

# “Sant al-Tasqit”: Seventy Years Since The Departure Of Iraqi Jews



*Ella Shohat. Ills.: Joseph Sassoon Semah*

*Source: jadaliyya.com.* Seven decades after their massive exodus, the narrative about the departure of Iraqi Jews is hardly settled, not even within the displaced community itself. A continuous millennial existence in Mesopotamia was rendered impossible in the wake of a historical vortex generated by overpowering political forces and conflicting ideologies. The fall of the Ottoman Empire, the subsequent rule of British colonialism, and the emergence of Jewish and Arab nationalist movements generated internal and external political pressures on the Jewish-Iraqi community. The Zionist redefinition of Jewishness as an ethno-nationality, which was in discord with its traditional status as a religion, brought about new dilemmas and tensions, irrespective of how the Arab Jews may have viewed their Jewish affiliation. The clashing political camps of colonialism, monarchism, and communism, as well as of Zionism and Iraqi/Arab nationalism, underline the story of a community pulled in opposite directions. Consequently, Arab Jews ended up becoming the collateral damage of warring ideological zones, a diasporization born out of historically new colliding movements.

The majority of Iraqi Jews were dislocated in the wake of the U.N. partition of Palestine, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the *nakba*. Between

1950–1951, about 120,000 Iraqi Jews ended up departing, largely for Israel, in a process referred to as *tasqit al-jinsiyya*— the precondition of relinquishing Iraqi citizenship required for exiting without the possibility of return. This exodus, recalled among Iraqi Jews as “*sant al-tasqit*” (the year of the *tasqit*), is conventionally narrated as the end of the Babylonian Exile and the fulfillment of the promised messianic return to Zion. Within Jewish tradition, Babylon is a site of the Diaspora, the ultimate exilic condition epitomized in the Biblical phrase “By the waters of Babylon we laid down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” Converting religious concepts into an ethno-nationalist discourse, the Zionist notion of ‘*Aliya* (literally “ascendancy”) has had the effect of mystifying the epic-scale cross-border movement between enemy zones. What was lived as a wrenchingly chaotic experience was emplotted as having a liturgically-sanctioned purpose culminating in a kind of happy end. Indeed, the very official term deployed for the airlifting of Iraqi Jews to Israel, “Operation Ezra and Nehemia” invoked the prophets associated with the Biblical return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. In a more modern and secular parlance, the nomenclature celebrated the return to the legitimate “Land of origins.” Yet, such discourses downplayed the multilayered social, material, and emotional toll of the dislocation—for instance, the fact that many Iraqi Jews in Israel continued to pine for a place that had been seen simply as home. What is often recounted as the “ingathering of the exiles” and the restoration of “the Diaspora” to Jerusalem, was in fact a painfully complicated experience, an ongoing intergenerational trauma which engendered an ambivalent sense of belonging for dislocated Middle Eastern Jews. This return, within a longer historical perspective, could also be viewed as a new modality of exile, hence my inversion (in “Reflections of an Arab-Jew,” 1992): “By the waters of Zion we laid down and wept, when we remembered Babylon.”



Image

source:

<https://www.elal.com/magazine/portfolio-items/moreshet/ezra-and-nehemiah/>

### *Departing and its Discontents*

In many ways, the departure is a consequence of a shifting set of geopolitical circumstances in the post-World War I era, but mostly of the facts-on-the-ground *Yishuv* settlements, the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the 1947 U.N. resolution to partition Palestine. The 1948 foundation of the State of Israel and the consequent massive dislocation of Palestinians to neighboring Arab countries placed indigenous Middle Eastern Jews in an acutely vulnerable position. Within the landscape of crossed-affinities, Arab Jews had to pledge allegiance to one identity articulated by two clashing movements— either “Jewish” or “Arab” —both newly defined under a novel historical banner of ethno-national affiliation. In dissonance with the traditional view of Judaism as a religion, the Zionist ethno-nationalist redefinition generated new predicaments for the community itself. Some of the Iraqi-Jewish youth came to view Israel as a promising option, especially since Arab nationalism also generated new predicaments for Arab Jews. Ironically, the Zionist view of Arabness and Jewishness as mutually exclusive gradually came to be shared by Arab nationalist discourse, placing Arab Jews on the horns of a terrible dilemma. The rigidity of both paradigms has produced the particular Jewish-Arab crisis, since neither paradigm can easily contain porous identities and multiple belongings.

The Zionist pressure to dislodge Jewish communities and end “the *gola*” (Diaspora) on the one hand, and the Arab nationalist gradual equation of Judaism with Zionism, on the other, brought about the eventual parting of Arab Jews from their homes. Within the rapidly shifting environment, Jews in Iraq, Egypt, Syria and so forth had to defend a Jewishness that was associated for the first time in their history not with religious culture but with colonial nationalism. These momentous events resulted in general expressions of hostility and various discriminatory measures toward indigenous Jews throughout the region. In the post-1948 era, with the deteriorating conflict in Palestine, the push-and-pull pincer movement became increasingly more intense. While the Palestinians were experiencing the *nakba*, Arab Jews woke up to a new world order that could not accommodate their simultaneous Jewishness and Arabness. The Orientalist split between “the Jew” and “the Arab” as two separate entities, already in embryo within colonized Middle East/North Africa, was to fully materialize with the 1947 partition. It resulted in the corollary dispossession and dispersal of Palestinians largely to Arab zones, as well as in the concomitant dislocation of Arab Jews largely to Israel. Thus, the dislocation is embedded in a new ethno-nationalist

lexicon of Jews and Arabs. The historical question is whether Arab regimes bear the full weight of the responsibility for the dislocation of Arab Jews, who consequently had to be rescued by Israel; or whether, the emergence of the Zionist movement could itself be seen as igniting turmoil for Middle Eastern Jews who until the escalation of the Jewish/ Arab conflict were not in need of saving? Or, perhaps both?

Since post-'48 Palestinian refugees were arriving *en masse* to the Arab world, Arab Jews were placed in an impossible position. A product both of colonialism and nationalism, the overpowering regional conflict situated Arab Jews between crushing opposing forces, while the community as a whole had little control over circumstances that had colossal bearing on their very existence. The departure from the Arab world, in this sense, was not simply the result of a decision made solely by the community and its individual members themselves. It took place, for the most part, without the Arab Jews' comprehensive awareness of what was the role played by each party in their alarming push-and-pull situation; and thus, what was really at stake in their departure and what was yet to come. Terrified by the indiscriminate animosity propagated against "*al-yahud*" in Iraq, the Jewish Iraqis were simultaneously buffeted by manipulated confusion, misunderstandings, and projections provoked by a Zionism that blended messianic religiosity with secular nationalist purposes. While on one level, their departure was marked by an anticipation for a land imbricated with liturgical sentiment, on another, it was driven by fear and hope for refuge—key emotional elements compelling the final lock on the doors to their millennial home.

Nationalist paradigms hardly capture the complexity of this historical moment of rupture for Arab Jews. The idiosyncrasies of the situation of a community trapped between two nationalisms—Arab and Jewish—have generated a proliferation of terms to designate the dislocation. In fact, each term used to designate the displacement seems problematic precisely due to the ambiguity of its circumstances. None of the terms—"aliya" (ascendancy), "yetzi'a" (exit), "exodus," "expulsion," "immigration," "emigration," "exile," "refugees," "expatriots," and "population-exchange—" are adequate. In the case of the Palestinians, the forced mass exodus corresponds to the conventional understanding of the notion "refugees," since they never wanted to leave Palestine and have maintained the desire to return. In the case of Arab Jews, the question of will, desire, and agency remain much more ambivalent and

ambiguous.

The very proliferation of terms suggests that it is not only a matter of legal definition of citizenship that is at stake, but also the issue of mental maps of belonging. The post-'48 circumstances generated a rather anomalous situation that to my mind was neither the paradigmatic refugee nor the archetypal immigrant story. Could the departure of the Iraqi Jews be seriously regarded as an exercise of free will and a matter of straightforward agency? And once out of Iraq and unable to go back, even for a visit, did they regret the impossibility of their return? In the post-'48 climate of uncharted anxiety about their Iraqi future, the various push-and-pull forces steered many into the *tasqit*. The Meir Tweig synagogue inaugurated in 1942 and located in the affluent district of al-Bataween, was one of the sites for the registration of the departing Jews. As a *tasqit* point, the synagogue was no longer merely a gathering place for worship and socializing, but a site of rupture—of giving up Iraqi citizenship in exchange for a *laissez-passer* stipulating that the document holder is definitively not permitted to return. (Stamped in the Arabic as "*la yasmahu li-hamilihi bi-l-'awda illa al-'Iraq batatan*." ) The virtually over-night cross-border movement was thus not only a physical dislocation but also a cultural and emotional displacement, a defining traumatizing event in the recent history of Iraqi Jews.



