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Author(s): Ella Shohat

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# Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims

ELLA SHOHAT

Alternative critical discourse concerning Israel and Zionism has until now largely focussed on the Jewish/Arab conflict, viewing Israel as a constituted State, allied with the West against the East, whose very foundation was premised on the denial of the Orient and of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people. I would like to extend the terms of the debate beyond earlier dichotomies (East versus West, Arab versus Jew, Palestinian versus Israeli) to incorporate an issue elided by previous formulations, to wit, the presence of a mediating entity, that of the Arab or Oriental Jews, those Sephardi Jews coming largely from the Arab and Moslem countries. A more complete analysis, I will argue, must consider the negative consequences of Zionism not only for the Palestinian people but also for the Sephardi Jews who now form the majority of the Jewish population in Israel. For Zionism does not only undertake to speak for Palestine and the Palestinians, thus “blocking” all Palestinian self-representation, it also presumes to speak for Oriental Jews. The Zionist denial of the Arab-Moslem and Palestinian East, then, has as its corollary the denial of the Jewish “Mizrahim” (the “Eastern Ones”) who, like the Palestinians, but by more subtle and less obviously brutal mechanisms, have *also* been stripped of the right of self-representation. Within Israel, and on the stage of world opinion, the hegemonic voice of Israel has almost invariably been that of European Jews, the Ashkenazim, while the Sephardi voice has been largely muffled or silenced.

Zionism claims to be a liberation movement for *all* Jews, and Zionist ideologists have spared no effort in their attempt to make the two terms “Jewish” and “Zionist” virtually synonymous. In fact, however, Zionism has been primarily a liberation movement for European Jews (and that, as we know, problematically) and more precisely for that tiny minority of European Jews actually settled in Israel. Although Zionism claims to provide a homeland for *all* Jews, that homeland was not offered to all with the same largess. Sephardi Jews were first brought to Israel for specific European-Zionist reasons, and once there they were systematically discriminated against by a Zionism which deployed its energies and material resources differentially, to the consistent advantage of European Jews and to the consistent detriment of Oriental Jews. In this essay, I

would like to delineate the situation of structural oppression experienced by Sephardi Jews in Israel, to briefly trace the historical origins of that oppression, and to propose a symptomatic analysis of the discourses—historiographic, sociological, political and journalistic—which sublimate, mask and perpetuate that oppression.

Superimposed on the East/West problematic will be another issue, related but hardly identical, namely that of the relation between the “First” and the “Third” Worlds. Although Israel is not a Third World country by any simple or conventional definition, it does have affinities and structural analogies to the Third World, analogies which often go unrecognized even, and perhaps especially, within Israel itself. In what sense, then, can Israel, despite the views of its official spokesmen, be seen as partaking in “Third Worldness?” First, in purely demographic terms, a majority of the Israeli population can be seen as Third World or at least as originating in the Third World. The Palestinians make up about twenty percent of the population while the Sephardim, the majority of whom come, within very recent memory, from countries such as Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran and India, countries generally regarded as forming part of the Third World, constitute another fifty percent of the population, thus giving us a total of about seventy percent of the population as Third World or Third World-derived (and almost ninety percent if one includes the West Bank and Gaza.) European hegemony in Israel, in this sense, is the product of a distinct numerical minority, a minority in whose interest it is to downplay Israel’s “Easternness” as well as its “Third Worldness.”

Within Israel, European Jews constitute a First-World elite dominating not only the Palestinians but also the Oriental Jews. The Sephardim, as a Jewish Third World people, form a semi-colonized nation-within-a-nation. My analysis here is indebted to anti-colonialist discourse generally (Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire) and specifically to Edward Said’s indispensable contribution to that discourse, his genealogical critique of Orientalism as the discursive formation by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient during the post-Enlightenment period.<sup>1</sup> The Orientalist attitude posits the Orient as a constellation of traits, assigning generalized values to real or imaginary differences, largely to the advantage of the West and the disadvantage of the East, so as to justify the former’s privileges and aggressions. Orientalism tends to maintain what Said calls a “flexible positional superiority,” which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relations with the Oriental, but without the Westerner ever losing the relative upper hand. My essay concerns, then, the process by which one pole of the East/West dichotomy is produced and reproduced as rational, developed, superior and human, and the other as aberrant, underdeveloped and inferior, but in this case as it affects Oriental Jews.

*The Zionist Master Narrative*

The view of the Sephardim as oppressed Third-World people goes directly against the grain of the dominant discourse within Israel and disseminated by the Western media outside of Israel. According to that discourse, European Zionism “saved” Sephardi Jews from the harsh rule of their Arab “captors.” It took them out of “primitive conditions” of poverty and superstition and ushered them gently into a modern Western society characterized by tolerance, democracy, and “humane values,” values with which they were but vaguely and erratically familiar due to the “levantine environments” from which they came. Within Israel, of course, they have suffered from the problem of “the gap,” not simply that between their standard of living and that of European Jews, but also from the problem of their “incomplete integration” into Israeli liberalism and prosperity, handicapped as they have been by their Oriental, illiterate, despotic, sexist and generally pre-modern formation in their lands of origin, as well as by their propensity for generating large families. Fortunately, however, the political establishment, the welfare institutions and the educational system have done all in their power to “reduce this gap” by initiating the Oriental Jews into the ways of a civilized, modern society. Fortunately as well, inter-marriage is proceeding apace and the Sephardim have won new appreciation for their “traditional cultural values,” for their folkloric music, their rich cuisine and warm hospitality. A serious problem persists, however. Due to their inadequate education and “lack of experience with democracy,” the Jews of Asia and Africa tend to be extremely conservative, even reactionary, and religiously fanatic, in contrast to the liberal, secular, and educated European Jews. Anti-Socialist, they form the base of support for the right-wing parties. Given their “cruel experience in Arab lands,” furthermore, they tend to be “Arab-haters,” and in this sense they have been an “obstacle to peace,” preventing the efforts of the “Peace Camp” to make a “reasonable settlement” with the Arabs.

I will speak in a moment of the fundamental falsity of this discourse, but I would like first to speak of its wide dissemination, for this discourse is shared by right and “left,” and it has its early and late versions as well as its religious and secular variants. An ideology which blames the Sephardim (and their Third World countries of origin) has been elaborated by the Israeli elite, expressed by politicians, social scientists, educators, writers, and the mass-media. This ideology orchestrates an interlocking series of prejudicial discourses possessing clear colonialist overtones. It is not surprising, in this context, to find the Sephardim compared, by the elite, to other “lower” colonized peoples. Reporting on the Sephardim in a 1949 article, during the mass-immigration from Arab and Moslem countries, the journalist Arye Gelblum wrote:

This is immigration of a race we have not yet known in the country . . . . We are dealing with people whose primitivism is at a peak, whose level of knowledge is one of virtually absolute ignorance, and worse, who have little talent for understanding anything intellectual. Generally, they are only slightly better than the general level of the Arabs, Negroes, and Berbers in the same regions. In any case, they are at an even lower level than what we knew with regard to the former Arabs of Eretz Israel . . . . These Jews also lack roots in Judaism, as they are totally subordinated to the play of savage and primitive instincts . . . . As with the Africans you will find card games for money, drunkenness and prostitution. Most of them have serious eye, skin and sexual diseases, without mentioning robberies and thefts. Chronic laziness and hatred for work, there is nothing safe about this asocial element . . . . “Aliyat HaNoar” [the official organization dealing with young immigrants] refuses to receive Moroccan children and the Kibbutzim will not hear of their absorption among them.<sup>2</sup>

Sympathetically citing the friendly advice of a French diplomat and sociologist, the conclusion of the article makes clear the colonial parallel operative in Ashkenazi attitudes towards Sephardim. Basing his comments on the French experience with its African colonies, the diplomat warns:

You are making in Israel the same fatal mistake we French made . . . . You open your gates too wide to Africans . . . the immigration of a certain kind of human material will debase you and make you a Levantine state, and then your fate will be sealed. You will deteriorate and be lost.<sup>3</sup>

Lest one imagine this discourse to be the product of the delirium of an isolated retrograde journalist, we have only to quote then Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, who described the Sephardi immigrants as lacking even “the most elementary knowledge” and “without a trace of Jewish or human education.”<sup>4</sup> Ben Gurion repeatedly expressed contempt for the culture of the Oriental Jews: “We do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are in duty bound to fight against the spirit of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies, and preserve the authentic Jewish values as they crystallized in the Diaspora.”<sup>5</sup> Over the years Israeli leaders constantly reinforced and legitimized these prejudices, which encompassed both Arabs and Oriental Jews. For Abba Eban, the “object should be to infuse [the Sephardim] with an Occidental spirit, rather than allow them to drag us into an unnatural Orientalism.”<sup>6</sup> Or again: “One of the great apprehensions which afflict us . . . is the danger lest the predominance of immigrants of Oriental origin force Israel to equalize its cultural level with that of the neighboring world.”<sup>7</sup> Golda Meir projected the Sephardim, in typical

colonialist fashion, as coming from another, less developed time, for her, the sixteenth century (and for others, a vaguely defined “Middle Ages”): “Shall we be able,” she asked, “to elevate these immigrants to a suitable level of civilization?”<sup>8</sup> Ben Gurion, who called the Moroccan Jews “savages” at a session of a Knesset Committee, and who compared Sephardim, pejoratively (and revealingly), to the Blacks brought to the United States as slaves, at times went so far as to question the spiritual capacity and even the Jewishness of the Sephardim.<sup>9</sup> In an article entitled “The Glory of Israel,” published in the Government’s Annual, the Prime Minister lamented that “the divine presence has disappeared from the Oriental Jewish ethnic groups,” while he praised European Jews for having “led our people in both quantitative and qualitative terms.”<sup>10</sup> Zionist writings and speeches frequently advance the historiographically suspect idea that Jews of the Orient, prior to their “ingathering” into Israel, were somehow “outside of” history, thus ironically echoing 19th century assessments, such as those of Hegel, that Jews, like Blacks, lived outside of the progress of Western Civilization. European Zionists in this sense resemble Fanon’s colonizer who always “makes history”; whose life is “an epoch”, “an Odyssey” against which the natives form an “almost inorganic background.”

