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Neither the New Jew nor the Old Jew: 'Oriental' Jewish Masculinity in Zionist Texts

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Abstract In the Yishuv, the Zionist image of the 'New Jew' was decidedly Ashkenazi, and many Ashkenazi writers assumed that Jewish men from the Middle East or North Africa were marginal to Zionist ideals. This paper discusses how Zionist and British Mandatory texts constructed the masculinity of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa. Using a lens of disability studies, this chapter analyses their portrayal as central to the Zionist project because of their able bodies and minds while also socially and culturally marginal to it.

Keywords Zionism. Mizrahi. Masculinity. Oriental. Mandate Palestine.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Lower Social Position of Mizrahi Jews. – 3 Able Bodies, Hard Workers. – 4 Mental Status and Civilization. – 5 Conclusion.

1 Introduction

During the years of the British Mandate, British and Zionist leaders shared much of their philosophy and policy about who should settle in Palestine. They both wanted able bodies and minds for practical reasons (they needed agricultural workers and other manual labourers to transform the land) and philosophical ones (they wanted the colonial enterprise to enact a Western ideal of the nation).

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The ideal Zionist was manly, strong, able-bodied, and healthy-minded. This is a story well known to Jewish history: The dominant forms of (Ashkenazi) Zionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries emphasized a strong, able, and often male Jewish body (Presner 2007; Stanislawski 2001; Reizbaum 2003; Herzl [1902] 2007; Weiss 2004). They created this image in part as a response to antisemitic tropes about the weak, bookish Jew and the historical victimization of Eastern European Jews in pogroms. Zionists often wrote that this strong and able body was necessary for upbuilding a Jewish homeland, and also that participating in that homeland would cultivate such a body.

Often women were missing entirely from Zionist descriptions of the relationship of the land and the body (see, for example, Herzl [1902] 2007). When Zionist leaders wrote about philosophies and goals, if women appeared at all, it was usually as supporters of men – largely as sacrificing mothers and faithful wives who raised children and kept tidy, efficient homes. Moreover, like most Western cultures, Zionists saw women's physical bodies as weaker, and the medical establishment agreed that they were more susceptible to mental illness (Saini 2018).

For both Zionist and British leaders, the able-bodied male was the ideal citizen. In fact, the able body and national belonging have often been deeply ideologically entwined in modernity. Disability studies scholars Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell write, "From the end of the eighteenth century to the conclusion of World War II, bodies designated as defective became the focal point of violent European and American efforts to engineer a 'healthy' body politic" (Mitchell, Snyder 2003, 843). Healthy citizens were strong and productive citizens, and working to support oneself and the nation were marks of worthiness. In many nations, early-twentieth-century immigration restrictions explicitly barred those who did not meet such marks of worthiness (Baynton 2019; Markel 2000; Zaves-Greene 2023).[1] In others, such as Germany, "racial hygiene", or eugenics, grew in popularity during the Weimar period as a way to discuss German ideals for the population (Poore 2010).[2] Jews participated in these conversations, and almost everyone agreed that strong, able bodies made good nations (Falk 2010).

In the development of the Yishuv, we can see a clear example of the widespread phenomenon that Mitchell and Snyder call

1 Political movements to keep out "undesirable" immigrants spread widely during the early twentieth century, including throughout the British empire, the US, French colonial territories, Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa. See MacDonald 2014, 159-60. Eugenics played a part in Japanese nationalism and colonialism too. See Robertson 2010.

2 For a discussion of how Theodor Herzl's work intersects with these campaigns for healthy bodies and ideal citizens, see Davidovitch, Seidelman 2003.

'ablenationalism', that is, "key conflation of nation and able-ism has been emerging since at least the late eighteenth century in countries enduring processes of industrialization and post-industrialization" (2010, 113). As the body politic, a nation must be healthy and strong. It requires productivity and strength. Ablenationalism has taken different forms in different nations, but in each case social, scientific, and political rhetoric posit a strong, healthy body as the desirable norm for the nation.

Both British officials and the Zionist movement assumed that Jewish men from 'Muslim lands' had a lower social status than Ashkenazi men, particularly those from Western Europe. They largely agreed about Jewish men from Yemen, Morocco, Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere in the region: they portrayed them as partaking in 'Arab' male traits as well as 'Jewish' ones. They often declared them less civilized, ignorant, superstitious, and backward. So, we might expect that this gendered picture of Zionism would paint them as less manly, and less physically able, than Ashkenazi Zionists. Yet Jews from North Africa or the Middle East were often portrayed as *more* physically and mentally robust than Ashkenazi Jews. Thus, they occupied the position of marginal citizens (not Ashkenazi, insufficiently Western), while they also occupied the place of normative citizens (stronger, more able-bodied workers than most Ashkenazim). This is the tension that drives this chapter.

