

In Berlin, Mizrahi Activists Face An Identity Conflict Over Judicial Protests



*Mati Shoemelo - Portrait:
Joseph Sassoon Semah*

With Netanyahu's visit to Germany, Mati Shemoelof struggles to reconcile the Mizrahi Jews' struggle for a political voice with their role in the rise of the ultra-religious Right.

In January, I received an email from a group of Mizrahi activists in Israel. The Netanyahu government was about to forge ahead with its judicial "reforms" and the email outlined a new Initiative: [A Mizrahi-civil collective regarding the public agenda of the new government](#).

I knew most of the activists from our mutual activism activities in Israel, from social justice and questions of multiculturalism to the growing social gaps in Israel. The invitation to join this new collective prompted a major dilemma for me. I had started following Israeli news almost obsessively. The new voices of protest and the hundreds of thousands of Israelis protesting every weekend in the big cities had me glued me to the internet.

However, I also felt reassured that I had made the right move by leaving that

place, that I had put the correct geographical distance between me and this extreme right-wing government. But could I just sit and do nothing? Even worse, hardly anyone I knew in Germany, a country loaded with Ashkenazi history, could understand my dilemma.

And then Natan Sznaider, an academic and writer who was born in Germany and moved to Israel when he was 20, wrote an article in the German newspaper [*die Taz*](#) about the struggle in Israel as one between the Mizrahi and the Ashkenazi Jews. Ok, I thought.

So, I read the policy papers of the collective and tried to understand from afar. Now, I want to spread the messages of the Mizrahi Left and challenge the idea that there are two camps here in Berlin fighting each other.

I edit texts and try to contribute as much as I can to help the collective. But the truth is it's hard for me to contribute much. I am no longer informed like I once was. Then I tell myself that's just an excuse. So, two weeks ago the collective took to [social media](#) and in Hebrew and Arabic put out an [open call for worried citizens to join the collective](#).

We sent our policy paper to politicians and the media and shared it on different channels. We got more than 1853 signatures.

Then we began working with groups of activists in different fields: democracy and protest, education system, culture and media, social justice, housing, public space, transportation and gender and LGBTQ+ rights. And as distant as I am, it is important to me to create a distinct Mizrahi voice in the Israeli media.

Benjamin Netanyahu is using his Mizrahi ministers to undermine the accomplishments of the Mizrahi democratic struggle. [For example, he's cancelled the public housing law that helped lower-income families](#), which is bound to worsen the ongoing and systematic harm inflicted upon marginalised and mostly Mizrahi populations in Israel.

But there is more to my dilemma, as I learned during my online activism. Some of the opposition discourse on Netanyahu's rule contains racist elements. People on the Left who do not know Mizrahi history are blaming the Mizrahi people for this judicial reform; they don't know how the Mizrahi Left contributed to social justice, democracy, and other important issues.

They also use stereotypes and racism when they criticise Mizrahi ministers and

forget that our democratic struggle should be clean from racism.

On the Right there is also a scary process, a steady co-option by right-wing pundits and politicians of the discursive fruits of the Mizrahi struggle. Our collective demands for representation, described as “the second Israel” or “periphery and centre,” have turned the discussion over recognition and rights into a confrontation wherein ignorance of Mizrahi history and culture has increased and the profound problems of the present have been silenced.

These right-wing politicians have never participated in the struggles for equality in education, the equitable re-drawing of local council jurisdictions, the expansion of public housing, the prevention of evictions, and the struggle against forced removals of Mizrahi residents of neighbourhoods such as Kfar Shalem, Givat Amal, Abu Kabir, and HaArgazim.

The Mizrahi collective has three main aims: First, we will not be silenced, we will criticise the policies of this government and we will not attempt to silence “the other” within Israeli society.

Second, we will bring our Mizrahi activism to the public to remind Israelis what we gained with former struggles and what we intend to do.

Third, we will use social media to reach out to a younger audience.

This is another moment of important Mizrahi intellectual resistance. We have requested meetings with politicians, we have published a legal paper and sent it to President Herzog with a request for a meeting.

It has also been sent to both the chairman of the Knesset’s Constitution, Law and Justice Committee and the Minister of Justice with a demand to stop judicial proceedings, and to adopt the position paper.

This Mizrahi activism empowered me to stand and argue my special point of view, even here in the weekly protests at the Brandenburg Gate, where most of the protesters are Ashkenazim. Now, I am protesting with them against the coup, while continuing to argue for the long history of Mizrahi struggle, a sharp stance of a Mizrahi Left.

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Mati Shemoelof is a poet and an author. His writing includes seven poetry books, plays, articles and fiction, which have won significant recognition and prizes. He has written a radio play for German radio WDR. A German edition of his bi-lingual poems was published by AphorismA Verlag.