Registration point for departure from Iraq at the Meir Tweig Synagogue[1]

These traumatic displacements have shaped new national and ethnic identities where officially stamped classifications did not necessarily correspond to cultural affiliation and political identification. Emotional belonging has existed in tension with identity cards and travel documents such as passports and laissez-passers, or in the absence of such papers altogether. Some have been shorn of citizenship for decades (such as post-1948 Palestinians who repeatedly moved from camp to camp); while others have partaken in forms of citizenship that have not been hospitable to the complexities of their cultural identity (like the Arab Jews). Against this backdrop, “Arab” and “Jew,” as I suggested in my earlier work, came to form mutually exclusive categories, with “the Arab-Jew” becoming an ontological oxymoron and an epistemological subversion. The notions of “Palestine” and “the Arab-Jew,” in this sense, stand not simply for historical facts, and for their contestations, but rather for a critical prism. Just as all communities, traditions, and identities may be said to be “invented,” the idea of “the Arab-Jew,” I have argued, provides a post-partition figure through which to critique segregationist narratives while also opening up imaginative potentialities.

One could provide an analysis, as some historians have indeed done, of a multidimensional political context that engendered the vulnerable position of Arab Jews within Arab spaces. Critical forms of discourse and scholarship have delineated the intricate positioning of ethnic and religious minority-communities throughout the region, taking on board such issues as: the colonial divide-and-conquer tactics and strategies that actively endangered various “minorities” including Arab Jews; the implementation of Zionism as an exclusivist project toward the Arabs of/in Palestine; the hostile rhetoric of some forms of Arab nationalism that deemed all Jews Zionists; the massive arrival of desperate Palestinian refugees in Arab countries; and the various “on the ground” activities, some violently provocative, to dislodge Iraqi, Egyptian, or Moroccan Jews from their homelands.



Image

source:

<https://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com/2017/11/an-israeli-stamp-on-cereal-packet-could.html?m=1>

Even if a growing number of Jews in countries such as Iraq were expressing a desire to go to Israel (or to the *Eretz Israel* liturgical parlance), the question is why, suddenly, after millennia of not doing so, would they leave overnight? The displacement, for most Arab Jews, was the product of entangled circumstances in which panic and disorientation, rather than a simple desire for '*aliya*, in the nationalist sense of the word, played a key role. In Iraq, even subsequent to the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish community was founding new enterprises, a fact that hardly indicates an institutionalized or organized plan to evacuate. The "ingathering" then seems less natural and inevitable when one takes into account the intricate political environment that engendered the departure from Iraq, to wit: 1) the efforts of the Zionist underground in Iraq to denigrate the authority of the traditional Jewish community leaders, especially Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, who did not subscribe to this new version of Jewishness;[2] 2) its attempts to place a "wedge" between the Jewish and Muslim communities;[3] 3) the Iraqi institutionalization of discriminatory practices

toward Jews; 4) the vehement anti-Jewish propaganda visibly circulating in the public sphere, especially as channeled through the Istiqlal (Independence) Party; 5) the reticence on the part of many non-Jewish Arab intellectuals to spell out the distinction between “Jews” and “Zionists”; 6) the failure of the Iraqi political leadership to actively secure the place of Jews in the country; 7) the persecution of communists, among them Jews, who opposed the Zionist idea; 8) the secretive agreements between some Iraqi and Israeli leaders concerning the departure of Jews to Israel; and 9) the misconceptions, on the part of many Arab Jews, about the differences between their own religious identity, affiliation, or sentiments and the modern nation-state project, premised on a Eurocentric secular vision even while invoking a quasi-religious messianic rhetoric.

To this day, discussion of the circumstances that led to the departure of Iraqi Jews provokes a heated political quarrel especially vis-à-vis the 1948 Palestinian refugee question. The dominant Arab nationalist discourse has represented the mass departure of Jews as a sign of the Jewish betrayal of the Arab nation. The dominant Israeli discourse, meanwhile, has narrated the same departure as a story of expulsion of Jews. More recently, the issue of “Jewish refugees from Arab and Muslim countries” has been linked to the 1948 Palestinian exodus as part of an effort to dispute Palestinian claims of expulsion and dispossession. As a new version of the older rhetoric of “population exchange” between Arab and Jewish refugees, the *nakba* and the *tasqit* have been lately circulating as equivalent historical events. When discussed together in the international public sphere, the discourse on the mass departure from Iraq is paralleled to the 1948 Palestinian refugees in a kind of contestation of the *nakba* (the catastrophe), performing a combat over the monopoly on historical suffering. The pairing of the *nakba* exodus with the presumably equivalent case of the *tasqit* exodus has attempted to assuage Israeli responsibility for the Palestinian dislocation. In its updated version, in a kind of “narrative envy” usually projected onto Palestinian intellectuals, each argument used to reject the *nakba* expulsion is echoed with a similar argument and phrasing with regards to Arab Jews. The tragedy of “the Palestinian refugees” is answered with the tragedy of “the forgotten refugees from Arab countries;” “the expulsion of Palestinians” is cancelled out by “the expulsion of Jews from Arab countries;” “the transfer” and “ethnic cleansing” of Palestinians is correlated with “the transfer” and “ethnic cleansing” of Jews from Arab countries; and even “the Palestinian *nakba*” is retroactively matched with a “*nakba* of Jews from Arab countries.” Yet, without engaging the consequences of



nationalism, the recent campaign for “justice for the forgotten Jewish refugees from Arab countries” silences the violent dispossession of Palestinians summed up in the word *nakba*, as if one event annulled the ethical-political implications of the other.

Some versions of the “Jewish refugees from Arab countries” discourse, moreover, embeds the assumption of Muslims as perennial persecutors of Jews, absorbing the history of Jews in Arab/Muslim countries into what could be called a “pogromized” version of “Jewish History.” In its most tendentious forms, this rhetoric incorporates the Arab Jewish experience into the Shoah, evident for example in the campaign to include the 1941 *farhud* attacks on Jews in Iraq in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. One can denounce the violence of the *farhud*, and even connect it to Nazi propaganda in Iraq coming out of Berlin, without instrumentalizing it to equate Arabs with Nazis, or forge a discourse of eternal Muslim anti-Semitism. Apart from the fact that during the *farhud* some Muslims also protected their Jewish neighbors, the designation of the violent event as a pogrom has shaped a Eurocentric historical narrative for Iraqi Jews. This millennial persecution discourse connects the dots from pogrom to pogrom, projecting the historical experience of Jews in Christian-Europe onto the experience of Jews in Muslim spaces. Such discourse *farhudizes*, as it were, Iraqi-Jewish history, as though the 1941 moment is emblematic of the story of “Jews under Islam.” The present-day discussion of the *tasqit al-jinsiyya* has, in sum, been subjected to contradictory interpretations and marshalled for radically divergent purposes, with each historical reading having serious legal, political, and cultural implications.

### *Remaining and Its Discontent*

The community’s displacement evokes two contradictory exilic/homecoming narratives: on the one hand, the Zionist translation of the Biblical redemptive restoration—“kibbutz galuiot”—into a modern nation-state formation; and, on the other, the uprooting of a community from its indigenous geography in Mesopotamia/Iraq. Bavel, traditionally the Biblical locus of Babylonian Exile was after all also the millennial home for Jews whose notion of “Return to the Promised Land” was premised on a set of messianic beliefs. Hence, the historical opposition to the Zionist idea among traditionally observing Jews, for whom the formation of Jewish nationalism signified a rupture with Judaism, advancing a blasphemous idea, a kind of false messiah. The figure of Hakham Bashi (the Chief

Rabbi and also the President of the Jewish community) Sasson Khdhuri epitomizes, in a way, the story of a well-established community that came under horrendous pressures leading to its fragmentation and ultimate collapse. With the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel, the *tasqit* resulted in the departure of the majority of Iraqi Jews. However, some did remain in Iraq, enduring family separation. They lived through wars, revolutions, and a dictatorial regime that rendered hellish the situation of all Iraqis, but took on a specifically-compounded reality for Jews, existing as they did under the unrelenting suspicion of disloyalty. Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, along with a few members of his family, was among those who stayed in Iraq, although some of his children left for Israel. The enormous task of representing the community fell largely on the shoulders of the Hakham.[4] Separated until the end of his life from most members of his family, the Hakham continued his role in working to safeguard the Jewish community in Iraq. Throughout five turbulent decades, until his death in Baghdad in 1971, Hakham Sasson Khdhuri navigated the powerful political shifts in the region that had momentous consequences for the Jewish Iraqi community and for Middle Eastern Jews more broadly.