A note on terms: historically, it is important to note that *Mizrahi* was not a major category of definition used by Ashkenazim, British authorities, or Jews from North Africa and Southwest Asia in the early twentieth century. Some Ashkenazi Zionists used *edot ha-mizrah* – peoples of the east – as a way to lump all of these Jews together. But by far the dominant way to name these groups was by their place of origin: Yemenite Jews, Moroccan Jews, Damascene Jews, Baghdadi Jews, Bukharan Jews, etc. They did not necessarily share customs, manners of dress, or even languages with one another, and so for those within these groups, as well as those who were intimately familiar with them, it made far more sense to talk about, for example, Moroccan Jews than it did to refer to some imagined pan-'eastern' idea.

English language sources sometimes used the term 'Oriental Jews', but this term was not exclusive to Jews from North Africa and Southwest Asia. Writers sometimes use the term to describe groups other than Mizrahi Jews, or a broad description that included any Jews not from Western Europe or the United States. For example, the American Zionist physician Joseph Krimsky disparaged indolence as "oriental", but the author actually used the label for some Ashkenazi Jews and not Mizrahi Jews. In Tiberias, he explained: "they have all sorts of odd and picaresque customs and ceremonies, which distinguish the various races and creeds living there, but they all resemble one another in their oriental indolence and disinclination

to do steady, useful work" (Krimsky 1920, 92). Yet the groups of men he describes are non-Jewish Arabs, Polish Jews, Russian Jews, and "Frank Jews" (Jews of Spanish descent) – none of which we would today consider Mizrahi. 'Oriental', then, was more often a judgment about the social or cultural status of a group rather than an empirical description of their origins.

The construction of Mizrahi masculinity was, as many gendered constructions are, filled with internal tensions. These texts and images from Europe, the US, and Mandate Palestine painted the bodies of 'Oriental Jews' as strong and resilient. They knew how to work hard, but they used backward agricultural methods. They were religiously devout but also uncivilized. They were domineering in family life, controlling their daughters, keeping their wives inside the home, and limiting education for both wives and daughters. Many Zionists argued that 'Oriental' Jewish men were the solution to the challenge of using only Jewish labour because the men were strong, hard workers, who needed less money to live.

This chapter considers a range of sources about Mandate Palestine – government documents, medical analyses, Zionist publications, memoirs, short stories, and poems – because a wide variety of discourses and material realities shape masculinity. I was intentional in finding female as well as male authors, though few of the women held the kinds of leadership posts or had the same medical training that the male physicians and scientists did. The most significant drawback to these sources is that they offer little from the perspective of Jewish men from Southwest Asia or North Africa themselves.[3] The set of questions is fundamentally a project about how their masculinity is portrayed by others. I do not want to risk silencing a group that has already been overlooked, but I do find these portrayals important to the history of Mizrahim. Because this appears in a volume with many other chapters that attend carefully to Mizrahi men through their own cultural productions and representations, however, it can contribute to a larger conversation without implying that Mizrahi men cannot represent themselves.

In this chapter, I show that Mizrahi men are portrayed as non-disabled – a characterization we would normally think of as making them central or normative, especially in a nation-building project such as the Yishuv. And it is true that they are often portrayed

3 There are some primary and secondary sources that reflect back on this period and could be used to reconstruct Mizrahi voices from the time. For example, see Moreno, Bitton 2023; Shabi 2008; Lavie 2018; Dorchin, Djerrahain 2021; Khazzoom 2008. Thank you to one anonymous reviewer for suggesting these sources. Notably, these sources often imply the social norm of male productivity, sometimes detail the problems that result from the assumptions of Mizrahi 'backwardness' especially with respect to health and childcare, but rarely discuss disability mental or physical disability.

as playing an important part in upbuilding the land, as inexpensive labourers. But their non-disabled status as workers and 'uncultured' thinkers actually facilitated British and Ashkenazi leaders to assign them a low status in the colonial Zionist nation-building project.

2 The Lower Social Position of Mizrahi Jews

Ashkenazim from Western Europe occupied the highest rung of the social ladder in both Zionist and British perceptions. They often saw Eastern European Jews as downtrodden, poorer, and sometimes superstitious in their religious and cultural beliefs (Ascheim 1982). Below that, both British and Zionist texts portrayed most Jews from Yemen, Morocco, Persia, Egypt, and Syria as poor and living in simple, dirty, and unhygienic conditions.[4] The British civil servant and Zionist Albert Hyamson, for example, wrote: "With the Yemenites, we must class the Moroccans, the Persians, the Kurdistan Jews, all for the most part sunk into deep poverty" (1910, 122).[5] The American Zionist Richard Gottheil called Jerusalem's Moroccan Jews "so fortuneless that they literally eat the dust of the earth" (1905).[6] Physicians blamed the prevalence of trachoma in Palestine on "Sephardic, [Y]emenite, and Persian Jews", whose habits most closely mirrored the "native population of Arabs" and their "mud huts" and "dirty floors" without adequate ventilation or light (Shimkin 1926, 266).[7]

Women Zionists' writing about Mizrahi Jews often reflects a concern for women learning to care for babies and children hygienically. For example, Hadassah president Irma Levy Lindheim wrote of the "backward Oriental world with its medieval customs and total ignorance of health laws", which she worried jeopardized the health of the children (1962, 172).

