Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities

Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies

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Piera Rossetto, Hadas Shabat Nadir,
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Abstract

Middle Eastern and North African (hereafter MENA) *Jewish Masculinities: Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies* explores how masculinities among Jews in and from the MENA region have been constructed, negotiated, and transformed across time, space, and language. Moving from the early twentieth-century post-Ottoman and colonial histories through Israel's statehood and new Jewish diasporas in the Americas, the volume specifically traces how migration, displacement, and cultural translation reshape the meanings of MENA Jewish masculinities, including Mizrahi ones in Israel. Through close readings of fiction, poetry, song, and personal narrative, the essays uncover shifting figures of the father, the male labourer, the soldier, the queer subject, and the writer.

Drawing from gender studies, Jewish history, migration studies, and literary criticism, the contributors approach masculinity as an embodied and mobile category – formed through movement across geographies as well as shifting power relations.

Spanning multiple generations of MENA Jewish masculinities, the volume shows how Orientalist hierarchies, Zionist remasculinization, and diasporic reimaginings continually refashion Jewish male identities. From colonial rankings of 'Eastern' bodies to poetic reclamations of tenderness and vulnerability, *Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities* positions masculinity as a travelling concept – translated across empires and languages, shaped by memory and motion, and embodied in the lived experiences of men who carry, contest, and rewrite the meanings of being MENA Jews.

Keywords Sephardi-Mizrahi Jews. Masculinities. Bodies. Mobilities. Ethnicities.

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1 Jewish MEN(A): An Introduction

> While he descended the air stairs, we were all excited and anxious to feel the appeal of Israel that we had dreamed of. […] Before we knew what was happening – a white cloud of DDT enveloped Abu Shaul, a man both respected and influential within Baghdad community. Through this cloud we saw my father lift his hand towards the spray gun; it was a silent protest. Hair, moustache and eyebrows turned white. The silk tie, the starched shirt and his elegant suit instantly changed into dusty rugs. After that humiliating moment and them treating him like the head of a herd of animals, I saw my father, silently, try to maintain his dignity by refusing to sneeze. Tears streamed from his eyes, his face muscles contorted like a tormented mask…and everything seemed disfigured, ugly and revolting. The spasms lasted only a few moments, but my father had won, he hadn't sneezed. There and then I witnessed the last victorious moment of Abu Shaul's life. The creature that later left the airport was no longer my father, all that remained was his pride.
>
> (Sami Michael, *More and More Equal*, 1974)

Sami Michael's scene captures not only humiliation but a moment of masculine transition. This well-known episode of the DDT spraying – a disinfection procedure applied to new immigrants arriving in Israel in the early 1950s, meant to prevent disease but remembered by many as a deeply degrading ritual – has been widely read as a symbol of the immigrant experience, as Michael himself presents. Yet it can also be read through the lens of masculinity, revealing how the figure of the father becomes central in recounting migration's hardships. As Abu Shaul steps through the mist, the man who once embodied authority and respect in Baghdad enters a new social order where those very qualities collapse. His silent defiance – refusing to sneeze – becomes a fragile act of control amid the unmaking of patriarchal power. Migration here is not only a passage between places but a reordering of gendered hierarchies.

This passage resonates with the broader interpretive frameworks that have shaped how Jewish masculinities – especially those rooted in the Middle East and North African (MENA) context – have been understood and represented. On the one hand, Orientalism (Said

We extend our sincere gratitude to Nancy Berg and Sarah Imhoff for their careful reading and insightful comments, which have substantially strengthened this introduction. The book employs a simplified version of the scientific system for transliterating Hebrew into English. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Hebrew and other languages are provided by the respective chapter authors. All terminological designations used throughout the chapters reflect the analytical decisions of the individual contributors.

1978) produced ranked stereotypes about race and gender – casting "Eastern" men at times as weak and feminized, at other times as hyper-virile and threatening – which shaped how colonial and later national societies judged and valued MENA Jewish men (Khazzoom 2003). On the other hand, Jewish thought also offered different models of masculinity. As Daniel Boyarin describes, this "unheroic masculinity" valued learning, gentleness, and openness – an alternative to the modern, militarized image of the strong male (Boyarin 1997). Aziza Khazzoom's sociological account of Israel's internal "chain of Orientalism" shows how such hierarchies became institutionalized in the 1950s, mapping old European stereotypes of the "exilic Jew" onto Mizrahim as "dirty, unhygienic, uneducated", even when their bodies were conscripted as sturdy national labor (Khazzoom 2003). In Connell and Messerschmidt's terms (2005), this represents an example of hegemonic masculinity in formation: a dominant style (European-Zionist, *sabra*) legitimates itself by subordinating others, including "Oriental" Jewish men.

The title of this volume, *Middle East and North African Jewish Masculinities: Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies*, captures our added perspective: a cross-generational, transregional lens that contextualises these national voices within wider cultural dynamics, showing how MENA Jewish masculinities continually translate and reshape belonging across time and place.[1]

The contributions straddle diverse academic fields such as gender studies, migration studies, Jewish history, and literary criticism, where each offers distinct analytical tools for understanding the experiences and representations of MENA Jewish (including Mizrahi) men through generations and in various geographical and historical settings. Moreover, the title points to the centrality of the body and of embodied experience to gain knowledge about masculinities: the ways in which masculinity is lived, negotiated, and manifested in the physical bodies of MENA men, shaped by history, social context, and personal narrative.

1 The heterogeneity of the texts gathered in this volume – spanning multiple disciplines, geographies, and historical moments – makes it challenging to settle on a single term that would adequately encompass all the communities discussed. Contributors consistently and productively employ Mizrahi in their individual chapters, reflecting the term's centrality within Israeli sociological, political, and cultural discourse. Yet as editors, we also sought language that would acknowledge the non-Israeli contexts from which many of these communities emerged and the broader regional frameworks within which their masculinities were historically shaped. For this reason, while individual authors specify how and why they use Sephardi, Mizrahi, or both, our introduction adopts a more capacious vocabulary – drawing at times on MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and at times on Sephardi – to better reflect the diverse pre-Israeli trajectories of the communities represented. This terminological tension is itself reflective of the communities' historical complexity: their identities have been shaped across multiple homelands, regimes, and languages.

MENA Jewish Masculinities follows MENA Jewish masculinities as they move in varied historical contexts – across ports and barracks, through transit camps, protest squares, family apartments, and on to the pages of novels and poems. Read chronologically, the chapters trace how ideas of 'being a man' are made, unmade, and remade as Jews travel from the Arab–Ottoman world into the British Mandate, the State of Israel, and contemporary diasporic locations in the Americas. Diaspora theory in particular helps us rethink masculinities as contextual and emerging "in movement" at contact zones. In Gilroy's terms, we are reading masculinity along "routes" (Gilroy 1993), which is precisely what marks it as a "travelling concept": portable, translatable, and continually renegotiated across settings (Clifford 1994, 308). Thus, two overarching aspects run through the volume: the migratory context that represents the travelling of concepts; and the historical-literary framework that informs our understanding of the prominent narratives of MENA Jewish masculinities across generations.

2 Masculinities On the Move

Most of the contributions in this volume address the complex historical process that, by the 1970s, had nearly brought an end to Jewish life across the Middle East and North Africa. In the late 1940s, hundreds of thousands of Jews still lived in Muslim-majority countries throughout the region. Yet within a few decades, a series of intertwined regional and global developments – political upheavals, wars, decolonization, and rising nationalisms – disrupted these long-standing communities and compelled many to leave their countries of origin. As a whole, these migrations represent a profoundly intricate phenomenon that defies a singular definition. Scholars have shed light on various facets, including the role played by the Jewish Agency and the Zionist Israeli establishment (Tsur 2000; Laskier 2006), and the involvement of Jewish organizations (Messika 2020). Recent advancements in Jewish studies scholarship have taken a more micro-historical analytical stance and have focused on representations of these migrations in retrospect in various contexts (Boum 2013; Baussant 2019; Miccoli 2024). In this vein, scholars have drawn upon various disciplinary ideas (or "bodies of knowledge") such as concepts from migration studies, placing a greater emphasis on comprehending these migrations from the immigrants' perspective rather than from the outside (e.g. Moreno 2020; Sadjed 2021; Rossetto 2021). Most recent developments in the study of Jewish migrations from the Middle East and North Africa, draw on frameworks such as "the 'emotional turn', the 'spatial turn' and the 'mobilities turn' […] to reconsider how migration stories are narrated, remembered, and silenced, and how

these processes are spatialized through texts, artworks, embodied memory, and performance" (Moreno; Rossetto; Galilee 2025, VIII).

Migration scholars have indeed emphasized gender-specific coping strategies during migration, highlighting how women often adapt more effectively to challenging circumstances (Franz 2003; Korać 2003). Memories of their childhood lead MENA Jews to vividly recall how their parents navigated these challenges differently (Luzon 2017; Mishal 2022; Shlaim 2023), grappling with the "expectations of recognition and its absence" (Markussen 2020, 1446). Recognition is a "vital human need" (Taylor 1992, 26) and a crucial asset for intersubjective identity formation (Honneth 1995). Individuals build their intersubjectivity through love-, legal-, and solidarity-based relationships and, through them, grow in self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, respectively (Honneth 1995; Markussen 2020). How, therefore, did MENA Jewish men address the challenge, recurrent in migratory processes, of downward mobility and the "drop in wealth, status and recognition" (Jansen 2008, 186; Al-Rasheed 1992)? Fathers, in particular, faced profound challenges related to "misplaced masculinities" (Jansen 2008). As Sami Michael's powerful opening scene echoes, many MENA Jews experienced migration as a moment of both promise and rupture – and thus remember the struggle of men, especially fathers, to establish themselves in their host countries, whether in Israel, Europe, or elsewhere. Remarkably, many of these men, despite not being biologically old, were considered too aged to adapt to their new circumstances. The body became the place where this struggle materialized, resulting in severe consequences, including depression and, tragically, death.

Building on these ideas and cross-disciplinary readings, *Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities* aims to advance the evolving terrain where Jewish migrations across the Middle East and the Mediterranean intersect with gender studies (Dahan-Kalev 2001; Motzafi-Haller [2012] 2018; Oppenheimer 2014) and it does so by specifically delving into the understudied realm of masculinities.

3 Literary Generations

The representation of Mizrahi masculinity in Hebrew literature has undergone numerous transformations over the years, particularly with increasing migration of MENA Jews to Israel in the 1950s. While the Ashkenazi-Western-Israeli male figure has been the subject of extensive scholarly discussion, the genealogy of Jewish-Mizrahi masculinity remains largely absent from literary research (see discussion on Mizrahi masculinity: Berg 1996; 2005; Ben Haviv 2002; Shimoni 2008; 2018; Alon 2011; Oppenheimer 2014; Shabat Nadir 2001). Increasingly, scholars trace the connections between pre- and

post-1948 Jewish-Arabic writing and other literary and artistic expressions of MENA Jews, situating them within transnational and multilingual networks rather than a solely national frame (Starr 2020; Behar; Evri 2020).

Studies addressing Ashkenazi–Jewish–Israeli masculinity often share the assumption that the discursive formation surrounding the Jewish male body, beginning in the early twentieth century, is structured between two poles. At one pole stands the ideological image of the Zionist body, symbolizing health, strength, naturalness, beauty, vitality, and youth. At the opposing pole stands the diasporic body, which the Zionist consciousness sought to reject and erase. The diasporic body image shaped within the framework of Western antisemitic culture penetrated the Jewish national self-critique articulated by Jewish intellectuals and writers since the nineteenth century (Raz Krakotzkin 1993; 1994; Khazzoom 1999). This figure represents a "delayed" or pathological Jewish masculinity, associated with illness, corruption, artificiality, ugliness, and weakness. According to this view, the pioneering life in the Land of Israel was expected to "correct" the "corrupted" corporeality of the Diaspora Jew. Hence emerges the centrality of the narrative of bodily rehabilitation within the Israeli cultural space, conceived as the locus where such restoration could take place (Oz 1997; Boyarin 1997; Gluzman 2008; Oppenheimer 2014).

Whereas such Israeli mainstream narratives – dominated by images of the "Ashkenazi Jew" – move between the figure of the weak "diasporic Jew" and that of the "new Jew", the sabra, the Mizrahi and Sephardi narratives may offer a different historiographical framework exemplified by several contributions in this volume. This perspective is better grasped against the backdrop of the generational frameworks shaping literary works about Mizrahi masculinity. By dividing the literary field into generations, it is possible to contextualize these works with greater nuance, considering the historical events, literary traditions, influences, and opportunities unique to each cohort.

A first category, referred to as "generation zero", can be divided into two main geographical and cultural spheres: writers who wrote in Ottoman and Mandatory Palestine; and, in parallel, Jewish writers in Muslim-majority countries, some under Western colonial rule (British or French) and others, later, under emerging local national regimes in the Land of Israel/British Palestine. Writers like Yitzhak Shami ([1923] 2015) and Yehuda Burla (1939) depict forms of masculinity situated within a changing world and grappling with tensions such as those between tradition and modernity, patriarchal society and emerging matriarchal shifts, or tradition and personal desire and love.

These representations of masculinity often encounter moments of crisis brought about by the transition to modern society and the

subsequent decline in male authority within the family structure. Jewish writers born in Arab countries, such as Egypt and Iraq, often depicted Jewish masculinity as an integral part of the modern urban landscape. Orit Bashkin (2012), for example, argues that Jewish male identity in Iraq was shaped as part of a modern, urban, and Arab identity. Similarly, Lital Levy (2013) contends that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jewish intellectuals in Egypt and Iraq were involved in the Nahda movement (Arab cultural renaissance), took part in the Arab literary discourse, and developed models of modern, educated masculinity as part of local Arab national projects, rather than in subordination to European Jewish discourses. Jewish masculinity, in this MENA context, is portrayed as urban, educated, multilingual, rational, and modern, often embodied in the figure of the journalist, teacher, publicist, or clerk. This is a masculinity that seeks to participate in the new Arab cultural sphere, not to exist outside of it (Rejwan 2004; Somekh 2007; Naïm Kattan 2007).

The migration of Jews from Muslim-majority countries in the second half of the twentieth century – one of the most significant demographic transformations in modern Jewish history – also had a profound impact on literary poetics and creativity in general, and on the shaping of Israeli literature in particular. Writers who were born in countries of the MENA region before the establishment of the State of Israel (1948) and most of whom immigrated to Israel afterwards, are usually referred to as "the first generation" of MENA Jewish immigrant authors. At the time, Hebrew literature was written primarily by authors whose first languages were European (especially Russian, Yiddish, and German) and who were steeped in those literary traditions. Writers of this first generation depict in their works the hardships of immigration to Israel and the profound transformations in living conditions and social status that accompanied it (Berg 2005).[2] At the same time, Mizrahi masculinity was not represented solely by first-generation immigrant writers but also by the hegemonic Israeli literary canon. Literature scholar Batya Shimoni examines the representation of Mizrahi masculinity in the hegemonic Western-Israeli literature of authors such as Yigal

2 Israeli fiction by first-generation immigrants from Muslim-majority countries often explores their efforts to assimilate into Israeli society while highlighting ongoing discrimination against Mizrahi communities. Shimon Ballas's *The Transit Camp* (1964) depicts immigrants' attempts to gain rights and dignity amid bureaucratic obstacles and internal conflicts. Sami Michael's *More and More Equal* (1974) shows a Mizrahi man whose ambition to improve his social status through romance is thwarted by persistent inequality. In contrast, Eli Amir's *Scapegoat* ([1983] 1987) presents young immigrants adapting successfully to Israeli society despite cultural and religious tensions. Overall, these works illustrate the struggles of the first generation in balancing tradition with integration, often at the cost of traditional Mizrahi masculinity.

Mossinson, Yoram Kaniuk, and Amos Oz (Shimoni 2018). Shimoni argues that the literature of the 1950s and 1960s portrays Mizrahi masculinity in an ambivalent and threatening manner: on the one hand, as heroically fighting for the borders of the young state, and on the other, as a force perceived as threatening the cultural and social boundaries of the dominant Ashkenazi-Israeli identity (Shimoni 2018; see also Mendelson Maoz and Ben Yehuda in this volume).

The second generation, born in Israel and educated in Hebrew mainly during the 1960s and 1970s, was distanced from the Arab world and its cultural legacy. Raised under Zionist ideology as the "generation of the land" (*dor ba-aretz*), they were expected to help build the new state. Their education centred on early Hebrew literature and the Palmach generation's works, mainly Ashkenazi writers shaped by the 1948 War. During this time, the sabra – a native-born Israeli figure rooted in socialist, secular, male, and Ashkenazi ideals – became the national archetype, emphasizing veteran settlers over new immigrants (Oz 1997). Within this ideological landscape, second-generation writers depict Mizrahi masculinity through two opposing poles, both positioned as "others" in relation to the dominant narrative of the Western–Israeli sabra. Raz Yosef argues that hegemonic Israeli masculinity – Ashkenazi, heterosexual, and national – was constructed through the exclusion of Mizrahi masculinity. On one side, Mizrahi masculinity was perceived as primitive and hypersexual; on the other, it was viewed as effeminate, broken, castrated, and repressed (Yosef 2004). In this context, Dror Mishani contends that the Mizrahi body was perceived as a re-emergence of the repressed diasporic Jewish body, intruding into the Zionist-Israeli space. This binary system of imagery was powerful and persistent enough to position the Mizrahi body in a role analogous to that of the diasporic Jewish body (Mishani 2006). The Mizrahi body was portrayed as tied to an outdated, old, and religious culture, in contrast to the "Israeli body", associated with modernity, youth, and strength. The Mizrahi body was thus represented as the successor to the diasporic body: both were objects of rejection and corrective practices (Oppenheimer 2014).

The third generation in the chain of Jewish immigration from MENA countries to Israel marks the emergence of a significantly different underexplored masculine configuration (see Consoli in this volume). Despite the lack of scholarly works on the topic, it is evident, however, that the third generation is reclaiming its place within Israeli culture (Shely-Newman 2019). A striking example can be found in the protest poetry of the Ars Poetica group, particularly in the writing of Roy Hassan and Shlomi Hatuka, which signals a new phase in the Israeli cultural sphere: a Mizrahi masculinity with a distinctly visible presence – black hair and black beard – that is unapologetic and asserts its rightful place in Israeli culture. Hassan and Hatuka

highlight the persistent inequalities within Israeli society, but rather than internalizing the Western gaze directed at them, they reclaim Mizrahi identity and place it once again at the centre of cultural discourse.

Taken together, these generational trajectories show that MENA Jewish masculinity is not just a reflection of social reality or response to Ashkenazi-led narratives but an active force in shaping cultural belonging across generations. From the urban modernities of Baghdad and Cairo to immigrant neighborhoods and protest poetry in Israel, they trace an ongoing struggle between exclusion and self-assertion. In line with the spirit of this volume, these narratives position masculinity as a site of translation – between homelands, generations, and shifting cultural worlds.

Middle East and North African Jewish Masculinities: Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies seeks to shed light on the nuanced experiences of MENA Jewish men during their migration journeys and what hence unfolded, contributing insights to Jewish, migration and gender studies in the literature. The chapter sequence below shows how regimes of knowledge (e.g., Orientalism), state-building (e.g. Zionist remasculinization), migration and class, queer visibility, and post-memory together reconfigure 'being a man' across time and space.

4 Structure of the Volume

Nancy Berg's "*Abu banat*: The Mizrahi Father of Daughter/s" offers a cross-generational perspective that can serve as an introductory case for the volume's broader themes. Moving across a century of Hebrew fiction – from Yitzhak Shami (1888-1949), Shimon Ballas (1930-2019), and Sami Michael (1926-2024) to Orly Castel-Bloom (b. 1960), Ronit Matalon (1959-2017), and Shani Boianjiou (b. 1987), with a poetic detour through Vicki Shiran (1947-2004) – Berg traces the evolving figure of the Mizrahi father. As she notes, modern Hebrew literature has long been a literature of fathers and sons; yet the father of daughters – *abu banat* – reveals shifting patterns of paternal power. Early stories attempt to restore the patriarch's control, while later works invert the script: daughters speak, and fathers appear vulnerable, caring, or flawed. The patriarch thus moves from a sovereign ruler to a remembered and contested figure, his authority unsettled by class, migration, and ethnic stigma. In this literary lineage, qualities such as care, listening, and tenderness emerge as new measures of masculine strength.

Sarah Imhoff's chapter, "Neither the New Jew nor the Old Jew: 'Oriental' Jewish Masculinity in Zionist Texts", starts in the 1920s-40s, where British Mandate officials and Zionist ideologues imagined

men from "the East" as paradoxical: brawny, sun-hardened workers and yet culturally "backward". The chapter's disability studies lens makes legible how this double vision – useful bodies, suspect culture – sorted Sephardi men beneath "Ashkenazi normativity" and paved the way for later struggles over belonging and worth.

"Racing Pianos at the Harbour: Sephardi Jewish Masculinity Put to the Test" by Shai Zamir takes us from early Zionist discourse to the docks of 1930s Salonica and Haifa, where Sephardi post-Ottoman stevedores literally performed strength in public contests to secure immigration slots and maritime jobs. The "Mediterranean sailor" trope is here inhabited and tweaked – neither the effete figure of antisemitic fantasy nor the passive "Oriental", but modern, sea-seasoned, and strategic. In other words, this chapter helps us see how the same male body is re-coded as it crosses regimes: first as Levantine labour, then as Zionist pioneer, then as mythic proof that Jews can "conquer the port".

Adia Mendelson Maoz's chapter, "Beyond the Myth: Kaniuk's Critique of Jewish-Israeli Masculinity", examines Yoram Kaniuk's literary reworking of Israeli masculinity, particularly the sabra ideal, while shifting the lens from the battlefield in 1948 to the bohemian streets and jazz clubs of New York. Rather than treating Kaniuk's texts as simple autobiography, Mendelson Maoz shows how his fiction–memoir hybrids fracture the image of the heroic fighter through wounded bodies, post-traumatic memories and the figure of the wandering artist abroad. In this reading, the sabra ideal is neither fully rejected nor affirmed: it is exposed as unstable, shaped by trauma, migration, and melancholic wandering. New York becomes a key site where the "new Jew" meets the diasporic, insecure, sexually searching man, and where toughness is constantly undercut by vulnerability and failure. Read alongside Boyarin's notion of "unheroic" Jewish masculinity (1997), Kaniuk's work reintroduces gentle, bookish, and receptive male figures into Israeli literature, unsettling the familiar opposition between diasporic "weakness" and national "strength".

Haim Bitton's chapter, "Re-Masculinizing Immigrants: The Moroccan Troubadour Sliman El-Maghribi's Social Ballads", widens the scope into the 1950s transit camps of Moroccan migrants on their way to Israel; there Jewish Moroccan men find patriarchal authority and economic standing shaken. Ballads, jokes, and laments in Moroccan Judeo-Arabic turn the stage into a workshop of dignity-production in a familiar diasporic language. Here masculinity travels into a more vernacular performance: public weeping, satire, and communal laughter assemble a "fringe" masculinity that counters the sabra ideal without simply reversing it.

In "The Construction of Non-Ashkenazi Homosexual Masculinity in Israel", Dotan Brom and Yuval Yonay look at Israel in the 1970s,

when the sons of earlier Mizrahi immigrants grew up alongside two major shifts: Mizrahi rights activism and gay liberation. The chapter follows two groups – men who came of age before the 1970s and those who did so after – to show how Mizrahi gay men faced two kinds of stigma at once: ethnic prejudice and homophobia. Many were treated as "less-than men", yet they still built Mizrahi queer spaces in which to belong and be seen.

Omri/Hannah Ben Yehuda's essay, "Returning to Ben Hamo: Dror Mishani and the Demon of Israeli Literature", revisits Yehoshua Kenaz's famous belly dance scene in *Infiltration* (1986) through the lens of ethnic and gender politics. Engaging Dror Mishani's overlooked 2006 study on Mizrahi representation, Ben Yehuda shows how the scene's reception reveals the tensions shaping Israeli literary culture. The Mizrahi male body, he argues, becomes a site of subversive performance – its sensual visibility unsettling the boundaries of the national.

Erica Consoli's chapter, "Grandfathers, Fathers and Sons in Contemporary Mizrahi Poetry", further explores and complicates Mizrahi masculinities through the lens of generations and the chain of transmission. Her chapter provides a glimpse into the 2000s, when poets Almog Behar, Mati Shemoelof, and Shlomi Hatuka look past their fathers toward their grandfathers – the migrants who carried Arabic, prayer, and loss. Through post-memory they adopt a diasporic discourse inside Israel, crafting tender, multilingual masculinities that reclaim what assimilation repressed and teaching sons to inherit a language of feeling as much as a lineage. Here masculinity moves from "muscles" to memory: from public proof to intimate cultural transmission. Clifford's "routes" are audible in these poems, where Judeo-Arabic words, synagogue melodies, and family anecdotes circulate across generations as masculine resources.

"'The Great and Mighty Body of Writing': On the Writing Body in Sami Berdugo's *All Five of Us*" (2022), by Hadas Shabat Nadir, continues with the generation of Mizrahi writers in Israel. This study interrogates Sami Berdugo's novel *All Five of Us* through the theoretical construct of the "writing body", which synthesizes narrative poetics with embodied experience. Shabat Nadir contends that the writing body operates as a dynamic locus of trauma, concealment, affective intensity, and generative potential. The novel's disjointed narrative architecture reflects corporeal fragmentation, reconfiguring these ruptures into a mode of literary agency and subversive resistance.

In the appendix, we include a text by journalist Shirley Nigri Farber entitled "Memories from My Family's Migration from Lebanon to Brazil". Born in Rio de Janeiro, Nigri Farber grew up in a Lebanese Jewish household rich with Arabic language, music, and food. Her contribution explores the migration of Lebanese Jews to Brazil and Israel, weaving together family testimonies, immigration records,

and historical documents in relation to their migrants' masculinity, tracing how the journey is remembered primarily through the actions and responsibilities of men – fathers who led departures, brothers who secured work abroad – while women's experiences surface at the margins, highlighting the gendered ways in which migration stories are told and transmitted across generations.

Read together, these studies trace a long arc. They show how MENA Jewish masculinities travel across places, regimes, and generations – performed in labour and dance, remade in song and poetry, and reimagined in prose – revealing a diasporic, continually transforming field of meanings. The study of masculinities requires an openness to multiple perspectives and methodologies, as well as an attentiveness to the ways in which gender, generation, migration, and culture are inscribed on and expressed in and through the body. Only by engaging with this plurality of "bodies of knowledge" can we begin to appreciate the intricate realities of Sephardi, Mizrahi other forms of ethnically inflected masculinities in their historical and contemporary contexts: as they migrate, translate, and hybridize; as they move across empire, nation, and memory – even when framed against Zionist imaginaries of Jewish exile.

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Abu banat: The Mizrahi Father of Daughter/s

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Abstract This article focuses on the character of the father in Mizrahi literature who has only daughters, including fiction from Yitzhak Shami (1888-1949) to Shani Boianjiu (b. 1987). The relationship between the father and his daughter/s challenges the conventional image of the patriarchal Mizrahi father and reveals its failure, albeit in different – and gendered – ways. In the male-authored works discussed, the daughter is a cipher. Those written by women not only question the traditional paternal trope but even propose alternative masculinities, alternatives that are only possible when the father cedes some of his authority.

Keywords Mizrahi. Masculinity. Father. Fatherhood. Daughter.

Summary 1 Fathers, Fatherhood, and Masculinity. – 2 Father Studies. – 3 A Literature of Fathers and Sons. – 4 Writing the Riddle. – 5 Absence. – 6 Righting the Riddle. – 7 A Man Who Isn't Here. – 8 Poetic Interlude. – 9 Rethinking Fatherhood. – 10 In Place of Speech.

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> What is a father? The one taken for the father. The one recognized as the true one. "Truth," the essence of fatherhood, its force as law. The "chosen" father. (Hélène Cixous, *Newly Born Woman*, 1975/1991)

1 Fathers, Fatherhood, and Masculinity

Nothing, I will contend, reifies – nor challenges – an individual's masculinity (and its systemic counterpart of the patriarchy) as does the relationship a father has with his daughter/s. I propose exploring the expression and performance of Mizrahi masculinity through this relationship, beginning with the fiction writing of Yitzhak Shami (1888-1949), Shimon Ballas (1930-2019), and Sami Michael (1926-2024) as a baseline, and then focusing on that of Orly Castel-Bloom (b. 1960), Ronit Matalon (1959-2017), and Shani Boianjiu (b. 1987) with a short detour for a poem by Vicki Shiran (1947-2004).[1]

These writers whose output spans almost one hundred years represent four different generations. Shami, born in Hebron, is considered one of the first native Hebrew writers in Palestine. While his writing in Arabic has been lost, his Hebrew works show Arab and Middle Eastern influence (Hever 2006; Tamari 2008). Ballas and Michael both came from Iraq where they were each active in the Communist Party. Having begun their writing careers in Arabic they transitioned to Hebrew after living in Israel. The Hebrew reading public's introduction to Ballas – his 1964 novel *HaMa'abarah* (The transit camp) – opened with an Arabic phrase transliterated into Hebrew (Berg 1996, 60). His subsequent works further challenged the Israeli mainstream identity. Michael's fictional account of his mother's childhood in the Jewish Quarter of Baghdad, *Viktoriyah* (1993) cemented his reputation as a writer and the inclusion of the Mizrahi voice (London 1993). Castel-Bloom, born to Egyptian Jewish parents in Israel, pioneered the spare writing (*k'tivah razah*) movement and is known for her dystopic narratives that straddle the hyper-realistic and surrealistic. Matalon's family was also from Egypt; she was the first in her family to be born in Israel. In her writing she stretched genres, bringing together classic works of literature with journalistic techniques, humour with social critique, the visual with the literary, the aesthetic and the repellent. The youngest of the writers, Boianjiu, entered the Israeli literary scene

I thank the other conference participants and especially the anonymous readers for their feedback.

1 Threaded throughout the paper are lines from a poem by Amira Hess (1943-2023), *We will be talking here about a man who is not*. She was born in Baghdad and came to Israel in 1951. Her first of more than a dozen collections of poetry was published in 1984.

from the side; her novel *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid* (2012) was originally written in English, and began as an assignment for one of her classes at Harvard. The story is harsh, the narrative raw, the tone tough, but, as with Castel-Bloom and Matalon's writing, it is not without humour. By age the Egyptian born criminologist-activist-poet Shiran belongs midway between Ballas-Michael and Castel Bloom-Matalon, but she came to writing late; most of her published poetry was published posthumously.

This article offers a way to begin thinking about the connection between masculinity and virility, and the connections between each and fatherhood. There is an odd connection between virility and passivity; what does it actually take to father a child? Here the verb fathering specifically means siring, not parenting; it is a mere contribution during an act – generally of short duration – in which the (hetero) man presumably finds pleasure.[2] The very idea that to sire a child is an expression of a man's virility and thus his masculinity is, to be sure, problematic. Added to this is the idea that a real man (read: unambiguously masculine) will father boys, as if he bequeaths his masculinity to his progeny.

The title of this paper, *abu banat*, is an Arabic phrase that translates as 'father of daughters', or in today's parlance, a girl dad. The latter, however, lacks the implicit insult understood by speakers of Arabic – including our Mizrahi writers and their characters – as if the man doesn't measure up, as if he doesn't have enough masculinity to spare for his offspring. So too, there is the perceived risk that living in a household dominated with women is emasculating or dilutes the manliness.

2 Father Studies

Potentially relevant research looks at the ways fatherhood and masculinity intersect (Marsiglio, Pleck 2005) while making distinctions between parental status and parenting, between paternal male gender status (biological sex) and masculinity orientation (and variations within, Pleck 2010). The area of father studies scholarship grows out of gender studies and is still in relatively early stages. Much of the research cited here is from the west.[3] Most of the

2 Here I am thinking of celebrities who are well known as prolific fathers such as Elon Musk and Nick Cannon (both claiming twelve children each), or super-donors such as Jonathan Meijer.

3 "[F]athers who have been studied largely fall into two categories: namely, white, American, middle-class men in monogamous marriages who are the biological fathers of children with whom they live, and, in contrast, men who have sired biological children but failed to enact the role of fatherhood for the most part" (Inhorn et. al 2015, 23).

scholarship coming out of the Middle East in Gender Studies in general is supported by NGO's (non-governmental organizations); it is focused the status of women and oriented toward policy (Elsadda 2023). This brief survey, however, is meant as a general context for understanding the literature and not as either a prescriptive or normative reading. The essential father hypothesis that dominated the early subfield – the idea that fathers make an essential, unique, and uniquely masculine contribution to the development of their child or children (Blankenhorn 1995; Popenoe 1996) – has given way to a more nuanced (and less politically fraught) understanding of the importance of positive involvement. An exploration of the shifting ideas of masculinity in the wake of so-called new fatherhood is prevalent in the west and especially among researchers in the US and the UK (Lewis, Lamb 2007; Finn, Henwood 2009). The literature suggests that men from underrepresented and marginalized communities characterized as representing 'hybrid masculinities' challenge and reconfigure the hegemony (Randles 2018). [4]

The typical image of the traditional father cuts across cultures.[5] He is described as authoritarian and distant, at least emotionally if not physically. His status as a paternal figure is determined by paternity and position; his role is defined by his success in providing for the family (*parnasa*) and protecting them. He is the head of household and is expected to be the one to solve problems. The state of the field of father studies – the applied side of which is largely rooted in social work – counters the stereotypes and is oriented toward finding ways in which fathers can be supported in their roles and encouraged toward better parenting.

3 A Literature of Fathers and Sons

Literature both reflects the traditional conception of the father and helps shape new approaches to the enterprise of fatherhood. Modern Hebrew literature is of particular interest here as it has long been characterized as a literature of fathers and sons. The biblical story of the *akedah*, of the binding of Isaac, has served as a central paradigm for writing and reading the literature, offering nearly unlimited opportunities for reinterpretation, transvaluation and revision (Nash 1984; Coffin 1985; Feldman 2010). The idea of the father prepared

4 While the article specifically refers to "poor men of color" in the US, similarities in hierarchies, power relationships, and centre-margin dynamics invite application to other minorities including Mizrahi men in Israel.

5 The traditional father is often contrasted with the egalitarian father. See for example: Glauber, Gozjolko 2011; Dette-Hagenmeyer et al. 2014; Suwada 2015; Paterna, Martínez 2006; and for brief historical overview see Maskalan 2016.

to sacrifice his son resonates in a society dominated by wars and shaped by mandatory military conscription. This characterization of the literature persists despite the many changes in Israeli society and in the literary scene. The father-son relationship is explored by variations on the akedah story in Mizrahi (Berg 1997), immigrant, and even post-Zionist literature, in which the son or the father dies in the beginning or the end of the narrative. Consider, for example, the son dying at the beginning of A.B. Yehoshua's novella *At the Beginning of the Summer* (1975) or the end of his novel *Mr. Mani* (1990) the father dying near the beginning of *Equal and More Equal* by Sami Michael (1974), at the end of Haim Hazaz' s *Mori Said* (1943), and both the father and son's deaths framing Yaakov Shabtai's groundbreaking *Past Continuous* (1977; Ezer 2000). The akedah motif is, of course, also prevalent in poetry (Jacobson 1987; Karton-Blum 2013). Israeli literature privileges the narrative of the father and son, the trope of the akedah looms large. The father – daughter trajectory is often omitted from the writing and almost always from the reading. Yet even before the flourishing of women's literature in the 1980s, daughters have somehow found their way into the story.

In western literature the father-daughter plot presents the daughter as a commodity, her challenges to the father's authority end with her marriage, death, or exclusion as a social outcast (Sheldon 1977; Boose, Flowers 1989). Often such works are modelled on the ancient stories of Electra or the daughters of Jephthah; either way the daughter is sacrificed. "The daughter, as opposed to the son, accepts a conflict solving ending which is in the interest of the father, consistent with his code of values […] daughter sacrifices part of her identity" (Sheldon 1977, 13).

At first glance, the same pattern or paradigm holds true for the Mizrahi writers as well, but upon a closer look, we see how the marginalized do indeed challenge the hegemonic patriarchy. The comparison to Ashkenazi writing is likely to remain implicit in this article, while the differences between generations and genders will be explicit. Rather than confirming or countering the conventional image of the patriarchal Mizrahi father, the women's narratives – and this article – confuse and confound the convention.

The stories authored by men focus on the difficulties of the father knowing his daughter. The women writers more often present the dyad from the perspective of the daughter, adding texture, complexity, and nuance. Here I argue that it is the Mizrahi father- or more precisely the father constructed by the Mizrahi daughter – who offers a rethinking of the father and his masculinity.

4 Writing the Riddle

> The father and the daughter are a riddle inside a riddle.
> (Sami Michael, *Water Kissing Water,* 2001)

In Yitzhak Shami's novella "Father and Daughters" the titular father-character is away from home for seven years, travelling in order to procure a dowry for his daughters. Instead of describing the father's journey, the narrator focuses on his return. Rather than ending in wedding joy, this narrative ends in shame, defeat and ignominious death. In the father's absence the daughters have descended into 'bad culture': entertaining strangers, dressing provocatively, and living in decadent opulence. The actual homecoming stands in stark contrast to the one the father imagined in happy anticipation: the daughters' cries of joy and expressions of contentment, their attention to him, and their delight at the splendid gifts he brings. Instead, his daughters react to his return with fear and revulsion, rejecting his gifts with scorn. The reader quickly understands how little the father has known his daughters. "The old feelings of distaste and loathing awoke [in the daughters] and extinguished the spark of pity and forgiveness which had kindled in the ashes of forgetfulness and distance" (Shami 1951, 63). The daughters have not changed in his absence, but rather have been liberated from his stifling rule, free to express their wanton materialism and licentiousness.

The law of the father has been totally abandoned; the story concludes when the father casts himself into the river. He cannot face life outside the (patriarchal) myth – while the daughters cannot face life within it. An interesting clash of myth and real, and in both there is destruction.

5 Absence

There are father-daughter stories in which the initial success of the marriage plot belatedly gives way to failure. In Sami Michael's *Water Kissing Water* (2001) the protective father Yaakov cedes his position (albeit less than willingly) to a protective husband Yosef. Shortly after, the daughter disappears, almost as if their protection suffocates her to the point of effacement and erasure.

After her disappearance, the father and husband become close, as if signatories to an unwritten pact. Their names – Yaakov and Yosef – as well as their personal status – bereaved father and orphaned widower – speak to the father-son nature of the relationship that develops between them. The daughter's absence suggests the impossibility of the father-daughter relationship, and a father's impotence to protect his daughter. A novel that starts out with strong

potential for exploring father-daughter relationship reverts to the father-son paradigm.

The father in *Not in Her Place* (or, Not in Place of Her) (1994) by Shimon Ballas is literally absent from the entire narrative. It is the daughter Nomi's obsession with the mystery of her late father that is at the centre of this novel. The daughter finds out that she knew little of his work life, his research and his private life.

She remembers her father only as an absence – at his government job by day and shut up in his study by night. After his death, she discovers that he was researching and translating Ferdowsi's *Shah-nameh*, a Persian epic that famously tells the story of fathers and sons (Ferdowsi 2007).

In the absence of her father, she has surrounded herself with father figures: the authoritative Gershon, the officious and aggressive Prof. Sharoni, her patronizing spouse Phillipe.[6] She is passive. Even while bridling under their forceful pronouncements she gives in. She cedes her father's papers to the professor, her cultural education and children to Phillipe, her power of attorney and bodily autonomy to Gershon. In the end she does what others want her to do, it merely seems to her that she is deciding. The father, as well as the father substitutes, dominate and she has little effect on them.

6 Righting the Riddle

> Suddenly you see things are not only in black and white
> And when you see colours they don't fade.
> (Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

The works discussed above were penned by male writers and tend to view the father-daughter relationship from the father's perspective (even when the daughter is seemingly at the centre). Over time, the father's function appears to shift away from providing for the daughter, providing a home and later a husband, yet it remains unclear what it is shifting to. Women-authored stories and poems not surprisingly redirect the focus to the daughter and her perspective; in so doing the patriarchal structure is further interrogated if not eroded. While the fathers' stories question his role, the daughter's question her place in the literature and the society.

In Orly Castel Bloom's *Dolly City* (1992) the accepted social values and patriarchal institutions are not so much questioned as imploded. The text is governed by feminist appropriations of the *Akedah*, the

6 "The absence of a biological father will only result in the proliferation of symbolic fathers" (Caeser 2000, 179).

binding of Isaac (Feldman 2010, 230), in which the woman replaces not the sacrifice – that is, Isaac or the ram – but Abraham. The akedah motif repeats; Dolly as the mother nearly kills her son with concern, and she confesses to having killed her father (Castel-Bloom 1992, 122). While read ultimately as an ode to motherhood[7] the text does battle with the sacred cows of the father – founding fathers, father texts, and the institution of the father.

The character Dolly's own relationship with her father fuels both her life and the narrative, albeit in perverse ways. An offhand comment by her father leads her to study medicine for eight years in Nepal; and she is crushed to realize he may not have meant her to do so. "The thought that my father hadn't actually intended me to study medicine in Katmandu was devastating to me", she remarks, "since this was the first and last thing he told me to do that I did" (Castel-Bloom 1992, 63-4). Her father's cancer causes her to see the illness everywhere, and her medical training induces her to try to cure it. Her methods are as questionable as her sanity. The father, in this work too, is represented by absence. He has died before the story begins. So too, the foundling Dolly adopts has no father. She makes a modest attempt to find out who the father is but limits her search to the other pilots at 'B. Off' (literally Be fly), her father's employer.

The narrative is critical of Zionist leaders and leading texts as well as the master narrative. A.D. Gordon, brought back to life as an organic farmer addicted to chlorophyll, plans to leave for Mexico City. "Dolly City is no place to start a farm… It's an ugly stinking, filthy, disgusting, boring, depressing city – What else is there to say?" (Castel-Bloom 1992, 67). The utopia described in Herzl's *Altneuland* is turned on its head (Ginor 1995).

This founding father offers a reassessment of the significance of the father. "The father is less important", says Gordon, "A child can know not his father, but a child who doesn't know his mother, that's serious" (Castel-Bloom 1992, 62). The text casts aside the father, the patriarchy, and the patriarchal order. It abandons the law of the father to embrace chaos.

7 Note that the book is dedicated to the author's daughter.

7 A Man Who Isn't Here

We will talk about a man who isn't here.
(Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

Ronit Matalon's father, Felix Matalon, shows up in her writing, in both her fiction and non-fiction. Homo politicus from the beginning, when he arrived in Israel from Egypt he established the *Sohba*, a political organization to deal with the problems faced by the Mizrahi population and edited its mouthpiece *HaMeorer*. Matalon's stories take a tolerant and even loving stance toward a father who was absent a great deal more than he was present, showing up in the character of the father: living elsewhere in her first novel *The One Facing Us* (1995); dead in the novella *And the Bride Closed the Door* (2016); or estranged in her masterpiece *The Sound of Our Steps* (2008). In this last example, the relationship between Maurice and *el-bint* (Arabic for 'the girl'), the author's alter ego, is perhaps best represented by the photograph of her with her parents in Venice's Piazza San Marco. Elsewhere I have written about this novel being a portrait of the mother (Berg 2018), but a portrait of the father also is found in its pages. He is represented by chapters titled "Paper", political writings based on those of the writer's own father, brief appearances, and a short word-portrait by the mother Lucette.

The photograph is worth dwelling on both because of its multiple (seven) appearances, and for the narrator's insistence that it doesn't exist: "A fictitious photograph… It never happened (Matalon 2008, 26); "There's no such thing. There's no such photograph. I won't make the photograph speak. I won't force it to be there because it isn't there. There's no such thing" (Matalon 2008, 139).

The existence of the photograph is undermined by narrative assertions to that effect that it does not actually exist; in other iterations where the photograph is described, the father's role is usurped by the mother, or, in another, the child crying throughout the trip refutes the ideal family portrait. So too the image described, of the mother, father, and child, is false: the photograph presents as if the three are a complete unit. It echoes a painting that plays a prominent role in the book,[8] but in fact omits from the family unit the older brother and sister who were left behind in Israel.

The father challenges the stereotype of both men in general and Mizrahi men in particular. Back in Egypt Lucette, who becomes the mother in the story, flees her abusive (first) husband at seven months pregnant. Maurice steps in and marries her, taking on a child who is not biologically his, without ego or prejudice. His full

8 Edouard Manet, *Le Balcon*, 1868-69.

acceptance of "another man's child" disrupts the aforementioned connection between virility and masculinity and the privileging of genetic fatherhood (what we might term sire-ship).

