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Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative

Sami Shalom Chetrit

This article explores the history of Mizrahi politics over the last twenty years and the entry of the Mizrahim into Israeli electoral politics as a force to be reckoned with. It analyzes the emergence of Mizrahi political parties such as TAMI and Shas, as well as the New Mizrahim, assessing their strengths and weaknesses and whether they augur well for the emergence of a new Mizrahi social and political movement that can successfully challenge the hegemony of Ashkenazi Zionism.

Constituting about half the Israeli Jewish population,[1] the Mizrahim—Sephardic Jews and Jews from the Arab and Islamic countries—still occupy, as a group, the lowest rungs of Israeli Jewish society.[2] The last two decades, however, have witnessed an important political awakening on the part of the Mizrahim. The immediate motivation has been economic and social, but as time goes on there are signs of an emerging Mizrahi alternative to Ashkenazi Zionism in all aspects—religious, social, economic, and cultural. At the same time, Mizrahi electoral power is a contested field for which most Israeli political parties vie. Their increasing tendency—like other Israeli groups—to vote along ethnic lines gives them even greater weight.

The Politics of Identification and Cooperation

If the Mizrahim have become a political force, it was not so in the early years of the state, despite their growing numbers as they poured in from the Arab and Islamic worlds. These were the most difficult years of their painful encounter with the European Zionist movement. Uprooted from their native lands, having lost control of their lives as individuals and communities, they were mainly preoccupied with a daily struggle for survival and with gaining the trust of their new rulers. In such circumstances, and despite their early understanding that they constituted the lowest class in a nonegalitarian society, their political rebellion took the form of short outbursts that never managed to rise to the level of independent, nationwide political organization.

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Such was the case with the Wadi Salib uprising, which broke out in 1959 and soon spread throughout the country, spawning a campaign against Ashkenazi-Zionist suppression before being quelled some months later.[3] Similarly, the Black Panther movement, which was able to field massive demonstrations as of early 1971, died out within a few years, as will be discussed below. Aside from such organized protest, the early period was marked by what might be called a "passive radicalism" in the form of disobedience to the law, low rates of conscription in the military, and high dropout rates from school. All these actions flowed from an abiding dissatisfaction, social alienation, and sense of being cheated and humiliated.

In discussing radical responses to oppression, we must recall that, except for the Wadi Salib uprising and the Black Panthers movement, almost all Mizrahi political action and organization up to the 1980s resulted from initiatives of the regime and its institutions. The primary and dominant pattern of Mizrahi political action in Israel had been set when Zionist organizations were established in Arab countries to mobilize local Jews for emigration to Israel. Introduced among the Jews of those countries as agents of the Zionist revolutionary movement, the Zionist activists acquired status as "partners in the revolution" (albeit at its periphery) whose primary role was to promote Ashkenazi (i.e., "modern") Zionist socialism and to expedite immigration from the Arab countries through organizations such as the Aliya Bet Mossad in Morocco[4] and the Zionist Underground in Iraq.[5] Most of these activists later found employment in the Mossad and the government, some in senior positions.

In parallel with their partnership in the Zionist revolution, the Mizrahi leaders who identified and cooperated with the state automatically assumed the role of "ethnic leaders," appearing alongside government officials in Mizrahi immigrant camps and settlements to "improve" the living conditions of their people. They maintained their hold through their political action within the state system and through their "ethnic" activism, which was their principal tool, establishing organizations such as the League of Former Moroccans in Israel, the Organization of Immigrants from Babylonia, and so on. Such organizations played an important role in shaping the Zionist and Mizrahi historiography of the first thirty years of the state, receiving subsidies to research "Zionism in Arab and Islamic Countries," "the Holocaust in Arab Lands," and other such topics. In this way, they served to erase Mizrahi history and reshape it in the context of the Zionist revolution.[6]

Unlike the Afro-American civil rights leaders in the United States,[7] the early Mizrahi leaders did not exploit their improved position to push for better housing conditions, education, and employment opportunities for their constituencies. Rather, they were faithful servants of the new regime. They received legitimacy in exchange for their role as intermediaries between the immigrants and the Ashkenazi political establishment and for their usefulness in neutralizing any signs of rebellion that might lead to the unification of the Mizrahim in a political umbrella organization. A good example of this

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was the massive co-optation of leading activists in the Wadi Salib rebellion into the Haifa Workers' Council in order to defuse the uprising.[8]

What had characterized Mizrahi politics well into the 1980s, including the Wadi Salib and Black Panther episodes, was what can be called "naive protest." On both the political party and extraparliamentary levels, the ideological arguments of those protests could be summarized as the demand to end "ethnic discrimination"—an expression that became a cliché in Mizrahi politics—and to accept the Mizrahim as equal citizens in Israel. Even the radical Black Panthers insisted that "we are protesting for our right to be like all the citizens of this state."[9] This ambivalent approach, like the integrationist approach of Martin Luther King Jr., sought to integrate the Mizrahim within "Israeliness" (a concept much discussed by Ashkenazi Zionists) and to acquire the identity offered by European Zionist hegemony. For this reason, all radical action focused on protest against what they defined as "material discrimination" rather than on the effort to propose alternatives.

