Who Am I? Mizrahi Discourse on Identity in Contemporary Israel

Abstract

In the past decades, Israel has seen a growing number of attempts to reclaim its Middle Eastern heritage through different forms. Those attempts are quite often made by Mizrahim – Jews whose origins are in Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa – themselves. They speak about their identity using artistic tools as well as social media. This article maps the landscape of this phenomenon, and tries to investigate its core features and answer several questions, including: How does this activity reflect the issue of Mizrahi identity? Do Israeli-Mizrahim speak one language? Can we talk about a common identity discourse for this group? How does it challenge a range of Israeli memories, present-day realities, and future aspirations?

Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead of identity as a production which is never complete (...).

Stuart Hall

Introduction

Since its establishment in 1948, the state of Israel has been engaged in the continuous trial of forming a local, native culture and identity that one could call ‘Israeli’. At the beginning of this process the Zionist discourse saw itself as a part of the European discourse (or even as part of a Eurocentric one) and therefore adapted the two dichotomic images of East and West. Thus, Israel’s diverse population was reduced to two concepts: a Jewish people with roots in the so-called West (i.e. Europe and America) called Ashkenazim, and the conceptual category of Jewish immigrants from Islamic countries and their children called Mizrahim who are associated with the East. This existence of two distinct Jewish ethnic groups living in Israel was established somewhat artificially. Jewish people from Islamic countries were treated by state institutions as one identical group, without any differences and
divisions within it. This treatment, in turn, led these immigrants to define and view themselves as one uniformed group as well. Of course, this process was neither quick nor obvious. However, the common experience after arriving in Israel, and the same treatment of the Jews of Moroccan, Iraqi and Egyptian origin by the authorities in various areas of social life, made these ‘Mizrahi’ Jews build a common identity. For years, the mythological image of the ‘new Jew’ called Sabra (native-born Israeli), disconnected from his troubled, traumatic past, was supposed to homogenize the immigrants of the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi groups, and create a monolithic Israeli culture.

For the last three decades, Israel has been undergoing major changes which affect its political, demographical, and cultural scene. Accordingly, the Israeli heritage is being deconstructed and renegotiated. The unrealistic vision of one single Israeli identity is gradually being replaced by the image of Israel as a pluralistic and diverse society. The hegemonic Zionist concept is confronted with a new reality, one which was created as either a result of or as a response to this restrictive Zionist concept.

In this article I would like to focus on Mizrahim⁴ and their perception of identity over the last twenty years. It is argued that, as a result of the politics of the state and its heritage, this group created a special selfhood which can be described as liminal and hyphenated. It seems that this identity is mostly visible in the so-called ‘new Mizrahi wave’ in art, which is consumed mostly by Ashkenazim or liberal-left Mizrahi⁵, but also in the virtual space.

**Literature**

According to Yochai Oppenheimer, works written in Hebrew by authors coming from the Mizrahi environment often refer to similar experiences, ideas, and cultural texts. This phenomenon is visible to such an extent that we can actually speak of a common discourse called ‘Mizrahi writing’. Each of these writers deals with the difficult experiences connected with emigration and adaptation in their works, as well as the marginal position of Mizrahim in Israeli culture.⁶

Authors such as Sami Michael, Shimon Ballas, Samir Nakash and Nissim Rejwan, who all belong to the first generation of Mizrahi writers, have entered the canon of Israeli literature quite recently. In their works, these authors confronted the problems

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³ Interestingly, a similar phenomenon occurred in the case of the dark-skinned inhabitants of North America and Europe. As noted by Paul Gilroy, the term ‘black’, used by the surrounding groups to describe them, caused people of different origins, i.e. Caribbean, the United Kingdom, America and Africa start to identify one with another in spite of their cultural differences. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic; Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993.

⁴ The term Mizrahim itself is used in the academic discourse, but is not actually used by ordinary people, who still define themselves as Sephardim or as a different sub-group.

⁵ Sometimes those authors are perceived by other Mizrahim (traditional, right-wing) as Sefardei Mishtaknez (Sephardim who became Ashkenazim).

of migration, transition and adaptation to a new situation. Interestingly, despite the fact that they wrote in Hebrew, which they had mastered to perfection, it was still quite often their second or third language. Therefore, their Hebrew syntax is often reminiscent of Arabic, a quality that separates their texts from those of their Ashkenazi counterparts and from those of future Mizrahi writers.