Many texts agreed that Mizrahi Jews lived in dirty, unsanitary, and disease-ridden conditions, but a few Zionists connected these conditions to laziness. This was, as we will see, a minority position, but it is worth noting that those who diagnosed Mizrahi men with laziness tended to connect that characterization to filth, poverty, and disease. The educator Dina Clemence Mayer blamed "poverty, ignorance, and Oriental indolence" for the dirty homes of the poor

4 Aziza Khazzoom has described the social interactions among these tiered groups in Israel "the great chain of Orientalism" (2003).

5 Hyamson would become the chief immigration officer in Mandatory Palestine from 1921 to 1934.

6 The *Maccabaean* also reprinted this article from which he is quoted here as its own pamphlet.

7 Shimkin was the chief ophthalmologist at the Hadassah Medical Organization in Haifa.

students in Palestine's kindergartens (1920, 537). Hannah Helena Thon, a German Zionist who married a physician after her 1921 move to Palestine, wrote in her 1937 article "The Problem of the Oriental Jews" that the residents "have no chance of gaining a useful profession […] and we should take no solace in the fact that all over the world there is a certain percentage [of people who suffer from] poverty, disease, and crime" (quoted in Radai 2023, 158-9). A "huge sector" of the Yishuv "live in such squalid conditions, which slowly undermine and devastate the physical and moral health of the Jewish community. And since a quarter of the Yishuv is comprised of Edot Hamizrah (in Jerusalem nearly sixty percent), the economic and cultural state of such a large segment of the population will ultimately affect the entire Yishuv" (159). Thon connected "physical" and "moral" health. Disease and lack of morality went hand in hand. In this, she echoed many eugenicists of her time. As disability studies scholars have noted, many cultures have correlated physical difference, disease, and moral deviance. Eugenicists and other public health officials reinforced or recast "the relationship between deformity, disability and moral deviance, riveting it home with the stamp of scientific approval" (Turner 2006, 9).

Thon also expected that men should be consistent in their production. They should work regular hours every day:

> Even in cases when the nature of the profession does not absolutely demand it, a substantial proportion of Edot Hamizrah laborers and artisans work only intermittently. The reason for this should not be sought solely in labor market conditions or disease, but to some extent in the unstable character of the *man of the Orient*. (quoted in Radai 2023, 159; emphasis in the original)

Thon stereotyped these Jewish men as poor in economic, moral, and hygienic terms. Yet Thon was an outlier in her evaluation of Mizrahi men. Even when other Zionists worried about lack of formal work, they often placed the blame on structures rather than men's motivation. For example, in a report for Hadassah, Jessie Sampter wrote that the Yemenite men were haunted "by the specter of unemployment", implying even its possibility concerned them – a far cry from being lazy (1931, 6). As we will see later, most authors characterized Mizrahi men in general, and Yemenite men in particular, as being hard workers.

European and American Zionists as well as British officials sometimes critiqued these 'Oriental' Jews because of their gendered social practices. The most frequent form of this concerned treatment of girls and women, including lack of education, young age of girls at marriage (sometimes as young as 8 or 9 [Ovadia 2014, 10]), and polygamy. The American Zionist Henrietta Szold worried about the

"spiritual darkness of illiteracy" to which many girls are "doomed in the Oriental community" (1937, 13). These, too, implicated men's practices.

In turn, some sources suggest that Mizrahi men are not properly Western family men. Both British and Zionist sources sometimes note that Mizrahi men marry more than one woman, or that there is a larger age gap between men and women. As Matan Boord writes in his article on fatherhood in the Labour movement, children's literature presented normative masculinity as Ashkenazi (2023). He tellingly titles one section "The Failed Mizrahi Fathers" and writes, "Mizrahi families as disruptive to the ideal spatial gendered family order; Mizrahi fathers are often described as sitting at home, passive and unemployed, while mothers and children roam outside, often assuming the responsibility for providing for the family" (278). Boord provides examples, such as 'Gam Zehariah Rotse Lilmod', a story about seven-year-old Zechariah who wants to attend school, but his eighty-year-old father and fifteen-year-old stepmother both strike him and demand he work to support the family instead (279).

Boord's Hebrew language examples are particularly striking because English language children's literature presents a different picture. Though also aimed at Ashkenazi kids, some of that literature offers very different descriptions of Yemenite fathers, for example. Jessie Sampter wrote a story, *The Key*, parts of which read like an ad for the Jewish National Fund; the story assumes its readers will identify with the Ashkenazi Zionist child who is visiting Palestine (1925). The central moral of the story is: "In Palestine, whether we come from America or Russia or England or Germany or Persia or Yemen, we are all Jews" (21). In the story, the Yemenite children tell wonderful stories and sing beautiful songs with the other children. It acknowledges social hierarchy while gently critiquing it: "Some of the neighbours' small children ran in, little fair-headed Russian and Rumanian Jews who were used to look upon the Yemenites as their servants" (21). The story has many of the simplistic and romantic elements of children's literature, but it does not portray Yemenite families as lesser or dysfunctional. One of the main characters, a Yemenite girl, was concerned because her father would whip her for failing at her chore of caring for another man's chickens, but the children worked together to solve the problem. There is no sense that the Ashkenazi children are superior or need to save the Yemenite children from their fathers.