Although the Black Panthers did not formulate an alternative worldview, they were heralds of a new Mizrahi discourse.[10] They were also the first to draw parallels with revolutionary situations elsewhere, such as the struggle of blacks in the United States (from whom they took their name) and the Marxist struggle in South America. Their most important achievement was to place on the Israeli agenda and in Mizrahi public consciousness the discrimination and unequal economic relations in Israeli society, directly pointing out the overlap with the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi ethnic divide. The Panthers, through Charlie Biton's branch (which later joined RAKACH, the Israeli Communist party), were also the first Mizrahim in politics to make the connection between the occupation of the Palestinian territories and the difficult economic and social plight of the Mizrahim.

The Black Panther movement collapsed for many reasons,[11] foremost among them its lack of political experience and organization. Like all Mizrahi protest of those years, the Black Panthers sought to be absorbed—and indeed were absorbed—within the Israeli political structure after their efforts to form a party failed. The importance of the movement was that it broke the dam of silence, triggering an irreversible process of radicalizing Mizrahi political consciousness that would, by the early 1990s, mature into a movement of critique and proposed alternatives.

The traditional Mizrahi leaders contributed to neutralizing the dissatisfaction in the Mizrahi immigrant communities and to suppressing collective Mizrahi organization through two channels. The first was through rewarding local leadership (co-optation)—making them chairmen of neighborhood councils, members of city councils, directors of welfare offices, school principals, municipal functionaries, and so on. The second was through absorbing the intellectual, spiritual, and religious leadership within the government by distributing honors and favors, thus neutralizing all independent and critical thought. Aside from those engaged in research and documentation on behalf of European Zionist historiography, the Mizrahi intellectuals who re-

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ceived research grants and special subsidies included artists, musicians, and authors who all joined in the campaign of Zionization[12] of the Arab and Mizrahi Jews. The state invested in the absorption and neutralization of the educated Mizrahi elite because, even though the group was very small, it constituted a potential threat on the one hand to the Ashkenazi historical and sociological narrative, and on the other to the traditional Mizrahi leaders themselves, who were generally poorly educated.

The mechanism of creating an elite that identifies and cooperates is well known in colonial and postcolonial history.[13] Here, however, the success was greater, because on the surface there was no subjection or oppression, but rather "the ingathering of exiles" of "a single nation" with "a single religion," "a single history," and therefore a "single fate." This message was imparted to the Mizrahim as soon as they arrived in Israel and were settled in border settlements facing the Palestinian fedayeen and later, during the wars, with the virtual sanctification of the Israeli army.

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA

The "Upset of 1977," when the Likud party won a resounding electoral victory against the Labor party, which was held responsible for Mizrahi oppression, brought euphoria to the Mizrahim. The massive vote for Likud by second-generation Mizrahim had been decisive, and many saw the elections as a Mizrahi victory over MAPAI and the beginning of independence under the leadership of Menahem Begin. Israeli sociologist Sami Smooha even suggested at the time that the Likud would lead the Mizrahim to power.[14]

By 1980, however, it was clear that Likud was not going to change the basic order of things, and Mizrahi activists began to think of alternatives. In August of that year, an event called "Israel Is Me" was held in Binyanei Hauma, a Jerusalem convention hall, with the aim of establishing an umbrella of all the Mizrahi organizations in the country. Organized by intellectuals of the second generation, who were under less economic pressure and therefore freer to contemplate new directions, the meeting was attended by representatives of all the major Mizrahi groups. Though the effort did not succeed, it remains important because of its effect on Mizrahi consciousness. Also significant was the publication, a year later, of Shlomo Swirski's groundbreaking work, *Israel: The Mizrahi Majority*,[15] which challenged the prevailing establishmentarian sociological thesis of "modernization and development" as the explanation for the inferior economic status of the Mizrahim and in so doing gave academic legitimacy to the arguments of many young Mizrahi intellectuals.

The first sign that the euphoria surrounding the Likud victory was over had in fact come at the end of the 1970s with the rise of the Tent Movement. The movement, led by Yamin Swisa, had begun in 1976 in response to a severe housing crisis in Jerusalem's Qatamon neighborhood. Initially organizing squatting in a new housing development built for the new Russian

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immigrants who began pouring in as of the early 1970s, by 1981 the group had erected a large tent camp on a nearby hill. The Tent Movement gained widespread public awareness and quickly replaced the Panthers in Mizrahi consciousness, speaking not only of housing but of education, culture, identity, and wages.[16] The movement's leaders also explicitly contrasted the distress in poor Mizrahi neighborhoods and development towns with the investment of billions of dollars by the Begin government in new settlements in the Palestinian occupied territories.

