

Such characterisations were not uncommon. David Ben Gurion described Mizrahi immigrants as 'without a trace of Jewish or human education' and stressed, 'We do not want Israelis to become Arabs. We are duty bound to fight against the values of the Levant, which corrupts individuals and societies, and preserve the authentic Jewish values as they crystallised in the Diaspora.' Politicised Mizrahim believe that the Kur Hitukh ideology was aimed at separating, 'de-Arabsing' and disadvantaging them.

Mizrahi immigration in the 1940s was needed to make up the shortfall of European and North American Jews who had not made *aliyah*, especially with regard to cheap manual labourers.⁶ Arab regimes in which the Mizrahim lived also had political and financial interests in their departure. However, integrating a non-Zionist community that had lived relatively peaceful and integrated lives among Arab societies posed particular challenges to Zionists, for whom Jewish history was a European or Biblically Middle Eastern affair. Four decades after Arye Gelblum's diatribe, Ashkenazi intellectuals like Amnon Dankner were still using racist language in *Hu'aretz* to justify stone-walling dialogue with their co-religionists:

These are not my brothers, these are not my sisters. Leave me alone, I have no sister... They put me in the same cage with a hysterical baboon running amok and they tell me, 'OK, now you are together, so begin the dialogue'. And I have no choice, the baboon is against me and the guard is against me, and the prophets of the love of Israel stand aside and wink at me with a wise eye and tell me, 'Speak to him nicely. Throw him a banana. After all, you people are brothers...'

By 2002, Dankner was editor of the popular right-wing newspaper, *Ma'ariv*. While he was avoiding empathy and understanding in 1983, though, the Mizrahim were en masse being taught Ashkenazi history in sub-standard schools, suffering routine discrimination and living in decrepit accommodation with few life prospects. Ashkenazim had on average three years' more schooling, an academic high school attendance rate 2.4 times higher, and a university attendance rate five times higher than Mizrahim.⁸ Real change did not begin until the 1970s when a Black Panthers movement emerged in Jerusalem's

5. Quoted in Ella Shohat, 'Zionism from the standpoint of its Jewish victims', *News from Within*, vol. XIII, no. 1, January 1997.

6. Segev and Weinstein, '1949', p. 172. In a secret record in October 1948, Berl Locker (chairman of the Jewish Agency Executive) wrote to the American-Jewish politician, Henry Morgenthau, saying: 'In our opinion the Sephardi and Yemenite Jews will play a considerable part in the building of the country. We have to bring them over in order to save them, but also to obtain the human material needed for building the country.'

* 7. Amnon Dankner, 'I have no sister', *Hu'aretz*, 18 February 1983.

8. Shohat, 'Zionism'.

Musrara neighbourhood, which linked Mizrahi and Palestinian oppression. It was ultimately gobbled up by Menachem Begin's Likud party but to some extent it changed the nature of public discourse.

Mizrahi Jews constitute perhaps the majority of Israel's population yet, by the late 1990s, 88 per cent of upper-income Israelis were Ashkenazi while 60 per cent of lower-income families were Mizrahi.⁹ According to researchers such as Ya'akov Nahon, the socio-economic gap between the two groups is continuing to widen despite intermarriage and absorption efforts. While Mizrahim as a bloc have tended to vote for right-wing parties, individual voices are still struggling to have a voice heard in the national debate.