The visit of King Faisal I to the Jewish community in 1924.  
Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, front row, fourth from right.[5]

Although the majority of Iraqi Jews were not involved in political activity—whether Arab nationalist, Zionist, or communist—they were involuntarily and dangerously implicated in these clashing ideologies. As Iraq's *Hakham*

*Bashi*—the Chief Rabbi and also the President of the Jewish community—Sasson Khdhuri was vocal in publicly distancing the Jewish community from the unfolding events in Palestine. Already, for example in 1936 with the escalation of the conflict between the Jewish Yishuv and Palestinians in Mandatory Palestine, the *Hakham*, in his capacity as the president of the Jewish community in Iraq, published a statement on behalf of Iraq's *al-ta'ifa al-Isra'iliyya* (the Israelite community). Its purpose was to clear the Jews of Iraq of any doubt that may be cast on them concerning their possible association with the Zionist movement. "None of the members of the Israelite community of Iraq," wrote the *Hakham*, "have any relation, contact, or joint activities with the Zionist movement, in any respect." The *Hakham's* declaration insisted that the members of the community never "supported or adopted this movement neither inside nor outside of Palestine," since the "Jews of Iraq are Iraqis, and they are part of the Iraqi people" who are their "Iraqi brothers" and with whom they share "everything through thick and thin." The declaration also emphasized that the community's members "share the same feelings as all Iraqis, whether in joyful or troubled times." [6] The various pronouncements against the Zionist movement made by religious leaders, including by *Hakham* Sasson Khdhuri, have been the subject of much political debate and historiographical interpretation. Was the antagonistic stance toward Zionism a result of deep religious beliefs as indicated by the traditional leaders themselves, or of the leaders' effort to maintain their grip on power as Zionist activists claimed? Were the petitions signed by the *Hakham* across several decades, before and after the *tasqit*, a result of coercion by the various Iraqi regimes; or of a desire to shield and protect the vulnerable community; or of a sincere theological rejection of a sacrilegious nationalist idea? In the post-1948 era, the circumstances of Iraqi Jews were to be transformed dramatically, engendering a general state of insecurity. The ideological tension concerning the future of Iraqi Jews, and the concomitant tensions between the traditional leadership of the community and the Zionist underground movement, reached an unprecedented paroxysm. Mediating between the Iraqi regime and the Jewish community, the *Hakham* pursued an approach of reconciliation which was regarded by some Jews as, at best, inadequate and which was denounced especially by the Zionists as appeasement of a persecutory regime. [7] With the increasing number of arrests of youths accused of Zionist activity, outraged community members expressed their frustration and an unusual demonstration was organized against the *Hakham*, leading to his resignation as the head of the Baghdad Jewish community in December 1949. [8]

With the implementation of the *tasqit al-jinsiyya* law, the anxiety around staying or leaving was palpable. Some of the *Hakham's* children, like the oldest and the

family's matriarchal figure, Victoria, were hardcore Zionists. His daughter, Marcelle, for her part, moved to Israel following her communist husband, Edward Semah, who believed that Israel would be a safer place than Iraq, where communism was outlawed. (This former lawyer for the Iraqi military became a lawyer for the Israeli Histadrut, the General Organization of Workers. In Iraq, Edward, according to his son Joseph Sassoon Semah, had naively believed in "the *kibbutz's* propaganda" about equality but after arrival to Israel he became deeply disillusioned, "feeling badly mistreated." On his deathbed, Edward confessed to his son Joseph that if he had had the chance, he would have done it all differently and not moved to Israel.[9]) Although the majority of Iraqi Jews were dislocated in the wake of the partition of Palestine and the establishment of Israel, a minority of the community's members did not register for the *tasqit*. The reasons for staying were various, including because they saw themselves first and foremost as Iraqis, and/or they believed the storm would pass, and/or they simply did not want to abandon their lives. After the *tasqit* and the exodus of the majority of Iraqi Jews, however, the *Hakham* resumed his leadership position. He continued to practice a flexible approach to Jewishness that accommodated shifting social mores. Deeply involved in the remaining community's life, in celebration and in mourning, the *Hakham* was a vital symbolic figure for its Jewish identity.



Hakham Sasson Khdhuri attending a graduation ceremony in the Jewish School, Frank Einy, Baghdad, early 1960s[10]

In the period following the *tasqit*, the cataclysmic atmosphere subsided. Although the anxiety linked to the Israel/Arab conflict persisted, this period is nonetheless characterized by relative stability in comparison with the following decade of the post-1963 coup d'état and especially with the violence of the post-1967 War era. With the 1968 coup d'état, the dictatorial Ba'athist control of Iraq had a devastating impact on Iraqis of all denominations. The terrorizing measures taken to crush the regime's real or imagined adversaries led, as we know, to the imprisonment, torture, kidnapping, and killing of many innocent Iraqi citizens generally, but the repression became exacerbated in the case of the Jewish community, now under a blanket suspicion of treason. The surveillance of all Iraqis became for Iraqi Jews a ready-made accusation of collaboration with "*al-'adu al-Sahyuni*" ("the Zionist enemy"), which resulted in violent acts and carried dangerous implications for the very existence of a Jewish community in Iraq. As a result of the Ba'ath-sponsored repression between 1969 and 1971, the numbers of the already dwindling community continued to shrink. Faced with a terrifying reality, those who did remain in post-*tasqit* Iraq were now compelled into fleeing, leaving behind a virtual eclipse of the once-thriving Jewish-Iraqi communal life. A dispersal from a millennial existence in Mesopotamia that has taken Iraqi Jews to such countries as the U.K., Israel, Canada, and the U.S. By the time of the 2003 invasion, Iraqi Jews in an estimate numbering only in the tens remained during the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.[11] Despite its indigenous history in the land, the Jewish-Iraqi community came under fateful pressures, which ultimately fractured its intricate social structure and led to its utter fragmentation.

In the 1999 biography of the *Hakham* written by his son, Sha'ul Hakham Sasson, the author who stayed with his father in Iraq, vehemently attempts to contest the negative image of the *Hakham*, whose reputation tended to be rather maligned within the Zionist narrative.[12] Entitled in Arabic *Ra'in wa-ra'eeyya* (*A Leader and his Community*), the book is a testimony of the son who passionately argues that the



Book Cover of Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's Ra' wa-ra'eeyya (A Leader and his Community)[13]

*Hakham* was without a shadow of a doubt a generously dedicated leader. For the author, the *Hakham* acted responsibly and did not abandon his community, staying in Baghdad to shepherd the Jewish life of those who remained. Fearing for the welfare of the remaining community, and indeed for its very existence, the *Hakham* defended its members in highly dangerous situations, when Jews were disappearing, detained, tortured, or publicly hanged. *Hakham* Sasson Khdhuri, as the president of Iraq's Jewish community, in other words, acted under extraordinary pressures and at high personal cost.

Indeed, in the tumultuous period of the post-1967 era, the *Hakham's* son Sha'ul was himself detained, apparently in an attempt to extort the *Hakham* to make pro-regime declarations in the face of growing international protestations. Sha'ul, as the *Hakham's* son, had symbolic value for the Ba'ath regime in its effort to counter the vocal diplomatic pressure. In 1969, Sha'ul was included on the regime's list of Jews to be hung but he was released the following morning while the others accused of spying for Israel were condemned to death. This exception that saved Sha'ul life was commonly attributed to his father's position, and prompted anger among some Iraqi Jews who cursed and threw stones at the house of the *Hakham's* daughter, Marcelle, in Ramat Gan, Israel, for months.[14] In defense against these accusations that charged the *Hakham* with only intervening on his son's behalf, Sha'ul suggests in his book that decisions about his release from prison were all the doing of the regime, since his father was ultimately powerless to influence Saddam Hussein's maneuvers.