Again in the early fifties, some of Israel’s most celebrated intellectuals from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem wrote essays addressing the “ethnic problem.” “We have to recognize,” wrote Karl Frankenstein, “the primitive mentality of many of the immigrants from backward countries,” suggesting that this mentality might be profitably compared to “the primitive expression of children, the retarded, or the mentally disturbed.” Another scholar, Yosef Gross, saw the immigrants as suffering from “mental regression” and a “lack of development of the ego.” The extended symposium concerning the “Sephardi problem” was framed as a debate concerning the “essence of primitivism.” Only a strong infusion of European cultural values, the scholars concluded, would rescue the Arab Jews from their “backwardness.”<sup>11</sup> And in 1964, Kalman Katznelson published his frankly racist *The Ashkenazi Revolution*, where he protested the dangerous admission into Israel of large numbers of Oriental Jews, and where he argued the essential, irreversible genetic inferiority of the Sephardim, fearing the tainting of the Ashkenazi race by mixed-marriage and calling for the Ashkenazim to protect their interests in the face of a burgeoning Sephardi majority.

Such attitudes have not disappeared; they are still prevalent, expressed by European Jews of the most diverse political orientations. The “liberal” Shulamit Aloni, head of the Citizen’s Rights Party and a member of the Knesset, in 1983 denounced Sephardi demonstrators as “barbarous tribal forces” that were “driven like a flock with tom-toms” and chanting like “a savage tribe.”<sup>12</sup> The implicit trope comparing Sephardim to Black Africans recalls, ironically, one of the favored

topic of European anti-Semitism, that of the “Black Jew.” (In European-Jewish conversations, Sephardim are sometimes referred to as “*schwartzze-chaies*” or “black animals”). Amnon Dankner, a columnist for the “liberal” daily *HaAretz*, favored by Ashkenazi intellectuals and known for its presumably high journalistic standards, meanwhile, excoriated Sephardi traits as linked to an Islamic culture clearly inferior to the Western culture “we are trying to adopt here.” Presenting himself as the anguished victim of an alleged official “tolerance,” the journalist bemoans his forced co-habitation with Oriental sub-humans:

This war [between Ashkenazim and Sephardim] is not going to be between brothers, not because there is not going to be war but because it won't be between brothers. Because if I am a partner in this war, which is imposed on me, I refuse to name the other side as my “brother.” These are not my brothers, these are not my sisters, leave me alone, I have no sister . . . . They put the sticky blanket of the love of Israel over my head, and they ask me to be considerate of the cultural deficiencies of the authentic feelings of discrimination . . . they put me in the same cage with a hysterical baboon, and they tell me “OK, now you are together, so begin the dialogue.” And I have no choice; the baboon is against me, and the guard is against me, and the prophets of the love of Israel stand aside and wink at me with a wise eye and tell me: “Speak to him nicely. Throw him a banana. After all, you people are brothers . . .”<sup>13</sup>

Once again we are reminded of Fanon's colonizer, unable to speak of the colonized without resorting to the bestiary, the colonizer whose terms are zoological terms.

The racist discourse concerning Oriental Jews is not always so over-wrought or violent, however; elsewhere it takes a “humane” and relatively “benign” form. Read, for example, Dr. Dvora and Rabbi Menachem Hacohen's *One People: The Story of the Eastern Jews*, an “affectionate” text thoroughly imbued with Eurocentric prejudice.<sup>14</sup> In his introduction, Abba Eban speaks of the “exotic quality” of Jewish communities “on the outer margins of the Jewish world.” The text proper, and its accompanying photographs, convey a clear ideological agenda. The stress throughout is on “traditional garb,” “charming folkways,” on pre-modern “craftsmanship,” on cobblers and coppersmiths, on women “weaving on primitive looms.” We learn of a “shortage of textbooks in Yemen,” and the photographic evidence shows only sacred writings on the *ktuba* or on Torah cases, never secular writing. Repeatedly, we are reminded that some North African Jews inhabited caves (intellectuals such as Albert Memmi and Jacques Derrida apparently escaped this condition) and an entire chapter is devoted to “The Jewish Cave-Dwellers.”

The actual historical record, however, shows that Oriental Jews were



overwhelmingly urban. There is, of course, no intrinsic merit in being urban or even any intrinsic fault in living in “cave-like dwellings.” What is striking, on the part of the commentator, is a kind of “desire for primitivism,” a miserabilism which feels compelled to paint the Sephardi Jews as innocent of technology and modernity. The pictures of Oriental misery are then contrasted with the luminous faces of the Orientals in Israel itself, learning to read and mastering the modern technology of tractors and combines. The book forms part of a broader national export industry of Sephardi “folklore,” an industry which circulates (the often expropriated) goods—dresses, jewelry, liturgical objects, books, photos and films—among Western Jewish institutions eager for Jewish exoticism. In this sense, the Israeli Ashkenazi glosses the enigma of the Eastern Jews for the West—a pattern common as well in academic studies. Ora Gloria Jacob-Arzooni’s *The Israeli Film: Social and Cultural Influences 1912-1973*, for example, describes Israel’s “exotic” Sephardi community as having been plagued by “almost unknown tropical diseases”—the geography here is somewhat fanciful—and “virtually destitute.” The North African Jews, we are told—in language which surprises so long after the demise of the Third Reich—were hardly “racially pure” and among them one finds “witchcraft and other superstitions far removed from any Judaic law.”<sup>15</sup> We are reminded of Fanon’s ironic account of the colonialist description of the natives: “torpid creatures, wasted by fevers, obsessed by ancestral customs.”

### *The Theft of History*

An essential feature of colonialism is the distortion and even the denial of the history of the colonized. The projection of Sephardi Jews as coming from backward rural societies lacking all contact with technological civilization is at best a simplistic caricature and at worst a complete misrepresentation. Metropolises such as Alexandria, Baghdad, and Istanbul, in the period of Sephardi emigration, were hardly the desolate backwaters without electricity or automobiles implied by the official Zionist account, nor were these lands somehow miraculously cut off from the universal dynamism of historical processes. Yet Sephardi and Palestinian children, in Israeli schools, are condemned to study a history of the world that privileges the achievements of the West, while effacing the civilizations of the East. The political dynamics of the Middle East, furthermore, are presented only in relation to the fecundating influence of Zionism on the pre-existing desert. The Zionist master-narrative has little place for either Palestinians or Sephardim, but while Palestinians possess a clear counter narrative, the Sephardi story is a fractured one embedded in the history of both groups. Distinguishing the “evil” East (the Moslem Arab) from the “good” East (the Jewish Arab), Israel has taken upon itself to “cleanse” the



Sephardim of their Arab-ness and redeem them from their “primal sin” of belonging to the Orient. Israeli historiography absorbs the Jews of Asia and Africa into the monolithic official memory European Jews. Sephardi students learn virtually nothing of value about their particular history as Jews in the Orient. Much as Senegalese and Vietnamese children learned that their “ancestors the Gauls had blue eyes and blond hair,” Sephardi children are inculcated with the historical memory of “our ancestors, the residents of the shtetls of Poland and Russia,” as well as with a pride in the Zionist Founding Fathers for establishing pioneer outposts in a savage area. Jewish history is conceived as primordially European, and the silence of historical texts concerning the Sephardim forms a genteel way of hiding the discomfiting presence of an Oriental “other,” here subsumed under a European-Jewish “We.”

From the perspective of official Zionism, Jews from Arab and Moslem countries appear on the world stage only when they are seen on the map of the Hebrew state, just as the modern history of Palestine is seen as beginning with the Zionist renewal of the Biblical mandate. Modern Sephardi history, in this sense, is presumed to begin with the coming of Sephardi Jews to Israel, and more precisely with the “Magic Carpet” or “Ali Baba” operations (the latter refers to the bringing to Israel of the Jews of Iraq in 1950-1951, while the former refers to that of Yemenite Jews in 1949-1950). The names themselves, borrowed from *A Thousand and One Nights*, evoke Orientalist attitudes by foregrounding the naive religiosity and the technological backwardness of the Sephardim, for whom modern airplanes were “magic carpets” transporting them to the Promised Land. The Zionist gloss on the Exodus allegory, then, emphasized the “Egyptian” slavery (Egypt here being a synecdoche for all the Arab lands) and the beneficent death of the (Sephardi) “desert generation.” European Zionism took on the Patriarchal role in the Jewish oral tradition of Fathers passing to Sons the experiences of their peoples (“*vehigadeta lebincha bayom hahu . . .*”). And the stories of the Zionist Pater drowned out those of the Sephardi fathers whose tales thus became unavailable to the sons.

Filtered out by a Euro-centric grid, Zionist discourse presents culture as the monopoly of the West, denuding the peoples of Asia and Africa, including Jewish peoples, of all cultural expression. The rich culture of Jews from Arab and Moslem countries is scarcely studied in Israeli schools and academic institutions. While Yiddish is prized and officially subsidized, Ladino and other Sephardi dialects are neglected—“Those who do not speak Yiddish,” Golda Meir once said, “are not Jews”—Yiddish, through an ironic turn of history, became for Sephardim the language of the oppressor, a coded speech linked to privilege.<sup>16</sup> While the works of Sholem Aleicham, Y.D. Berkowitz, Mendle Mocher Sfarim are examined in great detail, the works of Anwar Shaul, Murad Michael, and Salim Darwish are ignored, and when Sephardi figures are discussed, their Arabness is

downplayed. Maimonides, Yehuda HaLevi and Iben Gabirol are viewed as the product of a decontextualized Jewish tradition, or of Spain, i.e. Europe, rather than of what even the Orientalist Bernard Lewis recognizes as the “Judeo-Islamic symbiosis.” Everything conspires to cultivate the impression that Sephardi culture prior to Zionism was static and passive and, like the fallow land of Palestine, lying in wait for the impregnating infusion of European dynamism.<sup>17</sup> Although Zionist historiography concerning Sephardim consists of a morbidly selective “tracing the dots” from pogrom to pogrom (often separated by centuries), part of a picture of a life of relentless oppression and humiliation, in fact the Sephardim lived, on the whole, quite comfortably within Arab-Moslem society. Sephardi history can simply not be discussed in European-Jewish terminology; even the word “pogrom” derives from and is reflective of the specificities of the European-Jewish experience. At the same time, we should not idealize the Jewish-Moslem relationship as idyllic. While it is true that Zionist propaganda exaggerated the negative aspects of the Jewish situation in Moslem countries, and while the situation of these Jews over fifteen centuries was undeniably better than in the Christian countries, the fact remains that the status of *dhimmi* applied to both Jews and Christians as “tolerated” and “protected” minorities was intrinsically inegalitarian. But this fact, as Maxime Rodinson points out, was quite explicable by the sociological and historical conditions of the time, and not the product of a pathological European-style anti-Semitism.<sup>17</sup> The Sephardi communities, while retaining a strong collective identity, were generally well-integrated and indigenous to their countries of origin, forming an inseparable part of their social and cultural life. Thoroughly Arabized in their traditions, the Iraqi Jews, for example, used Arabic even in their hymns and religious ceremonies. The liberal and secular trends of the twentieth-century engendered an even stronger association of Iraqi Jews and Arab culture allowing Jews to achieve a prominent place in public and cultural life. Jewish writers, poets and scholars played a vital role in Arab culture, translating, for example, books from other languages into Arabic. Jews distinguished themselves in Iraqi Arabic-speaking theatre, in music, as singers, composers and players of traditional instruments. In Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Tunisia, Jews became members of legislatures, of municipal councils, of the judiciary, and even occupied high economic positions; the Finance Minister of Iraq, in the forties, was Ishak Sasson, and in Egypt, Jamas Sanua—higher positions, ironically, than those usually achieved by Sephardim within the Jewish state.

