History Begins at Home

This book is about the complex, conflict-ridden, and ambivalent encounter of Jews from Arab countries with Zionist nationalism and the Jewish state.[1] These conflicts had a tremendous bearing on my own upbringing, as the following personal story will show.

Some time ago, as I sat down to work in a Tel Aviv café in the area where I live, an elderly man suddenly approached me. "You are the son of Eliahu Shaharabani, of blessed memory," he said, half stating a fact, half asking. I looked at the man standing in front of me. I had never seen him before. He was handsome, about seventy years old, and spoke with a heavy Iraqi accent. This is what my father would look like if he were alive, I thought to myself.

"My name is Avner Yaron," the man explained. "I recruited your father into the intelligence community in the 1950s." The tables in the café were close together, and I had the feeling that everyone in the place was listening to our conversation. "I have proof," he said, as though revealing a secret. "If you like, I'll show you." I felt a sense of relief when he left. I watched him as he walked under the big awning of the café, crossed the street, and receded into the distance.

My discomfort had nothing to do with the suddenness of the man's appearance or his reference to my father's work. What he had told me came as no great surprise. I knew a little about my father's history, and somehow I had expected an episode like this sooner or later. I wasn't sure I would ever hear from Yaron again. Nor did I really want to.

Two weeks later, a fax arrived in my office from the secret agent, saying: "There is an envelope for you in the café." I was a bit put out: unmarked brown envelopes have unpleasant connotations these days. Nevertheless, I couldn't resist. The envelope contained two group photographs, in black and white, and a note: "These are photos with your late father from 1950." One photograph showed four young men and a young woman, all in their early twenties, some wearing khaki shirts, the others white shirts. All were Arab Jews. The other photograph showed four young men and two young women

standing on a beach. One of the women, in a two-piece bathing suit, did not look as though she belonged to the group. "Hemda was the commander's wife," the agent had written, as though anticipating my question. My father was standing at the back, smiling. I identified him at once by his high mane of hair, rather like Kramer's on the *Seinfeld* show. He must have been about twenty-one at the time the photograph was taken.

The pictures, like Yaron's appearance, confronted me with my complex location within what is often represented as an ancient, insurmountable conflict between Arabs (who are not Jews) and Jews (who are not Arabs). In something as simple as the ways in which Iraqiness marked their bodies, color, and language, Yaron, my father, and the others undermined the basic opposition between Arab and Jew. As a result, the treatment of Israel as a place where Jews can be open and comfortable with their Jewishness—so often apt for Jews from Europe and North America—does not even begin to frame the details of my family history, or of the history of the Arab Jews in general. For us, the story is instead about how "Arabness" was underscored, erased, and otherwise managed in order to fit us into the Jewish collectivity. It is about how the accent and bearing of an old Jewish man could be so discomfiting in the Jewish state in the late twentieth century.

The shift from being part of the Arab world to part of the non-Arab Jewish collectivity is evident even in the sparsest details of my background. My grandfather Yosef was a Baghdadi merchant who did a lot of traveling through the colonial territory, selling dates, fish, and eggs. At least once every three months, he took the Baghdad-Palestine railway line, and on one of those trips, he purchased a plot of land in the town of Petah Tikva, outside Tel Aviv. In 1936, the family left Iraq with the intention of settling there, but they returned to Baghdad after just nine months. Only Shlomo, my father's older brother, remained in Palestine. My grandfather continued his commercial travels during World War II as well. My father joined him on one of his trips, in 1942, and decided to remain in Palestine with his brother, Shlomo. I was told that my grandfather had objected, but that my father insisted and prevailed; he was thirteen years old and found construction work in Palestine.

When my father was seventeen, he moved with a group of Iraqi-born friends to Kibbutz Be'eri, on the ruins of the Arab village of Nahbir. In that same year, Avshalom Shmueli, a recruitment officer, came to Be'eri and recruited them into Israel's intelligence community. There is nothing surprising about this. They were part of an inexhaustible reservoir of ambitious young people, loyal to the state, spoke perfect Arabic, and looked like Arabs.

They had the ideal profile. As an intelligence man, my father worked hard and was sometimes gone for lengthy periods. His absences enhanced my status as a boy in the neighborhood. By working for the state against the Arab enemy, he earned his entry ticket into Israeliness. I was able to benefit from it vicariously. But this does not mean I was comfortable with his Arabness. As a kid, I fought against my parents and their culture, which I perceived as hostile Arab culture. Employing creative tactics, I would shut the radio off or put it out of commission when they wanted to listen to the great Arab singers Om Kolthoum, Farid al-Atrach, or Abd-el-Wahab. The truth is that I was greatly preoccupied with my own and my family's Arab Jewish origins but kept the subject to myself. Those origins did not provide a valid entry ticket to become an equal member in Israeli society, with its basically orientalist mentality, then as now.