The second and third generations of Mizrahim are no longer defined by multilingualism, but the heritage of the Middle East continues to leave its mark. This kind of ‘stigma’ often becomes a kind of common denominator for the texts they are writing. Each of these contemporary and award-winning writers – Kobi Oz, Yossi Sukari, Dudi Busi, Shimon Adaf, Ronit Matalon, Sami Berdugo, Sara Shilo, Almog Behar, Mati Shemoleof et al. – often touches upon the topic of Mizrahim in their work. Their achievement is in evoking an Israel which the outside world knows little about.

One of the more interesting examples of ‘new Mizrahi literature’ is Kobi Oz’s Moshe Huvato ve-Ha-Orev (Moshe Huvato and the Raven).7 Hailed as one of the most interesting and original books in recent years, the story reveals to its readers the reality of living in the Israeli periphery, more specifically in the so-called ‘development towns’. These towns – remote, underfunded, characterized by factory lines and vocational schools, often populated with Mizrahim – were historically disadvantaged, creating a deep-seated resentment towards the Israeli government amongst their residents.

As advertised by the novel’s publisher, tracing the story of the novel, which was written for young adults, is like viewing a family album, where each character recites a monologue in rock-opera style. The main character is Moshe Huvato, a young soldier, sad and thoughtful, busy planning his holiday from the army. However, he finds time to attend the funeral ceremony of his uncle Charlie, a sensitive musician who played the oud and never assimilated into Israeli culture. Moshe’s mother, proud of her son’s Eastern identity, spends hours cooking and baking Tunisian specialties. His father, the head of the municipal sewage department, obsessed with purity, is angry with Moshe, who in his opinion does not do anything to achieve success in life. The characters created by Oz constantly deal with issues of identity and the complexity of balancing between the imaginary East and West. Similar issues are found in Oz’s next book Avarian Tzaatzua (Petty Hoodlum).8

Yossi Sukari, who studied history and philosophy of science at Tel Aviv University and whose works have been included in the Israeli academic syllabus, did not shy away from the issue of the marginalization and deprivation of Mizrahim in his debut novel Emilia U-Melach Ha-Aretz: Vidui (Emilia).9 By showing the hero’s personal experience, his story touches upon the issues of alienation and the desire to become a part of Israeli society. Sukari takes the reader on a journey along the classic Israeli rites of passage – going to school, serving in the military, studying at university and

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7 Kobi Oz, Moshe Huvato ve-Ha-Orev [Moshe Huvato and the Raven], Tel Aviv: Keshet, 1997.
8 K. Oz, Avarian Tzaatzua [Petty Hoodlum], Tel Aviv: Keshet, 2002.
traveling abroad – in order to examine the main character’s identity, which is connected with Western culture, but whose legacy is inextricably associated with the ‘Orient’. The character’s grandmother Emilia represents the ‘bad Mizrahi’, who sees the enemy in every Ashkenazi. The Zionist state arouses contempt in her, and so she calls upon her grandson to seek his fortune abroad. All this being said, she is not the stereotypical ‘Mizrahi’ representative: she is educated, does not like to cook, and speaks a very distinct Hebrew. Jossi, her grandson, has absorbed her anger, but did not become either a social worker or a ‘professional’ victim of the system. He studied philosophy and was in a relationship with a Russian-born Israeli, and he feels guilty for not fulfilling the will of his grandmother. After looking for happiness in the United States and Germany, he ends up returning to Israel to take a job as a lecturer in philosophy. Trying to atone the fact that he had deviated from the planned path set for him by his grandmother, he organizes an academic summer camp for children from his neighborhood.

Another writer who chose to integrate some autobiographical facts in his work is Dudi Busi. Busi was born in an ethnically diverse district of Tel Aviv, and his experiences are very much reflected in his first novel Ha-Yare’ach Yarok Ba-Vadi (The Moon Goes Green in the Wadi)\textsuperscript{10}, which takes place in 1970. It tells the story of a young boy growing up in a multicultural slum where ethnicity determines social position, where his childhood and youth are filled with violence, and where the dreams of a brighter future are often the only source of hope. Musa is the son of Iraqi and Yemeni parents. This mixed origin (even though both parents are ‘Mizrahim’) causes the hero to experience intense anxiety and does not allow him to determine his own identity in a simple way. When he wants to join a Yemeni gang, he discovers that he is ridiculed and ostracized. The novel, which has a very authentic tone thanks to the use of different languages and dialects, balances between humor and seriousness. Children’s games and relationships within and between families are vividly depicted. The case of Musa’s family allows the author not only to tell a fascinating individual story, but also to raise universal issues such as the problem of social acceptance.

