in Eretz Yisrael, Workers Council in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, from September 1, 1940, to September 30, 1941*. Tel-Aviv: Fisherman Publications: 7–9.

⁷⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁰ See “[Our] Connection with Government Offices.” In *Darkenu [Our Path]: Financial Report of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization in Eretz Yisrael, Workers Council in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, from September 1, 1940, to September 30, 1941*. Tel-Aviv: Fisherman Publications: 10.

⁷⁷¹ See “From the Works of the National [Sephardic-Mizrahi] Council.” In *Darkenu [Our Path]: Financial Report of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Workers Organization in Eretz Yisrael, Workers Council in Tel-Aviv-Jaffa, from September 1, 1940, to September 30, 1941*. Tel-Aviv: Fisherman Publications: 3.

⁷⁷² Ibid.

⁷⁷³ Ibid.

attempts to provide for the Sephardic-Mizrahi population, the second generation of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders inevitably, or, perhaps consciously, reproduced the same ethnic and racial division against which they fought.

Against the backdrop of scientific and social expressions of segregation, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders attempted to make their protest and activism public. On June 10, 1942, *Ha-Mizrah [The Orient]: A Daily for Sephardic Jewry* offered another solution to the Sephardic-Mizrahi “problem.” Founded and edited by Eliyahu Elishar (1899–1981), a key member of various Sephardic institutions, including the *Halutzei Ha-Mizrah [Pioneers of the East]* (1918–1932) and the Sephardic Liberal Party (1936), the *Ha-Mizrah [The Orient]* became the mouthpiece for the entire Sephardic-Mizrahi community in Palestine. Elishar’s mission statement, entitled “Our Stage,” emphasized the struggle and difficulty of the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in identifying with a national project that excluded them and did not make “full rights” available.⁷⁷⁴ *Ha-Mizrah [The Orient]* provided a political platform for various Sephardic and Mizrahi speakers, including Elishar himself, Abraham Elmaliah, and David Sitton.

An increasing number of articles in *Ha-Mizrah [The Orient]* by Sephardic-Mizrahi scholars focused on Sephardic-Mizrahi folklore, customs, folktales, including biographies of historical leaders such as Albert Antebi, Saddia Gaon, and more. These intellectuals used Orientalism to constitute an identity (in the historical, Zionist, and cultural sense) in the struggle to demand equal rights.⁷⁷⁵ Here, the understanding of “Orientalism” by the historian, John Efron, as a discourse that “could be a profound expression of one’s own cultural anxiety, and insecurity,” parallels to the ways this group of intellectuals applied the Orientalist discourse to shape their histories and identity. *Ha-Mizrah [The Orient]* indeed

⁷⁷⁴ See Eliyahu Elishar, “Our Stage.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, June 10, 1942: 1.

⁷⁷⁵ See Abraham Elmaliah’s “Albert Antebi” In *Ha-Mizrah [The Orient]*, July 17, 1942: 6-7. As well as “Albert Antebi.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, July 31, 1942: 6–7.

related to a “deep-seated fears of inferiority.”⁷⁷⁶ But Orientalism also became a tool for this leadership to constitute and perform an Oriental-Mizrahi entity, and, thus, to mobilize political activism.

Studies of Sephardic-Mizrahi history and folklore attempted to mark exclusive ethnic and cultural boundaries for the Sephardic-Mizrahi community and history.⁷⁷⁷ The Interest of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in their culture and history already appeared in the publications of *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* [East and West] in the 1920s and 30s. Their current project to identify distinct Sephardic-Mizrahi folklore had a clear political edge, appeared next to their harsh claims against “Ashkenazi purity” in institutions of the Yishuv,⁷⁷⁸ which even led to a declaration of a Sephardic-Mizrahi strike in 1942.⁷⁷⁹ Folkloristic articles appeared side-by-side with increasing doubts concerning “the role of Sephardim in the Yishuv,” either in helping the “neglected Mizrahi youth”⁷⁸⁰ or in creating a better organization for the Sephardic worker who was apparently destined only to agricultural work.⁷⁸¹

⁷⁷⁶ Efron, John M. "Orientalism and the Jewish Historical Gaze." *Orientalism and the Jews* Ed. Ivan Kalmár, Derek Jonathan Penslar. (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 80.

⁷⁷⁷ The emergence of Jewish folklore in a range of networks in the Yishuv is particularly interesting considering the ongoing interest in the Sephardic-Mizrahi ethnic communities. Recent scholarship on Jewish folklore in the Yishuv of the 1940s argued the multiple understandings and “translations” of folklore during these years in Palestine: see Dani Schrire, “Collecting the Pieces of Exile: A Critical View of Folklore Research in Israel in the 1940s-1950s” (University of Jerusalem: Doctor of Philosophy, 2011), preface 14. On the intersection of anthropology and folklore, see Orit Abuhav, *In the Company of Others: The Development of Anthropology in Israel* (Tel-Aviv: Fetish, 2010), 73-83.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷⁷⁹ Anonymous, “The Council of Sephardic Delegates Demands the End of Discrimination: and ask its members to stop their work in the Yishuv until the change of this condition.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah* [*The Echo of the Orient*], June 30, 1942: 11.

⁷⁸⁰ Menahem Pitchon, “The Case of Youth in Jaffa and Public School.” In *Ha-Mizrah* [*The Orient*], June 10, 1942: 1. See also Y. Sofer, “To the Question of Our Youth.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah* [*The Echo of the Orient*], July 31, 1942: 3. Or, see also David Avishar, “To the Problem of the Uneducated Youth.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah* [*The Echo of the Orient*], August 28, 1942: 8.

⁷⁸¹ Anonymous, “The Sephardic Workers in Favor of Municipal Organizations.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah* [*The Echo of the Orient*], July 31, 1942: 14. About the specific “cleaning” jobs given to Sephardim-Mizrahim and their utter frustration, see Anonymous, “Cleaning Workers from Mizrahi Communities in Tel Aviv.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah* [*The Echo of the Orient*], August 14, 1942: 14.

To improve the image of the Sephardic-Mizrahi community, the production of folkloristic and historical studies characterized their shared history and common culture of the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity.⁷⁸² Their intellectual endeavor was dominated by their internal political tensions. Sephardic-Mizrahi intellectuals, primarily Jerusalemite Sephardim, such as Gaon, Attias, Elmaliah, and Avishar, explored histories and folklore of Sephardic and North African communities (from Iran, Tunisia, Yemen, and Salonika), like “tales from Sephardic-Mizrahi folklore,” and “the benefit of the Sephardic dialect.”⁷⁸³ Yet, as independent intellectuals, they also promoted the political agenda of the Jerusalemite Sephardim, dividing between Sephardim and Mizrahi communities and cultures, and putting aside these divisions when it came to political and social struggle against the Zionist-Ashkenazi establishment. Finally, they espoused a national agenda, suggesting “a more peaceful approach to our Arabic neighbors,” including the teaching of the Arabic language in Jewish schools.⁷⁸⁴

The ambivalent vision of these Jerusalemite intellectuals—on the one hand, unifying Sephardim-Mizrahim to present a unified struggle against Ashkenazi-dominated institutions and, on the other hand, dividing Sephardic and Mizrahi cultures and histories to reclaim past glories—motivated a number of striking declarations by Sephardic leaders. In the words of Gaon, “a series of shadows” was used to

⁷⁸² See Abraham Ben-Yacov, “Three Tales from the Mizrahi Folklore.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, July 17, 1942: 9. See also Abraham Elmaliah, “Righteous Soul: From the Jewish Folklore in North-Africa.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, January 15, 1943: 6-7; Abraham Ben Yacov, “Three Tales: From the Mizrahi Folklore.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, February 12, 1943: 8; S. Angel “Memories and Forgetfulness: From the Sephardic Folklore.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, April 10, 1943: 7. Or, a series of four articles named “From the Mizrahi-Jewish Folklore.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, April 19, 1943: 8-9; Yitzhak Levy, “About the Music of Sephardic-Jews.” In *The Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, April 19, 1943: 12; Moshe David Gaon, “Sephardic Jews in History.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, May 7, 1943: 4-5; Moshe Attias, “Beautiful Tarazan: From the Sephardic-Jewish Folklore.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, May 7, 1943: 9; Moshe Attias, “Sorcerous Luck: From the Sephardic-Jewish Folklore.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, September 3, 1943: 8; Doctor Joseph Rivlin, “Sacred Singing in the Mizrahi Communities.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, September 29, 1943: 11; Abraham Ben-Yacov, “Truth Tellers: From the Iraqi-Jewish Folklore.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, January 14, 1944: 11.

⁷⁸³ See Moshe Piamenta, “The Benefits of the Sephardic Dialect.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, September 29, 1942: 10.

⁷⁸⁴ See Eliyahu Elishar, “Jews and Arabs.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, September 11, 1942: 3. See also Eliyahu Sasson, “To Learn Arabic in Jewish Schools.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, August 28, 1942: 9.

promote the divide of “We and Them”:⁷⁸⁵ meaning, Sephardim (including Mizrahi communities) against Ashkenazim. In the declaration of Moshe Cassuto (1883–1951), a native of Florence (Italy) and biblical scholar who immigrated to Palestine in 1939: “I am Sephardic!”⁷⁸⁶

Cassuto’s assertion revealed the “European” and “noble” connotations attached to Sephardim in Europe, in contrast to the ways this category had become a source of “shame” in Palestine.⁷⁸⁷ He asked fellow Sephardim not to disguise their Sephardic dialect, and to become “proud of your Sephardism!” and its particular heritage.⁷⁸⁸ More importantly, aside from his attempts to revive Sephardic pride and glory, like other contributors to *Ha-Mizrah [The Orient]*, Cassuto accepted and embraced the conclusions of social studies that had configured Mizrahim as a “problem,”⁷⁸⁹ setting it apart from the Sephardic entity. Encouraged by leaders of the Yishuv, such as David Ben-Gurion, and shared by Mizrahi leaders in Tel-Aviv and Haifa, this turn to science as a reliable source of knowledge since 1936,⁷⁹⁰ although this “knowledge” indicated Sephardic-Mizrahi inferiority, had sinister implications in the entire Jewish community in the Yishuv by the early- and late-1940s.

Two publications, in particular, had direct and unmediated influence on Cassuto and other Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders, as both highlighted the division between “primitive” Mizrahim and other members of the Yishuv (including Sephardim). One was *Inquiry into Poverty and Malnutrition among the Jews of Jerusalem* (1943), and the second was *The Jewish Population of Palestine: Immigration, Demographic Structure and Natural Growth* (1944). The central contributor and editor of the two was the

⁷⁸⁵ See Moshe David Gaon, “We and Them.” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, August 14, 1942: 3, 17.

⁷⁸⁶ See Moshe Cassuto, “I am Sephardic!” In *Hed Ha-Mizrah [The Echo of the Orient]*, August 20, 1943: 11.

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁰ See David Ben-Gurion’s ongoing claims for the important “role of Jewish science in the creation of a Jewish nation.” In his speech to the Third Student Council Meeting, in David Ben-Gurion Archives, Tel-Aviv, January 12, 1944.

Italian demographer, Roberto Bachi (1909–1995). Bachi, a native of Rome, studied statistics and law at the University of Rome. Following his immigration to Palestine in 1938, he founded the Department of Statistics of the Jewish Agency of Palestine and then was on the faculty at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem from the early 1940s until he was hired permanently in 1947.⁷⁹¹

Bachi's work emphasized the division between Sephardim and Mizrahim, lumping Palestinian-Arab and Arab-Jews as a general Mizrahi-Oriental group. Like Frankenstein and Brill, Bachi conducted sociological and statistical research on natural growth, immigration rates, kinship, and hygiene of the Jewish and Muslim populace of Palestine.⁷⁹² His findings matched their finding regarding Mizrahi biological deficiency but he came up with different conclusion. In his analysis of the dangers for and future of the Jewish population in Palestine, paying specific attention to the birth rate of "Mizrahi" and "Western Jewish" women, numbering, according to his statistic analysis, 50 percent Ashkenazi, 20 percent Sephardic, and 30 percent Mizrahi. He found that the age of marriage of "the primitive" Mizrahi women was the lowest [twenty years old].⁷⁹³ In contrast, to the "European [Jewish] cultural women,"

⁷⁹¹ Roberto Bachi was born in Rome (Italy) in 1909. After receiving his doctoral law degree in 1930 from the University of Rome, he taught for six years statistics and demographics at various universities in Italy. With the rise of fascism, he immigrated to Palestine in 1938 and began working in the department of statistics in Hadassah. In 1982 he won the Israeli honorary mention for his contribution to studies of statistics and economy in Israel. Among one of the prominent followers of Bachi, was the demographer, Sergio DellaPergola (1942–current) (Natan 1996: 187–189).

⁷⁹² Demographic study of populations, as opposed to statistics, originated in Europe of the mid nineteenth century and led by various scientists, including the Italian-born Luigi Bodio (1840-1920) and the German social scientist Wilhelm Lexis (1837–1914). In the heyday of European colonialism, colonial classifications appeared instrumental in what the anthropologist Bernard Cohn related to the formation of new category of identity (specifically in India) (1987). The influence of colonial and Zionist dominated classifications in shaping Sephardic-Mizrahi (among other communities) concept of identity, traditions, and practices must not be considered apart from Sephardic-Mizrahi stereotyping, as I showed in the beginning of this chapter, or in Frankenstein's profiling of Mizrahi youth.