Ironically, the radicalization spearheaded by the Tent Movement served the purposes of rising Mizrahi politicians in the traditional mold of "identification and cooperation." Indeed, this trend had already begun with the Panthers. Younger politicians such as David Levy, Moshe Shahal, and Aharon Abuhatzera had become fluent in the jargon of the Panthers, using it against their Ashkenazi patrons to advance their careers. Levy, for example, had first wielded the Mizrahi card against Begin in 1977 to demand the post of deputy premier. In the case of the Tent Movement, Levy, as housing minister, became the sole intermediary between the protesters and Prime Minister Begin and got the credit—and thereby immense political power—for alleviating the housing shortage in Jerusalem's Mizrahi neighborhoods by placing young Mizrahi couples in new settlements in the occupied territories around Jerusalem.

The dynamic between the young Mizrahi leaders and the Ashkenazi establishment needs some elucidation. On the one hand, they were nourished by the radical effects[17] of movements like the Black Panthers and the Tent Movement, as well as by Mizrahi workers' strikes and housing demonstrations, which made them the sole negotiators with the government machinery.[18] At the same time, they themselves unwittingly radicalized their Mizrahi supporters. To prove their hold over their constituencies to their Ashkenazi patrons, while at the same time demonstrating to their constituencies their own effectiveness with the government, politicians such as Levy and Abuhatzera were forced to act like radicals among the Mizrahim. Their followers then displayed radical feedback to strengthen them within the government and to assert the level of their expectations. This mechanism in turn led to an erosion of the Mizrahi leaders' power within their parties following crises with their Ashkenazi bosses. The ultimate result was withdrawal from these parties and the establishment of independent ones—Abuhatzera left the National Religious Party (NRP) to found TAMI in 1981; David Levy left Likud to found Gesher in 1996.

As for the Tent Movement, it disappeared after its failure in the 1981 Knesset elections. Its gains in alleviating the housing crisis did not change the social and economic conditions of the Mizrahim. The fact that their situation did not improve under the Likud was obvious from various social indicators, though masked somewhat by the intense capitalization of the Israeli economy and the consequent illusion of plenty. The rise of a new Mizrahi middle class of contractors and speculators contributed to this. The Tent Movement

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wrote the words clearly on the wall this time and thus prepared Mizrahi public opinion for the electoral success of Israel's first Mizrahi party, TAMI.

The Rise and Fall of TAMI

TAMI was established on the eve of the 1981 elections as a result not of a new ideological consciousness but of a personal crisis of Mizrahi politicians within the Ashkenazi-dominated NRP, the leading religious Zionist party. Headed by Aharon Abuhatzera, who spoke of humiliated Mizrahi pride, the new party was joined by Aharon Uzan, a veteran Mizrahi politician within MAPAI who felt he had lost power in that party.[19] Although their motives in founding the new party had not been radical, their action was. TAMI was to have critical importance in blazing the trail toward a Mizrahi radical alternative.

Like the naive protest preceding it, TAMI simultaneously displayed the Israeli flag and Mizrahi symbols.[20] Drawing on the confidence born of the Mizrahi "victory" in the 1977 elections, the new party was premised on the belief that the Mizrahim had the "maturity and ability" to change their voting patterns.[21] Indeed, the new party succeeded in rallying diverse currents around its symbols and won three seats in the Knesset, demonstrating for the first time that it was possible to overcome the manipulation of the "party key" that divided and ruled their electoral power.[22]

Tami's election slogan, "Stand Tall," was refreshing and daring. It ran counter to the thinking of political marketing specialists, who avoid particularism, but it attracted Mizrahi voters because for the first time it addressed them exclusively. It appealed mainly to two groups: the Mizrahim of North African origin, particularly the traditional followers of the Abuhatzera rabbinical dynasty, and young Mizrahi students, intellectuals, and artists. In short, it was an encounter between religious and secular, between "Right" and "Left," between immigrants and native born, between educated people and workers, between intellectuals and artists and party functionaries.

Nonetheless, TAMI ultimately failed because it did not offer an alternative to the Ashkenazi Zionist hegemony it had abandoned. Radical action as such was insufficient because it had come as a local response to an Ashkenazi-Mizrahi quarrel within the Ashkenazi-dominated Zionist parties rather than as a result of political consciousness. TAMI initiated no social or economic change to extricate the Mizrahim from their economic and class inferiority in Israel. Voters soon understood this, and after one more election campaign in 1984, TAMI disappeared from the map.

The radical effect of the rise and fall of TAMI worked from the top down: the party was founded by well-established, traditional Mizrahi leaders acting within the political center. Nonetheless, TAMI established a new minimal political demand for the radical fringes—to become a political force within the government in its own right rather than under Ashkenazi party sponsorship. In so doing, it set in motion a process that greatly raised Mizrahi polit-

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ical consciousness in the years that followed. Furthermore, the disillusionment of the Mizrahi intellectuals who left TAMI stimulated the growth of a new Mizrahi discourse in the 1980s and 1990s.