Yetomim (Orphans)\textsuperscript{11} by Sami Berdugo includes two novellas about different characters of North African origin who are partially assimilated, but still do not feel that they belong to the Israeli culture. In the first, 18-year-old Yechiel, the youngest son of a large working class family from Morocco, is about to join the army (where his brother Shiko is already serving). On the one hand Yechiel is very excited about his impending enlistment, but it is also a source of deep fear. At the same time, his mother suddenly becomes pregnant at the age of fifty-two. As a powerful figure in the family she insists on keeping the baby, leading to the drama. In contrast to the birth at the end of the first novella, the main theme of the second is orphanhood.

\textsuperscript{10} Dudi Busi, Ha-Yare’ach Yarok Ba-Vadi [The Moon Goes Green in the Wadi], Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000.

\textsuperscript{11} Sami Berdugo, Yetomim [Orphans], Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuchad, 2006.
Forty-year-old Shmuel’s family splits. The wife suddenly disappears, abandoning their children. Shmuel himself still longs for his lost home, Morocco, which he had to leave at the age of thirteen. He admits that he has never become part of his new country, and this inner turmoil is exacerbated by the Israeli reality, with its anxieties, terrorist bombings and uncertain future.

These stories, among others, show clearly that the creativity of Mizrahim focuses on the periphery instead of the center – both figuratively, by making the characters ordinary Israelis with roots in the lands of the Muslim world, and literally. The role played by space in the writings seems to be invaluable. The novels are usually set in ‘development towns’ or in the disadvantaged neighborhoods of large cities, areas that were previously absent in literature written by Ashkenazim. The desire to break free from these areas and to start a new life is a feature shared by a number of characters within the discourse. This is the hope of one of the protagonists of Sara Shilo’s *Shum Gamadim Lo Yavo’u* (No Gnomes Will Appear), for instance. It seems that this is not only his own personal hope, but one that is shared by many people from his environment.

These new looks at Israeli reality and the totally fresh voice expressed by second and third generations of Mizrahim not only deconstruct the negative, often orientalizing approach to Jews from Islamic countries in Hebrew literature, but could also serve as the basis for a new literary canon in Israel.

What is more, these young artists do not avoid translating literary works written in the countries of their ancestors. Following in the footsteps of Sami Michael, who translated the Cairo trilogy of Arab Nobel laureate Nagib Mahfouz, among others, they are trying to bring the most interesting works of Arabic, Turkish and Persian contemporary writers to Israeli readers. Recently, in the face of looming war with Iran, Orly Noy published her Hebrew translations of two Persian books: *Da’i Jan Napuli’un* (My Uncle Napoleon) by Iraj Pezeshkzad and *Zwal Colonel* (The Colonel) by Mahmoud Dowlabatadi. Noy herself was born in Iran and in an interview with the Israel daily *Yediot Ahronot* she admitted that she had gone through the process typical of all immigrants: trauma, denying the culture in which they were born, and finally returning to their roots. “I wouldn’t let my parents play Persian music when my friends came to visit,” she said. “Slowly, slowly I re-connected. I always read Persian literature in the original language because at some point I felt that my Persian

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was slipping away. It was a gradual process of becoming re-acquainted with the culture I had abandoned in my childhood”. When asked why she had decided to publish her translations at that very moment, she responded “The translation of texts from Persian to Hebrew is my way of expressing something from both of my identities, Israeli and Iranian. At the same time I also hope to burst the big balloon called ‘Iran the menace,’ and portray my homeland as something real and alive with a past full of suffering and intrigues, politics and [vested] interests, good and evil. The Israeli reader can identify with these [themes] and, through them, also become acquainted with a different Iran”.  

Another attempt to redefine the concept of Mizrahim in Israeli society is a social-cultural magazine titled *Ha-Kivun Mizrah* (Direction East), which appeared on the Israeli market in 2000. The editor-in-chief of this journal is Yitzhak Gormezano-Goren, an Israeli who was born in Alexandria, and who is also the owner of the Kedem publishing house. The journal wants to present and discuss cultural texts produced by Mizrahim. The key question it poses is: What is the culture of the East? The editors try to answer this by showing readers contemporary work and analyzing current-day issues such as memory, biography, space and language. Most of the articles highlight the common cultural roots between Mizrahim and the Islamic world (the Arab countries, Turkey, Iran) and encourages the further creative exploration of these areas. It seems that its primary objective is to create a counter-statement against Israeli high culture, as promoted and created for years, usually by Ashkenazim.