RABBI SHLOMO KORAH

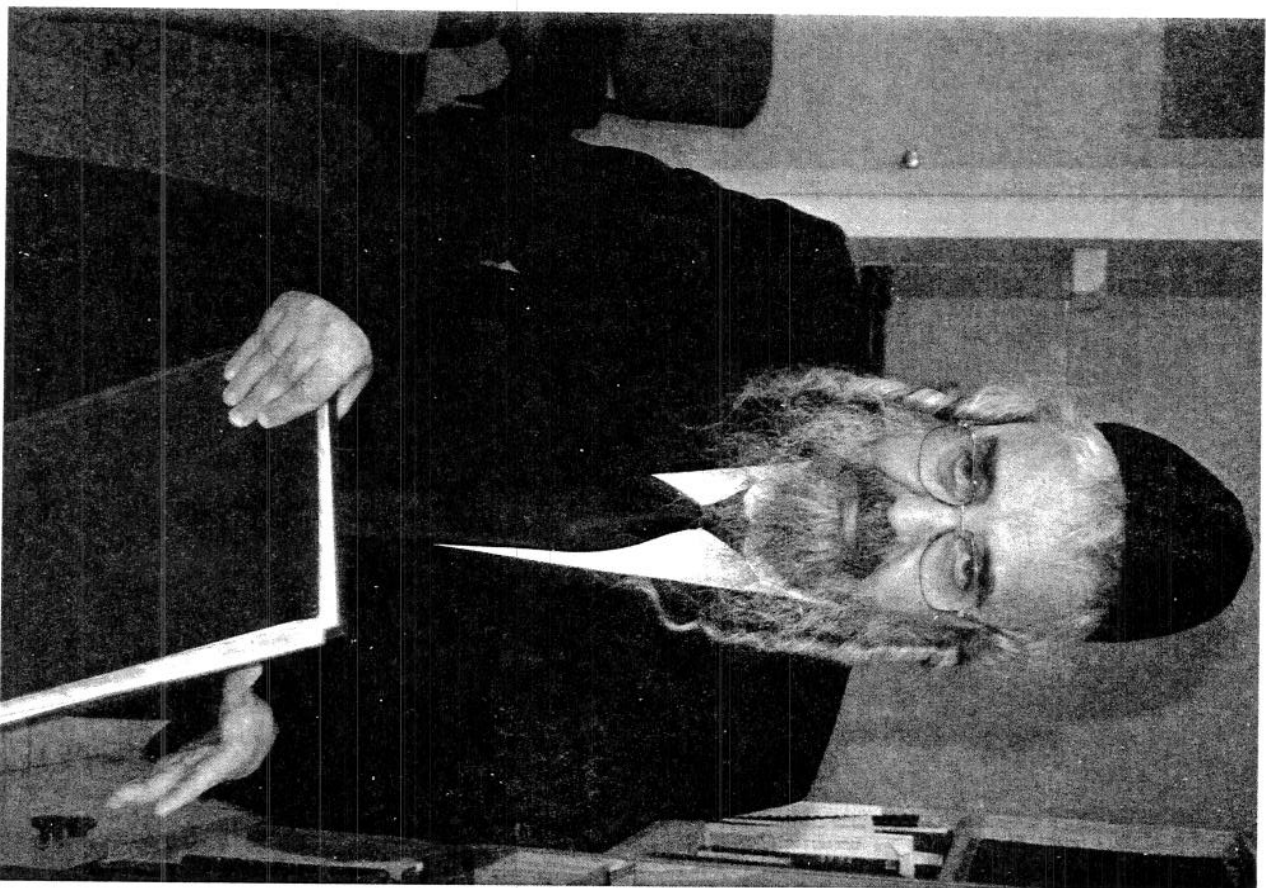
I am nothing and nothing that hurts me counts

The airlift of Yemenite Jews to Israel in 1949 is revered in Israel as one of the country's finest hours. Many Mizrahi Jews had been killed during riots in Aden, and the mission to save an apparently helpless and desperate community was hugely costly to the fledgling state. Yemenite Jews, though, were more ambivalent about 'Operation Magic Carpet'. Many felt a particularly acute sense of dislocation in Israel that few Ashkenazim could empathise with. In the 1970s, the first claims surfaced that hundreds of Yemeni children had been abducted for forced adoptions within Ashkenazi families between 1949 and 1954. Two public inquiries exonerated the authorities but Mizrahi hopes were raised when a third National Commission of Inquiry was established in 1995 under the retired Supreme Court Justice Yehuda Cohen. A *Jerusalem Post* editorial argued, 'What was done cannot be undone, but after half a century, the least the government owes the victims of such outrages is to come clean. The whole truth may never be found, but more must be done than to bury the problem with partial conclusions based on suspect documents.'¹⁰ However, this, Mizrahi campaigners say, is what happened. The issue had already become symbolic of a greater loss that had not been recognised and could not be assuaged. Shlomo Korah, the Rabbi of Be'er Barak, was then and remains now one of the Yemeni Jewish community's most articulate, capable and respected spokespersons.