⁷⁹³ Roberto Bachi, "Marriage and Birth Customs among the Various Jewish Communities in the Yishuv and Its effect on Our Future." In *The Jewish Population of Palestine: Immigration, Demographic, Structure, and Natural Growth*. Co-edited by David Gurevich, Roberto Bachi, and Aaron Gertz (Jerusalem: The Department of Statistics of the Jewish Agency of Palestine), 122–124.

that was “born in Europe and shaped by the [European] surroundings,” her average age of marriage was between twenty-two and twenty-eight.⁷⁹⁴

Informed by Arthur Ruppin’s *The Sociology of the Jews* (1930) and Raymond Peal’s *The Natural History of Population* (1939), Bachi investigated the fertility rate of European-Jewish immigrants (where 50 percent of the families have one child) compared with “Asian and African families” (where 50 percent bring five children or more).⁷⁹⁵ He explained the high death rate among Mizrahi youth in Jerusalem (2.6 to 1) by arguing that, “Mizrahim (and not Sephardim) are lacking in hygiene in comparison with Ashkenazim of similar economic status.”⁷⁹⁶ Finally, he concluded his study in juxtaposing “demographic traits of Ashkenazim” and those of the “Mizrahi Communities.”⁷⁹⁷ Considering the high fertility rates of Mizrahi communities, especially of those from “the primitive agricultural communities,” who were not yet fully “assimilated” in the Yishuv,⁷⁹⁸ Bachi warned against two threats: first, “If we will continue walking on the same path [low European-Jewish birth rate], the Jewish people will face a catastrophe as a result of a low fertility rate and aging.”⁷⁹⁹ Therefore, “our Yishuv will be in a difficult position in the demographic competition [*tacharut*] with Palestinian-Arabs.”⁸⁰⁰ Second, “The ‘modern’ side of the Yishuv will swiftly decline in numbers which will lead to various economic and sociological

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid., 153–156.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid., 214–215.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid., 236–238.

⁷⁹⁸ In his use of “assimilation,” Bachi referred to the adjustment of Mizrahi communities to the modern and European Yishuv. For him, Mizrahi assimilation appeared evident due to the declining percentage of Sephardic-Mizrahi populace in the Yishuv (41 percent in 1916–17, 23.3 percent in 1938, and 20 percent in 1943). See Roberto Bachi, “Marriage and Birth Customs among the Various Jewish Communities in the Yishuv and its Effect on Our Future.” In *The Jewish Population of Palestine: Immigration, Demographic, Structure, and Natural Growth*. Co-edited by David Gurevich, Roberto Bachi, and Aaron Gertz (Jerusalem: The Department of Statistics of the Jewish Agency of Palestine) 176, 215, 237, 248.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., 248.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid.

complications.⁸⁰¹ Bachi's results were embraced by leaders in the Yishuv and the Jerusalemite Sephardim, who found his demographic findings to be another justification to divide Sephardim from those swept under the mantle of Mizrahim.

Bachi's demographic analysis, together with Frankenstein and Brill's pedagogical and sociological studies, and the Jerusalemite Sephardim study of Sephardic-Mizrahi folklore, expose not only the interdisciplinary in Sephardim-Mizrahim but also how scientific discourse influenced the political sphere and perception of the Sephardic-Mizrahi identity. Together with its intersectionality and transformation, these studies attempted profusely to fix the Sephardic-Mizrahi category, either in space, cultural practice, historical narrative, religion, dialect, criminality, or mental ability.

This predicament informed a new generation of scholars who intended to use physical anthropology in order to further investigate the distinct Mizrahi biological "type." Among them, one in particular stood out, a native of Budapest and the first doctoral graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (1936), Raphael Patai (1910–1996).⁸⁰² Patai, a future collaborator of Bachi in *Hygiene, Education, and Nutrition among Kurdish, Persian, and Ashkenazi Jews in Jerusalem* (1948), also worked with members of the Jerusalemite Sephardim to carry their shared folkloristic endeavor to an end that they might not have envisaged.

"We Have a Special Duty": *The Palestinian Institute of Folklore and Ethnology*

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

⁸⁰² Patai, Raphael (1910–1996), Hungarian-born anthropologist who immigrated to Palestine in 1939, contributed to the anthropological study of the Orient. His influential publications on this topic include *The Jews of Kurdistan* (1994) [1944], *The Arab Mind* (1973), and *The Seed of Abraham: Jews and Arabs in Contact and Conflict* (1986), to name a few. In 1948, he moved to the United States.

On April 11, 1944, Dr. Raphael Patai gave a lecture in the Jerusalem Community House [*Bet Ha-Am*] hall in Jerusalem in which he laid out his plan to establish an institute of Jewish customs. The crowd contained central members of the Jerusalemite Sephardic Organization, including Abraham Elmaliah, Moshe Attias, David Avishar, and Rabbi Ouziel.

The invitation to the meeting emphasized the men's shared aim: "to rescue from oblivion the cultural assets of these [Mizrahi] communities in Israel."⁸⁰³ Building upon a particular that "nothing will remain . . . from the traditions and legends of the various Israeli communities,"⁸⁰⁴ Patai requested that they envisage a scientific institution devoted to the study of Mizrahi communities.⁸⁰⁵

Patai was a Hungarian native (Budapest) and the son of Zionist activist, Joseph Patai,⁸⁰⁶ the editor of the Zionist monthly *Mult és Jövő* [*Past and Future*], which he founded in 1912 and edited for twenty-seven years.⁸⁰⁷ From childhood, the younger Patai was introduced to prominent scholars such as the

⁸⁰³ See Raphael Patai Archives, *Correspondence between Bet Ha-Am Organizers and Invited Members to the Meeting, April 7, 1944*. In the National Library Archives.

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁵ Patai's initiative to form a folkloristic organization must not be viewed as an isolated attempt of Jewish-Zionist folklorist to establish such an institution. In 1942, Yom Tov Lewinsky had led the Yeda Am [Knowledge of the People] society that was formed in Tel-Aviv. See Dani Schrire, "Collecting the Pieces of Exile: A Critical View of Folklore Research in Israel in the 1940s-1950s" (Doctor of Philosophy: University of Jerusalem, 2011).

⁸⁰⁶ Joseph [Jozef] Patai (1882–1953), writer, poet, teacher, translator, editor, and one of the prominent and prolific Zionist leaders of the Jewish community in Budapest from the early 1910s to the late 1930s. Born in Gyöngyöspata, Hungary, he founded and edited *Mult és Jövő*, a Zionist monthly, from 1912 to 1944, which included translations of major Jewish writers, reviews of Jewish literature and arts, and opinions and thoughts of Hungarian Jewish intellectuals. Major publications included *A középső kapu* ("The Middle Gate" 1927); *A föltámadó Szentföld* ("The Holy Land Restored" 1926), based on his 1920s trips to Palestine; and his biography of Theodor Herzl (1931; *Star over Jordan*, 1946).

Like many travelers to the Orient, from Elkan Nathan Adler who wrote *Jews in Many Lands* (1905) to Ephraim Neimark, who wrote *Travels in Ancient Lands* (1886) [1947], Joseph Patai saw the "East" or *Mizrah* as of great interest and attraction. For him, it was alluring because it counted for a space where Jewish heritage and customs could be found intact. Similar to others' euphoric descriptions of Oriental Arcadia, Joseph Patai describes Palestine as an uninhabited "Eden," but for him the land embedded with its national and racial promise, was still within reach. See Joseph Patai's *Joseph Patai's Selected Poems* (1920: 7, 10–11). Translated by William N. Loew. Printed in English by Fovarosi Nyomda R. T.: Budapest.

⁸⁰⁷ Edited singlehandedly by Joseph (Jozef) Patai, *Mult és Jövő* [*Past and Future*], was a Zionist monthly journal that appeared from 1912 to 1944. The publication was tinged with Zionist ideas as it opposed assimilation and

Arabist, Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921).⁸⁰⁸ His early education at the University of Budapest and his arrival in Palestine in 1933 at the age of twenty-three, along with his dissertation (in the Hebrew University) on the topic, “Water: A Study in Palestinian Geography and Folklore during the Biblical and the Mishnaic Periods,” reflects his growing concern about Jewish folklore in Palestine (1936). During the 1930s, folklore, ethnology, and anthropology were not recognized disciplines at the Hebrew University.⁸⁰⁹ As

acknowledged *Eretz Yisrael* to be the cultural homeland of Jews. See the journal description in *Jewish Budapest: Monuments, Rites, History* by Kinga Frojimovics, Géza Komoróczy, Viktoria Pusztai and Andrea Strbik: “*Mult es Jovo* regularly published reports and photos about the *halutz* movement, about Jewish pioneer settlers in Palestine and the latest developments in the construction of *Eretz [Yisrael]*,” and most importantly, it was “the Zionist journal of Pest, helping to define intellectual and emotional approaches to Zionism” (1999: 215).

⁸⁰⁸ On the German influences on Patai’s scholarship see John Efron, *Defenders of the Race: Jewish Doctors and Race Science in Fin-De-Siècle Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Mitchell Bryan Hart, *Social Science and the Politics of Modern Jewish Identity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000). Among the central influences on Patai’s work and his interest in the Orient were two scholars from Austro-Hungarian Empire such as Arminius Vambery (1832–1913), and the “great Orientalist” Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921). Ignaz Goldziher (orig. Isaac Judah) of Hungarian Jewish descent, specialized on Arabic and Islamic manuscripts. Two of his major publications are *Der Mythos bei den Hebraeern [Mythology among the Hebrews]* (1877), and *A zsidóság lényege és fejlődése [Essence and Evolution of Judaism]* (1923–24). See also, Patai’s positive recollection of his meeting with Goldziher, “One of these visits was to Ignaz Goldziher, who had been acquainted with Father’s work since 1904, and whose importance as one of the founders of the scholarly investigation of Islam I learned to appreciate only years later when I myself began to study Arabic. When we left him, Father said to me, “Don’t ever forget that you shook hands with the greatest Orientalist alive” (1998: 159). On Goldziher’s work see Raphael Patai, *Ignaz Goldziher and His Oriental Diary: A Translation and Psychological Portrait* (Detroit; Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1987); Martin Kramer, *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis*. Ed. Martin Kramer, (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1999); John Efron, “Orientalism and the Jewish Historical Gaze.” *Orientalism and the Jews* Ed. Ivan Kalmár, Derek Jonathan Penslar (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

Arminius Vambery (Orig. Hermann Vamberger or Bamberger), was a Hungarian Jew and an acclaimed traveler, Orientalist, and writer. Born to an Orthodox family, from his early twenties he began traveling first to Magyars and Asia and then to Constantinople. During his six years stay in Turkey, Vambery published a Turkish-German dictionary (1858) and gained the friendship of Sultan-Hamid. Later, by 1863–64, he traveled to Armenia, Persia and Turkestan, disguised as Sunnite dervish under the assumed name of Rashid Effendi. At the time, he was considered to be the first European to make such a journey. His *Travels and Adventures in Central Asia* (1864) aroused great interest all over Europe. In his novels, Vambery, a traveler and self-made scholar, documents his adventures in the East. His accounts are infused with mystery and danger. His autobiographical novel, *Life and Adventure* (1886), reveals his inclination towards a modernization of the Orient, including what he names the “Mohammedan element” (1886: 14). It was his “disguise,” his ability to mimic the Orient both in terms of behavior and language and still retain his Europeaness that stood at the fore of his writing (1). Upon his return to Europe he became an Orientalist scholar at the University of Budapest. Among his students was Ignaz Goldziher. Lastly, Vambery supported the Zionist project and introduced Theodor Herzl to Sultan Abdul-Hamid in 1901.

⁸⁰⁹ A minor in folklore was added to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the early 1970s, and anthropology was added to the Department of Sociology at about the same time. See Abuhav 2003, 2010; Schrire 2011.

such, Patai's first publications focused on a biblical perspective of Palestine,⁸¹⁰ a branch of the discipline of "Palestiniology." In his meeting with the Jerusalemite Sephardim in April 1944, he was introduced as "a scholar known for his knowledge of the [Jewish] people and ethnology,"⁸¹¹ who agreed to lead this scientific project.

"We have the special duty," Patai declared with urgency in his lecture, "to create a central institution whose task will be to collect the customs of Israel as long as there is still time to do it."⁸¹² Like Bachi and other scholars, Patai believed Mizrahi communities were in the process of assimilation to the Ashkenazi-European values and society in the Yishuv, and thus would lose their ancient traditions and customs. But for David Avishar and Rabbi Ouziel, this folkloristic task stemmed from the need to "make these [Sephardic-Mizrahi] traditions and knowledge more appealing to the youth," who might go astray due to "foreign" influences,⁸¹³ reminding us about the political weight of folklore (among other studies) for this Jerusalemite leadership in defining their selfhood through the same scientific discourse that posited their inferiority.⁸¹⁴

⁸¹⁰ By 1944, Patai had five major publications, three in Hebrew and two in English. See (1936) *Ha-Mayim: Mekhkar bi-Yediat ha-Aretz ve-le-Folklore Eretz Yisraeli* [Water: a study in Palestiniology and Palestinian folklore]. Tel Aviv: Dvir [H]. Or, (1938) *Ha-Sapanut ha-Ivrit* [Jewish Seafaring in Ancient Times]. Jerusalem: Jewish Palestine Exploration Society [H]. Or, (1939a) "'The Control of Rain' in Ancient Palestine." In *Hebrew Union College Annual* 14: 251–86. Or, (1939b) "The 'Egla' Arufa or the Expiation of the Polluted Land." In *Jewish Quarterly Review* 30: 59–69. Or, (1942–43) *Adam ve-Adama: Mechkar be-Minhagim, Emunot ve-Agadot Etsel Yisra'el ve-Umot ha-Olam* [Man and Earth in Hebrew Custom, Belief, and Legend: A study in comparative religion] (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Press, 1939) [in Hebrew].