**Film**

When discussing Mizrahi films, this paper does not intend to address the Bourekas films written and directed by Ashkenazim, but rather the cinematic narrations created by Mizrahim themselves, seeking to renegotiate the approach to issues relating to the identity of Jews from the Islamic world living in Israel.

The film *Sh'hur* (Magic), which received a Special Mention at the Berlin Film Festival, and was also recognized in Israel itself, is the story of a Moroccan family and their struggle to maintain traditions in spite of ongoing modernization. The viewer sees flashbacks from the 1970s, i.e. the childhood of the protagonist, Rachel (Hana Azoulay Hasfari), who in her adult life became a television producer. The story we follow is her struggle to get away from the family where traditionalism has no limits, and *sh'hur*, a North African word for magic, is practiced at every opportunity. Rachel is confronted with a variety of adversities, and having a mentally ill sister (Ronit Alkabetz) and dominant mother (Gila Almagor) certainly does not help. We finally see her triumph when she receives high scores on her college entrance exams, which allows her to leave her family and go to Jerusalem. However, the road to freedom is like a tapestry, where traditionalism and modernity, with their positive and negative aspects, are intertwined so tightly that it is difficult to separate them.

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16 Ibidem.
17 A peculiarly Israeli genre of comic melodramas or tearjerkers based on ethnic stereotypes.
Similarly, Ronit Elkabetz and her brother Shlomi return to their childhood in *Ve-Lakahta Lekha Isha* (To Take a Wife), portraying an immigrant area of Haifa in the late 1970s, where the patriarchal culture imposed by the father and the mother’s desire to ‘upgrade’ tears the family apart. The film also depicts a struggle for primacy between the traditional and modern ways of life. Viviane (Ronit Elkabetz) feels trapped in the routine of raising three children, working from home and observing strict Moroccan traditions with her family. The heroine wants to be free, to live in the modern world, and to be herself, while her husband, Eliahou, a respected family man, is still fighting to keep everyone in check. On the brink of making a decision to leave, Viviane must once again face the brothers who pressure her not to divorce her husband. At the same time, Albert, her former lover, reappears in her life, and Viviane struggles with a new temptation. Interestingly, the film was promoted with a song sung by Elkabetz, an adaptation of a well-known hit (*Amor, amor*) which was most commonly performed by Zohar Argov, who is known in Israel as ‘the king of Mizrahi music’.

Both *Sh’ur* and *Ve-Lakahta Lekha Isha* are examples of a new way to represent Mizrahim in Israeli cinema. They are no longer ridiculed for their ‘unsuitability’ but speak their own voice. This voice screams of the problems and dilemmas connected with their identity, and is trying to reconcile the familiarity of the Israeli world with its strangeness.

In addition to the new wave of Mizrahi literature, these films again present the identity of characters created within the ‘third space’, to use Homi K. Bhabha’s term – a space “in-between” where the meaning and symbols of culture are translated, rehistoricized and reread.

**Music**

When people think about the music created by Mizrahim, the kind that most often comes to mind is the so-called *musica mizrahit* (Eastern music), basically present only in Israel. Associated mainly with this ethnic group, this genre developed independently from the major music publishing companies. Its popularity grew in the late 1980s and 1990s and it has been hailed as “cassette music” (from the popular media which was easy to copy), or even as “the music of the Central Bus Station in Tel Aviv” (located in a poorer part of the town, where the above-mentioned cassettes were sold). The beginning of this music can be dated to the 1970s, the time of the Panterim Ha-Shchorim (Black Panthers) and their protests, which in some way consolidated Mizrahim as one group.

What is *musica mizrahit*? From a professional point of view this genre is characterized by sounds that define the Western way of thinking about music, with its harmony and sections which are based on sixteen bars, but also has a certain ‘Eastern’ sound (while not associated specifically with one region). The hallmark of this music is a frequent use of melismata (i.e. the singing of a single syllable of text while moving between several different notes in succession), a nasal voice, improvisation, and the use of instruments such as the bouzouki, oud and qanun. Another characteristic is that the genre’s repertoire usually consists of covers of Arab or Turkish recordings, which are adjusted to Western
One such example is the song by Maor Edri entitled *Yalla, yalla*\(^{19}\), which is a remake of a Syrian hit by Wafik Habib.\(^{20}\) Listeners of this type of music vary, but the majority comes from one ethnic group – the Mizrahi. As was previously stated, there are different sub-Mizrahi groups, and therefore within the *musica mizrahit* there are different subcategories, such as Yemeni, Greek etc. Unlike mainstream music, the roots of the success of *musica mizrahit* were small, popular live performances, at weddings or parties. Nowadays though, the *musica mizrahit* concerts are huge pop culture events that attract many fans (such as performances by Eyal Golan or Moshe Perez).