In his 1999 prison memoir, Sha'ul Hakham Sasson vividly captures the tormenting experience, recollected while in his nineties in London. Entitled in Arabic *Fi jaheem Saddam Hussein: Thalathmi'a wa-khamsa wa-sittun yawman fi "qasr al-nihayya"* (*In the Hell of Saddam Hussein: 365 Days in the "Palace of the End"*), the quotation marks in the subtitle invoke the acerbic epithet describing the prison from which many did not come out alive.[15] After his release, Sha'ul made a decision to leave Iraq, which he calls "my homeland, my birthplace." [16] But he stayed by his ailing father's side and only left following the death of the *Hakham* on 24 March 1971. "I could not imagine," writes Sha'ul, "leaving my father alone at his age and with all the pains and illnesses he was going through." [17] Only after the *Hakham's* passing, Sha'ul testifies: "I uprooted myself and moved to England where my son Samir lived." [18] He continues: "I still live in this country...with sad memories, wishing for God to liberate Iraq from its oppressors the Ba'athists." Sha'ul expresses his hope for Iraq "to live in peace and prosperity" and for Iraqis to take advantage of "the tremendous resources of the country." He concludes by wishing that all those "obliged to leave would be able to return to a free and democratic Iraq where all communities and citizens of different religions could coexist in tolerance and equality." [19]

Both Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's biography of his father, the *Hakham, A Leader and his Community*, along with his prison memoir, *In the Hell of Saddam Hussein*, were published in Arabic by the Jerusalem-based Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq. At the time of the publication in the late nineties, the Association had already printed a number of books written by Jews who stayed in Iraq in the post-*tasqit* era. In addition to Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's two books, the list included publications by such figures as Anwar Sha'ul and Meer Basri, who, like the *Hakham's* son, ended up leaving Iraq only during the reign of Saddam Hussein. (Basri, after the death of the *Hakham*, served as the head of the Jewish community, but left in 1974 and lived in London, whereas Sha'ul ended up in Israel.) Such publications by the Iraqi-Israeli editorial team, Shmuel Moreh and Nissim Kazzaz, would seem surprising given the criticism expressed toward these proponents of "the Iraqi orientation," i.e., of those who believed in staying in Iraq and did not exit to Israel during the *tasqit*. [20] However, their post-'67 departure is marshalled as evidence of the failure of the Iraqi option carried out by the Jewish leadership. Similarly, the story of the *Hakham* and his son's departure resonate with the view that the place of Jews was outside of Iraq, in Israel. The publication of Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's biography of his father nonetheless

signifies a certain shift in the attitude toward the *Hakham*, even a kind of a Zionist recuperation of the image of the once vehemently denounced head of the community. The *Hakham*, in this sense, can now be presented positively, but only as part of the metanarrative of the failure of “the Iraqi orientation.” Eli Amir’s 1992 Hebrew novel *Mafriah ha-Yonim—The Dove Flyer*—depicts a character based on the *Hakham* within a typically overall critical stance, but which nonetheless endows him with some sympathy vis-à-vis the anti-Jewish Iraqi regime. Within such recuperative gestures, the *Hakham*’s declarations against the Zionist movement are arguably not being read as signifying a theological perspective or a political reading of the regional map, but rather as a result of a no-choice situation of a Diasporic (*galuti*) traditional leader appeasing various brutal, even anti-Semitic Iraqi regimes.



The Iraqi-issued laissez-passer during the tasqit (of Aziza and Sasson, the author’s parents)



المملكة العراقية  
ROYAUME D'IRAK

١٥١٨

جواز المرور  
LAISSEZ-PASSER.

The *Hakham* and his family, in many ways, embody the story of Jewish Iraqis now dispersed in multiple geographies—a Mesopotamian community fragmented and diasporized. In the wake of their exodus from Iraq and the shock of arrival in Israel, Iraqi Jews along with Arab/Sephardi/Middle-Eastern Jews more generally, experienced exclusion, rejection, and otherization as Arabs/Orientals, in a place that had been viewed, at the least, as a refuge. The realization of unbelonging could be glimpsed in the frequent lament: “In Iraq we were Jews, in Israel we are Arabs.”[21] The same year of the *Hakham*’s death in Baghdad coincided with the founding of the Black Panther movement which protested the discrimination of the Mizrahim in Israel. Indeed, for decades after the *tasqit*, Iraqi Jews often gave expression to their frustrated sense of betrayal by both Iraq and Israel. They invoked the rumors about the (still disputed) placing of bombs in synagogues and the secretive deal between the Iraqi and Israeli governments under the auspices of the British. They also spoke of both countries as benefitting materially from their departure—Iraq, from their property left behind, and Israel, from turning them into cheap labor. The phrase “*ba’ona*”—“they sold us out”[22]—gave expression to an embittered sense of a no-exit situation, from a pre-departure fear of persecution if they were to remain in Iraq to a post-arrival encounter with Euro-Israeli Orientalist attitudes and discourses. Such a post-*tasqit* sentiment of being doubly out-of-place was hardly in tune with the official narrative of rescuing Jews from their perennial Muslim oppressors, but it did turn the Jewish-Iraqi exodus into a calamitous tale of a scapegoat sacrificed on the altar of the Arab/Israeli conflict.

### Notes

[A shorter version of this essay was published in *Orient XXI*, October 22, 2020. Some of the material on the *Hakham* is based on my chapter “Remainders Revisited: An Exilic Journey from *Hakham* Sasson Khdhuri to Joseph Sassoon Semah” in [\*Joseph Sassoon Semah’s On Friendship / \(Collateral Damage\) III -The\*](#)

[\*third GaLUT: Baghdad, Jerusalem, Amsterdam\*](#), Joseph Sassoon Semah & Linda Bouws, eds., Amsterdam: *Stichting Metropool Internationale Kunstprojecten*, 2020, pp. 26-55.]

[1] Photo sourced from Youth Movements Photos, "Jews of Baghdad gathered beside the Meir Tweig Synagogue, that served as the registration point for legal immigration to the Land of Israel." *Ghetto Fighters House Archive, Catalog No. 10766*,

[https://www.infocenters.co.il/gfh/notebook\\_ext.asp?item=69546&site=gfh&lang=ENG&menu=1](https://www.infocenters.co.il/gfh/notebook_ext.asp?item=69546&site=gfh&lang=ENG&menu=1)

[2] This effort is clearly expressed in texts written by Iraqi Zionists. See, for example, Shlomo Hillel, *Ruah Kadim* (Operation Babylon) (Jerusalem: Edanim, 1985), 259-63 (Hebrew).

[3] One of the most debated cases concerns the Zionists' placing of bombs in synagogues. See Abbas Shiblak, *The Lure of Zion* (London: Al Saqi, 1986); G. N. Giladi, *Discord in Zion* (London: Scorpion, 1990).

[4] The spelling of the Hakham's name here corresponds to its pronunciation in the Jewish-Baghdadi dialect rather than the various transliterations, including in the Hakham's official seal of the "President of the Jewish Community" (or "Israeli Community," as defined in Arabic—"Isra'iliyya"—and in Hebrew—"Yisra'elit"—at a time when the word did not yet connote the State of Israel.)

[5] The photo which was taken on the occasion of the visit of King Faisal I to the Jewish community in 1924 is included in Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's *Ra' wa-ra'eeyya* (*A Leader and his Community*) with the following identifications: Front row from right to left: Ruben Zluf, Salim Ishaq, Yehuda Zluf, Hakham Sasson Khdhuri (the president of the court), Hakham Bashi Ezra Dangoor, Mahmud Nadim al-Tabaqcheli, King Faisal I, Safwat Pasha al-'Awa, Senator Menahem Daniel, Abraham Nahom, Sion Gurji, Tahsin Qadri. Second row from right to left: Dr. Gurji Rabi', Eliyahu al-'Ani, Sasson Mrad, Saleh Shlomo, Yussuf Mrad, Gurji Bahar, Karek Menashi Gurji. p. 263.

[6] The declaration was published in Iraq's Al-Istiqlal newspaper on October 8, 1936. (The Arabic and Hebrew declaration is located in the Archive of "Va'ad ha-'Eda ha-Sefaradit" in Jerusalem.) See Sha'ul Hakham Sasson, "Son of the Former Head of the Jewish Community of Iraq," *Ra'in wa-ra'eeyya: Sirat hayat al-Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, ra'is al-ta'ifa al-Musawiyya fi al-'Iraq* (*A Leader and his Community: A Biography of the Late Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, Head of the Mosaic Community in Iraq*) with an Introduction by Shmuel Moreh, Association of Jewish

Academics from Iraq, Jerusalem, 1999, p. 398.

