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Middle Eastern Jewish thinkers no one remembers

A collection of essays from 1893 to 1958 depict the views of intellectuals who saw themselves as part of the Middle Eastern cultural sphere, anchored in both Arab and Western culture, living and working in harmony with their surroundings.

By Tsafi Saar | Jun. 26, 2013



Professor Zvi Ben-Dor. Photo by Emil Salman



The cover of a book by Jacqueline Kahanoff, called 'Between Two Worlds.'



DID YOU KNOW? Kahanoff Street, named for Jacqueline Kahanoff, considered the mother of Middle Eastern Jewish feminism in Israel. Photo by Emil Salman.

She was a well-known author and women's rights activist, a part of the intellectual, literary, and journalistic world of the Middle East in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Esther Moyal (1873-1948) was without doubt an impressive woman, whose cultural influence spread across Beirut, Cairo, Istanbul and the Land of Israel. She wrote journalistic essays about the issues of the day, penned books that gave her a name across the Arab world, was a respected orator, and the host of a literary salon held at her Jaffa home.

But odds are that not a single reader has ever heard of her, or of any other name on the long list of intellectuals of North African and Middle Eastern descent, known as Mizrahim, who were active in this period before the establishment of the State of Israel. These were intellectuals who saw themselves as part of the Middle Eastern cultural sphere, anchored in both Arab and Western culture, living and working in harmony with their surroundings.

Professors Zvi Ben-Dor Benite and Moshe Behar gathered the essays of several of these intellectuals in their recently published English book, "Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought: Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture, 1893-1958" (Brandeis University). The book is the focus of a (Hebrew) discussion at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute Wednesday, in the presence of Ben-Dor Benite and Behar.

These essays about identity, politics and culture between the years of 1893 and 1958 depict a cultural milieu that has been all but forgotten.

Among the important people mentioned in the book is Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche, who in his own 1931 "Parshat Haiyai" ("Reminiscences of My Life") writes this about Zionism: "From the day of Herzl's appearance with the idea of political Zionism, Zionist propaganda has described, in all countries and all languages, the Land [of Israel] where we are going to build our national home as a desert land desolate and abandoned, without inhabitants."

Chelouche goes on to say that after describing the land as virgin soil, developed by Zionist methods, there is "one thing that they forgot - attention to the inhabitants that already reside in this land."

Ben-Dor Benite, a professor at New York University currently on a visit home, says with a smile that if he and other Mizrahi intellectuals and activists of our era thought that they were inventing something – these writings show that they are only continuing along the paths of their predecessors. "When we spoke about the erasure of Mizrahi culture we didn't know what we were talking about," he says.

These early 20th century intellectuals weren't anti-Zionists, Ben Dor Benite says. They aspired to a Jewish state and supported the return of the Jews to their land, but at the same time called for cooperation with Muslim leaders and warned of the disastrous arrogance with which the Jews from Europe behaved. And this was from the first days of Zionism, decades before Martin Buber, Hugo Bergmann and Gershom Scholem's Brit Shalom group that was established during the period of the British Mandate after hostility had already erupted between the sides.

Moreover, many decades before Edward Said wrote about Orientalism while sitting in an American university, says Ben-Dor Benite, Hayyim Ben-Kiki, a Moroccan rabbi who lived in Tiberias wrote about Western attempts to subjugate the East. He wrote that because the West could not do so with arms, it enlisted the services of the humanities and social sciences to do so, paving paths to racism that are familiar from early sociology.

Ben-Kiki, an ultra-Orthodox Sephardi rabbi, wrote about this subject already in 1920. In another essay, the rabbi complained about the impoverished language of modern Arabic, which drew less and less from the Koran.

These Jewish intellectuals, including Avraham Elmalih, Nissim Malul, David Sitton, Sasson Dallal and others were their own school of thought, as Ben-Dor Benite and Behar show in their book. The writings of these thinkers emphasize that the Jews of the Middle East always viewed themselves as Mizrahim. This view flies in the face of the widely held assumption that Middle Eastern identity first arose in the State of Israel in response to, and even in opposition to, Askenazi Jewish identity. From their perspective, the significance of the return of Jews to their homeland was also a return to Middle Eastern identity, even for Jews who had lived for hundreds of years in Europe.

This worldview was ultimately defeated. Jews of Middle Eastern identity were transformed from a social and political topic in the Middle East to a social problem in the State of Israel, according to Ben-Dor Benite. Later on, when the East for Peace ("Hamizrach el Hashalom") movement was formed in the eighties, or when in the nineties, with the advent of the Oslo Accords, the Jews of Middle Eastern origin were referred to as some sort of bridge to the Palestinians, the speakers didn't know that this was not a new idea, but one mentioned already 100 years ago.

Esther Moyal was among those who espoused such ideas a century ago. Two lectures she delivered in Beirut – masterpieces of Mizrahi feminism – appear in Behar and Ben-Dor Benite's book. In 1912, Moyal said (loosely translated), "We women and men of the East are deifying Westernizing, giving them the power to patronize us." This was years before the feminists of our times spoke of the internalization of oppression.

Ben-Dor Benite points to another text, which appears in the book, by the writer and essayist Jacqueline Kahanoff, considered the mother of Middle Eastern Jewish feminism in Israel. Visiting one of the transit camps for Jewish immigrants in Israel in 1956, she interviewed a Moroccan woman, and wrote about the crisis faced by Jewish immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, in the *Al Hamishmar* newspaper. The gap, between the powerful speech of a Mizrahi feminist in 1912 and the crisis written about by a Mizrahi feminist during the 1950s, attests to the great, tragic change that took place during those years.

Becoming acquainted with these men and women and with their activities and writings from 100 years ago provokes many questions. Why has a graduate of the Israeli educational system never heard of these people – or the option they represent? Why was this option struck a decisive blow? And can it be revived?

The book casts doubt on the commonly held view that the confrontation between the native Palestinians in Israel and the Jews that came here from Europe was inevitable because they came from opposite sides of a cultural divide. That isn't entirely true, says culture researcher Amos Noy, whose work focuses on Middle Eastern Jewish intelligentsia in Jerusalem toward the end of the Ottoman period.

Delving into the stories of these Middle Eastern Jewish intellectuals raises the possibility that there wasn't such a divide, says Noy, who is also participating in the Van Leer discussion. Here were men and women who were Jewish nationalists, who moved between the cultures, growing up on Arab culture but reading Victor Hugo. This is an opening for another possibility of life that is not based on the aggressive dichotomy that only one side can live here.