### *The Lure of Zion*

Zionist historiography presents the emigration of Arab Jews as the result of a long history of anti-Semitism, as well as of religious devotion, while Zionist

activists from the Arab-Jewish communities stress the importance of Zionist-ideological commitment as a motivation for the exodus. Both versions neglect crucial elements: the Zionist economic interest in bringing Sephardim to Palestine/Israel, the financial interest of specific Arab regimes in their departure, historical developments in the wake of the Arab/Israeli conflict, as well as the fundamental connection between the destiny of the Arab-Jews and that of the Palestinians. Arab historians, as Abbas Shiblek points out in *The Lure of Zion*, have also underestimated the extent to which the policies of Arab governments in encouraging Jews to leave were self-defeating and ironically helpful to the Zionist cause and harmful both to Arab Jews and Palestinians.<sup>18</sup> It is first important to remember that Sephardim, who had lived in the Middle East and North Africa for millennia (often even before the Arab conquest), were simply not eager to settle in Palestine and had to be “lured” to Zion. Despite the Messianic mystique of the Land of Zion which formed an integral part of Sephardi religious culture, they did not share the European-Zionist desire to “end the diaspora” by creating an independent state peopled by a new archetype of Jew. Sephardim had always been in contact with the “promised land”, but this contact formed a “natural” part of a general circulation within the countries of the Ottoman Empire. Up through the thirties, it was not uncommon for Sephardim to make purely religious pilgrimages or business trips to Palestine, at times with the help of Jewish-owned transportation companies. (Although the Zionist geographical mindset projected the Sephardi lands of origin as “remote and distant,” in fact they were, obviously, closer to Eretz Israel than Poland, Russia and Germany.)

Before the Holocaust and the foundation of Israel, Zionism had been a minority movement among world Jewry. The majority of Sephardi Jews were either indifferent or at times even hostile to the Zionist project. The Iraqi-Jewish leadership, for example, co-operated with the Iraqi government to stop Zionist activity in Iraq; the Chief Rabbi of Iraq even published an “Open Letter” in 1929 denouncing Zionism and the Balfour Declaration.<sup>19</sup> In Palestine, some of the leaders of the local (Sephardi) Jewish community made formal protests against Zionist plans. In 1920, they signed an anti-Zionist petition organized by Palestinian Arabs, and in 1923 some Palestinian Jews met in a synagogue to denounce Ashkenazi-Zionist rule—some even cheered the Moslem-Christian Committee and its leader Mussa Chasam al-Chuseini—an event which the National Jewish Committee managed to prevent from being published in the newspapers.<sup>20</sup> Zionism, in this period, created wrenching ideological dilemmas for the Palestinian Jewish, Moslem and Christian communities alike. The national Arab movement in Palestine and Syria, carefully distinguished, in the early phases, between the Zionist immigrants and the local Jewish inhabitants (largely

Sephardim) “who live peacefully among the Arabs.”<sup>21</sup> The first petition of protest against Zionism by the Jerusalem Arabs stated in November, 1918: “We want to live . . . in equality with our Israelite brothers, longstanding natives of this country; their rights are our rights and their duties are our duties.”<sup>22</sup> The all-Syrian convention of July 1919, attended, by a Sephardi representative, even claimed to represent all Arab-Syrians, Moslem, Christians and Jews. The manifesto of the first Palestinian convention in February 1919 also insisted on the local Jewish/Zionist distinction and even in March, 1920, during the massive demonstrations against the Balfour declaration, the Nazareth area petition spoke only against Zionist immigration and not against Jews in general: “The Jews are people of our country who lived with us before the occupation, they are our brothers, people of our country and all the Jews of the world are our brothers.”<sup>23</sup> At the same time, there were real ambivalences and fears on the part of both Arab Jews and Arab Moslems and Christians. While some Moslem and Christian Arabs rigorously maintained the Zionist/Jewish distinction, others were less cautious. In Nazareth, the Palestinian Anglican priest of Nazareth deployed theological arguments against “the Jews” in general, while Arab mobs, both in 1920 and again in 1929, did not distinguish between Zionist targets per se and the traditional communities quite uninvolved in the Zionist project.<sup>24</sup> Zionism, then, brought a painful binarism into the formerly peaceful relationship between the two communities. The Sephardi Jew was prodded to choose between anti-Zionist “Arabness” and a pro-Zionist “Jewishness.” For the first time in Sephardi history, Arabness and Jewishness were posed as antonyms. The situation led the Palestinian Arabs, meanwhile, to see all Jews as at least potential Zionists. With the pressure of waves of Ashkenazi-Zionist immigration and the swelling power of its institutions, the Jewish/Zionist distinction was becoming more and more precarious, much to the advantage of European Zionism. Had the Arab nationalist movement maintained this distinction, as even the Zionist historian Yehoshua Porath has recognized, it would have had significant chances for enlisting Sephardi support in the anti-Zionist cause.

Outside of Palestine, meanwhile, it was not an easy task for Zionism to uproot the Arab-Jewish communities. In Iraq, for example, despite the Balfour Declaration in 1917, despite the tensions generated by Palestinian/Zionist clashes in Palestine, despite Zionist propaganda among Sephardi Jews in Arab-Moslem lands, despite the historically atypical attacks on Iraqi-Jews in 1941 (attacks inseparable from the geopolitical conflicts of the time), and even after the proclamation of Israeli statehood, most Arab Jews were not Zionist and remained reluctant to emigrate. Even subsequent to the foundation of the State the Jewish community in Iraq was constructing new schools and founding new enterprises, clear evidence of an institutionalized intention to stay. When the Iraqi govern-

ment announced in 1950 that any Jews who wanting to leave were free to do so contingent upon relinquishing their citizenship and property, and set a time limit for the exodus, only a few families applied for exit permits. Since the carrot was insufficient, therefore, a stick was necessary. A Jewish underground cell, commanded by secret agents sent from Israel, planted bombs in Jewish centers so as to create hysteria among Iraqi Jews and thus catalyze a mass exodus to Israel.<sup>25</sup> In one case, on January 14, 1951, a bomb was thrown into the courtyard of the Mas'ouda Shemtob synagogue in Baghdad, at a time when hundreds were gathered.<sup>26</sup> Four people, including a boy of 12, were killed and a score were wounded. These actions appear to have been the product of a collusion between two groups—Israeli Zionists (including a small group of Iraqi Zionists), and factions in the Iraqi government (largely the British-oriented ruler Nuri Said) who were pressured by the international Zionist-led campaign of denunciation and who had an immediate financial interest in the expulsion of the Iraqi Jews. Caught in the vice of Iraqi government-Zionist collaboration, the Sephardi community panicked and was virtually forced to leave. What its proponents themselves called “cruel Zionism”—namely the idea that Zionists had to use violent means to dislodge Jews from Exile—had achieved its ends.

The same historical process that dispossessed Palestinians of their property, lands and national-political rights, was linked to the process that dispossessed Sephardim of their property, lands and rootedness in Arab countries (and within Israel itself, of their history and culture.) This overall process has been cynically idealized in Israel's diplomatic pronouncements as a kind of “spontaneous population exchange,” and a justification for expelling Palestinians, but the symmetry is factitious, for the so-called “return from exile” of the Arab Jews was far from spontaneous and in any case cannot be equated with the condition of the Palestinians, who have been exiled from their homeland and wish to return there. In Israel itself, as the Palestinians were being forced to leave, the Sephardim underwent a complementary trauma, a kind of image in negative, as it were, of the Palestinian experience. The vulnerable new immigrants were ordered around by arrogant officials, who called them “human dust,” and crowded into *ma'abarot* (transient camps), hastily constructed out of corrugated tin. Many were stripped of their “unpronounceable” Arab, Persian and Turkish names and outfitted with “Jewish” names by God-like Israeli bureaucrats. The process by which millennial pride and collective self-confidence and creativity were to be destroyed was inaugurated here. This was a kind of Sephardi “middle passage,” where the appearance of a voluntary “return from exile” masked a subtle series of coercions. But while Palestinians have been authorized to foster the collective militancy of nostalgia in exile (be it under an Israeli, Syrian, Kuwaitian passport or on the basis of *laissez-passer*), Sephardim have been forced by their no-exit

situation to repress their communal nostalgia. The pervasive notion of “one people” reunited in their ancient homeland actively disauthorizes any affectionate memory of life before the State of Israel.

*“Hebrew Work.” Myth and Reality*

The Zionist “ingathering from the four corners of the earth” was never the beneficent enterprise portrayed by official discourse. From the early days of Zionism Sephardim were perceived as a source of cheap labor that had to be maneuvered into emigrating to Palestine. The economic structure which oppresses Sephardim in Israel was set in place in the early days of the *Yishuv* (pre-state Zionist settlement in Palestine.) Among the orienting principles of the dominant Socialist Zionism, for example, were the twin notions of *Avoda Ivrit* (Hebrew Work) and *Avoda Atzmit* (Self-Labor), suggesting that a person, and a community, should earn from their own and not from hired labor, an idea whose origins trace back to the *Haskalah* or 18th-century Hebrew Enlightenment. Many Jewish thinkers, writers and poets such as Mapu, Brenner, Borochoy, Gordon and Katzenelson highlighted the necessity of transforming Jews by “productive labor,” especially agricultural labor. Such thinkers advanced *Avoda Ivrit* as a necessary pre-condition for Jewish recuperation. The policy and practice of *Avoda Ivrit* deeply affected the historically positive self-image of the Hebrew pioneers and later of Israeli as involved in a non-colonial enterprise, which unlike colonialist Europe did not exploit the “natives” and was, therefore, perceived as morally superior in its aspirations.