In a bizarre irony, my Iraqi father died of a heart attack when an Iraqi missile struck the neighborhood in Tel Aviv during the Gulf War. He was then sixty-two. Friends of his whom I met after his death spoke to me in Iraqi Arabic and wanted to be sure that I remembered them from the period when we lived on an intelligence base located in the southern city of Be'er Sheva. Not long ago, Avner Yaron remembered me again and sent me another brown envelope. This one contained a color photograph of our home — an old Arab house — on the base.

My father's colleagues were a "nature reserve," as the Israeli expression goes: they spoke Arabic, read the Arabic press, and listened to Arabic radio stations; some of them spent time in other countries and identified themselves as Arabs. They eavesdropped on the famous radio conversation between Egypt's President Abdel Nasser and Jordan's King Hussein a few days prior to the outbreak of the June 1967 conflict — in Arabic, of course. When they returned home from their assignments, they watched Lebanese television and listened to Radio Cairo. They held frequent all-night *haflot* — traditional Arab parties with plenty of food and communal singing. The greatest Arab Jewish singers in Israel were regular guests in my parents' home. How ironic that their very entry into the Israeli collective — through their intelligence work — demanded that they remain part of the Arab world against which they worked. Such is the logic of the Israeli state: top-heavy with contradictions. On the one hand, it wants to strip its Arab Jews — citizens of Israel known also as Mizrahim — of their Arabness, while on the other, it implores some of them (like my father and his friends) to go on living as Arabs by license.

These recollections bring to mind the story of Eli Cohen, a top Israeli spy

who infiltrated the senior ranks of the Ba'ath regime in Syria and was caught, tried, and executed in 1965. Eli Cohen was recruited by the Mossad espionage agency because he was an Arab Jew. In 1968 or 1969, not long after the Six Day War, the Committee of the Babylonian Community in Petah Tikva decided to rename the synagogue located next to the city's produce market after him. My maternal grandfather, Salim, who was one of the senior members of the committee and a *gabai* — an official of the synagogue — asked me to write the speech he was to deliver at the renaming ceremony. I was thrilled by the momentousness of the event. In the municipal library, I found a copy of *Our Man in Damascus*, a biography of Eli Cohen (Ben-Hanan 1968), which served me year after year in the annual commemoration ceremony, when I wrote new variations of that same tired old speech.

The draft of the address that I wrote for my grandfather was studded with quotations from the book. For example, that the handler of Agent 880 was "a cordial man with deep blue eyes"; that Sophie, Eli Cohen's daughter, would ask, "Why isn't my father coming home tonight, like all the other fathers?"; that Cohen's trial proceeded like "a cheap matinee film," like a play written according to the rules of the "Middle Eastern imagination." It declared: "The Damascus mob is thirsty for blood, and the government supplies it to the point of intoxication." The book related that Eli Cohen's mother, who watched her son's execution on television, cried out in tears, "Why did the state send my Eli?"; "Why was it my son, of all people, who had to die among Arabs?" I described his wife Nadia with her two infant children and quoted her proudly: "The state, which sent Eli Cohen on his mission, did not hesitate to launch an open struggle to save its agent."

I was about sixteen. I was slightly offended when my grandfather would set aside my text and launch into new realms of melodrama. He thought himself a superb and charismatic orator. Nadia Cohen sat in the women's section of the synagogue, and the entire congregation burst into tears with her. They wanted more of my grandfather's speech. These texts brought in handsome donations for the synagogue. We youngsters passed the time playing in the space between the synagogue chamber and the small yard around it. This was shortly after the 1967 war (the so-called Six Day War), the first full-scale war in which Arab Jews participated — having missed the first "heroic" war, that of 1948. Together with the Eli Cohen affair, their full participation in the 1967 ethos and national epic brought the color back to the cheeks of the Arab Jews. Eli Cohen had been an offering, a sacrifice that constituted an act of redemption and a source of pride, an expression of the symbolic — and con-

crete—price that the Arab Jews had to pay, then as now, in order to be part of the putative Israeli collectivity.