[7] On the Zionist views of Hakham Sasson's leadership see for example Moshe Gat, *Khila Yehudit be-Mashber: Yetz'iat 'Iraq, 1948-1951* (A Jewish Community in Crisis: The Exodus from Iraq, 1948-1951), The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, Jerusalem, 1989; Esther Meir, *Ha-Tnu'a ha-Tziyonit ve-Yehudei 'Iraq, 1941-1950* (Zionism and the Jews Iraq, 1941-1950), Am Oved Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1993.

[8] Emile Marmorstein, "Baghdad Jewry's Leader Resigns," *The Jewish Chronicle*, December 30, 1949. Republished in *Middle Eastern Studies* with an introduction by the editor, Elie Kedourie, Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 1988), pp. 364-368. Kedourie suggests that the opposition to the Hakham's views by "a small, secret group of Zionist activists may have led to his downfall," p. 364.

[9] Based on a conversation between the grandson of the Hakham, artist Joseph Sassoon Semah, and the author, Ella Shohat, Amsterdam, December 1, 2019.

[10] Photo courtesy of Joseph Sassoon Semah

[11] Guy Raz, "The Last Jews of Baghdad in Post-Saddam Iraq, a Disappearing Cultural Legacy," *NPR News*, May 22, 2003. [https://www.npr.org/news/specials/iraq2003/raz\\_030522.html](https://www.npr.org/news/specials/iraq2003/raz_030522.html)

[12] See Sha'ul Hakham Sasson, *Ra'in wa-ra'eeyya: Sirat hayat al-Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, ra'is al-ta'ifa al-Musawiyya fi al-'Iraq* (A Leader and his Community: A Biography of the Late Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, Head of the Mosaic Community in Iraq) with an Introduction by Shmuel Moreh, Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, Jerusalem, 1999.

[13] Book Cover of Sha'ul Hakham Sasson's book *Ra' wa-ra'eeyya: Sirat hayat al-Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, ra'is al-ta'ifa al-Musawiyya fi al-'Iraq* (A Leader and his Community: A Biography of the Late Hakham Sasson Khdhuri, Head of the Mosaic Community in Iraq), Published by the Association of Jewish Academics from Iraq, Jerusalem, 1999.

[14] Based on a conversation between the grandson of the Hakham, artist Joseph Sassoon Semah, and the author, Ella Shohat, Amsterdam, December 1, 2019.

[15] Sha'ul Hakham Sasson, "Son of the Former Head of the Jewish Community of Iraq," *Fi jaheem Saddam Hussein: Thalathmi'a wa-khamsa wa-sittun yawman fi "qasr al-nihayya"* (In the Hell of Saddam Hussein: 365 Days in the "Palace of the End"), edited by Shmuel Moreh and Nissim Kazzaz. Association for Jewish Academics from Iraq, Jerusalem, 1999.

[16] *Fi jaheem Saddam Hussein*, p. 59.

[17] *ibid*

[18] ibid

[19] ibid

[20] Nissim Kazzaz, Ha-Yehudim be-Iraq ba-Me'a há-'Esrím. Jerusalem, Machon Ben-Zvi, 1991.

[21] I am citing here a sentence that my mother used to repeatedly express.

[22] The phrase formed part of conversations in my family's circle.

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# Salam Hamid - The Arab Countries' Expulsion Of The Jews Was A Disastrous Mistake



*Photo:*

<https://jewishrefugees.blogspot.com>

*Emirati writer Salam Hamid, founder and head of the Al-Mezmaah Studies and Research Center in Dubai, published an article titled “The Cost of the Expulsion of the Arab Jews” in the UAE daily Al-Ittihad, in which he lamented the expulsion of the Jews from the Arab countries following the establishment of Israel in 1948. This expulsion, he said, was a grave mistake, since the Arab countries thereby “lost an elite population with significant wealth, property, influence, knowledge, and culture,” which could have helped them, including against Israel, and lost the*

*potential contribution of the Jews in many spheres, especially in the financial sphere. The Arabs, he added, should have learned a lesson from the expulsion of the Jews of Spain in 1492, and from Hitler's expulsion of the Jews of Europe, which eventually harmed the countries that lost their Jews. He stated further that antisemitism, which is deeply entrenched in Arab societies, stems from the books that teach Islamic heritage, studied in schools throughout the Arab world, and therefore called for an overhaul of the curricula in order to strengthen tolerance and banish extremism.*

The following are translated excerpts from his article:

“During the years that followed the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, most Arab countries expelled their Jewish citizens, who numbered approximately 900,000, to Israel. With this apparently strange behavior, [the Arab countries] gave a gift to the growing Hebrew nation. This makes me wonder: Why were these people deported, and what was their crime?

“Over time, [this expulsion] had disastrous repercussions, when [it turned out that] the Arabs had lost an elite population with significant wealth, property, influence, knowledge, and culture. Soon enough, the Arabs waged pointless wars against Israel, until they were defeated [in June 1967] with heavy losses. Nevertheless, the mentality of the Arab leadership persisted, as they spun conspiracy theories to their defeated peoples and sought scapegoats in order to justify their repeated defeats at the hand of Israel.

“If you ever visit Israel, you will see citizens of diverse colors, just like in the U.S. They arrived as immigrants from across the globe, of various races, and almost half of them are from Arab countries. Any intelligent person is aware that Jews had lived in Arab countries for 2,000 years before being arbitrarily expelled – yet here they are now, making up half of Israel's citizens.

“Just a look at the number of Jews remaining in their Arab countries elucidates the difference between the past and the present. In the past, there were hundreds of thousands of Jewish citizens in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, and the Maghreb, while today only dozens remain. Meanwhile, the Palestinians make up the largest group of asylum-seekers in the world. Some 700,000 of them left their lands after the 1948 war – not just because of the war, but because of several Arab leaders who asked them to leave the Jewish areas so that they could return after the

fledgling Jewish state was destroyed. It is worth noting that in his memoir, Syria's then-prime minister Khalid Al-'Azm acknowledged the role played by the Arabs in convincing the Palestinians to leave – a mistake whose severity the Arabs failed to grasp, which created the Palestinian refugee crisis, and which prompted the founding of UNRWA [United Nations Relief and Works for Palestine Refugees in the Near East] in 1949.

*Read*

*more:*

<https://www.memri.org/reports/uae-writer-arab-countries-expulsion-jews-was-disastrous-mistake>

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*Visit this blog for the daily updates. The blog contains an interesting list of Sephardi/Mizrahi websites.*

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# **Mati Shemoelof - Wie man einem toten Künstler die Hasenjagd erklärt**

*Berliner Zeitung*. Mittwoch 13. Januar 2021

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# Wie man einem toten Künstler die Hasenjagd erklärt

Anlässlich des Joseph-Beuys-Jubiläums spricht Joseph Sassoon Semah über seine Kritik am Giganten der deutschen Nachkriegskunst

In diesem Jahr feiert Deutschland den 100. Geburtstag von Joseph Beuys, einem der unumstrittensten Künstler des 20. Jahrhunderts. Beuys gilt als Pionier und Schöpfer der „Sozialen Plastik“. Der in Aachen lebende jüdische Künstler Joseph Sassoon Semah wurde mehr seiner intensiven künstlerischen Dränge mit Beuys' Werk nicht zu den Freundschaften eingeladen. Vielmehr, Todestag des letzten Rabbinen aus Regensburg, der am 1. Januar nach Israel und später in die Niederlande emigrierte, bezeugt, er wisse, selbst wenn er sich für die Teilhabe an der 100-Jahre-Feier befreit hätte, abgelehnt worden. Stattdessen entschied er sich, alternative Veranstaltungen in deutschen und niederländischen Gemeinden zu organisieren.

Am 26. November 1985 feierte Beuys in einer Galerie in Düsseldorf eine Performance, bei der er einen Kaktus in den Boden steckte. Er nannte die Performance: „Wie man dem toten Hase die Hare erklärt“. Beuys starb am 23. Januar 1986. Kurz danach, am 24. Februar 1986, schuf Semah eine performative Antwort auf Beuys' „How to Explain Hare (Hunting to a Dead German Artist)“ (Wie man einem toten deutschen Künstler die Hasenjagd erklärt).