In Israel he attains a senior position at the Labour Ministry where he jeopardizes his job and the family income for his principles. He neither provides for nor protects his family on any regular basis. But he does contribute. Because his relationship with the mother, is passionate and volatile, they can neither live together nor stay away from each other. Thus Maurice sporadically appears in the family's life but never with any consistency. When he does appear, however, he brings the entire outside world into their insular corner.[9]

> Maurice was *Elaalam*; intentionally or unintentionally he brought *elaalam* with him when he came.
>
> He brought a Hebrew newspaper when he came (the child looked for the hidden child in the picture: "Where's the child?"). He brought a French newspaper, which was also *elaalam: Le Monde*.
>
> He brought the newspapers he wrote in Hebrew and French, *HaMeorer The Wake-Up Call* ("But what's it supposed to mean? Who's sleeping?" asked Sammy). (Matalon 2008, 373)

8 Poetic Interlude

> About a man who is hollow even while living.
> (Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

Vicki Shiran's poem "The Bible Brings Tears" (Shiran 2005, 16-21) similarly paints a portrait of a father who, presumably, bears some resemblance to poet's own father. The poem opens with the image of a man crying in the bathroom. The lyrical or poetic I – that is, the voice of the poem – is that of the daughter. She is of indeterminate age, old enough to have childhood memories but still young enough to remember them as a child would, old enough to judge her father as wanting but young enough to do so without wisdom or grace.

In response to his daughter's question of why he spends so much time in the bathroom, he answers that he doesn't want his wife – her mother – to think less of him, to "think I am not a man" (Shiran 2005, 16). Both are aware that tears are not considered masculine; that his weeping violates the masculine standard. He retreats to the bathroom to complain to God, to shed his tears, and to find refuge from the expectations of the father's role.

9 In addition to his "Paper" chapters he also stars in multiple chapters titled *elaalam* ('the world' in Arabic).

There are three competing images of a father in the poem. The ideal (according to the daughter) is the father who is secure in his role, as head and provider of the family. "I wanted him to be a father with money in his pockets", states the poetic voice, "For books, for what the teacher said" (Shiran 2005, 17). The father remembered (in the child's memory), is the one who would take the family to the boardwalk on the weekend, treating his children to cotton candy, corn on the cob, and ice cream. The actual father, the one the child discovers as she gets older, is the one who cries, haunted by his shortcomings. Where the visits to the boardwalk were idyllic to the child, and her love for her father unequivocal:

> When I would lean on the railing on the boardwalk, my back to [the sea
> My father would encircle me in happiness, say to me
> Madame, you have on your shoulders a giant the colour blue
> His eyes sparkling with laughter
> And many beads of light
> (Shiran 2005, 17-18)

the father remembers the visits with anguish:

> Your mother hated it so much… / We'd ride like sardines [standing up…
> You should know, if a man gives a woman just a promenade on [the Sabbath
> And she, By God, cooks and cleans and washes all week,
> The woman looks at him like a rag, and with reason…
> (Shiran 2005, 18-19)

The girl's happy memories are the source of the father's shame: "So, if I have one bad memory in life | it is Sabbath afternoons on the boardwalk". The father's shame, however, is not just based in the strict gender roles – the wife takes care of the house, the father supports the household – but also his great love and appreciation for his wife. He gives her credit for her work throughout the week and regrets not fulfilling her needs and wants. "I was a man, your mother was the prettiest girl in Cairo | Life turned upside down on us like a bowl of mud" (Shiran 2005, 20).

The magic of the daughter's memories is checked by the father's reality. The girl, now older than she was in those outings, counters her father's confession with scorn, describing him as "broken like a broomstick". She recognizes that her scorn has crossed a line but cannot help herself, her once prince of a father now a pathetic figure crying in the bathroom, a "broken pendulum" (Shiran 2005, 21).

In a departure from the male-authored works, the poem does not leave the father as a broken figure weeping on the toilet, continuing the legacy of the fathers mentioned above: in Shami's novella the one who drowns himself; Abu Sha'ul (literally, Shaul's father) in Sami Michael's first novel *Equal and More Equal*, who loses his sight, his competence, and his status upon his arrival in Israel. While the father in Shiran's poem no longer commands the respect of his children as he would have had they stayed "back home" (in Egypt), he is not a wholly pathetic character. The daughter, buffeted by mixed feelings, swinging from love to derision, from loyalty to rebellion, coldly berates him. The father fights back:

> Your story, *habibti*, is not my story
> Mine is mine and yours is yours, I have cried over you
> And you over me, *kif kif*, we are even
> The slate is clean. In a strange whisper he added
> God's truth your story brings tears
> But mine too, admit it. (Shiran 2005, 21)

Perhaps broken, but unbowed.

9 Rethinking Fatherhood

> No one knows where this woman's father has gone
> One day he turned and left the scene.
> (Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

In Shani Boianjiu's debut novel *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid* (Boianjiu 2012) fathers are absent much to the same extent as most of the pieces discussed until now. One of the fathers, Avi, estranged from his family, makes his appearance late in the narrative, in the chapter whose title echoes that of the book: "And Then the People of Forever Are Not Afraid". Divorced from his wife he has not been involved in his children's lives for years.

Avi came to Israel from Libya when still a child, and yet he seems to continue to struggle with the adjustment, with society's expectations of him as a man. He longs for his life before Israel, where gender roles were distinct and there was no ambiguity, "where all the women were dark and young, and daughters like his didn't happen' (Boianjiu 2012, 237). Instead of dealing with the daily indignities of life in Israel where Ashkenazim were in charge,

> he would be riding on a horse with his daughter across the markets in Tripoli, buying her dark eyeliner and purple scarves. In Tripoli,

> girls started wearing makeup when they were as young as eight, and they always kept a scarf across their faces. (Boianjiu 2012, 239)

He had met his first wife in the transit camp. The story is both a familiar one of humiliation and a rather sweet one.

> When they met, they were standing naked on the asphalt outside the caravans with dozens of new refugees, covered in the DDT, the pesticide that rained on them from planes above. The Europeans in the immigration offices thought they could be carrying diseases. His future wife was naked and humiliated and white on the outside with chemicals, but dark in her eyes and throughout her heart, full of longing for the plane that had brought her. She was fourteen, four years older than he was. He promised her everything was going to be all right, even though he did not yet know her name. (Boianjiu 2012, 247-8)

Everything, however, is not all right. The wife was bedridden with depression, and the husband irate at her dysfunction, attacks her. They divorce; the father is subsequently denied custody and visitation rights after telling his daughter a story that ironically reads like a Zionist allegory.[10]

Emasculated by the circumstances, by his inability to understand or deal with his wife's depression, by the German social worker who persuades the wife to divorce him, by the system that keeps his children from him, Avi is forced to rethink his role. He needs to invent his own way of being a man, a husband, and especially, a father.

Of his three children, it is only with the middle one, Avishag, that he has any connection, and that connection is tenuous at best. His oldest, Daniel, dies by suicide at the beginning of the novel. Because of the divorce, the father had not seen him for most of the boy's life. The youngest, another daughter, has already made her way into mainstream Israeli society, leaving her family irrelevant: "[She] was now going by the dumb nickname 'Tzipi' and was happy" (Boianjiu 2012, 242). The point of view here is unspecified, whether that of the father or of Avishag – either is possible – but one reading would suggest it is a moment of agreement between the two and gestures to the potential of a relationship between them.

10 After being dispersed to the four corners of the earth, the people in his story are drowned by those amid whom they lived. "But some of them climbed out of the water… And then the ones that made it out of the water decided to go back to the country they left a million years before. They came back to the country from Africa and Russia and all over the world. [and then] They lived. … They lived like we live, They built houses and paved roads and planted trees. You know, they worked". (Boianjiu 2012, 245-6).

Avi has not been a presence in Avishag's life since he lost custody of the children. He has had only one encounter with her since the custody decision, an encounter that takes place during her army service. She is cold, hard, and borderline abusive both to the hapless soldier in her command whom she berates over the phone, and to her father. "And what, exactly do *you* want?" she asks him (Boianjiu 2012, 247). The ice cream he bought her seems ludicrously incongruous; it melts on the table as if mirroring the hopes he may have had for the meeting.

After Avishag is discharged from the army she takes to her bed, exhibiting signs of severe depression. The ex-wife, at her wit's end, appeals to Avi for help. There is, or has been, a connection between the father and his middle child, at least on the father's side: it is for her he learned to read. Their names – Avi (my father) and Avishag (possibly: my father's joy)[11] – signal their special connection. But they do not really know each other.

Initially he doesn't know what to do. He decides to buy his daughter a car, remembering that going for drives helped him after his army service. His ex-wife points out that the daughter doesn't drive, but he persists. He tells his daughter to smile, a tone-deaf response to someone suffering from depression, but that much more when it is an older man telling a younger woman to do so. During their time together he tries to get her to talk, seeking to define the problem. "He wanted there to be a certain thing wrong" (Boianjiu 2012, 234). Something wrong can be corrected, it is a problem to be fixed.

He begins to work out what it is he has to do, how it is he can be a father. There is progress toward communication. He understands her multiple apologies as her way of asking for help "This was her way of saying, *Do something*" (Boianjiu 2012, 243). He is still out of his element, but aware of being so. "He thought, *There is never a bad time to start*" (Boianjiu 2012, 250).

Despite her silence the father feels as if he learns something about her. Eventually he realizes "There was just her. There was nothing. There was just his daughter" (Boianjiu 2012, 244). Only when he stops trying to find something wrong that he can fix does he get her to act and react. She takes the wheel for the first time and drives them into the water. Together and separately, they face the worst possible outcome and swim to the shore. Just as he has realized there is just her, she realizes that she will always suffer from depression. Not the happiest of conclusions, but the breakthroughs on both of their parts suggest the possibility of a real relationship between them. For his

11 The etymology of the name – that of a biblical character who serves King David – is contested, sometimes parsed as 'father's mistake; my father erred', sometimes related to '*sigsug*', in Hebrew 'prosperity'.

part he is neither helpless nor heroic, neither providing a solution nor walking away. His ability to accept the situation for what it is, that it is not a problem to be solved or something broken to be fixed, heralds a new form of [Mizrahi] masculinity.

And there was his daughter, swimming, and he knew that she would eventually reach the shore, and him. She reached the shore, her clothes dripping water, and sat on the sand very close to him, in silence. He put his wet arm around her and his heart pulsated into her forehead, her unsteady breath slowing, becoming one with his. (Boianjiu 2012, 251-2).

10 In Place of Speech

There is a great dissonance in this.
(Amira Hess, *Tears Without Eyes to Shed*, 2014)

The literature of fathers and sons plays against the backdrop of Zionism; the Zionist ethos replaces the father. The literature of fathers and daughters takes place mostly outside of this backdrop and ethos. In a paraphrase of a poem by Yehudah Amichai – the real victim of the akedah may be the daughter.[12]

While the works written by women tend to diverge from the Zionist narrative and are less likely to support patriarchal authority, stories of fathers and daughters in general are every bit as much about substitution as the akedah. The daughter may take the place of her mother; her lovers may replace the father.

More contemporary narratives offer us fathers whose roles are less defined, whose masculinity is at risk, and whose power is less unequivocal than their predecessors. Their inability to protect their daughters – from harm, death or loneliness – and the near impossibility of the father and daughter truly knowing each other helps contribute to an alternative narrative or alternate reading of the Zionist narrative. As the protagonist in Michael's novel (discussed and quoted above) observes, "the father and the daughter are a riddle inside a riddle" (Michael 2001, 177).

The silence that pervades these stories speaks to the impossibility of communication. While the silence between fathers and sons seems primarily a silence of stoicism, that of the daughters is the silence of suppression, subversion and even rebellion. The daughters demand to be heard or retreat into silence. "Lacking syntax and story", Lynda

12 "The real hero of the binding of Isaac was the ram | Who didn't know about the collusion between the others…" Yehudah Amichai, "The real Hero" (1996, 21).

Zwinger states, "the daughter speaks anyway, across the body (of the text, of the law, of the father)" (Zwinger 1991, 138).

There is also the silence, however, such as in the last scene quoted, from Shani Boianjiu's *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid*, where the silence signals communication that is deeper than words, a silence of communion. Only when the father is willing to cede some of his ego, to surrender his need to solve problems, to relinquish his role as authoritarian, disciplinarian, and patriarch, and to reformulate his masculinity, can this deeper, non-verbal level of communication be reached.

The stories by men focus on the difficulties of the father knowing his daughter. They explore the role of the father, its dimensions and its transformations over time. The women writers more often present the father-daughter relationship from the perspective of the daughter, adding more texture and complexity to it. Their works tend to question the established order, and even, as in the last text discussed, suggesting, creating, and conjuring a new way to father a daughter – an emergent masculinity.

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Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities
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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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Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities
Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies
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Racing Pianos at the Harbour: Sephardi Jewish Masculinity Put to the Test

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Abstract This essay explores how Sephardi Jews from Thessaloniki, Greece, harnessed racial and gendered discourses to secure scarce resources, particularly immigration permits to Mandatory Palestine during the 1930s. Leaders of the Yishuv viewed their bodies as robust and well-suited for maritime labour, aligning with Zionist ideals of conquering the sea and cultivating the land. Salonican Jews capitalized on these perceptions to advance the migration of impoverished workers to Palestine. By examining archival materials and memoirs, the essay delves into the intersection of race, labour, and masculinity, revealing how Sephardi men reshaped Jewish identity within the Mediterranean landscape and Zionist ambitions.

Keywords Sephardic Studies. Masculinity. Thessaloniki. Haifa. Zionism.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Sephardi Exceptionalism. – 3 Conquering the Sea. – 4 Public Humiliation at the Port. – 5 Performing Masculinity. – 6 The Wonders of Heavy Weights. – 7 Conclusion.

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> The heart was drawn after those Jewish seamen of Salonica, handsome and upright, proud and strong, like no other Jewish diaspora. Where would you find such Jews, with iron muscles gripping oars? […] All of them instil fear in their neighbouring nations, and stop working at the port and city on Sabbaths and holidays. When were these Jews born […] capable of stirring a true revolution in conquering the ports, in the Land of Israel? (Molcho 1951, 20)

1 Introduction

During the 1930s the Sephardim of Thessaloniki (or Salonica), a major port city in the eastern Mediterranean, became the subject of a conversation about Jewish bodies and the role they should play in the Jewish national movement in Mandatory Palestine. The leaders of the Yishuv (the Jewish community of Palestine) of eastern European origin imagined Sephardi bodies as strong and therefore well prepared for the 'conquest of labour' in those fields still not dominated by Jews. Some Salonicans took advantage of this discourse to achieve their goals, primarily that of relocating impoverished Jews from Thessaloniki to British Palestine, where they could better sustain their families.[1]

This essay demonstrates how racial and gendered discourses were utilized by a racialized party to gain access to scarce resources, in this case immigration permits for poor workers from Thessaloniki. A lively discourse about their bodies and physical skills, portraying Sephardi Jews as more naturally suited to the Mediterranean landscape and the sea, enabled Greek Jews to assert their expertise in maritime labour. Such discourse was activated in concrete moments when there was a burning need to leave a strong impression on British officials and to convince sceptical Jewish leaders of the importance of Greek Jews to the project of Jewish labour in British Palestine. Thus, I examine the spread of a gendered image of masculinity from Salonica to Palestine in the early twentieth century by various agents, primarily Zionist activists, Salonican community leaders, and workers (roles that often overlapped in the history of labour Zionism). Here I follow recent studies which seek to explore racial notions among Sephardi subjects themselves, as the Jews of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean were more than passive bearers of others' knowledge about their bodies (Smith 2022; Moreno, Karkason 2024).

I wish to thank Billie Melman for her early guidance in this research project during her tutorial in urban history at Tel Aviv University, as well as Gabriel Mordoch.

1 On poverty in Salonica and its literary representations see Gruss 2012.

During the period I examine, the decline of Thessaloniki's port and the marginalization of its Jewish workers by Greek nationalists meant that many Jews had become poor and needed to find new occupational opportunities abroad.[2] Following the steps of other immigrants since the early twentieth century, many chose to settle in France (Mordoch 2021, 8-9),[3] while others in Argentina or the US.[4] Mandatory Palestine was a far less attractive destination. Even there, not every Jewish worker was in high demand: hoping to form a new socialist society and to create a Jewish state liberated from the 'maladies' of European Jews and their urbanity, Jewish leaders sought those well-equipped to work, especially in cultivating the land.

In pursuit of the dream of Jewish statehood, Salonican Jews offered an even rarer set of talents: they were men of the sea. Menachem Usishkin, the Zionist leader, described the inhabitants of Thessaloniki as the "Jewish sailor, master of the sea, with his strong muscles and national pride, whom we Ashkenazim aspire to see in our lifetime" (Molcho 1951, 42). Drawing on memoirs, archival sources, newspapers, and recent studies such as the works of Shai Srougo and Kobi Cohen-Hattab on modern maritime Jewish history, this essay examines how racialized ideas about Sephardi Jews were put to the test in the quest for Jewish dominance of local harbours, as stevedores had to publicly display their physical prowess alongside Arab workers. Through a gendered lens, the essay also explores the tensions surrounding Sephardi masculinity, which occupied an impossible cultural space. I argue that such masculinity was perceived as neither Ashkenazi, Jewish, nor Arab – while simultaneously being reimagined as a Zionist ideal for a new Jewish subject who could surpass Arab masculinity. This modern Mediterranean fantasy, imported from Thessaloniki to the shores of Haifa, materialized in struggle with the harsh realities harbour workers of modest means faced in the Mandate.[5]

2 Recently, Shai Srougo challenged this narrative, demonstrating that the process through which Greek workers replaced Jewish ones was only partially successful and was more gradual than historians have previously assumed. Still, at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s many Jews found themselves unemployed and sought to immigrate (Srougo 2014, 324-6).

3 See for example the biography of Vidal Nahoum (Morin 2009).

4 See for instance Naar 2007.

5 There is a growing interest in Haifa, its port, and shore as a site of Jewish and Palestinian modernity, as well as a site for interracial and interfaith border-crossing. See for example Hillel 2019 or Aharoni 2019.

2 Sephardi Exceptionalism

Sephardi Jews had been living in Thessaloniki since their expulsion from Spain. It was in this city, among other urban centres in the Eastern Mediterranean, where their Sephardi identity was created in a centuries-long process of community formation. Many of those Jews who decided to stay in Iberia and were willingly or forcefully converted to Catholicism, in Spain and later Portugal, also found their way to Thessaloniki during the sixteenth century, where they started practicing Judaism openly (Ankori 1988). Within a few years, the city became a "Jewish enclave in an otherwise Muslim state" (Levy 1992, 6). In 1520, more than half of the city's 30,000 citizens were Jews; they considered their city a 'second Jerusalem', and a centre for Torah learning and rabbinical innovation (Mazower 2005, 49-50).

400 years later, their descendants thought of Thessaloniki as their home; only a small group among them considered the alternative of immigrating to Eretz Israel. Following the Greek conquest of the city in 1912, a growing number of Jews began to see themselves as belonging first to the young Greek society (Naar 2016, 60-3), but Judeo-Spanish was still their native and main language, as they very slowly acculturated to the Greek language and its culture. A hint of their strong commitment to their Iberian heritage could be found in the decision of around 1,950 Salonican Jews to apply in 1913 for Portuguese or Spanish citizenship: they preferred these two European states over the young Greek one. This choice later saved the life of 366 of them, who were deported to Bergen-Belsen instead of Auschwitz, from which they were later transported to Palestine (Varon-Vassard 2021, 48, 58-9).

While it is difficult to determine the exact numbers, there were around 60,000 Jews living in the city around 1912, around a third of the city's general population (Gounaris 1993, 500-1). David ben Gurion recounted going to study the Turkish language in Thessaloniki (1912) and not in the capital Istanbul, "since I knew that it is a Jewish city, and indeed when living there I saw that it is the most Jewish city in the whole world, and even in Eretz Israel there is no Jewish city like it, since all the labour in this city – in factories, workshops and even at the port – is being done by Jewish labourers" (Ben Gurion 1972, 415). Thessaloniki was virtually synonymous with its port – and the port with its Jews. Famously, there were so many Jews involved in its maritime activities that on Shabbat work at the port would almost cease.

Foreign and particularly European travellers to Thessaloniki were impressed by the vast Jewish presence in the city. The main reason for their attraction was that the Sephardim of Thessaloniki were not like any other European Jews they had known or read about before. In his 1929 memoir of Thessaloniki, *The White Tower* (named

after the ancient and iconic tower located on the waterfront of the city), the journalist and Zionist organizer Yosef ben Pinhas 'Uzi'el (1888-1968), reported the great impression his fellow Jews had left on the Norwegian author Alexander L. Kielland (1849-1906) ('Uzi'el 1929, 9-10).[6] Kielland had published a short portrayal of the city in his 1891 collection of stories and essays, *Men and Animals*, and 'Uzi'el remained fond of this description decades later. Kielland, he wrote, was drawn above all to the clothes these 'typical Jews' wore – their blue cloaks and long, wide robes – which made them move "with a special oriental grace" ('Uzi'el 1929, 10-11). The author praised those Jews "with a black beard decorating suntanned or white faces, with an expression of strength and confidence" ('Uzi'el 1929, 11).[7]

'Uzi'el lived in Thessaloniki up until his *Aliyah* (immigration; literally: ascent) to Palestine. Although he was a passionate Zionist (and translated Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* to Judeo-Spanish), he continued to cherish the north European traveller's admiration of his compatriots in Thessaloniki. He used Kielland's gaze to offer a Hebrew readership a flattering portrait of his old community:

> If I were a Jew and lived in Northern Europe, where Jews must feel they are black and small and their legs are twisted, then, I would have rewarded myself an annual trip to Salonica […] I would have asked these relatives of mine of the same race to lend me for a few days their wide *cübbe* and thin and bright *entari*, and out of joy and pride of the special beauty of the chosen people, as they are revealed and embodied there, I would have straightened my legs and filled my soul with contempt to the people of the north, with their high hats and watery eyes.[8] ('Uzi'el 1929, 11)

Kielland describes a European Jew who, once a year, can escape his broken and twisted body and enter a space where oriental clothing transforms him into a new subject – a healthy, respected Jew who might look down on fellow Jews with disdain. The author attributes lesser bodies to the Jews of northern Europe, but his racial perspective allows for transformation: one can always travel to Thessaloniki.

Kielland was struck by the existence of other Jewish ways of life, which he viewed as noble and reminiscent of the lives of the biblical 'chosen people'. He also portrays Thessaloniki and its Jewish lifestyle as a solution to the Jewish Problem. Even before Zionist immigrants claimed to be the heirs to the ancient Jewish residents of the Land of Israel, Salonican Jews were seen as fulfilling that role. "I have never

6 For a short biography of 'Uzi'el see Benvenisti 1982, 185-8.

7 For the original Norwegian text see Kielland 1891, 244-6.

8 For the *cübbe* and *entari* see Refael 2001, 28-31.

seen in my life more beautiful people than these Jews whom I have seen in Thessaloniki, as they are walking outside on Shabbat through the streets or outside the city walls", Kielland wrote, and added:

> I was especially impressed by two youngsters, maybe brothers, tall as any other Portuguese, their hair and beard are wonderfully beautiful, their skin is brown and dark, their eyes are deep, and everything has a kind of calmness and self-confidence which is categorically different from what we see among the Jews. ('Uzi'el 1929, 11-12)

In Kielland's imagination, it was not just the Ottoman cultural landscape or the port city that made Salonican Jews appear beautiful; their distinctiveness was also racial, as they were both Sephardi and resembled non-Jewish Portuguese men. Their distinctive outfits captured his attention as well: as seen in this watercolour **[fig. 1]**, a modern reconstruction of nineteenth-century local outfit, the Jews of Salonica were wearing the *Entari* of striped silk over their garments, and over the *Entari* the *Cübbe*, an outer robe in the Ottoman fashion.[9]

Figure 1
Nikos Stavroulakis. 1988. Watercolor. Athens.
In *Sephardi and Romaniote Jewish Costumes in Greece and Turkey: 16 Watercolours*. The Jewish Museum of Greece, Athens

9 Working class people also wore the *entari* on Holidays, even if one less luxurious than the one depicted here. Molcho 1950, 94-5, 167.

Kielland declared that, after visiting Thessaloniki, he could finally understand what he had read about Jews in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius. Prior to this visit, he had regarded Josephus' accounts as mere legend; now, he grasped how these ancient Jews could have fought back against the Romans and inflicted significant casualties. As we will see, these images of Salonican men travelled to Mandatory Palestine, where Greek Sephardi émigrés actualized stories about their unique masculinity as they laboured in the Haifa harbour.

Around the same time 'Uzi'el published this portrait of Salonica, Salonican Jews laid the groundwork for a future Jewish presence at the port. As we will observe, networks of recent migrants, such as 'Uzi'el, helped pave the way for future migrants to enter a restricted labour market. Similar efforts to 'conquer' maritime labour had already occurred at the Jaffa port, where, in 1925, Jewish porters and wagon drivers from Thessaloniki began transporting goods to nearby areas. "This group introduced new methods for lifting heavy loads that the Arabs had neither known nor imagined before. Their organized and efficient work became the talk of the day among both the Mandate authorities and the Arabs alike", explained the entrepreneur and Zionist activist Shlomo Venecia who had immigrated from Thessaloniki only a few years earlier, highlighting the novelty of Salonican presence at the harbour (Molcho 1951, 52). Another small wave of immigration during the years 1929-32 laid the foundations for the transformation that took place at the port later in the decade (Srougo 2020, 875-6). If the Jewish authorities had previously ignored the water in favour of the land, by the mid-1930s, Kobi Cohen-Hattab identifies "a 180-degree turn […] in the attitude of the central institutions towards the sea; seafaring rose on the central leadership's agenda" (Cohen-Hattab 2019, 19).

How did this shift manifest in the performance of Jewish masculinity, and what role did Salonican men play in driving this change? In the next section, I trace this transformation as embodied in the porters. All rested on their ability to meet (or fall short of) the high expectations placed on them in the 'conquest of the sea'. And while Shai Srougo recently provided a detailed analysis of labour dynamics at the Haifa port (Srougo 2023, 866-84), my focus here is more modest: I aim to explore how Salonican Jews performed a distinct form of masculinity essential to the success of the Zionist project.

3 Conquering the Sea

"The Haifa port with its deepwater harbor guarded the gateway of the empire to the east, as well as the approach to the Suez Canal from the north": Deborah Bernstein evokes this significance in her description of the newly opened Haifa port in 1933, calling it "the hub of the life of the city" (Bernstein 2000, 141). To execute its important goals, it needed workers, and debates over their identity began in the earliest stages of the port's development. The Zionist activist Berl Repetur noted in *Davar* newspaper that "many fields of labour connected to the sea and the port have not yet been conquered by the Jewish worker, and the value of Hebrew labour is not yet found in these areas".[10] Historian Anita Shapira explains that such 'conquest of labour' referred not only to replacing Arab workers with Jewish ones but also to the idea of mastering oneself – overcoming the physical demands of labour and finding fulfilment in the struggle of hard work (Shapira 1999, 65).

Repetur contrasted maritime labour with other professions where Jewish workers were by now present and active, asserting that the sea remained largely inaccessible to them, despite the limited success of Jewish efforts to break into port labour in both Jaffa and Haifa. He attributed this problem to the Yishuv's prevailing attitude, which held that shipping and port work were too arduous for Jews. Repetur strongly rejected this view, advocating for Jewish participation in these demanding fields. "With the Jewish capital paid for portage [...] we could have sustained hundreds of new Hebrew families and fortified political positions whose importance is enormous". He also lamented the fact that Arab workers outnumbered Jewish workers three to one, and that in the fields of shipping, portage, and stevedoring there were only 50-60 Jewish workers.[11] From his perspective, there was no real value to commerce at the port, if it was not carried out by Jewish labourers. And he pushed against the notion, still common during this period, that one could not find Jews capable of strenuous physical work.

The answer to this challenge was to bring in skilled workers who, despite being Jewish, had a 'different' physicality. Jewish Salonican seamen fit the bill, both because of their objective skills and due to the reputation they had earned as physically superior to other European Jews; they already had a 'Zionist body' (Gluzman 2010). In

10 *Davar*, 31 October 1933, 10-11.

11 *Davar*, 31 October 1933, 10-11. In general, stevedores were considered more skilled than porters. See for example the request for 'good stevedores' versus porters who could only work at warehouses: Letter to the Palestine Office in Salonica (21 February 1935), The Pinhas Lavon Institute for Labour Movement Research (Tel Aviv, Israel) (=Lavon), IV-250-27-5-74. For the classification of porters see Broudo 1961, 74-6.

the pages of *Haaretz* (September 1933), the journalist and novelist Baruch 'Uzi'el (1901-1977) called on the authorities to help these seamen settle in Palestine.[12] He noted that no other group of Jews could adapt to maritime professions as easily and as quickly, given that the Salonicans had long worked the sea. Later, he published a memorandum to the Jewish Chamber of Commerce in Haifa:

> There is one place in the world where Jews have been engaged in maritime work for generations and that place is Salonica. There, you find veteran sailors, powerful dock labourers, and fishermen by birth. If we want to establish a class of maritime workers in the Land of Israel without many sacrifices and without much toil, we must turn, therefore, to this city and make use of its seamen. (Eshel 1984, 40)

Other Salonicans in Palestine also promoted the idea that a solution to the Yishuv's maritime challenges was to be found among the members of their former community. "Only port workers of this kind, who were accustomed to such hard work for generations and generations and were much experienced with the sea, could perform any role, whether light or heavy", wrote Isaac Molcho, another influential Zionist activist and journalist from Thessaloniki (Molcho 1951, 52). In Molcho's and Baruch 'Uzi'el's perspectives, we find an almost evolutionary perspective on the Salonican maritime experience: they were prepared for this work not only as the result of concrete physical training in their own lifetimes, but also thanks to a centuries-long process that had transformed their bodies.

Salonican men had their own reasons and motivations for immigrating to Palestine. Enthusiasm about the Zionist project spread after World War I and into the 1920s. By 1930, Zionism became the leading political movement in Thessaloniki. A nationalistic trend that promoted intolerance against the Jewish population also pushed Jews to leave the country. "The Salonican Jews are not Greek patriots but Jewish patriots. They are closer to the Turks than to us", said the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos (Mazower 2005, 382). The 1931 riots against 220 Jewish families who lived at the Campbell camp (known as the Campbell Riot) led more Jews to wonder if Thessaloniki was their home.

Another prominent factor was growing poverty, as many porters came from the lower classes of Jewish society (Hasid 1997, 41). Yet even poor Salonicans did not consider leaving for British Palestine. The scarcity of entry certificates issued by the British, a severe

12 On 'Uzi'el the Zionist politician and scholar of Judeo-Spanish culture see Refael 1988.

recession in Palestine, and the efforts of the Greek authorities to prevent Jews from leaving led to a smaller number of immigrants (Mazower 2005, 379). With a shortage of necessary certificates, many Greek Jews arrived first as tourists to Palestine, and only later found a way to stay permanently. The majority of these immigrants performed manual labour; only a small percentage practiced liberal professions and possessed capital (Kerem 2002, 181).

Many letters testify to the official effort to help Jewish workers leave Thessaloniki. For instance, in 1932 the Palestine Office in Thessaloniki wrote to Isaac Molcho in Jerusalem, asking that he use his influence to acquire more certificates for young women who were going through months-long agricultural training to prepare for *Aliyah*.[13] But there appears to have been even more urgency regarding bringing the men first. A letter from the Jewish Agency to the chief rabbi in Palestine, Yaakov Meir (1856-1939, who had previously served as the chief rabbi of Thessaloniki) apologized, declaring that the Agency was doing everything in its power to acquire more certificates, and insisting that the worsening conditions of Salonican Jews remained "close to their heart". At the same time, they noted that other Jewish diasporas were also going through great hardship.[14] Meanwhile, the Haifa port opened, creating even greater motivation to acquire the necessary documents.

4 Public Humiliation at the Port

The Haifa-Salonica Committee (later: The Maritime Committee) was established in 1933. Aba Hushi (1898-1969), the later legendary 'red' mayor of Haifa, joined the Committee and expanded its activities as the Secretary of the Haifa Labour Council. He took over responsibility for bringing Salonican workers and appealed to Moshe Chertok (later Sharet, 1894-1965), head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency. Through Chertok he secured immigration permits for fifteen Salonicans who committed to working at the Haifa port. The first fifteen were selected by the Palestine Office's officials, who promised they had chosen "the most skilled and capable elements for the work of unloading and loading ships" (Eshel 1984, 42). The dockworkers arrived in July, 1933 and were given a few days of rest before starting work at the port. However, it became apparent on day

13 The Palestine Office in Salonica to Isaac Molcho (07/11/1932), Archive of the Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center (Tel Aviv, Israel), P-16 (Isaac Molcho's Collection), Judeo-Spanish in Latin characters. I wish to thank archivist Anat Shimoni for her help.

14 A letter from the Aliya Department of the Jewish Agency to R. Jacob Meir (09/11/1932), Goldstein-Goren, P-16/174.

one that these dockworkers were entirely unfit for the task. Baruch 'Uzi'el reported that:

> With a sense of confidence and anticipation of victory, we approached to witness the work of our world-famous labourers, known for their great strength, and to derive satisfaction from our workers. But soon we were like dreamers. Are these the Jewish porters of Salonica? (Eshel 1984, 42)

Having advocated for the migrants, 'Uzi'el and other Zionist activists wished to see the fruits of their lobbying effort. But the high expectations were transformed into a deep sense of disappointment:

> Woe to the eyes that see such things. There they are, buckling under the weight on their backs, staggering under their burdens like drunkards about to fall […] My world darkened, and I could not utter a word. Had I not praised and exalted the sons of my city […] What will they say now? Indeed, I must have appeared like a liar in the eyes of others, and even I was infinitely disappointed. But no, I said to myself, this cannot be, there is a terrible mistake here, a bad dream […]
>
> Aba Hushi cast a sharp glance at us but said nothing. He turned away in disappointment and walked toward the port gate. (Eshel 1984, 42)

To the shame of the Jewish leaders involved, the Salonicans failed to deliver. The fiasco tarnished Thessaloniki's reputation, and that of its outstanding Jewish seamen, in the eyes of the Yishuv; the Jewish role in the portage sector was at stake. Baruch 'Uzi'el writes that

> The scene was bleak and embarrassing, and our ears heard the laughter of the Arab workers who were also observing the 'Jews' [*Yahud*] at work. Even the laughter of the Englishman [K.W.] Stead, the port manager, did not escape us. We knew that he was taking pleasure in our misfortune and that the whole matter of bringing Jewish dockworkers was not in accordance with his wishes. (Eshel 1984, 42)

Thus, the failure at the port was both visible and audible, and the entire port became a stage on which seamen tried and failed to perform their virtuosic skills. It was later revealed that the Salonican official responsible for selecting the workers had accepted bribes, as immigration permits were a rare commodity. As a result, the group consisted of milkmen and other tradesmen, with not a single experienced porter among them (Eshel 1984, 43). A frustrated Aba Hushi left for Thessaloniki and took matters into his hands.

5 Performing Masculinity

Before the incident, Zionist activists portrayed Salonican men as calm, healthy, strong, confident, and courageous. Now, subsequent efforts to test and confirm this image had both practical and symbolic implications: a new performance of masculinity had to erase the shameful memory of the first. It was indeed a performance, since, as Judith Butler suggests, masculinity is not an inherent trait but rather a construct built through performative practices.[15] Through the act of carrying (or failing to carry) goods from ship to shore the Jewish porters 'revealed' the nature of their masculinity. Of course, the ultimate goal was to demonstrate a 'superior' masculinity. According to R.W. Connell, there is no single masculinity but rather a multiplicity of masculinities, which engage among themselves in a struggle for hierarchy and hegemony (Connell 2005, 76).

In the early 1930s, Zionism confronted the hegemonic masculinity of the white, Western-European man.[16] At the same time, Zionist men also faced the local Arab masculinity of the Middle East. In Palestine, the project of creating the male Zionist body centred not only on challenging European masculinity, but also on the effort to differentiate from the local Arab man. Put differently, Zionist masculinity was not merely a response to antisemitic European portrayals of Jews as weak and effeminate; it also served to differentiate Jews from Arabs.

What were the specific masculine norms of the national Jewish movement? According to George Mosse, modern nation-states came to value and idealize a masculinity of 'quiet grandeur' and self-control, the latter required for hard physical labour. In doing so, they created a direct identification between the socio-political body and the male physical body. Furthermore, to reinforce this masculine stereotype, societies needed a countertype that would contrast negatively with their masculine virtues (Mosse 1998, 56). But, of course, Jewish-Arab differentiation was not only cultural; it also reflected the creation of a dual economy following the Jewish 'conquest of labour', which required the separation of Jewish and Arab societies in British Palestine and their organization into two separate economies. Since the British-controlled Haifa port was a space shared by both Jews and Arabs, it offered Zionist ideology a new challenge in its quest for masculinity.

Bernstein has shown that, regardless of the potential for Jewish-Arab solidarity at the port – hauling was a rare industry in which the

15 Butler 1999, 173.

16 See for example the new iconography of the Jewish *sabra* of Eretz Israel circulated in Jewish Mediterranean diasporas: Guedj 2019, 59-60.

groups comingled and might engage in joint action – organized Jewish labour soon led to segregation (Bernstein 2000,161-4). At the same time, I argue that gender, and masculinity in particular, was also instrumental in establishing such hierarchies and separation between port workers. Initially, Jewish masculinity needed to match that of Arab men; subsequently, this developed masculinity could be leveraged to create segregation. Salonican stevedores were recruited for this purpose as well: their 'oriental' customs and robust masculinity made them resemble Arab men, whom they were later expected to surpass in their work.

Following his earlier public failure, Aba Hushi decided to travel to Thessaloniki, where he would pick the labourers himself, after testing their skill at carrying large weights. He was familiar with the job: a decade earlier, right after his immigration to Palestine, he carried coal at the Haifa port (Eshel 2002, 22). Here are the impressions he shared with the *Histadrut* Executive Committee in September 1933:

> Dockworkers: There are still several hundred workers in Salonica engaged in various types of dock work from coal handling […] a type of work that even the local Arabs are not accustomed to, for which they bring in Sudanese labourers from Port Said; porters who can carry on their backs 350-400 kg, and stevedoring […]. From among these workers, after careful examinations and after observing each one individually at work at the port, I selected about 100 men for the jobs in Haifa. I spoke with each worker individually and thoroughly explained all the difficulties of working at the Haifa port, and arranged a work contract.[17]

Hushi compared the Jewish stevedores to the Arab ones and found the former superior: he claimed they could carry an almost unbelievable weight of 400 kilograms. Hushi also distinguished between local Arabs and 'other' Arabs – specifically, the stronger Sudanese who came to Palestine from Port Said.[18] This was not merely a professional hierarchy (related to how many kilograms each worker could carry) but also an ethnic one, linking ethnicity to physical strength.

Hushi went beyond testing the physical strength of the candidates. He sought information about "the lifestyle of the selected workers (as some of the workers in Salonica are communists, hashish smokers, card players, etc.)" and chose about 100 men who met these exacting qualifications: "If we obtain the necessary certificates, we will bring

17 Letter from Aba Hushi to the Executive Committee of the Histadrut (18/09/1933), Aba Hushi Archive, Younes and Soraya Nazarian Library, University of Haifa, A1/38:2.

18 Sudanese workers could be found in other sectors and were employed for example at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem (Lockman 1996, 313).

them to Haifa [within] two-three months from today to begin working at the port".[19]

Smoking hashish or playing cards were leisure activities common among the workers, and they can be found for instance in popular postcards of Jewish porters after World War I (Alexander, Hadar, Sabar 2011, 212-13). Yet Hushi sought to avoid stevedores who engage in them. Such activities might have reminded him of Jewish depictions – common to Jewish orientalist painting at the time – of Arabs playing backgammon or dominoes and smoking (Manor 2005, 129).

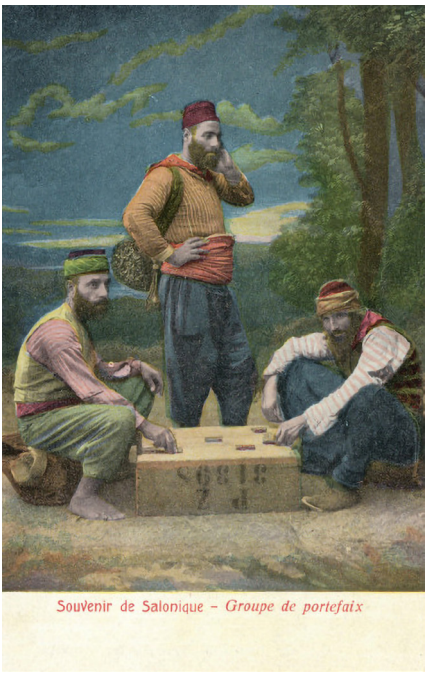

Figure 2
Three dockworkers from Salonica playing over an improvised box. 1917 ca. Postcard. *Souvenir de Salonique*, ed. Hananel Naar. University of Michigan Library

Such negative images had haunted the Jews of Thessaloniki since they had arrived in Palestine twenty years earlier. In Palestine and later Israel, they were considered more Sephardi than Salonican. David Benvenisti recounts in his memoir that as early as World War I, he and his fellow Sephardim tried to fight such stereotypes that were prominent among the Ashkenazim. They wished to show the latter "the good in the lives of the simple folk living in the Old Town of Jerusalem, those whom they saw after their difficult daily work sitting

19 Hushi to the Executive Committee, Hushi Archive, A1/38:2.

in tiny taverns during night time, playing backgammon, smoking narghile, or drinking coffee while having a friendly conversation".[20] They emphasized instead the Sephardi commitment to Jewish ritual life organized around the synagogue, and they worked hard to portray a pious Jewish masculinity. In Thessaloniki, Hushi continued to test the potential workers:

> I examine each individual at work and listen to each one, but I record my opinions privately to myself. Today, I observed the coal workers and was astonished at what even Arabs in our region are unable to do – here, Jews have been doing it their entire lives. […] I spoke with the stevedores working with coal, and they are as black as the Egyptians from Port Said who work in Haifa. The Salonicans work better – they carry larger sacks, 18/19 kilos each […] and they are willing to work 10-14 hours. (Molcho 1951, 57-8)

The workers' coal-blackened skin highlighted similarities and revealed the inherent ambivalence within Zionism's construction of the national masculine body: on the one hand, the ideal Jewish man was meant to resemble the strong, healthy Aryan; on the other, he was also expected to integrate characteristics associated with the Aryan's perceived opposite, the dark-skinned Arab. In the context of this racial theatre at the harbour, similarity to Arab workers was considered advantageous, at least temporarily: Hushi did not expect that Salonican Jewish workers would fully resemble the Arabs of Port Said, but rather appreciated the temporary resemblance facilitated by their work with coal.[21] The comparison to Arab workers was indeed dangerous, since the Zionist attitude toward the Arab body was ambivalent and entangled with racial politics of hygiene that associated 'oriental bodies' with disease and epidemics (Yosef 2004, 3). Zionist educators and hygienists also fretted over the potential 'orientalization' of Jewish immigrants, which they feared could lead to sodomy (Ilany 2017, 107-20).

20 Benvenisti 1981, 179: Benvenisti narrates how the Ashkenazim of Jerusalem looked down on the immigrants from Salonica, who nonetheless occupied a middle position between the European immigrants and other Sephardim: "when we complained to them about their inappropriate attitude, at times, towards the Sephardi, they would have responded: "you are not Sephardim… and even if so, you are different Sephardim".

21 Despite this report, Jews would not dominate the field of coal portage in the following years: a 1938 report still describes Jews in coal portage as a novelty. The author wished that Jewish coal merchants would consider hiring Jewish porters more often, given their newly demonstrated skills. "At The Haifa Port", *Haaretz*, 27 March 1938, 3.

6 The Wonders of Heavy Weights

The work of porters and their extraordinary capacity to carry heavy cargo also captured imaginations back in Salonica. Baruch 'Uzi'el opens one of his novels, *Jacob the Crow*, with the entertaining story of efforts by Yehuda, the deaf porter, to carry a chest (*forsél*) filled with expensive clothes and decorated with tulips that was the property of a family departing to Palestine:[22]

> He stumbled here and there, and the crowd of onlookers – porters and neighbours standing on the stairs and at the doorways – cheered at Yehuda's playful antics. Indeed, their laughter also stemmed from the enjoyment of seeing the man's great strength as he carried such a heavy load on his shoulders. ('Uzi'el 1973, 7-8)

Such performances of masculinity were also integral to life at sea. The sailor Ze'ev HaYam ('the sea wolf', Volodya Itzkovitz), who had long worked at sea, records this short anecdote from his journey to Jaffa:

> The Jaffa port sailors were known for their agility and professionalism throughout the Mediterranean, and even beyond its boundaries. To this day, I vividly remember that when I arrived with my mother in 1905 from Russia, as a small child, to visit my grandmother's house in Gedera, the Jaffa port sailors unloaded me from the ship in a most original manner: they tossed me from one sailor's hands to another, with half a dozen of them standing on the ship's gangway from the deck to the boat. (Ze'ev HaYam 1968, 71)

Elsewhere, Ze'ev HaYam recounts the daily ritual through which porters were selected for the day's work: "The foreman, a tall and large Arab named Kabichi, would touch the candidate's shoulder with the stick in his hand, signalling that he had been chosen for the day's work, and the selected one would enter the port running" (Ze'ev HaYam 1968, 72).