Both the fans and the creators perceive this kind of entertainment as the music of ‘ordinary people’. The singer is not seen as an idol, but as a man from the neighborhood, maybe even a family member as shown by the word *ah* (brother) which is often used by male fans when addressing male performers. This social aspect is expressed in the musical discourse in many ways, first of all through public performances, which used to be held in mostly restaurants, in social halls in development towns, and in family events. Additionally, the performances themselves give the genre a more intimate character, since many of them are based on audience requests, and very often the songs are sung in a semi-professional manner and performance style. Another important factor is that the songs are usually characterized by simple lyrics which are easy to identify with.

However, contrary to public perception, *musica mizrahit* is not the only music of the Mizrahim. One can find, especially in the Israeli periphery (for example, in development towns), that new creations are not always easy to classify. An example of such a group is the one which used to play in Sderot between 1986 and 1998 called *Sfataim* (Lips). This group tried to combine original Moroccan music, which the band leaders knew from their childhood, with works reflecting their position ‘in-between’ one culture and another. Sung in both Hebrew and Arabic, the group’s repertoire includes songs speaking of longing for Morocco, the marginalization of Mizrahim in Israel, and the ambivalence with which they approach life in their new homeland.\(^{21}\)

A real revolution in the Mizrahi music scene was sparked by the band *Tippex* (also known as *Teapacks*) formed in 1988 and by its leader, already mentioned in the pages of this article, Kobi Oz (who debuted as a keyboardist in the band *Sfataim*). The band consisted of musicians born in Sderot and in the nearby Sha’ar Ha-Negev kibbutz. The result of this collaboration was the music described as a fusion of Israeli rock with *musica mizrahit*. Oz, the band’s frontman and songwriter, found an apt way to describe the Mizrahi reality in his work, not sparing the use of irony. For example, their first hit

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\(^{19}\) *Yalla, yalla* by Maor Edri: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=-zMUlvW4DPE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=-zMUlvW4DPE) (accessed 26.08.2013).


Ha-Rabi Joe Kapara dealt with the topic of Mizrahi pilgrimages to the tombs of tzadikim – pious men (such as pilgrimages to Netivot) in a very cynical tone.

Oz himself admitted that his goal was to redefine the Israeli music scene and to play with social conventions. Many of their songs, such as Ma ale Avak (Dust Hills), the first verse of which can be read below, mocked the implementation of the ‘Zionist project’ by the Israeli government:

“It’s not impressive”, thought government officials,
   “There are empty parts on the map
And down there we’ve missed another ‘dot’”.
   So then they commanded:

   “Build a city here and bring some people
   Fill the new houses with their loves.
   This is good, a lot of points on the map,
   And the newspaper promised to promote it.”

That senior ministers ordered with a sleepy voice,
   And wanted to take care of emergencies.
   The junior lieutenant went there
   To welcome the new community called ‘dust’.

More and more artists who could be classified as Mizrahim by ethnicity are producing music which cannot be simply pigeonholed, and which is the result and expression of their hybrid identity. These include performers such as Etti Ankri, Shlomo Bar, Zehava Ben (who has recorded the hits of Umm Kulthum), Dikla, Karolina, Ehud Banai, Berry Sakharov, Ofer Levi, Knesiyat Ha-Sehel et al. Although some of them were initially identified only with musica mizrahit, they have entered the mainstream and are constantly seeking new forms of expression.

Social media

The internet, especially social media networks, has given everyone the unique opportunity to express themselves publicly. Ethnic groups often use this tool to continually construct and maintain their identity. Media experts consider this form of communication as the most egalitarian, since each individual can instantly transform from the reader of a cultural text to being an author. Therefore a new niche allowing self-creation is constructed. This niche can unite people with similar perceptions of their joint identity. On the other hand, researchers point out that the online voice of the minority is not always typical or even heard, because in order to reach a particular ‘meeting place’ online, a place where a given ethnic group can get together, one must first have the need and will to connect to this world.22 What is more, most Internet users are young people from the privileged classes.

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22 Aleksandra Bilewicz, ‘Internet a diasporyczne tożsamości etniczne. Perspektywa porównawcza’ [Internet and Diasporic Ethnic Identities. A Comparative Perspective], in Pamięć
Looking more closely at Mizrahi activity within Facebook, we find that they are concentrated not only in different groups but also on different pages offered by the website. In both cases there is a large variety of themes, which can be divided into several categories. In my analysis, I have only considered those which had the words Mizrahi or Mizrahi in the description or name, which in itself is a statement of a specific worldview and identity. I paid no attention to these groups or pages which used other nomenclature such as Sephardic, Mediterranean, etc.