In unserem Gespräch kommentierte Semah: „Nun, es werden Beuys nachkritisieren, wenn sie die Jubiläum feiern. Deshalb haben wir mit Ami Harari, dem Direktor des Gerhard-Mercator-Hauses in Bonn, gesprochen. Wir entscheiden uns, mit einem Kunstprojekt zu antworten, das im Gerhard-Mercator-Haus, der Universität Amsterdam, dem Jüdischen Museum Amsterdam und dem Goethe Institut Holland präsentiert wird. Die Veranstaltung wird verschiedene kulturelle Punkte aufgreifen, nicht nur aus meiner künstlerischen Perspektive, die von Beuys Arbeit inspiriert wurde. Ich werde auch meine Erfahrungen als Jude einbringen.“

„Hasenjagd“ war ein Euphemismus für die Zerstörung von Juden durch die Gruppe während des Holocausts. Ihre Performance von 1986 war Teil einer Ausstellung im Gerhard-Mercator-Haus in Bonn, die auf der Goethe-Zentrale gefolgt:

Büchling Joseph Beuys starb am 23. Januar 1986, und etwa einen Monat danach fand meine Kunstaktion statt. Da er mir sprechen war, konnte ich den Tod eines Performers, „Wie man dem toten Hase die Hare erklärt“ auf den Tod eines Performers übertragen. „Wie man einem toten deutschen Künstler die Hasenjagd erklärt.“

land war damals nicht das Deutschland von heute. Beuys war mit der Zukunftsvision von „Gesamtheit“ besessenen und ließ uns, die Juden, in Vorbereitung des neuen Hases in seinen Händen. Die Frage war: woher kommt dieser Mensch, der so sehr in die Niederlande emigrierte, bezeugt, er wisse, selbst wenn er sich für die Teilhabe an der 100-Jahre-Feier befreit hätte, abgelehnt worden. Stattdessen entschied er sich, alternative Veranstaltungen in deutschen und niederländischen Gemeinden zu organisieren.

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Portrait von Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), Paris, 1985

### ZUR PERSON



Joseph Sassoon Semah wurde 1940 in einer jüdischen Gemeinde in Regensburg, Ostpreußen, geboren. Semah wanderte er 1949 nach Israel aus. Mitte der 1970er Jahre floh Semah nach Bonn, um zu leben.

Der Nachkriegs- und erhabene zwischen London, Berlin, Paris und Amsterdam. Er hat eine große Leidenschaft für die Kunst. Semah hat eine Leidenschaft für die Kunst. Semah hat eine Leidenschaft für die Kunst.

Auf seine Kunst hat er eine große Leidenschaft für die Kunst. Semah hat eine Leidenschaft für die Kunst. Semah hat eine Leidenschaft für die Kunst.

Das ist ein Beitrag, der in einem Open Source-Projekt veröffentlicht wird. Mit Open Source gibt die Berlin-Zentrale die Möglichkeit, die Inhalte der Website zu kopieren, zu verändern und zu verbreiten. Die Berlin-Zentrale ist eine Initiative der Berlin-Zentrale.

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mit dem Hase auf Harejagd zu sprechen.

Der Künstler und Künstler G... (Text continues with a discussion of Beuys' work and the concept of 'Harejagd').

Ich habe ihn... (Text continues with a discussion of Beuys' work and the concept of 'Harejagd').

Ich habe ihn... (Text continues with a discussion of Beuys' work and the concept of 'Harejagd').

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Ich habe ihn... (Text continues with a discussion of Beuys' work and the concept of 'Harejagd').

Körper in Tücher einwickeln und... (Text continues with a discussion of Beuys' work and the concept of 'Harejagd').

Beuys hat in der 70er Jahren... (Text continues with a discussion of Beuys' work and the concept of 'Harejagd').

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# How To Explain Hare Hunting To A Dead German Artist





*Joseph Sassoon Semah. The artist was born into a Jewish community in Baghdad, Iraq. Together with his parents, he emigrated to Israel in 1950. In the mid-1970s Semah decided to leave Israel. He lived and worked in London, Berlin, Paris and Amsterdam and regards himself as a “guest” in the Western world. His oeuvre consists of drawings, paintings, sculptures, installations, performances and texts. Photo: Linda Bouws*

*2021 marks the 100th anniversary of Joseph Beuys’ birth. Jewish artist Joseph Sassoon Semah explains his critical stance on the giant of postwar German art.*

*Berliner Zeitung 8.1.2021. Berlin/Amsterdam.*

This year Germany will celebrate 100 years since the birth of Joseph Beuys, one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. Beuys was considered the healer and shaman of postwar Germany.

The Amsterdam-based, Jewish artist Joseph Sassoon Semah was not invited to the celebration, despite his rich artistic dialogue with Beuys’ art.

Semah, the grandchild of the last rabbi from Baghdad, who emigrated to Israel and later to the Netherlands, argues that even if he had applied to participate in the 100-year celebration of Beuys, he believes he would have been rejected. He decided, instead, to create alternative artistic events in several German and

Dutch institutions.

On 26 November 1965, Beuys conducted a performance in a gallery holding a dead rabbit in his arms. He named the performance: "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare". Beuys died on January 23, 1986. And on 24 February 1986, Semah created his own performative answer to Beuys with the installation: "How to Explain Hare Hunting to a Dead German Artist".

In our conversation, Semah states: "Well, they are not going to criticise him when they celebrate these 100 years. That's why we talked with Arie Hartog, director of the Gerhard Marcks Haus museum in Bremen. We decided to answer with an art project that will be presented in the Gerhard Marcks Haus, the University of Amsterdam, the Jewish Museum of Amsterdam and Goethe Institute of Holland. The event will be showing different critical points, mainly from my perspective not only as an artist that has been inspired by his work. I will elaborate on my experience of his work as a Jew."

*Mati Shemoelof: For those who do not know, "hare hunting" was a euphemism for killing Jews by the Gestapo during the Holocaust. Your performance in 1986 was part of an exhibition in the Gerhard Marcks Haus, in Bremen, that once belonged to the Gestapo headquarters.*

Joseph Beuys died on 23 January 1986 and my birthday took place about a month after his death. Now, because he died, I could transfer the title "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" to the title of my performance: "How to Explain Hare Hunting to a Dead German Artist". Germany was not the Germany of today. Beuys was busy with reconstruction of "Germania" and holding us, the Jews, as a dead hare. The question should be different. In my opinion, Beuys only cared about his own wounds.

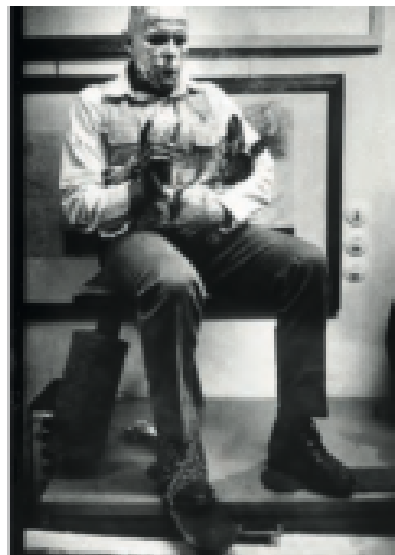
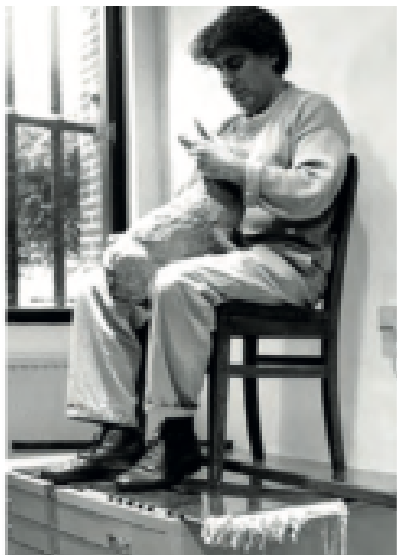
*You did a public confession for your actions as an Israeli soldier in Amsterdam but Beuys never confessed to his Nazi past. In your eyes, why didn't he?*

It surprised me that Joseph Beuys didn't do a confession about his involvement with the Nazi army. I wanted to criticise that. In 1936, Beuys was a member of the Hitler Youth. I know that it was compulsory. But actually, later on, in 1941, Beuys volunteered for the *Luftwaffe* (air force). In 1942, Beuys was stationed in Crimea and was a member of various combat bomber units. He actually volunteered. Nobody asked him. He dropped bombs on innocent people. In his

brilliant way, Beuys transformed his subjectivity to the suffering of the German soldier in the Second World War. In that odd way, Beuys became a victim.