Such public demonstrations of skill were an integral part of the porters' work lives: they occurred when workers were designated to travel abroad; at the beginning of each workday, and even outside of work, when they amused themselves and passengers with demonstrations of their physical strength. Additionally, at certain key moments, as I argue in this study, workers had to prove their strength in order 'to make history'; to show Jewish, Arab and British spectators the promise of a new Jewish subject able to transform land and sea through his muscular presence.

22 On the *forsél*, used to keep the bride's clothing and part of the dowry, see Juhasz 1990, 204-5.

Some Salonican Jews appeared to accept this reality and to use it to their benefit. An early anecdote from World War I reveals a division of labour between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. David Benvenisti describes how Jewish Salonicans entertained the crowd during a literary event (*neshef sifruti*, 1916, dedicated to the author Sholem Aleichem): "We took it upon ourselves to participate in the more humorous part: spectacular gymnastics exercises and dances […] We presented boxing exercises (without, of course, causing harm to the body), or human pyramids".[23] Gymnastic performances had been common among Jewish Salonicans since the Zionist Maccabi sport organization introduced them at the beginning of the century; by the 1930s, their body was already a locus of Zionist self-fashioning.[24]

I would like to conclude this essay with one physical demonstration that left an unforgettable impression on its spectators. It was more grandiose than previous tests and competitions and, according to its author, Ze'ev HaYam, left little doubt as to Jewish superiority:

> The Jewish porters from Salonica successfully competed with the Arabs and Hauranians who worked at the Haifa port and even caught up with them.[25] In response, Kamal Abu-Zeid and Kamal Rano demanded that their chief foreman, Abu-Ali, bring a group of Arab porters from the Jaffa port, known to be the most agile and strong.[26] A whole group arrived, including one named Abu-Qamar, and two groups of porters – Jews from Salonica and Arabs from Jaffa – prepared to compete. (Ze'ev HaYam 1968, 75)

Here, the inner- and inter-hierarchies of porter masculinity were at play: Arabs and Hauranians from the Haifa port failed to outcompete the recently recruited Jewish men of Salonica. In order not to suffer a humiliation at the hands of the newcomers, the best Arab porters were summoned from Jaffa. But even they could not succeed, the author suggested, against the superior Jewish porters:

23 Benvenisti 1981, 177-8. The event was dedicated to the question of whether Sholem Aleichem should be considered a Hebrew author despite his Yiddish novels.

24 See the testimony of Shlomo Venecia (1967, 116-17).

25 Hauran is a geographical region located in southern Syria, but the meaning of the term 'Hauranians' was not self-evident. For instance, Moshe Shartok asks the Haifa Labour Council (1935) whether by 'Hauranian' they mean "every Arab who is foreign to the land–meaning trans-Jordanians; Syrian who are not Hauranians; from Sinai, etc. […] are you confident that you haven't counted among them native Arabs–people from far away villages, Bedouin from the Negev or other places, etc." Moshe Shartok to the Haifa Labour Council (05/03/1935). Lavon, IV-250-27-5-100. All archival sources from Lavon are my translation from the Hebrew. I wish to thank Dr. Eran Tal for his kind help.

26 On Abu Zeid Shipping, Stevedoring & Storage company see Ran 2008, 47.

> When they began unloading pianos in crates from the ship, each weighing 500 kg along with the packaging, they loaded such a crate onto the shoulders of Moshe Kaprino, who carried it from the dock to the warehouse without any assistance. Before everyone's eyes, the Jaffa porters tore off their carrying equipment with their own hands, and threw it on the dock while shouting: "Against such demons we cannot compete!" (Ze'ev HaYam 1968, 75)

The competition was a visual spectacle that inverted common Zionist representations. Painters and novelists alike depicted the Arab as "a role model for the New Jew – an idealised image of belonging" which "represented in his rootedness and strong physique a kind of antithesis to the image of the feeble Jew of the diaspora". (Manor 2005, 129). Here, however, with the help of the 'imported' Sephardim, Jews overcame Arab masculinity. Additionally, the competition illustrates how the struggle between Jews and Arabs at the port went beyond the 'conquest of the body' in the sense of mastering self-control, as in this case the porters needed to demonstrate masculine *excess*. To win, they had to go beyond the limits of the body or the human. Beyond mere physical strength, the competition required the almost monstrous endurance and resilience needed for piano lifting. Everyone who watched could see that the new Haifa immigrants were no ordinary Jews, but 'demons'.

7 Conclusion

By November 1933, two months after Hushi's journey to Thessaloniki, 38 Salonicans worked at the port: 34 porters and 4 stevedores. These labourers brought their families with them, a total of 138 Salonicans. The Haifa Labour Council reported an immediate success:

> [T]he workers have earned a reputation as the best porters in the entire city. […] and many Arab merchants are requesting that we provide them with Salonican porters for work, as their expertise, responsibility, organization, and discipline have surprised everyone. This group of workers has opened a path for us to work in the port which had been closed to us for years. If we know how to take advantage of this beautiful start, we can bring hundreds of Jewish workers into the port and conquer the most important jobs in the government sector.[27]

27 Letter to the Jewish Agency (15/11/1933), Lavon, IV-208-1-608.

Additionally, for the first time, a new work contract was signed for the significant project of loading and unloading two and a half million crates of oranges, providing dozens more jobs. This trend continued during the following months, with the Haifa Port taking over key shipping functions from Jaffa. When Arab merchants turned to Syria (specifically Aleppo) and Egypt for a few hundred more workers to satisfy the new demands, the Haifa Labour Council responded by asking the Jewish Agency to obtain more immigration certificates and to put pressure on the British government to increase the number of Jews allowed to work at the port. It argued that now "every custom clerk, from the Arab policeman to […] the custom managers" understands that the Jewish porters are the most capable ones to execute such a job.[28] The performance of masculinity could thus be translated immediately into political demands for more Jewish control of portage. By 1937 there were 1,200 Jewish workers at the Haifa Port (including non-Sephardi ones).[29]

Zionist authorities and writers cultivated the glory of the Salonican porter, in real time during the 1930s, and years later, in memoirs praising the porters for their exceptional skills and essential role in securing Jewish labour at the port. Such praise had various functions: it eased the conscience of Zionist activists such as Aba Hushi, who placed a heavy burden on the Salonican workers' shoulders, wide as they were. Growing fame also served the Salonican themselves, providing them with a sense of pride. Was the recognition and glorification of their exceptional masculinity the compensation the Yishuv offered for their unbearable toil? Immigration, especially in the context of poverty, often destabilizes gender roles and traditional notions of masculinity.[30] Struggling to provide for their families in Haifa, these men might experience the performance of masculinity as humiliating, as their bodies were put under the scrutiny of other men. At the same time, performances of masculinity allowed the workers to demonstrate their value and skill in performing work at which they already excelled.

28 Letter to the Haifa Labour Council (29/1/1934), Lavon, IV-208-1-608.

29 Letter to the Halutz Centre in Germany from Aba Hushi (9/3/1937), Lavon, IV-250-27-2-319. When given other alternatives, some Salonican workers decided to pursue other opportunities and switch to a different profession. A 1938 letter, for instance, complained that the porters were to blame for their bad economic situation, as they had switched to other professions in times of greater prosperity and now, during the economic crisis brought on by the Great Revolt (1936-39), wished in vain to return to their jobs at the port. Letter to the Zionist Histadrut in Thessaloniki (14/7/1938), Lavon, IV-250-27-2-319.

30 See for example Devi Mays' study on the role of physical violence in restoring masculine honour, among Sephardi immigrants from the Ottoman Empire to Mexico and the US (Mays 2014).

Furthermore, years later, porters would use their heroic past at the port as pioneers in the conquest of maritime Jewish labour when making political claims. For example, in a 1951 letter to Prime Minister David ben Gurion (copying Aba Hushi, then the mayor of Haifa), the porter Isaac Strogano asked for support to buy a taxi:

> I have been a dockworker at the Port of Haifa since the year 1934. I came from Salonica with the Aliyah of Aba Hushi, and I was also a dockworker abroad. I was one of the first to work at Tel Aviv port in 1936. Five of my sons who served in the Israel Defence Forces also work at the port. I lost one of them in our War of Independence […] I am now 66 years old, my health is frail and I am no longer able to continue with this hard work.[31]

Jews from Thessaloniki continued to be a dominant group at the ports of British Palestine and later in the state of Israel – yet a comprehensive account of their post-1948 experience remains unwritten. During the Holocaust, the Jewish community of Thessaloniki was destroyed. Out of 56,000 Jews living in the city before the Holocaust, less than 2,000 had survived.[32] Hundreds of workers who left for Haifa during the 1930s survived with their family members. Jewish masculinity shifted from that Diaspora to the Land of Israel. When, in February 1958, an Israeli ship visited the port of Thessaloniki, the reporter covering the story for *Davar* newspaper emphasized the novelty of the event: "apparently, this is the first ship under Israeli flag at that port, and for this reason, an Israeli person, in the eyes of the Jews of Thessaloniki, is what such a person was to the entire world a few years ago: a creature from a fairytale land".[33]

31 Letter from Isaac Strogano to David ben Gurion (29/06/1951), Aba Hushi Archive, A1/38:2, Hebrew.

32 Table: "Jewish population in Greece before and after the Holocaust", Saltiel 2020.

33 "The Last Jews of Salonica and the First Sailors of Israel", *Davar*, ha-Shavu'a supplement, 12 February 1958, 2.

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Beyond the Myth: Kaniuk's Critique of Jewish-Israeli Masculinity

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Abstract This essay discusses Yoram Kaniuk's (1930-2013) literary approach to Jewish-Israeli masculinity as a performance rather than an essential identity. Instead of rejecting Zionist masculine ideals, Kaniuk created alternative geographic, temporal and symbolic spaces where different masculine performances became possible. The analysis of *Himmo King of Jerusalem* (1966), *Life on Sandpaper* (2003), and *1948* (2010) demonstrates fracturing heroic embodiment through abject survival, spatial displacement enabling alternative performance, and temporal distancing that expose the gaps between myth and memory.

Keywords Jewish-Israeli masculinity. Sabra myth. Yoram Kaniuk. Performance of identity. Trauma.

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1 Introduction

In a short article entitled "Benny's Friends" written in the 1970s, Kaniuk utilized a striking metaphor to depict the performative dimensions of wartime masculinity. His description of the war machine reads:

> We were cowboys on a giant game board. There were orders that came from somewhere, and people walked tired and sang to avoid falling asleep and conquered another village and another outpost, then retreated, and then were shot and died. This is how you build a state, and it was born there on the hills of Jerusalem […]. The war for Jerusalem was a mass suicide of young children, and no one protested it. They didn't even distribute medals. (Kaniuk 1973, 27)[1]

This image of soldiers as "cowboys on a giant game board" captures the essence of Kaniuk's understanding of masculine performance in the context of state-building: young men enacting predetermined roles on a stage they neither designed nor fully comprehend. War becomes their stage, while they remain external to the script that would later endow their actions with mythic meaning. They walk, sing, conquer, retreat, and die according to "orders that came from somewhere", where their bodily performances constitute the raw material from which the *sabra* myth would later be constructed.

This performative complexity defines Kaniuk's relationship with the myth of Jewish-Israeli masculinity. On the one hand, Kaniuk himself embodied an idealized version of this masculinity: born in Tel Aviv, he fought in the 1948 war and later worked on ships bringing Holocaust survivors to Israel. Even his move to New York was driven by the need to seek treatment for his war injuries at Mount Sinai Hospital. On the other hand, through his writings, Kaniuk systematically critiqued and deconstructed this myth to reveal Jewish-Israeli masculinity as unstable and far from fixed.

Rather than approaching this contradiction through biographical analysis, this article examines how Kaniuk's literary works, and not his explicit statements about masculinity, engage with and deconstruct Israeli masculine identity. A close analysis of his fictional narratives and autobiographical and autofictional writings reveals how literary representation itself can become a critical tool for exposing the performative dimensions of gender identity. This approach is particularly crucial for understanding Kaniuk's

1 Quotations from Kaniuk's novels that have been translated into English are taken from the official published translations. All other translations from Hebrew sources are by the Author.

work, where the relationship between life and literature remains deliberately complex. Even in texts that appear to be based on his biography, Kaniuk consistently incorporated playful and self-conscious elements when constructing his literary persona. This artifice itself was part of his critique of authentic masculine identity, which suggested that all identity performances involve elements of construction and theatricality.

The central argument advanced here is that the importance of Kaniuk's works does not lie in rejecting Israeli masculinity but in performing it differently. His texts demonstrate how the sabra myth functions as a performative identity that can simultaneously be inhabited and undermined. By embodying the warrior-hero while exposing its limitations, Kaniuk created a literary and political space for more complex expressions of Jewish-Israeli masculinity that can accommodate vulnerability, diasporic sensibility, and artistic pursuit alongside national commitment.

2 Theoretical Background

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir observed that "A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex. It goes without saying that he is a man" (Beauvoir 1956, XV). This reflection shows how masculinity functions as an unmarked, seemingly natural category that requires no justification or explanation. Men, Beauvoir suggested, are not compelled to perform or prove their gender identity in the way that women, who are constituted as a minority and perceived as 'other' must constantly do. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argued that "there is no becoming majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian" (1987, 106). In their framework, hegemonic identities such as masculinity and whiteness appear stable precisely because they serve as the unmarked norm against which all other identities are measured and found wanting.

The emergence of masculinity studies in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism during the 1960s began to challenge this apparent stability by revealing masculinity as performative rather than essential. The shift from 'woman' to 'gender' studies enabled the examination of manhood as a social role which, like femininity, provided scholars with a new vocabulary to question the stability and universality of identity categories (Adams, Savran 2002, 3-4).

Jewish masculinity has always been marked by instability. As George Mosse noted, normative masculinity is defined

> by the existence of a negative stereotype of men who not only fail to measure up to the ideal but whose body and soul were

> its foil, projecting the exact opposite of true masculinity. Groups marginalized by society, such as Jews and blacks, fulfilled this role. (1996, 6)

The seeming naturalness of hegemonic masculinity depends on the constant exclusion of alternative masculine performances. Jewish masculinity, which has historically been positioned as minoritarian and 'other', provides a particularly revealing case study for examining these performative processes, since its marginalized status makes visible the constructive mechanisms that hegemonic masculinity typically conceals.

For centuries, European Jews were viewed as an inferior minority. Anti-Semitic stereotypes portrayed Jewish men as weak, feminine, and physically inadequate. Their "misshapen bodies" were viewed as examples of degeneration (Mosse 1996, 6). In response, Eastern European Jewish communities actively constructed alternative masculine ideals that privileged scholarship and spiritual strength over physical prowess, creating what Daniel Boyarin described as an intentional differentiation from gentile masculine norms (1997, 4-5). The Zionist movement sought to transform this identity by advocating for a "new muscular Jew" who would embody physical strength and national commitment (Nordau 1955; Yosef 2004, 19). This transformation involved both rejecting diaspora Jewish masculinity and internalizing Western European masculine ideals. Crucially, it also required navigating internal hierarchies between Eastern and Western Jewish identities. As Aziza Khazzoom showed, East-West categories were employed to create social hierarchies within Jewish society (Khazzoom 1999). This effort extended beyond responding to anti-Semitic discourse to encompass a sustained drive toward Westernization and the elimination of Orientalist attributes, a process that would later manifest in Ashkenazi-Mizrahi tensions within Israeli society. (Khazzoom 1999, 385)

The sabra emerged as the culmination of this project where native-born Israelis embodied the ideal of the 'New Jew' without requiring the psychological transformation of their immigrant parents (Almog 1997, 14-15; Shapira 1996, 12). The sabra myth combined physical and spiritual qualities into what R.W. Connell termed a normative masculinity that provided "a clear inventory of a man's physical traits and modes of behavior" (1995, 70). During the struggle for statehood, this included the mythologization of fallen soldiers as *akudim* (bound) or the 'living-dead'; i.e., figures who remained eternally young and heroic in collective memory (Maoz 1995, 11; Miron 1992; Gluzman 2007).

The myth of the sabra became highly influential in the early Israeli state and was embedded in ideological texts and disseminated through education. However, Hebrew literature consistently reflected

its complexities. Discussions of Jewish masculinity became central to this evolving Hebrew literature, which was primarily written by male authors (Gluzman 2007; Peleg 2006). From Peretz Smolenskin, Judah Loeb Gordon, and Mendele Mokher Seforim, to later figures such as Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Saul Tchernichowsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg, and twentieth-century writers such as Moshe Shamir, Nathan Alterman, and A.B. Yehoshua, Hebrew writers frequently addressed Jewish masculinity and the male Jewish body.

Performance studies can provide a theoretical foundation for analysing Kaniuk's work. Reading masculinity in the context of performance studies opens up new possibilities for analysing how cultural identities are constructed, maintained, and transformed through literary representation. As Dror Harari showed, performance studies offer both systematic methodology and critical deconstructive praxis that expose the ideological nature of performative behaviours. This approach remains underutilized in Israeli humanities research (Harari 2018, 534). Performance studies reveal that apparently natural or essential identity is actually produced through repeated acts of cultural inscription that both constitute and potentially subvert normative categories (Schechner 2006; Carlson 1996). Literary performance creates the very subject it appears to express through what Schechner termed 'restored behaviour'; i.e., the repetition and variation of cultural scripts that precede any individual enactment (Schechner 1985, 36). Even a seemingly 'authentic' autobiographical performance involves complex negotiations between mimesis and self-presentation which reveal that "the role the actor now plays is a role which she claims as her own, but it remains a role, still deeply involved in both mimesis and representation" (Carlson 1996, 604). Thus, these performative roles need not maintain internal consistency; rather, they can simultaneously embody contradictory elements and competing cultural demands. Victor Turner observed that the "self is presented through the performance of roles, through performance that breaks roles, and through declaring to a given public that one has undergone a transformation of state and status, been saved or damned, elevated or released" (Turner 1987, 81). In this sense, performance inherently contains possibilities for both reproducing and subverting normative structures through 'misperformance', a non-standard enactment that fissures the surface of the representation and allows alternative meanings to emerge (Harari 2018, 532-3).

Yoram Kaniuk's literary engagement reveals the performative nature of sabra masculinity with particular intensity. From the image of the wounded war hero to the bohemian artist, Kaniuk's works demonstrate how masculine identity functions as repeated performance that can constitute but also potentially subvert normative categories. His writing exposes the gap between

idealized sabra identity and lived experience, which creates space for alternative performances of Jewish-Israeli masculinity that accommodate Mizrahi identity, diasporic sensibility, and artistic expression alongside warrior credentials.

This study focuses on three key manifestations of Kaniuk's critique. First, in *Himmo King of Jerusalem*, I examine how he fractured the heroic body by exposing the myth of noble sacrifice through depictions of wounded soldiers' grotesque reality. Then, based on *Life on Sandpaper*, I explore how his New York period was not an escape from Israeli identity but rather experimentation with alternative performances that combined warrior credentials with the artistic and erotic freedom unavailable in 1950s Israel. Finally, I analyze his deconstruction of military heroism in *1948* which presents the war as a series of traumatic experiences undergone by confused young men manipulated by ideological forces. Each of these works constructs alternative temporal or symbolic spaces that exist outside normative Zionist geography, thus enabling experimentation with masculine performances that would be impossible within the conventional Israeli cultural frameworks of the time.

3 Dismantling the Myth of the Living Dead in *Himmo King of Jerusalem* (1966)

Himmo King of Jerusalem (1966) engages directly with one of Hebrew literature's most powerful masculine archetypes initially formulated in Nathan Alterman's phrase – *ha-met ha-hai* (the living dead). In Alterman's influential image, the dead soldier returns from the grave not as a grotesque spectre but as an inspiring presence who guides the living toward honourable action, even unto death. This figure sanitizes battlefield mortality and transforms the gory reality of war into a spiritualized national ideal that preserves fallen heroes as eternally young, beautiful, and morally instructive.

Yoram Kaniuk's *Himmo King of Jerusalem*, written in 1966, is set during the 1948 war. It tells the story of Hamutal, a young, secular Ashkenazi woman from Tel Aviv whose fiancé was killed in the fighting in the Galilee. She joins a convoy to Jerusalem, and when reaching the besieged city, she makes her way to the monastery of St. Jerome, which has been repurposed as a military hospital. There, she cares for Himmo, a traditional Sephardi native of Jerusalem who has been fatally wounded and longs for death. In an act of compassion, Hamutal ultimately administers a lethal injection to end his suffering.

Kaniuk's *Himmo* offers a devastating counter-narrative to the Zionist symbol of the living-dead. This is done first through its engagement with Christian martyrological imagery. The monastery setting, Hamutal's nun-like appearance, and explicit references to

the crucifixion ("They're crucifying Himmo there on an olive tree") invoke a martyrological tradition that makes suffering visible rather than transcendent (Kaniuk 1966, 145). Unlike the *akedah* tradition that preserves Isaac's life and body intact, or Alterman's living-dead who return spiritually purified, Christian martyrology centres on the wounded body as a site of meaning, as Kent Brintnall showed in his analysis of masculine suffering in religious contexts (Brintnall 2011, 132). As Gershon Shaked observed, Kaniuk's work transforms the Hebrew sacrifice narrative by moving "closer to that of Jesus than to that of Isaac" (Shaked 1997, 74). This alternative religious framework allowed Kaniuk to present the abject survival of the mutilated living as potentially meaningful rather than simply tragic, thus revealing the performative nature of heroic masculinity by presenting an alternative embodiment that the dominant culture could not accommodate.

The graphic representation of Himmo's mutilated body serves as the novel's central confrontation with heroic mythology. The systematic dismemberment of his body in the text with the "right leg missing, left leg missing, one arm missing from the elbow, the other hand missing from the wrist; lacerated belly" is depicted as "crushed stumps of limbs, a trunk swathed in bandages, blue shrapnel marks, some embedded in the flesh and some skin-deep, red, gaping wounds, and the stink of rotting flesh" (Kaniuk 1966, 34-5) and creates what Julia Kristeva termed the "abject" (Kristeva 1982, 4). Norbert Elias noted in an analysis that drew on Mary Douglas's concept of pollution that cleanliness and order are essential to the social structure, thus making the grotesque body a fundamental disruption (Elias 1978; Douglas 1966). This catalogue of missing limbs and gaping wounds systematically dismantles the intact masculine body valorised in sabra iconography and exposes the material cost of heroic ideology that remains unable to fulfil its spiritual promise.

The novel's treatment of sexuality and gender further reveals the performative dimensions of masculine identity. Himmo's mouth becomes the site of both his remaining beauty and his sexual availability: "It was a beautiful mouth […] A delicate mouth, somewhat feminine, but with firm, bold lines" (Kaniuk 1966, 35-6). Hamutal's penetration of his mouth with her fingers represents what Ilana Szobel identified as a role reversal that challenges normative masculine sexuality (Szobel 2021, 77). Himmo's inability to initiate sexual contact transforms him from active masculine subject to passive object of desire: a position that renders him socially illegible as a man.

Himmo's character functions as what Maya Barzilai termed a *golem*, and raises fundamental questions about nationalist sentiment and the willingness to sacrifice young men for ideological causes (Barzilai 2016, 109). As Raz Yosef argued, the wounded soldiers

"aim to present a version of masculinity that willingly surrenders to magnificent passivity", by celebrating what he termed "liquid, uncovered, unsutured masculinity" that challenges coherent male identity (Yosef 2004, 71). Himmo exists as a grotesque, hybrid figure that brings the concept of the abject to its peak by disrupting modern notions of boundaries while challenging traditional ideas of masculinity and warriorhood.

Kaniuk's unflinching portrayal of those who could neither live the sabra myth nor die for it and instead remain suspended in a twilight zone of damaged survival, was deeply unsettling at the time of its publication and remains so today. Even in contemporary discourse after October 7th, the numerous wounded remain largely invisible in public consciousness, and the fragile condition of the hostages is euphemistically labelled 'psychological terror' precisely because their vulnerability disrupts images of strength and the robust body. Such representations upend narratives of victory and national triumph, as they always have. Yet Kaniuk did not seek to suppress these alternative performances but rather to create a literary space where they could exist without requiring elimination or erasure.

Within this framework of alternative masculine performances, Kaniuk's portrayal of Mizrahi masculinity reveals both a critique and the reproduction of stereotypes. Yochai Oppenheimer's analysis of Mizrahi literature suggests that it "discovered physicality not only for its own sake but also for the sake of Hebrew literature's dual liberation from the Zionist body and the dichotomous perceptions concerning it" (2010, 182). Marco, Himmo's brother, embodies the negative stereotypes of Sephardim: a well-dressed figure with 'primitive nobility', who is likened to a criminal and profiteer. This stereotypical representation is problematic, and Kaniuk can be legitimately criticized for reproducing orientalist imagery. Nevertheless, the novel's performative logic ultimately subverts this stereotype. Despite Marco's stereotypical 'dangerous' masculinity, it is Himmo – the vulnerable, feminized figure who cannot conform to masculine norms – who must be eliminated. This suggests that the real threat to social order is not stereotypical 'Oriental' masculinity but alternative masculine performances that refuse predetermined scripts. In fact, despite the stereotype, Marco poses no actual threat. Instead, it is Hamutal, the Ashkenazi nurse, who becomes the agent of violence. This representation thus undermines its own stereotypical foundation by showing that the supposedly 'dangerous' Mizrahi man is ultimately harmless, while the 'caring' Ashkenazi woman becomes the killer.

Hamutal's ultimate rejection of Himmo occurs precisely when the war's end threatens to return them to normal social reality. As she contemplates returning to "Tel Aviv, about the sunshine and the white buildings, about a return to normal life", she realizes that their

relationship cannot survive outside the monastery's suspended reality (Kaniuk 1966, 198). Her decision to administer the lethal injection does not stem from mercy but from her inability to accept alternative masculine performance within conventional social frameworks.

Himmo's death paradoxically restores his heroic status by transforming him from an embarrassing survivor into a properly fallen soldier. This restoration exposes how heroic masculinity does not depend solely on men's symbolic function within national mythology or on lived experience. The 'King of Jerusalem' who cannot rule over his own body becomes a king only in death, when his actual experience can be safely contained within memorial narrative.

The novel's conclusion reveals the cultural impossibility of deviating from prescribed gender performances within the Israeli society of the time. Each character in the Zionist narrative seemingly has a designated role: men must fight and potentially die heroically, Mizrahi men are expected to perform either criminality or exotic otherness, nurses must heal and maintain proper feminine boundaries. Superficially, all the characters in *Himmo* appear to fulfil their assigned parts: Himmo fought and was wounded, Marco embodies stereotypical Mizrahi masculinity, Hamutal is the devoted nurse. Yet the novel reveals how these performances ultimately fail or require violent enforcement to maintain their coherence. What emerges is the breakdown of performance itself, and captures the moment when cultural scripts prove inadequate to contain lived experience. Himmo's alternative embodiment exposes the exclusions necessary to maintain normative masculine performance, while the novel's monastery setting creates the temporary space for different possibilities that must ultimately be foreclosed. The tragedy lies not in Himmo's wounds but in a culture that can only accommodate masculine performance that conforms to predetermined scripts, thus revealing the fragility and violence underlying apparently natural gender roles.

This subversive potential helps explain why *Himmo King of Jerusalem* was only adapted for film in 1987, more than 20 years after its publication by Amos Gutman, a director known for his provocative and transgressive films. This delay suggests that the novel's challenging content required significant cultural shifts before it could find visual expression. Significantly, Gutman's *Himmo* appeared the same year as another film adaptation: *I Don't Give a Damn*, based on Dan Ben-Amotz's 1973 novel about a war-wounded protagonist. This parallel trajectory that both address wounded masculinity through alternative narrative strategies can also be linked to their shared experiences in 1950s New York. The synchronous appearance of these two films in 1987 suggests a broader cultural readiness to confront the costs of heroic masculine ideals that had been developing since

their earlier collaborative experiments with alternative masculine performance.

4 When the Sabra Myth Meets 'The Wandering Jew': Life on Sandpaper

In the collective biography of Hebrew writers, leaving one's birthplace tends to be understood as crucial for artistic maturation and creative development. This pattern of artistic pilgrimage can be traced through several generations of Hebrew literature such as Peretz Smolenskin's transformative journey to Odessa in the nineteenth century, where he encountered European literary movements, Micha Josef Berdyczewski's travels to Central and Western Europe seeking philosophical and cultural renewal, S.Y. Agnon's formative Berlin period, which exposed him to modernist literary techniques, and Avraham Shlonsky's Parisian sojourn where he absorbed avant-garde poetic innovations. For these writers, geographic displacement served multiple functions including escape from the intellectual limitations of traditional Jewish communities, encounters with broader cultural movements, and the distance needed to develop a critical perspective on their own cultural inheritance. Their wanderings westward often represented attempts to shed perceived Oriental origins and embrace Western cultural forms, yet paradoxically, this displacement frequently intensified rather than resolved questions of Jewish identity and belonging.

At the turn of the twentieth century, these journeys became closely linked to the *talush* (uprooted) archetype in Hebrew literature, as documented by scholars such as Nurit Govrin and Heddy Shait (Govrin 1985; Shait 2015). Berdyczewski captured this existential state in works such as "Menachem", where the protagonist exists as "a stranger here and there; he is a stranger in the world and in life" (Berdyczewski 1900). The *talush* figure embodied the painful liminal position of the modernizing Jew caught between traditional and modern worlds, and unable to fully inhabit either (Shaked 1977).

Kaniuk's generation, however, faced fundamentally different circumstances. Writers such as Dan Ben-Amotz and Amos Kenan, Kaniuk's contemporaries who similarly sought creative liberation by moving to Paris and New York, did not inherit the constraints of traditional Jewish society but rather the overwhelming expectations of the newly established Israeli state. As Kaniuk commented in an unpublished notebook found posthumously in his estate, he

> arrived in New York empty and broken and full of bitterness toward his country and his past and how he would never return to it, between one song of longing and another, to the beloved and

> cursed land where he was born, where all his friends were killed to give it a name on the map. (Archival materials found in his estate)

His life in New York is depicted in two major novels, *Susetz* (*Rockinghorse*, 1973) and *Life on Sandpaper* (2003). Kaniuk also published several short stories in the newspaper *Ma'ariv* during the 1980s; other unpublished drafts and materials still remain in his estate. The novels and stories describing his time in America reveal another facet of his engagement with the myth of Jewish Israeli masculinity. In these texts, the main character, who is either a reflection of Kaniuk himself (Naftali in *Rockinghorse*) or presented directly as Kaniuk, is a wandering Jew, a melancholic figure who paints and frequents the New York bohemian scene.

New York becomes what Victor Turner terms a "liminal space"; a threshold zone where established social structures are temporarily suspended, thus allowing for experimentation in identity that would be impossible within normative contexts (Turner 1969, 95). The liminal quality of this existence appears in the novel in the scene where he calls Information asking for his own phone number, reflecting a need for external confirmation of his existence – a moment that captures the fundamental disorientation and self-questioning inherent in this transitional state. Yet Kaniuk's *talush* performance involves conscious choice and theatrical self-presentation rather than psychological affliction. Like all performances, it contains repetitive and artificial elements such as the strategic deployment of Israeli war veteran credentials, which enable him to cultivate his image of the tortured artist-warrior.

This strategic marginality manifests in Kaniuk's deliberate affiliation with New York's artistic underground rather than mainstream American society. His New York experience engaged deeply with Beat culture, as influenced by the spirit of Jack Kerouac's world of jazz, girls, booze, drugs, freedom, and a sense of movement, as Tom Kellner showed in her analysis (Kellner 2015). He was not alone in this choice. Dan Ben-Amotz was a faithful companion during these experiments, who similarly sought creative liberation through his association with the city's fringe groups. Ronny Someck pointed out that this reflects "all that jazz" of existence "on the edge", a quality that would later influence Kaniuk's distinctive stream-of-consciousness writing style (Someck 2003): Kaniuk crafted "a single line of 400 pages" that captures this liminal existence.

The novel starts with the motto "Luck Be a Lady", referencing a song by Frank Loesser from the 1950s' musical *Guys and Dolls*, which was popularized through Frank Sinatra's performance in the 1955 film adaptation featuring Marlon Brando. The musical centres on two gamblers from New York, during the gambler's final game, where winning could restore his relationship with his beloved and

ultimately lead to his retirement from a life of gambling and excess. The phrase "Luck be a lady" not only evokes the Brando-Sinatra milieu of bachelorhood and masculinity (also addressed in the text) but also conveys the symbolism of 'the last game', suggesting a sense of transience and an interim state which, if fate favours him, could lead to a different life. This temporal framework of liminality and potential transformation permeated Kaniuk's entire New York experience. His edge-walking involved careful management rather than complete abandon, such as avoiding hard drugs while engaging in considerable consumption of alcohol that allowed him to inhabit the margins without total dissolution. His heavy drinking became part of this temporal performance, and enabled what he termed a lifestyle "like rowing a boat with a glass bottom over the sewers of America" (Harel 2003, 53), a precarious balance that could tip toward either salvation or destruction.

Contemporary research on gender and migration demonstrates how migration processes reshape masculine identities in complex ways. Katarzyna Wojnicka and Paula Pustułka observed that "migration as a process influences the changes in defining, negotiating and performing masculinities" (2019, 92). The diverse experiences of male migrants emerge from the intersection of multiple factors made up of class, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and family status, which create distinct social positions and outcomes. Although Kaniuk represents one specific example, understanding that men's spatial experiences are "intersectionally entangled with the question of power" (Wojnicka, Pustułka 2017, 89) helps show how his time in New York shaped his masculine identity through complex dynamics of marginalization and privilege. Rather than hiding his Israeli military background, Kaniuk transformed it into social capital within Beat culture. His war veteran status granted him access to artistic and erotic experiences while his Israeli exoticism provided performative advantages unavailable in conservative 1950s Israel. As Tamar Hess noted, this work served as "Kaniuk's identity card as an artist" by reflecting the shock of war, unfulfilled romantic relationships, and his journey from Little Tel Aviv to the wider world, all of which are milestones that shaped his identity as an artist, painter, and writer (Hess 2003, 26).

The novel's treatment of sexuality reveals how Kaniuk transformed traditional *talush* performance. As noted by Gershon Shaked, the *talush* figure in Hebrew literature was characterized by profound erotic dysfunction (*mimush eroti*), reflecting the psychological and physical inadequacy of the uprooted intellectual caught between worlds (Shaked 1977, 27-30). This lack of erotic fulfilment was central to the *talush*'s condition, because it symbolized a more general inability to achieve integration or satisfaction in any sphere of existence.

Yaron Avituv pointed out that in this novel "story chases story, bottle chases bottle, fuck chases fuck" (Avituv 2003). The memoir starts with an explicit juxtaposition of military trauma and erotic possibility: "There had been a war and I was wounded. When I got back, I was remote and detached from everything, didn't speak for days, and would draw on the walls because I'd killed people before I'd kissed a girl" (Kaniuk 2003, 9). This foundational statement is suggestive of the cultural constraints of Zionist masculine expectations that prioritize collective sacrifice over individual intimate fulfilment. Kaniuk writes that

> the girls in my days wouldn't tell a man he was handsome. They'd say he was smart or pioneering […] Only when I got to America did they tell me I was handsome. At 21, I learned for the first time that I had something attractive; it was too late to change that image. (Amir 1997, 59)

The Zionist realization of masculine ideals explicitly excluded sexuality, creating a fundamental tension that required geographic displacement to resolve. This juxtaposition of war and romantic encounters shapes the narrative's trajectory. The story begins with a night spent with a nameless girl, still haunted by nightmares of the Gestapo, and continues with his journey to Europe to rescue Holocaust survivors, alongside vivid depictions of prostitutes in Naples. The image of foreign girls emerges in other texts as well. In an unpublished manuscript Kaniuk sent to his friend Jay Lavee, several intertwined stories focus on different girls who are not Jewish; he meets them on ships, in Paris, or in New York, suggesting that the protagonist can only access overt sexuality through these encounters. This pattern which is reminiscent of the 'gentile woman' motif in Eastern European Jewish literature, represents an attempt to distance his identity from what he experienced as the castrating context of Zionist masculinity. Unlike the traditional *talush* figure's erotic dysfunction, Kaniuk describes his extraordinary sexual successes in these relationships. The narrative structure, organized around his relationships with various women, highlights both the expectation of masculinity expressed through battle rather than intimacy, and the possibility of experiencing erotic desire when one is 'out of the house'. However, this erotic freedom functions as performance rather than authentic fulfilment, because of its reliance on displacement from familiar cultural contexts and its inability to provide lasting satisfaction or genuine integration into American society.

5 Hollow Fighters – *1948*

> Oh, on those nights years ago. We used to run along the sands with a stick and shout insults at the moon, I would cook potatoes and tell jokes. On these sand dunes we grew up, […] Afterwards, they would say: What youth, what lack of culture, corrupt youth, *sabra*, the prickly pear cactus, boorish, inhuman, insolent, […] Suddenly, as if forgotten, we became the future of the nation, the silver platter, heroes of Israel […] we were like gods overflowing with titles to the point of bursting, mighty, wise, terrible, wonderful […] The period in which we were a state and a shoulder passed quickly, we remained people who need rehabilitation. (Kaniuk 2018, 109)

This monologue from Kaniuk's posthumously published novel *Soap* reveals the performative arc that structures his understanding of wartime masculinity. The progression from ordinary childhood activities such as "running along the sands with a stick", "cooking potatoes" to mythic heroism exposes the constructed nature of the sabra ideal. The same behaviours that were once dismissed as signs of cultural deficiency suddenly became the foundation for national mythology when reframed within the narrative of state-building.

This trajectory from ordinary boys to mythic heroes to traumatized survivors found its fullest expression in Kaniuk's seminal work *1948*. The novel, published 60 years after the war that haunted Kaniuk throughout his life represents not merely delayed testimony but a fundamental shift in cultural discourse that finally enabled him to confront the performative dimensions of wartime masculinity. As Motti Golani and Mitch Ginsburg noted, the book does not attempt to offer a balanced historical account but rather presents the war through the limited perspective of personal testimony (Golani 2010; Ginsburg 2013). Kaniuk himself acknowledged that "[m]emory is deceitful and mocking, and it can change reality for us" and openly admitted that his work is a story rather than documentary or historical research (Regev 2012, 13; see also Shapira 2011). This temporal distance proves crucial: only by writing during a period when critical evaluations of Israeli military culture had become more legitimate could Kaniuk fully expose the chasm between mythic expectations and lived experience.

Kaniuk's emphasis on soldiers as ordinary young men rather than idealized sabra figures extends beyond their lack of ideological understanding to encompass their fundamental alienation from the national project they were supposedly creating. He openly admitted that his comrades were not "people like Dado, Uzi Narkis, or Yitzhak Rabin, the Tel Avivians, the so-called 'beautiful Israel'" but rather *horranim* (rabble) who entertained themselves by "blowing out candles with farts" (Druzd 1999). This deliberate emphasis on their

crude, non-heroic behaviour serves to highlight the performative disparity between the mythic expectations placed upon them and their actual capacity to fulfil such roles.

The disconnection between soldiers and their mythologized role became central to Kaniuk's testimony. Although the cover of the book that reproduces Kaniuk's 1953 oil painting of the Israeli flag speckled with red (blood) stains suggests a kind of national signature, the novel itself is far from a typical Zionist text (Eshel 2012, 73-4). Specifically, it severs the connection between the soldiers' actions and the ideological framework that would later give them meaning: "It's a mistake to think that we fought for the establishment of this state. How were we to know how to establish a state? Had anybody done it before us?" (Kaniuk 2010, 14). This deliberate performance of incomprehension challenges the retroactive heroization of the sabra fighter by suggesting that the mythic masculine ideal was imposed upon rather than embodied by those who engaged in its foundational actions. Soldiers become unwitting actors in a script they neither wrote nor understood, and their bodily performances are later reinterpreted as conscious expressions of national commitment.

The ethical dimension of this struggle becomes particularly acute in Kaniuk's depiction of his ideological background and its collision with wartime reality. Throughout *1948*, he presents himself as someone who came to the war with clear moral principles since he was a member of *Ha-shomer Ha-tzair* that believed in binational coexistence between Jews and Arabs. Yet the memoir systematically documents how these principles collapsed under the pressure of military action. In a conversation with Yashka the Partisan, a Holocaust survivor who would later die in Kaniuk's arms during the war, Kaniuk received a brutal education in wartime pragmatism: as Yashka remarked, war has no morality and is never moral.

This ethical disillusionment becomes central to his testimony through his unflinching account of his own actions during the war. Kaniuk describes his shooting of a Palestinian child and his participation in the brutal expulsion of Palestinian civilians, without evasion or justification. These acts, carried out in direct contradiction to his binational ideals, reveal the complete breakdown of the moral framework that was supposed to guide the 'new Hebrew man'. Rather than presenting these actions as regrettable necessities within a larger just cause, Kaniuk exposes them as fundamental violations of the very values that the Zionist project claimed to represent. His willingness to document these moral failures without a redemptive narrative demonstrates how the vast discrepancies between ideological commitment and military performance destroys not only the mythic coherence of the sabra identity but also the ethical foundations upon which it was supposedly built.

This moral alienation, combined with their ideological incomprehension, contributes to the mechanical quality of the soldiers' actions. Kaniuk's approach deliberately fragments the teleological narrative of state-building, by instead revealing the fundamental disconnect between the soldiers' lived experience and their mythologized role. In the novel's opening chapter, he describes his wartime actions as a repetitive cycle: sleep, wake up, eat, fight, bury "as if there had been absolutely nothing inside my battered skull. We were like kids, so shamefully young, volunteers, we were boors, partisans" (Kaniuk 2010, 11). This mechanical enumeration of their actions strips away any heroic significance by presenting warfare as bodily routine rather than an ideological commitment. Cut off from both an ethical framework and ideological understanding, they become young men executing orders without the conviction that the sabra myth assumes they possessed.

Kaniuk's depiction of the soldiers disconnect from the very moment of statehood they were allegedly fighting to achieve is perhaps the most revealing. When describing how the news of independence reached them, they are depicted as bewildered bystanders:

> Come, let us arise and sing "Hatikvah" […] and we told the jerk, Crap! We don't even know the words, and anyway, where has Ben-Gurion established his state? And he said he'd heard that he'd established it in Tel Aviv, and we said, look, we're under siege here, in Jerusalem, we're in Bab el-Wad and there's no state here, and Jerusalem isn't in the State of Tel Aviv, and we fell asleep. (Kaniuk 2010, 17)

This scene crystallizes Kaniuk's fundamental insight into the performative nature of national identity: the soldiers who performed the foundational actions of state-building remained external to its symbolic meaning. Their crude response of "Crap! We don't even know the words" to the suggestion that they sing the national anthem reveals the dissociation between their lived experience and the ceremonial expectations of national belonging. The geographic distinction they draw between 'the State of Tel Aviv' and their besieged position in Jerusalem emphasizes their alienation from the national project: they fight and die while the state is declared elsewhere, by others, without them. Kaniuk's insistence on the soldiers' ignorance of their historical role represents more than simple narrative strategy. It exposes the performative disparity between the lived experience of warfare and its mythological representation by demonstrating how masculine ideals are projected onto rather than expressed through individual performances of military service.

6 Conclusion: Staging Masculine Identity

Throughout his literary career, Kaniuk developed emblematic strategies for challenging normative expressions of Israeli masculinity. Rather than rejecting the sabra myth entirely, his works create alternative spaces where different forms of masculine performance become possible. Each of the texts discussed in this article constructs its own staging that enables experimentation with identity outside the constraints of conventional Zionist discourse.

Kaniuk's *Himmo King of Jerusalem* creates what might be termed a 'heterotopic staging', a space that is fundamentally separate from normative Zionist geography that enables alternative masculine performances. As Victor Turner observed, cultural performance operates in the subjunctive mood of culture, in "a world of 'as if,' ranging from scientific hypothesis to festive fantasy" (Turner 1982, 83). The monastery-turned-hospital functions as a deliberate spatial intervention by removing characters from social structures that would otherwise police gender conformity. Within this liminal medical space suspended between life and death, the sacred and the secular, Himmo's fragmented, feminized masculinity can be explored without immediately triggering the social mechanisms that would eliminate such alternatives in ordinary Israeli space.

Similarly, Kaniuk's New York functions as deliberate spatial staging that enables alternative masculine performance outside the constraints of Israeli cultural geography. The liminal American space operates according to different performative rules, where Israeli military credentials become exotic social capital rather than obligatory national identity. This geographic displacement creates a subjunctive cultural space constituting a realm of experimental possibility where normative Israeli masculine scripts can be temporarily suspended and reconfigured. The Beat culture milieu, with its jazz clubs, bohemian communities, and artistic underground, provides the environmental staging necessary for Kaniuk to perform Israeli masculinity in ways impossible within conservative 1950s Israeli society. This staging enabled him to combine warrior identity with artistic expression, erotic experimentation, and individual exploration while maintaining core Israeli elements. Yet this spatial strategy proved necessarily temporary since this liminal staging could not provide a permanent alternative to Israeli cultural geography. It served solely as an experimental laboratory for expanding the possibilities of masculine performance.

