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The Long History of the Mizrahim: New Directions in the Study of Jews from Muslim Countries—In Tribute to Yaron Tsur by Aviad Moreno, and: *Under Eastern Eyes: Identity and Self Representation in Israeli Documentary Cinema* by Merav Alush Levron (review)



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Review Essay

Aviad Moreno, Noah Gerber, Esther Meir-Glitzstein, Ofer Shiff, eds., *The Long History of the Mizrahim: New Directions in the Study of Jews from Muslim Countries—In Tribute to Yaron Tsur* (Sede Boker, 2021) 551pp. [Hebrew].

Merav Alush Levron, *Under Eastern Eyes: Identity and Self Representation in Israeli Documentary Cinema* (Tel-Aviv, 2020) 421pp. [Hebrew].

IN AN ESSAY PUBLISHED TWENTY YEARS AGO, ELLA SHOCHAT—ONE OF the scholars who contributed most to the birth of Mizrahi Studies—argued that owing to the conceptual limitations of the term Mizrahim, scholars should develop a more critical understanding of the continuities and discontinuities entailed by Middle Eastern and North African Jewish cross-border movements to and from Israel. Yet as Mizrahi Studies have developed over several decades with an almost exclusive focus on Israel and the post-1948 period, Shohat’s call to view Mizrahim through a “multi-chronotopic and palimpsestic notion of time and space” becomes a difficult challenge.¹

And nevertheless, an increasing number of scholars today are examining the history of the Mizrahim from a transnational and diachronic perspective. Bryan K. Roby’s study, *The Mizrahi Era of Rebellion*, distinguishes several ideological junctures between the African-American civil rights movement in the United States and the Mizrahi protests of the 1960s and 1970s in Israel.² Yuval Evri attempts to unravel a more complex genealogy of Mizrahim in *The Return to Al-Andalus* through the connections between Hebrew and Arabic and Jews and Arabs during the first half of the twentieth century, using *Sefarad* as a central category of Middle Eastern Jewish heritage.³ These studies extend the spatial framework and timespan in which Mizrahi history takes place beyond the notion of Israeli exceptionalism and inevitable associations between common events and dates like 1948, the Wadi Salib riots

of 1959, the founding of the Black Panthers in 1971, the electoral victory of the *Likud* party in 1977, and the creation of *Shas* in 1984.

But does the era of the Mizrahim begin with the birth of the State of Israel, or should it include the pre-1948 period, or should the mass migrations of the 1950s and 1960s be our point of departure? And more importantly, how should we define Mizrahim and the past and present of a Jewish collective that did not define itself as such until the second half of the twentieth century? These are some of the issues raised in two recent works on Mizrahi history, culture and identity: *The Long History of the Mizrahim: New Directions in the Study of Jews from Muslim Countries*, edited by Aviad Moreno, Noah Gerber, Esther Meir-Glitzenstein and Ofer Shiff, and the monograph *Under Eastern Eyes: Identity and Self Representation in Israeli Documentary Cinema* by Merav Alush Levron.

The first is a collection of studies in honor of Yaron Tsur, one of the most prominent Israeli historians of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish history before and after the advent of the State of Israel; the second is a monograph treating contemporary Mizrahi documentary cinema. Although these two books are very different in focus and objective, both raise questions about the perspective of Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies today and in the future. Taking a cue from the seminal reflections of social scientists like Ella Shohat, Yehudah Shenhav, Henriette Dahan-Kalev and Sami Shalom-Chetrit and of historians such as Michael Laskier, Norman Stillman and Tsur himself,⁴ these two volumes explore places and events from the diasporic past of the Mizrahim until *Aliyah* and after. As novelist Abraham Yehoshua wrote so eloquently in *The Tunnel* (2018), there is a “genetic strand” that binds together the generations of Middle Eastern and North African Jews, and Israel of the present day with the Sephardi and Arab Jewish worlds of old.⁵

The Long History of the Mizrahim is divided into three parts: the first is dedicated to inter-ethnic relations in Israel, the second to migration as a recurring trope in Sephardi and Mizrahi history and the third to the history of the Jews of the Islamic world before 1948 in a regional and super-regional perspective. The first part opens with a study by Harvey Goldberg and Orit Abuhav on the contribution of Israeli anthropologists to the field of Mizrahi Studies: Goldberg pioneered the field in the 1960s with his studies of Tripolitanian Jews living on an Israeli *moshav*. Nissim Leon and Uri Cohen chart the rise of the Mizrahi middle class in recent decades which transformed the ethno-class structure in Israel. The chapter by Hila Shalem Baharad looks at the *ma'abarah* (“transit camp”) as a space where new identities emerged and new interactions between Jewish ethnicities developed.