Shas: First Model for a Mizrahi Political Collective

Shas grew from the ground prepared by TAMI, and constitutes another link in the chain of radical effects of Mizrahi politics. But while TAMI, despite its origins within a religious party, addressed the collective Mizrahi memory (its name is a Hebrew acronym for the Movement for Jewish Tradition), Shas was concerned with religion. Its political action was centered on the synagogue and the yeshiva, which were to function as hundreds of local branches of the movement. Given the submissiveness to fate generally associated with the religious camp, it is ironic that the most overt and effective political criticism (in contrast to merely theoretical criticism) of Ashkenazi Zionism's attitude toward the Mizrahim should come precisely from that camp, first from TAMI and then, more forcefully, from Shas.

Shas was originally formed in 1983 in Jerusalem under the patronage of the Lithuanian chief rabbi Eliezer Shach, to serve "Sephardi" Torah students and their families suffering from racial discrimination in the Ashkenazi Haredi yeshiva schools. In 1984, after having won seats on the city council of Jerusalem, Shas ran for the Knesset and won four seats. But the turning point came in 1988, when, disillusioned by the political manipulation of the Lithuanian Haredim among whom their leaders had been educated and first arose,[23] the party broke away from its patrons.[24] Rabbi Ovadia Yosef took over the spiritual leadership of the party, and Rabbi Arye Deri, who proved to be a brilliant politician, assumed political leadership. From that time forward, Shas became more political, although it retained its unambiguous and uncompromising ideology of spiritual and social reformation according to the Torah and Sephardic Jewish law.

Shas sees itself as a Mizrahi revolution. Armed with advanced rabbinical training and sometimes an academic education, its leaders had a highly developed Mizrahi political consciousness formed through years of discrimination in the Ashkenazi Haredi community. Their point of departure was the social and economic inequality between the Mizrahim and the Ashkenazim. As a movement, Shas has consciously propagated the idea that the secular Ashkenazi Zionist movement as a whole, and not just MAPAI, is responsible, in the name of "progress" and "modernization," for the Mizrahim's inferior social status and for their separation from the religion and tradition of earlier generations. It also promoted the notion of *Lehahazir Atara LeYoshna*, or bringing back the crown (of the Torah) to the (good) old days. What this really means is reestablishing the Sephardic dominance of rulings in Jewish reli-

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gious matters.[25] In a free political translation, this could be taken as a call for "Mizrahi power," though the term would certainly not be acceptable to the Shas leadership.

Where Shas failed was in becoming a social revolution. Its concentration on matters such as establishing an independent educational system, religious schools, synagogues and Mikvaot (ritual baths), rehabilitating delinquents and drug addicts, providing support for large families, creating jobs, and improving housing does show a clear social (but not socialist) orientation. But it also points to a Bolshevik-like, MAPAI-style model of dependence, supplying the needs of a community in return for absolute ideological devotion, mainly on election day. In this respect, Shas replaced one form of dependence with another.

Despite its political and social elements, Shas's discourse remains unequivocally religious. Its insistence on the term "Sephardim," for example, which today has mainly religious connotations (referring to the Sephardic prayer book, religious customs, law, and authority), emphasizes the primacy of what in their opinion is best protected: the synagogue and religion. Shas leaders know that use of the new political term "Mizrahim" would require them to include in their program ideological elements that they mistrust from outside the sphere of religious life.

Nonetheless, Shas's appeal to broader segments of the Mizrahim is clear in its growing success at the polls: six Knesset seats in 1988, six in 1992, ten in 1996. The leaders are well aware that many nonreligious Mizrahim (unofficial estimates speak of at least half of their supporters) vote for Shas in protest but feel no need to supply an ideological home for those voters. Secular Mizrahim have nonetheless been drawn to Shas because of its political outlook, exemplified in Rabbi Yosef's revolutionary ruling that parts of the Land of Israel may be relinquished in return for saving "Jewish lives." Because of the party's stance, which clearly distinguishes it from the Ashkenazi religious camp, Shas found itself in a coalition with the parties of the Ashkenazi political Left. It was Shas's support that allowed Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres to lead Israel into the Oslo process.

Shas's rise is the result of a combination of circumstances that made it a virtually ideal vehicle of Mizrahi protest, especially after the change in the electoral system allowing separate ballots to be cast for the Knesset and the prime minister. First, the disappointed hopes raised by TAMI left a vacuum. Second, by the 1988 elections it was clear that the Mizrahi voters who had abandoned Labor in 1977 were not, despite their disappointment with Likud, returning en masse to Labor, whose Thatcherite economic policy was no different from Likud's. Moreover, the dismantling of the welfare services by the right-wing economy offered Shas a golden opportunity to fill the resulting vacuum by providing its own welfare services in a religious framework. Third, the virtual disappearance of the peace process as a national issue helped wean Mizrahim from Likud, as they could no longer be manipulated with threats of national extinction.[26] Finally, Shas had the field to itself. Since

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its establishment, not a single significant Mizrahi party has risen to campaign for the Knesset, making Shas the sole magnet for all the disappointed protest votes of the Mizrahim, whether religious or secular.