1948 was Kaniuk's his most devastating critique of sabra mythology from within the Israeli cultural context itself. Unlike his earlier works, where traumatized protagonists sought escape through geographic displacement, this mature work illustrates how the temporal distance of 60 years, combined with the evolving

discourse around military trauma and national mythology, enabled him to deconstruct the sabra myth from within. While the novel does not create a separate physical space such as the monastery or New York, it constructs an alternative conceptual staging through the systematic alienation of the soldiers from their own actions and historical role. By describing their performance Kaniuk creates a critical space within the foundational narrative itself. This internal displacement proves even more radical than geographic escape, since it reveals the sabra myth to be an external imposition rather than an authentic expression of those who performed its constitutive acts.

These alternative stagings reveal the fundamental tensions and contradictions inherent to any attempt to perform Israeli masculine identity. Kaniuk's works show that masculinity cannot be understood as a singular performance but rather as a field of competing enactments, each requiring specific spatial and temporal conditions to become viable. His works make it clear that the most radical critique of normative masculine performance may come not from those who reject it entirely, but from those who inhabit it fully enough to reveal its constructed nature from within. By creating literary spaces where alternative masculine performances become temporarily possible, Kaniuk's work anticipated the eventual recognition that Israeli identity itself must accommodate multiple, often contradictory ways of being Israeli, an acknowledgement that remains as urgent today as it was during his generation's foundational struggle.

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Re-Masculinizing Immigrants in Israel
The Moroccan Troubadour Sliman El-Maghribi's Social Ballads

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Abstract Below I analyse three 'social ballads' by Sliman El-Maghribi, a key figure in the 'Moroccan troubadours' scene' that emerged in 1950s Israel as Moroccan male immigrants encountered Israel's then-hegemonic *sabra* masculinity milieu. The ballades reflect tactics that these immigrants, facing masculine marginality, adopted as they used the Scene as a platform for negotiation and reshaping of their masculine identity against their marginalization. By performing masculine compromise and adaptations, they developed a hybrid masculine model that coupled identification with Israel with criticism and rejection of its male hegemonic practices.

Keywords Troubadours' scene. Moroccan immigrants. 1950s Israel. Sabra. Male marginalization. Re-masculinization. Ballads.

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1 Introduction

Sliman El-Maghribi (Shlomo ben-Hamo) was a key figure in the Moroccan troubadours scene (hereinafter: the Scene), an under-researched musical-culture milieu that emerged and evolved in 1950s Israel to preserve Moroccan musical practices amid the cultural exclusion of Moroccan immigrants.[1] The Scene was a grassroots phenomenon revolving around Moroccan musicians whom I call troubadours because they circulated among immigrant communities, giving immigrants respite from their integration pressures by reconnecting them with their culture of origin from Morocco. In their social ballads, they critiqued the Israeli reality and mediated it for the immigrants in response to their cultural marginality. The Israeli cultural mainstream kept the Scene at arm's length, relegating it to Moroccan communities in the rural and urban periphery. Thus El-Maghribi crisscrossed the country, performed *haflot* (parties) at family festivities and fringe clubs, and preserved for his *mului'in* (fans) a vanishing musical style.

Below I analyze three of El-Maghribi's social ballads that deal with male Moroccan immigrants' confrontation with their immigration crisis and their encounter with the masculine hegemony of the *sabra* (the Israel-born Jew). Thus, I show how El-Maghribi's social ballads reflect the integration hardships of Moroccan-Jewish men and the strategies they developed against the challenge to their masculine identity. Thus the Scene, evolving as an alternative to the Israeli cultural mainstream and set in the socio-geographic periphery, created a platform for re-masculinization by establishing a masculinity community that could challenge the hegemonic sabra masculinity, formulate a new pluralistic male Moroccan model, and alleviate the immigrants' manhood-identity crisis via masculine compromise.

The cultural phenomenon of the Scene and the ballades reflect the formative and still-impactful encounter between Moroccan immigrants and fledgling sabra Israel. To make this argument, below I present the socio-cultural background of the Moroccan-Jewish masculine identity formation and the push factors behind the Moroccan Jews' traumatic immigration. Then I describe the conditions under which sabra masculinity developed its salient features, which serve as the backdrop of the crisis that ensued as the immigrants encountered it and faced stigmatization, cultural hostility, socioeconomic degradation, and weakening of community support networks. Continuing, I argue that Sliman El-Maghribi's

1 Hereinafter, 'Moroccan' as a noun or an adjective denotes a Jewish person of Moroccan origin.

social ballads created a vernacular arena in which Moroccan immigrants renegotiated their masculinity, forging a hybrid establishment-aligned yet counter-hegemonic model that facilitated a workable 'masculine compromise' with Israel's sabra order. I also show how El-Maghribi's ballads supplied these socially marginalized men with agency and challenge the prevalent incompetent image of Moroccan immigrants in the 1950s in the current Israeli academic and public discourse.

2 Methodological Remarks

My research methodology surmounts the informal nature of the Scene, reflected in the inaccessibility of the troubadours' lyrics, their unknown dates of publication, and their authors' intentions, by recapturing the texts via listening, transcribing the ballads from their source language (a Jewish dialect of the Moroccan *darija* and French), and translating them first into Hebrew and then into English. I then supplement missing historical information in the lyrics of the ballads by adding historical contextualization of their contents and interviewing members of El-Maghribi's family and participants in the Scene. I analyze the texts only as historical sources that may yield an interpretive narrative and not as objects of linguistic-musicological or cultural research. I avoid the classical meaning of the terms 'troubadour' and 'ballad' in their Medieval European context and do not compare that setting with the Scene discussed here. I borrow the terms in view of some similarities between them and characterize them on the basis of the Oxford Dictionary definitions. Thus, I use 'troubadour' to denote the practice of wandering between communities, and 'ballad' due to its storytelling characteristics.[2] Finally, I call El-Maghribi 'Sliman' in order to differentiate him from others who chose El-Maghribi as their stage name and because Moroccans in Israel and in the diaspora broadly associate him with this name.

3 Male Immigrants: Hierarchy, Emotions, and Coping

'Masculinity' denotes roles, behaviours, gestures, and beliefs that a society deems appropriate for males and sets them in social, historical, and political circumstances. Current attention to men's gender experience challenges common stereotypes in research and culture that identify masculinity with unidimensional representations of

2 Cambridge Dictionary. https://dictionary.cambridge.org/.

power and an unvarying outcome.[3] The term 'hegemonic masculinity', flowing from the pluralization of the masculinity discourse, abets the gendered re-examination of masculinity and reveals various masculinity models, although focusing on the hegemonic prism may blur nuances in the structuring of masculinity and its relations with hegemony. Hegemonic masculinity means not cultural superiority but rather a balance of forces in the struggle for dominance that favours one masculinity over another under specific circumstances that are open to historical change (Hearn 2004; Howson 2006). As Connell and Messerschmidt explain: "Hegemonic masculinities […] came into existence in specific circumstances and were open to historical change. More precisely, there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new means of being a man might become hegemonic" (Connell, Messerschmidt 2005, 832-3).

Migration denotes transition – a liminal process in which identity and cultural fusion create new hybrid or monolithic social entities (Turner 2003; Bhabha 2004). Variations of masculinity evolve in many parameters (ethnicity, nationality, etc.), allowing groups and individuals to change within stereotypic gender roles. Migration promotes struggle with hegemonic masculinity as migrants adopt, reject, and/or preserve masculine patterns and formulate a new male identity (Hibbins, Pease 2009). Socio-gender disorientation and institutional obstacles in the host society may inspire male migrants to strike an ideological 'patriarchal bargain' with the dominant masculinity in behaviour patterns, apportionment of power, and authority – or they may indulge in a diasporic retreat that cripples their assimilation (Pease 2009).

As Sliman's social ballads demonstrate, absent control over the migration process and in response to their weakness in their ambiguous situation, immigrants may fluctuate between two stereotypical masculinity behaviours: 'marianismo', a quiet, dependent, and transportable perception of masculinity; and 'machismo': confrontational, Spartan, rugged masculinity (Walter, Bourgois, Loinaz 2004; Flores Niemann 2004).

Migration research tends to identify male migrants with oppression and neglect and disregards their vulnerability to stigma, violence, and discrimination. In recent years, however, greater nuance in understanding masculinity in migration has acknowledged men's need to adjust to a host society that inflicts discontent, estrangement, marginality, and invisibility on them. In one such adjustment, men may revise their masculine ideology

3 Flood 2002; Clatterbaugh 1996; Connell 1987; Connell 2005; Carrigan, Connel, Lee 1985.

and redesign their masculinity (Montes 2013; Charsley, Wray 2015). The redirection of scholarly attention to male migrants' diverse experiences in coping with migration crisis has raised awareness that male migrants – foremost from traditional societies that invoke non-Western male ideologies – may adopt toxic behaviours toward themselves, manifested in depression, hopelessness, and defeatism, and outwardly in violence, substance abuse, social deviation, and crime (McDermott et al. 2022; Mahoney, Stattin 2000; Cerchiaro 2021). More optimistically, they establish a community and a social network that will help them attain cohesiveness, self-worth, and even a sense of supremacy over the hegemonic masculinity. By rewriting their masculinity narratives, male migrants may develop agency that helps them to challenge the hegemonic masculinity and perform a 'masculine compromise' within themselves and with the host culture's masculine ideologies and roles. The compromise may manifest, for example, in maintaining a gender boundary or emphasizing symbolic dominance while relinquishing power and cultural capital – or vice versa (Näre 2010; Choi 2019; Donaldson, Howson 2009). The Moroccan immigrant, negotiating with the masculine hegemony in Israeli society for his place in the hierarchy of masculinities, had to choose between social deviation and reinventing his masculinity. Sliman's ballads challenged the sabra hegemonic masculinity by putting forward a new and accommodative male ideology.

4 Jewish Masculinity in Morocco

Between 1947 and 1952, the Jewish population in Morocco approximated 250,000, most in fifteen large urban communities. One-third of males aged 15-60 and several percent of women and children under age fifteen were breadwinners. Only 2-4% held positions in bureaucracy and modern business; 50% made a living from trade, 38% from crafts, and 0.14% from agriculture. Most earned paltry wages. The most common crafts were tailoring among women and shoemaking, tailoring, glassmaking, and smithing among men. Thus, most Jews were socially marginalized, impoverished, and hard-pressed to sustain their families (Tsur 2002; Moreno, Bitton 2023).

Fatima Sadiki, describing Morocco at the outset of its modernization, states that social positioning defined masculinity in Muslim culture, social order rigidly regulated gender roles and stereotypes, and the Jews were a reverse image of the hegemonic model in Moroccan Muslim masculinity. The Moroccan masculine codex, she says, was imparted via education, rituals, and oral tradition, with moral conceptualizations such as 'a man's word' and honour as fundamentals. Muslim masculine hegemony, she

adds, stressed outward manifestations of masculinity, access to resources, and recognition by other men (Sadiki 2011). Although this generalization was somewhat valid for Jews, too, nowhere did Jews enjoy a status equal to that of Muslims. Although enforcement of the *dhimma* terms varied from time to time, most Jewish men inhabited the bottom of the class hierarchy (Benichou 2020; Larhmaid 2011).

The establishment of the French Protectorate (1912) brought about dramatic social, political, religious, legal, and cultural changes. Until then, Jews and Muslims shared a culture and language and practiced similar customs. Although most Jews remained juridically inferior, the penetration of modern education to parts of Jewish society and the legal sectorization of 'natives' as distinct from 'Westerners' challenged the traditional social order and Muslim-Jewish relations (Gilson-Miller 2013; Schroeter 2003; Tsur 2011). From the 1930s on, most Jews gradually abandoned rural villages, migrated to growing cities, and joined the lower middle class, aspiring to embrace modernization and Westernization. Concurrently, Moroccan Muslims responded to the French occupation and the support of the Moroccan *makhzen* (monarchy) for modernization and its liberal policy toward minorities by establishing the Al-Istiklal national movement, which in part opposed any change in the Jews' dhimmi status and their integration into Moroccan nationhood. According to Aomar Boum (2013), the events surrounding the 1940s pro-Nazi Vichy rule, the ascendency of the Arab League in 1945, the Arab-Jewish conflict in Mandate Palestine, and anti-Jewish propaganda restructured Muslim masculinity in Morocco by feminizing and dehumanizing Jews and accusing them of holding Muslims in contempt. In this political context, the Jewish male faced perennial abuse, humiliation, and derision (Wyrtzen 2015; Boum 2013; Gilson-Miller 2013).

In newly independent Morocco, Sultan Muhammad V and his son, Hassan II, introduced pro-Western diplomacy and sought for this reason to give their country a moderate image in its treatment of women and Jews. Radical Muslim religious forces countered by openly urging restoration of traditional male supremacy under Shari'a law and the inferior dhimma status (Chafai 2017; Conway-Long 2006; Wyrtzen 2015). In August 1962, Alal al-Fasi, a senior official in Al-Istiklal and the Minister of Islamic Affairs, stated: "Who says Moroccan, says Muslim. […] the 'Moroccan' Jew is only a dhimmi" (*L'avant Garde*, August 11, 1962, in Paloma-Elbaz 2021, 191). He said this more than a decade after some Jews, particularly the urban young, schooled in Zionist institutions in Morocco, had undergone a profound transformation of mindset pursuant to World War II, the Holocaust, and Israeli independence. Having internalized the ideas of French liberalism and the Zionist ideology, they were loath to acquiesce in social inferiority (Tsur 2002; Bitton 2020). Contrastingly, most Jews – older heads of household who dwelled in rural areas and

the margins of major cities – emigrated to Israel in 1947-56 under the impetus of religious passion, economic distress, social inferiority, and abusive treatment (Tsur 1994; Boum 2010).

5 Israeli Masculinity and Moroccan Immigrants in Israel's First Decades

Moroccan immigration to Israel began in 1947 and spanned more than two decades amid traumatic deterioration of security and economic conditions in Morocco. More than 80% of Moroccan Jewry, some 240,000 people, participated in this movement in two socioeconomically, demographically, chronologically, and culturally distinct waves (Schmelz 1988; Schmelz 1989; Laskier 2006; Gottreich Benichou 2020). In the first (1947-60), some 140,000 people emigrated, most from fringe urban strata and the rural periphery. They were religious traditional craftspersons, far from modernity, organized in large families, and culturally connected with the Muslim surroundings (Laskier 2006). In Israel, their socioeconomic weakness made them dependent on make-work and targeted them for settlement in *ma'abarot* (transit camps, sing. *ma'abarah*), new 'development towns' in the periphery, and *moshavim* (cooperative farming villages, sing. *moshav*). Around 60% were men, more than half aged 20-64, and most had minimal schooling. They were steered to blue-collar occupations (Schmelz 1989; Hacohen 2003).

The second wave (1961-71, mostly 1961-64, some 113,000 participants) centred on members of the urban lower-middle class; better educated than their predecessors, they practiced modern occupations and were religiously pragmatic (Laskier 1994, 2006; Tsur 2002). Most were directed to development towns and outskirts of major cities that quickly became breeding grounds of poverty and crime, identified with marginality and backwardness, stigma and social isolation (Efrat 1994; Tzfadia 2007; Shoham, Adad, Rahav 2017).

Early-modern West European nationalism embraced stereotyped masculine symbolism as a political practice that disdained tradition in favour of modernity. Men were educated in physical and mental discipline, quashing of emotion, aggressiveness, and sacrifice for the fatherland (Mosse 1996). The Jew was sub-humanized and portrayed as the inverse of European masculinity and an agent of social deviance and degeneration. Paradoxically, the heads of the Zionist movement, Theodore Herzl and Max Nordau – the latter, author of *Muskeljudentum*, 'muscle Judaism' – internalized the European perspective and considered 're-masculinization' a point of departure for the Jews' national struggle (Biale 1997; Boyarin 1997). Formative national societies, writes David Gilmore (1990), cope with

social and national tasks by conceptualizing masculinity; "Manhood ideals force men to overcome their inherent inertia and fearfulness and 'work' […] and [become] efficient or serviceable" (Gilmore 1990, 227). Therefore, during the pre-state period, masculinity for Jews in Mandate Palestine was identified with European masculinity, secularism, collectivism, military force, courage, mental and physical fortitude, and tilling the soil (Kaplan 2006; Biale 1997).

The sabras, most of Ashkenazi origin, bore national responsibility for the transformation of Jewish masculinity and inculcated cultural patterns that were typified anti-diasporism and adoption Spartan value adoption as a contrast to diasporic Jewish masculinity. Young males raised in socialist environments became mythical figures in the War of Independence. They represented the epitome of sabra masculinity – youth, strength, health, pioneering, rootedness, and manual labour – and were credited with moral supremacy for their solidarity, self-sacrifice for the whole, and sexual puritanism (Almog 2000; Spector-Marzel 2008). The army did much to shape the hierarchy of masculinities in Israel and scripted the hegemonic masculinity as silent, getting-things-done, restrained, concealing emotions, and bodily and mentally controlled, transforming soldiers and commanders into cultural heroes and national leaders who reflected the antithesis of the diasporic Jew (Almog 2000; Kaplan 2006; Sasson-Levy 2001; 2006). Accordingly, sabra society expected immigrants to jettison their diasporic culture and undergo 'Israelization', turning Moroccan (and MENA) immigrants' encounter with the sabras into a 'Kulturkampf' (Almog 2000; Chetrit 2010).

Phillip Hollander broadens this characterization by presenting rivalling masculinities among Jews who adhered at different times to a diasporic Jewish masculinity (Hollander 2012). Rahel Wasserfall, investigating perceptions of masculinity and femininity in a Moroccan immigrants' moshav three decades after their immigration to Israel, found that men developed behavioural practices that reflected both resistance and adjustment to the model of masculinity and the accepted masculinity patterns in Israel in the 'patriarchal bargain' mentioned above (Wasserfall 1987). In making this adjustment, they developed alternative practices to demonstrate the male honour that they had acquired under the influence of Muslim masculinity in Morocco. Wasserfall's interviewees described this struggle as so fundamental in Moroccan masculinity that the collision with the Israeli culture initially manifested in verbal and physical violence that subsequently was channelled into frustration with verbal practices for the attainment of male honour (Wasserfall 1987). A 'good male' conception evolved at this time. Born of the blending of masculinities in Israel (with some generalization), it balanced 'soft' Ashkenazi masculinity with 'rigid' Moroccan masculinity and defined

a worthy male as one who made a living while avoiding violence, gambling, and use of drugs or alcohol (Wasserfall 1987).

A generation gap ensued during these decades between young Moroccans, who had undergone a transformation of mindset in Morocco that inspired many to flout Muslim cultural dictates, and older men, most of whom immigrated to Israel with their families in the country's first decade and were relegated to socioeconomic weakness and sociocultural stigma and marginality. As I show below, Sliman's social ballads reflect the way this socially marginalized Moroccan immigrant fused resistance and adaptability with the patterns of sabra masculinity despite the ideological gap, striking a masculine compromise that combined Israeli hegemonic masculinity patterns with a rivalling Israeli masculinity – a Moroccan one.

6 Sliman and the Scene as a Community for Marginalized Masculinities

Sliman, according to his daughters, was born in 1925 in Meknes, Morocco. He attended a religious elementary school in boyhood and then a school that combined regular studies with music and voice development. His father, a singer and a violinist, managed a musical ensemble that performed in Morocco. The son further specialized in the Algerian style of vocal and instrumental performance while learning with the gifted music teacher David Ben-Haroush. In 1956, Sliman immigrated to Israel with his family under circumstances that ruled out his stay in Morocco. He was placed in a ma'abarah in Ashkelon and then moved to Haifa. Together with his brothers Maurice, Yitzhak, and Shimon, he established a band that performed at parties and nightclubs all over fledgling Israel and even in Europe while trying his hand at other vocations to make a living. In Israel, he began to record his songs in Judeo-Moroccan in the early 1960s. His repertoire, influenced by the musical scene in the Middle East and the Maghreb, was comprised largely of songs on romantic themes.[4] In the political environment of decolonizing 1950s Morocco, songs that made a 'political allusion' subversive to the French protectorate gained popularity (Silver 2022, 162-3). This trend appeared to continue in Israel as Sliman devoted some of his works to social and political matters involving the lives of Moroccan immigrants in Israel. Although his activities were very sympathetically received

4 Interview by the author with Sliman's daughters, Nicole Gueta and Berta Cohen, Haifa, August 21, 2024.

in the Moroccan diaspora by Jews and Muslims alike, he remained anonymous in the mainstream Israeli culture.[5]

The Scene in Israel crested in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when Zionist ideology shaped the popular culture in the service of the Israeli nation-building enterprise. Sabra music was so important in the formation of collective consciousness and immigrant acculturation that the state frowned on cultural entrepreneurs who worked in languages other than Hebrew (Cofman-Simhon 2023; Regev, Seroussi 2004; Helman 2002). To attenuate the crisis of immigration, MENA immigrants established informal musical settings of their own. In Israel's first years, most performers in these settings originated in the Middle East. Indeed, the Egyptian and Iraqi immigrant musicians who established the Voice of Israel Orchestra in Arabic (1948-93) and Café Noah (1951) in the socially peripheral Hatikvah quarter of Tel Aviv established hegemony in 'Oriental' music in Israel (Perlson 2006). The *trobairitz* Esther Alfasi notes that since the Moroccan troubadours came from schools of music (Sha'abi, Andalusi, and Djiri) that were foreign to the hegemony, they were excluded from the Mizrahi mainstream, in effect experiencing double cultural marginality and falling into a cultural vacuum.[6] The entrepreneur Rafael Azulay, who had immigrated to Israel from Morocco in 1948, identified an opportunity to fill the void and in 1957, together with his sons, established Zakiphon, the country's first independent label that recorded and distributed music by immigrant artists of MENA origin. Their activity met with derision from the cultural mainstream, prompting them to turn inward and focus on MENA immigrants' folk music (Verthaim 2017; Litvin 2017; Silver 2022).

According to the musician Haim Uliel and the social activist Reuven Abergel, the potential and reputation of the Scene in Israel was similar among immigrants and society at large. Due to the Scene's peripherality, they say, the state did not consider it a threat and largely spared it from cultural control. The Scene, they add, was a pronouncedly male arena that embodied a paradox: one needed money to participate in it even as most proletarian immigrants, unlike regular partygoers, had none. As a result, the nightclub and café clientele was dominated by hardscrabble men who had withdrawn from the economic rat race and the immigration crisis in despair or

5 Interview by the author with Sliman's daughters, Nicole Gueta and Berta Cohen, Haifa, August 21, 2024.

6 Born in 1940 in Salé, Esther Alfasi immigrated to Israel in 1961 and built an international career for Moroccan and Arab audiences. Interview by the author with Esther Alfasi, Ashkelon, April 16, 2022.

were active in the underworld.[7] Ironically, it was they who fuelled the Scene and preserved and sustained the MENA Jews' musical culture.

Due to livelihood difficulties and cultural marginality, troubadours had to circulate among Moroccan immigrant communities and operate in a climate and invoke masculine practices that burdened them due to their audiences' sociological characteristics. Relying on *ghr'aamah* (tips) for a living, they had to accede to customers' demands such as singing and playing pieces on request and extending their repertoire to classics and hits from the MENA countries. Furthermore, due to their dependence on a crowd composed mainly of men down on their luck and tough-guy criminals, they played for hours on demand and sometimes against their own wishes, their listeners treating them as subordinates and subjected them to humiliation and even violence if they failed to comply.[8]

Music, advises Thomas Solomon, is key in building diasporic communities because it delivers pleasure amid socialization, confirms and validates personal and community identity, helps in dealing with crisis and change, and fosters collective consciousness and a sense of community belonging (Solomon 2015). The Scene, as an autonomous grassroots peripheral subculture, transformed the troubadours into cultural heroes of the Moroccan immigrant communities and, along with Sliman's ballads, reflects an attempt to help them cope with the crises of immigration and cultural marginality. It created a platform for masculine negotiation, struggle, attainment of agency, a sense of self-esteem, and masculine compromise, and a reconstructed male identity in the encounter with Israel's hegemonic masculinity. Thus, Sliman and other troubadours embraced a dialectic masculine model that was concurrently subversive and integrative, one that undermined the cultural mainstream and the sabra masculinity by singing in Judeo-Moroccan and not in Hebrew, devoted many works to non-national themes, celebrated the diasporic culture of origin, lionized mythical rabbinical personalities, performed traditional liturgical poems and classical folksongs, and criticized the host society – while identifying with symbols of Israeli masculinity and the state's national aspirations. Thus, Braham Swirri sang about

7 Interview by the author with the singer and musician Haim Uliel, Sderot, June 15, 2023; interview by the author with Reuven Abergel, a founding member of the Black Panthers movement, Jerusalem, April 20, 2022. Uliel was a founding member of the Sfatayim group. His father, Matityah, established the Petit Bar pour les Amis (The small bar for friends), also known as Le café de Matatiah (Matatiah's café) in Sederot in 1958 and ran it until 1964. Reuven Abergel's father, David, ran L'qahawah di dre'ei (Dere'ei's café) in Jerusalem. See also Aharon Cohen and Sigalit Banai's documentary film *Ha-halutzim* (The pioneers), 2007 (23:14).

8 Interviews by the author with Uliel, June 15, 2023, Sderot, and April 20, 2022, Jerusalem; and with Shimon Yifrah, March 25, 2024, Ashdod. Shimon Yifrach is the former stage manager of the Ashdod Andalusian Orchestra.

immigrants' agonies in his ballad *Newcomer* and Cheich Mwijo pined for Morocco in his *Sultan Moulay El-Hasan*. Patriotic Israeli songs, however, were also sung, as in David Albashari's ballad *Yisrael Ya Zin al-Bildan* (Israel the lovely land) and Albert Suissa's ballad *Ya Sidi Dayan* (My master [Moshe] Dayan).

7 "I Lived with This Worry": Commiseration and Mocking as Reactions to Marginalization

Migration prompted by a threat to security, economic crisis, or extreme social deterioration inflicts trauma and impairs migrants' social integration. For immigrants who lack control over their situation and play the gender role of family breadwinner, the transition from one set of geographic, social, and class positions to another triggers anxiety and mental crisis (Fuller 2001; Pease 2009). The shocks that accompanied Moroccan Jews' encounter with Israeli society scalded their collective consciousness and exacerbated their trauma. In 1948-51, given their anti-diasporic disposition and the immigrants' Mizrahi demographic, sabras fretted over the possibility that Israel's cultural complexion would not endure. Although negligible in numbers, Moroccans suffered from a much greater extent of pejorative labelling than did other immigrants, males seen as the antithesis of Israeli values and tagged as patriarchal, primitive, violent, and foreign (Tsur 1997; Moreno, Bitton 2023).

In this context, in his ballad *Fil'maroc fckkit Yehudi* (In Morocco I met a Jew), probably composed in the late 1950s or the early 1960s,[9] Sliman criticizes Israel's treatment of Moroccan immigrants, challenges the emotional regime of sabra masculinity, and recounts the immigrants' crisis at two levels of intimate detail. At the first level, he traces the crisis to the degradation of the Moroccans' economic status, their helplessness, and their disorientation facing an insensitive establishment that dooms them to social marginalization as bums and criminals:

> I lived in dignity, today I live in a wretched ma'abarah / I began to search for work and didn't find any…I got a letter from Amidar [a public-housing company]; they said I had a year and a month left / pay up or shut up –don't tell and don't talk / and they didn't give me work until I and my future were gone…The city came too and gave me a fine / you have a year to pay it / The inspectors are

9 In Israel, Sliman recorded only on Azulay family's labels; the Azulays established Zakiphon in 1957, about a year after his immigration.

> searching for me and everyone's fining me, this came from the police…shouted "You criminal!" at me.
>
> *Wkānat ʿāyishat mkhtaram alyawm sākin fi maʿbara / walāt ḥalti mbrara wla khdama ʿalayya jarat…Jatni brīya mʿAmīdar qāl lik ġādī ʿām wshahr…Khlas wla tkwaytr la taklam wla tahdar / wshī khdama ma ʿṭāwnī ḥattā fāl ḥāli wkhiyālī / alʿīrīya ḥattā hīya wjāt lī ʿalāma fīhā / ʿindak ʿām takhallasah / faqahīn dayrīn bihā wkul wāḥid sāybo brīya…Ma sākh nisāʿ ʿalayya jarīm.*

At the second level, the ballad deals with the silenced and more profound experiencing of mental crisis among immigrant men who struggle for dignity and the ability to discharge their head-of-household duties. In the sabra masculine zeitgeist of Israeli culture, Mizrahi musicians' attentiveness to men's weaknesses and hardships caused them to be labelled 'crybabies' and their musical style to the contemptuous reduction of *dikaon* (weepy) music. The disclosure of weakness and vulnerability, however, allowed listeners to vent their emotions and improve their mental and emotional condition (Fradkin 2009). In what may have been his pioneering role in this lachrymose music, Sliman, I propose, created a community platform where male immigrants could share and identify with the dashing of their naïve expectations of a warm welcome in Israel, the collapse of their family status due to loss of earning ability, humiliation and indignity at the hands of sabra men, and dread of a bleak economic future. By sharing emotions and exhibiting 'weepiness', Sliman expressed resistance to and subversion of the sabra hegemonic masculinity and its emotionally restrained regime. To reinforce intimacy and identification with the immigrant male, he weaves the first-person and third-person singular into his account of the immigrant's experiences:

> In Morocco I encountered a Jew and said to him, where you going? / He told me: I'm going to my country to try my luck…I reached my country in faith and they handed me a hoe. They began to laugh at me and the manager stopped me… If he's like this in the transit camp, how will he get along in the tenement quarter?… He thinks first about work and lives for a mortgage… They'd rather keep you poor forever (Darwish)…I don't know who my children are anymore.
>
> *Fal-Murūk faqīt yehūdī qālat law fayn rāyiḥ ġādī / qāl lī rāyiḥ liblādī wtamā njarrib saʿdī…Wasalat li-blādī bil-nihya wqabatuhū liya at-Tūrya / sāru yidhakhkū ʿalayya w-l-munāḥal wa-kaf ʿalayya…Lī fī maʿbara w-ḥāl w-lī f-shīkūn kifāsh yaʿmal…Ykammim f-l-ʿamal liwal wa-ʿal mashkantā mitahūwal… Yḥibbu takūn dīmā darwīsh…Bilkawā ktaʿamru dārī, ma yaʿrfū b-ḥaq darrārī.*

Men in crisis may invoke humour and even invective to attain a sense of supremacy over repressive social forces, bolstering personal and community agency and venting frustration, insult, and self-estrangement (Hernann 2016). The refrain of Sliman's ballad reflects these tactics and the ambivalence of Moroccan masculinity. He reveals male vulnerability and bolsters immigrants' self-image in their collision with hegemonic masculinity and the blow to their dignity by disdaining the Ashkenazim, as in the following acidic line from *Fil'maroc fckkit Yehudi*: 'And we lived with the barbarians who spoke in Yiddish about us' (*Waʿīshtanā maʿa l-hīsh ʿalaynā yahdaru b-l-yīdish*) – adding a common Mizrahi epithet for an Ashkenazi, *vuzvuz*. Conversely, Sliman constrains his fury by dismissing the sabras' inability to cope with the challenges of nation-building and equitable treatment of immigrants with "Don't worry, sir". The tenor of the refrain reflects his tendency to avoid skewering Israeli society and send a constructive message of solidarity. Thus, instead of accusing Ashkenazim of deliberate malice and alienation, he stresses the solidarity of the Moroccan and the Ashkenazi, who 'sing together' despite the problems. Thus the refrain concludes:

> And I lived with this worry with the *vuzvuz* I sing (Don't worry, sir) / What's this life with the *vuzvuz* I sing.
>
> *Wa ʿayisht al-taqlīqa al-hādī maʿ al-wazwaz rānī nūwadī.*

8 "Jews, Work Your Land": Protest and Re-Masculinization

Shortly after mass immigration began, the Israeli leadership wished to fortify borders and sovereignty in the periphery. Many Israelis, however, remained indifferent to this mission, leaving the frontier areas desperately underpopulated. This, in 1954, made Moroccan Jews the prime targets of a 'ship-to-countryside' campaign that proposed to send them straight from Haifa port to moshavim and development towns. The problem was that most of the immigrants were urban, unaccustomed to farming, and lacking prior training for the job. Thus, those recruited, mainly men, had to undergo personal and collective 'productivization' before settling the frontier (Picard 2013).

The ballad *Ya zinu Haifa* (Haifa the beautiful), probably composed between 1957 and 1964, centres on the acclimatization hardships of immigrants who were sent to the periphery and faced discrimination

relative to sabras.[10] In 1959, after immigrants' displeasure erupted into violence in the Wadi Salib neighbourhood of Haifa, a public discourse about general society's hostility toward Moroccan immigrants deepened, prominent critics including the likes of the poet Nathan Alterman. That year, the popular Mizrahi singer Jo Amar released a protest song that became a hit: *Lishkat ha-'avodah* (Labor exchange), which deals with the marginalization and high-handed treatment of Moroccan immigrants relative to sabras. Sliman may have preceded Amar in disseminating protest songs, though evidence for this remains elusive.[11]

The male immigrants' story that unfolds in Sliman's ballad describes the passage from Morocco to Israel, the routing of the immigrants to peripheral settlements, the blow to their socioeconomic status, and their estranged encounter with the sabras. The ballad begins by recounting the religious immigrants' passivity vis-à-vis Israeli institutions that obtusely failed to ensure gender separation during the voyage to Israel. The immigrants' disappointment with Israel when they are sent from the pier to the ma'abarot is described afterwards. Then, in a passage that corresponds to Amar's hit, Sliman criticizes the indifference of the labour exchange to the offended male dignity and the impoverishment of the immigrant who cannot support his family:

> Aboard the *Kutubia*, they led us up and on the fourth floor they sat us down / women and men they mingled us / to Palestine we arrived, I was annexed to Pardes Hannah and Bayt Lid, come and see my homeland…We went to a labour bureau / Go away today and come back tomorrow / and the manager's reply: there's no work.
>
> *Fi l-Kutubiyah rakbunā fi Quatrième glassunā / nisā' wa-rijāl khallaṭunā / yā jāyyīn li-Filastīn / Pardes Ḥannah wa-Bayt Līd ajyu tashūfū l-Filastīn…mashīnā li-shikāt ʿamala / shīr lyowm wa-ṭjī ġadā / wa-qūlī: mā ʿandīsh khidma*.

A common response among Moroccan immigrants to fledgling Israel against their impotence and the degradation of their self-worth was romantic recollection of their bygone comfortable lives in Morocco

10 I cannot estimate with precision when this ballad was disseminated but I believe it fell in the 1957-64 range because in Ephraim Kishon's film *Salah Shabati* (1964), the actor Chaim Topol hummed the song in the scene at 2:25-2:31. Retrieved from: `https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ekQdGIkAxQ&t=14s`. The activist Reuven Abergel offers a similar estimation. See also Ben Shalev 2018.

11 In his film *Az'i Iyima* (Come, mother), 2009, Sami Shalom Chetrit claims that the song circulated in Israel before the Wadi Salib incidents. See min. 8:35-11:05. See also Alterman 2015; Chetrit 2010; Amar, Meislish 2024.

and criticism – albeit moderate – of Israel for excluding them from its pioneering ethos (Bitton 2020; Moreno, Bitton 2023). Sliman expresses this in the ballad with tongue-in-cheek sarcasm as a patriarchal bargaining tactic in the male immigrants' struggle with their social marginality. Thus, he describes the urban immigrants' expectations of Israel that were dashed by the drastic degradation of the status they had enjoyed in Morocco and their loss of comfortable lives and respectable jobs – replaced by discrimination and forcible placement in low-skilled, poorly paying work:

> For a week at sea did I sail, I reached Haifa and sighed / men once wealthy pick cucumbers / One is a policeman and another a porter and a third goes home jobless / Where did those times go when they had been polished white-collar professionals? / Today they are haulers, living on dairy only.
>
> *Sabʿa ayam fal-baḥar mshit / waṣalt l-Ḥayfa wa-t-hannit / dayir rjlin kanu f-sar, l-yawm rjʿu ykhadmu fi l-khiyar / shi shurṭi w-shi sabbal w-shi yirjʿa b-salamto mubtal / ya ḥasrah ʿala li ktatbiha li kanat ṣanʿathum naqiyya / l-yawm wlaw portiyya ḥatta maʿishathum bāl-lubaniyya*.

Boldly and with bristling sarcasm, Sliman critiques Israel's defense and settlement policies and defies its secular culture – no laughing matters in Israeli society at the time. He remarks on the absurdity of an Israeli defense policy that sends unskilled male immigrants to guard settlements in the wilderness against threats of terrorism by Palestinian *fedayun* (Drori 2006) and an employment policy that busies them in inexplicable make-believe jobs or digging holes for afforestation (Amir, Rechtman 2006). He writes about Israel's broken promise of comfortable lives in rural settlements and accuses the country of oppressing them on account of their religiosity. Then he asks God to forgive him by rescinding the 'punishment' of the hard lives to which they are doomed in Israel:

> Happy is the man who works on the moshav, "doesn't strain at all, at all" / By day he extracts sand from the pit and by night he fends off the wolves / Because of my prayer to God, I was fired after two weeks / God, why do I deserve this? Only You can forgive me.
>
> *Abyaḍ li yḳhdm f'lmoshav, hadak ma ʿandu ʿadhab / Fi nahar kiyjmaʿ fi ṭrab wfi-lil yaʿashsh ʿ diyab / Ila nṣalli lRab sma, ymḥini l'mnahal mn l'khdma / Ya Rabbi wash had l'blma, Anti li tismaḥ liya*.

Addressing the discriminatory treatment and the emasculation of the Moroccans, Sliman then invokes a common Moroccan cultural

practice (Ennaji 2009) by inserting French words into his critique. His does this in order to link the immigrants to the advanced culture that French implies, bolster the immigrants' self-confidence and symbolic capital against the offense they experienced in their encounter with sabra masculinity, and promote pride of belonging to the Moroccan community in Israel and its significant symbolic capital. Next, he further challenges Israel and its male hegemony by mixing *darija* into his refrain and calling Israel 'Palestine' – a lexeme that would become strictly taboo in the Israeli culture (Amara 2016):

> Ya zinu Haifa ya zin [O beautiful Haifa] / Beautiful Haifa beautiful Haifa rendezvous in Palestine […] If you speak Yiddish they'll give you a clerking or an engineering [job] / and if you speak François so you'll build roads.
>
> *Ya Zinu Ḥayfa ya Zin / Rendezvous fi Falastin /Ila kunti thadr b-l'idish, ya'ṭuk ḳuntab wla muhandis / W'ila kunti thadr l-faransi / ya'ṭuk l'ṭurya w'l'ḳvīsh*.

In his documentary film *Az'i Iyima* (Come, mother, 2009),[12] the intellectual and cinema artist Sami Shalom Chetrit shows his mother singing an anti-Arab Jewish nationalist song based on the lyrics of the ballad *Az'i Ayima* (Come, mother) (8:35-11:05):

> How beautiful is Haifa, may we meet in Palestine / Oh Muslims, get lost, Israel is not yours / Even if you waste your wealth on it, Israel will take it from you / How beautiful is Haifa, may we meet in Palestine / The Jew will build a bomb, will build it wisely / and the boat will load it, will load it onto the airplane.

In the film, Chetrit remarks, Zionist youth counsellors who operated in early-1960s Morocco put to verbal manipulation Sliman's valid lyrical protest and the adversarial criticism of Israel that was common among the immigrants. This, he argues, was intended to draw attention away from criticism of Israel by elevating nationalistic hatred of the rival Palestinian national project. Although research does not support this insinuation, the ambiguity of values here is a conspicuous pattern in the social psychology of Moroccans in Israel and is reflected in an authentic tendency to criticize the country, sometimes fiercely, while expressing profound identification with the idea of Israeli-Jewish fraternity or Zionism (Bitton 2020). Sliman leverages this ambivalence to encourage the immigrants to make

12 *Az'i Iyima* (Come, mother), 2009, directed by Sami Shalom Chetrit, produced by Haim Buzaglo [in Hebrew and *darija*].

a masculine compromise in their negotiation with themselves and the host society over social integration and their sense of self-worth. Accordingly, Sliman accompanies his overtly critical tenor, divisiveness, and challenge to the sabra hegemony in Israeli masculinity by urging listeners to identify with and become part of the Zionist mission, in contrast to the radical critical tendency in Sami Shalom Chetrit's argumentation. Sliman advises Moroccans to adjust their masculine ideology to sabra norms without sacrificing the underpinnings of their cultural identity. In his dialectic approach toward the binary zeitgeist of the period, reflecting the immigrants' masculine compromise with sabra masculinity, Sliman assimilates and imparts the Zionist ideal of working the soil and urges the immigrants to adjust to it. Concurrently, however, he calls for faith that God will spare the immigrants from failure and danger; thus challenging one ideal of socialist Zionism, secularism, while promoting another Zionist value, rural settlement:

> Jews, work your soil, no harm will befall you / God will be at your side, and thus you will surmount your enemies.
>
> *Ya l'Yehud khdmu bladkum ḥta si ma yijralkum / Allah hu li yʿawankum wʿala aʿdyankum yaghlibkum*.

9 'Dayan and Rabin': Liminal Masculinity, Machismo and Marianismo in Moroccan Manhood

After Israel's military victory in 1967, the traumatic anxiety that preceded the war yielded to national exhilaration. Culture, key in creating the buoyant and militaristic climate that evolved, centred on the invincible Israeli masculinity embodied in the personae of the architects of the grand outcome: Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan and Chief of General Staff Yitzhak Rabin. The national collective consciousness of the triumph, writes Anita Shapira, was reflected in two different patterns of response that the generals-cum-cultural heroes represented. One pattern, arrogant and condescending, manifested in the production of victory albums and military parades and was epitomized by the arrogant Moshe Dayan. The second, moderate and even-handed, was reflected in the popular book *The Seventh Day* and captured in the restrained persona of Yitzhak Rabin and his anti-war speech on Mount Scopus several weeks after the war (Shapira 2012). Socially marginal and relatively unrepresented in the military achievement, Moroccan immigrants were secondary players in the cultural euphoria and its accompanying economic growth. This very marginality spurred a social ferment that erupted countrywide

under the leadership of the Israeli Black Panthers movement in 1971 (Chetrit 2010).

In the interaction between masculine ideologies – the immigrant's and the host society's – the immigrant found himself in a liminal process that forced him to choose between the different masculinities in his surroundings and then to formulate his male identity. Generally speaking, the associated gender patterns spanned a stereotypical behavioural spectrum between 'marianismo', characterized by femininity, weakness, dependency, and passivity, and 'machismo', typified by aggression, assertiveness, and agency (Flores Niemann 2004).