The only problem was that when Eli Cohen from Bat Yam (a suburb of Tel Aviv) became Kamal Amin Thabat in Damascus, like my father's friends, no one bothered to mention that the primary criterion for his recruitment to the Mossad was his Arab origins. The public discourse denied and ignored that connection. For example, the Ministry of Education decided in the late 1990s to make the Eli Cohen affair a mandatory subject in the curriculum and to issue a commemorative booklet. Among those whom the ministry asked to reminisce about Cohen was the writer Amnon Shamosh, his friend, who wrote a story entitled "Kamal Efendi Returns to Bat Yam," emphasizing the role of Cohen's Arab background. After submitting the story, Shamosh received a furious phone call from the head of the association to commemorate Eli Cohen, Ephraim Hiram, who said he was very upset by it: "This is a national hero, and his ethnic identity is not important," he told Shamosh. "The terms 'Mizrahi' and 'Ashkenazi' are obsolete and their use in the story raises old demons." Shamosh refused to delete what the Ministry of Education termed the "problematic passages," explaining: "I could not forgo the ethnic connection, because Arabness is an integral part of Cohen's story, as was his criticism of his Ashkenazi handlers, who did not understand him or the surroundings into which he was sent. . . . Naturally, the members of the establishment were Ashkenazim and the people in the field in the Arab states were Mizrahim. . . . I am obliged to illuminate those aspects that the functionaries would like to sweep under the carpet." Hiram responded in an opinion piece in the daily *Yedioth Aharonoth*: "I insisted that Shamosh write . . . using a literary rather than a factual approach, and under no circumstances with a Mizrahi or Ashkenazi motif. . . . A story, that is all we asked for. . . . Why do intellectuals have to foment hatred within this nation instead of drawing people closer together?"

Shamosh's story did not appear in the Ministry of Education booklet. The link between Mizrahiness and national politics was perceived as dangerous. The booklet commemorating Eli Cohen denied and rejected any such link.

It may seem eminently reasonable for the new Jewish state to use immigrants' Arab backgrounds as "expertise" and the basis for a "career." As such, my use of Israel's spies to argue that the incorporation of the Arab Jews into the Jewish collective was complex and internally contradictory may seem facile. But first, though Arab Jews were routinely used as spies, their cultural skills were never used to forge positive links with Arab countries. This disjuncture suggests that the state was after more than just practical help. Its

practices were used to separate Arab Jews from their Arab backgrounds. Second, the Arabization and de-Arabization evident in the story of Kamal Amin Thabat was not limited to the recruitment of spies; it permeated the society and was part and parcel of its ideological structure. The same ethnicity that Hiram insisted does not matter clearly does matter, as both Mizrahim and Ashkenazim routinely mark it and deny it. For example, after the infamous Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann was captured in Argentina and brought to Jerusalem to stand trial in 1961, Hannah Arendt wrote in a letter to Karl Jaspers:

> Fortunately, Eichmann's three judges were of German origin, indeed the best German Jewry. [Attorney General Gideon] Hausner is a typical Galician Jew, still European, very unsympathetic, . . . boring, . . . constantly making mistakes. Probably one of those people who don't know any language. Everything is organized by the Israeli police force, which gives me the creeps. It speaks only Hebrew and looks Arabic. Some downright brutal types among them. They obey any order. Outside the courthouse doors the oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half Asiatic country. (Arendt and Jaspers 1992: 434–35)

Arendt does more here than just mark the Arabness of Arab Jews. As a European Jew (of German origin), she expresses a quintessential orientalist reading of Israeli society, one that could come directly from Edward Said's *Orientalism*.[7] She ranks Jews on a scale based on the distinction between "Occident" and "Orient," with "European" at one end and "Arab" at the other. At the top, she places the German Enlightenment, whose moral status was not compromised by its tragic history in the twentieth century. Below that, she places the Israeli attorney general. Hausner is still European, but a Galician who is "constantly making mistakes." She probably wonders how an eastern European Jew, the "Asian of Europe," became the "European of Asia," as it were. Below this, she ranks the Arab Jews, who speak Hebrew but look like Arabs. At the bottom of the scale is the "oriental mob," right out of the classical orientalist descriptions of Cairo, Baghdad, and Istanbul. The Arab Jews gave Arendt the creeps because they exposed a concealed feature—and the unusual mixture—of Israeli society. Bound by the Zionist lexicon, Arendt does not, however, have the terminology to define these hybrids.

Not all Arab Jews participated in de-Arabization as I did. Grandmother Farha, my mother's mother, who sadly passed away in 2005, probably at the age of ninety three, had the audacity to address that dangerous link and used the Arab Jewish category more explicitly. She explained to me that Eli Cohen's father was named Amin, and his mother was Sa'ida, and that he was

an Egyptian Jew and I was an Iraqi Jew. She liked to idealize the Jewish past in Iraq, even after 1967, when a shift (for the worse) occurred in the historical representation of Jewish-Arab relations. Grandmother, who had come to Israel from Iraq in 1950, said that the uprooting of more than 100,000 Jews from Iraq in the 1950s, along with the erasure of their past, was a barbaric act. She would surely have agreed with Walter Benjamin that, from the victim's point of view, history is not a progressive development but an ongoing catastrophe. Contrary to the prevailing fashion, grandmother did not consider Jews and Arabs to be two mutually exclusive categories. She continued to live in Israel as a pious Jew but never disavowed her Arab identity and culture.