The most common groups or pages are those relating to musica mizrahit. For example, ‘Shirim Mizrahit’ ("Mizrahi songs")\(^{23}\), advertises itself with the description: “Do you love music mizrahit? Do you want to know all the latest songs? Join our group!” and has 29,400 fans. However, apart from publishing links to Mizrahi songs, which refer to the musical heritage of the Middle East, and which are performed by Mizrahi, we cannot find any direct statements on this page which would separate this ethnic group from the rest of Israeli society. On the contrary, on different holidays, whether religious ones such as Passover, or national ones such as Yom Ha-Shoah (Shoah Day) and Yom Ha-Atsmaut (Independence Day), the group’s administrators place occasional holiday related posts.

Other groups are those that define ‘mizrahi-ness’ as something clearly not Ashkenazi, thereby creating a sharp dichotomy between Mizrahi and Ashkenazim. These groups generally focus only on collecting members who do not communicate their views actively on different forums, and their only statement of identity is made by joining this community. In many ways, the act of joining this Facebook group serves as a silent agreement between the group’s members on the definition of Mizrahi as defined by the name or description of the group. Such groups include ‘Mizrahi neged Ashkenazi! *Ha-Tzad shel Mizrahi!*’ ("Mizrahi versus Ashkenazi! *Mizrahi Side*")\(^{24}\), whose emblem is a figure symbolizing the Israeli Black Panthers, and which has 244 members; ‘Ha-Krav ha-gadol Shel Israel – Mizrahi neged Ashkenazi – ha-Tzad shel Mizrahi’ ("The Great Israel Fight – Mizrahi versus Ashkenazi – Mizrahi side")\(^{25}\) which consists of 226 participants, and the most popular of them all, with 1078 members, ‘Ha-krav ha-gadol shel Facebook – Ashkenazim neged Mizrahi – Ha-Tzad shel Mizrahi’ ("The Great Fight of Facebook – Ashkenazim versus Mizrahi – Mizrahi side").\(^{26}\)


types of pages we can add one which simply bears the name ‘Mizrahim’\textsuperscript{27}, whose description is accompanied by a drawing showing the protagonist of the Israeli cartoon ‘MK 22’, Shlomi Hanukkah, a dumb and aggressive Mizrahi soldier. This choice of iconography might be evidence of the internalizing of stereotypes about Mizrahim by the Mizrahim themselves, and of their use of stereotypes in order to describe their own characteristics and identity.

An interesting phenomenon is a group gathering Mizrahi students of the Technion technical college in Israel. Because of the privacy settings set by the administrator, a person who is not member of the group is only allowed to read the description:

\begin{quote}
Do you feel lonely? Everyone calls you Frenk\textsuperscript{28}? You’re the only brown one in the faculty? They ask you, ‘You are Yemeeeenii? Cool! I have one like that in the boombox.’ Never again! Unite our forces today! Moroccans with the Iraqis, Iraqis with Tunisians, Tunisians with Yemenites and Yemenites with the Russian girls...! We will remain and help one another.
This is one small step for the Technion, but one Yemeni step for all of us! (...).\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Thus we can see that Mizrahim tend to define themselves by the color of their skin, identifying themselves as ‘brown’, they feel discriminated against at school and try to unite their forces in the fight against prejudice. What is worth mentioning is the fact that science and technology are considered an Ashkenazi field in Israel, so Mizrahi people at Technion may feel that they ‘stick out’.

Another manifestation of this peculiar Mizrahi emancipation movement is a page fighting for transparency in determining judges drawn from the circle of Mizrahim. The founders of the 118-person community inform us that their group was formed to demand a transparent and socially fair appointment of judges in Israel, so that the ethnic composition of the profession would reflect the proportions existing in the whole of Israeli society. The initiators of the action also expressed their outrage at the fact that some courts in general lack Mizrahi judges, citing the case that only one of the Supreme Court’s judges comes from this ethnic group.\textsuperscript{30}