Daniel Schroeter, a renowned historian of the Jews of Morocco, discusses the idea of Moroccan exceptionalism in Israel, analyzing the relationship Moroccan Jews have with their land of origin today and the discrimination they experienced in Israel. Amos Noy examines the representation of Mizrahi Jews in the 1960s and 1970s, in light of Aziza Khazzoom's work on the role played by internalized orientalism among Jews, and argues that the ambiguous category of *Mizrahiyut* has always been interpreted in different ways which did not necessarily lead to their portrayal as backward and conservative.⁶ Malka Katz studies the attitude of religious Zionists towards Mizrahim in the early years of the State, drawing on Yehudah Shenhav's argument in *The Arab Jews* that after their Aliyah, Mizrahim were influenced by the Zionist establishment to become more religious. Katz reads *Mizrahiyut* as a driving force in the encounter between religious Zionists and Mizrahi immigrants.

Related to this is the idea of Sephardi rabbinic moderation, explained by Yuval Haruvi as a consequence of specific socio-historical contingencies, for example, the process of modernization which influenced the religious practice of nineteenth-century Tunisian Jews more than some innate Sephardi characteristic. Avi Picard analyzes two key-concepts in the work of Yaron Tsur, colonial order and national order, in the context of Israeli inter-ethnic relations. Almog Behar writes a compelling study highlighting the continuities and discontinuities between Sephardi and Arab Jewish literature in the Middle East and Mizrahi literature in Israel, and the need for a more global approach which, as I too have suggested, views "Sephardi and Mizrahi literature as a global corpus of texts, whose boundaries go beyond those of national languages and literary canons."⁷

The second part of the book takes migration as a permanent feature in the history of the Jewish people and of Israel.⁸ Gur Alroey studies the participation of Jews from the Arab world in the third and fourth Aliyah. Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman presents the case of Jewish migration from Yemen to Egypt, India, and Palestine between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and shows how these early migratory waves paved the way for post-1948 Aliyah. Yemen is also at the center of Menashe Anzi's analysis of the Yemenite Jewish diaspora in British Palestine and its impact in the 1930s on Dor De'a, a Yemenite Jewish enlightenment movement founded at the turn of the century. Zvi Zohar, another scholar who contributed greatly to the halakhic and social history of the Jews in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman world, considers the figure of Rabbi Moshe Maimon of Gabès and the relationship he maintained with Tunisia after his Aliyah. The chapter by Yosef Tobi focuses again on Tunisia, highlighting the neglect in the study

of sources such as local newspapers and Francophone literature. Yoram Bilu returns to his ethnographic studies on Moroccan *tzaddiqim* in Israel and discusses the flexibility of these popular figures and the religious and cultural practices that surround them.

The third and last part of *The Long History of the Mizrahim* moves to local and super-regional case-studies. The first chapter by Ethan Katz is dedicated to the Jewish underground movement in Algiers during the Second World War. Jessica Marglin unravels the fascinating account of the will of Nissim Shamama, a Tunisian Jew who died in Livorno in 1873, which disrupts dichotomies like tradition/modernity, Sephardi/Ashkenazi, Europe/Middle East and obliges historians to adopt a more open, and perhaps Mediterranean view of these issues. David Guedj describes the emergence of Hebrew intellectual networks in Morocco in the first half of the twentieth century. Tsvia Tobi adopts a linguistic historical perspective in her analysis of Italian in Tunisian Judeo-Arabic and what this can tell us about Tunisian Jewish history. Yaron Harel discusses Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan, a central figure of early twentieth century Mediterranean Jewry. Two other figures are addressed in the chapters that follow: Guy Bracha's study of Eliyahu Hai Sasson and his journalistic work in Syria, Yaron Ben-Naeh's chapter on the so-called court Jews, the *bazargan* ("supplier to the army") of the Ottoman Empire. The concluding chapter by Tamir Karkason provides methodological insights on the development of what he calls spatial sensitivities in the Israeli historiography of Mizrahi Jews.