Beyond the realm of children's literature, we see both a romanticization of Mizrahi masculinity and a concern about gender relations. Writing for Hadassah, and thus an audience of largely Ashkenazi American women, Jessie Sampter wrote: "The Yemenite Jews set in the Palestinian Jewish scene are a bit of Oriental medievalism in a modern community, their men and boys highly

schooled in Hebrew lore, the women kept in purposeful ignorance" (1931, 7). In education programs designed for Yemenite children, (largely by Ashkenazi women), they sometimes remarked that, for Yemenites: "the fathers are less co-operative than the mothers", in paying for the all-day kindergarten that feeds and teaches the children (7). Fathers, in the judgment of Hadassah women such as Sampter and Szold, were often against the education of girls because they thought it was a waste of time and took even young girls away from spaces where they could earn money for the family by doing small tasks like the "scrubbing of floors" for money or food (Szold 1937, 15). Sampter mentioned that younger women married to older men, and sometimes even more than one woman marries a man (which she and her readers understood to be bad). Yet, she wrote, "The theory is horrible, the facts somewhat less so, because there is much love and human kindness and the gentleness of ancient culture" (Sampter 1931, 7). Zionist writing, then, could both romanticize and criticize Mizrahi men and masculinity.

3 Able Bodies, Hard Workers

Taken together, what British Mandate and Zionist sources make clear is that while Mizrahi masculinity may have been stereotyped, that portrayal was not uniformly negative, nor was Mizrahi masculinity frequently portrayed as outside or counter to the project of nation-building. In fact, in two prominent ways, these documents portray Mizrahi men in general and Yemenite Jewish men in particular with central roles in the Zionist project of Jewish colonization. Instead of portraying them as a rejected other in terms of ability, they often assumed the opposite when it came to physical capacity and mental stability.

As the British empire took over the administration of Palestine, it had to consider what sorts of people should be allowed to immigrate and/or become citizens. Much scholarship has been dedicated to this because of questions of quotas for Jews, in particular. But less discussed – because it was in fact far more common across nations and empires at the time – was the creation of a nationality law that judged on the basis of ability or disability. The Palestinian Citizenship Order of 1925 created pathways for Ottoman citizens living in Palestine as well as their wives and children. (Discussions of citizenship and immigration were often discussions about adult men, and women and children appear as afterthoughts or only in relation to adult men. Thus, it is reasonable to think about men and masculinity while analysing these documents.) It also naturalized citizenship for most of those who had lived in Palestine for at least two years. But this naturalization was not automatic; it was under the "absolute

discretion of the High Commissioner", who had the right to withhold or deny citizenship with or without giving a reason "as he thinks most conducive to the public good" (*Palestine Gazette* 1925, 462).

The "public good" related to individuals' ability status. The Order declared: "a certificate of naturalization shall not be granted to any person under disability" (463), which it defined as "the status of being a married woman or a minor, a lunatic or an idiot, or otherwise legally incompetent" (465).[8] British and Zionist leaders found confounding "the mentally ill, transients, and labour migrants who settled in Palestine" (Banko 2019, 1153) and specifically strategized about how to encourage only strong, healthy, productive workers. Both groups relatedly assumed that Arabs, communists, and people with disabilities, were generally undesirable, and able-bodied Zionists were desirable as immigrants. Citizenship was about able male bodies and sane minds.

Within Zionist leadership, the question of labour again turned attention to able male bodies. The "Hebrew labour" movement declared that Jews and not Arabs should work on Jewish-owned land. Many scholars have described this movement and its ideology, so I will not rehearse it in depth here (see, for example, Shapira 1977; Shafir 1996). Most of the Jews who had lived in Palestine historically had not made their living primarily with manual labour. As the scholars Ruth Kark and Joseph Gladd find, in 1839, for example, "of Jerusalem's 1,751 Jewish breadwinners, only 229 Sephardim and 28 Ashkenazim earned a livelihood from physical labour and crafts" (2003, 344). Jews who immigrated to Mandate Palestine in the early twentieth century were similarly unlikely to have experience in agricultural or physical labour as their livelihoods.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the movement struggled with the problem, as they saw it, that Arabs could work harder for less money.[9] The British Zionist Arthur Ruppin, for example, wrote that the foundation was not prejudice against Arabs but rather "arises solely from our desire to transform ourselves into workers and fructify the soil with the sweat of our own bodies" (1975, 51). Historians, such as Anita Shapira, also point out that declining relationships between Jews and non-Jewish Arabs contributed to the ideology (1977).

