

Stephanie Schwartz ~ Double-Diaspora In The Literature And Film of Arab Jews



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Abstract

Inspired by the contrapuntal and relational critiques of Edward Said and Ella Shohat, this thesis conducts a comparative analysis of the literature and film of Arab Jews in order to deconstruct discourses on Jewish identity that privilege the dichotomies of Israel-diaspora and Arab-Jew.

[Sami Michael's novel *Refuge*](#), Naim Kattan's memoir *Farewell, Babylon*, Karin Albou's film *Little Jerusalem* and b.h. Yael's video documentary *Fresh Blood: a Consideration of Belonging* reveal the complexities and interconnections of Sephardic, Mizrahi and Arab Jewish experiences across multiple geographies that are often silenced under dominant Eurocentric, Ashkenazi or Zionist interpretations of Jewish history.

Drawing from these texts, Jewish identity is explored through four philosophical themes: Jewish beginnings vs. origins, boundaries between Arab and Jew, the construction of Jewish identities in place and space, and, the concept of diaspora and the importance Jewish difference. As a double-diaspora, with the two poles of their identities seen as enemies in the ongoing conflict between Israel-Palestine, Arab Jews challenge the conception of a single Jewish nation, ethnicity, identity or culture. Jewishness can better be understood as a rhizome, a system without a centre and made of heterogeneous component, that is able to create, recreate and move through multiple territories, rather than ever settling in, or being confined to a single form that seeks to dominate over others. This dissertation contributes a unique theoretical reading of Jewish cultures in the plural, and includes an examination of lesser known Arab Jewish writing and experimental documentary in Canada in relation to Iraq, France and Israel.

Thesis University of Ottawa,
2012: https://ruor.uottawa.ca/Schwartz_Stephanie_2012_thesis.pdf

The Mellah: The Historical Jewish Quarter

Mellah is the Jewish quarter in Morocco. The first official Mellah in Morocco was established in Fez in 1438. The Mellah is like a city within a city. This video takes one back to the history, via postcards, when the Mellah was inhabited by Jews and how it is different today.

Avi Beker ~ The Forgotten Narrative: Jewish Refugees From Arab Countries



Jewish Political Studies Review - Historically, there was an exchange of populations in the Middle East and the number of displaced Jews exceeds the number of Palestinian Arab refugees. Most of the Jews were expelled as a result of an open policy of anti-Semitic incitement and even ethnic cleansing. However, unlike the Arab refugees, the Jews who fled are a forgotten case because of a combination of international cynicism and domestic Israeli suppression of the subject. The Palestinians are the only group of refugees out of the more than one hundred million who were displaced after World War II who have a special UN agency that, according to its mandate, cannot but perpetuate their tragedy. An open debate about the exodus of the Jews is critical for countering the Palestinian demand for the “right of return” and will require a more objective scrutiny of the myths about the origins of the Arab- Israeli conflict.

Introduction

Why was the story of the Jewish refugees from Arab countries suppressed? How did it become a forgotten exodus?

Semha Alwaya, an attorney from San Francisco and former Jewish refugee from Iraq, wrote in March 2005 in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the world is ignoring her story simply because of the “inconvenience for those who seek to blame Israel for all the problems in the Middle East.”¹ As she notes, since 1949 the United Nations has passed more than a hundred resolutions on Palestinian refugees and not a single one on Jewish refugees from Arab countries. The UN makes a clear divide between the “right of return” of millions of refugees even into Israel proper (the pre-1967 borders) and the rights of these Jewish refugees.

Although they exceed the numbers of the Palestinian refugees, the Jews who fled are a forgotten case. Whereas the former are at the very heart of the peace process with a huge UN bureaucratic machinery dedicated to keeping them in the camps, the nine hundred thousand Jews who were forced out of Arab countries have not been refugees for many years. Most of them, about 650,000, went to Israel because it was the only country that would admit them. Most of them resided in tents that after several years were replaced by wooden cabins, and stayed in what were actually refugee camps for up to twelve years. They never received any aid or even attention from the UN Relief And Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, or any other international agency. Although their plight was raised almost every year at the UN by Israeli representatives, there was never any other reference to their case at the world body.