In its actual historical implication, however, *Avoda Ivrit* had tragic consequences engendering political tensions not only between Arabs and Jews, but also between Sephardim and Ashkenazim as well as between Sephardim and Palestinians. At first, the European Jewish settlers tried to compete with Arab workers for jobs with previously settled Jewish employers; “Hebrew Work” then meant in reality the boycotting of Arab work. The immigrants’ demands for relatively high salaries precluded their employment, however, thus leading to the emigration of a substantial proportion. At a time when even the poorest of Russian Jews were heading toward the Americas, it was difficult to convince European Jews to come to Palestine. It was only after the failure of Ashkenazi immigration that the Zionist institutions decided to bring Sephardim. Ya’acov Tehon from The Eretz Israel Office wrote in 1908 about this problem of “Hebrew workers.” After detailing the economic and psychological obstacles to the goal of *Avoda Ivrit* as well as the dangers posed by employing masses of Arabs, he proposed, along with other official Zionists, the importation of Sephardim to “replace” the Arab agricultural workers. Since “it is doubtful whether the Ashke-



nazi Jews are talented for work other than in the city," he argued, "there is a place for the Jews of the Orient, and particularly for the Yemenites and Persians, in the profession of agriculture." Like the Arabs, Tehon goes on, they "are satisfied with very little" and "in this sense they can compete with them."<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in 1910, Shmuel Yavne'eli published in *HaPoel HaTzair* (The Young Worker, the official Organ of the Zionist Party of the Workers in Eretz Israel, later part of the Labor Party), a two-part article entitled "The Renaissance of Work and the Jews of the Orient" in which he called for an Oriental Jewish solution for the "problem" of the Arab workers. Hazvi newspaper gave expression to this increasingly disseminated position:

This is the simple, natural worker capable of doing any kind of work, without shame, without philosophy, and also without poetry. And Mr. Marx is of course absent both from his pocket and from his mind. It is not my contention that the Yemenite element should remain in its present state, that is, in his barbarian, wild present state . . . the Yemenite of today still exists at the same backward level as the Fellahins . . . they can take the place of the Arabs.<sup>29</sup>

Zionist historiographers have recycled these colonialist myths, applied both to Arabs and Arab Jews, as a means for justifying the class-positioning into which Sephardim were projected. Yemenite workers have been presented as "merely workers," socially "primeval matter," while Ashkenazi workers as "creative" and "idealists, able to be devoted to the ideal, to create new moulds and new content of life."<sup>30</sup>

Regarded by European Zionists as capable of competing with Arabs but refractory to more lofty socialist and Nationalist ideals, the Sephardim seemed ideal imported laborers. Thus the concept of "natural workers" with "minimal needs," exploited by such figures as Ben Gurion and Arthur Rupin, came to play a crucial ideological role, a concept subtextually linked to color; to quote Rupin: "Recognizable in them [Yemeni-Jews] is the touch of Arab blood, and they have a very dark color."<sup>31</sup> The Sephardim offered the further advantage of generally being Ottoman subjects, and thus, unlike most Askkenazim, without legal difficulties in entering the country, partially thanks to Jewish (Sephardi) representation in the Ottoman Parliament.<sup>32</sup>

Tempted by the idea of recruiting "Jews in the form of Arabs," Zionist strategists agreed to act on "the Sephardi option." The bald economic-political interest motivating this selective "ingathering" is clearly discernible in emissary Yavne'eli's letters from Yemen, where he states his intention of selecting only "young and healthy people" for immigration.<sup>33</sup> His reports about potential Yemenite laborers go into great detail about the physical characteristics of the



different Yemenite regional groups, describing the Jews of Dal'a, for example, as "healthy" with "strong legs," in contrast with the Jews of Ka'ataba with their "shrunken faces and skinny hands."<sup>34</sup> These policies of a quasi-eugenic selection were repeated during the fifties in Morocco, where young men were chosen for aliya on the basis of physical and gymnastic tests.

Often deluding Sephardim about realities in the "land of milk and honey," Zionist emissaries engineered the immigration of over 10,000 Sephardim (largely Yemenites) before World War I. They were put to work mainly as agricultural day-laborers in extremely harsh conditions to which, despite Zionist mythology, they were *decidedly not* accustomed. Yemenite families were crowded together in stables, pastures, windowless cellars (for which they had to pay) or simply obliged to live in the fields. Unsanitary conditions and malnutrition caused widespread disease and death, especially of infants. The Zionist Association employers and the Ashkenazi landowners and their overseers treated the Yemenite Jews brutally, at times abusing even the women and children who labored over ten hours a day.<sup>35</sup> The ethnic division of labor, in this early stage of Zionism, had as its corollary the sexual division of labor. Tehon wrote in 1907 of the advantages of having Yemenite families living permanently in the settlements, so that "we could also have women and adolescent girls work in the households instead of the Arab women who now work at high salaries as servants in almost every family of the colonists."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the "fortunate" women and girls worked as maids, the rest worked in the fields. Economic and political exploitation went hand in hand with habitual European feelings of superiority. Any treatment accorded to the Sephardim was thought to be legitimate, since they were bereft, it was assumed, of all culture, history or material achievement. Sephardim were excluded, furthermore, from the socialist benefits accorded European workers.<sup>37</sup> Labor Zionism, through the Histadrut, managed to prevent Yemenites from owning land or joining cooperatives, thus limiting them to the role of wage-earners. As with the Arab workers, the dominant "socialist" ideology within Zionism thus provided no guarantee against ethno-centrism. While presenting Palestine as an empty land to be transformed by Jewish labor, the Founding Fathers presented Sephardim as passive vessels to be shaped by the revivifying spirit of Promethean Zionism.

At the same time, the European Zionists were not enthralled by the prospect of "tainting" the settlements in Palestine with an infusion of Sephardi Jews. The very idea was opposed at the first Zionist Congress.<sup>38</sup> In their texts and congresses, European Zionists consistently addressed their remarks to Ashkenazi Jews and to the colonizing empires which might provide support for a national homeland; the visionary dreams of a Zionist Jewish State were not designed for the Sephardim. But the actual realization of the Zionist project in Palestine, with

its concomitant aggressive attitude toward all the local peoples, brought with it the possibility of the exploitation of Sephardi Jews as part of an economic and political base. The strategy of promoting a Jewish majority in Palestine in order to create a Jewish national homeland entailed at first the purchase and later the expropriation of Arab land. The policy, favored by the *Zionut Ma'asit* ("Practical Zionism") of creating de facto Jewish occupation of Arab land formed a crucial element in Zionist claims on Palestine. Some Zionists were afraid that Arab workers on Jewish lands might someday declare that "the land belongs to those who work it," whence the need for Jewish (Sephardi) workers. This skewed version of *Avoda Ivrit* generated a long-term structural competition between Arab workers and the majoritarian group of Jewish (Sephardi) workers, now reduced to the status of a subproletariat.

It was only after the failure of European immigration—even in the post-Holocaust era most European Jews chose to emigrate elsewhere—that the Zionist establishment decided to bring Sephardi immigrants en masse. The European Zionist rescue phantasy concerning the Jews of the Orient, in sum, masked the need to rescue *itself* from possible economic and political collapse. In the 1950's, similarly, Zionist officials continued to show ambivalence about the mass importation of Sephardi Jews. But once again demographic and economic necessities—settling the country with Jews, securing the borders and having laborers to work and soldiers to fight—forced the European Zionist hand. Given this subtext, it is instructive to read the sanitized versions promoted even by those most directly involved in the exploitation of Sephardi labor. Yavne'eli's famous *Shlihut* (Zionist emissary promoting *aliya*) to Yemen, for example, has always been idealized by Zionist texts. The gap between the "private" and the more public discourse is particularly striking in the case of Yave'eli himself whose letters to Zionist institutions stress the search for cheap labor but whose memoirs present his activity in quasi-religious language, as bringing "to our brothers Bnei-Israel [Sons of Israel], far away in the land of Yemen, tidings from Eretz Israel, the good tidings of Renaissance, of the Land and of Work."<sup>39</sup>

### *The Dialectics of Dependency*

These problems, present in embryonic form in the time of the pre-state era, came to their bitter "fruition" after the establishment of Israel, but now explained away by a more sophisticated set of rationalizations and idealizations. Israel's rapid economic development during the fifties and sixties was achieved on the basis of a systematically unequal distribution of advantages. The socio-economic structure was thus formed contrary to the egalitarian myths characterizing Israel's self-representation until the last decade. The discriminatory decisions of Israeli

officials against Sephardim began even before Sephardi arrival in Israel and were consciously premised on the assumption that the Ashkenazim, as the self-declared “salt of the earth,” deserved better conditions and “special privileges.”<sup>40</sup>

In contrast with Ashkenazi immigrants, Sephardim were treated inhumanely already in the camps constructed by the Zionists in their lands of origin as well as during transit. A Jewish Agency report on a camp in Algiers speaks of a situation in which “more than fifty people were living in a room of four or five square meters.”<sup>41</sup> A doctor working in a Marseille transit camp for North African Jewish immigrants notes that as a result of the bad housing and the recent decline in nutrition children have died, adding that “I can’t understand why in all the European countries the immigrants are provided with clothes while the North African immigrants are provided with nothing.”<sup>42</sup> When information about anti-Sephardi discrimination in Israel filtered back to North Africa, there occurred a decline in immigration. Some left the transit camps in order to return to Morocco, while others, to quote a Jewish Agency emissary, had virtually “to be taken aboard the ships by force.”<sup>43</sup> In Yemen, the voyage across the desert, exacerbated by the inhuman conditions in the Zionist transit camps, led to hunger, disease and massive death, resulting in a brutal kind of “natural selection.” Worrying about the burden of caring for sick Yemenites, Jewish Agency members were reassured by their colleague Itzhak Refael (Nationalist Religious Party) that “there is no need to fear the arrival of a large number of chronically ill, as they have to walk by foot for about two weeks. The gravely ill will not be able to walk.”<sup>44</sup>

The European-Jewish scorn for Eastern-Jewish lives and sensibilities—at times projected onto the Sephardim by Ashkenazi orientaling “experts” who claimed that death for Sephardim was a “common and natural thing”—was evident as well in the notorious incident of “the kidnapped children of Yemen.”<sup>45</sup> Traumatized by the reality of life in Israel, some Sephardim, most of them Yemenites, fell prey to a ring of unscrupulous doctors, nurses and social workers who provided some six hundred Yeminite babies for adoption by childless Ashkenazi couples (some of them outside of Israel), while telling the natural parents that the children had died. The conspiracy was extensive enough to include the systematic issuance of fraudulent death certificates for the adopted children and to ensure that over several decades Sephardi demands for investigation were silenced and information was hidden and manipulated by government bureaus.<sup>46</sup> On June 30, 1986, The Public Committee for the Discovery of the Missing Yemenite Children held a massive protest rally. The rally, like many Sephardi protests and demonstrations, was almost completely ignored by the media, but a few months later Israeli television produced a documentary on the subject, blaming the bureaucratic chaos of the period for unfortunate “rumors,”

and perpetuating the myth of Sephardi parents as careless breeders with little sense of responsibility towards their own children.