The Long History of the Mizrahim highlights the importance of basing research on a variety of materials beyond the scope of institutional archives and strictly historiographic sources, including interviews and ethnographic data, literary texts, newspapers, and films. What emerges is "a constellation of voices, a cacophony of whispers and murmurs, hardly constrained by the serialized language of regimented taxonomies"⁹: a new and diverse archive that engenders a "new understanding of the continuities and discontinuities" in Mizrahi history, as Shohat suggested.¹⁰ With this understanding, Mizrahi memory and history will no longer be viewed as competitors but rather as companions. Their discrepancies will be taken into account so as to avoid distorted interpretations of the Mizrahi past, too often attributed to an (alleged) overreliance on memory, and the banalization of the Middle Eastern and North African Jewish past, whether in a neo-lachrymose direction or through an overly positive view of Arab-Jewish relations. It will likewise avoid a contemporary reading of these subjects in relation to regional tensions and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹¹ Nor will it evade the present but rather acknowledge its heuristic potential: the present as a place and

time from which to uncover past histories, as yet unwritten, and to imagine future possibilities.

Therefore, similarly to what Gil Z. Hochberg recently argued for Palestinian artists in *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination for the Future*, Merav Alush Levron's *Under Eastern Eyes: Identity and Self Representation in Israeli Cinema* views the work of Mizrahi documentary film-makers as a living archive which allows for the construal of an unconventional history and temporality.¹² Alush Levron contributes to the field of Mizrahi cinema studies, initiated by Ella Shohat's groundbreaking *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*. More recently, Yaron Shemer published a comprehensive study of this subject, *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel*. The interplay between Arabness and Jewishness has also been the object of research focused on Middle Eastern—particularly Egyptian—Jewish actors and film directors before and after 1948: for example, Deborah Starr's work on the Alexandrian film director Togo Mizrahi and Hanan Hammad's work on the famous Cairo Jewish actress Layla Murad, who converted to Islam after 1948.¹³ Alush Levron concentrates on documentaries from the 1990s until the present day by second- and third-generation Mizrahim: from Asher Tlalim and David Deri to Sigalit Banai and Duki Dror. Among the documentaries analyzed are *A Question of Time* (2005) by Marco Qarmel which deals with the Holocaust and war sufferings of the Jews of Libya, blending personal testimony and interviews with Israeli academics, *Grandpa* (2015) by Amram Yaqobi, a poetic reflection on issues of belonging and migration centered on the biographical experience of the director's Iraqi-born grandfather; and *Cinema Egypt* (2002) by director Rami Kimhi, an exploration of his mother's Egyptian heritage and identity.

In the introduction, Alush Levron explains the theoretical background of the book and why these films can be regarded as cultural texts which offer a "possible horizon" for a close reading of Israeli identity from the margins.¹⁴ Although this close reading uses a theoretical apparatus which is difficult to follow at times and includes a variety of cultural theorists and philosophers like James Clifford, Marc Augé, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and Emmanuel Levinas, *Under Eastern Eyes* constitutes an important advancement for Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies. The first chapter, which focuses on migration and its cinematic representation of emotions ranging from mourning to melancholia, reconsiders the depiction of Mizrahim as *bakhyanim* ("whiners"). The second chapter looks at films that relate to episodes in the history of Mizrahim in contemporary Israel like the Wadi Salib riots, as a counterpoint to hegemonic memory and

narrative. This allows the author to shed light on a history that has often been obscured and at the same time, to reflect on the traumatic processes of memory-making in the context of Israel and against the background of Zionism. In the third chapter, the issue of home and belonging to a (real or imaginary) place is analyzed as a vector of social change and activism in Mizrahi identity constructed by the space which Mizrahim inhabit. These issues are also discussed in the fourth chapter, which focuses on films that deal with movement and travel, for example, Rami Kimhi's *Father's Name* (2015). The fifth and final chapter is an original analysis of ethnographic or autoethnographic documentary films that deal with Mizrahi women, particularly those from the periphery or with unusual life-stories.