Judging by its contents, the ballad *Dayan wa Rabin* was written after the 1967 victory and expresses the tension attending to the Moroccan men's liminality on the masculine spectrum of Israeli society. In this ballad, Sliman praises the architects of the victory and reflects the immigrants' wish to embrace the Israeli mainstream's militaristic masculine ethos. However, it also expresses, unconsciously in my judgment, the ambivalence and the ideological tension that permeated the public discourse and split Israel's hegemonic masculinity after the war between machismo 'Dayanism' and marianistic 'Rabinism'. Notably, Dayan enjoys top billing in the ballad, as he did in the contemporary public discourse, but ambivalence and polarization surface in the different characteristics of masculinity – marianismo and machismo – that Sliman attributes to Dayan and Rabin – aggression, intimidation, courage, and glory in Dayan, as against flaccidity, purity, and sentimentality in Rabin:

> Dayan! Oh Dayan! Dayan, my precious one / the best of them all… May God watch over you…How you surprised the enemies / Oh son of the brave…you're famous everywhere…You act as do the leopard and the lion / Your name alone stirs fear…The enemy fears you.
>
> *Dāyān yā Dāyān / yā sayyid al-rijāl / yuḥḍīk al-ʿālī / kayfas ghafaltī al-ʿadyān / yā walad al-shujʿān / dāyirīn bīk al-khawān / fīk al-nimr wa-al-sabʿ / ghayr ismīk yikhlaʿ / Dāyān yā Dāyān / al-ʿadū mink fazaʿ.*
>
> Rabin, oh my healer / Ya, son of *halal* [you redeemed] the land of our parents and grandparents / There we drive a stake / Bad people, there are lots of that kind / we fear no one.
>
> *Rabin yā ṭabībī yā walad al-ḥalāl / bilād al-bu wal-jadd / fīhā nadkū l-watad / ḥubūth rābā bījihad / mā nḥfū min ḥadd.*

The ballad reflects the Moroccan's liminality in the Israeli masculinity discourse by switching from assimilating values from the two contradictory approaches to a response worthy of the military

victory. Accordingly, Sliman shuttles between marianismo, expressed in helplessness and fear as the war looms and the anti-war jubilation that ensued when it ended – and machismo, which gloats over the Arabs' loss as if compensating for generations of male inferiority under Muslim masculinity:

> You soothed my sorrow / and my mind / days and nights…with [God's] mercies…Ultimately there is nothing to rely on / neither a kit nor a cannon / neither soldiers nor home / for months and years…we are trying peacefully…the heart is wounded…Now I feel relief…
>
> *Sakant lī hawālī / wikhāṭirī w-bālī / nahār w-layālī / wa-ʿalayk kanbārī…ḳalāṣ rāh mā bāqā nafaʿ / lā ʿiddah lā madfaʿ / lā ʿaskar lā maḥāl / li-ʿāmāt w-ash-shuhūr… w-ḥannā fīk naḥtāl / w-al-qalb kān maḍrūr / raḥīt wallāh*.
>
> The enemy is interested only in a pillow / he's interested only in the evening…He's like a lunatic / from morning to noon / you've left him helpless…The enemy has lost; he's exhausted / he fantasizes and threatens / He has no one for support / His head has sunk and is bent / Together with the heads of the other impure ones [*di haram*].
>
> *Ghayr al-mikhaddah w-al-jamʿ / wa-ʿaṭāh li-qaṣār / min ṣubḥiyā li-ẓuhr ḳallaytū maʿḥūr / al-ʿadū ḳasar wa-ithadd / yakhammam wa-yuhaddid / wa-lā ʿālāmīn yusud / rāsu ṭāḥ wa-dall / maʿ rūyūs di haram.*

Sliman's dialectic approach to the late-1960s paradigm of Israeli masculinity, which correlate with Wasserfall's findings, is instructive, I suggest, of the Moroccans' response to the crisis of migration and the encounter with the hegemonic sabra masculinity and their place in the realm of liminal masculinity. In his inner masculine compromise between machismo and marianismo as he negotiates with the dominant sabra masculinity, the Moroccan, aware of his marginality, appears to choose to reach out to sabra ideas while continuing to keep them at arm's length. Accordingly, paradoxically and sophisticatedly, Sliman's ballad expresses agency in the Moroccan immigrant's male resistance in neither an aggressive response nor in defiance of the machismo of sabra secularism but in demonstrating vulnerability and emphasizing the religious tenet of fate beyond one's control. Thus, Sliman challenges the sabra mindset and invites immigrants to define their male identity and invest it with meaning and value.

10 Conclusions

The concept of competing hegemonic masculinities challenges cultural constructions of manhood as male migrants confront hegemony, build a community and social network, and reshape their masculinity by rewriting a masculine narrative and performing masculine compromise. Moroccans who faced social marginalization, dehumanization and feminization, French modernization, Zionist ideology, and deteriorating relations between Muslims and Jews powered a dramatic shift of masculine consciousness toward national auto-emancipation and assertiveness in resisting socio-political marginalization.

The Moroccan Jews who flocked to Israel became identified with marginality and social deviance soon after arrival. Thus they had to re-masculinize themselves in the Zionist melting pot and join the nation-building project while adopting the values of emotional restraint, physical strength, secularism, anti-diasporism, and patriotism that characterized the sabras who enjoyed hegemony in Israeli masculinity. The setting of the Scene and Sliman's ballads on the social and cultural fringes of 1950s Israel offered a platform for a change in this construct, and the dialectic and hybrid Moroccan masculinity took up the challenge.

Sliman, a key figure in the Scene, avoided both the toxic atmosphere in the fringe clubs where he performed and the sabra masculinity. Consequently, his ballads promoted collective agency, ways to cope with the immigration crisis, a sense of self-worth, and ideological re-masculinization. The ballads and their popularity reflected the duality of Moroccan masculinity by simultaneously criticizing and empathizing with sabra masculinity in several ways. First, they challenged the sabra regime of restraint of emotions and public display of weakness and pain. Using humour and ridicule, they provided emotional ventilation, emotional buoyancy, agency, and a sense of self-worth. Second, they criticized the host society's integration policies and attitudes towards Moroccans by romanticizing Morocco, using sarcasm, and emphasizing French symbolic capital to challenge taboo issues in Israeli society and encourage feelings of superiority as compensation for the blows the Moroccans had sustained – while also identifying with Israel and urging listeners to integrate into its society and identify with the Zionist idea. Sliman's constructive attitude also gave immigrants a platform on which they could accomplish this by making a masculine compromise in negotiations with the hegemonic sabra masculinity and revising their masculinity in a way that combined seemingly contradictory masculine ideals.

The liminal masculinity model that the Moroccan immigrants developed, reflected in Sliman's ballads, rested in the centre of

the behavioural-ideological spectrum between marianismo and machismo. Thus, in negotiating with hegemonic masculinity, it offered a selective choice between outreach to the popular secular sabra idea and the unpopular religious-marianistic idea that attributed Israeli success to God. The hybrid masculine ideology that the Moroccans developed was unique mainly in two senses: its avoidance of forceful and defiant resistance to the hegemonic masculinity along with candid disclosure of vulnerability and weakness, and its selective choice of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinity patterns in formulating their masculine ideology. The model highlighted here offers a new way to analyze Israel's encounter with MENA immigrants and the adjustment strategies that the latter adopted. Belying those who see them as helpless victims of Israeli policy, the immigrants showed resilience and developed practices that helped them to create communal symbolic capital and integrate into Israeli society.

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Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities
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The Construction of Non-Ashkenazi Homosexual Masculinity in Israel

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Abstract This chapter explores the construction of non-Ashkenazi homosexual masculinity in Israel, focusing on first- and second-generation immigrants from MENA countries. Divided into two cohorts based on their exposure to the politicized gay and Mizrahi discourses of the 1970s, the analysis draws on oral testimonies, literary texts, and artistic works. It traces how these cohorts navigated their masculinity within intersecting gay and Mizrahi discourses, highlighting both continuities and differences between them.

Keywords Mizrahi masculinity. Gay identity. Homosexuality in Israel. Queer Mizrahim. Jewish masculinities.

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1 Introduction

Scholarship on Jewish masculinity has focused primarily on European and Ashkenazi contexts, from Mosse's foundational work (1985) to more recent studies by Boyarin (1998), Baader, Gillerman, and Lerner (2012), Nordheimer Nur (2014), Boord (2017), and Grinberg (2024). Homosexuality and homoeroticism figure prominently in these accounts as key sites for analysing Jewish gender and identity (e.g., Mosse, Boyarin, and Nordheimer Nur, as well as Kraß, Sluhovsky, Yonay 2022). By contrast, the histories of Jewish men from Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) backgrounds have received little scholarly attention, and their same-sex sexualities remain almost entirely absent from the literature. This chapter seeks to address this gap by examining how first- and second-generation immigrants from MENA countries in Israel constructed non-Ashkenazi homosexual masculinities, and how their self-understandings were shaped in relation to both gay and Mizrahi discourses.

This chapter examines Israeli Jewish men of MENA origin who engaged in sexual or romantic attraction to, and relationships with, other men (for short, we will use the acronym MENA MSM). These are biographical facts. We differentiate between these lived experiences and two transformative discourses that emerged in Israel in the 1970s and gradually gained more momentum in following decades: a politicized and empowered Mizrahi masculinity and an affirming, politicized discourse on homosexuality. The distinction between same-sex acts and gayness as a historically specific category of identity, culture, and politics is well established in queer historiography. While same-sex behaviours have existed across times and places, 'homosexuality' as a social category and an identity emerges only when such acts are named, socially classified, and situated within broader cultural and material conditions (Foucault 1978; D'Emilio 1983; Halperin 2002; Weeks 2010). 'Gay' gained traction in the American context as a political identification in the 1960s (Cervini 2020).

The differentiation between MENA ethnic origins and Mizrahi identity and politics follows a categorically similar logic. Following Chetrit (2004), we treat *Mizrahiyut* not primarily as an ethnic label but as a social–political identity that crystallized in Israel out of power relations between European and non-European Jews. In this view, Ashkenazi-Zionist socialization erased 'Arab-Jewish' identity, and recoded Jews from Arab and Muslim countries as *edot ha-mizrah*. This discursive shift was coupled with discrimination in housing, education, culture, media, and the economy, producing structural marginalization. Mizrahiyut thus emerged as a counter-hegemonic discourse that reclaimed identity against assimilationist erasures, articulated demands for recognition and redistribution, and enabled an autonomous Mizrahi political voice. Both of these discursive

categories – gay and Mizrahi – extend beyond political or cultural self-identification. They also function as social labels applied by society at large, at times reinforcing their political aims and at other times used in derogatory ways.

Building on Rosenfeld's (2003) framework, we identify the rise of the Mizrahi and gay discourses in Israel as a watershed moment. Drawing on interviews she conducted, Rosenfeld distinguished cohorts of gays and lesbians according to the stage of life at which they first encountered affirming discourses around their sexuality, which shaped how they perceived and expressed their sexuality and how they engaged politically. Similarly, we argue that the politicized gay and Mizrahi discourses shaped two distinct cohorts of men, depending on the stage in life at which they encountered them. We emphasize how their styles of masculinity, sexual desire, self-understanding, and self-expression varied according to these encounters and to the tensions between the two discourses. In doing so, we offer a critical perspective on Jewish masculinity at the intersection of immigration, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

We begin this chapter by examining the cohort of men who shaped their identities before the emergence of the politicizing discourses of the 1970s. Key sources for this analysis include Jehoeda Sofer's (1992) brief reports, based on a series of non-academic interviews he conducted in the 1970s, as well as the study of gay experiences by Yuval Yonay, one of the authors of this chapter. Yonay interviewed several dozen gay men born between 1924 and the late 1940s, focusing on the development of their sexual identities and life experiences. These interviews began in 2001 and are ongoing. Most of the interviewees were Ashkenazi, reflecting both the demographics of those consciously identifying as gay during this period and research biases related to the centrality of Ashkenazi gay activists in connecting subjects for the research. For the purposes of this chapter, we draw on five interviews with men of MENA backgrounds conducted between 2001 and 2003, two additional interviews with MENA men from 2018, and several interviews with Ashkenazi men who recounted experiences involving MENA men.

Next, we turn our attention to the cohort of men who shaped their identities in the wake of the emergence of politicized Mizrahi and gay masculinities. Drawing on literary texts and artistic works created by MENA MSM, as well as interviews with such individuals featured in the media, we identify and describe several strategies used to construct a gay Mizrahi masculinity – or, for some, a non-heterosexual, non-Ashkenazi masculinity.

Note that this chapter is not intended as a systematic study of masculinities among MENA MSM. Rather, it draws on a diverse range of sources – activists' reports, academic interviews, literary and artistic works, and mass media representations – to outline a possible line of inquiry and to offer preliminary reflections on a

subject that has received little scholarly attention to date. The types of sources used, and the relatively small number of informants and artists included, inevitably bias the study toward men willing to be interviewed about their sexual experiences and identities, as well as toward writers and artists. As a result, the self-understandings and expressions presented here cannot be taken to represent the experiences of MENA MSM as a whole, and may not even reflect the majority. Nevertheless, we contend that even within these limits, the findings are valuable for illustrating cultural and political formulations at the intersection of marginal ethnic, gender, and sexual experiences, and for demonstrating the impact of politicized and affirming discourses on these formulations.

1.1 The New Mizrahi Masculinity

Edward Said (1978) famously argued that the West depicted the Orient as feminine and penetrable – a perspective that also found expression in Zionism, which portrayed non-Ashkenazi Jews in feminized roles. Raz Yosef (2004) claims that under the Ashkenazi Zionist hegemony, immigrant fathers from MENA countries, stripped of their cultural identity and economic stability upon immigration, were symbolically 'castrated,' unable to fulfil traditional patriarchal roles. These marginalized masculinities, using Raewyn Connell's (1995) term, were used to uphold Ashkenazi hegemonic masculinity.

In response, second-generation men sought to construct a new, empowered masculinity. Following the establishment of the Mizrahi protest movement The Black Panthers in Jerusalem in 1971, a new Mizrahi masculinity emerged, portraying Mizrahi men as potent, active, and masculine. Drawing inspiration from the American Black Panthers, the Israeli movement of the same name adopted a hyper-masculine and highly sexualized aesthetic characterized by clenched fists, long sideburns, and Afro hairstyles. The Panthers used their hyper-masculine image not only to challenge Ashkenazi dominance but also to critique the dependency and submissiveness they associated with their fathers' generation. They articulated their anger in both racial and sexual terms, associating passivity with subjugation and activity with resistance. For example, they described their marginalized status as being 'fucked-up and black' (*defuqim u-shehorim*), tying their class and racial oppression to sexual domination by the Ashkenazi establishment. This narrative framed Ashkenazi-Zionist oppression as a form of symbolic homosexual rape, positioning the Mizrahi man as a victim of humiliation and emasculation. By reclaiming an active, dominant heterosexual masculinity, the Panthers aimed to heal these wounds and reassert their place within the Israeli social hierarchy (Yosef 2004, 92-112).

Figure 1 The Black Panthers' hyper-masculine aesthetics, as shown on the cover of the movement's journal, ca. 1973. *The Black Panthers – Exhibition Catalogue*. Musrara – The Naggar Multidisciplinary School of Art and Society. 1999. Copyright of the Musrara collection at Musrara

While the Panthers garnered press coverage, Menachem Golan's 1973 hit film *Casablan* likely played a pivotal role in popularizing the image of the new Mizrahi man. The titular protagonist ("Casa" in short) is a Moroccan-born gang leader from Jaffa whose hyper-masculine appearance and demeanour mirror the Panthers' aesthetic, characterized by muscular physiques, Afro hairstyles, and a tough,

sexualized image. However, Yosef (2004, 98-103) argues that the film policed this new masculinity rather than celebrated it, framing Casa's masculinity as a problem that required reform through mimicry of Ashkenazi heteronormative ideals.

1.2 The New Gay Discourse

Alongside the transformations in Mizrahi masculinity, the 1970s marked a major shift in the history of homosexuality in Israel. In 1975, The Society for the Protection of Personal Rights (today known as The Association for LGBT Equality in Israel, or *Ha-Aguda*) was established by a group of men almost all of whom were Ashkenazi. Ha-Aguda created a gay collectivity, organized social events, and published a newsletter that connected gays and lesbians with each other and provided them with vital information. It lobbied for repealing Israel's anti-sodomy law and shifting public opinion on homosexuality, addressed police harassment, negotiated with military authorities to preclude discrimination in the IDF, and worked with the Ministry of Health to establish quasi-anonymous medical tests of STDs (Yonay, Shapira 2025). Many lesbians were active in the Aguda during its early years but due to dissatisfaction with male dominance created in 1978 their own organization, ALeF (acronym for "a Feminist Lesbian Association") and were active also in advancing the social and legal standing of lesbians and gays (Safran et al. 2016).

This activism paved the way for what Aeyal Gross (2001) termed the 'Gay Decade'. Beginning with the repeal of Israel's anti-sodomy law in 1988 and culminating in the mass pride parade in Tel Aviv of 1998, this period saw significant legal and political victories for the LGBT community, laying the groundwork for broader acceptance in the decades that followed (Yonay, Spivak 2016).

While the prominent activists in Ha-Aguda were Ashkenazi, MENA gays nonetheless played influential roles in creating spaces where the new affirming gay discourse could flourish and where individuals could develop a sense of self rooted in pride in their sexuality. By the early 1990s, figures such as Shim'on Shirazi, Ofer Nissim, and Dana International – two gay men from MENA backgrounds and a Yemenite transgender woman – were pivotal in establishing Israel's first gay clubs and party lines.

As demonstrated, the new discourses that emerged in the 1970s politicized and empowered marginalized masculinities. However, they also created a tension between Mizrahi masculinity – particularly its virile variety exemplified by the Black Panthers – and homosexual masculinity. Mizrahi masculinity was often associated with overt heterosexuality, while the activist circles of the gay community remained predominantly Ashkenazi.

2 The First Cohort

As outlined in the introduction, the 1970s marked a turning point in the politicization of Mizrahi and gay masculinities. Before these transformative discourses emerged, however, earlier generations of Jewish men from MENA countries navigated their identities in a vastly different social and cultural landscape. Some scholarship has explored these earlier contexts. Ben-Naeh (2005) examined male same-sex relations and related discourses among Ottoman Jews in the early modern period, showing that despite biblical prohibitions, same-sex relations were common in Ottoman Jewish society. Ilany (2017) conducted an exhaustive study of references to male-to-male sexuality during the Mandatory period, arguing that this practice was regarded by Ashkenazim as pervasive among Oriental men, Muslims and Jews alike. This claim aligns with Sofer's (1992) observations, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The following section, drawing primarily on oral testimonies, examines the experiences of a cohort of Jewish MENA MSM who came of age prior to immigration or in Israel before the emergence of politicized Mizrahi and gay discourses, highlighting how they understood and navigated their sexuality and masculinity.

2.1 Sexual Roles in Male-to-Male Sex

Jehoeda Sofer (1944-1992), an Iraqi-born Jew who lived in Israel for several years and then migrated to Amsterdam, conducted a series of non-academic interviews in the 1970s, documenting the sexual lives of Palestinian and MENA Jewish men who had sex with men. His summary of these interviews (Sofer 1992) provides us with a rare glimpse into the practices and views of that period, but unfortunately, the posthumously published article contains only snapshots of the full interviews. Sofer met these men in public parks in Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan, and Jerusalem that were used as cruising sites. Most of them did not identify as gay; many were married to women and most insisted on taking the penetrative role in sexual encounters. According to some interviewees, being penetrated was regarded as both a personal and national humiliation, particularly for Arab men penetrated by Jewish partners. This view indicates the mainstream meaning of masculinity among MENA (including Palestinian) men, which associated penetration with domination. In what follows we concentrate on the stories of those for whom male-to-male sex was an essential part of their sexuality.

Yitshaq was one of the immigrants from MENA countries Sofer encountered who seemed to have internalized the mainstream view associating penetration with masculinity. He was born in Iraq and

immigrated to Israel in 1950 at the age of 16, living within a mostly Iraqi community. Yitshaq had been sexually sought after by men since childhood, and he performed the receiving role, which became part of his subjectivity. Accepting the mainstream view, he had a binary view of sexuality, seeing men as exclusively penetrative ('men') or exclusively receptive ('women'). When he travelled to Europe and visited gay spaces, he found the men there too feminine and struggled to distinguish between the 'men' and 'women'. Yitshaq recounted a sexual encounter with a European man, expressing astonishment at the affection shown towards him. In contrast, he found that sexual encounters in Israel's cruising grounds were more utilitarian. Although he liked the affection, he saw it as unmanly (1992, 106-7).

Another man whose sexual identity was related to his pleasure as the penetrated partner in male same-sex sex was Dani, a Yemenite from a Yemenite neighbourhood in the Tel Aviv region. Since he was 14, Dani had performed the receiving role with many men, presumably not gay, in his neighbourhood. "At 25 he finally met an Ashkenazi teacher […] with whom he lived for three years as housewife both in bed and in the kitchen" (1992, 116). Unlike Yitshaq, however, Dani changed his practices and perceptions after moving to Berlin. There he observed that, "no clear separation existed between men who fuck and men who get fucked" (115-17).

The first stories involved 'passive' men from MENA backgrounds who associated masculinity with penetration. What about MENA men who performed the 'active' role? According to Yitshaq and Dani, there were many men in their environment (in Baghdad and in Dani's Yemenite neighbourhood) who would 'exploit' them sexually without considering themselves gay. Sofer was less likely to be able to find and interview such men. However, a few of the men who preferred the penetrating role, including married ones, were more attracted to men than to women and would regularly seek sex in cruising areas and achieving sexual satisfaction with their wives.

Shaul, an Iraqi Jew, viewed himself as a 'real man'. He was "big, masculine, well hung, and very popular among males who wanted to get fucked" (1992, 111). He was often seen in or near the cruising park with his wife and two kids. He declared that he was not 'like that' but obviously socialized with "fair, effeminate men, whom he addressed in the feminine" (111). Shaul emphasized his dominance by not allowing his sexual partners to reach orgasm, especially not before him, and refused to touch their genitalia. Apparently, he felt that sexually satisfying his partners would hurt his masculinity.

Eli, an Ashkenazi gay man, told Sofer about an 'active' Moroccan man he met in a cruising park. According to Eli, that man came to the place to look for a female prostitute when his wife was hospitalized. However, realizing that it would cost him too much to bring her home, he decided to try a sexual relationship with a man, a practice he

had heard about from two friends. Unlike the way Shaul treated his effeminate partners, Eli's partner "treated him lovingly and caringly" (1992, 112), and they met several times until the partner's wife returned home. A year later, he met the Moroccan man again in the cruising park. Apparently, he was not willing to give up the pleasure of male-to-male sex.

Moshe, another MENA Jew, shared with Sofer his experience with Ibrahim, a Christian Palestinian man from Shefa'amr (Hebrew: Shfar'am) who, as an owner of a building supply shop, belonged to a more affluent class. Moshe identified as a 'bottom' but defied the stereotype with his masculine appearance. He told Sofer that typically, sex with Palestinians or Mizrahim was short and utilitarian. However, his experience with Ibrahim differed: Ibrahim was affectionate and prolonged their encounters. The two maintained a relationship for five years, with Moshe visiting Ibrahim in Shefa'amr and meeting his wife, son, and friends (1992, 108-9). While Yitshaq's story suggests a dichotomy between the Middle East, where same-sex acts were pragmatic and binary, and Europe, where roles were more fluid and affection between men was acceptable, Moshe's story indicates that class might also play a role, with more affluent and highly educated Middle Eastern men being more willing to engage in affectionate and long-term relationships.

Moshe was not the only MENA Jew to describe sexual encounters with Arab men. Yosef, an Iraqi Jew who immigrated to Israel in the early 1950s, also had frequent relationships with Arabs. A singer of classical Arabic music, Yosef was popular among both Iraqi Jews and Palestinians. After his performances, men from these communities would often approach him, and he, being in a position of choice, would select the most masculine and well-endowed partners. When performing in Palestinian villages, Yosef often spent the night there and engaged in multiple sexual encounters with Arab men. He described this experience as empowering, as he could choose his partners and was treated with respect. Interestingly, the Palestinian men made no effort to hide what had occurred and continued to treat Yosef respectfully in public the following morning (1992, 107-8).

Yosef's story provides a curious connection to the interviews that Yonay conducted decades later. One of his interviewees, Shlomo, shared a strikingly similar account about his friend Yossi.[1] Yossi (a common nickname for Yosef), also a musician born in Baghdad, performed in Arab communities in private homes. While Shlomo was more discreet in describing sexual encounters, it is clear that Yossi also engaged in sexual relations with men following his performances

1 For a more detailed discussion of this interview, see Yonay 2022.

(interview by Yuval Yonay, 24 March 2001). It seems very likely that Sofer's Yosef and Yossi are the same person.

Shlomo, born in Baghdad and immigrating to Israel at the age of 13, was never attracted to women and never considered pursuing a heterosexual relationship. With men, however, he assumed the 'active' role exclusively. His friendship with Yossi began with a sexual encounter, as Yossi played the receptive role exclusively. After one or two such encounters, their relationship became platonic, but they remained close friends for years. Together, they frequented cruising spots across Israel, East Jerusalem, and even Egypt, choosing partners based on their preferences. The following excerpt from the interview with Shlomo demonstrates the way Shlomo thinks about sex:

> Q: Concerning Arab partners, did you meet some who were willing to perform the passive role?
> Shlomo: But of course! Many Arabs want it, of course, oral [sex] and passive [role]. I had a friend [Yossi] who died recently of AIDS, and we would go to the *hammam* in Jerusalem, on Yehezkel Street [a hammam which serves the general public] and we had a lot of encounters. There were two totally passive men there. [Q: Jerusalemite Arabs?] […] Yes, we met them and he [Yossi] had an apartment there. […] It was a time of innocence; no violence, nothing. He had an apartment, and we would use it a lot, really a lot. […] [Q: Was Yossi also in the active role?] He was passive, wholly passive. […] We would go to Jerusalem together, enter [the hammam], and each one of us would pick up his [partner]. Sometimes we picked up two friends who came together and we liked them both. We would take them to [Yossi's] apartment and slept there. Once one of them and he asked me "don't tell my friend what I did to you"; It was oral sex or something similar. [Q: Active Arab guys were willing to suck?] No; active ones would not; they would even don't touch you. But they were not for me. I sent them to Yossi. I'd sort them out, If [the guy] would be willing to be in the passive role, please do! I was very fussy about these issues. Often I passed [a guy] to Yossi. If he was active and did not want [to be in the passive role]. "Please go to him". (interview by Yuval Yonay, 24 March 2001)

Yossi occasionally requested Shlomo not to allow a receptive partner to reach orgasm, so that that partner would remain sexually aroused and assume the 'active' role with Yossi. It is evident in Shlomo's story the centrality of sexual roles for his and Yossi's self-images but the distinction between them did not hurt their close friendship. We can learn from Shlomo that sexual roles were also important for many of their sex partners, Jews and Arabs alike, but it seems that some

partners were willing to be in the passive role as long as it remained a secret.

These details in Shlomo's long interview demonstrate that his exclusive preference for the penetrative role was not connected, in his perception, with dominance and superiority over those men who played the receptive role. Yossi had been his closest friend, and at the time of the interview, he still grieved Yossi's death from AIDS. It was also evident from his story that he respected his sexual partners. Indeed, although he was not interested in long-term relationships, his pleasure was more than sexual. This is quite obvious from the few long-standing relationships on which we will elaborate in the next section.

This section examined male same-sex relationships among Jewish MENA men whose masculinity took shape before the 1970s. For many in this cohort, attraction to men was not the defining aspect of their masculine identity. Instead, assuming the penetrative role in sex (regardless of the gender of the penetrated party) and adhering to traditional gender roles were seen as central components of masculine behaviour. This pattern is well attested across Arab and Islamic histories and societies, and it is likely that many men in this cohort were acquainted with it before immigrating to Israel.

Khaled El-Rouayheb (2005) showed that, unlike modern Western societies where sexual identity is determined mainly by the gender of the object of desire, in Arabic-speaking regions of the Ottoman Empire until the nineteenth century the focus was on the sexual role. In these societies, men could have sex with different kinds of partners without it determining their identity, as long as they maintained the penetrative role. Moreover, homoerotic admiration, often tied to social hierarchies (such as relationships between men and beardless boys, known in Arabic as *murd*), was common and different from the modern Western expectation of egalitarian homosexual relationships.

Modern Western concepts of homosexuality, formulated in late-nineteenth-century Europe and the U.S., gradually reshaped Arab-Islamic understandings of same-sex desire. Dror Ze'evi (2006) showed how Ottoman discourses in medicine, law, mysticism, and other fields became less open and more heteronormative under Western influence. Joseph Massad (2007) similarly argued that Arab writers, adopting Western notions of sexuality, distanced themselves from classical Arabic texts that had openly depicted male-to-male desire, recasting such depictions as signs of cultural decline. Still, the interviewees cited in this section, along with the testimonies discussed by Sofer, suggest that although literary, legal, and religious discourses began to shift in the nineteenth century, it is unclear how deeply these changes penetrated everyday life in MENA countries, which may have continued to adhere to older models of male sexuality, centred on penetrative roles and social hierarchy.

2.2 Erotic Relationships Between Non-Gay Married MENA Jews and Older Men

When Shlomo was about 35 years old, he met a younger Yemenite man who was only 17 and a half at the time. Thirty-one years later, the Yemenite was married with four children, but he still visited Shlomo two or three times a week. Shlomo was a good friend of the whole family and helped the younger man's wife when she needed something, such as a ride. According to Shlomo, the Yemenite partner avowed that he would have divorced his wife had she demanded sexual contact; his sexual energies were channelled exclusively toward Shlomo. However, when the interviewer expressed interest in speaking with the Yemenite man, Shlomo explained that it was impossible because the man denied being gay. Given Shlomo's exclusive adoption of the 'active' role, it is evident that his partner assumed the 'passive' role. Nevertheless, he maintained his masculine position within the family and resisted the gay identity that Shlomo himself had long accepted. Surprisingly, though, Shlomo admitted that for this Yemenite partner, he occasionally assumed the 'passive' role as well, explaining that his love had overcome him and he was willing to do things that his partner asked (interview by Yuval Yonay, 24 March 2001).

While his relationship with the Yemenite man continued, Shlomo fell in love – although he did not use the expression, there is no other way to describe the emotion he conveyed – with a manual worker from Gaza whom he met in 1982. At the time of the interview, more than two years into the Second Intifada, their meetings were more limited, but they remained attached. When the Gazan married, as his family expected him to do, Shlomo was deeply depressed, even though he was reassured that the marriage did not mean the man had stopped loving him. This statement turned out to be true. The relationship 'survived' the marriage, and Shlomo played a significant role in helping his lover's wife obtain reproductive treatment in Israel. Their son was named after Shlomo (2001).

Several interviewees mentioned this pattern of deep and long-lasting relationships between an older man (Ashkenazi or Mizrahi) and a much younger MENA man who was married and had a family. Arye and Mordechai, long-time Ashkenazi partners from Jerusalem, recounted a few such cases among their friends (interview by Yuval Yonay, 10 July 2001). For example, when they spoke about Stefan, whose small apartment served as a 'community centre' for local gays, they also shared the following:

> [Arye:] He was a very nice person. He was lucky; [name] fell in love with him […] and took care of him until his last day. [Mordechai:] They had sex occasionally, but--- [Arye:] I don't believe it; at the end, certainly not. […] That Yemenite was married with five

> kids and yet he took care of him--- I wish many parents to be so kindly taken care of as he was. (2001)

When asked to put the interviewer in touch with the Yemenite, Arye answered: "He is not gay. He will beat you if you say that he is gay". Similar to Shlomo's Yemenite lover, Stefan's lover also did not identify as gay, and therefore would not participate in a study about gays.

In other cases, the older and younger men lived together, as in this story:

> [Arye:] We know a couple in Tel Aviv. He was an educated European man, a nice person, and he 'adopted' [as a spouse] a boy, a nice Moroccan fellow […] 50 years apart, and they were together until the [older man] died, and there was mutual understanding. (2001)

Interviewing the younger MENA partners of older gay men, who were married and were fathers was not possible, but two gay interviewees, who were interviewed by Yonay, were also attracted to older men and spoke freely about their desires. One of them, Doron, was born in Morocco in 1946 and immigrated to Israel as a teenager (interview by Yuval Yonay, 3 May 2018). His first sexual experience occurred at the age of 17 when a man about 50 years old made a pass at him. They began dating for about a year until Doron was conscripted into the army. Although they engaged in oral sex, Doron recalls that their relationship was mostly social, consisting of activities like going to the movies together. He was not in love but appreciated the company of the man, who was three times his age.

Doron considered the next affair his first serious relationship. He was 23 years old when he met Nikola, a Holocaust survivor from Yugoslavia, who was 64 at the time. Doron did not spend much time reflecting on his attraction to older men. He had a robust relationship with Nikola that lasted 24 years until Tibor's death at the age of 88. "We travelled abroad, we enjoyed life, we ate. He was brilliant; he knew 10, 12 languages", Doron said, sharing few additional details about his partner. Only a few years before Nikola's death did he meet Doron's mother. This occurred because Doron underwent serious surgery and needed help from both his mother and Nikola. After Nikola passed away, Doron's mother remarked that he was now free to marry a woman. Doron rebuked her, asking, "Do you want to make me ill?".

A year later, when Doron was 48, he met his second partner, Shmuel, an 80-year-old widower whom he remembered from a casual encounter at a cruising area on Rothschild Avenue 30 years earlier. This time, the relationship was quite open to both families, and they lived happily until Shmuel died in 2006, coincidentally on the same

date as Nikola. Again, Doron did not analyze his attraction to older men. He jokingly recounted several instances in which he rejected younger suitors, telling them to try again when they reached old age.

In this section, we examined enduring relationships between older gay men and younger men from MENA backgrounds, many of whom were married with families. As shown, younger partners often avoided identifying as gay, maintaining traditional roles within their households while engaging in intimate and sometimes long-term relationships with older men. This is an empirical finding. We looked at our interviews for stories related to MENA men and came up with these cases. We cannot tell how common such relationships were, but we should add that with many more interviews with Ashkenazi men we did not hear anything similar to the pattern described in this section. All we can do, therefore, is to open the question whether some features in the construction of gender and sexuality in MENA societies facilitated this pattern. It is admittedly a very speculative conclusion that we hope future researchers would be able to examine more thoroughly. In the next section, we will turn to the cohort of men whose masculinity developed during and after the transformative period of the 1970s.

3 The Second Cohort

The second part of this chapter examines gay and bisexual men born in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily second-generation descendants of Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. This cohort's masculine identity formed during a period when politicized and affirming Mizrahi and gay (and, for some, queer) discourses were already available among the general public. We argue that these discourses influenced the development and expression of their masculinity, as reflected in testimonies, media representations, and artistic works created by this cohort. However, not all men responded uniformly to the Mizrahi discourse, the gay discourse, or their intersection. The following sections explore three strategies that this cohort used in navigating and engaging with these discourses to shape their masculinity: fostering male-to-male intimacy without adopting identity labels; reclaiming stereotypical depictions of Mizrahi women to construct a queer, feminine Mizrahi masculinity; and forging a Mizrahi or Levantine queer identity that challenged hegemonic Zionist ideals.

3.1 The First Strategy: Non-Gay Same-Sex Sex and Intimacy

The first strategy reflects a continuation of the patterns observed in the previously discussed cohort. Men employing this approach refrained from identifying as gay or bisexual, despite engaging in sexual, erotic, or even romantic relationships with other men. This pattern aligns with the experiences of the first cohort. Many did not identify as gay and sometimes were described as actively rejecting the label. Additionally, elements characteristic of the first cohort's masculinity – such as the dichotomous perception of sexual roles – are also evident in the men adopting this strategy, as we will demonstrate shortly.

Alongside these continuities, there appears to be the adoption of the hyper-masculinity associated with the Black Panthers, and with works like *Casablan*, together with a reliance on stereotypes often attributed to Mizrahi men – such as the hyper-sexualized man who assumes the penetrative sexual role. Another stereotype, described by Yosef (2004, 142-71) as emerging in the 1980s and 1990s yet rooted in older Orientalist imagery and fantasies, is that of the effeminate Mizrahi boy, who usually occupies the receptive role. As we will see, this stereotype also informs the repertoire of images employed in this strategy to construct a non-gay homoerotic masculinity.

An example of the masculine variant of this strategy can be found in Dani Kaplan's (1999) research on masculinity and sexuality among gay Israeli combat soldiers in the 1980s. Kaplan illustrates how different military units fostered distinct cultures aligned with specific ethnic groups in Israel. The Golani infantry brigade, for instance, was associated with the working class and the strong presence of Mizrahi young men (1999, 69). A gay Mizrahi interviewee described his platoon as filled with homoerotic tension, sometimes explicitly expressed – such as direct propositions for sex (69-74). In contrast, many gay interviewees from other units reported much more clandestine same-sex encounters. The men in Golani, according to Kaplan, did not identify as gay. Rather, the interactions between them were seen as part of the *Sahbakiya*, the intimate camaraderie of warriors isolated from home and their girlfriends – a camaraderie that included physical intimacy that might not have been approved in other contexts and that in some cases led to male-to-male sex or propositions thereof (214-18).

Jane Ward (2015) described a sexual culture of American white men who engaged in various sexual acts with other men while avoiding or rejecting gay or bisexual identity. She argued that sexual contact between straight white men, often in fraternities at colleges and universities, was not antithetical to their heterosexuality. Instead, when performed "the 'right' way – when they make a show of enduring it, imposing it, and repudiating it – doing so function[ed]

to bolster not only their heterosexuality, but also their masculinity" (2015, 5).

Akin to fraternities, the army is a homosocial space of social and cultural centrality. The public nature of many acts that Kaplan's interviewees described – from the friendly touch of one another's bodies, through public nudity to very explicit, yet perhaps playful, propositions of sex – reinforces the participants' heterosexuality and masculinity. As Kaplan (1999) notes: "If the entire military service is a chain of masculinity tests, homosexual relations can become a part of it as well, if one knows how to present it 'the right way'" (216). This is true in all combat units. However, in Golani, a unit associated with working-class Mizrahim, references to sex, including male-to-male sex, were more explicit, and there was less pressure to hide the feelings of attachment between the men. In other units, 'too much' emotional or physical attachment between two men might be classified as 'truly gay'. Therefore, soldiers might be more guarded in playing with what are considered homosexual signals and patterns.

'Gayness,' of course, is not merely a matter of sexual preference but also encompasses a mode of self-expression, cultural affiliation, and aesthetic identification. Kaplan's testimonies suggest that in the post-1970s Mizrahi discourse 'gayness' was coded as Ashkenazi. Consequently, male-to-male intimacy, when stripped of a gay agenda, aesthetics, and feminine gender expression, and performed by non-Ashkenazim, could be interpreted as 'not gay'. This variant of masculinity and sexuality is also represented in literature. Sami Berdugo, a gay Israeli author born in 1970 to parents of Moroccan descent, explores these themes in his short story *Like Us, Lovers*, which depicts a sexual and romantic relationship between two men (Berdugo 2011a). The narrator is an unemployed man in an unhappy marriage, while the other man, Rafi Buskila, is a divorced single father. Though also financially strained, Buskila embodies symbols of Mizrahi masculinity: dark skin, shaved black hair, coffee brewed on the stove, soccer coaching, and military reserve service.

This is not a coming-out story, nor one of self-discovery; the men do not see themselves as gay. Instead, their relationship becomes a space to express their masculinity. In this space, they transcend their struggles with financial hardship and complex relationships with women, instead finding a realm of generosity, passion, and potency. In this sense, the men in *Like Us, Lovers* operate within a logic not dissimilar from the *Sahbakiya* – where sexual and emotional connections between men (in their case – actual sex and romance, which were not part of the *Sahbakiya*) serve as a means to reaffirm their masculinity in the face of the emasculating (in their experience) socio-economic and familial contexts in which they are set.

Another of Berdugo's short stories, titled *Sissy* (2011b), portrays an effeminate Mizrahi teenager from a small town who walks the

streets of a nearby city on his way to visit his ailing father. He has an Ashkenazi appearance, with curly blond hair, green eyes, and a hairless body, but in his veins runs "the blood of a hot Mizrahi" (2011b, 214). Along the way, he meets and is attracted to masculine, hairy, and tough Mizrahi youths and men, who are "brown and strong because of their temperamental character and dark genes" (212). They are described in a manner that intertwines their Mizrahi appearance, their allure in the narrator's eyes, and their masculinity:

> The voices coming out of the mouths of men and youths impress me. […] Someone already caught me red-handed about a year ago, when I asked some country stranger to talk, and later I also wanted him to lift his arm and let me peek at the bursting hair of his armpit, because a sissy like me […] is powerless in the face of temptation. (2011b, 209-10)

In one scene, he observes "three such Mizrahi men. They act as if to threaten, wearing black jeans and button shirts. Their hands attract me like delight [*ta'anug* in Hebrew], and my gaze moves over their pointy faces that perfectly suit men like these" (2011b, 210).

The narrator's unconventional gender expression draws attention from people around him, much of it is seemingly sexual: "The young men mark [him] and wait to see [him] naked" because "the blond does something that would arouse anyone" (2011b, 210). However, being a sissy is also portrayed as an abnormal excess, which in several scenes leads to violent reactions:

> I see two tall men walking. […] The swarthy, thin one looks at me and blows smoke out of his mouth, and it seems to me he gestures toward me with a sign of serious beatings. […] And here I am, unable to stop my heart from beating next to these Mizrahi men, and one of them puts another cigarette in his mouth and says something to the other guy. Both of them start walking in my direction – it can't be otherwise – and soon they will yell, "Where did this sissy come from?". (2011b, 219-20)

Berdugo clearly leans into both stereotypes described earlier – namely the hyper-masculine Mizrahi man and the delicate Mizrahi boy – and uses them to portray homoerotic tension that mirrors heterosexual attraction, where the effeminate youth substitutes for a woman – all without applying the label "gay".

Tom Salama adopts a similar approach in his memoir, *The Boy Who Thought He's A Fat Woman* (2022). Born in 1982 and raised by a single mother in Kiryat Ata, Salama left home at 16 and moved to Tel Aviv. The narrator of the memoir is an effeminate, overweight gay boy who develops a complicated relationship with a classmate,

the domineering and macho Maor – both of whom are of MENA descent. Eventually, their relationship turns sexual, characterized by clear power dynamics but also tinged with mutual affection. For the narrator, this experience fulfils his gay fantasies. Maor, however, does not identify as gay or bisexual. He boasts about his sexual relationships with girls and is portrayed as stereotypically hypermasculine. Maor and the narrator never openly discuss their sexual relationship. The closest Maor comes to expressing his attraction to the narrator is through his fantasies of having sex with fat girls, indirectly emphasizing the narrator's weight and femininity through an unspoken association. The power dynamics between the two extend to their sexual relationship, where Maor takes pleasure in his dominant role (2022, 123-8).

The narrators in *Sissy* and Salama's memoir present a different subjectivity compared to the youths and men to whom they are attracted. Their objects of desire are embodiments of hypermasculinity – who are on the 'down low' if attracted to other men at all – and the sexual tension is framed along the lines of a traditional heterosexual couple. In other words, it unfolds between a masculine man or teen and a feminine teen, constructed as a girl or a sissy (compare to Yitshaq's characterization of men who occupied the penetrated role as 'women'). However, the narrators themselves might employ a strategy closer to the one outlined in the next segment in formulating their effeminate masculine identity and expression.

To conclude, this strategy exemplifies the adoption of a Mizrahi identity while rejecting a gay discourse. By refraining from aligning with gay identity, it frames male-to-male intimacies as compatible with, or reinforcing, traditional masculine ideals.

3.2 The Second Strategy: *Forach*

The second strategy in forging a non-Ashkenazi gay masculinity is centred on creating a feminine, carefree Mizrahi gay identity that subverts both the macho norms of Mizrahi masculinity and the Ashkenormative dominance within Israel's gay culture.[2] We term this strategy *Forach*, which is a key term in *Ochtshit*, a Hebrew gay slang. It embodies a light-hearted and cheeky ethos characterized by overtly feminine, campy, and flamboyant mannerisms. Previous research on *Ochtshit* (Levon 2010; Elias 2021; Brom 2022) highlights

2 Ashkenormativity is a colloquial term defined by the *Jewish English Lexicon* as "assuming Ashkenazi Jews and Jewishness as the default; excluding Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and other Jewish practices and histories from Jewish communal life" [*Jewish English Lexicon*, s.d.]. On the dominance of Ashkenazi culture in the Israeli society in general, see Sasson-Levy and Shoshana 2013.

its links to Mizrahi identities, both lexically (with words deriving from Jewish Arabic dialects) as well as socio-linguistically. The term *Forach* itself stems from *Freha*, a derogatory stereotype of a common, stupid, boorish Mizrahi woman.

Much has been written about this stereotype, its use in the repression of Mizrahi women in Israel, and its simulacral nature (see, for example, Naaman 2006; Evri 2008; Haruvi, Shabat Nadir 2015). While criticism of the Freha stereotype is significant, its reclamation in certain Mizrahi circles and among speakers of Ochtshit is equally compelling. The latter draw on linguistic indices associated with the Freha (among others) to construct a light-hearted, campy, and feminine gay persona. This persona leverages the cultural vocabulary of a Freha-inspired Mizrahi femininity to embody the ethos of Forach, thereby subverting hegemonic Israeli masculinity and its adoption by parts of the gay community (Brom 2022).

Contemporary Ochtshit lexicon has been influenced by characters played by actor Ilan Peled, born in 1969 to Jewish immigrants from Tripoli, Libya. Peled gained fame with his portrayal of Miri Pascal, a vulgar, larger-than-life Mizrahi female parking-enforcement officer. Later, he developed a similar character named Danit or Deniz, a Mizrahi wedding singer whose identity is underscored by her speech (Gafter 2019, 237-8) and occupation – a 'wedding singer' being a stereotype once used disparagingly against Mizrahi musicians. While a full analysis of Peled's linguistic style is beyond this chapter's scope (see Gafter 2019 and Brom 2022), his characters serve as more than mere parodies of Mizrahi women.[3] Their immense popularity in Israeli gay spaces and their centrality within contemporary Ochtshit style demonstrate the allure of the vulgar, larger-than-life, stereotypical Mizrahi woman for Israeli gay audiences. Peled's characters serve as cultural resources for those gays, who use Peled's linguistic mannerisms and expressions to craft their own empowering non-macho, overtly queer Mizrahi personas (Brom 2022).