Especially in the late 1910s and 1920s, European Zionist settlers thought that Jews from Yemen and North Africa might be possible solutions to this issue, since the Zionists perceived them as strong,

8 For more on Palestinian citizenship, see Banko 2016.

9 As Gershon Shafir explains, they were often willing to work for less money because "the Arab workers possessed some land, housing, and social services as part of their traditional way of life, and sought in the Jewish settlements only seasonal work and supplementary income" (1990, 173).

hale, and happy to work for less money. In 1913, after crediting Ashkenazi leaders like himself with "set[ting] in motion" Yemenite immigration to Palestine, Ruppin wrote that Yemenite Jews "do not bring with them European standards and European habits, and can therefore manage on the rate of pay which is general in the country" (1975, 55). Ruppin compared their physical capacity explicitly to Ashkenazim: Jews from Yemen, Urfa, Morocco, and Aleppo could compete with Arab labourers, whereas "the East European labourer is unable to compete with this labor" (1911, 141). In another address, he explained, "the low rate of pay which obtains in the country is enough for the sustenance of a family; [the Oriental Jew] is even able to save a little, especially if his wife knows how to make herself useful" by running a frugal household and working for wages herself (1975, 33). Aharon Eisenberg, the general director of Agudat Netaim (The Planters Society), wrote to the head of the Jewish National Fund Menachem Ussishkin, "these brothers of ours are contented with little, at the level of the Arab", and they gave "hope to ridding us of the Arab worker!" (quoted in Shafir 1990, 177-8).

Zionists held up Yemenites in particular as hard workers who could play a critical role in the project of building a Jewish nation. In the American youth publication *Young Judaean*, a rabbi characterized Jews from Yemen as "the poorest of the people who do the hardest of the work" (1930, 31). In her *Course on Zionism*, Jessie Sampter wrote,

> For cheap farm labor the colonists have been forced largely to employ Arabs, because of their low standard of living, and because their neighboring villages make them convenient seasonal workers. The Yemenite Jews, recent refugees from persecution in Arabia, where they had lived for about 2000 years, are largely replacing the Arabs. They are sober, intelligent, industrious, and can live on almost nothing. But that does not solve the complicated labor problem. (1915, 81)

The American Zionist B.L. Gordon wrote about the moving "evening prayers" of the "poverty-stricken and spiritually crushed Yemenite Jews" he had seen in Rehovot. He romanticized their Judaism as traditional suggesting that their work ethic and physical capacity would provide an answer to Zionism's labour issues: "These good people are very energetic, frugal and conscientious laborers, who have persevered in all their purity in distant Yemen the old Jewish virtues of deep piety and scrupulous morality. They are content to live a simple life and they can compete with Arab labor" (1912, 159).

Yet in one of Sampter's poems, she suggested that maybe not all were content with nothing but labour and simple lives. "Mosheh (Moses) The Yemenite Errand Boy" tells of a boy whose parents work hard, but he "cannot be content with common things"; "He wants an

education. He may stare/ Through windows at the scholars at their desks". He dreams of "high adventure". Yet he also partakes in the myth of the pioneer: "But here he is, stretching his muscles out/ Swinging his hoe and breaking the deep earth/ The fragrant clods that gave his people birth". (Sampter 1937, 33-5).

In a letter to the fifteenth Zionist convention, the German Zionist Warburg Hantke, on behalf of Das Aktions-Comite der Zionistischen Organization, wrote of the "steady immigration of our Yemenite brethren into the country the last few months, who, by virtue of their industry and thrift are destined to become an important element in the Jewish labor forces in Palestine" (1912, 19). A report from that same convention read: "The Convention learns with deep interest of the continued immigration into Palestine of large numbers of Jews from Yemen". The writers expressed "deep sympathy" with their "brothers":

> We recognize in them not only a sturdy tribe of our race with a romantic history and a valuable literature, but we welcome their flocking to Palestine as a hopeful symptom, importing a valuable, hard-working element, which is certain to prove helpful in the tasks of colonization. ("Fifteenth Annual Convention of the Federation of American Zionists" 1912, 8)

The Jerusalem-based rabbi Lazar Grunhut wrote of Yemenite Jewish men:

> They can be employed in almost any occupation: they can turn just as well to filigree work as to agricultural labor, to masonry or stonecutting to carrying parcels or heavy loads. […] For the same daily wage they will do as much or more as the fellah (peasant). (1911, 33)

Henrietta Szold, for example, extolled both Yemenite Jewish men and women for their labour capacities: "Industrious and frugal, speaking both Hebrew and Arabic, their wives ready to replace Arab women in domestic service, the Yemenites were recognized especially by the plantation colonies as valuable accessions, worth making an effort for" (1915, 65). As Gershon Shafir writes, Yemenite immigrants to the Yishuv were "Jewish workers who could be paid Arab wages" (1990, 177).

The example of Zionist imaginations of Jews from Yemen as solutions to the issues of Hebrew labour demonstrates the dominance of this narrative of the Mizrahi male body as strong, able, productive, and perhaps even central in the upbuilding of a new nation. Yet even at its rosiest, this narrative contains hints of the other ways Jews from Yemen were not central: these writers expressed pity for their

poverty and romanticized their Judaism in ways that indicated they would not be integrated into the dominant Zionist culture.