Under Eastern Eyes regards these films as “an ethical and political encounter between communities and individuals,” with an emphasis on the identity of second- and third-generation Mizrahim that move “between poles and cultural dichotomies.”¹⁵ Furthermore, one of the important arguments put forward by Alush Levron, evoking the philosopher of Egyptian Jewish origin Edmond Jabès, is that Israel is not the end of the Diaspora but a diasporic territory in itself.¹⁶ The Israeli history of the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa, as both *The Long History of the Mizrahim* and *Under Eastern Eyes* suggest, is an ongoing journey of people, memories and spaces that has not and cannot come to an end and that, as Moreno and Gerber note in the introduction to *The Long History of the Mizrahim*, must be understood through the totality of Jewish history rather than the history of their present country of residence.¹⁷ For this reason, it would have been interesting to read about the history of Middle Eastern and North African Jews after the 1950s or before they immigrated to Europe, the US and Latin America—for example the Moroccan Jews who moved to Venezuela, the Libyan Jews who ended up in Italy or the Egyptian Jews who settled in France.¹⁸

This aspect is also largely absent from *Under Mizrahi Eyes*, and even though Alush Levron mentions places outside Israel related to Mizrahi memory—for example Alexandria, the island of Rhodes, Baghdad, and Morocco—she does not consider documentaries that are similar to the Mizrahi films but produced in Europe, the US, or the Arab world. I am thinking of *Tinghir-Jérusalem: les échos du mellah* (2013) by the Moroccan Kamal Hachkar or *Salata Baladi* (2007) by the Egyptian Nadia Kamel. Recent research has instead demonstrated that a comparative approach proves very helpful for reassessing the place of Mizrahim in Jewish history, and the differences and similarities between various groups of Jewish immigrants.¹⁹ Moreover, it allows for a better grasp of the multiple meaning(s)

of being Mizrahi, and therefore of being Israeli, as the poet Adi Keissar—founder of the Mizrahi poetry collective *Ars Poetiqa* in 2013—wrote in one of her most famous texts: “I am the Mizrahi/you do not know/I am the Mizrahi/you do not remember/who sings/all the songs/of Zohar Argov/and reads Albert Camus/and Bulgakov/and mixes them all together slowly/on a small flame.”²⁰

The Long History of the Mizrahim and *Under Eastern Eyes* do not provide definitive answers to the questions I raise at the beginning of this review about when and where the history of the Mizrahim begins and how we define Mizrahi. More pertinently, as noted above, Israel today is a place where diasporic identities are reborn in new forms. In conclusion, *The Long History of the Mizrahim* and *Under Eastern Eyes* succeed in “deprovincializing” Mizrahi Studies by redefining Israel as a space that borders on Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa where Mizrahim as a group construct their identity amid new national tensions and old migrant/diasporic legacies which, as it happens, exist in other parts of today’s globalized world and can be embodied and imagined in multiple ways.²¹

NOTES

1. Ella Shohat, “The Shaping of Mizrahi Studies: A Relational Approach,” *Israel Studies Forum* 17.2 (2002): 87.

2. Bryan K. Roby, *The Mizrahi Era of Rebellion: Israel’s Forgotten Civil Rights Struggle, 1948–1966* (Syracuse, 2015).

3. Yuval Evri, *The Return to Al-Andalus: Disputes Over Sephardic Culture and Identity Between Arabic and Hebrew* (Jerusalem, 2020) [Hebrew].

4. See Ella Shohat, “The Invention of the Mizrahim,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29.1 (1999): 5–20; “Rupture and Return: Zionist Discourse and the Study of Arab Jews,” *Social Text* 21.2 (2003): 49–74; “The Split Arab/Jew Figure Revisited,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, 54.1–2 (2020): 46–70; Yehudah Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, CA, 2006); Sami Shalom-Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (London, 2009); Michael Laskier, *North African Jewry in the Twentieth Century: The Jews of Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria* (New York, 1994); Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (Philadelphia, 1991). An important turning point in Mizrahi Studies was engendered by the works of Hannan Hever, Yehudah Shenhav, Pnina Motzafi-Haller, eds., *Mizrahim in Israel: A Critical Observation into Israel’s Ethnicity* (Jerusalem, 2002). Among Yaron Tsur’s many seminal publications consider; *The Jews of Casablanca: A Study of Modernization in a Colonial Jewish Society* (Tel-Aviv,

1995); *A Torn Community: The Jews of Morocco and Nationalism 1943–1954* (Tel-Aviv, 2001) [all in Hebrew]; and “Carnival Fears: Moroccan Immigrants and the Ethnic Problem in the Young State of Israel,” *The Journal of Israeli History* 18.1 (1997): 73–103.