I did.

Denial is a key concept in psychoanalysis, but it has a sociological context as well. The moment it became clear to me that the denial that I believed was a private experience was in fact a collective phenomenon would be a moment of discovery for me: the discovery that the experience of denial was a formative one for many in my generation.[3]

In the summer of 1998, I found myself talking to a German audience in Munich about the different modes of the "discourse" about Arab Jews in Israel during the country's first fifty years. I spoke about the connection between the Zionist project and Arab Jews, and I enumerated the intergenerational changes that had taken place among Arab Jews in modes of speech, denial, and silence. The speaker immediately after me was Mahmoud Muhareb, an Israeli Palestinian, who was then a member of the faculty of Birzeit University in the West Bank. His lecture was "naturally" about Zionism and the Palestinians. At the end of the day, a senior member of the Israeli diplomatic mission in Germany approached Muhareb and said to him in a tone of incredulity, "I appreciate your talk. It was perfectly clear to me what you were talking about. But what in the hell was Shenhav talking about? There hasn't been an ethnic problem in Israel for a long time." That diplomat is hardly alone in this view; it is commonplace in the Israeli public arena. By then I knew how to respond to the diplomat. In fact, I had published the response a year and a half earlier in the form of an op-ed piece in the weekend magazine of the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*.

The article, entitled "Bond of Silence" (*Ha'aretz Magazine*, December 27, 1996), dealt with the collective denial, especially by the Zionist Left, of the intra-Jewish ethnic rift in Israel. Drawing on my personal experience, I tried to explain how the Israeli society had placed a taboo on any discussion of the Mizrahi question as a political issue (as distinct from a folkloristic phenomenon). The Left's recognition of the Palestinian question, I argued, did

not stem from a love of the Orient but was rooted in a desire to keep the Palestinians on the other side of the tracks, or fence, where they will not be a threat to the perceived Western hegemony in Israel. However, I pointed out, the Arab Jews cannot be moved to the other side of the fence; at most, bypass roads can be built to skirt the development towns and inner-city ghettos they inhabit. Instead, their Arabness is handled by erasing it. Recognition of the Arab Jews as a collectivity (and not only as individuals) would require rearticulation of Israeli society's basic assumptions and its reorganization. In many senses, my article described the ideological context within which my own personal denial had taken place.

The outburst of reactions proved to me how strongly naming these dynamics violated a social taboo, how much Israeli society needs to keep intra-Jewish ethnicity invisible. The article drew a surprising number of responses, letters, and rebuttals over a period of about four months, and it was quoted widely on radio and television current affairs programs, and even in foreign (English and German) media. I received sharply worded letters, accusing me, among other offenses, of disseminating "hatred" and "rage," creating "antagonism between the communities," and asserting that I was personally "crass," "extremist," "postmodernist," and "sick." Some of my academic colleagues scolded me for making "nonsociological" use of certain terms; others explained to me that I was positioning myself at the extreme end of the scale. The true cause of the emotional response by so many people was not only the article's substance but principally the fact that success had not guaranteed silence in my case. All those who had accepted me as a "success story" in Israeli academia were now unable to forgive my treachery in breaking the silence. One of my colleagues, who is Iraqi-born himself, stated that he personally had not experienced discrimination, and that only the hyperactivity of successful Mizrahim such as myself, "who suffer from endless obsession and chronic restlessness," kept the question on the public agenda. Most of the reactions illustrated the depth of the denial, thus effectively affirming the article's thesis. One professor noted that according to public opinion surveys, the majority of Mizrahim in Israel (88 percent) say they have never experienced ethnic discrimination. However, instead of considering the possibility of interpreting this as a form of denial, he concluded that it demonstrated the absence of an ethnic issue in Israel. This attitude is particularly odd in light of the sociological fact that the gaps between Israeli-born second-generation Ashkenazim and Mizrahim have not decreased in the past thirty years and in some cases have increased (see Cohen and Haberfeld 1998; Khazzoom 1998; Khazzoom forthcoming). Overall, Mizrahim are now some 45 percent of

Israel's population, but they account for only a quarter of the students in the country's universities, and their proportion among university professors, judges, leading media figures, writers, and in the arts remains substantially below their ratio in the population.

Why is the location of Arab Jews in Israel so complex, so emotional, and such dangerous territory? In this book, I move from personal to collective history, and from individual analysis to cultural analysis, in order to analyze the mechanisms of representation of the Arab Jews in the Zionist and Israeli context.