Only at the end of October 2003 was a bipartisan resolution (H. Con. Res. 311) submitted to the U.S. Congress that recognized the “Dual Middle East Refugee Problem.” It speaks of the forgotten exodus of nine hundred thousand Jews from Arab countries who “were forced to flee and in some cases brutally expelled amid coordinated violence and anti-Semitic incitement that amounted to ethnic cleansing.” Referring to the “population exchange” that took place in the Middle East, the resolution deplores the “cynical perpetuation of the Arab refugee crisis” and criticizes the “immense machinery of UNRWA” that only “increases violence through terror.” The resolution called on UNRWA to set up a program for resettling the Palestinian refugees.

Typically, the issue of the Jewish refugees was not on the agenda of the Israeli-

Palestinian negotiations for a final settlement at Camp David in July 2000. The subject emerged only after the parties failed to reach an agreement on the issue of the Palestinian refugees. Only then did the Israelis raise the question of justice for the Jews from Arab countries.

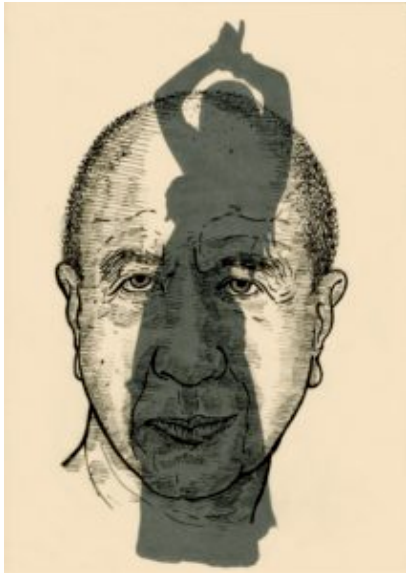
In addition to the international constraints, there have been domestic political reasons for successive Israeli governments' suppression of the subject. Many Israelis regarded the immigration and later integration of the Middle Eastern Jews into Israeli society as an important element in the Zionist ethos of the ingathering of exiles, and there was a reluctance to describe it in terms of a forced expulsion or, at best, an involuntary emigration. The Zionist leadership of the newborn state chose the romanticized code-name Magic Carpet to describe the immigration from Yemen, and the biblical title Operation Ezra and Nehemiah – they were Jewish leaders who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon to build the Second Temple – for the exodus of the Iraqi Jews.

Read more: <https://www.jcpa.org/jpsr/jpsr-beker-f05.htm>

Egypt Reopens Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue After Restoration

Egypt reopened the two and half century old Jewish synagogue, Eliyahu Hanavi after three years of restoration. It can accommodate 700 people; however, in 2018, the Jewish community in Alexandria counted for less than 10 members.

The Ballet Dance Of The Pita In The Hummus Plate



Ronny Someck - Ills.:
Joseph Sassoon Semah

I begin in the East: East is the crown that Mohamed Abd el-Wahab placed on the head of "Cleopatra." East is the dust left by a galloping horse on the road between Ras Mohammed and Nuweiba. East is the ballet dance of the pita on the hummus plate. East is a bag of tears hidden in the corridor of Umm Kulthum's throat. East is Mahmoud Darwish's suitcase. East is two lines by Omar Khayyam: "Ah could I hide me in my song, To kiss thy lips from which it flows!". East is the space between 'tfadl' (Arabic for "please") to *sahten* (Arabic for "well done") חסרה שורה על סבא סלח . East is Grandmother Haviva's plate of rice. East is a yellowing picture of palm trees on the banks of the Tigris. East is where the sun rises every day.

Umm Kulthum was the first singer I ever heard. She was the queen of the gramophone at the café on Struma Square. My grandfather had a regular table there, and he took me there every morning. It was a five minute walk from the transit camp on the border of Holon-Bat Yam. He spoke only Arabic. The black box of his memoirs contained the gap between the Tigris and the Euphrates. From time to time, he would turn his head to me and wet my lips with drops of arak.