Redcliffe Nathan Salaman, the physician, scientist, and British Zionist served as a Regimental Medical Officer in Palestine. While there, in 1918, he wrote: "The Yemenites display a really passionate love for Judaism and have withstood centuries of bitter persecution. They are most industrious workmen, and everyone speaks well of the part they are playing in the new Yishu[v]" (1921, 29). Yet he also wrote that Yemenites,

> are not racially Jews. They are black, long-headed, hybrid Arabs […] from the historical evidence, it is at once clear that they have but a trace of Jewish blood in them though they probably have rather more than the Falashas. The real Jew is the European Ashkenazi, and I back him against all comers. (Salaman 1921, 28)

Elsewhere in the volume, he calls them "purely semitic" (24). Salaman at once claimed Yemenites for the Jewish national project – they were "industrious workmen" who played an important part in upbuilding the nation – while disavowing them as racially Jewish. (Interestingly, when Salaman's letters were published, the editor of the volume, H. Ormsby Gore, singles out this opinion as one with which readers will likely disagree: "Many will dispute his statements that Yemenites are not racially Jews" [Preface to Salaman 1920, xii]).

Salaman's depictions of different groups within the Yishuv help us see the coexistence of the images of Mizrahim as able-bodied workers and still social outsiders to the nationalist cause. He recorded his observation of

> groups of Yemenites working on their own. They were dressed and behaved as the crudest of Arabs, and to my mind are not being properly looked after. They are not being exploited, but they are not being Europeanized, and it is essential that they be made into westerns and not be left as degraded Arabic Jews. (Salaman 1920, 184-5)

Moroccan Jewish men who had joined a regiment were "semi-Negroid but often very handsome" (25). These locutions suggest how Yemenite and Moroccan Jews could be seen as at once masculine and have a lower status: the standards of masculinity included strength, hard work, ability to work the land, and self-sufficiency. They could enact these while still failing to perform westernness – which is what Salaman writes is happening. They are mentally and physically able, but they are culturally deficient; thus, they could perform something like a hegemonic masculinity while still occupying a lower status culturally.

4 Mental Status and Civilization

In the eyes of Ashkenazi writers, physical ability paired with social and cultural backwardness also meant that Mizrahi Jews experienced fewer mental illnesses and disabilities. As Halperin had noted, Ashkenazi Jews were more likely than these other Jews to be "insane", and they were less "susceptible to psychic morbidity", which he and others attributed to coming from less civilized societies. In this, he was quite typical of both psychological specialists and British and Zionist officials more generally. On the one hand, they saw Mizrahim as culturally and educationally inferior, but on the other hand, this very civilizational inferiority meant they were far less likely to have mental illness.

These leaders thought that Arabs in general were less civilized, lived in squalor, and were more likely to spread disease; they thought that Jews from Arab lands shared some of these characteristics (on Mizrahi stereotypes, see, for example, Dahan-Kalev 2001; Radai 2023). Some also believed that Arabs were "immune to certain infectious diseases" that affected Jewish colonists (Mendelsohn 1935, 998; Cohen 2022).

One clear historical source is the 1931 census. It counted people according to gender, religion, country of origin, and age, as many do. But it also counted the diseases and disabilities that the population had. This in itself is notable: British officials decided that data on physical disabilities, such as blindness and deafness as well as mental disabilities ('insanity' and what we would now call intellectual disabilities), were crucial measures for quantifying a population. The writer of the report, Major E.M. Mills, also consulted with physicians in Britain and Palestine as he wrote the final report, so it reflects some of the more general medical conversation while also placing it in terms of administering and governing a territory.

The 1931 census was the most "systematic attempt to come to terms with" mental illness in Mandate Palestine, as Chris Sandal-Wilson has written (2024, 7). In studying mental health in Palestine, scholars have often concentrated on the Jewish institutional history of psychiatry, but a wider array of sources makes clear that the construction of the healthy mind and body was a society-wide project and not just one taking place inside particular institutions.[10] The census included a whole section titled "infirmities". In it, Mills recorded and explained

10 Sandal-Wilson also expresses this judgment: "Within this scholarship, the history of the mandate's engagements with mental illness is given little attention, except insofar as the colonial government's provision is represented as a kind of foil, as forming a parallel if inferior system to that being evolved by and for the Yishuv, Palestine's Jewish community" (2024, 9).

data about deafness, blindness, and the "insane".[11] The central issue for disability, the census implied, was economic productivity. Adult men with these disabilities could not be productive workers.