⁸¹¹ See Raphael Patai Archives, *Correspondence between Bet Ha-Am Organizers and Invited Members to the Meeting, April 7, 1944*. In the National Library Archives, Jerusalem.

⁸¹² See the Tel-Aviv daily *HaZman* [*The Time*], April 16, 1944, quoted in Raphael Patai's *Journeyman in Jerusalem* (1992: 436).

⁸¹³ See Raphael Patai Archives, *Rabbi Ouziel's Speech in the Founding Meeting, April 11, 1944*. In the National Library Archives, Jerusalem.

⁸¹⁴ Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

One month later, in May 1944, after another meeting in Jerusalem, suggestions were made to include more scholars in this project of collecting Jewish folklore.⁸¹⁵ To promote his “Institute of Jewish Folklore,” in September 1944, Patai appointed the following honorary presidents⁸¹⁶: Rabbi Ouziel, the chief Sephardic rabbi of Palestine; Yitzhaq Ben-Zvi, the head of the *Va’ad Leumi*⁸¹⁷ [National Committee], who would later become the second president of Israel;⁸¹⁸ and Dr. Max Grunwald,⁸¹⁹ historian and acclaimed folklorist of Jewish communities in Western Europe, specifically of Jewish folklore in Germany. A fourth honorary president, Rabbi J. L. Zlotnick, the director of the South African Jewish Education Foundation and folklorist,⁸²⁰ was elected in 1947.

Patai was appointed to the position of Director of Research of the Palestine Institute of Folklore and Ethnology (PIFE), and would soon become the principal contributor and editor of its *Edoth* [Communities], a *Quarterly of Folklore and Ethnology*, published in between 1944–1948. As Patai attested in his memoir, both the PIFE and its quarterly journal depended on his contribution and

⁸¹⁵ See Raphael Patai Archives, *Protocols of Meeting, May 2, 1944*. In the National Library Archives, Jerusalem.

⁸¹⁶ Additionally, the following individuals were elected to the Executive Committee: D. Avisar, Molkho, Dr. M. Zobel, Dr. Joseph J. Rivlin (who also contributed to the Institute’s *Edoth*), Dr. Moshe Shulvas, and Mr. T. Ben Hefetz.

⁸¹⁷ *Va’ad Leumi* (or *Ha-Va’ad Ha-Leumi*) [National Committee] was the central executive organ of the Jews in Palestine. It operated from Oct. 10, 1920, until the establishment of the Provisional Government of the State of Israel in May 1948. According to Gil Eyal (2006), the *Va’ad* also attempted to study Sephardim-Mizrahim. They hired various “sociologists, psychologists, and social workers, typically under the auspices of the Institute for Economic Research of the Jewish Agency, its department of youth immigration, or the social department of the National Board [*Ha-Va’ad Ha-Leumi*]” (88).

⁸¹⁸ Yitzhaq (Izhak) Ben-Zvi (orig. Shimshelovich) (1884–1963), historian and anthropologist, was the second president of the State of Israel as well as a member of the First and Second Knessets. Born in Poltava, Ukraine, he moved to Eretz Yisrael in 1907. Among his many activities, in 1945 he was elected to *Va’ad Leumi* as its president, and in 1948 he founded the Institute for the Study of Oriental Jewish Communities (which was renamed the Ben-Zvi Institute in 1952). Among his publications about the Orient is *The Exiled and the Redeemed* (1956).

⁸¹⁹ Dr. Max Grunwald (1871–1953) was a historian and folklorist by training who graduated from Breslau. Born in Hindenburg, he served as a rabbi in Hamburg and Vienna. While in Hamburg, he began publishing the first edition of the *Mitteilungen der jüdischen Volkskunde* (1898–1929), which he was to edit singlehandedly in different formats for thirty volumes. He settled in Jerusalem in 1938.

⁸²⁰ Judah (Yehuda) Leib Avida (Zlotnick) (1887–1962), a Polish-Jew who was known for his folklorist literary publications in Hebrew, Yiddish, and English and as a Zionist publicist, philologist, folklorist, and ethnologist. In 1938 he immigrated to South Africa, where he served as the director of the South African Jewish Education Foundation. In 1949 he immigrated to *Eretz Israel*, where he stayed until his death.

leadership. As he noted, “[I]t developed that, apart from the moral value represented by the use of the names of respected scholars and public figures, I got no actual help from anyone, and I alone organized and subsequently managed the affairs of the Institute, without receiving any remuneration.”⁸²¹ In letters Patai sent to other committee members, he acknowledged that “no responsibility or duty would be asked of them,” aside from giving their name to his institute.⁸²² Patai’s personal motivation and ambition were at the heart of the PIFE.

Around the mid-1940s, popular opinion in the Yishuv eagerly awaited the founding of the PIFE. In contrast to other folkloristic studies of cultures based on textual analysis,⁸²³ the PIFE’s emphasis on “oral sources” was imbued with urgency in relation to the preservation of European Jewishness and the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity in Palestine. The necessity for greater engagement with the changing population in Palestine was evident in the response of the Jerusalem weekly *Hed Ye’rushalayim* [*Jerusalem’s Echo*] from May 12, 1944:

[T]he Jerusalem Institute, which will be headed by the folklore expert Dr. Raphael Patai, will have as *its task to research mainly the oral sources; customs, songs, proverbs, etc.* All this is fast disappearing from the tribes of Israel that had been so rich, each with its own particular folklore, and *if we don’t hurry to study and to record it we shall undoubtedly miss the opportunity.* (emphasis, mine)

The journalist, moreover, also mentioned what was not in the public’s interest:

To our regret, there is no interest in our midst in this matter: our lectures and writers “please themselves in the brood of aliens” and concentrate on the customs of *Fellahim* and Bedouin .

⁸²¹ Raphael Patai, *Journeyman in Jerusalem* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1992), 437–438.

⁸²² See Raphael Patai Archives, *Letter Exchange between Raphael Patai and Rabbi Toladeno, May 26, 1946*. In the National Library Archives, Jerusalem. See also Raphael Patai Archives, *Letter Exchange between Raphael Patai and Moshe Attias, August 24, 1944*. In the National Library Archives, Jerusalem.

⁸²³ Gil Eyal, *The Disenchantment of the Orient: Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 76–77.

. . . but until now we have not properly studied the customs of our brethren who came from various countries.⁸²⁴

Even though he was aware of the lack of journalistic interest in the study of *Fellahim* and Bedouin, Patai refuted public opinion and decided to have two essays on those customs in the first volume of *Edoth*, which came out in October 1945.⁸²⁵ This contradiction between the collective disdain of Patai's colleagues concerning the Orient for which "Fellahim and Bedouin" stand, and the Institute's expressed interest in the Arab and the Mizrahi communities, offers an intricate entryway into the institute's journal, *Edoth*.⁸²⁶

The periodical was first published in October 1945 until July 1948, and consisted of four editions per year. Throughout the twelve issues of *Edoth*, Mizrahi Jews were at the center of various physical and cultural anthropological projects that aimed to examine what Patai called "the customs and beliefs of the population of backward countries and savages."⁸²⁷ Whereas folklore focused on various modified cultural currents in "civilized countries," Patai's methodologies changed, as anthropology examined what he called "savages."⁸²⁸ Patai directed our attention to science as a means of classification between advanced

⁸²⁴ Jerusalem weekly *Hed Ye 'rushalayim* [Jerusalem's Echo], May 12, 1944. In Raphael Patai, *Journeyman in Jerusalem* (1992: 437).

⁸²⁵ Here I specifically refer to Joseph Braslavsky's "The Composition of the Bedouin Tribes of the Negeb." In *Edoth* [Communities], [English version] Vol. 1, (1945: 89–126).

⁸²⁶ It is important to note that *Edoth* also attracted readership outside Palestine. See for example this call for contributors and readers in *Folklore* on Sep., 1946:

In October 1945, the Palestine Institute of Folklore and Ethnology began the publication of a quarterly journal called "*Edoth* (Communities): a Quarterly for Folklore and Ethnology." *Edoth* contains for the time being c. 64–70 pages per issue. The main body of the journal is printed in Hebrew, with a detailed English summary of each contribution. *Edoth* is not confined to Jewish matters: it contains also articles of general folkloristic and ethnological interest though among these priority is given to articles touching upon problems and phenomena connected in one way or another with the ancient or modern Near East. . . . Contributors and readers of *Folk-Lore* are invited to send articles on Folklore and Ethnology, 34 David Street, Jerusalem, Palestine. (*Folklore*, Vol.57, No.3 (Sep., 1945), 150)

⁸²⁷ Raphael Patai, "Jewish Folklore and Ethnology: Problems and Tasks". *Edoth* [Communities], Vol. 1, No.1, 1945–1946: 25.

⁸²⁸ Ibid.

and primitive, and Occident and Oriental: “if one wishes to be scrupulous in the use of terminology, one would better speak of the folklore of East-European (Ashkenazi) Jews, while the term ethnology, or its equivalent, cultural anthropology, should be applied only to oriental Jewish communities.”⁸²⁹

Contributors to the study of Sephardim-Mizrahim ranged from Jerusalemite Sephardim, including Attias, Gaon, and Elmaliah, to trained folklorists such as Yehuda Bergman and Max Grunwald. Additionally, the journal reprinted Erich Brauer’s studies on Yemenite and Kurdish Jews. Recurrent mention of “indigenous Jewish communal”⁸³⁰ lives, “Oriental music,”⁸³¹ “customs,”⁸³² “hygiene,”⁸³³ and “medicine,”⁸³⁴ as well as other “Arab” communities, such as the “the Bedouin Tribes of the Negev,”⁸³⁵ testified to this preoccupation. Overall, the subject of “Mizrahim” remained a focus (accounting for 80 percent) of Patai’s journal. The remaining articles (20 percent) in *Edoth* were devoted to the study of European-Jewry, what he considered to be part of Jewish “folklore” (1945), as evident in entries on “The Top among Jews and Gentiles,”⁸³⁶ “Kunst Bichl,”⁸³⁷ and “Various Charms and Magical Recipes.”⁸³⁸

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

⁸³¹ Edith Gerson-Kiwi, “The Musicians of the Orient.” *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol.1, No. 1, 1945–1946.

⁸³² Moshe Attias, “Marriage Customs in Salonika.” *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol.1, No.1, 1945–1946. Also see J. D. Oppenheim’s “Jewish Customs among the Suriname Population.” *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 3, No. 1–2, October 1947–January 1948.

⁸³³ Sarah Bergner-Rabinowitz, “Hygiene, Education and Nutrition among Kurdish, Persian and Ashkenazic Jews in Jerusalem.” *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 3, No. 1–2, October 1947–January 1948.

⁸³⁴ Max Meyerhof, “Arab Medicine Among the Jews of the Yemen.” *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 3, No. 1-2, October 1947–January 1948.

⁸³⁵ Braslavsky Joseph, “The Composition of the Bedouin Tribes of the Negeb.” *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 1, 1945–1946.

⁸³⁶ Max Grunwald, “The Top among Jews and Gentiles.” In *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (January, 1946): 72–75.

⁸³⁷ Max Grunwald, “*Kunst Bichl*.” In *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (April 1946): 181–184.

⁸³⁸ Max Grunwald, “Various Charms and Magical Recpies.” In *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (July 1946): 241–248.

Originally published in Hebrew, the journal offered summaries of major English-language summaries. By the April–July 1947, these were stretched to include complete translations into English of articles deemed significant by Patai to attract international attention to the journal.⁸³⁹ Patai and his *Edoth* were in discursive dialogue with other Israeli-Ashkenazi scholars whose research focused on the Mizrahi entity, including writers such as Erich Brauer⁸⁴⁰ (1936, 1942, 1944, 1948), Shlomo Dov Goitein (1936, 1947), and Yitzhaq Ben-Zvi (1956), to name a few.⁸⁴¹ German-born anthropologist Erich Brauer (1895–1942) was an especially important influence for Patai. His ethnological cataloging of Mizrahim in Jerusalem in 1920s⁸⁴² mapped out Mizrahi-Oriental biological types according to their “average height,” “black eyes and skin,” shape of their skulls, and other physical characteristics.⁸⁴³

⁸³⁹ The need to translate the journal into English, and thus to manufacture knowledge that traversed the national and geographical borderlines of Palestine, is worth careful attention that I cannot pursue in this chapter. To what extent, one might ask, was *Edoth* intended to actually attract the attention of English speakers, and how did that affect its content?

The fact that *Edoth* [*Communities*] was sponsored by the South African Jewish educational foundation with the help of Rabbi Zlotnik must raise questions concerning the connection between economic issues and representation that I hope to address in the future.

⁸⁴⁰ It is important to note that Erich Brauer’s *The Jews of Kurdistan* (1948) [1942] was completed and edited by Patai and published in Palestine with the help of the Palestinian Institute of Folklore and Ethnology. Brauer (1895–1942), German-born anthropologist and ethnologist by training was interested in Oriental Jewish communities. His writings on the Yemenite Jews [1934] and the Kurdish Jews were praised by Patai as historical documents, as he writes: “In these two books Brauer applied modern ethnological methods to the study of Oriental Jewish communities and thus paved the way for future researchers into the complex subject of Jewish ethnology” (introduction by Patai, in Brauer 1993: 23).