A group with a similar character is ‘Ha-Hazit Ha-Mizrahit belIsrael’ (“Eastern Front in Israel”)\textsuperscript{31}, with 137 participants who are willing to fight to change the way ethnically based perceptions define Israeli society. As one of the active members has written, being Mizrahi has a deep meaning for him:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{28} In (rather old-fashioned) Hebrew slang, Frenk is a derogatory term for a Jew of Mizrahi provenance.
\textsuperscript{29} Facebook group called ‘Mizrahim beTechnion’ (Mizrahim at Technion): https://www.facebook.com/groups/320815401291946/?fref=ts (accessed 26.08.2013).
\textsuperscript{30} Facebook group fighting for transparency in determining Israeli judges: https://www.facebook.com/groups/389850544407670/ (accessed 25.08.2013).
\textsuperscript{31} ‘Ha-Hazit Ha-Mizrahit belIsrael’ (‘Eastern Front in Israel’), Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/229945587147616/ (accessed 25.08.2013).
Mizrahi corresponds to the culture of the region. Mizrahi means a fair and peaceful social division. Real Mizrahis are those who want to heal the wounds of man/society that have been bleeding since the creation of the State of Israel, a Mizrahi is the one who, with courage and reason, is opposed to ethnic and racial discrimination. An Ashkenazi can also be a Mizrahi. Mizrahiness is a culture of tolerance, pluralism and mutual respect. To be Mizrahi is an ambitious goal. The sun appears in the East [author’s note: Hebrew ‘Mizrah’]. To be Mizrahi means to be a man who loves nature, humans and the creator. To be Mizrahi means to break the shackles of oriental hate, fear, incitement and white poison.\footnote{32}

Also in this statement, we see the use of the Mizrahim/Ashkenazim opposition, as well as the color contrast between black and white, the latter being associated with something bad, poisonous. What is interesting is that the writer has created a specific archetype of Mizrahi, one that is quite different from that prevailing in broader society. According to the author of the post, a Mizrahi is a person who loves everyone and everything and is the embodiment of all goodness, beauty, and wisdom.

The Mizrahi opposition movements on Facebook often refer to the legacy of the Israeli Black Panthers. This is the case with a group called ‘Ma-ha-pe-ha mizrahit le-Tsedek Halukati’ (‘Mizrahi re-vo-lu-tion for equitable distribution’)
\footnote{33}, which in its iconography uses a clenched fist, the symbol of both American and Israeli ethnic protest movements. Of the 305 members of the group, some are public figures, representatives of the so-called ‘new Mizrahim’, such as the director of the feminist organization Ahoti/Shula Keshet, and the translator Orly Noy. The ‘Ma-ha-pe-ha...’ is a very active community, with people constantly publishing links to events and articles related to social protests in Israel and to the culture of Mizrahim.

The members of the Facebook Mizrahi groups are also trying to create strategies to defend their culture and memory of the past. This is the aim of the social group which includes 31 people and is called ‘Ha-Gizra ha-mizrahit – Zihronot MaAvar Mizrahi Ganuv (Documenting Jewish-Mizrahi Past)’ (‘Eastern sector – memories from the stolen Mizrahi past (Documenting Jewish-Mizrahi Past)’).
\footnote{34} The founder of the initiative, who is clearly influenced by postcolonial studies, explained her aims in these words:

The purpose of this initiative is to create a Mizrahi Archive, which would bring our Mizrahi ancestors’ voice, past, memories and culture into the Walls of memory.

\footnote{32} The event called ‘To be a Mizrahi in Israel’: \url{https://www.facebook.com/events/450118948410536/} (accessed 25.08.2013).
\footnote{33} ‘Ma-ha-pe-ha mizrahit leCedek Halokti’ (‘Mizrahi re-vo-lu-tion for equitable distribution’), Facebook group: \url{https://www.facebook.com/groups/240315509376433/?fref=ts} (accessed 25.08.2013).
\footnote{34} ‘Ha-Gzerah ha-mizrahit – Zihronot MaAvar Mizrahi Ganuv (Documenting Jewish-Mizrahi Past)’ (‘Eastern Sector – Memories from the Stolen Mizrahi Past (Documenting Jewish-Mizrahi Past)’), Facebook group: \url{https://www.facebook.com/groups/215270268531046/} (accessed 25.08.2013).
Their voice has been stolen by Ashkenazi domination of the National Memory. In colonial regimes, it is, following Frantz Fanon, “[t]he settler that makes history and is conscious of making it”. Israeli ‘Memory’, like any Western National Memory, has been portrayed from a Eurocentric and androcentric stand point ignoring Mizrahi history. It preserves and further reproduces their exclusion by discarding our History from, amongst other, the national curricula.