Another highly popular cultural phenomenon in Israel's gay scene was *Arisa*, a line of gay Mizrahi parties founded in 2010 by Yotam Papo and Omer Tubi. Shortly after its creation, Uriel Yekutiel, a drag performer, joined the team and quickly became the face of Arisa. This party line achieved two significant milestones: it created an unapologetically Mizrahi gay space that attracted diverse crowds, including LGBT Mizrahim from small towns, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and Palestinians. This inclusivity was

3 Previous analyses of Peled's characters have highlighted their dual role in both reinforcing stereotypes of Mizrahi women as vulgar, grotesque, unintelligent, and uncultured, and simultaneously ridiculing Ashkenazi elites while reimagining the Mizrahi woman as an empowered cultural icon. See Ben Yehuda 2015 and Elias 2018.

partly due to Arisa's policy of eliminating door selection at the club entrance, allowing broader access. Additionally, Arisa collaborated with prominent Mizrahi music performers, overcoming barriers in a genre that was often seen as homophobic (Atwan 2015).

Arisa produced music videos featuring well-known Mizrahi hits, working with artists to create Mizrahi gay anthems. These videos, many of which went viral within the local LGBT community, starred Yekutiel in his drag persona. Born in 1988 to a Jewish family of Afghan descent, Yekutiel's gender-bending persona blends femininity with Mizrahi cultural symbols. He appears on stage with elaborate makeup and often in traditional female attire from various MENA communities or modern feminine clothing coded as Mizrahi. His look is further accentuated by an impressive moustache – a symbol of Mizrahi and Arab masculinity – that he pairs with both feminine and masculine roles. Many of the characters Yekutiel portrays are recognizable Israeli Mizrahi archetypes or stereotypes, like the Moroccan mother or the Breslever Hasid. Arisa, then, can be understood as a space for unapologetic Mizrahi gay expression, with Yekutiel embodying a carefree, playful, and feminine Mizrahi masculinity – much like Ilan Peled's characters.[4]

As a final example, we highlight the work of visual artist and animator Dotan Moreno, born in 1985 to a family of Egyptian descent. Moreno's art explores themes of Mizrahi masculinity – "a fragile, passive masculinity that appears tough on the outside but is soft on the inside" (Moreno 2018). Moreno's men feature emblematic elements of historic and contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi masculinities. He depicts Ottoman male figures in turbans, hairy-chested young men with moustaches, a black-haired man clad in a black Adidas tracksuit and white sneakers, and men in traditional homosocial spaces, such as synagogues. Yet, Moreno's men are never aggressive. They exude melancholy, introspection, and occasionally a touch of cheekiness. In one animation on his Instagram page, a man in Ottoman attire reveals a hairy buttock. In an installation at Ha'amakim Gallery, Moreno reimagines Goya's *The Straw Manikin* (1791), replacing the manikin with a Mizrahi man suspended mid-air, tossed by four Mizrahi women – a striking representation of passive masculinity.

Moreno also draws on the concept of Forach, using it as the title for a series of portraits of men painted in watercolour and ink, where colours flow freely across the surface. Many of the figures in Forach meet the viewer's gaze directly with tears in their eyes, hinting at

4 Like Peled, Arisa has also been analysed as simultaneously subverting hegemonic Israeli masculinity and creating a space for Mizrahi queer expression, while perpetuating misogynistic stereotypes of Mizrahi women (see Horesh 2013).

an emotional intensity beneath their tough exteriors. While not as overtly feminine or flamboyant as the personas seen in Arisa's video clips or among speakers of Ochtshit, Moreno subtly constructs a Mizrahi masculinity that challenges traditional straight Mizrahi machismo by embracing vulnerability and fluidity within masculine identities.

The Forach strategy emerges from these examples as one that embraces both Mizrahi and gay/queer affirming discourses. Unlike the first strategy, which draws on images of Mizrahi hyper-masculinity, Forach reclaims and reimagines cultural symbols traditionally tied to Mizrahi femininity to craft identities that are campy, flamboyant, and unapologetically queer. It challenges both the Ashkenazi dominance in Israeli gay culture and the hyper-masculine ideals of Mizrahi identity, instead celebrating vulnerability, playfulness, and gender fluidity.

Figure 2 Dotan Moreno, *Black Tears*. 2017. Water colours and ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist

3.3 The Third Strategy: A New Middle East

The third and final strategy, like the second, embraces both Mizrahi and gay/queer discourses, but in a distinctly different manner, as it uses them to critique Zionism or Ashkenormativity. Author Moshe Sakal offers a queer alternative to prevailing Zionist narratives, an alternative that is rooted in his family biography. Born in 1976 to a family of Damascene and Cairene descent, Sakal has spent much of his life outside Israel, mainly in Paris, and currently resides in Berlin with his husband. His literary work, encompassing six novels and a collection of short stories, is often imbued with semi-autobiographical details, with many of the works centred around gay men, writers, and Egyptian and Syrian immigrants to Israel.

In his analysis of Hebrew literature by authors of Jewish Egyptian descent, Dario Miccoli (2014) has written about Sakal's 2011 novel, *Yolanda*. The titular character is the narrator's grandmother, who was born in Cairo to a bourgeois family and immigrated to Israel shortly after the establishment of the state in 1948. The narrator, Momo, lives between Tel Aviv and Paris, where he pursues a degree in French. Momo's relationship with his grandmother, mirroring the author's with his, is thus spatially constructed between Paris, Cairo, and Israel. Temporally, Yolanda's memories are rooted in a Cairo that does not exist anymore. Her present in Israel is shadowed by her unaccomplished childhood dreams of going to the 'Promised Land' in Paris. At the same time, Momo lives in that Promised Land, but is caught up in a nostalgic fantasy of a multicultural Cairo through his grandmother's stories. Miccoli notes that both of them are living a diasporic existence and are rooted in a language – their familial idiolect of French – rather than a place.

This diasporic tendency permeates Sakal's entire oeuvre, potentially reflecting a gay sensibility to feelings of exclusion from the heteronormative majority or aligning with a queer politics that resists assimilation into that majority. However, while the creation of 'chosen families' outside the biological family is a recurring theme in queer history and fiction, Sakal situates queerness within the biological family itself. His novel *The Diamond Setter* (2018) is inspired by true events from the author's family. The plot centers on Tom, the male narrator, a writer who begins working at his great-uncle Menashe's jewellery shop in Tel Aviv. The narrative alternates between past and present, revealing a 1930s love triangle involving Menashe's parents and a Palestinian Muslim woman from Jaffa named Laila. In the present, Fareed, a young man from Damascus and Laila's grandson, crosses illegally into Israel, attempting to return a piece of a legendary diamond that his grandmother had given him to its rightful owner in Jaffa. Fareed becomes part of a second love triangle, all-male in this case, with the narrator and an Israeli soldier named Honi.

Through these intertwined stories, the novel explores queer love that spans generations and connects two families – one Jewish and one Muslim. As in *Yolanda*, the novel's treatment of space and time subverts the Zionist framing of Israel as a Promised Land. It reminds the reader that this region is also a site of Palestinian nostalgia and political aspirations of return, as well as Damascus being a part of Jewish history. This transgressive stance is epitomized by queer love – not only in the homoerotic sense experienced by Fareed, Tom, and Honi, but also in its challenge to monosexual ideals (through the love triangles) and, perhaps most importantly, in its defiance of national and religious boundaries.

Sakal's ethnic and gays identities translate into a political vision of a Middle East existing either before or beyond the nation-state framework, where diasporic communities sustain their cultures through language and family stories, and where national, ethnic, and religious borders are permeable to erotic ties with outsiders – a kind of Levantine Pax Erotica. The term 'Levantine' connects Sakal's work to that of Jacqueline Kahanoff, another Cairene Jewish writer and intellectual. Born in 1917, Kahanoff immigrated to Israel in 1954, where she encountered a society shaped by Zionism's rejection of the diasporic past. She reclaimed the pejorative term 'Levantinism', reframing it as a positive model for a pluralistic, hybrid society embracing diverse cultural identities. Her vision called for reviving the Levant as a cultural and geographic entity, bridging East and West and fostering coexistence. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Kahanoff broadened her Levantinism into a regional framework, proposing it as an alternative to imperialism and domination (Starr, Somekh 2011).

Sakal (2015) articulated his vision of Levantinism in an essay published in *Haaretz* at a moment when Mizrahi identity was being politically mobilized by the right wing, shortly after Miri Regev, the Mizrahi Minister of Culture from the Likud party, had proudly declared that she had never read Chekhov and preferred listening to Mizrahi music instead:

> The New Levantine gazes indifferently at the ongoing identity wars in the country. Those who believed the Levantine was a derivative or extension of the Mizrahi identity were mistaken. […] The ancestors of the New Levantine didn't travel in cattle cars across Europe, weren't smuggled to the land on immigrant ships, weren't expelled from Arab countries, nor sprayed with DDT and brought to transit camps. They arrived impoverished but proud. They didn't build the country, didn't fight, didn't kill, and didn't receive medals of valour. (Sakal 2015)

This formulation explicitly rejects the Zionist Ashkenormative narrative while simultaneously distancing itself from the mainstream political Mizrahi discourse that seeks recognition for Mizrahim as well for their contribution to the nation building project, offering instead an ethics of non-belonging.

As noted earlier, this perspective aligns closely with gay sensibilities and queer politics. Sakal (2015) draws the connection himself: "The New Levantine is a minority among the masses – whether *galuti*,[5] a woman, or gay – therefore he is weak, but therefore is also strong. All places are his. All times are his. […] He is neither 'Mizrah' nor 'Ashkenaz'.[6] He is a multitude of negations. He is a multitude of affirmations". Sakal's masculinity is therefore a queer one, rejecting both national and heteronormative formulations of hegemonic masculinity – whether those of the Ashkenazi pioneer or the Mizrahi Black Panther – and instead celebrating weakness and marginality.

4 Conclusion

This chapter explored the construction of non-Ashkenazi homosexual masculinity across two cohorts of men from MENA countries. The first cohort, navigating their identities prior to the 1970s, adhered to traditional gender roles, upheld a binary view of sexual roles where penetration expressed masculinity, and had male-to-male sex without adopting a gay identity. In contrast, the second cohort, shaped during and after the emergence of politicized Mizrahi and gay discourses in the 1970s, demonstrated a more diverse engagement with masculinity and sexuality. While some continued to emphasize traditional sexual roles and avoided adopting a gay identity, others actively subverted hegemonic norms. These subversions included crafting feminine masculinities through the reclamation of Mizrahi stereotypes and developing queer identities that challenged both Zionist and Ashkenormative ideals.

We hope this study helps fill gaps in the scholarship on Jewish homosexuality and Mizrahi masculinity. Beyond adding to our knowledge about a group historically marginalized in both Israeli society and academic discourse, this research also improves our understanding of the lasting impact of the sociopolitical transformations of the 1970s on political discourses, identities, and modes of self-expression in Israel over the past 50 years – a topic that remains under-researched.

5 *Galuti*, the Hebrew translation of diasporic, is considered pejorative in the Zionist ideology that glorifies the return of Jews to Eretz Israel and demeans Jewish life in the Diaspora, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi alike.

6 Sakal goes back to the geographical terms – Mizrah, the East, and Ashkenaz, the Medieval Hebrew name of Germany – from which the two social categories of Mizrahim and Ashkenazim were derived.

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Returning to Ben Hamo: Dror Mishani and the Demon of Israeli Literature

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Abstract This essay returns to Yehoshua Kenaz's famous belly dance scene in his novel *Infiltration* (1986), its incredible reception against the backdrop of ethnic shifts and ruptures in Israel, and especially the reading it received in Dror Mishani's remarkable and forgotten research on representations of Mizrahim in Israeli literature from 2006. Although I offer an in-depth interpretative reading of the dance scene, my main arguments concern the reception of secondary scholarly literature itself, in the long turbulent relationship between Israeli and Jewish Studies and its confrontation and suppression of racial frictions among Jews. The rupture concerns the relation between words and body; between the spirit and the flesh.

Keywords Israeli literature. Postcolonial Studies. Queer Studies. Decolonisation of Jewish Studies. Yehoshua Kenaz. Dror Mishani. Abdellatif Kechiche.

1 Introduction

In her seminal memoir on the days she spent in her ancestry lands in Africa, studying the routes of the transatlantic slave trade to the Americas, Saidiya Hartman mentions some of the behavioural habits of the Africans on board, two thirds of whom, according to a study from the 18th century, used to die just out of melancholy (Hartman

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2007, 252). Abductees who were sent to the New World to become slaves, lost any will to live on the ship and stopped eating, a danger also to the machinery of trade. Other than threats and physical abuse, one of the methods used to incite their appetite again was dancing: "Dr. Thomas Trotter […] advised dancing as a therapeutic measure against suicidal melancholy" (Hartman 2007, 252).

In what follows I return to one of the most famous scenes in Israeli literature, Rahamim Ben Hamo's oriental belly dance in Yehoshua Kenaz's *Hitganvut yechdim* (Infiltrating one after the other, 1986, later translated *Infiltration*, 2003), in order to shed some light on Mizrahi relations and perceptions, between body, matter and words. Kenaz's seminal novel pertains to racial or ethnic ruptures of Israeli society, and its reception with time became a narrative of confrontation and suppression on the domestic, intra Jewish colonial tensions. I will return to Dror Mishani's disconcerting study of Mizrahi representation, which was perhaps doomed to oblivion after marking the eighties as a fault line that haunts, like the demon, Israeli society, its media, high politics and literature right until today. If the Mizrahi haunts, if the Mizrahi man is a demon, it is only because he is there as displacement: for the effeminate European Jew, who fails the imperative of national resurrection.

2 Criticism and Its Reception

The thirty-year-old Dror Mishani published *Be-khol ha-'inyan ha-mizrahi yesh eize absurd* (In the whole Mizrahi affair, there is a certain absurdity) in 2006, the first monograph on Mizrahi literature in over twenty years. Only Lev Hakak preceded him, publishing two books on the matter during the 1980s that did not gain much attention (1981, 1985). Since then, only one book has come out that deals comprehensively with Mizrahi prose, authored by Yochai Oppenheimer, an Ashkenazi scholar at Tel Aviv University (2014). Oppenheimer's book did not receive a review beyond an essay I published in *Theory and Criticism*, where I survey the publication of four books that served a comprehensive and very timely overall look on Mizrahi literature (Ben Yehuda 2016): two monographs by Oppenheimer (this one and another on Mizrahi poetry; Oppenheimer 2012); and two by Ketzia Alon (two studies she published on Mizrahi poetry in 2011 and 2014). I wrote on Oppenheimer's intervention with relative enthusiasm because at that time (2014), any work dedicated to Mizrahim was considered a breakthrough. However, my reservation was that Oppenheimer, and Alon too, in her work on poetry, followed the way laid out for them by critical research in Israel in sociology, cinema, and history, that understands the

Mizrahi struggle as part of a class struggle, in light of developments preceding the 1977 political shift.

In general, discourse in Israeli humanities and social sciences has been entrenched – and it is safe to assume it still is – mainly in the injustices of Mapai which, although foundational, are somewhat dated now from the perspective of a nearly eternal Likud rule. For both Alon and Oppenheimer, after much work that has been done in sociology and history, Mizrahim represented a political alternative to mainstream statism of Zionism, because they themselves were Arabs, that is, the enemy. In seeing Mizrahim as really alien to Ashkenazim, academic Israeli discourse was immersed in the figure of the Arab-Jew as a way to engulf the ethos shared by the fathers of the State of Israel, who rebuked everything that is Arab. In being alternative to mainstream Israeli ethos, I thought both Alon and Oppenheimer were missing the essence of Mizrahi trauma that was the denunciation of the self, something which can barely be leveraged as an alternative, and very much reminds us of the Jews in Europe in the last centuries, for which the term 'self-hatred' was prevalent and accurate.[1]

The critic I expressed in *Theory and Criticism* was something I repeated in countless forums: there is something in the Arab-Jew discourse, shared by some of the people closest to me, that is fundamentally orientalist. First, it clings to one of the basic paradigms that Edward Said pointed out in his monumental *Orientalism* (1978), which glorifies the Arab past at the expense of its present. Second, it places Middle Eastern studies in a niche. The research project I was trying tirelessly to promote, albeit with very little success, chose two different parameters: first, I wanted to step out of the niche and read canonical Western literature from a Mizrahi perspective (something I began with the dissertation I wrote on Kafka and Agnon), and second, I viewed contemporary Mizrahi identity not as a leftist alternative to Likud or the historical Mapai, but as an area of wound, of trauma, thus embedded in relationships of adaptation and hybridization, much like my own case as a queer-Mizrahi-German-speaking researcher, who hope to say something about milestones in Zionist history like Bialik and Agnon.

Not very alien to 'self-hate', the fundamental paradigm for me was that of 'histhaknezut' (passing as Ashkenazi) whose validity, it is important to internalize, applies to everyone, both 'Ashkenazim' and 'whites': everyone is entrenched in the same project of becoming a (white) man, meaning someone who knows how to control his emotions,

1 I was trying to use the theoretic term of "Jewish self-hatred" on Mizrahim while discussing Shimon Balass's critic towards the relatively influential Iraqi Jewish community in Israel (Ben Yehuda 2020).

someone who understands restraint, and thus also expresses good taste, moderation, precision, and powerful minimalism. Mishani's book, written while he was a doctoral student who never completed his degree, has been neglected over the years, likely due to chilled critical reviews by Hannan Hever, another Ashkenazi professor – more senior and influential than Oppenheimer – who has dealt with Mizrahi issues (Hever 2008). Oppenheimer too, mentions Mishani only in passing, without giving much thought to his remarkable argument. Instead, he focuses his analysis, after Deleuze and Guattari, on Mizrahi representations of the body (a core theme in Mizrahi literature) again as an emancipatory vocation vis à vis the Zionist restrain body (Oppenheimer 2014, 110). The Zionist body is a transparent and repressed sum, while the Mizrahi body is made of many different body parts which together are always in a process of becoming, dissolving and uniting again and again (Oppenheimer 2014, 110). This theoretic angle has many merits for close readings, which the scope of Oppenheimer's survey does not always allow, and it must be thoroughly unravelled alongside Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, but in terms of delving into Israeli ethos and politics, it failed to leverage the body into a convincing approachable reading.

Mishani's intervention was even more overlooked in the collection of essays devoted to the work of Yehoshua Kenaz that was published two years later (Strass, Dotan 2016) although it contained Mishani's own essay of 2002 on Mizrahi representations in Kenaz's work. It seems that what Mishani had to say in his neglected and modest book – it does not exceed 200 pages and has no pretension of surveying the entire bulk of Mizrahi representations; on the contrary, it reads only the mainstream and quite hegemonic novels of Kenaz, Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua – perhaps even escaped his own conscious over the years. It is plausible that Mishani genuinely forgot Mishani, or perhaps there was more to it. He left academia and became one of the most successful Israeli writers and I believe his classic read in Mizrahim – better say 'Mizrahiness' – can use an example to the rare moments in literary historiography where the history of reception pretends more to criticism or secondary literature than to novels and poetry. One of the famous examples of this is the reception of Sigmund Freud's theory of trauma during his own lifetime, not only by his peers, but by himself,[2] which could allow us to assume something about Mishani. Like the return of the repressed, I offer here returning to his thesis about the Mizrahi body as a belated repressed embodiment of the Jewish diasporic body in Europe, something which Israeli discourse was not able to

2 The classical study on Freud's anxiety from his own findings is Judith Herman's (1992).

confront. Mishani's thesis that Mizrahi body representations in the work of the aforementioned canonical authors is a latent return of demons, those that Zionism wished to leave behind in the figure of the diasporic Jewish body in Europe, could perhaps be in itself something that Israeli academic discourse compulsorily repressed yet again, in the almost twenty years that have passed since Mishani's book was published.

3 The Real Great Question is the Ashkenazi One

The 'absurdity' in Mishani's title (a quote from A.B. Yehoshua), related to the Mizrahi 'issue' (*'inyan*, affairs, a Mizrahi 'business') is a way to explain the obscurity and intangibility of Mizrahim in discourse: there is something about Mizrahim that doesn't let go, yet is always pushes to oblivion. In an interview, Mishani referred to the events preceding the book's release in 2006, when Amir Peretz was the first Mizrahi elected as head of the Labour Party. According to him, Peretz, in his victory speech, sought to bury the demon (*hashed ha-'adati*), but in doing so, he actually gave it life. The Israeli public is always reluctant to differentiate between Jews and treat them separately in terms of race or ethnicity. Statistics are always hard to come by and just prior to October 7, 2023 sociologist Sigal Nagar-Ron was able to bring forth a reform in defining Mizrahim as part of the Israeli census. The census abolished any trace of North African or Islamic States' Jews, due to the assumption that in the second generation of emigrants, this information is entirely obsolete (Nagar-Ron 2021). After Hamas onslaught of 2023, Israel was gathered together under a call for unity and togetherness, thus even the word 'Mizrahi' seemed to have perished. Racial differentiation among Jews is a taboo, although it was the underlying tension of the near civil war that erupted following the announcement of the judicial reform in January 2023.

Since Hamas's onslaught there were many example for this. Shaul Mofaz, the second of only five Mizrahi chiefs of staff the IDF has ever had, proposed in October 2023 that Israel release all Palestinian political prisoners in exchange for the abducted civilians, but was dismissed by a cabinet of five men, four of whom Ashkenazim. To assign Mofaz politics a kind of 'Mizrahiness' is very much contestable, but to overlook his marginality against the backdrop of his ethnic affiliation is a form of silencing. Just now, more than a year after the break of the Gaza ongoing carnage, I was amazed to see the recoil with which a post written by Zvi Ben Dor Benite (November 2, 2024), a respectable Mizrahi intellectual, who, in his obituary to the death of theater and cinema actor Yaacov Cohen, related to him as *sahkan mizrahi* (a Mizrahi actor). Ben Dor Benite's Facebook friends

were having difficulty and rebuked him for mentioning Cohen's very obvious association in Israeli domestic politics. For them, Cohen is just "an Israeli actor".

Mizrahim today are a group defined by many traits, and many of them of families who, after many generations in the State of Israel, are still very much distinct as non-Ashkenazi. I am completely aware that readers might find this too essentialistic, but in that regard I wish here just to stick to numbers, as critics of essentialism suggest also a form of silencing. In dubbing 'Ashkenazi scholar' when relating to Hever and Oppenheimer, I simply refer to a form of cultural apartheid that is still ongoing in Israeli universities, especially in the humanities. If dealing here with this 'Mizrahi business' and its 'absurdity', that is, in the ongoing obsession with the demon exactly in trying constantly to eradicate it, I wish to use a different vocabulary and not refer to 'Mizrahi' writers but to 'Ashkenazi scholars' instead. Thus, the first Mizrahi candidate of the labour party was himself seeking in 2006 to dissociate from the very discourse that erupted around him.

Talking of Mizrahim is still a form of provocation and even repulsion, but, as intimated, the fundamental reason of Mishani's oblivion is that like Michael Seltzer, who wrote in the sixties the book *The Aryianization of the Jewish State*,[3] he reads Mizrahi literature and representations through an Ashkenazi lens. In other words: he speaks about Mizrahi identity from the perspective of the Ashkenization process of the mainstream Israeli society originating in Europe. This is why, in Mishani's book, the Mizrahi body appears as one that actualizes the repressed Jewish body as such. Mishani argues that Mizrahim became Mizrahim through discourse, simply to allow Ashkenazim to be perceived as Europeans. In order to create a new Jew, Ashkenazim needed an old Jew, and thus they channelled everything they themselves had absorbed in Europe, whether from Western-German Jews or from Christians, towards the descendants of North Africa and the Middle East. Just as Ostjuden were transformed into Mizrahim (then it was more common to say 'Asians'), over time, those orientals turned the descendants of Islamic countries into the 'new' and only Mizrahim. Once there was a 'new' Jew, you had to have someone embodying the old, in what Yehuda Shenhav (2006) dubbed *hadata* (religionisation): the making of Mizrahim as a form of remaking religion, thus leaving the secular signifier applicable to Ashkenazim only. In the many Mizrahi studies platforms that were opened in recent years, scholars are trying to grapple with the term Mizrahi Jewry, without addressing the much more acute transformation, to which one can easily assign the

3 For a survey of the Book's reception see Ben Dor Benite 2005.

adjective 'revolutionary', which is the becoming of Ashkenazim. These new Jews here in Israel are distinguished from Ashkenazi Jewry, which pertains also to Americans and their own socio-economic implications, and from Mizrahi Jewry and Mizrahim in Israel that were there only to absorb the many tribulations and deliberations coming from Europe. The real great question is the Ashkenazi one, and perhaps just because of that the demon becomes a demon: in circumventing the Mizrahi demon, academia and its allies tries to circumvent the creation of ashkenazim in Israel, which is something much more related to one self.

4 Men's Object: The Coming of the (Animalistic) Queen

It's no surprise that the focus of Mishani's work is the body, as that was the main sight upon which the father figures of New Judaism managed their labor, healthcare endeavors of vitalizing the 'old dry bones', from the biblical Ezekiel to Pinsker, Nordau, Herzl and Berdichevsky. To understand the relationship between words and the body – two incommensurable things (Butler 1997) – we must return to one of the foundational scenes in Israeli literature: the strange, sensual dance of Rahamim Ben Hamo, one of the recruits in *Infiltration*. Ben Hamo, a Moroccan immigrant to the young State of Israel of the fifties, embodies a blend of East and queerness, representing a sexual performance that does not conform to the patriarchal order. He is part of a group of young recruits with minor physical disabilities during their basic training at an Israeli army camp. Almost all have some sort of imperfection vis à vis the desired military body, and many of them, perhaps the majority, are Mizrahim. Ben Hamo is the only one among them who comes up blatantly as homosexual. He is small, rounded, feminine and unabashedly desires other men. The two remarkable scenes associated with him are perhaps the most remembered from this epic novel, probably also due to Dover Kosashvili's film adaptation (*Infiltration*, Israel, 2009): the belly dance scene and the one in which his mother and sister are coming to visit him in the base, bringing a magnificent basket filled with food which he knocks over with his leg, and then weeps on his mother's lap begging for her forgiveness (Kenaz 1986, 211-12). Interestingly, albeit missing from critics (and in this case Mishani among them) it is the Sabbath that accompanies both scenes, something that brings a break not just in terms of temporality, but also from the military, masculine and Zionist imperatives ("the Holly Sabbath Queen" as the story refers to it in the indirect speech of Nahum, the religious soldier of the unite, see Kenaz 2003, 96). When Ben Hamo dances, the many Mizrahi soldiers around him encourage him to continue, and address him in the female form "come to us sweetheart, come to us!" (Kenaz

2003, 94), a very uncanny reminder of "come, O bride, come" which Jews sing at the very same moment to the Shabbat, whose female impersonation is very much eroticized in the known *lekha dodi* (go, my beloved) piyyut (liturgical poem) of Moshe Elkabetz.

As Mishani rightly identifies, the first-person narrator in the novel perceives no bodies but those of Mizrahim; all other soldiers, despite their physical blemished presence, are transparent –unnoticed by the narrator's gaze (Mishani 2006, 70). The encounter with the queer Mizrahi body, which embodies both animalistic and feminine traits (Mishani rightly refers here to the performance of drag; Mishani 2006, 76), is what generates the fully anxious intellectual gaze of the storyteller:

> The expression of concentration on his face grew more acute, and *the chains were us, his spectators*, our faces observing him, our eyes barring his way. His body writhed and twisted, fusing to surrender to the hostile forces trying to paralyze him, straining to snap the chains and escape far away from here. The Arabic song, so ugly to me in its tearful tone, its wet, guttural consonants, its dissonant trills, its repulsive *moans*, took possession of the room and everyone in it.
>
> No longer a beggarly outcast, its foreignness and ugliness were transformed into a source of strength. The laughter and *catcalls* died down. We stood in a circle around the dancer and the singers, watching silently, not knowing what all this had to do with us. Rahamim Ben Hamo danced *as if possessed by a demon, increasingly liberated from the forces connecting him to us*, increasingly given over to the demon inside him; he closed his eyes and writhed like a rearing *snake*, his *hips* and *thighs* and *belly* and *chest* and *neck* and *arms* and *head* all at the mercy of a strong inner tide sending waves rippling through every inch of his body. His eyes were closed and his face looked as if he was on the point of tears, or in the throes of some terrible, *ecstatic expectation*. Zackie fell silent and only the drumming on the tin can was heard, with Sammy accelerating the beat.
>
> Rahamim opened his eyes and glanced at Zackie as if to obtain his permission forgoing on with the dance although the singing was over. He went on dancing with his *eyes open*, and there was a different expression now in those big, black, stupid *eyes*, beaten and long suffering and resigned, an expression such as I had never seen before […] Suddenly a throttled cry escaped from his lips. A shriek of *pain or pleasure*, and then another, and his face flushed darkly, and as his body went on writhing he stretched out his hand as if in a cry for help, as if the intensity of the *pain or the pleasure* that was producing one moan after the other from his mouth was too much for him to bear. The ugliness of the *animal-like* writhing

> and the moans that accompanied it, of the savage beating on the drum, was so powerful, dark and fascinating that it hardly seemed ugly at all. (Kenaz 2003, 95-6)[4]

Although Mishani does not explicitly state it, it does not take much to understand that Kenaz here describes, through his first person narrator Melabes, a young Ashkenazi soldier-to-be, perhaps the earliest and most complete depiction of what Israeli discourse cannot stop returning to: he describes here the ethnic demon, *ha-shed ha-'adati*.

Ben Hamo's dance, narrated by the observing, analytical narrator who is both fascinated and repelled, is indeed the demon; it appears just as such, in line with a long tradition in literature of first-person narrators observing the exotic East. In Thomas Mann's famous *Death in Venice* (1912) for example, this East is simply Venice, the southern city whose waters turn into a swamp of diseases and pedophilic-homosexual desires. The demon, always fluid, has many figurations. For the narrator in Mann, the acclaimed poet Christoph von Aschenbach, it is not only Tadzio, the Polish youth which makes his fixation, but the entire 'orient', whose literal fluidity is an expression of excessiveness, of overflowing emotions, desires and disease (the other side of sex). These are objects of marvel, of 'marvelous possessions' if we relate to an important study on the first encounter of Europeans with the Americas (Greenblatt 1992). The narrator as observer needs its object in order to render his own position as a man, human being, and not an animal, but also not a woman, in his ability to use words as something that tames a lustful and silence surrounding.[5] Note that in *Infiltration*, the narrator specifically mentions that they, he as narrator and the rest of the unit, were not only the gaze which observes the dance, but more than that: the chains, the hold of which the demon releases itself right in front of our eyes.

The pain and pleasure intertwined in Ben Hamo's marvelous and terrifying dance express a body surrendering to its corporeality; that is, it lacks the regulatory constraint identified by Freud with the Überich (often translated as the superego). This immersion in corporality, reveals dance in its ecstatic, rare moments, but more so, associate with what humans are becoming in the act of love, in making sex. And this scene, with its ingratiating and terrifying rapport between a subject (the narrator and the rest of the group) and

4 All italics in the text are by the Author of the chapter.

5 For a study of this position of an observer who has words with which he creates his masculinity as a synonym to his humanness (a man who is hu-man) in particularly while observing animals, see Ben Yehuda 2022.

its seductive and bewitching object (Ben Hamo) is a very rare moment of sex, which aligns also with the coming of the Shabbat in Sefardi congregations, as prayers recite *The Song of Songs* (which some scholars view as stemming from old Egyptian sex poetry). This is not a sexual dance that remains within the realm of dance, but rather a clear surrender to the act of sex itself, in a kind of unfathomable freedom, which deeply unsettles the worldview of the young men at the moment they offer their bodies to the pressures (or chains) of the national order, the moment of their initiation to the army. Thus, they observe their object becoming a subject in its own merit, and they, perhaps, paralyzed in amazement.

5 The Liberating Moment in Becoming Body-Parts

The belly dance itself, normally referred to in Arabic as *raqs sharqi*, oriental dance, is a source for many post-, anti- and decolonial confrontations right to this day. It is not just a classic in Israeli literature in its self-assessment as part of the West, but a classical symbol of the encounter with the Arab orient in modern times, from Napoleon's occupation of Egypt to Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Until today, women of all ages, in small wealthy suburbs in the West, are taking classes in oriental dance because this dance in particular signifies liberation due to its very blunt feminine traits, its use of makeup, its celebratory approach to a robust, or not entirely skinny feminine body (the fixation on the belly is because of its remarkable presence), and of course its movements, which are, like in Kenaz, animalistic and pertain to different body parts (hence 'belly', or 'hands', or 'looks/gaze', the main part is usually the hips; see Fenster 2019, 40). It seems that this dance in particular is a counter gesture towards the restrained lives of western womanhood, and interestingly, in Israel, ordinary women who attend the studio, complain about the lack of contact with 'real' oriental Arab women, in this case in the Palestinian communities all around them (Fenster 2019, 49).

Kenaz's lengthy scene, perhaps one of the longest descriptions of dance in world literature, is a reminiscent again of the observant subject of a somewhat unfamiliar and desired object. Melabes' lengthy description reminds the dark vast spaces of Africa and Asia, in the careful and magnet-like depictions in Joseph Conrad's legendary *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Darkness represents womanhood, a continent which awaits light to penetrate it by European manhood. The almost compulsory close ups that the fixation on body parts allows, is in itself subversive in its negation of a complete and unified whole (after Oppenheimer's reading with Deleuze and Guattari), but more than that, it is part of the colonial use of metonymy as a stereotype with which whites identify blacks (Bhabha 2004). Subjects/objects

of the colonial global south are normally depicted by this focus on one particular body part (mostly their hands, but sometimes their mouth, teeth or hips), because their representation fails to signify a whole (which will be transparent, as much as spiritual). Subjects of the global south have bodies, because they don't pertain to the spirit, which western theology associates with its knightly and well-mannered *gentle*, and thus supreme, *men*.

Against the backdrop of multiculturalism in a postcolonial age (the State of Israel is special, because one could argue that the postcolonial era began there in the fifties or earlier, in times of anti-colonial struggles anywhere else; again, it opens up the question of Ashkenazim as both Jews and New),[6] a remarkable belly dance scene is the climax and the end of Abdellatif Kechiche's acclaimed film *The Secret of the Grain* (2007). It is one of the most celebratory representations of the year-long immigration to France from its former protectorates in North African countries. Here, the clash between Christian French and the community of multilingual immigrants of first and second generations, reaches its dramatic fulfilment in the great celebration of 'couscous and fish', the supreme dish with which the protagonist, the 60-year-old Slimane (Habib Boufares), tries to persuade the authorities and local investors to support his new restaurant. Of course, everything is ready apart from the couscous grains themselves, and as he tries to appease the angry guests with alcohol, while going back to his former wife's kitchen to search for the missing main part of the dish, his close friend and the daughter of his current partner, the still-adolescent Rym (Hafsia Herzi), tries to gain time by appeasing the native French guests with a spontaneous belly dance accompanied by a traditional Maghrebi orchestra. The screen time of the dance is truly unique (there is another separate film, which consists only of the dance scene and lasts 45 minutes), and in cross-cutting we see how the sexual movements of the youth are flattering the penetrating audience, while the aged man literately loses his breath in chasing kids who stole his bike and mock him.

A colossal depiction of generational and gender difference, as Rym is both very young and a woman, Kechiche uses a similar gaze on her belly, which, like in Kenaz, unsettles, but this time not the narrator and the group of young soldiers, but us, the audience. We are astonished by the young woman's incredible act of agency (at the same time as the generation of her parents completely lack any), in using her sex and at the same time dismantling the possibility of a pedophilic consumption of it. While focusing on extreme close ups of her fleshy belly, hips and breast, we also watch in cross-cuts not

6 If Ashkenazim are simply Jews, and not New, Palestine was in fact never conquered by an alien Western invader.

only the French guests but also the Maghrebi music players, all quite elderly and in a position of being hypnotized but also embraced at their own passivity. In fact, that passivity – in front of a body that celebrates its being a body (its being parts: belly, hands, hips etc.), that celebrates its immersion in desire – is something that both the film and the novel share. What happens in the liberating moment of sex and of becoming body parts, in this shameless enacting of desire – wishing to be consumed and in that also consuming – isn't just the acknowledgement of the body, but more so, the admission of the demon. The ethnic demon is there just as a form of admitting, that beyond so many veils (and the oriental traditional belly dance uses many veils) there is flesh.

6 Mediterranean Aryans: Minimalism and Excess

It is important to note two interesting observations on the Kenazian gaze that were consolidated in this seminal novel of Israeliness. In her contribution to the aforementioned collection of tribute to Kenaz, Keren Dotan argues that *Infiltration* was able, by means of the first person narrator and his penetrating gaze, to render a new Israeli subjectivity that confront and rebukes the "sin of eurocentrism" (Dotan 2016, 352). The subject that is been consolidated by way of narrating, is also a new cultural and national subject, created anew after its collapse in the aftermath of the rise of Mizrahim and multiculturalism (Dotan 2016, 352). Interestingly, it is almost the same argument Ariel Hirschfeld pointed out almost twenty years earlier, four years after the novel was published. For him, the narrator Mlabes was the first confrontation in Hebrew literature with its anxiety with the orient. Mlabes' "spiritual ability to observe" creates a "contrapuntal humanism", which requires particular voices that unites but not in unison, something which projects on the entire Ashkenazi ethos, that, after Kenaz/Mlabes, is able to contain pluralism (Hirschfeld [1990] 2016, 458). Precisely that spiritual achievement of the novel, leads Mishani to argue that it is the outcome of a denial of corporeality, of the repressed body of the Jew (Mishani [2002] 2016, 478).

The failed moment of initiation to the army and the national project, is also the initiation to and in words, and that is perhaps what is missing from Dotan and Hirscheld's contributions. Precisely this big and new conscience, the new critical subject that is able to confront and even contain its own demons, is a literary vocation of a man: someone whose humanity is based on his denial of corporality, associated with womanhood, queerness and animality. In being spiritual he is beyond flesh, and with that also subjugates those who are left with flesh alone, their bodies being commodity, governed and

consumed. Mishani's sensible reading shows that Ben Hamo's dance is not merely, as critics perceived, a display of ethnic polyphony in Hebrew literature, but rather an expression of anxiety regarding what has been repressed (Mishani 2006, 25). Mlabes' anxiety is the anxiety of New Jews from their own Jewishness. The national body, regulated in such a way that it lacks visibility in the text, experiences through this sensory awakening, a return of the Jewish body as such – something present, animalistic (between the movements of the snake and the braying of the donkey), stinky, sweaty, and very much sexual (thus feminine). If body is matter and presence, the national imperative is transparent and clear, it wishes to be unnoticed at all.

This relationship between an observing Ashkenazi narrator and a ravishing Mizrahi figure, between words and body, also found prominent expression in the literature of the 1980s in Amos Oz's novel *Black Box* (1987), which was yet another attempt to introduce some form of multicultural ethnicity into the fabric of Israeli literature, until then very monolithic and European. *Black Box* became the best-selling novel in the history of the State of Israel, as well as a symbol and a resonant low point in the career of a prominent champion for the Labor movement. In this novel, the narrator, through the figure of the Ashkenazi woman, expresses desire and disgust towards the Mizrahi male body, which symbolizes Arabness and religiosity – two aspects most identified in Israel with the East. Here, too, Mishani identifies the repressed body of the Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora: The horror and revulsion evoked by the presence of the actual body of the Mizrahi in the text does not stem from his 'Mizrahiness', but rather from the fact that within the body of the Mizrahi – the small, hairy, dark body, the kippa-wearing man who exudes odors of urine and garlic – there returns to the text the suppressed bodily history of the European Jewish male, the diasporic body before it was transformed in national writing into a "Bedouin Viking", a "cheetah tiger", a "brutal hunter", or "Tarzan, King of the Jungle" (Mishani 2006, 119).

Oz juxtaposes the body of Michel Sumo, Ilana's second husband, who is Mizrahi, against the body of her son Boaz, from her first marriage to Dr. Gideon, an Ashkenazi. Boaz's body symbolizes the renewal of the *sabra* identity in Palestine-Israel. The "Bedouin Viking" explicitly responds to earlier depictions of the muscular Zionist body as envisioned by Max Nordau, which was also intertwined with the local indigenousness of the Mediterranean region, representing an Aryan embodiment (Boaz is also compared to Siegfried, the heroic son in the Germanic myth of the Nibelungen, with which Herzl associated, see Boyarin 2007) of desert masculinity, of the mythical (biblical) Jew before entering the rotten decadent era of modernity. While Mishani does not explicitly mention it, the identification of Sumo with garlic aligns with the most pronounced stereotype of Jews among Germans in the eighteenth century (Gilman 1986, 162). During

this period, Germans elevated themselves to a higher status, by trying to associate with the Enlightenment, intellectualism and good taste, while speaking the standardized High German. Garlic, with its strong odor and demanding flavor, symbolized excess in terms of corporeality (sensual and essential materiality), which the universal, spiritual European image, influenced by the Paulinian gesture of the spirit, sought to distance itself from.

It is true that Central European cuisine is indeed poor in resources, but this natural fact was transformed by Germans into 'naturalness', something transparent and proper about Europe as Europe (minimalist, refined) precisely because it is not 'Jewish', hot and spicy. A similar process happened two centuries later in Israel, as Ashkenazim suddenly 'discovered' that their Jewish food was 'grey', refined at best and boring at worst. Yet, this is also very much a creation of a new Jew which does not necessarily correspond to reality. Eastern European cuisine, heavily influenced by the Ottomans, is a rich and even robust cuisine, especially when compared to German cuisine. But, wishing to become Germans, Israeli Ashkenazi Jews shifted garlic away from themselves towards Levantines, Jews and Muslims alike.

7 The Demon and the Eighties

Mishani always maintains the word 'Mizrahi' in quotation marks, which might explain why his work is so groundbreaking: Israeli academy, in writings of Berkeley alumni like Hannan Hever or Michael Gluzman, is committed to imagining the Mizrahi as truly Mizrahi, an Oriental figure standing in opposition to an Ashkenazi establishment that is also fundamentally different. They were not the first to do so. Even in *Infiltration*, 'us' (Ashkenazim, that is Europeans who listen and practice classical music) and 'them' (Mizrahim, that is completely oriental, especially in their music, cuisine and emotional behavior) is a self-given (see for example Kippod's dystopic vision of a Mizrahi usurpation over the state; Kenaz 1986, 348-9). Just a generation away (the soldiers in Kenaz's novel were born in the thirties) Jews who were born at the turn of the century in the Pale of Settlement were remote from the West, both as a projection and as reality. They were remote from the modern western sophisticated image as any other periphery from the metropoles of London and Paris. But for Kenaz, as well as Hever, Gluzman and many scholars who follow suit, Ashkenazim are Europeans while Mizrahim are Arabs (thus also the popularity of the hyphen Arab-Jew, extremely contested by Mizrahim themselves).

The view in dichotomies that eschews 'Asian Jews' in Europe, allows for the belief that the European Jew is truly European. Yitzhak Laor was in fact the only critic I know of who was able to point

out that the ethnic wave in Israeli literature of the eighties, and especially Kenaz's 'ethnic Other' in *Infiltration*, were representations of a displacement for the actual colonization of the self (Laor [1995] 2016, 237-8). The too-easily dichotomist view became with time – apart from Mishani and Laor – entirely uncontested in the scholarship of Israeli literature, and more broadly in Israeli sociology and Jewish studies worldwide. It is as if Aziza Khazzoom's famous title *How the Polish Peddler Became German Intellectual* (2008) was obliterated as a question, because the Jew as part of western elite seems a natural given. True, Oz's Boaz is blond and tall, just like Amoz Oz, who, despite being short, was also fair, blue-eyed, and had 'Aryan' features, but these attributes are first and foremost in the hands of those who write them. Mizrahim in Israel, once they were forced to settle in the periphery and work in large factories, indeed became something new, they created Mizrahim, but alongside this transformation, a far greater revolution occurred: the transformation of some Jews into becoming Ashkenazim. Suddenly, 'real', new Jews emerged, whether in high-tech, in the courts, in law offices, as private expensive doctors or in modern Hebrew literature which is, like the Jew, new. The former seems always already religious and oriental and the latter always already modern and European.

Traditionally, the history of Hebrew literature is divided into the literature of Hazal, medieval literature, and New Hebrew literature. Mishani reminds this very new literature, that it is also a project: The Zionist project, which means the colonization of the Jew by himself. The more visible colonization of Palestinians and Mizrahim merely facilitates this.[7] All the occupants of academic chairs in Israeli campuses, whose socio-economical uniformity is notorious by now, are committed to an esteemed Jewish-Arab dialogue because that is how they position themselves as new (modern) and enlightened.