Both British and Zionist officials agreed that immigration policy should be designed to keep people with mental illness or disability out of Palestine. In 1938, Zionist and neurologist Lipman Halperin published an article interpreting the data of the 1931 census alongside a 1936 study. His article reflected widely held Zionist ideas about mental illness and the development of a Jewish society in Palestine. First, he celebrated the foresight of immigration restrictions: Jews in Palestine were less likely to have mental disease than Jews in other countries in part because of who was allowed in. "This comparatively favorable aspect of insanity prevalence among the Jews in Palestine, in spite of the difficulties of adjustment previously mentioned, is due largely to the regulations governing the selection of Jewish immigrants. Mentally abnormal individuals are not allowed to enter the country" (Halperin 1938, 1218). Before the census, in a 1924 article, Dorian Feigenbaum, a physician based in Palestine, had already warned that untreated neurotic or psychopathic immigrants would become "a thorn in the flesh of his surroundings and of society" (1924, 3-4).[12] For people experiencing mental illness or with a cognitive disability, Palestine offered less care than other Western places. Mills wrote: "Imbeciles die young in Palestine while in Europe proper care and attention keep them alive" (1931, 241). According to these leaders, immigration restriction that weeded out people with mental disabilities was good scientific planning and morally sound decision making.

The patterns of mental illness in the census showed significant differences among populations according to their religion, which was also related to their place of origin. In his published studies, the physician Lipman Halperin (who also corresponded with Mills) wrote: "Many of the social and individual difficulties inherent in civilization or brought about by it have as a negative result an increased susceptibility to psychic morbidity" (1938, 1217.) Because Jews were more cultured, this explained why they had more "insane" people than Muslims or Christians. Halperin used the same logic to explain why there were so few Mizrahi Jews among the roles of the "insane": "in conformity with the social level, the frequency index among Ashkenazim or Occidental Jews amounted to 1.12, among Sephardim to 0.79, and among the other Oriental communities to 0.49" (1218). In another study, he included a chart with the number

11 Three Jerusalem-based physicians – J. Hermann, J.C. Stathearn, and M. Salzberger – each also offered their analyses of the statistics in the census.

12 Gillit Ben-Shimon argues that we can also see ideas of deviance in the Yishuv's approach to special education (2006).

of "insane" per 100,000 people. These numbers were: "Moslems", 65; Christians, 109; Jews, 143 (1944, 776). These numbers exemplified the assumption that people of European descent were more susceptible to mental illness. Lipman reinforced these quantitative data in his anecdotes too. In these anecdotes, he differentiated between Jewish groups. He explained that Ashkenazi (male) patients whine and wallow in their symptoms; whereas "oriental Jews" do superstitious things like burn the head of a person with mental illness (779).

In her study of the Tel Aviv Psycho-Hygiene Clinic for Children, the scholar Tammy Razi describes how hundreds of children in the 1930s and 1940s were diagnosed as "retarded" or as having "neurosis", and how those diagnoses reflected Zionist ideas about disability and ethnicity, as well as a desire to fix or contain such disabilities in the Yishuv. She finds that in most cases Mizrahi children were diagnosed as "retarded", while Ashkenazi children were diagnosed as suffering from neurosis. She concludes that this demonstrates "two basic trends in yishuv society, especially prominent during the British Mandate: the labelling of the Mizrahim in general, and Mizrahi children in particular, as culturally and mentally inferior; and a high degree of intervention on the part of mental health specialists" (Razi 2012, 340). Assumptions about the relationship of especially cognitive disability and Mizrahi background continued for many decades (see, for example, Mor 2007; Di Giulio 2023).

Mental illness also had a gendered aspect in reports and statistics. Halperin wrote: "Whereas the majority of mental cases among the Arabs, both Moslem and Christian, are men, the majority among the Jews are women" (1944, 778), because of, Halperin explains, "the smaller number of alcoholic and syphilitic psychoses which ordinarily are more frequent among men" (1938, 1220; 1944, 778). He assumed that male psychosis was usually a result of alcohol or syphilis, whereas female psychosis had other factors. He believed that Arab men were more likely than Jewish men to experience psychosis because they were more likely to be alcoholics or have syphilis. As a result, Jewish women therefore accounted for a larger percentage of overall Jewish mental illness.

For the modern reader, this approach to mental illness and disability has mixed assumptions: the doctors and statisticians thought that some components were heritable and influenced by 'race', but they also believed in the relevance of cultural factors, such as how 'civilized' a society was and what its morals around alcohol and sexual promiscuity were. Dr. Hermann, one of the physicians who contributed to the census, wrote:

> Mental disease is a sickness of modern civilization. Here the situation is much complicated. On the one hand, there is, undoubtedly, a connexion between progressive culture and civilization and the

> spread of psychoses […] I am convinced that no-one becomes insane, as a direct consequence of his peculiarly difficult struggle for life, unless he is born with a pre-disposition to madness. One thing is certain, that, with increasing civilization, the number of so-called functional nervous disorders is substantially increased, and, therefore, again indirectly influences the deterioration of the hereditary proportion in the next generation. (quoted in Mills 1931, 230)

Experts read and relied on eugenics, but that did not mean their ideas about disability were limited to race-based assumptions about heredity and disability. They included those ideas at times, but they also believed cultural and historical factors, like how civilized your culture was, influenced whose bodies and minds were healthy.