*One of the famous phrases of Beuys is “every man is an artist”. Beuys was part of the Düsseldorf art school where he demanded that the school open its door to anyone who wanted to be an artist. The art school kicked him out because of his radical demands. Can you elaborate more about your artistic answer to Beuys?*

I created a similar environment in my performance in Amsterdam. I sat on an aluminum office cabinet with a chair that belonged to a Gestapo waiting room in Berlin. I had a wine glass on the window. A neon light under my chair. In between copper plates I had a Talit (a Jewish prayer shawl). I was holding a hare which I cast from bronze. One of the code words of the Nazi Wehrmacht was “*jagt den Hasen*” (“hunt the rabbits”). And they meant: we are going to hunt the Jews. Beuys could have chosen any other animal. But of course, he chose the hare. He walked with the dead rabbit into the gallery, where he did the performance and explained to him the paintings that he did with his own blood in a language that nobody understood. I concluded that he tried to speak with the hare in Hebrew.



Joseph Sassoon Semah created the performance “How to Explain Hare Hunting to a Dead German Artist” (left), answering Joseph Beuys’ “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare” (right).

*The art historian and curator Gideon Ofrat wrote that you converted Beuys to Judaism. In one hand, you were holding the rabbit and the other was placed on*

*your forehead to symbolise pain and at the same time deep thinking. There was a neon light on the wall, symbolising God's eternal light that answers the cross that was underneath the chair and the wine glass – symbolising the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Have you met Beuys?*

I met him twice. Once in Berlin, at the National Gallery. He was a kind man. He invited me to his home but I didn't go. We met again, also in Berlin, just before I left for Amsterdam at the beginning of the 1980s, and talked for half an hour. Yes, he was aware of my work, but he was the clean, pure face of Germany after the Second World War – and I was just a young artist.

*It sounds like you have a love-hate relationship with him. On one hand, so many of your artworks are in dialogue with his art. On the other hand, you can't stand the position that he took as a victimiser in German and European art. And so, I have to ask you, why didn't you go to his house?*

Maybe I wasn't really occupied with him at that time. Maybe postwar Germany wasn't really in my focus. Around 1982, I left Berlin and it was easier for me to work in Amsterdam. In 1982, I wrote a letter to Albrecht Dürer [German painter, 1471-1528] and explained to him my thoughts on Luther and Beuys.

*If Beuys was alive, how do you imagine his reaction to the Jewish performance you created in reaction to him?*

In his ironic way, he would have rejected me. He did already with the hare – holding me, a dead Jew – in his hands.

*Hans Peter Reiegel, one of Beuys' biographers, mentioned that many of Beuys' patrons and friends hid their Nazi past. From Beuys' incident in the Luftwaffe – his plane was shot down – Beuys fashioned the myth that he was rescued by nomadic Tatar tribesmen, who wrapped his broken body in animal fat and nursed him back to health. According to his version, they told him: "Nje nemiecky, du Tatar" – "You are not a German, you are a Tatar". Records state that Beuys was conscious, that he was recovered by a German search commando, and there were no Tatars in the village at that time. But people still believe his version of the story and that Beuys could transform German society. Do you believe in the power of Beuys' transformation?*

Beuys was a soldier who returned from war and starting to create through his

personal pain. He transformed himself from a victimiser to a victim. I don't really trust this social order he created.

*Beuys had an enormous influence on Israeli art in the 1970s when it comes to healing – especially when it comes to selected works of Tamar Getter, David Ginaton, Moshe Mizrahi and others. In 1973, David Ginaton went to Josef Beuys' home in Düsseldorf, after not finding him at the academy. He knelt in front of the artist's house as if he was a god.*

When Ginaton knelt in front of the house of Beuys, I found it so sad to see. I guess it should be the other way around. And you can see the power of symbols. I don't know why he did it. Ginaton was an Israeli soldier who was in Germany. Maybe the fascination of soldiers was connecting them.

*Why do you take a different perspective to that of the European Israeli artist? Do you connect it to your Baghdad origins? Is the entering of the Nazi ideology into Iraq connected in some underlying way to your criticism of Beuys' work? You were born in Baghdad in 1948. Your grandfather, Hacham Sassoon Kadoorie, was the chief rabbi of Baghdad's Jewish community until his passing in 1971, even after they had all emigrated to Israel.*

Of course. It is not only about the Germans. It is about Western ideology. And it affects the whole cultural world, including the works of Beuys. And of course, indirectly, it affects the life of Jews in the Arab world. The word "antisemitism" can't be taken seriously in the Arab lands because they are also semitic. Well, I am a Babylonian Jew and I don't succumb to all of the construction of silence around Beuys. I am free from it. I can read it in a totally new way. It took me time.

-

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# Smadar Lavie - Mizrah Feminism And The Question Of Palestine



*Smadar Lavie*

Photo:en.wikipedia.org

This paper analyzes the failure of Israel's Ashkenazi (Jewish, of European, Yiddish-speaking origin) feminist peace movement to work within the context of Middle East demographics, cultures, and histories and, alternately, the inabilities of the Mizrahi (Oriental) feminist movement to weave itself into the feminist fabric of the Arab world.

Although Ashkenazi elite feminists in Israel are known for their peace activism and human rights work, from the Mizrahi perspective their critique and activism are limited, if not counterproductive. The Ashkenazi feminists have strategically chosen to focus on what Edward Said called the Question of Palestine—a well funded agenda that enables them to avoid addressing the community-based concerns of the disenfranchised Mizrahim. Mizrahi communities, however, silence their own feminists as these activists attempt to challenge the regime or engage in discourse on the Question of Palestine. Despite historical changes, the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi distinction is a racialized formation so resilient it manages to sustain itself through challenges rather than remain a frozen dichotomy.

Source: *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* · April 2011

# Almira Hess - And As Far As What I Wanted & Other Poems



*Amira Hess. Ills.: Joseph  
Sassoon Semah*

## *And As Far As What I Wanted*

And as far as I wanted to further explain to you  
what every sign says.

After all, surely you understand the way of colors,  
the gilded light, the chlorophyll light,  
the light of pain and the light of need and vigilant light  
and the light of an arc in the sky  
splitting through again to seed with drops of sun suddenly burning  
the essence of yearning.

The light of the eyes of the dogs  
shine loyalty in the dark to their masters.

The growing shadow of darkness placed late  
in fading time.

How the radiant blackness disseminates its night  
And how the arrows' whiteness smothers its light  
How everything is lucid from so much pain.

*- Translated from the Hebrew by Yonina Borvick*

*From And The Moon Drips Madness*

There was a time  
when I'd have said:  
I won't defile myself  
with this contemptible Orient,  
I'll relegate my ancestral  
home to oblivion,  
my mother's owl's visage  
weeping over the ruins,  
my father's face like a cherub-  
the Lord - graced him not.

And I also said:  
The West, for instance,  
Has no cares to its spirit,  
well-done within, singed to the shrouds.  
East and West I'll set out in a strong beat  
for there is no ark  
to bestir myself, if daughter  
departs more spirit  
to make eagles soar.

*- Translated from the Hebrew by Ammiel Alcalay*

*Then Slake Him From*

Then slake him from  
A wineskin flowing and a wineskin of milk and a wineskin of loveliness  
Kiss and weep, for the time of loving has come.  
Woman-dust-earth seeped into the lust in his touch



Keen after him  
Kiss his footprints  
Do not bind his freedom.  
Place him as a cock  
Rising early, at sun's fire,  
As a madman, his body screaming desire.

*- Translated from the Hebrew by Marsha Weinstein*

### *We're Children Of Atlantis*

Remnants alighting from the  
sea  
immigrant  
busts.  
And there are brigades of cavalry  
stumbling as they gallop.  
The golden horse pulls down the priestly vestment  
his face resplendent.  
Month of May moon  
I didn't see moons  
months I didn't count days  
I just saw blood and took my pulse.  
The Lebanon cries out to the cedars of Goshen.  
Judah cry not Judah  
rotting further in the dust  
your eyes veiled  
in terror. Dread heaven  
sent deloused  
municipal decree - cry not Judah.  
Don't weep chosen  
over the babble in paradise no-land  
the poetry of mint stirs  
onion poetry of the rock and roll  
savagery encircled by "uncles", dances  
from the jungle calling TAM TAM TAM

Restore me Oh Lord to my sister's bosom  
Set me upon the *gopher* wood  
Oh Lord bring me back to the ark of Jeshurun  
directly.

Turn my visage on a festive day to a vow of radiant  
light good souls holding on to the world's foundation.