But Shas's great achievement may also be its greatest trap. As long as Shas had only six or even ten Knesset seats, its leaders could define the movement as ultra-Orthodox and free themselves from any thought of a democratic social movement. But in the 1999 elections, Shas won seventeen Knesset seats. An additional 200,000 people voted for the party, and their vote meant "I am an independent Mizrahi," not "I am an ultra-Orthodox Sephardi." These Mizrahim are clearly seeking a new social ideology and a new movement to lead them. Will Shas be able to include within it, structurally and ideologically, the voters who increasingly reject both the Likud and Labor? To do so, Shas would have to open up, which could destroy the intimate sectarian atmosphere of its inner ruling core and do away with its closed and undemocratic structure, where power mainly derives from proximity to the ear of Shas's spiritual leader, Rabbi Yosef.

In such a political context, how many steps beyond the synagogue will Shas be willing to take? Can it separate its political branch offices from the synagogue? Conversely, how many steps will Shas's secular voters be prepared to take in the direction of the synagogue and even into it? What is the ideal midpoint, and is it feasible in Israeli political reality? If such questions are not satisfactorily resolved, a new Mizrahi movement, social in its goals and democratic in structure, could well arise within the next decade and begin precisely at that midpoint.

THE NEW MIZRAHIM: RADICAL CRITICISM AND ALTERNATIVE

Mizrahi politics continues to be dominated by Shas and, to a lesser extent, Likud. But a new trend has been emerging for some years, which cannot really be called a movement but which could suggest a future development.

The "New Mizrahim" is a term for an unorganized but growing wave of young people—academics, educators, students, artists, authors, journalists, and intellectuals—who, in the past two decades, have created a new discourse with their critique of Israel's Ashkenazi-dominated social, economic, cultural, and political structures.[27] In recent years, their discourse has in part been appropriated (and domesticated) by the Ashkenazi Zionist Left, as part of the fashionable "politics of difference," under the name "post-Zionism," and has thus entered the historical and political paradigm of Ashkenazi Zionism.

The New Mizrahim do not view Israeli society through the Zionist dichotomy of Arabs and Jews,[28] nor in terms of Right and Left. In fact, according to the New Mizrahi analysis, whatever Right-Left division exists has reference not to economic and social issues but to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this context, the so-called Left, including the kibbutzim,[29] is actually very conservative.

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In contrast with earlier Mizrahi radical movements such as the Black Panthers and the Tent Movement, which presented a penetrating critique of the state but did not question Zionism's basic assumptions, the New Mizrahim reject the process of Zionization that they and their parents underwent. They seek no credit for the Ashkenazi Zionist revolution, which their parents' generation had no say in shaping—that generation did not even have any control over their own immigration and settlement in Israel. By the same token, the New Mizrahim want none of the Ashkenazi Zionist collective memory and seek to form a Mizrahi collective memory from which a Mizrahi consciousness and alternative vision for the State of Israel will emerge.

The New Mizrahim's main historical critique focuses on the Ashkenazi Zionist revolution and its Mizrahi (not just its Palestinian) victims,[30] and more particularly on Ashkenazi Zionism's success in suppressing Mizrahi culture and identity, seen as threatening the European character of the state.[31] The fact that, on a popular level, most educated Mizrahim of the second and third generations deny the suppression does not mean that there is none: on the contrary, the suppression is so deep as to make any discussion of its existence extremely painful. From this starting point, many educated Mizrahim have set out on a difficult inner journey, sometimes involving the loss of imaginary identities and existing alliances. It is because of the difficulty of the journey that not many undertake it.

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One of the important organizations that spread radical political consciousness among Mizrahim in the 1980s was HILA, the Public Committee for Education in the Inner City and Development Towns.[32] Working with parents in inner city and development town schools, HILA sought to increase awareness about the poor and oppressive state of education in their children's schools, and in so doing to raise Mizrahi social and cultural consciousness in general. Indeed, an important result of the decade-long encounter was that parent activists throughout the country adopted many parts of the New Mizrahi discourse, leading to other radical action, including demonstrations and lobbying in the Knesset and Mizrahi feminist initiatives.

Building on the work of HILA were the alternative Kedma (literally "Eastward") schools, established in 1993 in the Mizrahi neighborhoods of Hatikva in Tel Aviv and Qatamon in Jerusalem as well as in the Mizrahi development town Kiryat Malakhi. The organization was founded by Mizrahi educators and academics, by Ashkenazis who identified with the cause, and by parents in the communities involved. Besides the main goal of providing equal education in Mizrahi communities, Kedma sought to develop, together with the parents and pupils, culturally balanced curricula encompassing Mizrahi narratives and cultures. Not surprisingly, Kedma became the target of attacks from the academy, senior educators, and the official media.[33] Branded as