Again, however, the sources offer some exceptions to the idea that all groups of non-Western Jews were uncultured, and most of these examples name a particular community rather than generalizing about *edot ha-mizrah* or 'Oriental' Jews in general. Several Zionists wrote about the culture of Bukharan Jews in admiring ways. Richard Gottheil, the Zionist and professor at Columbia University wrote:

> The little village, Rehovot, which the Bochara Jews have built on the rising ground is a pleasure to the hungry sight of the visitor: the large, wide streets are lined with houses that are neat, clean, and comfortable […] Their men are an exceptionally fine looking class […]. (Gottheil 1906, 277)

Gottheil reported on the men he saw when he visited a yeshiva in the neighbourhood:

> Upon divans around a large room sat some twelve venerable looking forms: their fine clean figures, their long patriarchal beards and their thoroughly oriental courtesy, quite fascinated the sympathetic onlooker. They had the air of freemen, the dogged and chased look was entirely absent from their features. (Gottheil 1906, 277)

These men were "oriental", but they were not dirty or uncultured. To the contrary, they were appealing. This image, of course, also traffics in orientalism, but it is the kind that romanticizes these men's physical and cultural attributes.

In the early twentieth century, scholars in the US and Europe had begun to publish about the poetry of the Jews of Yemen. A 1912 *Jewish Quarterly Review* article, for example, referred to seven of these poems as a "remarkable poetical production" and discussed the historical tradition of their Hebrew language poetry (Bacher 1912, 373; The author is from Budapest.). This again fit with romanticized

ideas of an unchanging Judaism unaffected by the centuries. In this case, we can see how Zionists could imagine that the Jews of Yemen had been untouched by the ills of modern civilization because they had held fast to ancient ones.

Others noted the culture of some Mizrahi men while simultaneously noting how they were rejected by Jewish and British elites. While living in Cairo, Helen Bentwich reported: "These Jewish families, however well educated, are looked on as 'Levantine' by most of the population and have little social contact with the British" (1973, 47). She and her husband's closest associate, the Cairo businessman Jacques Mosseri, had a beautiful house, an impressive flower garden, and was highly cultured and educated, all things she prized in men.

Interestingly, none of these writers who argued for the culture of a particular group of Mizrahi Jews suggested that the men were somehow less manly or more feminine. When historical actors Orientalize a group, they often feminize and sexualize that group. Although these sources certainly romanticize Mizrahi men, they very rarely feminize or sexualize them. From British and Zionist perspectives, Mizrahi masculinity hewed closely to many aspects of normative masculinity – they were strong, able-bodied, and productive. Even their shortcomings, such as the Hebrew literary portrayals of domineering or neglectful older fathers, rarely moved into feminizing stereotypes.

5 Conclusion

The Hungarian rabbi Lazar Grunhut, who lived in Jerusalem from 1882 until the end of his life, was an ardent Zionist and took an interest in the many communities around him in Jerusalem. He wrote something about Yemenite men that sounds like it could have come out of an Ashkenazi fantasy of the New Jew:

> It is astounding what the bodily strength of the [Yemenite] shows at the Hadlakah (Feast of the Fire) on the eve of Lag beomer. Bearing a man on his shoulders, holding a child in each hand, the Yemenite performs marvelous movements in the ring of dancers around the fire, and also various gymnastic exercises. The climax of this feat of strength is reached when he passes through the flames. (Grunhut 1911, 34)

without catching his clothes on fire.

Zionist and British documents often portrayed Mizrahi men as both normatively masculine and non-disabled, and yet they still assigned them a lower social status. This is obviously not true for every single document, or even every genre, but it is particularly

remarkable in the context of a national and colonial movement that is invested in building up the land via the physically demanding work of agriculture.

However, this portrayal is not unprecedented, and it fits in with the idea that Mizrahi men in Israel today are somehow "more" masculine. The scholars Dafna Hirsch and Dana Grosswirth Kachtan argue that, in both the historical situation of "early Zionist ideological workers" and present-day men in the IDF, the perception is that Mizrahi masculinity looks *more* masculine than the normative Ashkenazi masculinity. They write that in both situations, "a symbolic hierarchy of masculinities emerges, in which Arabs – and in the case of Golani soldiers, also 'Arab Jews', that is, Jews who descended from Arab countries – are marked as more masculine than hegemonic Ashkenazi men" (2018, 687). Interestingly, this does not lead to a situation in which Mizrahi men rank higher on the social hierarchy, or that their performance of masculinity becomes hegemonic. Yet neither is it the case that their gendered attributes are cast as animalistic, as in the case of many racist tropes, such as those that painted African Americans as hypersexual, aggressive, and sub-human (Leab 1973). These historical sources about Mizrahi masculinity therefore suggest a different interpretation than Harriet Dahan-Kalev, who has called Mizrahim "The 'Other' in Zionism" (2001, 90). There are certainly aspects of difference – and difference aimed at denigration – but there are also significant central traits that mark Mizrahim as appropriately masculine and able-bodied. Mizrahim, according to Hirsch and Katchan, "are not associated with excessive and dangerous masculinity but rather with valued masculine qualities, both in the context of [historical] agricultural labor and in the context of [present-day] military service" (2018, 688). Their analyses suggest that the history of portraying Mizrahi men as having an able-bodied, physically strong, and mentally resilient masculinity I've observed here also has a present-day version.

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