

## REZENSIONEN

Moshe Behar/Zvi Ben-Dor Benite (eds.), *Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought. Writings on Identity, Politics, and Culture, 1893–1958* (The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series/ The Brandeis Library of Modern Jewish Thought), Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press 2013, xlii, 257 pp.

The anthology is a collection of articles written by Middle Eastern Jewish intellectuals in several languages, including Arabic, Hebrew and French. The editors are Moshe Behar, Pears Senior Lecturer in Israeli and Middle Eastern Studies, at Manchester University, and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Professor of History and Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University.

The 33 articles are organized chronologically, with some exceptions, from 1893 to 1958. Each author is briefly introduced, which functions as a key to assist the reader in understanding the respective author's writing, along with giving information not only about the publication data but also about the contextual framing of the articles. However, the editors do not prefigure a specific interpretation of the texts, instead they leave interpretation up to the reader.

To begin with, they address the crucial question of terminology: Should one speak about Oriental, Sephardic, Eastern or Mizrahi Jews? The editors thus begin their rich anthology of modern Middle Eastern Jewish thought with an informative diachronic investigation of the term *Mizrahi* Jews. This journey to a neglected part of history is an attempt to read Oriental Jewry beyond the perimeter of the strictly literary sphere – a salient aspect of the anthology.

After their mass immigration to the State of Israel during the 1950s Jews from Arab countries found themselves in a linguistic and cultural milieu dissimilar to their Oriental culture. Therefore one can argue that Oriental Jews were at the very center of the ultimate clash between Orient and Occident. This claim springs mainly from key geographical and historical facts; the location of the State of Israel after 1948 in the Middle East, where Arabic language and culture are dominant, was bound up with the Israeli Ashkenazi leadership's vision of establishing a Jewish homeland and national state significantly influenced by European culture. Therefore it is not surprising that the first article of the anthology, written by Avraham Elmaleh (1876–1967), is titled *East and West*. Elmaleh discusses the aims and visions of founding the Hebrew journal *Miqraḥ u-Ma'arav* (East and West) in Jaffa, published between 1919 and 1928. Moreover, at its end, the anthology presents two Oriental

Jews, Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff (1917–1979) and David Sitton (1909–1989), who wrote about the cultural conflicts between Oriental Jews and Western Jews a decade after the State of Israel was established. The final essay of the volume, *From Ingathering to Integration: The Communal Problem in Israel* by Abraham Abbas (1912–1958), looks at the Mizrahi Jews' state of integration in 1958. As the editors write in their introduction, "[d]uring this decade, the Middle Eastern Jewish diaspora effectively came to an end. [...] At this point the Jews of the Middle East cease to be the Middle Eastern version of the so-called Jewish Question and become – as they remain today – an Israeli social, political, and cultural problem." (xcvii)

Strung between East and West, the debate arises – regarding identity, belonging, assimilation, relations within the surrounding Arab neighborhood, the question of language, etc. However, this continuous debate requires more historical investigation on the sociopolitical, cultural and identity dilemma of Mizrahi Jews over the last two centuries. The anthology takes an important step toward the exploration of the underlying motivations and reasons for such debates by providing a collection of articles written by nineteen intellectual Mizrahi Jews covering the period from the end of the 19th century until the 1950s.

The editors note that the choice of representing in the collection non-fictional as well as sociopolitical writings derives from the need for "rereading" Mizrahi Jewish intellectuals outside the perimeter of literary texts, for specifically exploring Mizrahi Jewish writings about political, cultural and social issues. To my mind, the anthology this way opens doors to explicit alternative images of modern Jewish history in the Middle East. Moreover, one of the main aims of the anthology is to rewrite the history of the Jews in the Middle East by providing a forum for different voices from the Mizrahi Jewish intellectual world over a period of some 60 years.

The authors' diverse political, educational and social backgrounds point up the rich variety of Jewish viewpoints on certain critical issues concerning the Jewish and the Arab world at the time, including Zionism, nationalism, Marxism, and colonialism. The authors and articles have been carefully selected here so that essential historical, political, social and religious issues discussed by intellectual Mizrahi Jews can find fair representation. Yet, by way of critique, I think it would have been better the volume had included more voices from other North African countries, such as Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. That way, the anthology could reflect more precisely the diverse gamut of Mizrahi Jewish voices in the Maghreb.