Ethnic discrimination against Sephardim began with their initial settling. Upon arrival in Israel the various Sephardi communities, despite their will to stay together, were dispersed across the country. Families were separated, old communities disintegrated and traditional leaders were shorn of their positions. Oriental Jews were largely settled in *ma'abarot*, remote villages, agricultural settlements and in city neighborhoods some of them only recently emptied of Palestinians. As the absorption facilities became exhausted, the settlement authorities constructed "Ayarot Pituha" ("Development Towns") largely in rural areas and frontier regions, which became, predictably, the object of Arab attack. The declared policy was to "strengthen the borders" implying not only against Arab military attacks but also against any attempt by Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland. Although Israeli propaganda lauded the better-protected Ashkenazi Kibbutzim for their courage in living on the frontiers, in fact their small number (about 3% of the Jewish population, and half that if one considers only border settlements) hardly enabled them to secure long borders, while the settlement of the more numerous Sephardim on the borders did ensure a certain security. Sephardi border settlements lacked, furthermore, the strong infrastructure of military protection provided to Ashkenazi settlements, thus leading to Sephardi loss of life. The ethnic segregation which tends to characterize Israeli housing also dates from this period. While Ashkenazim tend to live in the more prosperous northern zones, Sephardim are concentrated in the less wealthy Southern zones. Despite this quasi-segregation, the two communities are generally linked in a relation of dependency, whereby the poor neighborhoods serve the privileged neighborhoods, a relational structure that mirrors that between the "Socialist" Kibbutzim and the neighboring Development Towns.

In cases where Sephardim were moved into pre-existing housing—and in Israel pre-existing housing means Palestinian housing—the Sephardim often ended up by living in promiscuous conditions because the Orientalist attitudes of the Israeli authorities found it normal to crowd many Sephardi families into the same house, on the assumption that they were "accustomed" to such conditions. These poor Sephardi neighborhoods were then systematically discriminated against in terms of infrastructural needs, educational and cultural advantages and political self-representation. Later, when some of these neighborhoods became obstacles to urban gentrification, the Sephardim were forced, against their will and despite violent demonstrations, to other "modern" poor neighborhoods. In Jaffa, for example, the authorities, after the removal of the Sephardim, renovated the very same houses that they had refused to renovate for their Sephardi dwellers, thus facilitating the transition by which sections of

“Oriental” Jaffa became a “bohemian” touristic locale dotted by art galleries. More recently, the Sephardi neighborhood of Musrara in Jerusalem has been undergoing a similar process. Now that the neighborhood is no longer near the pre-1967 border, the authorities have been trying to remove its Sephardi residents and force them to relocate to settlements on the West Bank, again under the pretense of improving their material conditions. The pattern is clear and systematic. The areas forcibly vacated by the Sephardim soon become the object of major investments leading to Ashkenazi gentrification, where the elite enjoys living within a “Mediterranean” *mise-en-scene* but without the inconvenience of a Palestinian or Sephardi presence, while the newly adopted Sephardi neighborhoods become de-capitalized slums.

As a cheap, mobile and manipulable labor-force, Sephardim were indispensable to the economic development of the state of Israel. Given the need for mass housing in the fifties, many Sephardim became ill-paid construction workers. The high profits generated by the cheap labor led to the rapid expansion of construction firms, managed or owned by Ashkenazim. Recruited especially into the mechanized and non-skilled sectors of agricultural production within large-scale government projects, Sephardim provided much of the labor force for settling the land. In the case of agricultural settlements they received less and poorer lands than the various Ashkenazi settlements such as the Kibbutzim and much less adequate means of production, resulting in lower production, lower income and gradually the economic collapse of many of the Sephardi settlements.<sup>47</sup> After agricultural development and construction work reached a saturation point in the late fifties and early sixties, the government acted to industrialize the country and Sephardi workers once again were crucial to Israel’s rapid development. A large section of the Sephardim came to form, in this period, an industrial proletariat. (In recent years, the monthly wage of production-line workers in textile factories has hovered around \$150-200 roughly equivalent to that earned by many Third World workers).<sup>48</sup> In fact Israel’s appeals for foreign (largely Jewish) investment were partially based on the “attraction” of local cheap labor. The low wages of workers led to a widening gap between the upper and lower salary ranges in the industry. Development Towns, essential to industrial production, became virtual “company towns” in which a single factory became the major single provider of employment for a whole town, whose future became inextricably linked to the future of the company.<sup>49</sup>

While the system relegated Sephardim to a future-less bottom, it propelled Ashkenazim up the social scale, creating mobility in management, marketing, banking and technical jobs. Recent published documents reveal the extent to which discrimination was a calculated policy that knowingly privileged the European immigrants, at times creating anomalous situations in which educated

Sephardim became unskilled laborers, while much less educated Ashkenazim came to occupy high administrative positions.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the classical paradigm where immigration is linked to a desire for individual, familial and community improvement, in Israel this process, for Sephardim, was largely reversed. What for Ashkenazi immigrants from Russia or Poland was a social *aliya* (literally “ascent”) was for Sephardi immigrants from Iraq or Egypt a *yerida* (a “descent”). What was for persecuted Ashkenazi minorities a certain solution and a quasi-redemption of a culture, was for Sephardim the complete annihilation of a cultural heritage, a loss of identity, and a social and economic degradation.

### *The Façade of Egalitarianism*

These discriminatory policies were executed under the aegis of the Labor Party and its affiliates, whose empire included a tentacular set of institutions, the most important of which was the General Federation of Labor (Histadrut). The Histadrut controls the agricultural sector, the Kibbutzim, and the largest labor unions in the industrial sector. With its own industries, marketing cooperatives, transportation systems, financial institutions and social-service network, it exercises immense power. (Solleh Boneh, a Histadrut construction company, for example, could easily “freeze out” private builders from the Likud Party). As a kind of caricature of trade-unionism, the Histadrut, despite its professed Socialist ideology, generally wields its vast power for the benefit of the elite, consistently favoring Ashkenazim for white-collar management positions, and Sephardim for blue-collar skilled and unskilled labor, leaving the latter most vulnerable in situations where factories are closed or workers are laid off. The same relational structure of oppression operates in the process whereby regional factories (even government-owned regional factories) tend to be managed by the largely Ashkenazi Kibbutzim while the workers are largely Sephardi or Palestinian. The dominant institutions, and more specifically the “Socialist-”Zionist elite, then, virtually forced the Sephardim into underdevelopment, and this contrary both to Ashkenazi denials that such processes have been taking place or to the claims that those processes were unconscious and uncalculated.

The dominant Socialist-Humanist discourse in Israel hides this negative dialectic of wealth and poverty behind a mystifying facade of egalitarianism. The Histadrut and the Labor party, claiming to represent the workers, monopolize Socialist language. Their May Day celebrations, the flying of red flags alongside the blue and white, and their speeches in the name of the “working class” mask the fact that the Labor network really represents only the interests of the Ashkenazi elite, whose members nevertheless still refer to themselves nostalgically as *Eretz Israel HaOvedet* (Working Eretz Israel). The Sephardim and the



Palestinians, the majority of workers in Israel, have been represented by special Histadrut departments called, respectively, the “Oriental Department” and the “Minority Department.” (The Histadrut is not preoccupied, it goes without saying, with the economic exploitation of West Bank and Gaza Strip workers). The manipulation of syndicalist language and the cooptation of Socialist slogans has thus served as a smokescreen for oppression. As a consequence, Sephardi militants have had to confront a kind of visceral aversion, on the part of lower-class Sephardim, to the very word “socialist,” associated, for them, with oppression rather than liberation.

Although the official melioristic discourse suggests a gradual lessening of the gap between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, in fact the inequalities are more glaring now than they were two generations ago.<sup>51</sup> The system continues to reproduce itself, for example, in the differential treatment accorded to present-day European immigrants versus that accorded to veteran Oriental settlers. While second-generation Sephardim stagnate in substandard housing in poor neighborhoods, newly-arrived Russian immigrants (with the exception of the Sephardi Georgians) are settled by the government into comfortable housing in central areas. (I do not examine here the discrimination suffered by the Ethiopian Falashas, now undergoing what the Sephardim experienced in the fifties, supplemented by the added humiliation of religious harassment.) Indeed, the ethnic allegiances of the establishment become especially clear with regard to immigration policy. While supposedly promoting universal aliya and the end to the Diaspora, the establishment, given its (unnamed) fear of a Sephardi demographic advantage, energetically promotes immigration by Soviet Jews—a majority of whom would prefer to go elsewhere—while dragging its feet in response to the Falashas who desperately want to go and whose very lives have been endangered.