The colonization of the Mizrahi and the Arab, in its way, allows for the imagining of the Jew as Western and enlightened, through which his own colonization is perpetuated. Hence, critical Mizrahim constantly return to the 1970s while tending to pause in the 1980s. This fundamental decade was also marked by a shift in the ethos of war that was also conceived in ethnic-racial terms: an Ashkenazi rational approach that emerges for no other choice at hand – *milhemet*

7 We are waiting for a serious critical engagement with the political work of David Grossman from that time, in his two reportage volumes on Palestinians: *The Yellow Wind* of 1987, dealing with Palestinians of the occupied territories, and the less known volume *Sleeping on a Wire* (*Nokhḥim nifkadim*) of 1992 which deals with Palestinians with Israeli citizenship. Jews are represented in both volumes (mostly by Grossman's Arab interviewees) as belonging to a modern and western society, while Arabs are seeing as traditional and backward. Again, the state of the new Jew is there as a given, uncontested and without historical context.

ein brera – and obscene violence, bloodthirsty, and latently Mizrahi and Jewish in the case of the First Lebanon War and the First Intifada. While literary scholars avoid that fundamental shift and the long Likud years that followed it, sociologists such as Nissim Leon, Nissim Mizrahi and Avishai Ben Haim embark on those evolving currents, but focus mainly on Shas or the oriental Jew as a religious observant Jew, which they also accept uncontested as a given.

In the relationship between words and body, and between literature and high politics, that of the Knesset and the government, Mishani marks the 1980s as a major turning point and refers to ideas expressed by Dan Miron, perhaps the most prominent literary critic of that time. It should be noted: Zionism, as Benjamin Harshav taught us, is an ideology that created a language that advanced a society that became a state (Harshav 1993, 89). This is the immense power of Hebrew literature, which preceded practical or political Zionism by decades. Harshav mainly referred to the pioneering settlement emerging around the second wave of immigration in Eretz Israel-Palestine, but there is no doubt that from the turning of the centuries and far into the State of Israel itself, Hebrew literature and Zionist politics were intertwined in a truly uplifting manner, in accordance with the European humanistic model (of National Authors that corroborate not only the nation but even the state). The peak of this process is probably Natan Alterman's poetry, which was a brilliant expression of the Zionist movement in its encounter with the era of the welfare state and the social democratic era (Miron 2019). However, immediately following the political shift of 1977, and even more so with the elections of 1981, the First Lebanon War, and the isolating ethos of the Israeli left that crystallized the paradigm of "shooting and crying",[8] this ideal relationship between literature and politics began to be shaken. Miron was sensing that right away. He articulated poignantly how the Likud political shift was accompanied by a taste of rebellion from the part of the Israeli public against Hebrew literature and its establishment, a rebellion that displaced it from its position of influence and hegemony, and left it with a 'void', a 'deepening sense of absence', and a profound experience of emasculation (Mishani 2006, 86).

Mishani argues that Miron spoke of the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi tension without explicitly stating it. Again, the demon keeps being a demon whose presence should be left in the bottle. Although ethnic differences among Jews were already present in the language of Israeli journalism of the eighties, the language of literary discourse, which was more conservative and cautious in its colors, was clean

8 The literature on this term is vast, especially in studies of Israeli film. For a relative up-to-date survey see Ben Yehuda 2023.

of ethnic differences and tensions: it marked its boundaries using neutral language that tried unsuccessfully to disguise its real anxiety, careful not to articulate the (un)said (Mishani 2006, 86-7). Thus Mishani's 'sin' was double: he wasn't just very critical of the discipline of Hebrew literature (showing of its conservatism even vis a vis journalism), he was not shying away from the demon (talking about race among Jews), but he even reminded Ashkenazim of their own race, which is oriental too.

We see how the demon, which was likely created almost consciously in the 1980s (at the first decades of the state, ethnic tensions were much more bluntly articulated as is so evident in *Infiltration* and in Nagar-Ron's studies on the census), has a much stronger relevance in the field of culture and literature. The 'absurdity' Mishani has in his title, was something that was consolidated in the relation of a phenomenon – a demon, a body, a smell, matter – to the words around it which in fact try to circumvent it. Thus, if its presence as a demon continues to this day, during the great judicial reform and the total appropriation of the Mizrahi struggle by the Israeli government, in academia, and especially in literary circles, ethnic denial was and still is very much prevalent.

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Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities
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Grandfathers, Fathers and Sons in Contemporary Mizrahi Poetry

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Abstract This essay examines the representation of grandfathers and fathers in contemporary Mizrahi poetry through the poetic works of Almog Behar, Mati Shemoelof, and Shlomi Hatuka. It investigates how the poetic narratives of these writers shape these masculine figures and whether they function as models in the construction of Mizrahi masculinities. Throughout this paper, it can be observed that the poets' desire to save their grandfathers' histories and migration experiences from oblivion permeates their verses, leading to a deeper identification with the emotions and experiences of their grandfathers than those of their fathers.

Keywords Mizrahi poetry. Grandfathers. Fathers. Migration. Mizrahi masculinities. Third generation poets.

1 Introduction

Categories are useful tools for organizing and structuring research, yet they rarely capture reality in all its complexity, especially when addressing human experiences. For this reason, it is important to define what is meant by Mizrahi poetry in the context of this study.

While the meaning of the term 'poetry' is relatively straightforward, the concept of *Mizrahi* is more nuanced. In the Israeli context, Mizrahi ('Oriental') is a label originally applied by European Jews to designate non-European Jews, particularly those who migrated to Israel from

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Arab and/or Muslim countries. Before the establishment of the State of Israel, being both an Arab and a Jew was one possible identity among others. However, in the Israeli context, this hybrid identity became an oxymoron (Shohat 1999, 6). As the term Mizrahi suggests, it represents an 'orientalist' definition of Arab Jewish identity, which is often viewed as inferior and exotic, particularly from the point of view of the Israeli Ashkenazi elite who played a key role in founding the State of Israel (Khazzoom 2003).

Mindful of the challenges involved in classifying literary production according to the origins of its authors, this study defines 'Mizrahi poetry' as the work of poets who explicitly choose *Mizrahiness* as one of the identities shaping their cultural and personal expression or the work of poets who write about Mizrahim or Arab Jews and their experiences in the State of Israel. As Eli Hamo, a Mizrahi social activist, was quoted in the manifesto of the Eastern Joint Initiative – Mizrahi Palestinian Partnership: "'Being *Mizrahi* is not an ethnicity, it's a form of consciousness' […]. His implication was that this is a matter of choice" (in Behar 2017, 229). In this sense, labels and classifications are indeed useful for organizing thoughts, but they are also elective: they are fluid, contextual, and subject to change. Moreover, I use the term Mizrahi in the sense articulated by Ella Shohat, who argued that:

> The term began to be used only in the early 1990s by leftist non-Ashkenazi activists who saw previous terms such as *bnei edot hamizrah* ('descendants of the oriental ethnicities') as condescending; non-European Jews were posited as 'ethnicities,' in contradistinction to the unmarked norm of 'Ashkenaziness' or Euro-Israeli 'Sabraness,' defined simply as Israeli. (1999, 13)

This shift underscores how Mizrahiness is not only an externally imposed category but also a matter of self-definition, especially in the field of social activism.

What marks a poem as Mizrahi, while also being part of Hebrew or Israeli literature, are the echoes of the Middle Eastern or North African cultures that resonate in its verses through imagery, vocabulary, or cultural references. Referring to the first generation of writers coming to Israel from Arab or Islamic countries, Sami Shalom Chetrit observed that

> What was special and new about the arrival of those writers on the Israeli literary scene was not only their Mizrahi origin but also the subject of their works, which dealt with the life of Mizrahim in Israel and the crisis of their migration to Israel. (Chetrit 2004, 181)

The experience of migration to Israel represents a crisis for many Jews, regardless of their origin, due to the Zionist idea of the 'denial of the diaspora', which aims to create a new Israeli Jewish national identity. However, the arrival of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa to Israel and their first experiences in the country were, in general, different from those of Jews who came from Europe, and it became a literary topic. It can be observed in the literary works of first-generation migrants. For example, Shimon Ballas (Baghdad, 1930-Tel Aviv, 2019) titled his first novel, written in 1964, *HaMa'abarah* (The Transit Camp). The novel was set in one of the transit camps most of the Jews from Arab countries had to live in during their first years in Israel.

As Yochai Oppenheimer (2012) and others[1] have argued, not only is the collective experience of migration from Arab countries a recurring theme in Mizrahi literature, but the language used by these authors also introduces a new element into the field of Hebrew literature through the presence of Arabic words or structures. In an interview with Ammiel Alcalay, Ballas stated: "I think that I am probably trying to bring my Hebrew closer and closer to Arabic" (1996, 68).

In Mizrahi poetry, the presence of Arabic language can be seen, for instance, in the verses of Erez Biton (Oran, 1942-), who is considered the father of Mizrahi poetry and has inspired many poets of the following generation. He was awarded the Israel Prize of Hebrew Literature in 2015, becoming the first Mizrahi poet to receive the award. In his famous poem *Summary of a Conversation*, Biton wrote: "What does it mean to be authentic, | to run through the middle of Dizingoff and shout in Moroccan Jewish dialect: | *Ana min el-Maghreb*, *Ana min el-Maghreb* | (I'm from the Atlas Mountains, I'm from the Atlas Mountains)" (1996, 264; transl. by Ammiel Alcalay). Words in the Arabic dialect of the Jews of Morocco resonate in the poem because they were shouted in one of the most central streets of Tel Aviv, a symbol of the economic and cultural power of the Ashkenazi elite.

These verses demonstrate how Mizrahi poetry, and Mizrahi literature more generally, not only deals with the topic of migration and its crises and consequences – a topic that can be found in many Israeli literary works – but also brings to the Israeli literary stage traces of Arabic language and culture, a culture that was marginalized because of its link with the new 'enemies' of the State of Israel.

1 Cf. Chetrit 2004; Levy 2009; 2014; Alon 2011; Mendelson-Maoz 2014; Shely-Newman 2019; et al.

These main features are evident in the poetry of both first-generation Mizrahi poets who migrated to Israel from the Middle Eastern and North African region and Mizrahi poets who were born in Israel.

For the purpose of the current study, which considers the representations of the masculine figures of grandfathers and fathers, I have decided to analyze poems written by three poets belonging to the 'third generation' of Mizrahi writers: Almog Behar (Nethania, 1978-), Mati Shemoelof (Haifa, 1972-), and Shlomi Hatuka (Ranat Gan, 1978-).

Behar is a prolific author whose work seeks to preserve the Arabic roots not only of his mother's family but also of Judaism and Israeli culture more widely. As a researcher, he has explored the links between Arabic and Hebrew languages and cultures and has published academic studies on Arab Jewish poets such as Erez Biton, Amira Hess (Baghdad, 1943-), and Ronny Someck (Baghdad, 1951-). He is also one of the founders of the Judeo-Arabic cultural studies program at Tel Aviv University.

Shemoelof is an Israeli writer now living in Berlin. He is deeply engaged with Mizrahi identity not only in his literary works but also through his social and literary activism – for example, as a co-founder of *Guerrilla Tarbut*, a social movement and publishing house that released poetry and promoted political causes with art performed in public spaces. Shemoelof and Behar collaborated on many of these projects, which often involved both Hebrew and Arabic poets.

Hatuka is the author of three books of poetry published by Tangier, the publishing house he established with the aim of giving voice and representation to those whose voices have been excluded from the cultural stage, and also to create a cultural home for activists. His Yemenite family's roots emerge in his poetry and in his social and cultural activism. He co-founded the association Amram (The Yemenite, Mizrahi and Balkan Children Affair), which seeks to raise awareness about the disappearance of children from Yemen, the Balkans and the Middle East during the first years following the establishment of the State of Israel.[2] More recently, he has hosted a program on the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation (Kan) and continues to challenge the underrepresentation of Mizrahi voices in Israeli culture.

The three authors share a commitment to social and cultural activism related to the Mizrahi and Arab Jewish struggle for equality in Israel, as well as a personal and poetic connection with their family histories and roots. The latter quality makes their poetry particularly significant for exploring the figures of their grandfathers and fathers as models of Mizrahi masculinities.

2 About this subject, see Inbari 2024.

2 Fathers and Grandfathers in Mizrahi Literature

In "The Politics of Paternity and Patrimony", Professor Nancy E. Berg has observed that "Modern Hebrew literature was once characterized as a literature of fathers and sons, reflecting the patriarchal nature of the society" (2006, 100). Her analysis focused on literary works primarily written by first-generation migrants, describing their engagement with Zionist ideology and the modern reinterpretation of Isaac's sacrifice (*akedah*) in Israeli literature. Later, Professor Yochai Oppenheimer (2011) extended this discussion by exploring father-son relationships among the second generation of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, drawing on Freud's Oedipal framework.

Building on these insights, this article shifts attention to the third generation of Mizrahi poets and considers how masculinity is constructed through their depictions of grandfathers and fathers. The use of the concept of the 'third generation' is well supported in *Echoing Identity* (Shemoelof et al. 2007), given that the subtitle of the book refers to a metaphoric Mizrahi language chosen by third-generation writers as their literary language: *ha-dor ha-shlishi kotev mizrahit*, which can be translated as 'The third generation writes in Mizrahi'.

While the poets examined here were born in Israel and did not themselves immigrate, they have nevertheless "inherited" the memories of displacement from their grandparents and identify with that generation's experiences.

Oppenheimer describes this dynamic as an "adoption of the diasporic discourse" (2011, 179), which is in opposition to the Zionist narrative and its emphasis on forging a new Israeli national identity. In his article "In the Name of the Father", Oppenheimer analyses Almog Behar's short story *Ana min al-yahoud* (2008b) as a case in which the return of the repressed – according to a Freudian reading – is dramatized. The protagonist's Arabic accent, which suddenly appears in his voice, reveals a genealogical connection to his grandfather. Here, the grandson literally identifies with the grandfather, whose voice continues to resonate through him.

In the poem *Our History*[3] (2009, 56), Behar reflects on the role of writers in relation to the histories of previous generations, and he assigns a prominent importance to poetry as a tool for giving voice to silenced memories as well as the Arabic language:

3 Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my literal (not poetic) renditions of the original texts.

If historians do not write history
We, the poets, will write it. Together we will gather
The pearls of our fathers' time, we will gather
The gems of our memories, which were drowned
In the ocean of shame, and we will expose them clearly to view.

History that was the place of the big loss
Of our parents, history that is again not ours,
History that was stolen, that without it is impossible
To write high poetry, history that forced us write
Thousands of poems of resistance against the history of the
[thieves and not
A poem to our families, it will become the place of victory.

And it ends with a clear statement in which the poetic voice reveals who is considered to be the thief of history and which is the language of the silenced histories:

We will travel together to the belly of Zionism,
Thief of the great history, until perhaps we put an end
To the family silence, until we teach our children to speak
Arabic.

In the third verse of the poem, "the pearls of our father's time" refers to the 'ancestors' (*avot*), the previous generations, and it is a quote from Mati Shemoelof's poem *Truly* (2006):

In the bar mitzvah I was so afraid of the security guards of the
[melting pot
that I gave them, in a deal without argument,
the gold necklace of my pride.

Today I am gathering the pearls of our fathers' history
Far away from the local jewellery stores
And I am collecting the gems of memory that plunged the lost
into an ocean of shame. (Shemoelof 2006, 11)

Behar's poem was dedicated to his friend Shemoelof, and it represents a poetic dialog with him. The poems of both the authors refer to personal and family history and to more ideological and collective themes. Zionism is present in both poems. In Behar's, it explicitly represents the "theft" of the histories of silenced Jews, while Shemoelof describes the poet's surrender to the Zionist idea of the "melting pot", which erases memories from the diaspora. In both poems, the idea emerges of recovering and saving from oblivion

the histories that were excluded from the Israeli canonical narrative through a process of postmemory (Hirsch 2008; Miccoli 2016).

In addition, Almog Behar highlights the importance of Arabic as a language that was silenced in his generation but that is essential to be transmitted to future generations.

In symbolic terms, Raz Yosef has argued that:

> The Oedipal struggle of Mizrahi men is not against the Mizrahi father, because he was taken down by Ashkenazi Zionism from the position of patriarchal power and considered defeated, passive and castrated. The struggle is against the 'white' colonial father – David Ben-Gurion. (2004, 41)

This broader cultural confrontation with Zionist hegemony is evident in the work of Behar, Shemoelof, and Hatuka, whose verses often challenge dominant historical narratives and reclaim erased familial and communal experiences.

3 Grandfathers' Languages and Longings

Almog Behar's first published book opens with the poem *Grandfather and Grandfather* ([2008a] 2017, 14-16; transl. by Dimi Reider). This highlights the central importance of Behar's relationship with his grandfathers' histories – the family's past, his roots – in his poetry. The poem not only serves as a personal introduction to the poetic speaker but also explicitly expresses his intention to be like his grandfathers, to recover their history, and, in doing so, to recover the history of an entire generation: "And I for years have been practicing them | Walking with my hands enjoined | behind a forever-upright back. | For years, I've been practicing | to be a wave-breaker | for my grandsons" (2017, 16). The bond that Behar creates with his grandfathers through poetry traces a genealogical line of masculine identification that, in turn, reflects a desire for his future and for future generations.

Moreover, he explicitly expresses a wish to recover the memories that the waves broke, and he evokes his fear of losing "all the other languages", referring to the diasporic languages spoken by his grandfathers, apart from Hebrew, which is the only language Behar learned to speak as a child: "For years I've been practicing drawing flowers | With Hebrew words | Fearing I'll lose | The colours of all the other languages" (2017, 16).

In Shemoelof's verses, "all the other languages" become the "many languages" that King Salomon spoke, similarly to the poet's father, and the traditions that were lost, like the words in an old dictionary:

They say that you knew as many languages as King Salomon
but I don't remember you speaking
Farsi with my grandfather who extended his hand to me
and I kissed it.
Today I understand that this kiss is a very specific word in a
[dictionary
that was lost in the past century. (Shemoelof 2024, 9)

In Mizrahi poetry written by third-generation poets, the presence of these languages – especially Arabic, but also Farsi and others – represents an important (and often broken) link with their grandparents' generation.

In the section of the poem *Grandfather and Grandfather* dedicated to Behar's maternal grandfather, titled *Ezra Gahtan (1904-1986)* ([2008a] 2017), the poet writes that this grandfather had the "longings of a refugee" (*ga'aguei palit*) and that he came from a "different world" (*olam aher*) or, as he himself said, *husa laares* meaning "abroad". He pronounced *hutz la-aretz*, with an Arabic accent, emphasizing his feeling of strangeness, given that the Arabic language and Arabic origins are not part of the State of Israel's national identity[4] and indeed are often considered to be characteristics of the nation's perceived enemies.

When I was a child
My grandfather's hands
were held back.

And on the picture with my mother
Now in her bedroom
The suit of his life
Sews his body
into the longings of a refugee
Two and eighty years long
was his life's journey
From the palms on the banks of the Tigris
And to the old fountain
since demolished
at the end of the promenade leading
To the Netanya beach.

4 Oren Yiftachel clearly states that "Following independence in 1948 Israel began a concerted and radical strategy of Judaization (de-Arabization)" (2000, 736), demonstrating how Judaization and Arabness are positioned as opposites.

A memory is a tear in the flesh of the present
And in the picture his daughter is smiling
Her hand on his shoulder
and he keeps his face severe
the old fountain is behind them
and the horizon is the Mediterranean tub
that has no respect for rivers.

In the backdrop, some ornamental palms
planted by the municipality
and in his flesh the saplings of a white mustachio
and a black tie
marking him to be of a different world.
And in a moment he'll open his mouth
Say "abroad"
And mean Eretz Yisrael. (Behar 2017, 14-15)

The strangeness of Mizrahi Jews is expressed in poetry not only through the use of Arabic, but also through physical gestures or attire, such as the hands of one of the grandfathers in Behar's poem, which are held back in a passive stance, yet also in the attitude of someone who refuses to hide himself. In fact, Behar observes that "the suit of his life | sews his body | into the longings of a refugee" and notes the "black tie | marking him to be of a different world". These dress codes are very different from the images of the Israeli pioneers or of the 'new Israeli Jew' who came to Eretz Israel to work the land. They are clearly related to the feelings of nostalgia, distance, and strangeness.

In one of Mati Shemoelof's poems, *I Wish I Could Go Back Between the Knives of Time* (2019), we encounter the figure of the grandfather, who "never came back" because "the past has its own time | the time has its own past". In this poem, as in Behar's, we can observe elements that characterize the Arab Jewish identity in Israel, particularly the Arab aspects: in Shemoelof's poem, the grandfather played backgammon and drank arak. Furthermore, he wore "a worn wedding suit" that reminds us of Behar's grandfather's "black tie". These are symbols of distinct dressing customs, of a different culture, and of a "different world".

Hadar neighborhood in Haifa waited for my grandfather in a
[worn wedding suit
And in honor of his retirement they gave him two worn
[backgammon dice
And poured him a glass of arak.
And my grandmother told me how she was sitting at the bus
[station with no roof

> In the Ein lelo Hayam[5] neighborhood,
> And she worried, but he never came back from there, as he was.
> The past has its own time
> The time has its own past
> The time has its own past
> *Allah ma'ak*, grandfather Shlomo. (Shemoelof 2019, 38)

At the end of the poem, the poet blesses his grandfather in Arabic: *"Allah ma'ak*, grandfather Shlomo", contributing once more in saving his family's culture and language "from the ocean of shame".

Instead of rejecting or hiding these Arab elements, third-generation Mizrahi poets are attempting to reclaim the physical traits tied to "Arabness" from previous generations and make them their own.[6] The poets reference their relationships to their grandfathers by symbolically borrowing their moustaches and beards. We see this, for instance, in Shemoelof's verses, where he declares: "Israel, once I was a Jewish-Arab, and now | I only have an untidy mustache" (2019, 60). Similarly, Behar describes his grandfather's "white mustachio" (2017, 15). He also writes about the beard of *Ana min al-yahoud*'s narrator at the end of the story:

> I am not here not there, not East not West, not my voice now and not the voices of my past, and what will happen in the end. I walk through the streets mute and also somewhat deaf. This time only my appearance worries the police, my thick beard and my stubbornness not to utter a word. ([2008b] 2017, 160; transl. by Vivian Eden)

A significant link between the first and the third generations of immigrants from Arab countries is a shared sense of strangeness in Israel, an experience made visible through the physical features of their literary characters.

Therefore, in the representation of masculinities, grandfathers emerge as male figures of strangeness, longing, and loss, figures that Almog Behar, Mati Shemoelof and other Mizrahi poets seek to reclaim as positive and significant – as part of their personal and collective roots – wishing to bring them "clearly to view" (Behar 2009, 56) on the stage of poetry.

5 Ein Hayam is a neighborhood in Haifa with both an Arab and a Jewish population. Its former name was Wadi al-Jimal. Here, the poet makes a wordplay: instead of *Ein Hayam* ('spring of the sea') he wrote *Ein lelo Hayam*, meaning 'spring (or 'eye') without the sea'.

6 In the cases we are considering here, there is a connection between the physical features mentioned and ethnicity. It represents a difference in relation to what Yochai Oppenheimer argues in his article "On the Becoming of the Mizrahi Male Body" (2014), which is based on an analysis of Mizrahi fiction.

These descriptions diverge from the image of Mizrahim or Arab Jews portrayed by the Israeli Black Panthers[7] or by Mizrahi soldiers. In the article "Is 'Hegemonic Masculinity' Hegemonic as Masculinity? Two Israeli Case Studies", Dafna Hirsh and Dana Grosswirth Kachtan contrast the concept of hegemonic Ashkenazi masculinity, suggesting that "especially in the physical contexts of agricultural labor and military combat, the perception of Arabs and Mizrahi Jews as less civilized than Ashkenazi Jews allowed to associate the former with desirable masculine qualities" (2017, 5). They focused their research on the construction of masculinity among early Zionist ideological workers and on military masculinities and ethnicity in Israel. At least in those specific contexts, they observed that Arab men are associated with valued masculine qualities and Arab and Mizrahi Jewish men are defined as more masculine than Ashkenazi men.

However, this perception does not seem to be present in contemporary Mizrahi poetry, at least in the works of the authors discussed in this paper. It appears that Mizrahi poets' views of their own or of their families' Mizrahi masculine references differ from how Ashkenazi Jews perceive Arabness or Mizrahiness in relation to masculinity.

In the case of Mati Shemoelof's poem (2024, untitled), hegemonic patriarchal masculinities, represented by grandfather Shlomo and the secretary of the kibbutz, present a different attitude through Arabness, even if it does not mark a qualitative difference regarding masculinities:

> Your mother's sewing machine "Singer" is a time machine, that
> [doesn't stop
> Rattling and mumbling,
> One day it appears in a showcase in Rosenthaler Platz.
> At night you dream about your grandmother who walks one
> [morning
> Holding your one-year-old mother's hand,
> picking spice plants, on the Israel-Jordan border
> in the territory of one of the kibbutzim.
> A Jordanian *falah* passed the Jordan river and she blessed him
> [*as-salam 'aleikum*
> At night the Ashkenazi secretary of the kibbutz came to
> [grandfather Shlomo, and
> asked him
> To tell her not to speak with the enemy.
> But he does not agree to cut into little pieces
> the wide map of the Middle East
> in which we live, before and after the border. (Shemoelof 2024, 97)

7 About this Mizrahi social movement, see Bernstein 1984 and Chetrit 2004.

Through the opposite images of sewing together and cutting into little pieces, this poem presents Mizrahi Jews as those who maintain links not only with their own Arabness but also with their Arab neighbourhoods, in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews from the kibbutz, who sever all ties with them. These attitudes represent a paradigm of Israeli ethnocracy (Yiftachel 2000), reflected both in human relationships and in the marginalization of ethnicities and masculinities.

4 Fathers' Prisons and Jailers

In Mati Shemoelof's verses, when he writes: "[…] but I don't remember you speaking | Farsi with my grandfather" (2024, 9) the figure of the father can be seen as the missing link between generations. In general, the parents of these poets, the second generation of migrants, didn't transmit their inherited culture or languages to the following generations.

The Oedipal rebellion of the children against their fathers can be observed in the Mizrahi poetry of third-generation authors as a rejection of the more passive or assimilation-oriented attitudes of their fathers, and in the identification with their grandfathers' or grandparents' feelings of longing and loss, from which arise their aim to "rewrite" history through their "histories", as described earlier.

In Almog Behar's *A Poem for the Prisoners* ([2016] 2017, 26-7; transl. by Matan Kaminer), we witness a conversation between the poetic speaker and his father. In this poem, Behar is competing with his father's and his father's neighbours' way of thinking. He attempts to open their eyes and reveal the "big jail" in which all of them (and all of us) are imprisoned. Here, the father represents a more traditional way of thinking, or a more submissive attitude towards the world in which we live. Behar seeks to challenge this through poetry, even though he acknowledges the difficulty of changing reality in this way.

> I wrote a poem for the prisoners and showed it to my father.
> Said he: What good will poems do the prisoners, and who are we
> to doubt the justice of the jailor, judge and lawmaker?
> Said I: The prisoners of whom I write are us.
> Daily I go back to my cell, await a distant jailor's call.
> At his command I'll place my hands in manacles, and if he asks
> I'll strike the window-bars and beg for freedom.
> Said he: This is all dreamy poet's talk, but you, my son,
> Stand this day well clear of jailhouse doors. I did not beget sons
> for prison, son,
> I'll send you to the Faculty of Law, perhaps, if you desire.
> You might become a judge, instead of poems you'll write sentences
> To ease the world's pain. I answered: Father, as I am your son,

I did not beget progenitors to cower afraid. The jail, you see, is bigger than us both,
It closes now upon us, and the jailor recommends
That you refuse to notice your incarceration, that you ask
To never leave the confines of your cell. Said he: Well then, we all
Are prisoners of God, my son, all bondsmen of His word,
His laws, pronouncements, righteous all, and not a one among us
Has not sinned, do you forget? Said I: This prison, father,
Was erected by men, and daily we assist them
In their work, we build new wards, we set up cameras,
And soon enough they'll have no need of guards, they'll all be fired
And then we shall all guard ourselves. I shall not attend any
Faculty of Law, but then I've already decided
To give up poetry. Said he: Decided what? But I've
Announced up and down the halls of our prison wing
That my son writes songs for liberation day; our neighbours, son,
Are learning now to sing your songs. Said I: I hear you, father,
But those are not my songs they sing, those songs were written by the guards,
From now on I'll write sentences to rival theirs,
Verdicts to rival theirs. From my cell I'll write letters too, to you and mother, in which I'll reveal
That liberation will not come until your grandchildren have gone, long is the struggle Longer than a poem can say, all poems fail. (Behar [2016] 2017, 26-7)

In his struggle for a fairer world, against the power that makes us all prisoners, the son finds a more acquiescent father, a father who worries for his son but seems unaware of the lack of freedom in which he lives. Through this conversation between father and son, Behar questions the power of poetry to fight injustice while simultaneously drawing a comparison between two generations, one embodying a more idealistic vision of the world and society and the other a more pragmatic view.

It is notable that in Almog Behar's work, the grandfather returns to give his grandson his accent in order to reclaim his own presence, whereas the father attempts to silence, or at least to weaken, his son's poetic struggle.

In Shlomi Hatuka's *Family Tree (Roots Work)* (2015), we find the figure of a resigned father, one who lives in another kind of prison – the prison of the home and of the television, a machine of unattainable dreams that generates frustration and reminds him of his failures. This is a significant poem to highlight the relationships between generations, genders, and social classes. It is based on a real exercise that most Israeli students undertake in schools, an educational project where each student documents their personal

family heritage, known as "Roots Work" (*avodat shorashim*). Through his poetic work, Hatuka highlights the discriminations suffered by his Mizrahi family and, in doing so, addresses broader social and historical discriminations.

> On my mother's side
> I am the third generation of housemaids
> Who cleaned the Ashkenazi stairs
> And polished their mirrors,
> On my father's side
> I am the second generation of a young man who aspired to be a [singer
> But was condemned to be the audience
> (In our house the living room was a prison
> And the television an instrument of torture:
> On the other side of the tempered glass a loud crow was out of tune
> Taunting him from a branch),
> On my grandmother's side
> I am the grandson of Shulamit
> Who paid a little girl as a tax to the Jewish Agency
> And on my grandfather's side
> I am the grandson of Salah Seleyman
> Who built his kingdom in the synagogue
> Because they left him no other space
> Those who cut off his ringlets
> And did not give him a place to find his faith
> Those who stole his books,
> Those in whose family tree
> No matter how high you climb
> You will never find
> God. (Hatuka 2015, 15)

In these verses, feminine figures, such as those of the mother and grandmother, take precedence over the masculine ones. In all of Hatuka's poetry, it seems that the mother plays a more positive role than the father. She is a working woman, a housekeeper for wealthier Ashkenazi families (and here, the social separation and discrimination should be noted), but she is also a strong and positive figure who does everything she can for her family. In another of Hatuka's poems, *The South or, The Gospel of Matthew* (2015), the poet has a short dialogue with his mother:

[…] "Mom, retire, you have no strength
in your arms anymore…"

"And who will retire me,
ya ibni?… I thought you would be
a judge, or a doctor…"

"…Mom,
you have no strength in your arms anymore…"

For all the workers,
for all those who make sacrifices,
for all the roots
that go on in pain and darkness
but know that, thanks to them, the tree will be big and beautiful:

the stars are dead
the roots are alive.
[…] (Hatuka 2015, 19-22)

It is evident here as well that strength and perseverance, despite difficulties, are represented by the figure of the mother. This poem also highlights the importance of social discrimination and of family roots in Hatuka's poetry, embodied in the mother.

The figure of the father, on the other hand, carries a different connotation. In the poem *Family Tree*, the father represents the failure of the second-generation immigrants, who once had aspirations in the host society, but were, in different ways, rejected by it. In Hatuka's poetry, the father does not play a central role either in society or in the family. He is represented as a spectator, as a passive victim of television and its distorted portrayal of life, as well as a resigned, and perhaps unaware, victim of social and ethnic discrimination.

Hatuka's portrayal of the father is reminiscent of that of Samir, a Moroccan emigrant described by Alice Elliot in the book *Arab Masculinities*: "Samir had started spending increasing amounts of time at home, watching television" (2020, 97). Elliot uses this case study to demonstrate that migration from Morocco to Europe (in this case to Italy) does not necessarily represent a transition to manhood, but rather can reveal a precarious need to repeatedly confirm one's masculinity within his original family. Samir symbolized a failed integration into the host society, and when he went back home, he was unable to engage in any work.

In the same way, Hatuka's father's inactivity seems to question his role as a (masculine) role model for his son, representing a failed attempt at integration or assimilation.

Two relevant concepts to consider here are Raewyn Connell's notions of "hegemonic masculinity" and "marginalized masculinities", which change depending on the context and represent "the configuration of practices generated in particular situations in a changing structure of relationship" (2005, 81). In Hatuka's poetry, the figure of the father serves as a non-hegemonic example of masculinity in relation to gender identity construction in Israel; he represents Mizrahi masculinity, characterized by the specific challenges faced by marginalized masculinities from economic, social, and ethnic perspectives. In fact, the hegemonic masculinity in Israel is considered to be the Ashkenazi one, or at least the image of the New Israeli Jews who broke all ties with the diaspora (see Raz Yosef 2004). This form of masculinity is related to the fight for the land, to agricultural labour, and, more generally, with European physical traits and culture.

Despite the points raised above, it is important to introduce the concept of "cultural repertoire" as defined by Hirsh and Kachtan. They argue: "By 'cultural repertoire' we mean more than a set of discourses and representations. We use the term repertoire to refer to a structured set of models for organizing human action and perception" (2017, 15), and continue by stating that: "we need a concept of masculinity as a cultural repertoire, of which people make situated selections" (2017, 17). This definition allows the idea of "hegemonic masculinity" to shift in a way that is more related to context and decision. In contemporary Mizrahi poetry, the elements that characterize fathers and grandfathers can be seen as part of the repertoire of Mizrahi masculinities' models. From this, each individual – and in this case each poet – makes a conscious or unconscious selection to describe their masculine models as they perceive them.

Regarding masculine roles, in Hatuka's poem about family roots, the figure of the father is portrayed as more passive, lazy or resigned than that of the mother, while his grandfather is represented as a victim of the discriminations that followed his migration to Israel. While it is true that all members of his family reflect the consequence of discrimination of some form, his mother and father react differently to their situation. In contrast, the histories of his grandmother and grandfather represent the injustices associated with their migration. His grandfather's experience is portrayed as the result of the discrimination he faced under the secularism of the Zionist state to which he was relocated. Here, the notion of theft emerges in the critique of hegemonic Israeli culture, which is seen as attempting to erase the traces of diasporic cultures, as well as diasporic masculinities.

Migrant Mizrahi men are portrayed as victims of state policies. Hatuka's grandfather, for instance, was not permitted to wear his

ringlets, symbols of his religiousness, and he could not bring his books, which were emblematic of his (religious) culture, to Israel with him.

Mizrahi women were victims as well. Hatuka's grandmother lost one of her children after arriving in Israel. Until a few years ago, when documents on the affair were published, the family believed that the child was kidnaped. This belief shaped Hatuka's life both as a social activist within the Amram Association (The Yemenite, Mizrahi and Balkan Children Affair) and as a poet who is deeply committed to the importance of postmemory and of rewriting Zionist canonical narration.

Therefore, a sense of responsibility or a kind of 'care work' – as Piera Rossetto suggests[8] – can be observed in Hatuka's relationship with his grandparents' heritage, as well as towards the mother. However, this sense of care does not extend to the character of the father, who represents a failure of integration and a failure to transmit the family's heritage. In fact, in the poem that opens Hatuka's second poetry book, *Island* (2020), the figure of the father is associated with the moon, darkness, absence, and to some extent, violence. This reflects a rejection of the father, in contrast to the mother, who is portrayed as the sun, light, and a positive force. Hatuka's father represents most of the characteristics associated with a patriarchal construction of masculinity:

> It is possible to describe a family
> Saying that we are sparkling little stars
> The sun is the mother
> And the moon –
> Related to the dark
> Threatening to disappear
> Coming back as a fist – Is
> the father.

Hatuka goes on to compare the figure of the father with Icarus, who escaped from the island of Crete – the same island Hatuka left behind. Like Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and saw his wings melt, Hatuka's father appears to have lost his connection to his homeland and, perhaps, to the people he loved. We also learn that he lost his dreams, including his wish to become a singer. It seems that his desire to fly too high or to go too far caused him to lose what he once had: the bonds of love.

8 Piera Rossetto, "Broken Masculinities. Writing the Mizrahi Father", paper presented at the International Workshop *In the Name of the Father? Writing Jewish Masculinities across the Middle East and North Africa*, Venice, 28-29 October 2024, Ca' Foscari University of Venice – Department of Asian and North African Studies.

In the plane I remember to myself not to be dazzled
By the spotlights, so that will not melt
The tender bonds of love,
So that I will not repeat the mistake of Icarus, I mean, of my father.

Lastly, in a classical Oedipal-themed poem, while drawing on the imagery of the prison, the figure of the father is portrayed as the jailer against whom the son must rebel:

Father approaches the road
Like a jailer. One has to rebel
Against the father, to see the world.

Using the imagery of prison and rebellion against the father's generation, although in different ways, Shlomi Hatuka and Almog Behar distance themselves from the figure of the father to get closer to the figure of the grandfather and to relate to that generation's histories of migration and their culture.

Mati Shemoelof's case is different. He lost his father, and has dedicated many poems to him. In his poetry, the struggle of a Mizrahi poet centres on resisting the "white colonial father" (Raz Yosef 2004, 41) and addressing the discrimination perpetuated by the Zionist State against Arab people, both Jewish and non-Jewish.

While critiques of Israeli politics are prevalent in his work, when it comes to the figure of his father, his verses express only nostalgia and a desire to preserve his memory. It seems that Shemoelof collects his father's memories as his father collected stamps or coins, weaving his presence into various verses and situations.

In *The Journey to the Lost Vocabulary of My Father* (2019), the poetical speaker identifies with his father:

My father had a collection of coins from all over the world,
That seemed to me like the treasure of an old pirate
And I took them out of the used plastic bag
And I classified the coins by the size of the nose of the coined face,
Or the sound that they made when they fell on the floor
And now my daughter doesn't know that I am the father who is
[collecting coins
With no purpose and I bless
Be blessed the one who takes out our longings
To stay within that unbearable togetherness,
Charmed those who are killing us
And another day is passing, letters are coming, letters are leaving,
Letters remain open for the grief
and only the body forgets (how) to scab. (Shemoelof 2019, 26)

This heritage of customs, as well as words, passed down through generations, represents not only what Mizrahi poets want to rescue from their grandfathers' past but also what they hope to pass on to their daughters and sons: "other languages", memories, and longings.

5 Conclusions

The experience of migration from Arab countries to Israel plays a significant role as an experience that third-generation Mizrahi authors, born in Israel, seek to recover and rescue from oblivion. In their poetic works, as discussed in this paper, these poets identify with the feelings of nonbelonging and estrangement experienced by their grandfathers. Even as native-born Israelis, they give voice to the silenced narratives of their grandparents' generation.

This endeavour implies some kind of critique against their fathers, who failed to transmit the cultural heritage of their parents. It manifests as a rejection of the assimilationist tendencies and acceptance of Israeli societal values, which risk erasing their families' experiences in Arab countries. The poets' parents' generation often endured the challenges faced by their own parents but responded by seeking assimilation into the surrounding society, often without succeeding, as Hatuka's father demonstrates.

For this reason, the third generation of poets engage in an act of postmemory. This practice highlights a masculine lineage in which the concept of masculinity aligns more closely with the model set by their grandfathers rather than by their fathers. It recovers some elements of Arabness, echoed in language and physical features, such as moustaches and beards, which these poets borrow from them in their verses.

Connecting memories, bodies, and generations, the verses that conclude Almog Behar's poem dedicated to his grandfather sum up this discussion of the male figures in his family and their legacy in contemporary Mizrahi poetry: "[…] For years I recall | All the other cities | I didn't recall as a child | Composing prayers | and growing upon myself | the sinews and skin | of memories | breaking over the waves" (2017, 16).

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"The Great and Mighty Body of Writing": On the Writing Body in Sami Berdugo's *All Five of Us*

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Abstract This essay examines Sami Berdugo's novel *All Five of Us* through the lens of the 'writing body'. The concept integrates narrative poetics with corporeal practices. Drawing on previous scholarship on Berdugo's engagement with Mizrahi identity, language, and embodiment, I argue that his writing body emerges as a charged site of trauma, secrecy, pleasure, and creative power. The novel's fractured structure mirrors bodily ruptures while transforming them into a mode of literary agency and resistance.

Keywords Sami Berdugo. Writing body. Mizrahi literature. Corporeality. Narrative poetics. Trauma. Language. Body. Gender.

1 No One in the World can Validate and Uplift Me Like Writing Does

In an interview published in the journal *Mikan*, author Sami Berdugo linked the act of writing with the uprightness of the self and the body:

> I mentioned that there is a sexual pleasure in it. Because alongside this difficulty that I am immersed in, in the moment of writing, there is no verdict, and I am at the heart of my own words, together

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> with language, with the world, and with everything that happens there. And there is a tremendous awakening, a great erectness, a very strong validation of myself, a validation that no one in life is able to give me like writing does. There is no person in the world who can, neither my mother nor my father, not my friend or my partner, no one, not even a literary critic who writes the most brilliant review about me, no one in the world can validate and uplift me like writing does, making me feel that I exist, that I am here. (Berdugo 2017, 459)

Berdugo marks, in words of desire and pleasure, the presence of his existence as a writing body. For Berdugo, writing is a space of awakening, a space where the self becomes upright and the body is stirred. The sexual connotations, "erectness", "awakening", are already embedded within the writing, charging both the body and the self with libido to the extent that the "writing self" becomes a singular space of sexual pleasure. As I will demonstrate, in his novel *All Five of Us* (2022), Berdugo constructs the writing body as a body full of life, pleasure, and desire. In this sense, Berdugo challenges conceptions of the body in both Israeli and Jewish culture, on both the Western (Ashkenazi) and Eastern (Mizrahi) sides of the spectrum.

In his book *The Zionist Body*, Michael Gluzman argues that with the rise of Jewish nationalism in the late nineteenth century and the consolidation of Zionist ideology, this ideology was also formulated through bodily terms, repeatedly declaring the necessity of constructing a new Jewish body. Until the emergence of Zionism, Hebrew literature produced an elaborate discourse on the Jewish body's deficiencies, portraying it as exilic, weak, hunched, and bent over books (Gluzman 2007, 11-13; Peleg 2000, 31-58; Boyarin 2000, 71-104). This discourse originated from the internalization of the Jewish body's image within the framework of nineteenth-century European antisemitic thought. The rise of Zionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was accompanied by an imaginative and ideological reconfiguration of the exilic Jewish body. According to Zionist ideology, a national, healthy life was believed to restore a degree of vitality, physicality, and material presence to Jewish existence. Thus, the Zionist male body was constructed as strong, natural, capable, beautiful, and youthful – standing in opposition to the exilic Jewish body, which Zionist consciousness sought to discard, characterizing it as diseased, defective, unnatural, ugly, and weak (Oppenheimer 2014, 104-5).

In contrast to this Western-Zionist perception, Yochai Oppenheimer argues that the conceptualization of the Mizrahi body closely resembled that of the exilic Jewish body, which had been marginalized and rejected. Israeli discourse constructed the notion of the 'Western body', a reincarnation of the 'Zionist body', as a model of sexual

normalcy, health, hygiene, and social functionality (Raz 2004, 31-62; Oppenheimer 2014, 35-6). In opposition to this, it positioned the 'Mizrahi body' as its flawed and threatening counterpart. From this perspective, Oppenheimer contends that the Mizrahi body serves as the heir to the exilic Jewish body: both were objects of rejection and subjected to corrective practices (Oppenheimer 2014, 104-6). Aziza Khazzoom, for instance, has demonstrated that the very same images once associated with the exilic Jew were later applied, in the 1950s, to Jewish immigrants from Arab countries. These immigrants were perceived as dirty, unhygienic, uneducated, and sexually aggressive. The Mizrahi body was thus cast as the Other, distinct and separate (Khazzoom 1999, 385-428).

However, Mizrahi literary discourse disengaged from Zionist discourse and its dichotomous constructs of the body. According to Oppenheimer, the rigid opposition between normative and defective masculinity is largely absent from Mizrahi literature. Instead, alternative constraints and resolutions emerge, offering a new bodily language. The Zionist discourse on the body remained foreign to second-generation Mizrahi writers, failing to evoke in them a need for its internalization that is, the notion that they must conceive of themselves as 'new Jews' whose immigration to Israel constituted a phase in the correction of their supposedly defective bodies. Oppenheimer argues that Hebrew literature presents two opposing representations of the Mizrahi body. On the one hand, it appears as an object of control and subjugation; on the other, it is fluid and decentralized, a subject that resists domination and attains an autonomous existence beyond normative boundaries and established meanings (Oppenheimer 2014, 105-11; Mishani 2006). He proposes that the Mizrahi body should be viewed as a body 'in becoming': a concept drawn from Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework (Deleuze, Guattari 1986, 9-15), emphasizing the multiple ways in which it undergoes transformation. In doing so, the Mizrahi body destabilizes and disrupts the dichotomous order of the Western-Zionist system.