Other children, for example, learned to recognize lions from books or at the zoo. The first lions I saw were the ones printed on the arak bottle labels. My first king of the jungle had a combed mane and it was wet from the drops of the drink, which was well blended with the smell of the jasmine branches that the owner of the café placed in vases on the tables every morning. Umm Kulthum's voice mingles in my head with the sound of the backgammon dice and the murmurs of the men who whispered every word along with her. Her picture, which hung on the wall, frightened me. She was the great woman from the dreams. Not my dreams. But my grandfather would translate lines from her songs into fractured Hebrew for me and try to fish from my eyes half of the lust that flooded his own.

My friends were in kindergarten back then. They sang Shavuot songs like "Baskets on our Shoulders" and others, which polished the Hebrew in their throats, while I was captivated by the hammering of a woman's voice that struck a lost, distant love. Later, when she sang: "I accustomed my eyes to watch you/if you do not come one day/ that day will be erased from my life". I believed secretly that these lines were directed at me, too.

Then I heard other voices, but the ritual of hearing her new song on the first Thursday of every month continued. My parents knew that she was Nasser's singer, and that he was an enemy, and she would often sing to the Egyptian soldiers in order to sharpen their bayonets, which were aimed at us. But in the face of her magical voice, even reason released its grip.

Umm Kulthum is present in the poems I wrote about her as well as in the sense of power of an entire orchestra that lays out a carpet for her vocal chords. I learned from her how to unravel threads from the same carpet and how to weave poetry from them, association after association. She reminds me that I was born in Baghdad.

I wrote my first poems when I was sixteen and a half years old. The secret drawer was locked. I played basketball then and my coach asked us to shoot fifty baskets every day. When I went to the school's basketball court, I found Amnon Navot there. We had an agreement. He brought back all the balls that didn't touch the net, and in return I listened to the poems he recited. Thus, against the soundtrack of the bouncing balls, Amnon recited Avidan, Amichai, Guri, Dor, Ravikovitch, and Wallach, Wieseltier, Horowitz, Penn, Gilboa, Alterman and once even half a story by Kaniuk. In his school bag were poetry books and copies of the journal Achshav.

Navot was the engine and I connected the cars of association. "Just a little blood to top off the honey," he would shout, and since then I have been running on the bridge with the poems running after me.[1] I sent the first poems to David Avidan. He answered immediately, read one of my poems on a radio program, and even called me when my first poem was published in the literary supplement of Ma'ariv (edited by David Giladi). Avidan was, in my eyes, the hard asphalt that paved the "roads that take off slowly." [2] He was the "cutting and simple fact we have nowhere to go." [3] He was the poet who had been cut out of the dream journal. The musical scale of his songs reminded me more off a rock and roll stadium than a concert hall.

In the last year of my military service, I worked with street gangs in Beit Shemesh. Before that I had worked in the Ktzi'ot prison. The difficulty of making the transition to working with a street gang was primarily mental. In the soldier's library one could find a copy of Sartre's "Intimacy," while the only reading materials these youth had were arrest warrants. I never believed until then that one could actually grow up without Pink Floyd's "Atom Heart Mother" or conduct a debate for a whole night on the difference between the detention cell at the Russian Compound and the one at the police station in town. From these adolescents I learned that a knife is first of all a knife and only secondly a metaphor for a knife. I learned that the first rule of the jungle is that there are no rules and, first and foremost, that when you bang your head against the wall, there's a good chance the wall will break too.

Once a week I ran away from there. The city of refuge was called a creative writing workshop. I was suspicious of the meeting with other writers, yet fascinated. "Each and every man" Halpi once wrote, "is a little pope in the Vatican of his life." But the real popes were the workshop teachers. Yehuda Amichai spoke about his diet and his sense that he would not teach how to write, but how to erase. Dan Pagis empowered the word "reduction." T. Carmi painted our faces in Indians war paints when he presented three lines of a poet with an eagle eye, and Amir Gilboa sat facing us, poems engraved on his forehead. There was a sense that the poets had suddenly fallen from the shelf and become flesh and blood. But more than what happened in the room happened in the road between Batei Mahase Square and Jaffa Gate. It was a Socratic walk. Amichai taught me that poetry can also be in a vendor's tomato box in the Old City, and Amir Gilboa would always stop by the Armenian's tattoo shop and say "one day you will write

a poem about it." I am a student of both of them. I learned from Gilboa that resting the pen on a paper resembles placing a gun to the temple and from Amichai I learned that that same gun does not forget the finger that pulled the trigger.