The largely segregated and unequal educational system in Israel also reproduces the ethnic division of labor through a tracking system which consistently orients Ashkenazi pupils toward prestigious white-collar positions requiring a strong academic preparation while pointing Sephardi pupils toward low-status blue-collar jobs. Ashkenazim have double the representation in white-collar occupations. The schools in Ashkenazi neighborhoods have better facilities, better teachers, and higher status. Ashkenazim have on the average three more years of schooling than Sephardim. Their attendance rate in academic high school is 2.4 times as high, and it is 5 times as high in universities.<sup>52</sup> Most Oriental children, furthermore, study in schools designated by the Ministry of Education as schools for the “teunei tipuah” (literally, “those who need nurture,” or “culturally deprived”), a designation premised on the equation of cultural difference with inferiority. The educational system functions, as Shlomo Swirski



puts it, as “a huge labelling mechanism that has, among other things, the effect of lowering the achievement and expectations of Oriental children and their parents.”<sup>53</sup>

On whatever level—immigration policy, urban development, labor policy, government subsidies—we find the same pattern of a discrimination which touches even the details of daily life. The government, for example, subsidizes certain basic dietary staples, one of them being European-style bread; the pita favored as a staple by both Sephardim and Palestinians, meanwhile, is not subsidized. These discriminatory processes, which were shaped in the earliest period of Zionism, are reproduced every day and on every level, reaching into the very interstices of the Israeli social system. As a result, the Sephardim, despite their majority status, are under-represented in the national centers of power; in the Government, in the Knesset, in the higher echelons of the military, in the diplomatic corps, in the media, and in the academic world, and they are over-represented in the marginal, stigmatized regions of professional and social life.

The dominant sociological accounts of Israel’s “ethnic problem” attribute the inferior status of Oriental Jews not to the class nature of Israeli society but rather to their origins in “pre-modern,” “culturally backward” societies. Borrowing heavily from the intellectual arsenal of American “Functionalist” studies of development and modernization, Shumuel Eisenstadt and his many social-scientist disciples gave ideological subterfuge the aura of scientific rationality. The influential role of this “modernization” theory derives from its perfect match with the needs of the establishment. Eisenstadt borrows from American “Structural Functionalism” (Parsons) its teleological view of a “progress” which takes us from “traditional” societies, with their less complex social structures, to “modernization” and “development.” Since the Israeli social formation was seen as that entity collectively created during the *Yishuv* period, the immigrants were perceived as integrating themselves into the pre-existing dynamic whole of a modern society patterned on the Western model. The underlying premise of Zionism, the “ingathering of the exiles,” was thus translated into the sociological jargon of Structural Functionalism. The “absorption” (*Klita*) of Sephardi immigrants into Israeli society entailed the acceptance of the established consensus of the “host” society and the abandonment of “pre-modern” traditions. While European immigrants required only “absorption,” the immigrants from Africa and Asia required “absorption through modernization.” For the Eisenstadt tradition, the Oriental Jews had to undergo a process of “desocialization”—that is, erasure of their cultural heritage—and of “resocialization”—that is, assimilation to the Ashkenazi way of life. Thus cultural difference was posited as the cause of maladjustment. (The theory would have trouble explaining why other Sephardim, coming from the same “pre-modern” countries, at times from the

very same families, suffered no particular maladjustment in such “post-modern” metropolises as Paris, London, New York and Montreal.) At times the victim is even “blamed for blaming” an oppressive system. Here is sociologist Yosef Ben David: “In such cases ethnic difficulties will render yet more acute the immigration crisis . . . . The immigrant will tend to rationalize the failure by putting the blame openly or implicitly on ethnic discrimination.”<sup>54</sup>

The Ashkenazim, however, hid behind the flattening term “Israeli society,” an entity presumed to embody the values of modernity, industry, science and democracy. As Swirski points out, this presentation camouflaged the actual historical processes by obscuring a number of facts: first, that the Ashkenazim, not unlike the Sephardim, had also come from countries on the periphery of the world capitalist system, countries which entered the process of industrialization and technological-scientific development roughly at the same time as the Sephardi countries of origin; second, that a peripheral *Yishuv* society had *also* not reached a level of development comparable to that of the societies of the “center”; and third, that Ashkenazi “modernity” was made possible thanks to the labor force provided by Oriental mass immigration.<sup>55</sup> The ethnic basis of this process is often elided even by most Marxist analysts who speak generically of “Jewish workers,” a simplification roughly parallel to speaking of the exploitation of “American” workers in Southern cotton plantations.

### *The Ordeals of Civility*

The Oriental Jew clearly represents a problematic entity for European hegemony in Israel. Although Zionism collapses the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim into the single category of “one people,” at the same time the Sephardi’s Oriental “difference” threatens the European ideal-ego which phantasizes Israel as a prolongation of Europe “in” the Middle East, but not “of” it. Ben Gurion, we may recall, formulated his visionary utopia for Israel as that of a “Switzerland of the Middle East,” while Herzl called for a Western-style capitalist-democratic miniature state, to be made possible by the grace of imperial patrons such as England or even Germany. The leitmotif of Zionist texts is the cry to form a “normal civilized nation,” without the myriad “distortions” and forms of pariahdom typical of the Diaspora. (Zionist revulsion for shtetl “abnormalities,” as some commentators have pointed out, is often strangely reminiscent of the very anti-Semitism it presumably so abhors.) The Ostjuden, perennially marginalized by Europe, realized their desire of becoming Europe, ironically, in the Middle East, this time on the back of their own “Ostjuden,” the Eastern Jews. Having passed through their own “ordeal of civility,” as the “blacks” of Europe, they now imposed their civilizing tests on their own “blacks.”<sup>56</sup>

The paradox of secular Zionism is that it attempted to end a Diaspora,

during which Jews suffered intensely in the West and presumably had their heart in the East—a feeling encapsulated in the almost daily repetition of the phrase “next year in Jerusalem”—only to found a state whose ideological and geopolitical orientation has been almost exclusively turned toward the West. It is in this same context that we must understand the oppression of Sephardim not only as Middle Eastern people but also as embodying, for the Sabra-Zionist mind, what it erroneously perceived as a reminiscence of an “inferior” shtetl Jewishness. (This attitude was at time expressed toward Ashkenazi newcomers as well). The immigrants from the Third World, and especially from Arab-Moslem countries provoked “anti-Jewish” feelings in the secularly oriented Sabra culture both because of the implicitly threatening idea of the heterogeneity of Jewish cultures and because of the discomfiting amalgam of “Jewishness” and what was perceived as “backwardness.” This latter combination was seen as a malignancy to be eradicated: an ideological impulse manifested in the measures taken to strip Sephardi Jews of their heritage: religious Yemenites shorn of their sidelocks, children virtually forced into Euro-Zionist schools, and so forth. The openness toward Western culture, then, must be understood within the relational context of a menacing heteroglossia, as a reaction against the vestiges of shtetl culture as well as against a projected penetration of “alien” Oriental Jews. The Sephardi cultural difference was especially disturbing to a secular Zionism whose claims for representing a single Jewish people were premised not only on common religious background but also on common nationality. The strong cultural and historical links that Sephardim shared with the Arab/Moslem world, stronger in many respects than those they shared with the Ashkenazim, threatened the conception of a homogeneous nation akin to those on which European nationalist movements were based.

Those Sephardim who came under the control of Ashkenazi religious authorities, meanwhile, were obliged to send their children to Ashkenazi religious schools, where they learned the “correct” Ashkenazi forms of practicing Judaism, including Yiddish-accented praying, liturgical-gestural norms and sartorial codes favoring the dark colors of centuries-ago Poland. Some Oriental Jews, then, were forced into the Orthodox mould. The caricatural portrayal of Sephardim as religious fanatics, when not the product of *mauvaise foi*, is linked to a Eurocentric confusion between religiousness and Orthodoxy. In fact, however, the wrenching dechirement of the secular-orthodox split, so characteristic of the European-Jewish experience, has been historically quite alien to Sephardi culture. Among Sephardim, Jewishness has generally been lived in an atmosphere of flexibility and tolerance, downplaying both abstract laws and rabbinical hierarchy. It is not uncommon, among Sephardim, to find co-existing within the same family diverse ways of being Jewish without this diversity

entailing conflict. In Israel, the clash which pits secular against orthodox Jews largely divides Ashkenazim rather than Sephardim, the majority of whom, whether religious or secular, feel repelled by the rigidity of both camps, as well as mindful of the ways both camps have oppressed them, albeit in different ways.

As an integral part of the topography, language, culture and history of the Middle East, Sephardim were necessarily close to those who were posited as the common enemy for all Jews—the Arabs. Fearing an encroachment of the East upon the West, the establishment repressed the Middle Easternness of Sephardim as part of an attempt to separate and create hostility between the two groups. Arab-ness and Oriental-ness were consistently stigmatized as evils to be uprooted. For the Arab Jew, existence under Zionism has meant a profound and visceral schizophrenia, mingling stubborn self-pride with an imposed self-rejection, typical products of a situation of colonial ambivalence. The ideological dilemmas of Sephardim derive from the contradictions inherent in a situation where they are urged to see Judaism and Zionism as synonyms and Jewishness and Arab-ness as antonyms (for the first time in their history), when in fact they are both Arab and Jewish, and less historically, materially and emotionally invested in Zionist ideology than the Ashkenazim.

Sephardim in Israel were made to feel ashamed of their dark olive skin, of their guttural language, of the winding quarter-tones of their music, and even of their traditions of hospitality. Children, trying desperately to conform to an elusive “sabra” norm, were made to feel ashamed of their parents and their Arab countries of origins. At times the semitic physiognomies of the Sephardim led to situations in which they were mistaken for Palestinians and therefore arrested or beaten. Since Arabness led only to rejection, many Sephardim internalized the Western perspective and turned into self-hating Sephardim. Thus not only did the “West” come to represent the “East,” but also, in a classic play of colonial specularities, the East came to view itself through the West’s distorting mirror. Indeed, if it is true, as Malcolm X said, that the White man’s worst crime was to make the Black man hate himself, the establishment in Israel has much to answer for. In fact, Arab-hatred when it occurs among Oriental Jews is almost always a disguised form of self-hatred. As research from 1978 indicates, Sephardi respect for Arabs rises with their own self-esteem.<sup>57</sup>

Sephardi hostility to Arabs, to the extent that it does exist, is very much “made in Israel.”<sup>58</sup>

Oriental Jews had to be taught to see the Arabs, and themselves, as Other. The kind of self-hatred which sometimes marked the post-Enlightenment Ashkenazi community, had never been a part of Sephardi existence in the Moslem world; for the Sephardim, *self-hatred* (of themselves as Orientals) had to be “learned” from the Ashkenazim, who themselves had “learned” self-hatred at the

feet and among the ranks of the Europeans. Here too we are confronted with problematic antonyms, in this case that opposing the words “Zionism” and “anti-Semitism.” (But that subject merits separate discussion).