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extremist and segregationist, the organization was called a danger to state security on the grounds that advocating multicultural identities weakens the Jews against the Arabs by removing the foundation that unites Israeli Jews. In May 1994, Knesset member Limor Livnat led a demonstration of Beitar Youth in front of the Kedma school in Tel Aviv because it commemorated the persecution of peoples throughout history by lighting a seventh candle (in addition to the traditionally six candles lit in memory of the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust) at a Holocaust remembrance ceremony.[34] Among the most vociferous critics of Kedma educators have been the traditional Mizrahi leaders, who still rule local politics of the inner city and who clearly feel threatened by such consciousness-raising ventures. It should be noted, however, that these politicians show the same apprehension toward the Shas institutions that have flooded Mizrahi communities. In fact, Kedma did not survive the struggle waged against it; two of its three schools were closed by the government. Nonetheless, its legacy and pedagogic practices were absorbed by the Mizrahi community and educational activists all over the country and even by the educational system: Kedma's alternative Holocaust ceremony, for example, is taught in Holocaust museums and teachers' colleges.

The culmination of radical effects from Wadi Salib to Kedma was the establishment, in March 1997, of an all-Mizrahi movement called Hakeshet Hademokratit Hamizrahit (the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition). It is still too soon to evaluate the actions, ideology, and influence of this organization. Nonetheless, its founding manifesto shows the highest degree of Mizrahi political radicalism to date, even while showing a clear understanding of the successes and pitfalls of Mizrahi politics. Like the Tent Movement some two decades earlier, the Rainbow Coalition began by focusing on Mizrahi housing and property rights. It simultaneously radicalized, and was radicalized by, the local grass-roots groups supporting squatters in empty houses belonging to the Jewish Agency in the Jerusalem suburb of Mevaseret Zion. The Rainbow Coalition's action on behalf of the public housing tenants ultimately led to a Public Housing Law enabling such families to buy their apartments for a token sum,[35] though to date the law has not been implemented.[36]

The New Mizrahim cannot easily be dismissed, as were their radical predecessors, the Black Panthers and the Tent Movement. They express themselves forcefully and fluently both in the press and the broadcast media, as well as in the academy both in Israel and abroad. Unlike their predecessors, they are not asking for "acceptance" or "integration" but are questioning the fundamental premises of the state. Without doubt, they are articulating a new agenda.

It must be pointed out, however, that the Rainbow Coalition has undergone a rapid process of academization in the past two years. Its attention has shifted mainly to social research and to holding conferences on Israeli society and economy, in cooperation with Israeli academic institutions. In the

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process it seems to have left aside its ambition of becoming a mass social movement or even a political party, as some of its founders had intended. Most of those founders have quit the movement for this reason.

CONCLUSION

Even with the emergence of the New Mizrahi discourse, the old Mizrahi discourse of identification and integration continues to prevail. This discourse of the first Mizrahi generation has been passed to succeeding generations via the state educational system and the Ashkenazi-dominated media.

The reasons for the persistence of the old discourse, which does not serve Mizrahi interests, and for the Mizrahi failure to organize themselves into a collective are not difficult to discern. The Mizrahim were never, as a group, partners in the policies of state building but were merely immigrants in a process of integration and adaptation, ostensibly as in any immigrant state. But Israel in those years was not like any immigrant state, for it arose with the immigration itself and was formed in the process of immigrant absorption, with the number of immigrants exceeding the number of those absorbing them. The collective (i.e., the Zionist movement) sought first of all to maintain Ashkenazi dominance and cultural hegemony. Hence, the Mizrahim of the first generation, deprived of all political power, struggled to survive in alien social and economic structures and found themselves subjected to a socialization process that in essence urged them to erase everything partaking of their identity and culture. And while erasing the Mizrahi (mainly Arab) image in themselves, the Arab was marked out as their new enemy both on the battlefield and in the quest to create a new Israeli Jew.[37]

In these conditions, it is not surprising that the model of identification and cooperation offered the most comfortable possibility for survival. Only in a long and painful process did some Mizrahim allow themselves to become consciously aware that alienation and oppressive relations were not temporary but had become permanent, just as the tent camps solidified into shed camps and then into prefabricated housing developments. Only then does one find the first signs of disillusionment and protest that ultimately led to two diverse currents at odds with the prevailing discourse—Shas and the political approach of the New Mizrahim.

What is clear is that the Mizrahim will not aspire to become a political collective as long as they identify and cooperate within the paradigm of Ashkenazi Zionism. This paradigm is broad enough to create the illusion that it can encompass everything: Right/Left, peace camp/nationalist camp, religious/secular, Israeli-born/new immigrants, and a multiplicity of political views. The Mizrahim are invited to integrate themselves into this paradigm and "be like everyone else." But in fact, the basic social infrastructures of the economy and capital, of education and culture, still serve mainly the Ashkenazi collective, with all of its divisions and political camps.[38]