It is essential to clarify at this point that the category of "Arab Jews," used throughout this book, is neither natural nor necessarily consistent and coherent. It is a splicing together of two categories whose relations are at best ambivalent, given the long history of rupture between them. As a viable option of practice and discourse in Israeli society, "Arab Jews" was short-lived, and the label was edited out by historical circumstances, particularly the rise of Jewish and Arab nationalisms. Several Jewish intellectuals in the Arab world have, in fact, used it to identify themselves (see, most notably, Memmi 1975; also Udovitch and Valensi 1984; Cohen and Udovitch 1989). As Albert Memmi says: "The term Jewish Arabs or Arab Jews is not a very good one, of course. But I have found it convenient to use. I simply wanted to remind my readers that because we were born in these so-called Arab countries and had been living in those regions long before the arrival of the Arabs, we share their languages, their customs, and their cultures to an extent that is not negligible" (1975: 29). Memmi adds that the Arabs did not respect the Arab Jews (or Jewish Arabs, as he sometimes refers to them), and that "it is far too late to become Jewish Arabs again" (1975: 20).[4] Last, it should be mentioned that the term "Arab Jews" was used descriptively by Zionist emissaries and state functionaries. Even as late as 1972, interviewed by the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, the prime minister of Israel, Golda Meir, referred to the Jews from Arab countries as "Arab Jews" (Fallaci 1976: 104).

Today, given the historical circumstances in the Middle East, the concept does not necessarily depict a real identity, but rather functions as a counterfactual category that seeks to challenge the paradigm I label "methodological Zionism," following Ulrich Beck's concept of "methodological nationalism" (2003). Methodological Zionism refers to an epistemology where all social processes are reduced to national Zionist categories. I challenge methodological Zionism and suggest that the "impossible" juxtaposition of Jews and Arabs as a signifier of one's identity posits a critical option that resembles Max Weber's notion of "objective possibility" (Weber 1949). Indeed, some con-

temporary intellectuals use "Arab Jews" as a political category to challenge the discursive structure of the Zionist lexicon, among them Shimon Ballas, Samir Naqash, and Ella Shohat. Shohat's work, in particular, was pioneering in establishing this category in contemporary colonial and postcolonial studies (1988, 1997a, 2001).[5]

I argue that insisting on the category of Arab Jews reveals the contradictory practices of Zionist ideology, among them, seeking to absorb the Arab Jews into its ranks while remaining European, and to retain its Jewish primordial character while remaining modern and secular. These are a series of steps that were taken during the building of a coherent national identity and then erased in order to cast that national identity is self-evident and uncontested. The five chapters of this book deal with the social history of these steps, both prior to the establishment of the state of Israel (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) and thereafter (Chapters 4 and 5). They examine the encounter between Arab Jews and Jewish nationalism in four contexts: the encounter between Zionism and Arab Jews in a colonial context, where colonialism, orientalism, and nationalism shaped its parameters (Chapters 1 and 2); the "religionization" of the Arab Jews in that encounter as a way of incorporating them into the Zionist collective while erasing their Arab background (Chapter 3); the political economy where the incorporation of the Arab Jews was used to erase the Zionist debts to Palestinians (Chapter 4); and Zionist memory, into which one group of Arab Jews tried to incorporate themselves (Chapter 5).

In describing these contexts, I draw on Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, and postcolonial writers such as Edward Said and Homi Bhabha. The story I tell challenges not only naïve historical analysis that accepts Zionist narrative as history but also approaches to Israeli society shaped and molded by "methodological Zionism." More concretely, Zionist epistemology has shaped prior work on Israel in at least three ways that I avoid in this book. The most fundamental change I make is to begin the analysis several years prior to the formation of the Jewish state, rather than with the physical immigration of the Arab Jews to Israeli soil in the 1950s (see also Shohat 1988; Khazzoom 2003). This runs counter to Zionist epistemology, which promotes a state-centric, Israelocentric perspective in which inequality, discrimination, and cultural clashes are studied within the context of the state of Israel.[6] While admittedly useful, such studies are limiting, because they treat the Arab Jews as immigrants and as citizens of Israel dealing with an established state and formal institutions.

In contrast, I begin the analysis with the colonial encounter in Abadan, an Iranian city at the head of the Persian Gulf, about 420 miles (675 km) south-

southwest of Tehran, where Jews from Arab countries were representationally shaped into appropriate subjects for immigration to the Zionist state. This constitutes the "zero point," or terminus a quo, of the story I seek to tell in this book, because Zionism had never before focused on Arab Jews as potential immigrants to Palestine. Here we find what Bhabha calls a "third space," where any number of outcomes were possible (as opposed to the single outcome necessitated by methodological Zionism). This vantage provides an alternative, and broader, epistemological view of practices that are not easily discerned in the Zionist state-centered perspective.