Sami Berdugo is one of the most prominent and influential writers in contemporary Israeli literature, particularly within the field of Mizrahi writing. His work has received wide critical and institutional recognition, including the Sapir Prize (2011) for *Zeh ha-Dvarim* (That is to say, 2010) and the Bialik Prize for lifetime achievement (2018). Scholarly and critical discussions highlight the complexity of his writing, which oscillates between engaging with Mizrahi identity politics and persistently unsettling fixed frameworks of identity (Haver 2006, 4; Levi 2014, 227-35; Oppenheimer 2010, 282-306; Alon 2011, 4) A substantial body of research focuses on Berdugo's contribution to shaping a distinctive Mizrahi literary discourse. Yochai Oppenheimer points to the familial structures that dominate

his work: complex, castrating, and marginal systems within which the protagonists are formed. The father, and sometimes the mother, often appear as weakened, silent, and inaccessible figures embodying the 'Mizrahi past' pushed to the margins of Israeli society. The second generation seeks to construct a new identity but does so within familial and social frameworks that limit their agency and mark them as peripheral to the Zionist mainstream. Oppenheimer's reading positions Berdugo within a clear political and cultural field, where his fiction both reflects and articulates intergenerational rifts and experiences of Mizrahi exclusion.

Within this field, however, Berdugo develops narrative and poetic strategies of resistance as well as bodily practices that complicate straightforward readings through identity politics. Hanna Soker-Schwager focuses on the poetic dimension of his writing and identifies what she terms a "poetics of excess": linguistic, corporeal, and material. In his book such as *Ki Gi* [Because guy] and *Kakha Ani Medaberet im ha-Ruach* [And say to the wind], language behaves as bodily matter: overflowing, erupting, and refusing to be contained by coherent interpretation. These excess produces what she calls a "cut in the real", (Soker-Schwager 2021, 9) an attempt to reach trauma, the body, and memory through linguistic multiplicity and unrestrained exposure. Soker-Schwager argues that Berdugo does not offer a coherent identity or a fixed representational mode; rather, he writes from a vibrating space between language and body, unsettling any single interpretive paradigm including identity politics itself (Soker-Schwager 2021, 347-61). Yoni Levene (2017) highlights another dimension of this strategy. According to his reading, Berdugo exposes readers to stereotypical modes of reading often applied to Mizrahi texts, pathological, biographical approaches, while simultaneously dismantling them from within. In the short story "Shuk", [Trade] for example, the narrator leads readers from an initially judgmental perception of fraught mother–son relations to an understanding of the narrative as a sophisticated *Ars poetica*, not a straightforward confession. Levene argues that Berdugo strategically adopts the fantasy of literature for its own sake, a supposedly pure, apolitical literary space, only to expose the power relations embedded between authorial identity, readerly expectations, and artistic expression. His work thus performs a double movement: it establishes a distinct Mizrahi identity while simultaneously undermining the possibility of reading it through a single, fixed identity lens (Levene 2017, 476-506). Similarly, Yigal Schwartz (2022) emphasizes the bodily dimension of this destabilization. He reads Berdugo's writing as a sadomasochistic performance, in which the narrator's total bodily, sexual, and emotional exposure positions the reader within an ethical and aesthetic impasse. One cannot simply identify or detach: leaving the text is akin to admitting the failure of art; staying implicates the

reader in the violence of the performance. Through this mechanism, Berdugo not only reflects Mizrahi marginality but also articulates a defiant, non-compliant stance within the Hebrew literary field, simultaneously affirming the reality of social violence while resisting its smooth literary containment (Schwartz 2022).

I would like to argue that in *Kulanu ha-Hamisha* (*All Five of Us*, Berdugo 2022), Berdugo integrates both of the critical tendencies identified in previous scholarship: the narrative poetics and the corporeal dimension, into a single constellation: the writing body. At the core of his work, two interwoven narratives emerge: the question of his position as a writer within the literary field, and the personal and familial story of the narrator. Berdugo's writing draws from the raw material of lived experience: "He crafted a story from the leftover bread crumbs on the kitchen counter of our childhood home" (Berdugo 2022, 276). However, the act of writing simultaneously liberates the body from familial, national, and literary constraints. The writing body in Berdugo's work emerges as a charged site of both secret violence and intense pleasure and desire. It bears the marks of familial and social violence, while at the same time asserting itself as a source of creative power and sensual agency. Through this dynamic, Berdugo challenges national images of the weak, exilic, bookish Jewish body. Writing becomes a mode of re-inscribing the body, not merely as an object of trauma, but as an active agent of transformation. Through this embodied practice, Berdugo constructs a literary "I" that both asserts and elevates itself, distancing his work from postcolonial identity-based readings while still engaging with them.

Berdugo's 'writing body' is a body that has undergone an act of violence, one that excludes it from language and severs it from the Jewish chain of transmission between parents and children. At the heart of the novel lies the 'primordial sin' committed by the father against his children: the youngest of the five siblings is killed in a car accident, and at his funeral, the father unilaterally decides to recite the *Kaddish* alone, without including his other sons, despite the fact that they have all reached *bar mitzvah* age. This event is revealed only at the end of the novel, yet it serves as the driving force behind the entire narrative. It is the curse that lingers over them, the rupture of their bond with their deceased brother, enacted by their father. In response, the siblings vow that one day they will exhume their brother's body and recite the Kaddish together. The plot revolves around this secret, the 'primordial sin' of the father at his son's grave and the vow made by the siblings. This breach constitutes the abyss at the core of the novel:

> No one can fathom now just how deeply all four of us might be harmed, perhaps even more than that. Because if this moment has arrived, then for the first time in our lives, the four of us stand at

> the edge of an abyss. And how will each of us continue to defy it despite the abyss? (Berdugo 2022, 10)

The brothers' vow to recite Kaddish at the open grave of their younger brother serves as a rectification of the father's primordial sin. The words must be spoken in confrontation with the abyss that resides within them, to expose the secret, to reach the core of things. In doing so, the brothers seek to redress the injustice, to restore themselves to themselves, and ultimately, to return themselves to language.

The 'primordial sin' committed by the father at his son's grave creates a rupture between the parents and the siblings, and among the siblings themselves. In doing so, the father shatters the covenant that once bound the five brothers together. This fraternal bond is marked by a shared genetic defect: all five siblings suffer from a 'greenstick fracture', a break in one of the soft rib bones that, if fully fractured, could lead to paralysis. The siblings live under the constant threat that their lives could be immobilized in an instant, as the narrator confesses at the opening of the novel: "We are four children, cut apart, torn between columns and walls, carried weakly through the air, unable to grasp the hooks planted around us" (Berdugo 2022, 7). And elsewhere: "An old core of sealed loyalty" (Berdugo 2022, 47). The fracture in the rib alludes to the biblical origin of woman from Adam's rib, suggesting that the children are bound to one another, as if born from one another. The greenstick fracture thus becomes a birthmark, a scar, and a shared covenant. The father's primordial sin violently severs the bond between the four living siblings and their deceased brother, expelling them from sacred language, from the chain of transmission, and from their fraternal covenant. In doing so, he transforms them into a fragmented, shattered network:

> We are not a single cohesive unit. 'Family' is an unusable noun for us, […] That is the truth: we are four children severed from our mothers and fathers. […] Though both were with us, they did not belong to us. […] We saw, with our own eyes, our father and mother detaching themselves from us, and we, with a greenstick fracture in each of us, in our very bones discovered that our lives were not in our hands, but merely displayed before us. (Berdugo 2022, 23-4)

And elsewhere: "A tangled and conflicted network among themselves" (Berdugo 2022, 47). This network of relations between the children exists not only within their physical bodies but also within the language of the text itself. Throughout the novel, Berdugo employs the first-person plural, *Kulanu ha-Hamisha* (All Five of Us), to signify the shared consciousness that binds the siblings together. The greenstick fracture thus emerges as a motif embedded both within their bodies and at the very heart of the novel's narrative structure.

Yet, the greenstick fracture is not merely a covenant; it is also the curse imposed upon the siblings. The rupture of the bond between the living brothers and their deceased sibling, along with the looming threat of paralysis inherent in their shared condition, haunts the novel. In response to this trauma, the siblings decide to separate from one another, ceasing all communication for fourteen years. From that moment onward, they become fragmented shards, destabilizing social structures time and again.

As I argue, the poetics of the writing body, the broken body, is also the poetics of a fractured, fragmented, and repetitive text. The novel's structure mirrors its thematic concerns: divided, ruptured, wounded, and discontinuous. The abyss at the core of the narrative translates into a form of writing in which the storyline remains fractured, scarred, and digressive, resisting convergence into a single coherent novelistic form.

In his book *Bodies and Names* (2016), Galili Shahar examines the relationship between the body and writing in Agnon's stories. He proposes a reading that interweaves bodies, language, and script, arguing that in Agnon's work, bodily wounds, deformities, ruptures, decay, and discharge, are transposed into linguistic textures and stylistic registers (Shahar 2016, 150-203). Similarly, Berdugo's novel, which he explicitly defines as a 'non-novel' in its opening pages, refuses to reveal the secret at its core, instead orbiting around it, perpetually deferring resolution.

The greenstick fracture does not merely signify a familial defect; it also embodies the children's bodies within broader ideological and national frameworks of corporeal perception. The term greenstick fracture functions as a metonym for an olive branch, a symbol of peace in Jewish and Israeli culture. However, rather than signifying harmony, it marks the internal conflict between the siblings and their relationship with Israeli society. As previously discussed, Zionist ideology positioned Mizrahim as the heirs of the exilic Jewish body, attributing to them an inherent genetic defect: they were perceived as weak, fragile, and disruptive to social order. Consequently, the children deviate repeatedly from the prescribed path, challenging hegemonic structures. Berdugo subverts this imposed genetic flaw, the 'Oriental' body that designates the Mizrahi subject as the Other, as inferior within Israeli society, by transforming it into the 'writing body'. The libidinal, sexual desire, and pleasure inherent in writing render the narrator's body omnipotent and strong, countering the discourse of deficiency imposed upon it.

2 Greenstick Fracture: The Broken Body and the Fractured Narrative

The greenstick fracture is not only a physical rupture but also a rupture embedded in language:

> Our eldest brother's limbs fall asleep and tingle, his knees lock. Our sister's spine suffers from scoliosis, her feet are too flat, lacking an arch, and cause her pain. My hip joints wear down, affecting my sacroiliac joint; my fingers are inflamed. Our youngest brother has an inflamed Achilles tendon, which intensifies the pain in his heel bone; his left arm trembles, and he also has a heel spur. We do not know whether the greenstick fracture is the reason that each of us stumbles here and there, that bruises appear on our bodies and linger. Words, too, get stuck between our lips. Often, we utter them in tangled order, our pronunciation clumsy as we search for the correct sequence of speech. (Berdugo 2022, 49)

The fracture is inscribed at the very heart of language and at the core of the novel. Words resemble bruises on the novel's body, marking the wounds of its fractured narrative. The book's subtitle, *Not A Novel*, introduces an internal rupture within its literary genre. The sections of the text are not referred to as chapters but as "papers": "Who will be left with these papers I am now copying onto?" (Berdugo 2022, 57). These papers are drafts, fragments, and shards born out of rupture. They divert the novel from its own narrative trajectory, concealing it so that the secret at its core remains undisclosed, the story of the exhumed child must not be revealed. The narrative hovers at the edge of an abyss. For this reason, it is a *Not A Novel*, the hyphen functions as a boundary, a partition that must not be crossed, a barrier obstructing passage, like a final support before plunging into the chasm between words. But the hyphen may also be read as a metonym for the grave of the youngest brother, separating the siblings from their father, words from meaning. Berdugo severs the novel at its foundation, instating a fracture between the narrator and the reader.

The narrator's bodily distortions are mirrored in the distortions of the narrative, where deviation and delay disrupt the linear progression of the plot. The narrative fracture, coupled with the fear of revealing the unutterable, leads the narrator from the outset into digressions, deferrals, and detours away from the central storyline. This is a narrative that moves backward rather than advancing forward. The novel opens with a police officer summoning all the siblings to their eldest brother's home (formerly their parents' house) to prevent his suicide. Yet, the narrator does not immediately respond to this urgent call. Instead, from this moment onward, the plot veers off course,

turning backward to recount the history of the five siblings. Although the novel is structured around a single day, the narrator disrupts this temporal frame, expanding it into a retrospective gaze that unfolds the family's past. Notably, the urgent summons generates a linguistic structure in which past and future become entangled: "Here it is Thursday. Before I am about to leave here and drive to our eldest brother's locked house, reality's turning away strikes within me once more; it has never granted us, the four children, a chance to confront face-to-face who we are" (Berdugo 2022, 7). The event itself is rendered as a future-past, imagined by the narrator as if it has already occurred. If we examine the temporal framework, we might suggest that the singular day contains within it past, present, and future: an interwoven temporal fabric through which the narrator gazes with both estrangement and the detached perspective of a witness. This perception of time evokes Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History' (Benjamin 1969, 257-8) whose body faces forward toward progress while his head remains turned backward, confronted with history as a series of accumulating ruins. In the "Theses on the Concept of History", Benjamin (Benjamin 1969, 253-64) breaks the chronological narrative of progress into fragments and shards, through which he seeks to create a new history. In a similar manner, the narrator dismantles the plot into broken pieces of stories. He is standing at the margins of life, observes them as a vast landscape of familial wreckage, a chain of fractures, deviations, and fragments scattered across space. However, unlike Benjamin's angel, who gazes upon history from above, the narrator, by the novel's end, is compelled to travel to his eldest brother's home. He does not merely observe the ruins from a distance, he plunges into them, becoming once again part of their shattered remains.

The fracture in the narrative is not merely a rupture within the novel itself; it also signifies the narrator's rupture with the literary community. Throughout the novel, the story of the bad advice given by a famous writer to the young narrator recurs repeatedly, his suggestion the narrator should 'wait' to publish his major works and save them for later. Just as the father severed the children's connection to language, so too does the renowned writer attempt to fracture the bond between the young narrator and literary writing. This advice operates as a form of literary castration, an internal disruption of the writing process, one that ultimately inscribes the greenstick fracture within the very act of writing. The repetition of this anecdote throughout the novel signals its profound resonance for the narrator, marking the internal wound that echoes past events, the rupture between the father and the narrator. Yet, it is precisely here that the writer refuses to abide by the misguided counsel of the established author. Instead, he reconfigures the dynamic between

the self and writing, between the body and language, transforming the fracture into an assertion of literary agency.

The absent body, the dead body of the child, leads not only to his physical erasure but also to the death of the story itself, to its points of stagnation and impasse. Berdugo recounts the death of the youngest brother, struck by an American driver. Yet, instead of checking on the child's condition, the bystanders turn their attention to the American woman, consoling and restraining her. Even at the moment of his death, the younger brother experiences estrangement and alienation; no one approaches him as he lies lifeless by the roadside: "One of the women kept asking in a pained voice: 'Who is he? Do you know him? Do you know his name? What is his name?' And all that time, the firm grip on the half-American woman's arm did not relent" (Berdugo 2022, 55). The younger brother lies abandoned on the roadside, a stranger, with no one to hold him in his final moments. He dies alone at the edge of the road, while the grip on the half-American woman remains unbroken. Something in this scene appears distorted, morally inverted, as if the story is being told from the wrong side of history.

Just as the brother dies alone, cast aside, so too does the narrative itself seem to reach moments of dead ends:

> Why am I not writing now what must and should be written? How can I come to terms with the cruel fact that in every written story there will always be something missing, something whose significance I failed to recognize, something I pushed away or relinquished? (Berdugo 2022, 30)

Further reinforcing this absence, The Narrator repeatedly laments the solitude of his writing, his lack of a literary community:

> Who will be left with these papers I am now copying onto? I think (dream?) of the many people of the Israeli nation, the millions who, justifiably, recoil from any form of art and storytelling. In the world of most people in this land, there is neither book nor painting; they do not acknowledge their existence, or they even cast them aside. A deep pain resurfaces in me, knowing that I speak only on behalf of these dear castaways. (Berdugo 2022, 57)

Literary writing reaches its point of no return, its internal castration. In this sense, the narrator inadvertently follows the misguided advice of the famous author who urged him to delay writing his most important truths. He withholds the full revelation of the father's transgression, the injustice committed at his son's grave, and in doing so, inflicts a flaw upon the narrative itself. This is a writing that is

castrated, lifeless, a narrative that erases itself, diminishes itself, and leaves itself for dead by the roadside.

3 The Upright Body and Libidinal Writing

Yet, despite the body's susceptibility to fracture and paralysis, a certain reversal occurs midway through the novel. The theme of the greenstick fracture is almost entirely abandoned, barely mentioned by the narrator. Instead, the text shifts toward manifestations of libido, pleasure, and sexuality. At a particular moment, a transformation takes place within the narrator's body: shifting from a figure that passively accepts its corporeal inferiority and the ever-present threat of fracture, to one that actively celebrates its homosexual desire, as if the narrator has discovered his escape route.

> There was also the blond-reddish-haired boy from the religious yeshiva […]. I felt that he gave himself to me entirely, without restriction. […] There were times when I moved up and down on his back, and suddenly, a sharp stab pierced one of my ribs, radiating in waves toward my pelvis. It twisted my body, and I cried out, falling with a thud onto the young man's bare back. (Berdugo 2022, 134)

This stab in the rib marks the greenstick fracture, a moment in which the body could have been paralyzed. Yet, desire and sexuality seemingly heal it, as if repairing something deeply fractured within. This moment represents Berdugo's 'becoming-body', the transformative process that unfolds at the midpoint of the novel: a transition from a broken body to one full of vitality, from the familial collective 'all of us' to the singular 'I', from the constraints of the childhood home to the private room in Mariana's apartment. The novel unfolds through a physical and cognitive movement between the natural landscape, where the narrator feels liberated and awakened, and the private room, where writing takes place. This movement constitutes the process of self-becoming, a line of escape through which the narrator liberates himself from the familial narrative, from literary criticism, and from the Israeli-Western ideological framework. Deleuze and Guattari theorize the 'body in becoming', discussing the multiple forms of becoming that are not merely acts of resistance against institutionalized writing imposed upon the body, but also alternative, fluid, and multifaceted modes of bodily experience (Deleuze, Guattari 1986, 9-15). According to them, these 'becomings' generate freedom of movement and produce intensities that possess intrinsic value. Yochai Oppenheimer expands on this, arguing that such a framework allows for a departure from the dichotomous theoretical model that

positions power in opposition to resistance, as well as from the Zionist historical framework that constructs the Zionist body in contrast to the exilic body (Oppenheimer 2014, 109). Between the meadow and the private room, a movement unfolds, a movement that celebrates the freedom of the self, the body, and writing simultaneously. This is a liberation detached from the constraints of literary criticism and biographical narration.

This process of 'becoming' translates into Berdugo's 'writing body'. In an interview, Berdugo reflects on his writing process: "I can say that this is truly my absolute nakedness. It is my complete exposure in every possible aspect. […] It is so concrete, so physical, so tactile. It is aliveness" (Berdugo 2017, 458). Writing, for Berdugo, is an intimate space of selfhood, where pleasure and vitality manifest. He describes the act of writing as akin to an act of love with men:

> Was it their very maleness that, in my mind, so perfectly corresponded with the act of writing? In the morning, after my encounter with the exploitative literary woman, I dropped to the floor, pulled a blank sheet of paper from the corner, and sketched the shape of a story in lines and blocks. I thought of filling it only with women. 'Write about women,' I commanded myself, but I could not. To my dismay, I realized that every woman in my world was merely a station on the way toward one man or another. While women seemed to me a repetitive motif, the physical form and character of men appeared ever-changing, shifting before my eyes, growing in their uniqueness. (Berdugo 2022, 191)

The descent to the floor to write about men parallels an act of love with writing itself. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Roland Barthes explores the relationship between text, language, body, and desire, arguing that reading is not merely an intellectual act but also a bodily and erotic experience. Barthes employs the term *jouissance*, which in French exceeds the meaning of mere 'pleasure', suggesting an intense, even transgressive, experience. Texts of this nature generate moments of linguistic and narrative instability, leading the reader into a disorienting and sensuous engagement with the text. Barthes proposes two modes of writing, two possible movements of the "supine hand": one that "incises, carves, marks", a writing that seeks to penetrate the depth of a secret; The other is a "brushstroke", a circular, protective, enveloping mode of writing (Barthes 1975, 37). The pleasure in Berdugo's writing lies precisely in the way he 'penetrates' the text, 'incises' it, leaves a 'mark', writing things as they are. His writing is a transgressive experience, a space that is at once sacred and intensely alive, intertwining the body and the senses. Berdugo's writing penetrates the very essence of things. It is not coincidental that Yigal Schwartz (2022) and Hanna Soker-Schwager

(2008, 153-75) express discomfort in response to the homoerotic depictions in his novel. Berdugo writes what must be written. In this context, it is worth noting that a few years ago, Berdugo taught a writing course titled: "The Knife or the Blanket? How Do We Write?" Indeed, Berdugo's writing does not veil or conceal; it incises, exposes, and penetrates, leaving an indelible mark on the text.

Within the space of writing, an ongoing act of intrusion and penetration occurs into the writing process itself, into the 'writing body'. At the beginning of the novel, when Mariana offers the narrator a room in her villa, she confesses: "I have always wanted to be close to someone engaged in writing" (Berdugo 2022, 16). By the novel's end, the narrator sees Mariana invading his room, peering into his papers, and infiltrating his writing. In a parallel moment, she unexpectedly enters the bathroom while the narrator is showering. Before her, both the nakedness of writing and the nakedness of the body are exposed. It is as if Mariana seeks to penetrate the book itself, to enter the words and inhabit them as both body and presence. This intrusion into the act of writing is ultimately successful, Mariana enters the novel and becomes part of it. At the same time, the narrator penetrates her character, delving into her thoughts and motivations. In an interview, Berdugo was asked about his writing process and responded: "I hear myself through the characters, or the characters hear me. Sometimes there is no boundary; the boundary is unclear. I am the character; the character is me. It is not an easy thing" (Berdugo 2017, 458). Writing, then, is a transgressive space, borderless, unstable, and perpetually invaded. It is a space open to the narrator's consuming gaze, through which he penetrates the characters, animates them, and gives them voice. At the same time, the characters, too, penetrate him, entering the text and dissolving the boundary between self and fiction.

4 The Primordial Sin and the Law

As noted, the father's 'primordial sin' dismantled the bond between the siblings, severing them from language specifically, from sacred language and the chain of transmission. This transgression effectively cast them outside the boundaries of the law. From this moment onward, each sibling disrupts and challenges normative order. The eldest brother is unable to conform to any institutional framework, repeatedly expelled from both secular and religious settings. He aligns himself with society's margins and becomes entangled in acts of violence, brawls, and sexual assaults against young girls. The youngest brother engages in a sexual relationship with a minor, resulting in pregnancy. The sister, by walking half-naked, explicitly challenges social conventions. Even the narrator's homosexual relationship is perceived by his nephew as an act of disruption,

leading to a request that he distance himself from the family. The siblings, having been cast outside the law, become strangers both to themselves and to the normative structures of Israeli society.

Yet, this fractured network also becomes their means of salvation. The siblings take a vow: one day, they will exhume their youngest brother's body and recite the Kaddish for him. This vow is meant to restore their bond with their deceased brother and re-establish their unity. Unlike an ordinary oath, a 'vow' carries supreme status, it holds the force of law. A vow must be fulfilled, just as the biblical Yiftah[1] was bound to uphold his tragic oath. Notably, it is the eldest brother, precisely the one who has been cast out of the law, who has disrupted and defied it, who now seeks to restore familial order. In doing so, he attempts to reclaim his position as the eldest sibling, the leader of the family. He sends a text message to his siblings: "I'm taking him out" (Berdugo 2022, 41), a signal that the time has come to recite the Kaddish for their brother. At this moment, however, another reversal occurs, one that is not immediately apparent but becomes evident through a close reading of the text. Immediately after the siblings receive this message, a police officer contacts each of them, urgently summoning them to prevent their eldest brother's suicide. The novel does not explain why the officer calls these three siblings specifically, nor why they alone are expected to save him. On an initial reading, the sequence of events appears straightforward. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the eldest brother has manipulated the legal system. The siblings' gathering does not occur as an act of defiance or an illegal exhumation, which would leave them outside the law and outside language. Instead, it takes place under the auspices of the law, at the behest of a police officer. This strategic move ensures that the ritual of Kaddish does not occur as a transgressive act but rather as one conducted in the presence of all the siblings 'and' under legal authority. In doing so, the eldest brother reintegrates himself into the collective body of the siblings while simultaneously restoring them to the domain of language of the law. This manoeuvre recalls Franz Kafka's *Before the Law* (Kafka 2009, 3), in which the protagonist stands before the gate of the law, waiting indefinitely for permission to enter. However, unlike Kafka's man, who passively submits to the law's inaccessibility, Berdugo's eldest brother subverts this dynamic, actively returning the siblings to the law rather than awaiting its acceptance.

1 According to the story in the biblical Book of Judges, Yiftah (Jephthah) makes a rash vow before going to battle against the Ammonites: if he is victorious, whoever comes out first from the door of his house to greet him upon his return will be offered as a sacrifice. After his victory, the first to come out to him is his only daughter. Jephthah is torn between his vow and his love for her, and ultimately fulfils the vow. The story serves as a warning about impulsive oaths and their tragic consequences.

To a great extent, the title of the novel, *All Five of Us*, proclaims the completion of the act, the reconstitution of the siblings as a unified entity. The shared consciousness, expressed through the narrator's first-person plural voice, restores the siblings to language. Yet, this restoration is not merely linguistic; it also signals Berdugo's return to a mode of writing that emerges from the materiality of lived experience. As he states in an interview: "I am at the heart of my own words, with language and with speech" (Berdugo 2017, 459). This notion is further reinforced by the title of his third novel, *Zeh ha-Dvarim* (That is to Say, 2010), which underscores a commitment to writing grounded in the tangible, the raw, and the unembellished. Berdugo's writing does not strive for aesthetic refinement but rather embraces the remnants of existence, "the leftover bread crumbs on the kitchen counter" (Berdugo 2022, 276). His writing that emerges from the abyss, from the hidden recesses of familial secrets. Yet, it is precisely from within this abyss that Berdugo celebrates the 'writing body', revealing in the power, freedom, and creative force that writing makes possible.

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Appendix

As editors of this volume, we are pleased to include, in the appendix, a contribution of a more intimate and personal nature: the memories and reflections by journalist and independent researcher Shirley Nigri Farber on her extended Lebanese family. During the Venice workshop that served as the starting point for this volume, Nigri Farber contributed to the discussion on Jewish masculinities from the Middle East and North Africa by sharing the life stories and trajectories of the men (and women) of the Nigri-Chattah families.[1] Leaving behind the familiar landscape of Beirut – as many others did at the beginning of the last century – the Nigri and Chattah families embarked on a journey that would carry them from the eastern Mediterranean to the other 'end of the world': Brazil. Nigri Farber reconnects the threads of stories that are both unique and shared by generations of young men sent abroad to take the first steps toward improving their own economic condition and that of their extended families – families that would often later join them, rebuilding a familiar space imbued with the tastes and sounds of the Levant.

1 Shirley Nigri Farber, "Jewish Migration from Lebanon to Brazil: Differences on Age and Gender on Adaptation to the New World", paper presented at the International Workshop *In the Name of the Father? Writing Jewish Masculinities across the Middle East and North Africa*, Venice, 28-29 October 2024, Ca' Foscari University of Venice – Department of Asian and North African Studies.

Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities
Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies
edited by Piera Rossetto, Hadas Shabat Nadir, Aviad Moreno

Memories from My Family's Migration from Lebanon to Brazil

Shirley Nigri Faber
Board Member of Centro de Estudos Judaicos do Amazonas

I was born in Rio de Janeiro but grew up in a Lebanese house, with Arabic food, language, and music. I am a girl from Ipanema who did not listen to Bossa Nova but to Arab music from Oum Kalsum and Farid el-Atrach and ate tabbouleh and kibbeh instead of Feijoada (beans and pork).

In this essay, based on family recollections and anecdotes, I read my Levantine family's journey from Sidon and Beirut to Brazil as a case study in travelling masculinities. Across ports, synagogues, shops, living rooms, and schoolyards, men in the Nigri-Chattah networks fashioned adulthood through mobility, provision, and communal stewardship: young cousins left to dodge conscription and 'make a living', grandfathers organized synagogues and mutual aid, fathers managed paperwork and remittances, and boys often exited school after bar mitzvah to work. At the same time, these practices were never monolithic. Masculinity was braided with language (Arabic at home, French in school, Portuguese in the street), class (peddling, small retail, later entrepreneurship), and religion (from tarbush-wearing kosher observance to Chabad yeshiva). Seen through this lens, the story complicates stereotypes of 'Eastern' Jewish men as either hyper-virile or passive: it shows care, paperwork, kin brokerage, and ritual leadership as gendered labours that were re-composed in Brazil – what this volume theorizes as masculinities made in motion rather than fixed essence.

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My grandfather Mourad Nigri (Sidon, 1882-Rio de Janeiro, 1969), son of Sara Benisti and Youssef Nigri of Sidon, Lebanon, initially travelled to Brazil as a single man around the time of the First World War, in 1911. Family members do not know the exact date or the places my grandfather visited but they related that he left Sidon with a group of male cousins, and his journey included stops in the Amazon, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Mexico. In 1913, along with relatives from Sidon, Mourad Nigri founded the Sociedade Israelita Siria, which later became Temple Bnei Sidon, now located in Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro. During the early twentieth century, Jews and non-Jews from the Ottoman Empire were drawn to Brazil with the promise of improved economic opportunities. My father Joseph Mourad Nigri (Beirut, 1923-Rio de Janeiro, 2005) said that for young men, it was also a means to avoid military conscription.

In 1922, at the age of 40, Mourad returned to the Ottoman Empire to marry Rosa Alfie (Damascus, 1901-Rio de Janeiro, 1995), the daughter of a jeweller. The couple settled in Beirut where they had my father, Moise, Edmond, Sarina (Nina), Robert, Samuel and Alfred. By 1939, the couple had planned to emigrate to Brazil to join the Nigri cousins who were already established, but the outbreak of the Second World War forced them to delay. Their sons Moise and Edmond, ages 20 and 18 respectively, were the first to emigrate in 1946. The rest of the family followed three years later. My father, the eldest son, remained in Beirut to oversee the liquidation of the family's assets which included a store located in the Wadi Abu Jamil, the historic Jewish quarter in the heart of Beirut. He was the last of the family to emigrate, arriving in Brazil in 1951 after stopping in France where some of his friends were living.

The Chattah family, from my maternal side, resided in Beirut in an apartment with a porch facing the Mediterranean Sea. My maternal grandfather, Nissim Chattah (Damascus, 1905-São Paulo, 1970), served as a *chazan* (cantor) at two different synagogues, the 'Spanish' and the 'Damascquie', and would be hired to officiate during religious ceremonies. In addition to his role in the community, he worked as a peddler bringing merchandise to people's homes. Nissim and Rachel (*née* Khalili, Beirut, 1916-Israel 1991) had five children – Elie, my mother Lisa, Moise, Juliet and Celly – while tragically losing two more in infancy. Rachel's parents, Ibrahim and Hosen, also shared this multigenerational dwelling. Rachel's maternal grandparents, Rabbi Eliahu Diwan and his wife Rachel (*née* Sasson), lived in Sidon.

Elie Chattah (Beirut, 1934-São Paulo, 2016), the eldest son, was the first to emigrate in 1956 at the age of 22, settling in São Paulo. There, he pursued work in the clothing industry, benefiting from the support of Lebanese relatives and friends already established in the city. His younger brother, Moise, followed in 1958. On August 26, 1960, the rest of the family arrived on board the Provence ship

at the port of Santos, São Paulo. Rachel's father Ibrahim planned to emigrate with the family but passed away in Beirut before he could make the journey. His wife Hosen had passed away in 1956.

Both my father and my uncles Moise and Elie explained that, back in Lebanon, it was common for males to leave school after their *bar mitzvah* to enter the workforce. My father went on to become an apprentice electrician for the English army and also recalled working at a chocolate factory. My mother took courses and became a seamstress so at an early age she was able to have an income. Later in Brazil, when her children were about to enter college, she got her high school diploma and was able to graduate from Law school. Unlike most women of her generation who did not have a formal education, my grandmother's Rachel Chattah attended an English language Catholic school despite her family's observant lifestyle. This decision was likely influenced by her English-speaking grandmother, Rachel Diwan (*née* Sasson), who was born in Mumbai, India and immigrated to Lebanon.

At both grandparents' homes, Arabic served as the primary language of communication, but French words frequently punctuated conversations, especially among females. Common examples include the use of *merci* (thank you), *bon appétit* and *bon voyage* (safe trip), instead of their Arabic equivalents. They would use Arabic expressions for divine references rather than Hebrew as in *Inshallah* (God willing), and *Allah ma'ak* (God be with you, used as a farewell). A trace of this bricolage of languages remained in our Passover celebration. We would usually spend the first night of Passover in Rio de Janeiro, with my father's family, in a festive and relaxed atmosphere. Late at night, we would take the train or bus to São Paulo to stay with my mother's side of the family. At the Chattah, there were less people so we could all get a seat at the table and follow the Hebrew *Haggadah* led by my uncle Moise. We were not kosher at our home in Rio, so for me it seemed very restrictive that my grandmother ruled no industrialized products during Passover. The part that I found more representative of our traditional Lebanese heritage was the theatrical part which was performed half in Hebrew, half in Arabic: the *Mish'arotam Tzerurot Be-Simlotam Al Shichmam* (their kneading bowls wrapped up upon their shoulders). Starting with the leader and passing the *matzah* rolled on a fabric napkin as if it was a backpack over one shoulder, each one would read the sentence in Hebrew from the *Haggadah* and the rest of the table guests would ask in Arabic "min wein jayieh?" (where are you coming from?) and each participant would answer in Hebrew "Mi-Mitzraim" (from Egypt). Then all would ask again in Arabic "when raicha?" (where are you going?), then each at their turn would answer "Yerushalayim". It was very participatory and gave each one at the table a chance to shine. As a child, it gave me a sense of pride to show off the language I learned in school. During

the plagues' recitation, the male leader would pour a bit of the wine from his cup into a bucket as we all would read out loud the name of each plague. As the youngest, my job was to take the bucket and flush the content in the toilet.

Families would have different generations within the same house speaking different languages. While my parents conversed in Arabic all the time, we would communicate only in Portuguese. Arabic was used when they did not want the maids to understand. Even though Arabic was spoken, I did not see any written communication other than in French or Portuguese. My father confirmed that he could read and write in Arabic but since he did not practice in Brazil, it became difficult for him. In the case of older women, in general they would be confined to the household and family gatherings with minimal interaction with Portuguese speakers. Even today I can hear their strong foreign accent. The linguistic diversity was not only generational but also shaped by gender. For instance, in social gatherings I would hear my mother conversing with other Lebanese women of her generation in French instead of Arabic. The French language in Brazil was associated with the educated elite with many wealthy families providing education in the French language or even sending children abroad to learn the idiom. My siblings and I learned French at the Alliance Française in Rio de Janeiro. Later, we would exchange letters in French with my aunt Juliet who moved to Mexico and with my grandmother Rachel when she immigrated to Israel.

In Brazil, men in my family benefited from a network of Arabic speakers who arrived in the country prior to them. At the same time, they were able to learn a new language while interacting with people doing business, at the synagogue or at sports clubs. In Rio de Janeiro, the SAARA district became a hub for Lebanese and other Middle Eastern immigrants, Jews and non-Jews alike. These encounters would take place at restaurants serving Arabic food, clubs where they played backgammon (*tawle*), cards, soccer and drank *Arak* (alcoholic drink made of anise). The name SAARA is an acronym of the street names, but would evoke the Sahara Desert. My father, his relatives and many other Jews opened clothing and home goods stores. In the beginning of the century immigrants would have the store on the street level and live on the second floor. Later, families kept the store but moved to affluent neighbourhoods. My father children's clothing store was called Edmarc and during the very busy Christmas period the whole family helped. At lunch time we would go to the Lebanese restaurant and buy *kibbe*, *pita* and *esfihah* which became very popular among Brazilians.

My parents always described the religiosity of Lebanese Jews as different from orthodox. As an example, my mother conveyed that her father would keep kosher and shabbat, but never enforced it on the children, letting them go to the pool or beach on Saturday and eat out with friends. He would wear a brimless hat (*tarbush*) like

many other Lebanese and not a *kippah*. When they moved to Brazil, he continued to keep kosher but instead of the *tarbush* he would use a fedora that was not different from other Brazilian men. In Beirut, the largest and most famous synagogue was Maguen Abraham, built in 1925 by the Sasson family, it would house the Talmud Torah Selim Tarrab and the youth group Maccabi. My parents frequented during the High Holidays, weddings and youth meetings. For weekday prayers and Shabbat people would go to the smaller synagogues. In Brazil, my grandfather, Mourad Nigri, founded Bnei Sidon in 1918 with other townsmen, while another group of Lebanese established the Beirutense synagogue in the same neighbourhood of Tijuca. Both synagogues still exist today. When I questioned my father about the need for two Lebanese synagogues in the same area, he explained that the traditions of the two cities were different. He personally did not frequent either of those as there were two Sephardic synagogues closer to our home, Beth El in Copacabana and Agudat Israel (now Edmond Safra) in Ipanema. The Jewish community's social welfare system, which was based on the principle of *tzedakah* (charity, lit. justice) was important in Lebanon as well as in Brazil. Synagogue was usually the place where male leaders of the community convened to deliberate on matters of economic dispute, the sustenance of vulnerable groups such as widows and orphans, and discuss the needs of congregants and new immigrants. This patriarchal approach extended to migration logistics, as men often assumed responsibility for arranging travel, handling legal documentation, and sending money overseas. For instance, widows frequently depend on male relatives – such as brothers or sons – for economic survival. In fact, my grandfather Mourad Nigri brought his twin sister Simcha to live with him and his family, once she became a widow without children. Even in Brazil the Lebanese Jews preferred marrying within their Lebanese Jewish community; however, the limited number of suitable Jewish women in Brazil presented a significant challenge. In a few cases, men returned to Lebanon to look for a wife, which was the case of my grandfather Mourad Nigri in the 1920s and of my uncle Elie Chattah later, in the 1970s. Others arranged for brides to join them in Brazil, sometimes they were relatives as in the case of my uncle Samuel Nigri and his cousin Lilian Alfie, who left her parents in Lebanon.

Jewish organizations in Brazil would help with the immigration paperwork but because of the high demand for funds to help Jewish immigrants from other areas of the world, they could not provide financial support for tickets but offered interest free loans. Sometimes relatives working in Brazil would send a *Carta de Chamada* (calling letter) attesting that they would financially support the incoming immigrant. It was common for relatives to go to the port to witness and help with the logistics of departure and arrival. Sima Uziel (*née* Chattah) has fond memories of the day when my aunt Celly Leopold

(*née* Chattah) was embarking at the port in Beirut. At the time, both cousins were ten years old. Sima shared that she could not immigrate to Brazil since her father had died, her mother had left for Israel, and she was being raised by her grandparents. She moved to Israel in 1970 with her grandfather Moussa Chattah. My uncle Robert Nigri (born in 1936) remembers the day he arrived in Brazil with his family, with emotion the 15 years old saw at the pier his two older brothers Moise and Edmond along with a cousin.

After World War II, few countries were willing to accept Jewish immigrants, leaving many families with limited options. According to my parents, they were well received in Brazil and did not experience any animosity when relating to non-Jewish neighbours even though the country was under military dictatorship. When my uncles emigrated as single men, they were granted a temporary visa while the visas issued to both families Nigri and Chattah at the Brazilian consulate in Lebanon already came with a permanent residence permit. These documents listed the head of household's occupation and number of dependents, yet they omitted religion, even though religious affiliation was required in Lebanese official documents and expressed on the Lebanese passport. For instance, in the passenger list issued by Brazilian customs for the *Provence* ship arriving at Santos in August 1960, my grandfather Nissim Chattah, a religious Jewish *chazan* with no formal trade, was listed as a Catholic. Of the 30 individuals on the same passenger list, only two were identified as Israelis – that is Jewish. Immigration documents often misrepresented key details, including age (to make the individuals appear older and employable), profession (to align with labour demand in the destination country), religion (to avoid discrimination) and number of children (to minimize the appearance of financial burden). For example, my father, who had experience working as an electrician, was listed as a textile technician, and my grandfather Chattah, was listed as a carpenter. Conversely, my mother, a professional seamstress, was listed simply as a housemaid (*prendas domesticas*), reflecting the systemic disregard for women's professional contributions in official records.

As a journalist and researcher, I find it fascinating to compare the family narratives with the documentation located in newspapers and historical sources. At a recent family meeting, I mentioned that I often wondered why our grandfather didn't stay in Mexico or went north to America instead of south to Brazil. My cousin Rosangela Cohen (*née* Nigri) asked me if I did not know the story of the *enforcado* (the one that was hanged)? I had never heard of it, and neither had any of my cousins who were present. Rosangela explained that a group of cousins had left Sidon – including our grandfather Mourad, the brothers Salim, Luis, Toufic and Jose Nigri, as well as her maternal grandfather Moussa Hadid and his father. She stated

that in Mexico, Salim Nigri was accused of possessing counterfeit money, was hanged, and that the others became afraid and left the country. Some family members confirmed the story of a cousin being hanged in Mexico, but no one had details or proof. After weeks of searching online, I was able to find two newspapers dated from April 1915 reporting:

> Salamon Nigri and Rafael Fereze, the two Turkish victims of Villista wrath, were executed at Torreon on the charge of having counterfeit 'aguilar' money. Luis Nigri, a brother and part owner of the store with Salamon, was advised by telegraph at El Paso that the two had received 1,000 pesos of 'eagle' money and had then had it O.K.'d by the cuartel. Later the store was entered and the two were arrested and put to death.[1]

Among the cherished memories of Lebanese Jews are the vibrant exchanges on Facebook groups or informal conversations. I have read heartfelt comments on posts about my grandfather, Nissim Chattah. People recall, "I used to go to the synagogue just to hear his singing", or "To this day, I can remember his voice". These recollections speak of his legacy, both in Lebanon and later at the Mekor Haim Synagogue in São Paulo where Ezra Nasser remembers witnessing when my grandfather had a stroke at the *bimah*. Others reminisce fondly about the warmth of family visits and the unforgettable flavours of traditional foods offered to guests such as *maamoul* (sweet made with dates or walnut) and watermelon with *mazaher* (rose water).

Nevertheless, some topics are conspicuously avoided. For instance, the word Holocaust was never mentioned explicitly in my house and was euphemistically referred to as "the war". Incidents of antisemitism are often dismissed, as though forgetting could erase their impact. Notable events, such as the 1945 terrorist attack in Tripoli, Lebanon that killed 14 Jews and the 1950 bombing that claimed the lives of Alliance School director Mme. Ester Pensa and a custodian were never mentioned. Instead, when I brought it up during interviews, participants insisted that students had been relocated to another building and classes proceeded normally. These instances of concealing or forgetting, made me reflect on the fact that, in order to truly understand the various nuances of migration of Jews from Lebanon to Brazil throughout the last century, we must examine the full spectrum of experiences: the joys, the challenges and the secrets.

Looking back at my extended family memoirs, in particular the recollections and anecdotes by and about its male components, I realised that masculinity was not only performed through public

1 "Kill Americans", *The Monmouth Inquirer*, April 1915.

authority: it also took form in quieter labours of care, in the paperwork of emigration, in communal mediation, and in language choices within the household. My family's story reveals how masculinity operated at once as provision, protection, and memory, while always in negotiation with women's education, labour, and religious practice. By situating these experiences within broader dynamics of Sephardic migration, this personal essay shows that Jewish masculinities were never static but were continuously reassembled through migration, multilingualism, and the everyday work of sustaining community life.

Figure 1 Nigri family, ca. 1897. Sidon. My great-grandfather Yosef Nigri with wife Sara Beniste and three daughters, Miriam (with husband Isaac), Esther and Simcha and two sons Mourad and Salim, and cousins © Shirley Nigri Farber

Figure 2 Chattah family, ca. 1956. Beirut. Left to right: Liza, her father Nissim, Elie, Moise, her mother Rachel, Juliet, grandfather Ibrahim Khalili and Celly © Shirley Nigri Farber

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Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Masculinities: Bodies of Knowledge across Generations and Geographies examines how Jewish masculinities from the MENA region are formed, negotiated, and changed across time, places, and languages. Moving from the late Ottoman era through Israeli statehood to today's diasporas, it shows how migration, displacement, and cultural translation reshape fatherhood, labour, queerness, and writing. Using gender studies, history, and literary analysis, the essays presents MENA Jewish masculinity as a mobile, embodied concept – reimagined across empires, memories, and geographies.

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