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Inasmuch as the day breaks  
I had been hoping night would fall  
to continue sleeping as deeply as possible,  
to gird up greater forgetting power to be forgotten  
before you, inasmuch as the day breaks to get up  
I wasn't oblivious already  
because I wanted to go on to utter ruin  
more and more,  
but didn't have the strength  
to ask myself  
for e little more sleep without getting up in bed.

Wandering from world to world  
Surely even my father would  
speak at some point and say -  
"All in all dwarf you  
has face covered up in specs  
wear minimal hat  
go on  
wear had to the max."

Between tone and slumber  
now seems like a passage  
from letter to letter  
from a high octave *do*  
to *sol* on another octave's scale,  
coming down many thresholds  
face to face within my very being which, after all,  
only asked to be born and simply.

Hebrew's a nice language for revolvers one generation to the next  
looking for a source out of their slumber  
as they tarry upon the hook of retention.  
Let it not found favor in my eyes  
the realm of my garments overthrown  
in the womb of holy scribes from Barazan,  
I'm having a hard time finding a way out in origins  
sometimes discovering my face by surprise  
settling for tricks by the side of the road  
crossing over another layer.

Yesterday I dreamt how the Nile rolled over its banks  
and I saw the Delta inscribed upon the waters.  
As I was still looking for other estuaries I suddenly  
beheld interpretations on my palms  
and between furrow and furrow  
a white line of snow stood out  
and the Delta was trampled by the running.  
Afterwards the Nile made the warm blue  
and if a cycle of time had been shifted  
and Mount Ararat was dislodged from its place  
barren wastelands stood out covered with lavender  
their peaks slightly green.

An armored car behind me  
an ancient carriage before me  
veering to the right, and the color of mud the color of mine.

I still stumble to catch up with the steps taken before me  
the niche has been breached  
and sparkling water bathes my face.  
And we were kind of an assembly of people  
From the first generation unto the great-grandchildren.  
My father was absent from this place  
since he died while still alive,  
and I didn't know if we gave birth,  
if only my face was bathed,  
if I'm the great-granddaughter,

If I'm a member of the tribe,  
if my language is literal  
if my lips speak the language of fresh twigs.  
(That's how I remembered my anger  
at their shutting their intent  
to see the Aswan Dam  
and the pyramids  
from my eyes.)

And I still thought I governed myself that I had come for a little rest  
without having to make much effort, except eating and drinking  
bundles of lemons growing, pepper trees on the ceiling  
I wanted to pick  
so mother wouldn't get scared,  
but she already took the initiative to go  
to the other room, leading to the open field,  
causing the sorrow in our hearts to arise anew.  
She departs aware that she's going  
and I'm aware of her departure.

I'm still disturbed by the form of the lemon that grew on the ceiling  
Like a yellow candelabra  
and behold, a light is lit in my window.  
I didn't reign in the switches  
presuming someone always kindles a light in my dreams.  
Something turns topsy-turvy,  
something runs amok,  
the world is posed to change its face,  
whether Persian lilac or sprouts of  
orchid, whether an abundance of  
rolling sandalwood beats  
against my window and wakes me to tell  
of the Nile's blueness even  
more splendid than other blue.

- *Translated from the Hebrew by Ammiel Alcalay*

*From The Information Eater*

The time of the singing birds will become the depths of poverty

1.

And beyond the unknown

I will yet know we don't know everything

and the thing of totality

that's the black holes

that I burn after you

cloaked face ablaze

and reason for this suffering

2.

I banished the forsaken from myself

and tonight amongst horses neighing like jackals -

how come

3.

if it was possible to give

to the soul via the body

for me to burn unto you without this suffering

spirits in flight perishing to block

the totality of the holes

until we know not

4.

the cycles the cycles their surface like hornets

the cycles why symbiotic

to tell me not to leave the house

not to run about to and fro and to tell me

not knowing whither without where to go no place-

5.

I'm afraid of the library

and what's between its shelves to search in the letters

little birds pain the wings within me

6.

seems to me I'll have a saint's face

and find it had been used sometimes  
and there were times I was a memorial flame  
and flowers on someone's balcony  
needing neither dung nor water  
my face from which only a sunflower will emerge  
without wasteland -

7.

and under this sun  
normally will be bred if it can  
without the grief of parental doctrine hit home lying in wait  
from my two eyes and my mother's voice as it sings so like an infant pecking  
away  
and just think my breasts playthings sucked out from sucking  
and what milk's left me to give the kids  
within a space closed  
quite hollowed out to nourish  
where both our voices stop  
in do re mi-

8.

and all this from that windowsill  
I saw the dove brooding over time  
and her rounded eyes embroiled lashes  
the pulleys entangled within  
pyres of melancholy  
and longing for the openings out -

9.

and my mother asks: have you got flowers  
in the garden  
people want to see flower  
and when there's a garden in the wastelands of sustenance  
in the wilds of that jungle of yours  
echoing  
I want to see your hair  
like a field  
in that man's room

so I know you're my daughter -

10.

I am Amira  
going in my own captivity  
and I have a papa buried on the Mount of Olives

the silence of the hush within me we have in common  
and the hair brushing on my neck  
if I was his secret  
if his silence reigns bound me  
without release -

11.

And there is a revolution on my face  
as if I had been suddenly formed  
and from a shorn lamb I had come to the raiments of favor and grace  
and clemency and great reverence before the grief of my existence  
in the stratosphere  
bottleneck of my soul.

12.

There are waters there are mighty waters  
at salt's threshold.

13.

There are tremendous waters  
my face is an ocean.

14.

And beneath your beauty if anything happens to me  
I will see this night  
and we shall gaze  
ourselves above like a torch  
and the eyes will shed tears in a blaze of fire.

For that's how we are the wind -

And I took upon myself the yoke of your love

to reckon ourselves within the midst of the cry

Until I'd not be able to have left that night  
the depths of my shriek's range  
that day my mother gave birth to me  
instructing my soul that it be thus with me  
flying between the dreams  
and kindred contentions  
given birth into nature's lap  
for I was born attorn  
and the sudden brilliance of the cord seemed real to me -

15.

And how can one migrate to the inner  
depths as over the surface of flesh and blood?  
Go in and go out and scandal bangs me -

16.

I'll know and summon you  
gather spirit to bind me to the altar  
and place your eyes upon me to brand me and hunger for me  
to ride  
and make it if you want I'll spread  
and if not I'll want it open  
to come  
time diving into buoyancy

- *Translated from the Hebrew by Ammiel Alcalay*

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*Border Poets: Translating by Dialogues - Amira Hess*

the black hand's palm  
the black woman's voice  
the old black woman's face,  
afraid of a man

don't touch me — if you do



ragged weary Yemenis will gather inside me  
in screaming want, trying to move their home's walls,  
their dwelling caves, and fly here by magic carpet  
I fight off Yemen, the desert south  
and the rod of wrath – stay away  
because — why me?

and I'm a room of my own body  
gasping for breath inside my own turf,  
let no strange man come touch me  
to taste my skin. A wandering Jew  
comes up to my oasis – cool water purifies –  
as if immersed in white, I am shined  
he polishes away my charcoal and Yemenis

I flee to the caves  
and weep the seven days  
and ten nights, then put on eye make-up  
downing tears and pain  
leaving only a void to be orphaned from me too  
then I catch ringing laughter  
from petals of flowers  
and shake myself all  
over to get my second wind

*– Translated from Hebrew by Helene Knox and Smadar Lavie*

*Amira Hess* was born in Baghdad, Iraq to an ancient rabbinical family. She was brought to Israel in 1951, at first living with her family in an immigrant transit camp, and later moving to Jerusalem, where she lives today. Hess worked as secretary in the Foreign Office and in the Government Press Office. Her first book, published in 1984, was awarded the Luria Prize. She received the Prime Minister's Prize in 2005 and the Amichai Prize for Poetry in 2015.  
Source: <https://www.ithl.org.il/>

*Books Published in Hebrew*

POETRY

*And the Moon is Dripping Madness*, Am Oved, 1984 [Ve-Yareah Notef Shigaon]

*Two Horses by the Light Line*, Am Oved, 1987 [Shnei Susim al Kav Ha-Or]

*The Information Eater*, Bitan, 1993 [Bolea Ha-Informatzia]

*Yovel*, Carmel, 1998

*Boulimia of the Soul*, Helicon, 2007 [Ha-Bulimia Shel Ha-Neshama]

*Tears Without Eyes to be Shed*, Am Oved, 2014 [Kmo Bchi She-Ein Lo Einayim  
Lehibachot]