⁸⁴¹ Of course, by referring to institutions and writers who worked in Palestine from the early-twentieth century to the mid- 1950s, I do not wish to limit the study of the Orient to temporal or geographical specificity. Further research on Oriental Jewish or Mizrahi discourse must refer to other educational and “scientific” bodies that operated outside Palestine and existed prior to Theodor Herzl’s initiation of the *The Jewish State* (1896). The inauguration of the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* (1860), for instance, or the development of *Ostjude* (“Eastern” Jew) should be examined in considering the elasticity and multivocality of the Sephardic-Mizrahi category, where East European Jews “were regarded as immoral, culturally backward creatures of ugly and anachronistic ghettos”: see Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 3.

⁸⁴² Imperative in examining this periodical is the distinction between ethnology and anthropology. While nowadays the two terms seem related—“anthropology” as the study of humankind, and “ethnology” dealing with culture—their genealogies differ. Essentially, “anthropology” emerged during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, used by imperial forces or travelers in their attempts to study and classify “the physical as well as the mental characters of man” (Franz Boas 1899: 94). “Ethnology” was the study of human races, including linguistics, physical measurement and culture in order to compare and locate common attributes.

⁸⁴³ Erich Brauer, *The Jews of Kurdistan: An Ethnological Study*, Ed. Patai, Raphael (Jerusalem: The Palestine Institute of Folklore and Ethnology, [1927] 1947), 191.

As from Patai's "Call for Anthropometric Contributions" that was posted in the *Harefuah* Journal [*Israel Medical Association Journal*] on September 4, 1945, a month prior the first publication of *Edoth*, attests his ambition had long been to study Mizrahi rituals, musical instruments, customs, and material culture. However, his greater aim was to evaluate and classify the Mizrahi "breed," according to a typological study of their hygiene, blood type, skin color, and hair. In his public request, Patai asked medical doctors "to play a part in vital scientific research that has to be done in this generation, and not in any other time period."⁸⁴⁴

As an admirer of the work of the renowned German-American anthropologist Franz Boas,⁸⁴⁵ Patai was interested in "the adjustment of the physical type to various surroundings, including issues concerning Eugenics."⁸⁴⁶ He emphasized the ways the "Israeli [Palestinian]" environment stood "as a natural laboratory for grand-scale anthropometric research."⁸⁴⁷ Patai posited Mizrahim in an isolated space (unlike Ashkenazim, for example), where they emerged, according to Patai, on the verge of extinction, a hypothesis that gave him an exclusive opportunity to take their measurements. It seems that this interest in a distinct Sephardic-Mizrahi type was a common goal for both Patai and the Jerusalemite Sephardic leadership, while each had different aims in mind.

⁸⁴⁴ See Raphael Patai, "Call for Anthropometric Contributions." In *Harefuah* [*Israel Medical Association Journal*], September 2, 1945.

⁸⁴⁵ Considered the towering figure of modern anthropology, Franz Boas was born in Minden, Westphalia, Germany, in 1858. In 1881, he received a PhD in physics, with a minor in geography from the University of Kiel. Among his projects, from 1883 to 1884, he had his first fieldwork experience among the Eskimo in Baffinland, Canada, and from 1892 to 1893, he was involved in bringing the cultures of Native Americans to the general public as part of the Chicago World's Fair. His study, from 1908 to 1910, of changes in bodily forms among descendants of immigrants, titled *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (1912), argued about the effect of environment on the physical type of immigrants. Based on a series of anthropometric measurements on nearly eighteen-thousand European immigrants and their children, his findings proved to be central in "The Retreat of Scientific Racism" (Barkan 1992), which refocused anthropological discipline from "physical to cultural preoccupations" (Winant 2000). For an extended discussion on Boas's study, particularly in relation to the Jewish body, see Hoefel 2001; Morris-Reich 2006, 2008; Hart 2000; Painter 2010; Lewis 2001; Barkan 1992; Lieberman 1989; Gravlee, Bernard, & Leonard 2003; and Gilman 1985.

⁸⁴⁶ See Raphael Patai, "Call for Anthropometric Contributions." In *Harefuah* [*Israel Medical Association Journal*], September 4, 1945.

⁸⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Specifically, in relation to Patai's project, the required contributors to his project—tracing physiological changes in relation to a change in environment—were physicians and medical practitioners. In specifying his requirements and expectations, Patai turned away from “anthropometry,” and discussed the importance of “physical anthropology” not only for his research, as he claimed anthropology important to the growth of the Hebrew University. No responses to Patai's call appear in his archives (either in Jerusalem or in New York).⁸⁴⁸ Nevertheless, this apparent lack of response did not prevent Patai from maintaining that “Mizrahim” did not mark an ethnic concept associated with commonality of origin (the East) or descent. Instead, as we will see next, “Mizrahim” came to be viewed as a biological type, a physical and mental condition of an inferior Jewish race (in that sense, Patai provided physiological and biological evidence to Frankenstein's racial theories).

About “the Other End of the Scale”: Depicting Mizrahi Jewish Communities

Published in the first edition of *Edoth [Communities]*, Patai's manifesto “Jewish Folklore and Ethnology: Problems and Tasks”⁸⁴⁹ exposed his reliance on racial system used to catalogue Mizrahi communities. Patai defined the Jewish race as generally “white,” claiming, “The Jews, in general belong to the Caucasian or ‘White’ stock”.⁸⁵⁰ He admitted that the Jews as a whole are a distinct race,⁸⁵¹ mostly

⁸⁴⁸ In the Raphael Patai Archives, I located only one letter and an article from Doctor Uriel Pueah from Jerusalem, dated December 1948. It is unclear whether Patai used the Dr. Pueah's study of the Yemenite community in Palestine in his study. Moreover, in his “Anthropology during the War” (1946)—a report of Patai's Institute submitted to American Anthropological Association—Patai referred to a number of physicians that sent him their research in anthropometry. It seems that Patai's network stretched widely across the various medical institutions in the Yishuv and included medical practitioners such as Dr. M. Stekelis, Dr. E. Simon of the Department of Physical Training of the Jewish National Council, Dr. A. Sandler, a physician at the Hebrew University, and Dr. Dreyer of the Sick Fund Hospital in Safed, Upper Galilee. See Raphael Patai's “Anthropology during the War.” In *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 48, No. 3 (July–September, 1946): 480–482 .

⁸⁴⁹ This article by Patai was first published in *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol.1, No.1 (October, 1945), 1–12. Its complete English version, which I quote and refer to, appeared as “Problems and Tasks of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology.” In *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 59, No. 231 (Jan–Mar., 1946), 25–39.

⁸⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁵¹ About thirty years later, Patai reconsidered this assertion about the Jews as a distinct race. See Raphael Patai and J. Wing, *The Myth of the Jewish Race*, (New York: Schribner's, 1975).

of “White” and “Caucasian” extraction and, hence, cultural affiliation. But within his manifesto Mizrahi communities appeared as a deviation of the so-called Jewish race.

As Patai reviewed the Jewish race, mainly in Europe, he formulated a hierarchy of Jewish body types. He first asserted that Jews are white: “[T]hough they [the Jews as a whole] comprise mainly communities belonging to the Alpine race (white skin, brown eyes, brown hair), [they] include in European countries a fair percentage of individuals exhibiting the Nordic type.”⁸⁵² Against the unmarked European-Jewish category, Patai constructed Oriental difference. Although he did not obtain sufficient anthropometric evidence at that time, Patai’s marking and cataloging of Mizrahi types left no room for doubt about their non-Jewish-whiteness. He catalogued non-white Jews and, most importantly, characterized and hierarchized the Oriental-Mizrahi type to be “*at the other end of the scale, pure, that is for many generations endogamous, types such as the dark brown Yemenites, and various quite black communities.*”⁸⁵³

By “scale,” Patai did not assert difference of skin-color. His “scale” was more akin to Frankenstein’s racial hierarchy, evoked in another essay published in the last issue of *Edoth*. Assessing the “Hygiene, Education and Nutrition among Kurdish, Persian and Ashkenazi Jews in Jerusalem” (Oct. 1947-Jan. 1948),⁸⁵⁴ the sociologist Sarah Bergner-Rabinowitz, classified “Mizrahi communities” again at “the other end of the scale.” She claimed that “These people [Kurdish and Persian communities that form for her “the larger part of the Oriental sector of the Yishuv”] have so far not adapted themselves to a higher standard of living, dwelling close together in their own quarters and still keeping to their old

⁸⁵² Raphael Patai, “Problems and Tasks of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology.” In *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 59, No. 231 (Jan–Mar., 1946), 30–31.

⁸⁵³ *Ibid.*, 31 (emphasis, mine).

⁸⁵⁴ Unlike most essays published in *Edoth [Communities]*, so far Berger-Rabinowitz, “Hygiene, Education and Nutrition among Kurdish, Persian and Ashkenazic Jews in Jerusalem” is the only article I found that was published only in its English version. See *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol.3, No. 1–2, (October 1947–January 1948), 123–134.

customs brought with them from their countries of origin.”⁸⁵⁵ Like Frankenstein and Brill, Bergner-Rabinowitz consolidated Mizrahi communities with racial inferiority as well as “low” culture.

To expand Patai’s “scale,” consider his assertion that another prevalent feature of these communities was their “pure” and undeveloped mentality. In contrast to European Jews, Mizrahim came to be viewed as “authentic,” for they preserved a “typical” Jewish heritage and religious customs. He considered this population to be the marker of Jewish religiosity,⁸⁵⁶ “only Mizrahi Jewish communities are typical, that is only they exhibit special features in all or most of the data with which ethnology was concerned.”⁸⁵⁷ The primary reason why Mizrahim were of interest to Patai’s anthropological enterprise was their atavistic biblical figures, or better, what he considered to be their atavistic backwardness. According to this mindset, “they” did not adapt to modernity, and hence “their” Mizrahi-Oriental inferiority and “authenticity” was self-evident.

In contrast to Mizrahim, he posited the “adaptable” and absorbent European Jewry. On the one hand, Patai argued that, “Modern western civilization is a great leveling force, it absorbs cultural traits, or rather stamps them down into a uniform and continuous surface.”⁸⁵⁸ On the other hand, he held that cultural assimilation and close alignment with progress have a cost: a reformed view of Jewish religion, as “Jewish communities in the great cities of the West were the first to succumb to its pressure. What remained of their specifically Jewish culture consists of little more than the synagogue, with ever diminishing frequentation, and the cemetery; while their ever present philanthropic institutions and their

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid., 123.

⁸⁵⁶ About ten years later, in “Religion in Middle Eastern, Far Eastern, and Western Culture,” Patai extrapolates this claim, and makes the Orient synonymous with religion and sentimentality. He writes, “In a study dealing with the general cultural characteristics of the Middle East, the religious component of Middle Eastern culture has been characterized as permeating the totality of life and as holding supreme sway over performance, thinking, and feeling—in brief, over life as a whole. Religion is the fundamental motivating force in most phases and aspects of culture, and is in evidence in practically every act and moment of existence” (1954: 233–254).

⁸⁵⁷ Raphael Patai, “Problems and Tasks of Jewish Folklore and Ethnology.” In *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 59, No. 231 (Jan–Mar., 1946), 34.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid.

schools have retained only a minimum of peculiarly Jewish traits.”⁸⁵⁹ In short, at its core, this “scale” highlighted a racial and cultural binary, where skin color appeared to determine levels of adaptability and mental ability.

Skin color, however, was only one method used to “define” Mizrahim. Patai’s next attempt to typify a Mizrahi racial type was discussed in *The Science of Man: An Introduction to Anthropology* (1948).⁸⁶⁰ If to this point Patai had discussed the physical characteristics that define either the “Nordic” Jewish race, or the Jewish Mizrahi race, including skin, hair, and eye color, in his 1948 publication, he argued that in the past few decades Jewish communities adapted to their environment. In other words, according to his Boasian argument, Jews who lived in Europe became more “European” in their physique and mentality, and Jews from Arab countries accepted the attribution of the so-called East. To support his claims, Patai compared head-size of “East European Jews” (about 84 millimeters), Kavkazi Jews (about 87 millimeters), Yemenite Jews (about 74 millimeters), and Persian Jews (about 79 millimeters), suggesting that “East European Jews with their large head-size” have similar characteristics with the “Alpine race.”⁸⁶¹ Thus, for Patai, average head-size attested to a higher level of culture and intellectual abilities.

Moreover, “Mizrahim” marked not only a body or mentality but also a Mizrahi genus. In cataloging the percentage of A, B, O, or AB blood types of the various Jewish communities, Patai contended that, “a comparison between the different percentages of blood types will reveal a similar phenomenon characteristic to the external-type [*tipus hitzoni*] of the Jews among the natives they reside with.”⁸⁶² He argued that the percentage of blood types of Jews became identical to the percentage of the native populace. The shift from skin/hair/eye color, to head-size, and then to blood type encapsulated

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁰ Raphael Patai, *The Science of Man: An Introduction to Anthropology*, Ed. Patai, Joseph Rivlin and Raphael (Tel-Aviv: "Yavneh" Publishing House, Published for the Palestinian Institute of Folklore and Ethnology, 1948).

⁸⁶¹ Ibid., 63–65, 72–73.

⁸⁶² Ibid.

Patai's growing interest in the corporeal to expose the mentality of the Jewish body and the Mizrahi type in particular. Mizrahi physical difference came to define the Mizrahi character and its stagnant mental condition.