Furthermore, by highlighting the Arabness of the Arab Jews, rather than treating them as an ethnic group unrelated to the Arab world from which they came, I avoid compartmentalization into the "external national" problem, or Arab-Israeli cleavage, and the "internal ethnic" problem, or Mizrahi-Ashkenazi cleavage (Shohat 1988; Khazzoom 2003), a dichotomy that has been part of Zionism since its inception. As Gershon Shafir has explained, Zionism was established as a theory of political legitimation, which demands that ethnic boundaries not cross political boundaries ([1989] 1996). Thus, for example, in analyzing the genesis of the Palestinian refugee problem, the "new" historian Benny Morris (1987) does not mention its inexorable connection with the Arab Jews. Anthropologists analyzing the heritage of the Jews from the Islamic countries (e.g., Deshen and Shokeid 1984) and historians writing about the waves of immigration to Palestine and Israel (e.g., Ofer 1996; Hacohen 1998) address these subjects as an ethnic question that is (seemingly) separate from the Palestinian question. Yosef Meir (1983), analyzing the Yemenite immigration of 1910, does not cite its substantial relevance to the Palestinian question, as opposed to Shafir ([1989] 1996), as well as to Ella Shohat (1988, 1989, 1997a, 1999), and others who have used an integrated approach. Canonical Israeli historiography, then, is based on a system of cultural classification that channels the "different" spheres of discourse into separate tracks. This division of labor depoliticizes the question of the Arab Jews, defines it as an "ethnic" issue (i.e., an intra-Jewish ethnic question), and eliminates the possibility of describing the history of the Arab Jews in its overall — historical and political, let alone colonial — context.

The discourse about the identity of the Arab Jews in Israel is similarly caught between an approach that views it as a natural phenomenon rooted in the Arab Jews themselves and in their Arabic culture (known as essentialism); and a class-based neo-Marxist approach that treats "Mizrahiness" as a homegrown Israeli category that is determined by class, place of residence, education, and labor market conditions. Each approach suffers from innate self-

blindness. The essentialist-cultural position ignores the political and cultural context within which the identity of the Arab Jews is forged and overlooks the ideological apparatuses of the Jewish state within which it is reproduced, shaped, and articulated. The class-based approach ignores the Arab origin of the Arab Jews and negates their history. Moreover, both approaches adduce "Mizrahiness" in contradistinction to "Ashkenaziness" and thereby miss the fact that the former, like the latter, is a site that has wide margins and is inconsistent and multifaceted. In this book, I offer a different perspective that attempts to avoid some of these obstacles.

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Apart from Chapter 1 which sets the stage, the book is organized around four units, represented by Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5. Each of the four units can be read as an independent essay focusing on one question in the social history of the Arab Jews and Zionism. At the same time, the units are interrelated at several complementary — and non–mutually exclusive — levels: *chronological, analogical,* and *theoretical*. The *chronological* connection is built-in. The first unit describes the encounter between Zionism and Arab Jews in the colonial context of the early 1940s and indicates the point at which the Arab Jews were "discovered" as a reservoir for immigration. The second unit (Chapter 3) describes networks of national emissaries and their patterns of operation between 1942 and 1945 and lays out the symbiotic relationship between nationalism, religion, and ethnicity — the three categories that make up the ideological project known as "Zionism" (see below). Chapter 4 focuses on the Jews of Iraq in the 1950s prior to, and upon, their arrival in Israel and the manner in which national accounting linked this population with that of the Palestinian refugees. The final chapter deals with the Mizrahim — a new title given to Arab Jews in Israel — over a period of thirty years, from the mid 1970s to the present.

The *analogical* connection tells the story of the interplay between nationalism, religion, and the ethnicity of Arab Jews on four different analogical screens. The first is the colonial screen, the second the religious, the third the economic-political, and the fourth that of memory. Thus, for example, I analyze the religiosity of the Arab Jews not only as a phenomenon bearing theological meaning but also as a screen on which additional social, political, and cultural questions are displayed. I argue that the religion described in the reports of the Zionist emissaries is a marker of ethnicity that finds concentrated symbolic expression in the religious category. The four screens, which appear in the different chapters, enable alternative multivocal presentations

of the Arab Jews, their identity, and its relations with Zionist/Israeli nationalism. The screens, then, are not only historical stages but also four fundamental identity options that are realized or assume high visibility at certain historic moments.