"Poetry," said Christopher Frey, "is the language in which man explores his own amazement." To this amazement I'm adding a scratch.

The first cultural war in which I participated took place between the Elvis Presley camp and the Cliff Richard camp. Cliff's people were, usually, the good kids from the youth movements. We, the Elvis people, were a metaphor that could ride on the back seat of a motorcycle. It was enough to hear a song of his in order to dress the words in black leather suits and boots designed for the gas pedal only. There were no thoughts, for example, about a mechanic's black nails after cleaning a tail pipe. I wondered then how, in the movies, Elvis came out of the pool with his hair perfectly combed and brilliantined, exactly as it had been before he jumped in, every time. In general, by the way, this relationship between brilliantine and Elvis reminds me of Sabah, the king of the neighborhood of my youth. Sabah grew out his short hair just so he could dress it with brilliantine. Clearly he was an Elvis man, and clearly he dreamed of a motorcycle. His father went out in his pajamas to buy ice, and Sabah, alongside him, was the proof that a renewed meeting between father and son could have only occurred in a synagogue. Once he received a gift, a ticket for Cliff Richard's concert at the Ramat Gan stadium. On the day of the concert, he deliberated whether he should go to the concert or burn the ticket. Cliff has never been seen holding the handlebars of a motorcycle even in his imagination, and the result was that I can smell the burning of the ticket to this day.

I'm re-painting the war colors of this distant argument, because at the end of the day it is a poetic disagreement. This is an argument over wording. Or, in other words, is it possible to sing only about a rose or are we required in a song about a rose to mention the thorns that also grow on its stem? I already liked the thorns back then. The music was the tunnel and the headlights of the car were the light at its end. Therefore, Elvis's rock and roll took me to the suicidal voice of Jim Morrison, to Eric Clapton's guitar, which knew how to tighten fingers into a fist, to the alcohol-soaked voice of Marianne Faithfull, and especially to the minefield New York's avant-garde. Elliott Sharp, the musician with whom I recorded several pieces, plays like he is sweeping plucked feathers from the floor of the

slaughterhouse. "Music," I wrote about him, "is never the last request/emitted by the lips of the victim in the face of the guns/it is the path of escape in the rusty heart of the barbed wire fences." In my poems, I attempt to glorify that rust.

P.S. And perhaps I can reduce the whole story to the two years during which I stammered. To two years of near silence. The silent person, especially if he is nine years old, is the ultimate listener. The silent person is an avenger.

נקמת הילד המגמגם

היום אני מדבר לזכר המלים שפעם נתקעו לי
בפה,

לזכר גלגלי השנים שפוררו הברות
מתחת ללשון והריחו את אבק השרפות
ברוח בין הלע לשפתים החשוכות.
חלמתי אז להבריח את המלים שנאָרְזו כסחורות גנובות
במחסני הפה,

לקרע את אריזות הקרטון ולשלף את
צעצועי האלף-בית.

המורה היתה מניחה יד על כתפי ומספֶּרֶת שגם משה
גמגם ובכל זאת הגיע להר סיני.

ההר שלי היה ילדה שיִשְׁבָּה
לידי בפתה, ולא היתה לי אש בסנה הפה
כדי להבעיר, לנגד עיניה,
את המלים שנשרפו באהבתי אותה.

Revenge of the Stuttering Child

I speak today in memory of the words which once stuck in my mouth
in memory of the toothy gears which crushed syllables
under my tongue and smelled the gunpowder
in the gap between the gullet and the arid lips.