Stuart Hall's critiques of the creation of an Other⁸⁶³ may be useful in unpacking Patai's motivation in defining the Mizrahi as a "pure" and degenerate type. According to Hall, a sociologist and cultural theorist, the decentralization of nation-state authority is inextricably tied with the manufacturing of an Other. In questioning the search for the roots of a monolithic national-self, he argues, "the notion that identity has to do with people that look the same, feel the same, call themselves the same, is nonsense. As a process, as a narrative, as a discourse, it is always told from the position of the Other."⁸⁶⁴ To echo Hall, my aim, therefore, is to examine the extent to which *Edoth* [*Communities*] was not only deeply complicit in the production of a Mizrahi Jewish Other; but how *Edoth* was written from the position of the Other.

Taking my cue from Ivan Kalmar and Derek Penslar's claim that "orientalism has always been not only about the Muslims but also about the Jews,"⁸⁶⁵ and Azziza Khazzoom's insistence on the ways cascading waves of orientalization were enmeshed in dynamics of internalization⁸⁶⁶ and then projection of racial stereotyping,⁸⁶⁷ I am interested in the political and personal implications of Patai's orientalization of a Mizrahi other. Attempts to scrutinize the "Orient," as depicted in Patai's racial project, could allow

⁸⁶³ Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* Ed. John Solmons and Les Back. (London; New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁸⁶⁴ Hall 2000: 147.

⁸⁶⁵ Ivan Kalmár and Derek Jonathan Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 8.

⁸⁶⁶ On the relationship between "orientalism" and "internal colonialism" see Martin Kramer ed., *The Jewish Discovery of Islam: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lewis* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 1999); Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁸⁶⁷ Azziza Khazzoom, "The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel," *American Sociological Review* 68(2003): 481–510.

different and fresh contemplation of the term: as engagement with and response to religious, cultural, racial, national, and sexual anxieties and disparities that fueled Patai's work.



To reposition and reconstruct Patai's interest with the Orient-Mizrah ("East"), my task is to come to know the motives of Patai's interest and actions. My intent here lies in establishing what I name the ambivalent nature of the processes of "Orientalization," and its production and reformation as an elastic "set of divisions," based on a changing set of binaries that are constantly in flux and at times dependent and challenged by their contradictory formations. Investigation of Mizrahinization as a verb could not only separate but also connect and reveal the commonalities of the so-called *Ashkenazim* and *Mizrahim*. This term complicates, challenges, and interrupts what is "inside" and "outside" the racial, cultural, and linguistic demarcations, and other constructions of "we" against "them."

To that purpose, it is useful to consider what Patai identified as his scholarly gravitation "toward Semitic languages and the ancient Near East" as far back as the 1930s and prior to the inception of the Palestinian Institute of Folklore and Ethnology, in 1945. This was evident in his reflexive contemplations about his scholarly work, disclosed to his young sister, Evi. In November 29, 1932, he wrote to her:

I want to and shall, God willing, take my doctorate in May. And, beyond this, and beyond my hours at the [Breslau] Seminary, I am engaged in something really beautiful: I am working on a study that I shall title *Gotterzeugende Rasse* [*The God-Begetting Race*], which will be a comparison between the Aryans and the Semites.⁸⁶⁸

Here "the Semites" stood for the whole Jewish collective as representative of a homogenous Jewish collectivity. Hence, Patai saw himself as a Semite-Jew—and the Orient/Palestine as the center of his identity—in contrast to the Aryan, the Gentile. He continued to expound on what his attempts to consolidate Jewish identities would yield:

⁸⁶⁸ Raphael Patai, *Apprentice in Budapest: Memories of a World That is No More* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998), 396.

Such comparisons have been made so far always in favor of the Aryans people. I want to try, on psychological-historical foundations, to print up the higher values of the Semitic peoples, as the only racial community in the circle of the Mediterranean cultures that was able to produce the pure ideal of God.⁸⁶⁹

Patai exploited the Orient for theological reasons, as the Jews are part of “the pure ideal of God.”⁸⁷⁰ The evidence for this was the mention of the “Semitic peoples” of the “Mediterranean cultures.” In other words, geographical locality, religiosity, and production of “pure” Jewish religion became characteristics of the Orient. Mizrah, in the theological sense, was consolidated here with the Middle East, and produced a stereotypical view of Oriental cultures, *Mizrahim*, an unalloyed (primitive) group that originated from the Orient.

Patai identified himself with the nativity of the Orient. Emphasizing Mizrahi “purity” allowed Patai to establish his authority as a speaker and interpreter of the Orient’s “higher values” and ancient traditions. I turn now to his rabbinical ordination ceremony at the Breslau seminary on October 12, 1936, to consider a more detailed description of his work:

[T]he central foundation of our culture is the Bible, (this hundred-visaged manifestation of the soul of believing man, which nourishes like an ancestral root the spreading branches of Jewish culture and religion,) . . . Those roots (draw) *drew* their strength from the ancestral land, from that ancestral land that through the millennia radiated its spirit into all countries of the (Diaspora) *globe*. The fiery breath of that land carried in it the word of the living God, and I saw that its faith-giving power was unbroken even today [emphasis in text].⁸⁷¹

For Patai, speaking of and about the “ancestral” Oriental land appeared to welcome elements of risk and danger. He further gave a rich and animated account of his stay in the historic land and of his time among the inhabitants there, as he “sat among the Hebrew peasants of the Valley of Jezreel [*Emek-Y’israel*], and

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid., 396–397.

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid., 434.

felt among them the power of living faith [as] they strove to adjust the commandments of our ancient religion to the demands of changed conditions.”⁸⁷² Indeed, he also “sojourned among the Bedouins of Beer Sheba, and listened in the evenings to their colorful tales in which Allah-Eloha lived, appeared, and acted,” and even “sat among the Oriental Jews of Jerusalem, on whose lips the Hebrew word has lived ever since antiquity as the mother tongue, and recognized their deep religiosity.”⁸⁷³ Patai’s scholarly work distances him from his object of study, the Oriental.

But his accounts went beyond the Orient as a site of discovery, regeneration, and rebirth, for they belie tensions relating to his suspected Oriental self.⁸⁷⁴ To speak about the Orient in Palestine (or the entire Middle East) was to fill this group with meaning rooted in antiquity. It was not only that his parents insisted on speaking German at home, the language of the “*European*, a citizen, culturally speaking, of the great civilized world,” but the “East,” this time referring to Eastern Europe, constantly appeared as a site of fear and inferiority (mainly in relation to German culture).⁸⁷⁵

“The German students at the Seminary,” Patai called to mind during his one-year stay at the Breslau seminary in Germany during the 1930s, “kept their distance from us foreigners.”⁸⁷⁶ He continued: “In addition to Hungarians, there were also Polish, Rumanian, Czechoslovakian, and other East European students at the Seminary, all of whom, including the Hungarians were considered by the German students *Ostjuden* (Eastern Jews).”⁸⁷⁷ I point out this compelling account to show how the “East” extended beyond its perceptible confinement to the physical demarcations of a place: the Middle East. The “East” and Mizrahim, therefore, must be read as a dynamic concept is constantly reconstructed in order to separate

⁸⁷² Ibid.

⁸⁷³ Ibid., 435.

⁸⁷⁴ See John M. Efron, “Orientalism and the Jewish Historical Gaze.” *Orientalism and the Jews* Ed. Ivan Kalmár and Derek Jonathan Penslar (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2004).

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid., 435.

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid.

and isolate national, racial, economic, cultural, geographic, philological, and corporeal demarcations. But the constitution of selfhood from the Mizrahi/Oriental/ *Ostjuden* standpoint implies speaking from the position of the subaltern, presenting resistance in the face of domination.

I return to Patai's narration of his divided personality, what historian David Myers might see as an illuminating example of European Jews who were "[a]t once deemed Occidental and Oriental".⁸⁷⁸

Now, in Breslau, for the first time in my life I got a slight taste of what it meant to be looked down upon by other Jews who held themselves to be superior. Not that there was any overt act, such as rudeness or snubbing. But I had enough sensitivity to feel that the German Jewish students were a shade less friendly to us *Ostjuden* than they were to their compatriots, that we were not included in their social activities, and that by design or happenstance our friendships and contracts were largely confined to our own numbers.⁸⁷⁹

The question remains, however, as to what degree Patai's "bifurcated identity" fueled the production of an Oriental-Mizrahi Other. Were the Orient and specifically Mizrahim the culmination of European Jewry's projections of personal Otherness and inferiority? And to what extent was the production of an homogenized body called "European Jewry" or Ashkenazim as a progressive, developed, and modern body, dependent upon the creation of an Orient (Mizrahim)?

But Orientalism must not be seen an internal problem that various European-Jewish communities (or only Jews, for that matter) and scholars addressed, echoing Ussama Makdisi's argument that "[in] an age of Western-dominated modernity every nation creates its own orient."⁸⁸⁰ In examining the creation of the orient not merely as an imposition of power and cultural superiority, we need to be tuned to the ways dynamics of waves orientalization were used to from the standpoint of political powerlessness.

⁸⁷⁸ David N. Myers, "'Distant Relatives Happening onto the Same Inn': The Meeting of East and West as Literary Theme and Cultural Ideal." *Jewish Social Studies* 12(1995): 75.

⁸⁷⁹ Raphael Patai, *Apprentice in Budapest: Memories of a World That is No More* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998), 357–358.

⁸⁸⁰ Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 3(2002): 768–796.

To elaborate in this point, a new host of queries must emphasize the contribution of Jerusalemite Sephardim to Patai's *Edoth* [*Communities*]. Were the Sephardic contributors aware of Patai's racial science project at all? Put differently, to what extent was the manufacture of a Mizrahi Other crucial for their understanding of their own Sephardic identity? Returning to Patai's journal, I will contemplate these questions in the next section.

Mimicry Gone Wrong? Sephardim-Mizrahim in Gaon's Writing

As reiterated before, most of the articles in *Edoth* [*Communities*] zoom in on the Mizrahi type and their practices, customs, and language. Second only to Patai's contribution to each issue was that of the renowned folklorist Max Grunwald, the appointed honorary president of the journal, primarily in its first year of publication.⁸⁸¹ His entries, such as "The Top among Jews and Gentiles,"⁸⁸² "*Kunst Bichl*,"⁸⁸³ and "Various Charms and Magical Recipes,"⁸⁸⁴ reflected on the culture of Jews in several European regions, and most set them apart from the "hostility of the Gentiles."⁸⁸⁵ One way to examine Patai's emphasis on folklore when it came to European Jews and science and anthropology is to understand his use of racially motivated scientific research to demonstrate and exhibit his (European) belongingness in order to assert cultural and political dominance.

But the same set of scientific and racial discourses was also embraced by the Jerusalemite Sephardim who contributed to Patai's *Edoth*, including in Attias' article on "Marriage Customs in

⁸⁸¹ In total, Grunwald published five essays in *Edoth* [*Communities*]. Three of the five were issued during the very first year of the journal's inception.

⁸⁸² Max Grunwald, "The Top among Jews and Gentiles." In *Edoth* [*Communities*], Vol. 1, No. 2 (January 1946): 72–75.

⁸⁸³ Max Grunwald, "*Kunst Bichl*." In *Edoth* [*Communities*], Vol. 1, No. 3 (April 1946): 181–184.

⁸⁸⁴ Max Grunwald, "Various Charms and Magical Recipes." In *Edoth* [*Communities*], Vol. 1, No. 4 (July 1946): 241–248.

⁸⁸⁵ Max Grunwald, "The Top among Jews and Gentiles." In *Edoth* [*Communities*], Vol. 1, No. 2 (January 1946): 74.

Salonika” (1946),⁸⁸⁶ and Gaon’s “The Fight of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews against the “Indulco” (1946).⁸⁸⁷

Gaon, in particular, asked his readers to pay attention to his torturous and daunting captivity in his Sephardic aunts’ room (in Travnik, Bosnia). Surrounded by his aging relatives, Gaon disclosed his morbid encounter with *Indulco*, also known as sweetening [in Hebrew *mittuq*],⁸⁸⁸ a ritual intended to appease the demons by offering them sweets. Chief among his recollections of his adolescent years in the Balkans was “the whole procedure of the ‘indulco,’ that includes the segregation of the sick person undergoing the treatment, and the repetition of the charm for three, seven, or nine consecutive nights.”⁸⁸⁹ Although Gaon acknowledged the presence of this custom among Ashkenazi communities, he associated *Indulco* entirely with Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewish communities and their irrationality and backwardness.

Gaon concluded his essay with a warning: “In spite of the severe warning [by Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis], the practice still exists to this day among the uncultured classes of the Oriental Jew.”⁸⁹⁰ In the Hebrew version of this essay, Gaon offered salvage to Mizrahim, perhaps as one who has already been redeemed from those “evil” and what he identifies as Oriental customs. Let us listen to his cry: “This misdeed [*Indulco*] is prevalent among guileless circles, that the redeeming light of culture have not penetrated their murky dwelling yet. And education will be required . . . until all the sons of the chosen people will be freed from this web of evil customs, that they are drawn to not of their own accord.”⁸⁹¹

⁸⁸⁶ Moshe Attias, “Marriage Customs in Salonika.” In *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Jan., 1946): 24–27.

⁸⁸⁷ M. D. Gaon, “The Fight of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews against the “Indulco”.” In *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jan., 1946), 104–107, or [the English summary] 124–127.

⁸⁸⁸ “Indulco” appealed to Patai even twenty years after Gaon’s article in *Edoth [Communities]*. See Patai’s “Indulco and Mumia.” In *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 77, No. 303 (Jan.–Mar., 1964), 3–11.

⁸⁸⁹ M. D. Gaon, “The Fight of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews against the “Indulco”.” In *Edoth [Communities]*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Jan., 1946), 104–107, or [the English summary] 124.