The theoretical connection between the units is manifested through the following triangle, which describes the components of the Zionist project: nationalism, religion, ethnicity. I argue that in order to get a grip on the Zionist encounter with the Arab Jews, Zionism needs to be conceptualized as an ideological practice that is anchored in three symbiotically related categories, set out in Figure 1.

These three categories tend to appear simultaneously, and the ties between them cannot be unraveled easily.[7] This connection, as it is shaped within national thought, resembles the form of relationship that Foucault posits between knowledge and power. Knowledge does not lead to power, and power does not lead to knowledge, Foucault says. Knowledge/power appears as one seemingly inseparable unit (Foucault 1980). Paraphrasing Foucault, it can be said that nationalism, religion, and ethnicity are not only related in Zionist thought, they are almost interchangeable, or intertwined. Each of these categories is a necessary but insufficient condition for the whole, and each category requires the other two in order to produce the "Zionist subject." Only when these three categories co-appear do they succeed in manufacturing a coherent Zionist identity.[8] Despite the fact that Zionism ideologically fuses these three categories, it nonetheless continues to treat them as if they were mutually exclusive.[9] The remarkable success of

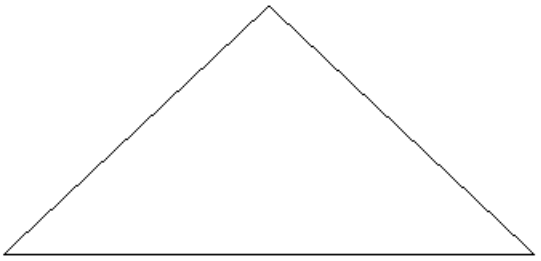

Figure 1 The Ideological Structure of Zionism

the Zionist project during the twentieth century can be understood only in relation to the hegemonic status that it obtained through mobilization, cooperation, and co-optation — through these categories — rather than as based on coercion or repression (as far as the Jewish subjects of the project are concerned).

In each of the chapters, I choose alternative relationships between these categories and seek to dismantle their ostensible binarism. I point to their symbiotic relationships, as well as the ambivalence in modes of representation. For example, I show that although nationalism does in fact appear simultaneously with ethnicity in national thought and practice, its appearance at once creates and negates ethnicity. This is why every attempt by the Arab Jews to reconstruct their past within the Zionist discourse forces an "ethnic approach" on them, and the denial of the "ethnic approach" by the agents of nationalism paradoxically cleaves the national logic into Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. Furthermore, note that I use the three — nationalism, ethnicity, religion — as categories of practice, not only as conceptual categories. In practice, nationalism is identified as an outcome of dispersed political practices rather than as an a priori, predisposed category.

My intention in this book, then, is to undo the national-religious-ethnic package and expose the mechanisms by which its components acquire a unifying logic. The analysis will be accomplished by a methodological dismantling of each category into diverse voices and multiple, heterogeneous logics. In my analysis, nationalism does not speak in one voice, just as ethnicity and religion are not closed categories, but fractured and multiple. For these and other reasons, I also maintain that it is impossible to understand the construction of the identity and the status of the Arab Jews in Israel without closely tracing the colonial roots of these social processes. The formative stage of the "discovery" of the Arab Jews by the Zionist movement and its attempt to transform them into objects of migration are deeply embedded in a colonial context. Although a number of earlier pioneering works in the past decade have focused attention on the colonial context of the Arab Jews (e.g., Shohat 1989, 1997a, 1997b, 2001), the canonic academic discourse continues to downplay its importance and shies away from the use of postcolonial analysis in regard to Israeli society. The conclusions of this book clearly show the need to place the repressed colonial setting at the center of discussion. Notwithstanding the differences between the colonial experiences of the Jews in Iraq and the Jews in North Africa, I show that the colonial setting is the place from which any discussion of the Arab Jews must begin. As post-

colonial theory suggests, the remnants of this colonial logic vis-à-vis the Arab Jews remain embedded in Israeli culture and politics to this day.

In the course of the book, I use the category of Arab Jews (or Mizrahim) to represent the Jews from the Islamic countries as a whole. It should be noted that the use of such generalizing sociological categories is the result of a dialectical game with the categories that hegemonic Zionism itself has identified and manufactured over the years. The Zionist institutions and then the state made use of these and other classifications as essentialist categories that define all the "Arab Jews" as a homogeneous, uniform identity group and blur the differences among them.[10] In retrospect, the shared life-experience of the Arab Jews in education, the army, the development towns, the factories, or on the margins of the lower middle class had the effect of ratifying the common definitions and in practice created a homological sameness between the different groups of origin among Jews from Islamic countries.