The purpose of this initiative is to allow our ancestors speak through their own voice. It is usually us, the second and third generations Mizrahis who speak for them, and for us, through our own works, legal, literary, artistic, cultural etc. Let them speak and resist their and our exclusion and squat into the ‘formal archives’ of history, challenging the official story. We take by force the task of ‘story-telling’, deconstruct and decolonize it by creating a counter-herstory that competes with that of the official National story. 35

A slightly different character defines a more popular group, with 206 people, called ‘Silent Exile: Plight of the Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews’. 36 This group is more international and fits more within the official discourse promoted today by the State of Israel, a discourse which emphasizes not so much the Mizrahi heritage but rather their persecution in Islamic countries.

Another category of groups and pages are those directly related to specific social movements, cultural or political, that exist and operate beyond the social networking site. They include fanpages like that of the Ahoti organization37 which has been ‘liked’ by 1823 people; the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition (425 fans)38, and the community portal built around Ha-Oketz39 which presents critical thoughts about society, Mizrahim, politics, media and feminism (4639 fans).

Looking at all the above-mentioned types of sites, we can say that the virtual world is not an accurate representation of the real one. The most popular groups associated with ‘mizrahi-ness’ are those that promote musica mizrahit, and belonging to them is not associated with a deeper reflection on identity, and has no political character. We can also see the antagonization of Mizrahim versus Ashkenazim and the construction of Mizrahi identity on the basis of opposition to the Ashkenazim, and sometimes even the reproduction of stereotypes. Memory, both about their ancestors’ countries of origin and about the fate of the Mizrahim in Israel, plays an important role in many Internet narratives. Stigma, exclusion and emancipatory struggles have become a powerhouse for many Facebook groups. It should be noted

that on Facebook we see an overrepresentation of left-wing groups, identifying with the so-called ‘new Mizrahim’. This is probably because such environments include academics, journalists and activists, for whom social media is one of their tools of work, but is also due to the fact that other Mizrahim do not feel the need to discuss and redefine their identity. On Facebook, we do not find any religious group associated with Mizrahim, yet specific religiosity and adherence to tradition is one of the most important determinants of the Mizrahi communal identity.

Undoubtedly, Mizrahi groups and Facebook pages encourage a consolidation of Mizrahim and are important places not only for reinforcing, but also changing the identity of Mizrahim. It will be intriguing to see how much of what takes place in the social media continue to have real influence in Israeli society.

The development of social media also allows us to take a closer look at the self-perception of those Mizrahim who are not necessarily influential. It is symptomatic for them to define themselves by reference to a rival group, or as a ‘non-Ashkenazi’. There is no doubt that social media groups are promoting the establishment and strengthening of a separate identity, but the membership of such virtual communities is not a mass phenomenon.

**Conclusion**

As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have noted, “identity neither ‘grows out’ of rooted communities nor is a thing that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors. It is, instead a mobile, often unstable relation of difference”.\(^{40}\) Mizrahim in Israel seem to agree with this statement. We can see how the merger of state policy and the common experience of immigrants from Islamic countries led to the creation of the Mizrahi group itself. Initially, it was difficult to expect the Jews of Baghdad who came to Israel to identify with those from Casablanca. Today we see that this sometimes happens because (but not only) of the orientalizing politics of the authorities. However the situation is still evolving. We should not forget that other forces and desires have influenced Mizrahim identities. For instance, people immigrating to Israel were constantly subjected to external pressure, but were also defined by their own personal will, and it is very likely that many of them wanted to ‘modernize’ and become part of the imagined community of Israel.

Although we will not find a single, clear and uncompromising message conveyed by this group, it can be tempting to find some common characteristics. One of them is nostalgia for the lost, often idealized time spent in the Islamic world. Another one is the awareness of being marginalized by the state for years. Finally, the last one is self-identification mainly as Israelis, which often affects those who feel torn between the imaginary East and West (present especially in the book and film creations).

The typical situation of being ‘in-between’ led to a specific way of self-expression, of which the clearest example is musica mizrahit. The Mizrahim’s identity thus appears as a hybrid identity, but they do not always want to label it in that way.

The development of social media allows us to look closer at how the Mizrahim are discussed by those who do not necessarily aspire to the role of ‘opinion-formers’. Is their manner of self-expression different in the semi-private space (i.e. social media)? Certainly it lacks all of the voices present in the public discourse. The people active on these sites typically define themselves by reference to a competitive group, or as a ‘non-Ashkenazi’. There is no doubt that the activity in online groups fosters a consolidation of a separate identity, although membership in such virtual communities is not a mass phenomenon, and in fact is still very much a niche expression.