### *The Demonization of Sephardim*

The “divide and conquer” approach to Sephardi/Palestinian relations operated, as we have seen, by turning Sephardim into the most accessible targets for Arab attacks as well as in the deformation of the ideal of “Hebrew Work.” But the everyday power mechanisms in Israeli society also foster concrete economic pressures which generate tension between the two communities. Those Sephardim who continue to constitute the majority of the Jewish blue-collar workers are constantly placed in competition with the Palestinians for jobs and salaries, a situation which allows the elite to exploit both groups more or less at will. The considerable government expenditures for West Bank settlements, similarly, prod some Sephardim to move there for economic reasons—rather than the ideological reasons that motivate many Ashkenazi settlers—and thus provoke Palestinians. Finally, because of the segregation between the two groups, Sephardim and Palestinians in Israel tend to learn about each other through the Ashkenazi-dominated media, with little direct contact. Thus the Sephardim learn to see the Palestinians as “terrorists,” while the Palestinians learn to see the Sephardim as “Kahanist fanatics,” a situation which hardly facilitates mutual understanding and recognition.

Although liberal left discourse in Israel has in recent years taken a small step toward recognizing the “Palestinian entity”, it continues to hermetically seal off the Sephardi issue as an “internal social problem” to be solved once peace is achieved. Just as this discourse elides the historical origins of the Palestinian struggle and thus nostalgically looks back to an imagined prelapsarian past of “beautiful Israel” so it also elides the historical origins of Sephardi resentment and thus constructs the myth of “reactionaries.” One problem is compartmentalized as “political” and “foreign” and the other as “social” and “internal”; the mutual implication of the two issues and their common relation to Ashkenazi domination is ignored. In fact the Sephardi movement constitutes a more immediate threat to Ashkenazi privilege and status than the abstract, perpetually deferred, future solution to the Palestinian question. Whereas the “Palestinian problem” can be still presented as the inevitable clash of two nationalities, acknowledgment of the exploitation and deculturalization of Sephardim in a putatively egalitarian Jewish state implies the indictment of the Israeli system itself as incorrigibly oppressive toward all peoples of the Orient.

Peace Now leaders such as General Mordechai Bar On attribute the lack of

Sephardi enthusiasm for Peace Now to “strong rightist tendencies” and “excited loyalty to the personal leadership of Menachem Begin,” symptomatic of their “natural and traditional tendency . . . to follow a charismatic leader” all compounded with a “deep-rooted distrust in the Arabs.”<sup>59</sup>

The Sephardi Other is portrayed as uncritical, instinctual, and, in accord with Oriental-despotic traditions, easily manipulated by patriarchal demagogues. The Sephardim, when not ignored by the Israeli “left,” appear only to be scapegoated for everything that is wrong with Israel: “they” have destroyed beautiful Israel; “they” are turning Israel into a right-wing anti-democratic state; “they” support the occupation; “they” are an obstacle to peace. These prejudices are then disseminated by Israeli “leftists” in international conferences, lectures and publications. The caricatural presentation of Sephardim is a way of enjoying a self-celebratory We-of-the-liberal-West image before international public opinion, at a time when Israel has undeniably lost its “progressive” allure and past unquestioned status, while continuing to enjoy, in Israel itself, a comfortable position as an integral part of the establishment. This facile scapegoating of Sephardim for a situation generated by Ashkenazi Zionists elides the reality of significant Sephardi pro-Palestinian activities as well as the lack of Sephardi access to the media and the consequent inability to counter such charges, which are then taken seriously by Palestinians and public opinion around the world. The demonization of Sephardim also has the advantage of placing the elite protestors in the narcissistic posture of perpetual seekers after peace who must bear the hostility of the government, the right wing, the Sephardim, and recalcitrant Palestinians. This martyrdom of the “shoot-and-cry” public-relations left contributes almost nothing to peace, but it does create the optical illusion of a viable oppositional peace force. Even the progressive forces in the Peace Camp that support a Palestinian state alongside Israel seldom abandon the idea of a Jewish Western state whose subtext inevitably is the ethnic and class oppression of Sephardim. Within such a context, it is hardly surprising that the membership of Peace Now is almost exclusively Ashkenazi, with almost no Sephardi, or for that matter, Palestinian, participation.

Sephardi hostility toward Peace Now, rather than being discussed in class and ethnic terms, is conveniently displaced by Ashkenazi liberals onto the decoy-issue of a presumed general Sephardi animosity toward Arabs. This formulation ignores a number of crucial points. First, anti-Arabism forms an integral part of Zionist practice and ideology; Sephardim should not be scapegoated for what the Ashkenazi establishment itself has promoted; Secondly, Ashkenazim form the leadership of the right-wing parties and many Ashkenazim vote for these parties. (Polls taken during the 1981 elections showed that thirty six percent of foreign-born Ashkenazim and forty-five percent of Israeli-born



Ashkenazim opted for Likud.<sup>60</sup> Sephardim, for their part, have also voted for Labor and other liberal parties, including the Communist party.) In fact, however, the relatively high Sephardi vote for Likud has almost nothing to do with the latter's policies towards the Arabs; it is, rather, a minimal and even misplaced expression of Sephardi revolt against decades of Labor oppression. Since Sephardim cannot really represent themselves within the Israeli political system, a vote for the opposition interests within the ruling class becomes a way, as some Sephardi militants put it, of "strengthening the hyena in order to weaken the bear." Some independent leftist Sephardi activists viewed Likud, for example, as "an overnight shelter" where Oriental Jews could find temporary refuge while beginning to forge a powerful Sephardi revolt. The difference between Likud and Labor with regard to the Palestinians, in any case, has not been one of practice but rather one of discourse, one aggressive-nationalist and the other humanist-liberal. The difference between the two parties with regard to Sephardim, similarly, is less one of policy than one of a contrast between populist appeals (Likud) and elitist condescension (Labor).

From Kahane to the Communists the ideologies of the Israeli parties—from non-Zionist religious Orthodoxy dating back to Eastern-European anti-Zionist opposition, through religious nationalism which foregrounds the "holiness of the land" (a religious variant on a common topos of European nationalism), to the dominant secular- humanist Zionism, based on European Enlightenment ideals—"translate" on a political register the various Jewish-European identity dilemmas. Founded, led and controlled by Ashkenazim, these parties are the locus of struggle over the share of power among the various Ashkenazi groups. Within this structure there is little place for Sephardi aspirations. The Jewish-Sephardi majority has been politically marginalized, in other words, in a Jewish state, and in what is ritually and erroneously referred to as the "only democracy in the Middle East." The historical reasons for this marginalization are complex and can hardly be detailed here, but they include the following: the historical legacy of the Ashkenazi domination of the institutional party apparati prior to the arrival en masse of the Sephardim; the inertia of a hierarchical top-down structure that leaves little room for major shifts in direction; the deligitimization of the traditional Sephardi leadership; objectively harsh conditions, in the fifties and sixties, which left little time and energy for political and communal re-organization; and the repression as well as the cooptation of Sephardi revolts.

Political manipulation of Sephardi immigrants began virtually on their arrival, and at times even before, when Israeli party recruiters competed for Sephardi allegiance in the Oriental countries of origins. In Israel, the immigrants were met in the airports not only by the officials in charge of arrival procedures but also by representatives of the various parties, who parcelled out the



Sephardim along the existing political spectrum. In the *ma'abarot*, as in Palestinian villages, the government controlled the populace through the intermediary of “notables” authorized to dispense favors in exchange for votes. At the time of the foundation of the State, there was some discussion of having a token Sephardi among the first twelve Cabinet Members, and considerable energy was expended on finding a sufficiently insignificant post (“The Sephardi minister, said David Remez of the Labor, ”cannot have any grandiose pretensions”).<sup>61</sup> At the same time, the Ashkenazi institutional apparatus has always claimed to represent the interests of all Jewish people, including Sephardim, as demonstrated by the proliferation of “Oriental Departments.” Unlike Palestinians, Sephardim were never denied official access to any Israeli institutions, and they were allowed, even encouraged, to find refuge in existing organizations. Class resentments, could thus be exorcised through “socialist” organizations, while traditional Jewish activities could be entertained through religious institutions.

### *Signs of Sephardi Rebellion*

Despite these obstacles, Sephardi revolt and resistance has been constant. Already in the transient camps there were “bread and jobs” demonstrations. David Horowitz, then General Director of the Ministry of Finance, during a political consultation with Ben Gurion, described the Sephardi population in the camps as “rebellious” and the situation as “incendiary” and “dynamite.”<sup>62</sup> Another major revolt against misery and discrimination began in Haifa, in the neighborhood of Wadi-Salib, in 1959. Israeli authorities suppressed the rebellion with military and police terror. The Labor Party (Mapai) furthermore, tried to undermine the political organization that emerged from the riots by obliging slum residents to join the Party if they hoped for a job. Another large-scale rebellion broke out again in the seventies, when the Israeli Black Panthers called for the destruction of the regime and for the legitimate rights of all the oppressed without regard to religion, origin or nationality. This alarmed the establishment, and the movement’s leaders were arrested and placed under administrative detention. At that moment, the Black Panthers launched demonstrations which shook the entire country. In a demonstration that has since become famous (May 1971) tens of thousands, in response to police repression, went into the streets and threw Molotov cocktails against police and government targets. The same evening, 170 activists were arrested, 35 were hospitalized, and more than 70 policemen and officers were wounded. Taking their name from the American movement, the Black Panther revolt was led by the children of the immigrants, many of them delinquents who passed through rehabilitation centers or prisons. Gradually becoming aware of the political nature of their “inferiority,” they

sabotaged the myth of the “melting pot” by showing that there is in Jewish Israel not one but two peoples. They often used the term *dfukim veshehorim* (screwed and blacks) to express the ethnic/class positioning of Sephardim and viewed the American Black revolt as a source of inspiration. (The choice of the name “Black Panthers” also ironically reverses the Ashkenazi reference to Sephardim as “black animals”). More recently in December 1982, riots broke out in response to the police murder of an Oriental slum resident whose only crime was to build an illegal extension to his overcrowded house.