⁸⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

But to hypothesize about the possible motivates of this performance, I turn to Parama Roy, whose compelling study of mimicry in (post-)Colonial India resonates with Gaon's mimicry discussed here. In speaking about the relationship and implications of colonialism and mimicry, Roy claims, "The ultimate aim of colonial mimicry is not simply to constitute natives as objects to be studied; it must also produce natives as self-reflexive subjects who know themselves as others (the colonizers) know them."⁸⁹² Like Patai, but through different methodological means, Gaon located himself in a "racial and cultural scale" and emphasized Mizrahi-Oriental religiosity, irrationality, and decadent character. These features became the salient signifiers of Mizrahim, and Gaon, perhaps as (an educated) native, must keep performing his nativeness to distance himself from those "backward" communities. In other words, Gaon's performs the irrational Sephardic-Mizrahi to satisfy the needs and curiosity of the dominant-Ashkenazi minority including other social scientists like Patai. But Gaon identifies with that dominant minority and its idea of culture primarily to validate himself, as an intellectual and a person of culture, using their standards of culture and science.

Productions and performances of Europeanness (Ashkenazim) by Patai or Mizrahim by Gaon share similar characteristics, anxieties, and disparities. I wish to see *Edoth* as a ground where the dynamics of performance and mimicry were encountered, mirrored, and altered. *Edoth* was also the intellectual space where both Patai and Gaon grappled with their complex "Oriental" bodies and attempted to "dis-Orient" themselves, meaning (per)forming a body erased of Arab or Oriental stereotypes, in order to formulate an apparent yet deceptive equilibrium.

Edoth [*Communities*], moreover, was not the only public and literary platform where Sephardic-Mizrahi communities became "self-reflexive," recognizing themselves through the terms and definitions of scholars such as Patai, Bachi, Brill, and Frankenstein. The concept of recognition was illuminating, especially when viewing the various meetings of the Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership that took place during the mid-1940s, when Patai's work was distributed in Palestine. Gaon's participation in *Edoth*, I argue, is a

⁸⁹² Parama Roy, *Indian Traffic* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 209.

reflective of a shift in the ways Sephardim-Mizrahim evaluated and catalogued their identity and culture using (racial) scientific language and standards.

It now seems more interesting to see what the protocols from Sephardic-Mizrahi national meetings tell us about how leaders of those communities embraced and used this kind of knowledge about Sephardic-Mizrahi types. To paraphrase Fabian Johannes, an anthropologist who examined how knowledge gained from German travelers in Africa “changed the knower,”⁸⁹³ my aim is to focus on the Sephardic-Mizrahi object of racial, demographic, and social inquiry, asking how these subjects changed their discourse and experiences of being Mizrahi and Sephardic.

Invisible Sephardim-Mizrahim

In the mid-1940s, across the Yishuv, with the closure of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Worker Organization and the promise of the Jewish state began to materialize. As a result various Mizrahi communities met independently to discuss current problems and hopes for the future. At times their meetings had a clear agenda, like the protest of Mizrahi communities in Rishon LeZion to encourage their “to fight for their rights,”⁸⁹⁴ and another meeting of workers in Tel-Aviv to “fight” for the rights of Mizrahi workers.⁸⁹⁵ At other times, however, sporadic demonstrations, including the rally of Syrian immigrants in Tel-Aviv, expose the growing anger of working-class communities who needed to come to terms with “negligence, poverty, and missing educational infrastructure for its youth.”⁸⁹⁶

⁸⁹³ Johannes Fabian, *Anthropology with an Attitude: Critical Essays*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001).

⁸⁹⁴ Anonymous, “Mizrahi Communities Demand Their Rights.” In *Al Hamishmar [On Guard]*, July 18, 1944: 4.

⁸⁹⁵ Anonymous, “Details about the National Meeting of the Mizrahi Communities.” In *Al Hamishmar [On Guard]*, July 31, 1944: 2.

⁸⁹⁶ Anonymous, “The Negligence of Mizrahi Immigrants Provokes Public Uproar.” In *Al Hamishmar [On Guard]*, July 23, 1945: 4.

Bitterness also shaped writers' public claims in the press of the Yishuv. For example, one agricultural worker, Zecharia Gamzo, who had immigrated from Yemen, complained about "becoming a slave to the land" when he was not given any opportunity for finding employment by the Workers Organization because of his ethnicity.⁸⁹⁷ Another letter to the editor, from one who identified as A. Nisani, took a harsher stance and complained about being treated as Sephardic-Mizrahim "Inferior Jew."⁸⁹⁸ Nisani disclosed the direct and indirect effect of Patai's racial work, while negotiating his supposed "inferiority."⁸⁹⁹ His evocative confession read: "I have learned that I am an inferior Jew in comparison to 'pure' Jews from enlightened Europe—the 'superior race' of the Jewish people."⁹⁰⁰ While he did condemn "ethnic discrimination," he also criticized "the division of races."⁹⁰¹ A division that made him question his contribution to the national effort: "for [I did not come here] to be discriminated [against] and enslaved."⁹⁰² His account, among many other manifestations of protest, was particularly illuminating, given the spread of declarations by Jerusalemite Sephardim in 1946 advocating for the Zionist Organization, its premise, and leadership.⁹⁰³

Those political declarations on behalf of the Sephardic community (and not Mizrahi communities) in full support of the Zionist Project—"for our Zionist inclinations are deeply ingrained in our [Sephardic] history and unique soul"⁹⁰⁴—prompted the meeting of Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in the final days of 1946. Unlike previous Sephardic-Mizrahi assemblies that gave voice to protests against

⁸⁹⁷ Zecharia Gamzo, "[Are We] Slaves of the Land or Agricultural Workers." In *Al Hamishmar [On Guard]*, October 11, 1945: 2.

⁸⁹⁸ A. Nisani, "About Inferior Jews." In *Al Hamishmar [On Guard]*, September 24, 1945: 2.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁰¹ Ibid.

⁹⁰² Ibid.

⁹⁰³ Public Announcement of the Sephardic Community. "For We Are Your Brothers." In *Al Hamishmar [On Guard]*, March 14, 1946: 2.

⁹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Zionist institutions, patriotism and Zionist advocacy served as a new uniting force of Sephardim-Mizrahim. Given the increasing number of demonstrations against Zionist institutions, it appeared unclear whether this celebration of Sephardic-Mizrahi unity could proceed without interruption.

On December 12, 1946, the Sephardic-Mizrahi National Assembly was held, its first meeting since the end of the Second World War. During a press conference anticipating the Assembly, Meir Lagnado, a prominent Sephardic activist, reported about the aims of the assembly, attempting to unify Sephardim-Mizrahim under a single organized leadership. But, as opposed to past attempts, this time, particular attention was given to the work of the Sephardic-Mizrahi bloc in alliance with the Zionist Organization.⁹⁰⁵ For that matter, one hundred and fifty Sephardic-Mizrahi delegates from all across the Yishuv arrived at the assembly from Tel-Aviv, Haifa, and especially from Jerusalem, in addition to a crowd of more than two hundred guests. It was a Sephardic-Mizrahi celebration of the national enterprise. The blue-and-white Israeli flag stretched across the meeting table, as scouts welcomed the delegates at the “Menorah” hall in Jerusalem.⁹⁰⁶

Unlike previous Sephardic-Mizrahi meetings, it seemed that now, as Lagnado testified, the Sephardic-Mizrahi group was determined to prove they were “an integral part of the Zionist Organization.”⁹⁰⁷ At the same time, Zionist delegates in Basel (Switzerland) attended the twenty-second Zionist Congress, where Rabbi Ouziel represented the Sephardic-Mizrahi community.⁹⁰⁸ Although sources do not reveal much about the logic and reasoning behind the timing of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Assembly in this charged date, one could speculate about the particular motivations that were in play in presenting Sephardic-Mizrahi unity when Zionist delegates met in Basel.

⁹⁰⁵ Anonymous, “Today, The National Sephardic Assembly.” In *Davar* [Word], December 22, 1946: 1.

⁹⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁸ Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of Eretz Yisrael in the Menorah Club in Jerusalem,” December 22–23, 1946 in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box: 1.

From the opening speech of Abraham Elmaliah, by now considered “the oldest [Sephardic-Mizrahi] public activist,”⁹⁰⁹ it appeared that Sephardic-Mizrahi lobbying in favor of the Zionist Organization would proceed without interruption. In contrast to their previous Assemblies, including the first World Sephardic Assembly in 1925 in Vienna, where Elmaliah charged claims the Zionist Organization with discriminatory and “abusive” treatment of the Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, in 1946, Elmaliah did not even allude to that history. Instead, he highlighted the new goals of the unified Sephardic-Mizrahi community together with the Zionist Organization, including the need to educate the unschooled youth of the Mizrahi communities, establish a Sephardic Literary Club, and to form a Scientific Sephardic Organization in order to organize folkloristic work about the Sephardic-Mizrahi communities in Palestine and abroad.⁹¹⁰

Discussions repeatedly considered the need to unite the Sephardic-Mizrahi community within the Zionist project,⁹¹¹ the importance of the Jewish national enterprise after the Holocaust,⁹¹² and the role of the Sephardi women in the Sephardic-Mizrahi faction. During the initial meetings, this performance of national solidarity—either between Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, or between the Sephardic-Mizrahi faction and the Zionist Organization—seemed to advance smoothly. But two days into the meeting, with the speech of Eliyahu Elishar, the founder of the daily *The Orient* and the political party *Halutzei ha-Mizrah* [*The Pioneers of the East*], and an intrepid critic of the Zionist Organization, the laborious production of national and communal unity began to crack.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid., 2.

⁹¹⁰ Ibid., 3. See also Anonymous, “The National Sephardic Assembly.” In *Davar* [*Word*], December 23, 1946: 1.

⁹¹¹ Meir Ginio’s Speech. “Organizing Sephardic Jews in Eretz Yisrael.” In the Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael* in the Menorah Club in Jerusalem,” December 22–23, 1946 in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box: 21–25.

⁹¹² See Moshe Geinado’s Speech. “Sephardic Jewry in the World.” In the Protocols of the “National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of *Eretz Yisrael* in the Menorah Club in Jerusalem,” December 22–23, 1946 in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box: 17–20.

Elishar's speech, entitled "The Problem of Education in the Land [*Eretz Yisrael*]," disapproved of the pro-Zionist theme of assembly and the fall down of independent Sephardic-Mizrahi institutions. He criticized the "lack of belief of Sephardim-Mizrahim in themselves,"⁹¹³ and derided their dependency on the Zionist Worker Organization [*histadrut*] to provide for them, rather than establishing an independent social infrastructure. He also turned against the "fear that paralyzed the Sephardic-Mizrahi activities," which made them give up on their own initiatives.⁹¹⁴ Elishar charged: "[I]t is we who are at fault for we gave up on our rights . . . we do not need the mercy of others. We better struggle."⁹¹⁵ Then, while condemning the hierarchies created among the Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, he found fault with the current Sephardic-Mizrahi internal clash:

We suffer from an inferiority-complex [*nechitut*] . . . we accepted the idea that all those who come from the West are to be welcomed, while those from the East are damaged . . . we endlessly tried to imitate our new [Ashkenazi] brothers in our speech and behavior. We must admit, [it was] with our cooperation [that] we falsified our organic Mizrahi character.⁹¹⁶

Elishar's candid words throw light on the internal struggles and the sense of inferiority that afflicted the Sephardic-Mizrahi imagination. His talk also exposed what members of the assembly preferred to silence or leave unheard. In his speech, Elishar brought to life a past not yet dead that the current Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership denied in the form of an insidious silence. The creation of Sephardic-Mizrahi consciousness began when historical and imaginary ties were cut and rejected, as the Sephardic-Mizrahi idea of self adapted the internal logic and vesture of a Eurocentric view of the Zionist project. By a

⁹¹³ See Eliyahu Elishar's Speech. "The Problem of Education in the Land [*Eretz Yisrael*]." In the Protocols of the "National Assembly of the Sephardic Jews of Eretz Yisrael in the Menorah Club in Jerusalem," December 22–23, 1946 in Jerusalem City Hall, General Box: 38.

⁹¹⁴ Ibid.

⁹¹⁵ Ibid.

⁹¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

greater paradox, moreover, this was especially true when Elishar talked about the increasing cases of poverty and negligence among Mizrahi youth.

Elishar, who so far had talked about the Mizrahi notion of a self-imposed sense of inferiority, turned to praise the works of sociologists such as Moshe Brill, and demographers such as Roberto Bachi. He constituted his selfhood through their studies and used their racialized knowledge to define the Mizrahi youth problem, their malnutrition, improper hygiene, and “scattered minds.”⁹¹⁷ While he championed the work of “Ashkenazi journalists” in pushing to the fore the problem of Sephardic-Mizrahi youth, at the same time he held responsible the Zionist Worker Organization (*histadrut*) for the poverty spreading among Sephardic-Mizrahi workers.

At this point, growing public clamor took over the hall.

A noisy uproar erupted and interrupted Elishar’s speech. People in the crowd asked him to leave the stage and end his speech. Indeed, the speaker left, and then returned to continue his speech, further underscoring larger cases of discrimination against Sephardim-Mizrahim in the Jewish Agency or educational institutions of the Yishuv.⁹¹⁸ Elishar asserted that only the reestablishment of independent Sephardic-Mizrahi organizations that would be responsible for the education, occupation, and immigration of the Sephardic-Mizrahi community would help their community.