My dream then was to smuggle the words packed like stolen goods
in the mouth's warehouse,
to rip the cardboard boxes open and pull out the
toys of the alphabet.

The teacher would lay a hand on my shoulder and say that Moses, too,
stuttered but nonetheless made it to Mt. Sinai.

My mountain was a girl who sat
next to me in class, and I had no fire in the bush of my mouth
to ignite, before her very eyes,
the words consumed by my love of her.

Poem translated by Vivian Eden

Notes

[1] This is a reference to the poem “Jonathan” by Yonah Wallach. This line is taken from Linda Zisquit’s translation in *Wild Light*. Sheep Meadow Press, New York, 1997, 1-878818-54-6.

[2] This is a reference to Avidan’s poem “The Streets Take off Slowly.”

[3] This is from the poem “Power of Attorney” by David Avidan.

Ronny Someck: <http://www.ronnysomeck.com/>

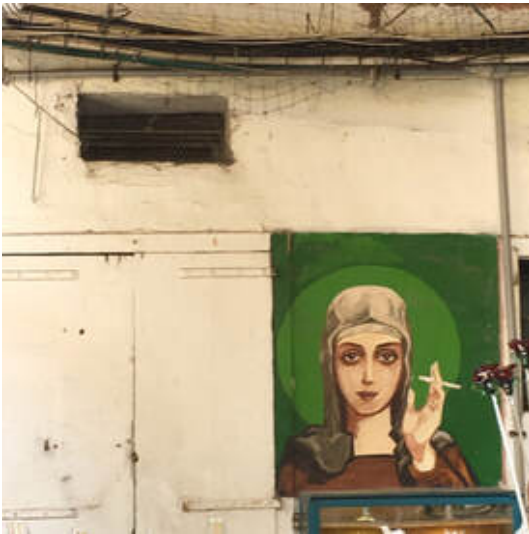
Sophie Levy ~ Fiction, Poetry, And The Shaping Of Mizrahi Cultural Consciousness

*“So sometimes people think we are Arabs
and they are Jews?”*

*[My nephew’s] words make flocks of birds fly through my body
ripping my blood vessels in the commotion
and I want to tell him about my Grandmother Sham’a
and Uncle Moussa and Uncle Daoud and Uncle Awad
But at the age of six he already has
Grandmother Ziona
Grandmother Yaffa
lots of uncles
and fear and war
he received as a gift*

from the state.”

- Adi Keissar, “Clock Square”



Ills.: The Current

I read Adi Keissar’s poetry for the first time at fifteen years old, when my mother forwarded me a link to Haaretz’s Poem of the Week under the headline [“Who’s who? Who’s an Arab, who’s a Jew?”](#)

The poem was a vignette of a conversation between Keissar and her young nephew as they walked beside the clock tower in Jaffa, tracing the aftermath of his distant observation of a man speaking Arabic. With each consecutive line, I felt like an anvil had been dropped on my chest (in the best way possible). Why did a Persian girl from Los Angeles who hadn’t really thought about her Judaism in years feel such a punch in the gut from a poem by a Yemeni woman in Israel? It felt incomplete and a little tacky to exclusively attribute my reaction to our shared Judaism. There was another layer to consider— a quiet but strong common denominator between the way I thought of my family and the way Keissar wrote about hers, even though I grew up hearing Farsi spoken more than Arabic, and I am American, not Israeli.

I only heard the word Mizrahi used to describe people from Middle-Eastern and North African Jewish backgrounds a few weeks before I read “Clock Square.” It made sense to me that there was another word for us out there—for Jewish people who called ourselves Sephardi even though our supposedly Spanish lineage seemed less-than-factual. It felt good to become aware of this new, audibly

articulated way of making a distinction I wanted made—not because I resented the Sephardi label, but because I noticed something different about the community from which I came, and those differences were bound to Iran, not Spain. I let the word roll around inside my head and off my tongue. Mizrahi. So that's what I'm called.

The complete article The Current - Fall 2019: <http://www.columbia-current.org/fiction-poetry-and-the-shaping-of-mizrahi-cultural-consciousness.html>