The establishment, meanwhile, has consistently tried to explain away all manifestations of Sephardi revolt. The “breads-and-jobs” demonstrations in the transient camps were dismissed as the result of the agitational work of leftist Iraqi immigrants; the demonstrations of Wadi salib and the Black Panthers were the expression of “violence-prone Moroccans;” individual acts of resistance were the symptoms of “neurosis” or “maladjustment.” Golda Meir, Prime-minister during the Black Panther revolts, complained maternalistically that “they are not nice kids.” Demonstrators were described in the press and in academic studies as lumpen proletarian deviants, and the movements were caricatured in the media as “ethnic organizing” and an attempt to “divide the nation.” Class and ethnic antagonism were often suppressed in the name of a supposedly imminent “national security” disaster. In any case, all attempts at independent Sephardi political activity have faced the carrot-and-stick counter measures of the establishment, measures which range on a spectrum from symbolic gestures toward token “change” channeled via the welfare infrastructure, through systematic co-optation of Sephardi activists (offering jobs and privilege is a major source of power in a small centralized country) to harassment, character assassination, imprisonment, torture and, at times, pressures to leave the country.

The orchestrated attacks on Sephardi independent political activities—including by the “left”—were executed in the name of “national unity” in the face of the Arab threat. The assumption throughout was that the dominant parties were *not* “ethnic”—the very word, here as often, reflects a marginalizing strategy premised on the implicit contrast of “norm” and “other”—when in fact the existing Israeli institutions were *already* ethnically based according to countries of origins, a reality masked by a linguistic facade which made the Ashkenazim “Israelis,” and the Sephardim “Bnei Edot haMiarach” or “Sons of the Oriental Ethnic Communities.” The plural here “covered” the fact of the Sephardi numerical superiority, emphasizing plurality of origin, in contrast with a presumed pre-existing (Ashkenazi) Israeli unity, and disguised the fact that the Sephardim, whatever their country of origin, have come in Israel to form a collective entity based both on cultural affinities and the shared experience of oppression. Like many other ethnically-based dominating groups, the Israeli Ashkenazim have a kind of

pudeur about being named; they rarely refer to themselves, or their power, as Ashkenazi; they do not see themselves as an ethnic group (partially because “Ashkenazi” evokes the “unflattering” memory of Shtetl Jews). The Sephardim, however, do not share this pudeur. Sephardim, whatever their superficial political allegiance, often refer to the “Ashkenazi state” and “the Ashkenazi newspapers,” “the Ashkenazi television” “the Ashkenazi parties,” “the Ashkenazi court,” and at times even “the Ashkenazi army.” The overwhelming majority of army deserters is to be found in the Sephardi community, particularly among the very lower classes whose behavior reveals a reluctance to “give anything to this Ashkenazi state” and this in a society whose very structure sends the subliminal message: “Fight the Arabs and then we will accept you.” A recent editorial in a Sephardi—neighborhood newspaper, entitled “Forty Years of the Ashkenazi State,” summed up Sephardi feelings after four decades of statehood:

This is the 40th year of independence for the Ashkenazi state called Israel, but who is going to celebrate? Our Oriental brothers who sit in jails? Our prostitute sisters from Tel Baruch? Our sons in schools, will they be celebrating the decline in the level of education? Will we celebrate the Ashkenazi theater of Kishon’s Sallah? Or the rising fanaticism in our society? The flight from peace? The Oriental music broadcast only in the ghettos of the media? The unemployment in development towns? It seems, that the Orientals have no reason to celebrate. The joy and light is only for the Ashkenazim, and for the glory of the Ashkenazi state.<sup>63</sup>

Although effaced or overshadowed by the Israeli/Arab, conflict, and despite official harassment, Sephardi resistance is always present, going through transformations, changing organizational forms. Despite the attempts to engender hostility between Sephardim and Palestinians, there have always been Sephardi activities in favor of justice for the Palestinians. Many members of the older Sephardi generation, both inside and outside of Israel, were eager to serve as a bridge of peace to the Arabs and to the Palestinians, but their efforts were consistently refused or undercut by the Establishment.<sup>64</sup> The Black Panthers, seeing themselves as a “natural bridge” for peace, called in the seventies for a “real dialogue” with the Palestinians, who are “an integral part of the political landscape of the Middle East” and whose “representatives must be allowed to take part in all meetings and discussions which seek a solution to the conflict.”<sup>65</sup> The Panthers were also among the first Israeli groups to meet with the P.L.O. In the eighties, movements such as East for Peace and The Oriental Front in Israel and Perspectives Judeo-Arabes in France—the names themselves point to the shedding of self-shame and the utopia of integration into the political and cultural East—have called for an independent Palestinian state led by the P.L.O. The

Oriental Front stresses that Sephardim are not Zionists in the conventional sense, but rather “in the Biblical meaning of ‘Zion,’ of a Jewish life in the birthplace of the Jewish people.” They stress as well the “debt of respect to Arab countries that gave [us] protection during centuries” and the strong Sephardi “love and respect for Arab culture,” since “there is no alienation between the Arab existence and the Oriental [Jewish] one.”<sup>66</sup>

### *Epilogue*

In many respects, European Zionism has been an immense confidence trick played on Sephardim, a cultural massacre of immense proportions, an attempt, partially successful, to wipe out, in a generation or two, millennia of rooted Oriental civilization, unified even in its diversity. My argument here, I hasten to clarify, is not an essentialist one. I am not positing a new binarism of eternal hostility between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In many countries and situations, the two groups, despite cultural and religious differences, have co-existed in relative peace; it is only in Israel that they exist in a relation of dependency and oppression. (In any case, only 10% of Ashkenazi Jews are in Israel). Obviously Ashkenazi Jews have been the prime victims of the most violent kinds of European anti-Semitism, a fact that makes it more delicate to articulate not only a pro-Palestinian point of view but also a pro-Sephardi point of view. A Sephardi critique is expected to be suppressed in the name of the menaced “unity of the Jewish people” in the post-Holocaust era (as if within all unities, especially those of recent construction, there were not also differences and dissonances.) My argument is also not moralistic or characterological one, positing a Manichean schematism contrasting good Oriental Jews with evil Ashkenazi oppressors. My argument is structural, an attempt to account theoretically for the “structure of feeling,” the deep current of rage against the Israeli establishment that unites most Sephardim independent of their declared party affiliation. My argument is situational and analytical; it claims that the Israeli socio-political formation continually generates the underdevelopment of the Oriental Jews.

A spectre haunts European Zionism, the spectre that all of its victims—Palestinians, Sephardim (as well as critical Ashkenazim, in and outside Israel, stigmatized as “self-hating” malcontents)—will perceive the linked analogies between their oppressions. To conjure this spectre, the Zionist establishment in Israel has done everything in its power: the fomenting of war and the cult of “national security,” the simplistic portrayal of Palestinian resistance as “terrorism;” the fostering of situations which catalyze Sephardi-Palestinian tension; the caricaturing of Sephardim as “Arab-haters” and “religious fanatics;” the promotion, through the educational system and the media, of “Arab-hatred” and

Sephardi self-rejection; the repression or cooptation of all those who might promote a Palestinian-Sephardi alliance. I in no way mean to equate Palestinian and Sephardi suffering—obviously Palestinians are those most egregiously wronged by Zionism—or to compare the long lists of crimes against both. The point is one of affinity and analogy rather than perfect identity of interests or experience. I am not asking Palestinians to feel sorry for the Sephardi soldiers who might be among those shooting at them. It is not Sephardim, obviously, who are being killed, time after time, in the streets of Gaza or in the refugee camps of Lebanon. What is at stake, in any case, is not a competition for sympathy but a search for alternatives. Till now both Palestinians and Sephardim have been the objects and not the subjects of Zionist ideology and policies, and till now they have been played against each other. But it was not the Sephardim who made the crucial decisions leading to the brutal displacement and oppression of the Palestinians—even if the Sephardim were enlisted as cannon fodder after the fact—just as it was not the Palestinians who uprooted, exploited and humiliated the Sephardim. The present regime in Israel inherited from Europe a strong aversion to respecting the right of self-determination to non-European peoples; whence the quaint vestigial, out-of-step quality of its discourse, its atavistic talk of the “civilized nations” and “the civilized world.” As much as it is impossible to imagine peace between Israel and the Arabs without recognizing and affirming the historical rights of the Palestinian people, so a real peace must not overlook the collective rights of Oriental Jews. It would be short-sighted to negotiate only with those in power or embraced by it, dismissing the subjection of Jews from Arab and Moslem countries as an “internal Jewish” problem; a position which would be analogous to taking the Zionist attitude that the Palestinian question is an “internal” Arab problem. I am not suggesting, obviously, that all Sephardim would ascribe to my analysis, although most would endorse much of it. I am suggesting, rather, that only such an analysis can account for the complexities of the present situation and the depth and extent of Sephardi rage. My analysis hopes, finally, to open up a long-range perspective that might aid in a larger effort to move beyond the present intolerable impasse.

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56. For a discussion of the secular European-Jewish encounter with Protestant culture see John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).
57. See Hashem Mahameed and Yosef Gottman, "Autostereotypes and Heterostereotypes of Jews and Arabs Under Various Conditions of Contact," *Israeli Journal of Psychology and Counseling in Education* (Jerusalem: Ministry of Education and Culture), no. 16 (September 1983).
58. See a recent study *The Sephardic Community in Israel and the Peace Process* (New York: Institute for Middle East Peace and Development, CUNY, 1986), directed by Harriet Arnone and Ammiel Alcalay.
59. Mordechai Bar-On, *Peace Now: The Portrait of a Movement* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1985), pp. 89-90 (Hebrew).
60. Swirski, "The Oriental Jews in Israel," pp. 89-90.
61. Segev, p. 174.
62. Segev, p. 161.
63. Beni Zada, "40 Years for the state of Ashkenazim," *Pa'amom* no. 16 (December 1987).
64. Abba Eban, for example, opposed "regarding our immigrants from Oriental countries as a bridge toward our integration with Arabic-speaking world." (Smooha, p. 88).
65. Cited from a Black Panther press conference held in Paris, March 1975.
66. Quotations are taken from several speeches of the Oriental Front delivered in their meeting with P.L.O. in Vienna, July 1986.