Elishar’s approach was rejected by a younger generation of Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership, led by Bechor Schetrit (1895–1967),⁹¹⁹ a Moroccan-born judge (appointed in 1935) and a future minister in the first Israeli parliament [*Knesset*]. Nevertheless, Elishar’s speech became the nucleus of the remaining

⁹¹⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁹¹⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁹¹⁹ Schetrit was born in Tiberias in 1895, was the son of immigrants from Morocco, who arrived to Palestine in the mid nineteenth century. He received his law degree from the Law School in Jerusalem in the 1920s and was fluent in both Arabic and Hebrew. Schetrit, unlike most Sephardic-Mizrahi activists, was not active in any Sephardic or Mizrahi organizations from 1918 to the mid 1930s. In 1935 he was named as a District Judge, and in 1939 he was appointed as Head District Judge in Lod.

debates at the assembly.⁹²⁰ Activists insisted that unity with the Zionist institutions and rejection of an independent Sephardic-Mizrahi entity was best for their community. Even Schetrit, who in 1942 warned against the “neglected youth who . . . are left in the streets . . . [and] to the mercies of the uncensored cinema” and thus “could become criminals” because of lack of social care, preferred to remain silent this time about issues of inequality and stick with the Zionist coalition.⁹²¹ It seemed that, at this point, Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders had decided to adopt a more reserved political stance.

Nevertheless, the paradox Elishar contested remained unresolved. His speech mirrored a sense of confusion among the alleged inferior Sephardic-Mizrahi communities. Those categories that meant to define and unify, has led to unforeseen distress, political immobilization, a breakdown of meaning and cohesion. This entanglement between this imposed and internalized view of self-inferiority, on the one hand, and continuing exclusion from the Zionist Organization now supported by a racial scientific discourse, on the other hand, had an enduring effect. It is a disputable triumph of the Yishuv and the later Israeli society that it was able to scientifically demonstrate and convince those communities to whom it has given an inferior status of the validity of this decree. The Sephardic-Mizrahi identity—marked by imposed and internalized sense of alleged inferiority—became one that has yet to be told and that no member in the Yishuv was prepared to hear.



A few months after the National Sephardic-Mizrahi Assembly, the Sephardic-Mizrahi story became a tale of statistics and numbers, as Carl Frankenstein decided to take his investigation about “statistics of youth crime in Jerusalem” a few steps further. While compiling his book, *Youth Neglect: Its Essence, Process, and Reasons* (1947), Frankenstein turned to Gaon, the internal Sephardic expert on the

⁹²⁰ Note that across the Yishuv in the popular *Davar* [*Word*], Elishar’s talk was ridiculed: “It seemed that Mr. Elishar is back to his old habits of taking personal or collective responsibility and putting the fault only on the General Workers Organization (*histadrut*).” See also Anonymous, “The General Workers Organization—The First to Lead Constructive Acts In Favor of the Sephardim.” In *Davar* [*Word*], December 24, 1946: 1.

⁹²¹ Bechor Schetrit, “About the Criminalized and Neglected Youth.” In *Bmaaracha, Degel Zion in Eretz Yisrael*, 1942: 3.

demographics of the Sephardic-Mizrahi cohort, to confirm his statistics about the Mizrahi communities in Jerusalem.⁹²² After a meeting and correspondence with Gaon, Frankenstein's research embraced past studies by Roberto Bachi, Raphael Patai, and Moshe Brill, highlighting "criminality" and "primitiveness" among those that he identified from "the Mizrahi sector (inclusive to both Mizrahi Jews and Arabs)."⁹²³

Mizrahim, Jews and non-Jews alike, were the focus of Frankenstein's analysis of youth crime. For him, the fact that more than 70 percent of Arabs in Jaffa and 50 percent in Jerusalem live in poor conditions explained their "primitive inability to perceive the value of an organized idea of life."⁹²⁴ At fault were "Mizrahi impassivity" and "lack of collective responsibility." Mizrahi patriarchy caused the decay of the Mizrahi woman. And, therefore, Frankenstein reached the following conclusion:

[their, meaning Mizrahi Arabs][n]egative development is a result of some glaring differences . . . between the primitive retard [expressed] in the views and conducts of Palestinian-Arabs and their civilized surrounding that was brought to the land [Palestine] primarily by European Jews, and thus remained for many of the Arabs as a foreign body.⁹²⁵

The results of those cultural and racial tensions, in addition to "Mizrahi aggressiveness,"⁹²⁶ led to a large number of criminal attacks, including sexual offenses that spanned all Palestinian-Arab hubs in Palestine.

Mizrahi Jews, moreover, were viewed as a diverse ethnic community (numbering 180,000 and 26 percent of the total 600,000 Jewish population) in the Jewish community of the Yishuv but defined as Mizrahi types, "who are by and large suffering from negligence and still not qualified to understand the

⁹²² M. D. Gaon Archives, *Correspondence between Moshe David Gaon and Karl Frankenstein, specific date is missing, assumed between 1946-7*. In the National Library Archives, File 83.

⁹²³ Carl Frankenstein, *Youth Neglect: Its Essence, Process, and Reasons* (Jerusalem: Henrietta Szold Foundation for Child and Youth Welfare, 1947): 135.

⁹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 138–39

⁹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

themes and values of Western culture aside from passive mimicry and absorption.”⁹²⁷ What is more, Frankenstein produced a list of symptoms of neglected Mizrahi youth, some of which we already encountered in Elishar’s speech, including “aggressiveness in one’s home” (72 percent); stealing from one’s home (55 percent); malnourished (92 percent); dropping out of school (77 percent); instability in the work place that is part of the “typical Mizrahi approach that lack agency” (75 percent);⁹²⁸ recurring visits to the cinema hall (68 percent); begging (4 percent); gang activity and theft (81 percent); sexual offenses (30 percent); and prostitution, including homosexuality (9 percent among Jews and 14 percent among Arabs).

With the creation of the Israeli state, Frankenstein became a towering figure in the field of education, while Elishar’s position, including his relentless critique of the Zionist Organization and its racial ideology, continued to cause antagonism, because it kept retaining voices and sentiments that the new Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership preferred to silence in order to better adapt to a new reality.

Conclusion

This chapter narrated the events, scientific publications, and debates that not only produced the racialization of Mizrahim, but also reshaped the experience of becoming Sephardim and Mizrahim. The social and demographic analysis conducted by Israeli social scientists, such as Moshe Brill, Roberto Bachi, and Carl Frankenstein, during the 1930s claimed to prove Mizrahi inferiority. These pseudo-scientific studies demoralized different Sephardic and Mizrahi communities in several ways. For one, this knowledge inculcated a sense of hierarchy and rivalry between these groups, unraveling the Sephardic-Mizrahi alliance, as became evident in the suspicion between these communities across economic, ethnic and geographical spheres.

⁹²⁷ Ibid., 144–145, 148.

⁹²⁸ Ibid., 156.

This chapter also traced the naturalization of a racialized Sephardic-Mizrahi discourse, revealing the desperate attempts of these communities (or, at least, of its leaders) to gain inclusion into the Zionist project. In that sense, I argue, the internalization and the performance of a racial discourse (including racializing one's body) functioned as an entry ticket to the Zionist project. It is a hard but intriguing fact that Sephardic-Mizrahi intellectuals supported projects of folklore and racial science in attempts to define, mark, set them apart, and catalogue Mizrahi communities. This asks us to come to terms with the idea of agency not only in a romantic and heroic sense, but also in terms of assenting to existing hegemonic-Zionist powers and notions of Ashkenazi-European racial supremacy.

The purpose of this chapter has not been to catalogue grievance or dwell on Mizrahi victimization. Rather, it highlights the necessity to confront the history that led to the creation of the Israeli state and try to read Frankenstein, Patai, and Gaon with a historical perspective. Frankenstein, like Patai, after all, believed keenly in the solace their studies offered to Mizrahi communities in Palestine.

After Patai had already moved to the US, he corresponded with Frankenstein on these matters. In a letter to Patai from 1953, Frankenstein discloses his true concern with the “sub-standard” Mizrahi immigrants, and his wish to help them “in their process of acculturation.”⁹²⁹

[L]ife conditions of many Oriental Jews are certainly sub-standard, and consequently cause disaffection among many of them—but it does not follow that they all strive to give up their ways of living. I am convinced that organic “change,” far from being the quasi-automatic result of social coexistence or the outcome of coercion and authoritatively imposed new patterns, will take place only to the extent that the Oriental immigrants are allowed to change from within, as it were. This means that the Western sector of the population must learn how to give up its arrogant attitude of superiority and contempt and how to respect otherness even when it *seems* undesirable.⁹³⁰

⁹²⁹ Raphael Patai Archives. *Letter correspondence between Raphael Patai and Carl Frankenstein*, November 22, 1953. In the New York Public Library, Box 23.8 (emphasis, in text).

⁹³⁰ Raphael Patai Archives. *Letter correspondence between Raphael Patai and Carl Frankenstein*, August 25, 1953. In the New York Public Library, Box 23.8 (emphasis, in text).

The point of Otherness, especially as encoded in the Sephardic-Mizrahi case, is crucial to the story narrated in this chapter. Notions of exclusion are deeply embedded in the paradoxical experience of Sephardim and Mizrahim, which made them cling, at times helplessly, to the fused identity Sephardim-Mizrahim. Time and again, Sephardic-Mizrahi leadership was trapped in a historical trap when they attempted to bring unity on the basis of their own exclusion. They tried, in effect, to come to terms with this history of Zionist subjugation and alienation. For innumerable reasons, they had to believe that as Mizrahim they are inferior to the European-Jewish members of the Yishuv.

Conclusion

Sephardic-Mizrahi Agents

In *The Struggle for Sephardic-Mizrahi Autonomy* I have chronicled the invention of Sephardic-Mizrahi identities in Palestine between 1918 and 1948. Much of the existing scholarship thus far has lacked historical specificity about Sephardim and Mizrahim in the Mandate period, particularly in those cases where ethnic identity was rooted in political activity that extended beyond the borders of Palestine, as was the case with Sephardic-Mizrahi peoples. By studying the multifaceted aspects of Sephardic-Mizrahi identities in colonial Palestine, my work joins existing debates on ethnic, racial, and colonial identities. I expand those conversations to consider the complex nature of Sephardic-Mizrahi agency, asking how the creation of Sephardic-Mizrahi identities in 1918 provided a conceptual space of resistance and activism for Sephardic-Mizrahi leaders in the face of political powerlessness during the 1920s and 1930s. I thus contend that the hyphenated term “Sephardim”-“Mizrahim” should be understood both as a concept and as an ethnic group, indicating the dynamic interplay between racial categorization by the Ashkenazi establishment and the internalization of that scheme by Sephardim-Mizrahim.

The movement of ideas, and particularly of racial ideas, as we have seen, is multidirectional, with diverse points of exit and entry, as well as spaces of immobility. From the time of the creation of the Israeli state up to the present, Sephardic-Mizrahi histories and were cut and ignored, as Sephardic-Mizrahi identity needed to continually adapt to a Eurocentric view of the Jewish nation. Thus, the omission of Sephardic-Mizrahi histories must be taken seriously.

The continuation of the story of this dissertation brings us to the 1950s. According to the work of various Israeli social scientists in that decade, the common characteristics of the Sephardic-Mizrahi objects were their “primitive mentality” and anger, lack of culture, religious

piety, and criminality (although these studies began in the 1930s).⁹³¹ This scientific research questioned the ability of these immigrants to assimilate and overcome their alleged mental inferiority. The Sephardic-Mizrahi population appeared to suffer from the “inability to understand the meaning of inner rules” and from an “inability to control affects and impulses.”⁹³² Between 1948 and the mid-1950s, not long after the arrival of more than 800,000 Middle Eastern and North African immigrants to the newly established Israeli state, such debased and essentialized portrayals of the Sephardic-Mizrahi Jews provided justification for declaring a “culture clash.”⁹³³

About a half-century prior to Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993, 1996), a number of Israeli scientists concluded that Israeli culture was divided between Ashkenazi (European) and Mizrahi (Oriental) Jewry. Among the highly regarded scholars who contributed to the construction of a racial hierarchy were educators such as Abraham Shumsky (1955) and Carl Frankenstein (1951a, 1951b, 1952, 1953, 1957, 1962, 1972), the latter of whom won the prestigious Israeli Prize for Education (1963). Other contributors included the Orientalist and folklorist Raphael Patai (1949, 1950, 1954, 1955). We have already seen how Patai and Frankenstein contributed to the racialization of the Sephardic-Mizrahi category during the 1930s and ‘40s; in the 1950s and ‘60s, they along with other scholars further fortified the categories by serving as policy consultants for the new state.⁹³⁴ This attempts to define and

⁹³¹ Carl Frankenstein (Ed.), “Ethnic Difference in Israel.” *In Between Past and Future: Essays and Studies on Aspects of Immigrant Absorption in Israel* (Jerusalem: The Henrietta Szold Foundation for Youth and Child Welfare, 1953), 20.

⁹³² Ibid.

⁹³³ Ibid.

⁹³⁴ Patai characterized Sephardic-Mizrahi by their “traditional culture,” “familialism,” “aestheticism,” “religious outlook.” These communities remained “traditional,” according to Patai, as they were “deeply influenced by the culture of the non-Jewish environment. We have noted that all features which were characteristic of Arab culture were characteristic also of the culture of the Jews who lived in Arab lands.” Assuming that the so-called Arab space

control a changing and diverse population were accepted in Israeli society and the broader Jewish world. The result has been an inescapable binary divide in Israel between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim.