The debate on Zionism constitutes a central focus in the volume. The authors selected can be divided into three groups: the first comprises pro-Zionist intellectuals, such as the Hebron-born politician and teacher David Avisar (1888–1963) and

Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (1880–1953); the second anti-Zionist intellectuals, living principally in Iraq, including the leader of the League for the Struggle against Zionism, Yusuf Harun Zilka (born 1921) and Sasson Shalom Dallal (1929–1949), along with anti-Zionist activists in Egypt, such as the Marxist Marsil Shirizi (born 1913), co-founder of *Al-Itihad al-dimuqrati* (The Democratic Union).

The third category comprises authors who tread a path somewhere in between: i.e. they support the idea of establishing a home for the Jews in Palestine, yet believe it important to pay attention to the indigenous Arab population in Palestine and in neighboring lands. Eli Eliacher (1899–1981), born in Jerusalem, published many works concerning this issue. His article in the anthology is entitled *A Jew of Palestine before the Royal Commission*. Writing in 1936, Eliacher stressed the need for establishing negotiation and dialogue between Arabs and Jews under British supervision. He also suggested publishing Jewish periodicals in Arabic as well as using Arabic and Hebrew languages equally and obligatorily in the public service of Palestine. In his article *The Question of All Questions Concerning the Settling of the Land*, Hayyim Ben-Keki (1887–1935) stressed the importance of the Oriental Jews' role in establishing peaceful interchange and dialogue between the Hebrew Yishuv and the Arabs. He also touched on the necessity to maintain the Arabic culture of Palestine while building Zionism, and for its sake.

The call for strengthening Arab nationalism is also stressed by some Mizrahi Jewish intellectuals here, among them the co-founder of *Nabdat Al-Nisa* (The Women's Awakening), and the feminist and journalist Esther Azhari Moyal (1873–1948). Born in Beirut, she spent periods of her life in Egypt, Turkey, and Palestine. In her article *Our Renaissance*, she called for an Arab awakening by harnessing the energy of youth in agriculture, building factories and establishing educational institutions so as to develop Arab countries.

Although the anthology aims to present Mizrahi Jewish intellectuals writing about sociopolitical issues, it also offers literary and linguistic topics. Sami Michael, an Iraqi Jew and well-known novelist in modern and contemporary Hebrew literature, discusses here the hardships *The Newly Arrived Men of Letters* faced in Israel during the 1950s. There is also an essay entitled *The War of our Nation*, by Murad Farag (1866–1956), detailing some sociolinguistic aspects in spoken Egyptian Arabic at the beginning of the 19th century, as for instance the varieties of linguistic usage in greeting and addressing non-Muslims, including Jews, in Egypt at the time.

Another interesting focal point: touched on is the integration of Oriental Jews into Arab communities as well as tolerance and amicable relations between Jews and Muslims. Y'aqub Sannu' (1839–1912), aka Abou Naddara Zarqa, was

an Egyptian national activist during the 1860s and '70s, until his exile to France in June 1878 due to his opposition to the government of Khedive Isma'il Pasha. He was among the founders of the Egyptian theater, a journalist, playwright and cartoonist, and also founded the Arab-French satirical magazine *Abou Naddara* in 1877. The anthology includes eight texts by Sannu', among them an essay entitled *Some Teachings of the Koran*. It is the earliest text in the anthology, presented in 1893 at the World's Parliament of Religions and at Religious Congresses in Chicago, where he discusses his views on the Qur'an. Sannu' wrote: "The Qur'an is tolerant, humane and moral." (12) In another text here, Sannu' begins by congratulating Muslims on the occasion of the festival "Eid-al-Fitr," one of the most important religious Islamic festivals. (14)

In my view, the book is a must-read for scholars interested in the history of Oriental Jewry in the 19th and 20th centuries. It provides plentiful and useful leads for scholars who want to embark on further research of Mizrahi Jewry. The anthology covers diverse aspects of Jewish thought and activity, mutual relationships with Arab communities, the debate on Zionism and nationalism. There is considerable data about Oriental Jews from texts originally written in other languages, here translated into English, thus facilitating accessibility to these sources and enriching available literature on Oriental Jewry. In addition, the volume should prove interesting for a more general readership, given its handbook-like presentation of the authors and their articles, supplemented by relevant footnotes that will assist non-specialists in appreciating the texts in a broader context.

Mohamed Ahmed