My starting point is provisionally to accept the hegemonic definition and counterpose a critical opposition to it. Acceptance of the hegemonic definition is a well-known move in identity politics. The minority group challenges the hegemonic definition of themselves by imputing a different meaning to it. This may result in a strategic posture that Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak would call "strategic essentialism." Like the "new ethnicities" throughout the Western world (Hall 1996a, 1996b), the Arab Jews in Israel accepted the hegemonic image of identity and sameness and tried to imbue it with political meaning that was positive and assertive (see also Regev 1995, 2000; Regev and Seroussi 2004). My use of the discursive category of Arab Jews accepts the generalizing dimension of the hegemonic category in the first stage, but contests its political implications.

A similar phenomenon occurred in North America and Europe when the identity category of "blackness" was applied to blacks from different ethnic groups. It acted as an umbrella concept that gave rise to the assertive identity experience that Paul Gilroy (1993) terms "the Black Atlantic," and with it to the possibility of joint struggle by blacks as blacks. Similarly, the category of "queer" began as a pejorative in reference to gays and lesbians but ultimately acquired an implication of self-empowerment. This occurred even though queer theory does not believe in gender-based preferential identity or in a limited number of gender categories between which one can move (Butler 1991).

The first stage in identity politics is therefore to accept the hegemonic definition and reverse its substantive meaning. Research practice shows that in the second stage of identity politics, researchers begin to dismantle the es-

sentialist definition and conduct separate critical analyses for separate identity groups. In this stage, an attempt is made to articulate a variety of definitions through which it is possible to dismantle the essentialist definition, based on the insight that identity is not a closed category (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000). Recently, for example, "African American" became a term for debate in the United States. During the twentieth century, many black Americans shifted from "colored" to "Negro" to "black," and then to "African American." However, with the demographic shift due to immigration from sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean, the use of the term has diverged into additional subcategories, such as Nigerian American and Jamaican American.[11] A similar process occurs in the Israeli context and in this book as well.

The archival materials on which the analysis is based refer primarily to the Jews of Iraq, beginning in 1941, and to some extent to Iranian and Yemenite Jews. Plainly, the focus on Iraqi Jewry is closely bound up with my personal biography. However, in light of the fact that the dominant conception in the hegemonic discourse adds the Jews of Iraq to the identity category of Mizrahim and tends not to distinguish between them and Jews of Moroccan or Yemenite origin, for example (and also in light of the fact that this generalization is often accepted among Jews from Iraq themselves), I consider it legitimate to use the Iraqi example as a tentative case study for the encounter between the Zionist movement and all the Arab Jews.

At the same time, it is clear that this study does not constitute a representative work encompassing all the Arab Jews. The necessity for the different points of view stems precisely from the dialectical character of the use of the category of Mizrahiness. That dialectic is manifested by being, on the one hand, a "true" category as used by various agents, establishments (e.g., the state and its branches, the media, and academe), and critical agents (e.g., protest groups); yet, on the other hand, it is plain that its use is an invention resulting from defining historical circumstances. Deconstructing those circumstances necessitates the adoption of additional points of view. It is more than likely that an analysis based on the Jews of Yemen or of Morocco instead of Iraqi Jewry would cite a different terminus a quo and very possibly arrive at conclusions that differ from mine. Such an approach invites additional alternative Mizrahi points of view. These might demonstrate that Mizrahiness is not the opposite of Ashkenaziness but is a category with broad margins, whose boundaries have to be clarified within its historical and discursive context. These theoretical questions are extensively discussed throughout the book.

Finally, I would note that the complex connections between nationalism, religion, and ethnicity, as they emerge in this book, constitute one analysis, or one show, in a complex pageant that is rich in additional variables. Because of the complexity of the critical project with which this book deals, together with the nature of the historical encounters that are its focus, the gender perspective is not included as one of the modes of looking at Zionist and Mizrahi history.[12] That perspective can turn the nationalism-religion-ethnicity triangle into a quadrangle and give rise to an additional observation point that challenges the Zionist narrative and exposes further relationships within it — among concepts of gender, nationalism, ethnicity, and religion — as well as problematizing each concept separately. Examples of the fascinating questions that I was unable to address in this book would include an analysis of the connection between concepts of gender in Zionism and the method by which Zionism approached and constructed the Jews in the Arab countries; the connection between gender otherness (of women in the Zionist project) and ethnic otherness (of the Arab Jews within the project); the national-ethnic-religious place to which the Zionist project assigned Arab Jewish women (see Melamed 2002); and the way in which these women themselves perceived their ethnicity (see Khazzoom 2002), religiosity, and nationality in relation to Mizrahi men, on the one hand, and the national project, on the other. A study of these and other questions could help dismantle the monolithic character of the national discourse, generate new starting points, and add new precincts of memory and alternatives to the Zionist narrative.