5. Abraham B. Yehoshua, *The Tunnel* (New York, 2020), 30.

6. Aziza Khazzoom, “The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel,” *American Sociological Review* 68.4 (2003): 481–510.

7. Dario Miccoli, “Introduction: Memories, Books, Diasporas,” in his edited, *Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature: A Diaspora* (London, 2017), 3.

8. See Aviva Halamish, “Immigration Is Israel’s History, So Far,” *Israel Studies* 23.3 (2018): 106–13.

9. Paolo Sartori, “Introduction: Reading Colonial Archives with a Grain of Salt,” *Quaderni storici* 176.2 (2021): 296.

10. Shohat, “The Shaping”, 87.

11. See Mark R. Cohen, “The Neo-lachrymose Conception of Arab-Jewish History”, *Tikkun* 6.3 (1991): 60–4 and Yifat Gutman and Noam Tirosh, “Balancing Atrocities and Forced Forgetting: Memory Laws as a Means of Social Control in Israel,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 46.3 (2021): 705–30—that also focus on the case of the Day Marking the Departure and Expulsion of Jews from Arab Lands and Iran (November 30), established by the Knesset in 2014.

12. Gil Z. Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination for the Future* (Durham, 2021).

13. See Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin, TX, 1989); Yaron Shemer, *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2013) and Deborah Starr, *Togo Mizrahi and the Making of Egyptian Cinema* (Berkeley, 2020); Hanan Hammad, *Unknown Past: Layla Murad, the Jewish-Muslim Star of Egypt* (Stanford, 2021).

14. Merav Alush Levron, *Under Eastern Eyes: Identity and Self Representation in Israeli Cinema* (Tel-Aviv, 2021), 14 [Hebrew].

15. *Ibid.*, 20.

16. *Ibid.*, 203.

17. Aviad Moreno and Noah Gerber, “Studying Jews from Muslim Countries in Israel—Developments and Divergences,” in Aviad Moreno, Noah Gerber, Esther Meir-Glitzstein, Ofer Shiff, eds., *The Long History of the Mizrahim: New Directions in the Study of Jews from Muslim Countries* (Sede Boker, 2021), 27 [Hebrew].

18. A similar disconnection is to be found in the historiography on Ashkenazi migration, that so far largely focused on the Land of Israel *or* on other spaces, for example the United States, but more rarely adopted a comparative approach. See Gur Alroey, “Two Historiographies: Israeli Historiography and the Mass Jewish Migration to the United States, 1881–1914,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 105.1 (2015): 99–129.

19. See Aviad Moreno, "From Israel's Black Panthers to A Transnational MENA Jewish Solidarity," *AJS Perspectives*, Spring 2021: 60–1; Sasha Goldstein-Sabbah, *Baghdadi Jewish Networks in the Age of Nationalism* (Leiden, 2021). For an anthropological perspective see Piera Rossetto, "Mémoires de diaspora, diaspora de mémoires: Juifs de Libye entre Israël et l'Italie, de 1948 à nos jours" (PhD diss., Ca' Foscari University of Venice/EHESS Toulouse, 2015); Michèle Baussant, "Aslak eh? De Juif en Egypte à Juif d'Egypte," *Diasporas* 27 (2016): 77–93.

20. Adi Keissar, *Black on Black* (Tel-Aviv, 2014), 66 [Hebrew]. On *Ars Poetiqah*, see Esther Schely-Newman, "Poetics of Identity: Mizrahi Poets between Here and There, Then and Now," *Quest-Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 16 (2019), <https://www.quest-cdecjournal.it/poetics-of-identity-mizrahi-poets-between-here-and-there-then-and-now/>.

21. Here, I take cue from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ, 2000). See also Orit Bashkin, "The Middle Eastern Shift and Provincializing Zionism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46.3 (2014): 577–80.

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