In *The Clash of Cultures in Israel* (1955), Shumsky writes: “The Orientals . . . are characterized on the whole by passivity and by limited technological knowledge resulting from centuries of life in the feudal Orient.”⁹³⁵ Shumsky examined the structure of the Oriental family, ethnic neighborhood, physical appearance, clothing and behavior. As part of his investigation of the various spheres of Mizrahi life in Israel, he focused on “school segregation,” which was already in practice involving Mizrahi and Ashkenazi students in more than twenty-eight schools in Tel-Aviv and Jerusalem.⁹³⁶ He did so ostensibly in order to find ways to resolve the “disintegration in the culture of the Orientals,”⁹³⁷ but in fact he ended up affirming unbridgeable division in undermined Israeli culture. To identify better the “culture [or lack thereof] of the Orientals,” Shumsky consulted studies that discussed the division in the United States between white and black communities, using them as a methodological model to address what he perceived to be the Sephardic-Mizrahi problem.⁹³⁸

was hermetically closed and immobile, Patai asserted that: “Israel’s Jewish population today is composed of two major elements approximately equal in numbers. About one half came from the Middle Eastern countries, the other half from Europe, in the main from Eastern and Central Europe. The importance of this specific composition of Israel’s population lies in the fact that each of these groups which settled in Israel brought along with it its own traditional culture.” See Raphael Patai, *Israel between East and West: A Study in Human Relations* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1953), 21–23.

⁹³⁵ Abraham Shumsky, *The Clash of Cultures in Israel: A Problem for Education* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1955), 3.

⁹³⁶ Abraham Shumsky, “An Analysis of the Ethnic Group Problem in Israel with Implications for the Role of the School,” (Degree of Doctor of Education: Teachers College Columbia University, 1954), 113–124.

⁹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁹³⁸ As instrumental tool in providing pseudo-scientific studies on Sephardic-Mizrahi communities and their difficulties in adjusting to the Israeli culture was the publication of *Megamot [Tendencies]: Child Welfare Research Quarterly*, first issued in October 1949. Edited by Carl Frankenstein, and published by The Henrietta Szold Foundation for Child and Youth Welfare, the journal included the contribution of various psychologists,

Shumsky's approach set a precedent for other Israeli social scientists, who used studies of "culturally disadvantaged" or "culturally deprived" African-American communities in the United States as a comparative model to explain notions of racial hierarchy in the Israeli context.⁹³⁹ The racial criterion of blackness was associated with Sephardic-Mizrahi racial identity.⁹⁴⁰ Israeli social scientists used black-white racial discourse to justify and rationalize the need for continued segregation. Meanwhile, in an interesting replication of earlier patterns, Mizrahim themselves adopted rhetoric and tactics from the African-American civil rights movement. Beginning in the late-1950s and sporadically throughout the 1960s, social protests by Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants spread across Israel. The participants identified themselves as "Black Panthers" and borrowed the symbols and ideology of the Black Power Movement in the United States.⁹⁴¹ Here, similar to the strategies by the previous two generations before them, Sephardim-

philosophers, and sociologists. Although they offered different approaches to deal with Sephardim-Mizrahim, this community emerged as a problem within the newly created state. For the central contributions of Frankenstein to the journal, see Carl Frankenstein, "Live ayat ya-hevdelim ha-etniim [on the Problem of Ethnic Differences]." *Megamot [Tendencies]*, 2, No. 3 (April 1951): 261–276; "Le-musag ha-primitiviyut [on the Concept of Primitivity]." *Megamot [Tendencies]*, 2, No. 4 (July 1951): 339–360; "Ha-hisha ha-psychologit li-ve ayat ha-hevdelim ha-etniim [the Psychological Approach to the Problem of Ethnic Differences]." *Megamot [Tendencies]*, 3, No. 2 (January 1952): 158–170.

⁹³⁹ Among the list of studies see N. R. Ellis (Ed.), *Handbook of Mental Deficiency* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963); C. Burt, *The Backward Child* (London: University of London Press, 1937); A. K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys* (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955); P. Ausubel & P. Ausubel "Ego Development among Segregated Negro Children," in H. Passow (Ed.), *Education in Depressed Areas* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1963); F. Riesman, *The Culturally Deprived Child* (New York: Harper, 1962).

⁹⁴⁰ The Black-White racial discourse and its relationship to racial studies of the Jewish identity/body have been thoroughly examined by various scholars, including Sander L. Gilman, "Are Jews White? Or, the History of Nose Job." *The Jew's Body* Ed. Sander L. Gilman, (London, New York: Routledge, 1991): 169-94; Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks: Let the Healing Begin* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995). The "blackness" imposed by Ashkenazi-Israeli social scientists on Sephardic-Mizrahi communities during the 1930s and 40s, and, then, the ways this Black-White discourse was used by Sephardic-Mizrahi activists to advance social struggle and protest against the Israeli government, from the early 1950s to the late '70s, indicate the persistent racialization of Sephardic-Mizrahi identity has in the Israeli society to this day.

⁹⁴¹ The Wadi Salib riots that erupted in 1959 (Segev 2009; Weiss 2007; Nachmias & Spiegel 2009) and especially the emergence of the Black Panthers Movement [*Ha-Panterim Ha-Shehorim*] in the late-1960s (Chetrit 2010) position Sephardim-Mizrahim in setting similar to those of African-Americans: a minority struggling to fight against racial inequality. The genealogy and processes embedded in *Blackening* the Sephardic-Mizrahi entity must be read

Mizrahim found themselves internalizing and translating hegemonic rhetoric of the establishment in order to unite and resist discriminatory state policies.

In the midst of the civil unrest in Israel, these scholarly studies continued into the 1960s. In his study *The Disadvantaged Child* (1967), the educator Abraham Minkowich found Jewish immigrants from Muslim/Arab countries to be as “culturally disadvantaged” as African-Americans and other ethnic minorities in the United States. A similar sensibility informed the aforementioned, Carl Frankenstein, when he began experimenting in “intellectual recovery” for those with “impaired intelligence”⁹⁴² during the 1950s and 60s—namely, Sephardim-Mizrahim. He attributed their social immobility and intellectual stagnation to “tendencies to remain chained to their forefathers’ traditions.”⁹⁴³

In the 1960s, the state policy toward of Sephardim-Mizrahim revolved chiefly around concerns over immigration and assimilation. Statistics and demography stressed that Mizrahi immigrants lagged behind their Ashkenazi counterparts, and were not equipped to assimilate successfully in modern industrialized Israeli society (Lissak 1965; Matras 1963; Sicron 1957; Eisenstadt 1953, 1954, 1967; Weingrod 1960, 1962, 1966). The perception of racial division influenced a number of bureaucratic and political policies, including limited access to

in tandem with the transnational flow of racial ideas and theories, and particularly with *whitening* of the growing Jewish community in the US (Goldstein 2006). On the relationship between the question of ethnicity and protests in the Israeli context, see Deborah Bernstein, “Ha-Panterim Ha-Shehorim: Konflikt u-meha’ a ba-hevra ha-yisre’elit [Conflict and Protest in Israeli Society: The Case of the Black Panthers].” *Megamot [Tendencies]* 25, No. 1(1979): 65-79; Yfaat Weiss, *Wadi Salib: A Confiscated Memory* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007); Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (New York; London: Routledge, 2010); Deborah Bernstein, “Ha-Panterim Ha-Shhorim: Konflikt U-Mehaa Ba-Hevra Ha-Yisre’elit [Conflict and Protest in Israeli Society: The Case of the Black Panthers].” *Megamot [Tendencies]* Vol. 25, No. 1 (1979): 65-79.

⁹⁴² Carl Frankenstein, *They Think Again: Summary of an Educational Experiment with Underprivileged Adolescents* (Jerusalem: Ahva Print, 1972), 10–11.

⁹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23, 39–41.

education,⁹⁴⁴ segregated communities, inequality regarding government housing and landownership,⁹⁴⁵ and blocking the access of Sephardic-Mizrahi Jews to combat positions and their promotion to senior officer status in the Israeli Defense Force.⁹⁴⁶ According to this view, it was the arrival of Sephardic-Mizrahi immigrants, not the attitude of the predominantly Ashkenazi dominated Israeli society, that caused racial polarization in the formative years of the Israeli state. And yet, restricted access to education for Sephardim-Mizrahim led to the perpetuation of their marginal status, overlooking their histories, and ignoring their ongoing struggle against inequality before the creation of the state.

Owing to work in the humanities and the social sciences from the 1970s and the 1980s, that was often motivated by the social unrest, we can discern a shift from past discussions of the pseudo-scientific racial categorization of Sephardim-Mizrahim to questions of ethnic inequality, discrimination, and low occupational status (Smooha 1978; Nahon 1978, 1984; Ginor 1979; Bernstein and Swirski 1982, 1989). According to this scholarship, Sephardim-Mizrahim gained agency only through a particular binary paradigm: either through protest or through embracing the Israeli “melting pot” idea and erasing their Orientalist markers. Scholars working within this framework have tended to analyze Sephardic-Mizrahi notions of agency through a colonial

⁹⁴⁴ On the segregation of Mizrahim in the Israeli education system, see Shlomo Swirski, *Politics and Education in Israel: Comparisons with the United States* (New York: Falmer Press, 1999), 64; Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (New York, London: Routledge, 2010), 45–50.

⁹⁴⁵ According to studies by the Israel Central Statistical Bureau (1963), Mizrahim suffered from inequality in regarding to government housing, see Henriette Dahan-Kalev, “Structures of Self-Organization, Waddi Salib and the Black Panthers: Implications for the Israeli Establishment” (PhD Dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991), 64. In this respect, as recent scholarship has contended “developing cities” and *Shikunim* [housing block] have become signifiers of Mizrahi culture and political activism: see Haim Yacobi, “The Third Place: Architecture, Nationalism and the Postcolonial Gaze.” *Theory and Criticism*, Vol. 30 (2007): 63-88; *The Jewish-Arab City: Spatio-Politics in a Mixed Community* Ed. Dumper, Mick (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁹⁴⁶ On the position of Sephardim-Mizrahim in the Israeli Defense Force, see Yoav Peled, “The Politics of Language in Multiethnic Militaries: The Case of Oriental Jews in the Israeli Armed Forces.” *Armed Forces and Society* Vol. 26, No. 4 (2000): 587-605; Yagil Levy, “The Role of the Military Sphere in Building the Socio-Political Order in Israel.” PhD Dissertation, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993; Dana Kachtan, “The Construction of Ethnic Identity in the Military—from the Bottom Up.” *Israel Studies* Vol. 17, No. 3 (2012): 150-75.

paradigm—that is regarding Sephardim-Mizrahim as a colonized entity subjugated to the Ashkenazi Zionist establishment. Somewhat ironically, the effect of this scholarship has been to reify Sephardic, Mizrahi, and Ashkenazi ethnic and racial categories in Israel and the Jewish Diaspora.

My interest in Sephardic-Mizrahi agency moves in a different direction, building on research that first emerged in the late 1990s. This scholarship sought to portray Sephardim-Mizrahim as active agents whose lives were far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested (Rodrigue 1990; Beinin 1998; Rodrigue & Benbassa 2000; Cohen and Stein 2010; Tsur 2007; Rejwan 2004; Levy 2008).⁹⁴⁷ This dissertation continues the task of restoring the absent voices of émigré Jewish communities from the North African and Middle Eastern contexts. But the emphasis on Sephardic-Mizrahi agency here does not assume unfettered success in overcoming subordinate status—nor does it assume perpetual victimization. Rather, it suggests a struggle by Sephardim-Mizrahim to face their categorization and act despite constraints. It demonstrates the way in which they took action that cannot be charted in a linear progression, but rather was subject to multiple and opposing vectors and that operated simultaneously.

My dissertation has attempted to approach Sephardim-Mizrahim not through the lens of quasi-scientific findings, nor as a tale of relenting victimhood, but rather to see them as subjects negotiating a complex web of political, economic, and social choices. By tracing the changing definition of Sephardic-Mizrahi identities in colonial Palestine, this project has sought to show the engagement with prevailing ethnic, racial, and national identities. In so doing, this dissertation revealed how the crystallization of Sephardic-Mizrahim identities, even under the

⁹⁴⁷ To a certain extent, this emphasis on Sephardic-Mizrahi agency within historical studies paralleled attempts in the humanities to restore agency to working-class societies. The most recent example of this effort is the subaltern studies project (see, for example, Guha and Spivak 1988; Spivak 1992; Chakrabarty 1998, 2002; Chatterjee 1986).

weight of social marginalization, also provided a space for self-assertive activism. The struggle of Sephardim-Mizrahi to dismantle the racial binary has been long and unrealized. Indeed, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews have been caught in a circular web that was constructed in the period between 1918 and 1948. They were categorized as Other, internalized the distinction, used it to advance political advocacy, and then both submitted to claims of their inferiority and fought against them. This is a web that has proven very difficult to escape even today—and even for the present author—though the forces of social integration in Israel and the ongoing need to distinguish between Jew and Arab in that country continue serve to erode it. In conclusion, this dissertation has attempted to produce a key chapter in an important story that has not yet been told in full, but what will continue to be written through historically sensitive and politically attuned scholarship in the coming years. After all, the Sephardic-Mizrahi experience must be confronted, so that fleeting from reality will be replaced by acts of change.

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CZA = Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem

CAHU = Central Archives of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem

ISA = Israel State Archives

ISA = Israel Museum Archive

JMA = Jerusalem Municipality Archives

NYPL = New York Public Library, New York

TAMA = Tel-Aviv Municipality Archives, Tel Aviv

YBZA = Yad Ben-Zvi Archives, Jerusalem

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Davar [*Word*]

Darkenu [*Our Path*]

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Do'ar Ha-Yom [*The Palestinian Daily*]

Edoth [*Communities*]

Haaretz [*The Land*]

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