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The interrelationships between the Mizrahi apparatchiks in the dominant Ashkenazi parties and the Mizrahi activists in the protest movements, and between the Mizrahi parties such as Shas and the New Mizrahim, are nothing if not complex. Though the picture is obscured by rivalries and tensions, confrontations and vehement disputes, anyone observing it in its entirety will note many features of cross-fertilization in the chain of radical effects. These mainly arise outside the established system. But we have also seen that sometimes they are absorbed and acted upon by Mizrahi-identified co-opted leaders in the Center, who then transmit these radical positions to their constituencies. An important question not treated in this essay, but which deserves close attention, relates to the factors outside Mizrahi politics per se that spurred the process of disillusionment and made possible the emergence of the New Mizrahi discourse. Two such factors are, first, the severe weakening of the central Zionist ideology and of the Zionist socialist trend (including the Kibbutz movement), mainly since the Upset of 1977, and, second, the collapse of the "David and Goliath" myth of Israel and the Arabs and the reversal of the roles involved: it was thanks to this myth that Zionism had been able to dictate the international community's policy toward Israel and the Arab states until 1982. These large fissures in Ashkenazi Zionist hegemony set in motion a process of consciousness-raising among Mizrahim, legitimizing doubts regarding the unshakable power of Ashkenazi Zionism and planting the seeds of heretical thought, hitherto repressed, regarding Mizrahi rule in the state. Contributing to the process, the Likud government demonstrated this possibility by appointing Mizrahi ministers (albeit of the faithful cooperative variety) to key senior positions. Even more important is the emergence of Shas and its impact on the notion of Mizrahi political power in the last sixteen years.

NOTES

1. The Mizrahim constituted 51.6 percent of Israel's Jewish population in 1988, but by 1996, following the massive arrival of Jews from the former Soviet Union, the percentage had dropped to 47.3 percent (see Youssef Courbage, "Reshuffling the Demographic Cards in Israel/Palestine," *JPS* 28, no. 4 [Summer 1999], pp. 21–39). However, these figures assume all the former Soviet Jews to be Ashkenazi, whereas in fact at least 20 percent of the "Russians" are Sephardic Jews from the Asian republics.

2. For the disparities between the Mizrahim and Ashkenazis in terms of education, income levels, and so on, see Yinon Cohen, "Mizrahim and Ashkenazim: Income Gaps," *Israeli Sociology* 1 (August 1998), pp. 115–132.

3. Wadi Salib, where the rebellion broke out, was a formerly Arab neighborhood of Haifa in which North African Jews had been settled after the expulsion of the Palestinians. The political organization created during the uprising, the North African Union, did not survive the movement's suppression by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's special forces. Its leaders were detained for many months, while others were co-opted within MAPAI.

4. See Shmuel Segev, *Mivtz'a Yakhin* (The Yakhin operation) (Tel Aviv: Maarachat, Ministry of Defense, 1984).

5. On underground Zionist activity in Iraq to speed the emigration of the Jews, see Gidon N. Giladi, *Discord in Zion* (London: Scorpion Publishing, 1990), and Naim Goladi, *Ben Gurion's Scandals*

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(New York: Glilit Publishing, 1992). It is no coincidence that the books were published abroad and in English.

6. See Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Texts* 19–20 (Fall 1988), pp. 1-35.

7. See Herbert H. Haines, *Black Radicals and the Civil Rights Mainstream, 1954–1970* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), pp. 15–76; James H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 1–17; and Max James Fendrich, *Ideal Citizens* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), pp. 31–84.

8. See Devora Bernstein, "Hapanterim Hashehorim: Konflikt Umehaa Bahevra Hayisraelit" (The Black Panthers: Conflict and protest in Israeli society), *Megamot* 25 (1979).

9. Black Panther manifesto, 3 March 1971.

10. See Eric Cohen, "The Black Panthers and Israeli Society," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 14 (1972), p. 106. For the movement in general, see Bernstein, "Hapanterim Hashehorim," and Henriette Dahan Kalev, "Ma'arekhet Hitargenut 'Atzmit" (Wadi Salib and the Black Panthers: A self-organizing system), an unpublished PhD dissertation (Hebrew University, 1991).

11. See Cohen, "The Black Panthers and Israeli Society."

12. "Zionization" means essentially acceptance of the political Zionist ethos and the cultural hierarchy established by Ashkenazi Zionism.

13. See, for example, Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (London: Orion Press, 1967), and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1968).

14. See Sami Smooha, "Shalosh Gishot Besotziologia Shel Yahasei 'Edot Beyisrael" (Three approaches in the sociology of ethnic groups in Israel), *Megamot* 28 (1984).

15. Shlomo Swirski, *Israel: The Mizrahi Majority* (London: Zed Books, 1990). The Hebrew title is, *Lo Nehshalim ela Menuhshalim* (Not fallen behind but left behind) (Haifa: Mahbarot Lemehkar Ulebikoret, 1981).

16. For an extensive treatment of the Tent Movement, see Hason, *Mehaat Hador Hasheni.* (The protest of the second generation) (Jerusalem: Institute for Jerusalem Studies, 1987).

17. See Haines, *Black Radicals*, chapter 1.

18. According to Charlie Biton, originally a Black Panther and the only Mizrahi leftist in the Knesset (for sixteen years until 1992), Mizrahi political "hacks," as he called them, used to tell him that their status rose in their parties after every Black Panther demonstration, and they always promised to exploit their situation for the "struggle from within." Interview with author, Tel Aviv, November 1993.

19. See Hannah Herzog, *'Adatiut Polittit: Dimui Mul Metziut* (Political ethnicity: The image and the reality) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hemeuchad, 1986).

20. See Herzog, Ibid.

21. See Abraham Diskin, "Kituv Venayadut Bekerev Haboharim Babehirot Lakneseet Ha'asirit" (Polarization and mobility among voters in the tenth Knesset elections), *Medina Memshal Veyahasim Beinleumim* 19–20 (1982).

22. Before 1948, Ben-Gurion and the NRP established a system, called the "party key," that divided the Mizrahi voters' registration among the parties according to their power at the Zionist political institutes. Ben-Gurion's purpose was to keep his majority power after the Mizrahim arrived, since 90 percent of them were religious and thus would have joined the NRP if they had free choice.

23. Mizrahim had been educated by the Lithuanian Haredi, who opened yeshivas for them and took on the mission of rescuing them from Zionism.

24. Rabbi Shach supported them in establishing an independent party, though he once stated publicly that he did not regard them as worthy of leadership.

25. *Atara* (literally "crown" in Hebrew) has a connotation of rule and kingship solely in a Jewish religious context.

26. On this matter, see Shohat, "Sephardim."

27. Among the principal spokespersons and shapers of the discourse during the last two decades have been Shlomo Swirski, the sociologist who founded the alternative social analysis of Israeli society; Moni Yakim, a veteran of the Black Panthers; Viki Shiran and Asher Idan, participants in TAMI; David Hamo, founder and editor of *'Iton Aher*; Yossi Dahan, who

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writes on inequality in Israeli society; Yossi Yona, a critic of the educational system; Meir Amor, a founder of HILA; Ella Shohat, theoretician of Ashkenazi-Mizrahi cultural relations; Shiko Bahar and Zvi Ben Dor, founders of the student group TZAH; Eli Hamo, a veteran activist in all Mizrahi organizations since the Black Panthers; Shlomo Vazana, a radical multidimensional artist and a founder of the Tent Movement and the Ot organization; Henriette Dahan, who writes on Mizrahi feminism; Ammiel Alcalay, a radical scholar of East-West cultural relations; Simone Biton, a television and documentary film director; David Ben Chetrit and Sini Ben David, documentary filmmakers; Meir Gal, an artist; and the author of this article.

The most important venue for the publication of the New Mizrahi discourse was the radical Mizrahi journal *'Iton Aher*, published between 1986 and 1996.

28. For an important contribution to breaking the one-dimensional view of Israeli society, see Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

29. The kibbutzim, far from being the socialist, humanitarian Left depicted in Israeli myth, refused to allow Mizrahi children from nearby development towns attend kibbutz schools on the grounds that the kibbutz children's socialist values must be defended from the materialistic influences of city children. See Shlomo Swirski, *Hinukh Beyisrael: Mahoz Hamaslulim Hanifradim* (Education in Israel: The realm of separate tracks) (Tel Aviv: Mifras, 1991), p. 52.

30. See Shohat, "Sephardim," and Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

31. See Ella Shohat, "The Invention of the Mizrahim," *JPS* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1999), pp. 5–20.

32. See Swirski, *Hinukh Beyisrael*. Swirski was one of the founders of HILA and its ideological leader.

33. See, for example, the extensive coverage from August 1994 to March 1996 in the weekly newspapers *Tel Aviv* and *Ha'Ir*.

34. See Tamar Barkay and Gal Levy, "Beit-Sepher Kedma" (Kedma school), in *Hamishim LeArbaim ushmone* (Fifty to forty-eight) (Tel Aviv: Van Leer Jerusalem Institute/Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1999), pp. 433–40.

35. Most of the 110,000 (mostly Mizrahi) families placed in public housing in the 1950s and 1960s had already paid the full cost of their apartments in rent by the time of the protest. The Rainbow Coalition's argument was that the citizens had no choice about where they would live when they were settled in Israel and that for economic reasons they had not been able to buy their apartments.

36. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had unsuccessfully opposed the legislation, froze it and instead issued a governmental decision granting tenants of public housing the possibility of purchasing their apartments at a large discount (thereby strengthening his own position by being seen as the benefactor of the poor). During the 1999 election campaign, Ehud Barak attacked Netanyahu on this issue and promised to implement the law as written. But as prime minister, he has continued freezing the law and has not even carried out the decision of the prior government.

37. This explains to a large extent the phenomenon of the Mizrahim's conspicuous identification, external and symbolic, with Zionist nationalism as well as their votes for parties emphasizing those symbols, first MAPAI and later Likud.

38. A comprehensive survey of all of these infrastructures and current data was published in a series of articles in *Ma'ariv Weekend Magazine*, Fall–Winter 1996–97.

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