Time, in Yemen, was measured according to the sun. It was better that way, you were more relaxed. Here, you have to run from place to place, looking at your

9. Shlomo Swirski and Ety Konor-Attias, *Israel: A Social Report* (Tel-Aviv: Adva Center, 2003), p. 10; Chetrit, *Hama'arak Hamizrahi Beyisrael*, p. 218.

10. Editorial, 'Time to come clean', *Jerusalem Post*, 28 August 1997.



Rabbi Shlomo Korah. Photo by Arthur Nesten

Strangers in the Land of their Fathers Documents stolen by J.A. 71

watch every other minute. I was born in Sana'a, in Yemen. My family migrated there from Tiberius [in Iraq] in 1260. We had documents to prove this but they were stolen from us by the Jewish Agency when we arrived.

Jews in Yemen faced a similar situation to Jews in Poland before the Haskala.¹¹ Our synagogues were the social centres of life. We spoke Hebrew when we didn't want anyone else to understand us and a Judeo-Arabic language which mixed Aramaic, Hebrew and Arabic at other times.¹² We're still the only community to translate the Bible into Aramaic every Sabbath morning. It's an ancient tradition. Our Hebrew accents, religion and prayer books are all different to those of other Mizrahim. In fact, our accent is recognised as scholastically the most accurate. But today you won't hear one news broadcaster using a 'het' or 'aiyin'. It's become an obstacle to getting on.

In political and economic terms, we were freer in Yemen. We didn't need licences to import or export or open a shop. All the government demanded of you as a Jew was that you paid a yearly Jewish Tax – assuming they knew you existed. We had some autonomy. My grandfather was the head of the Jewish court in Yemen – which was like the Supreme Court here. He could put people in jail or exile them if he wanted, but he never had to. We were a God-fearing community. The only real problem we faced was poverty, and that wasn't a specifically Jewish problem. Poverty wasn't a Jewish problem on its own. We didn't want to come to Israel¹³ but after the state was created, Bedouins started moving into our neighbourhood, our neighbours started selling their apartments and the situation became intolerable. In 1949, we decided to go. Around 50,000 Jews had already made *aliyah* but another 50,000 were hesitating. My grandfather was a spiritual authority who people looked to for guidance so when he decided to leave, the 50,000 who'd hesitated went with him. Only a few hundred stayed behind.

Some Jews had donkeys or horses but most went by foot. There were hardly any automobiles in Yemen but the King did allow my family to use his car. For

11. The Haskala or Jewish enlightenment encouraged secularisation among European Jewry and gave birth to phenomena as diverse as Zionism, Reform Judaism and the revival of the Hebrew language.

12. Yemenite or Temani Hebrew is the dialect most closely related to biblical Hebrew. However, its phonology has been influenced by Yemeni-spoken Arabic.

13. Diaspora Jews have a long and rich history in Yemen. Some trace the first Jewish settlements back to the time of King Solomon, 42 years before the destruction of the First Temple. According to oral history, some 75,000 Jews first travelled to the region under the Prophet Jeremiah. When Ezra the scribe commanded them to return to Jerusalem, they refused and Ezra retaliated by banning them from the city and cursing them to forever be a poor people. As a result, 'Ezra' is the one biblical name no Yemeni Jew will give their child.

really funny *

most Jews it took weeks of walking to get to Aden¹⁴ and many died on the way. Little groups of people would march together, carrying their family manuscripts in their hands. There was no printing technology in Yemen then so people kept manuscripts from their ancestors.

The two largest libraries belonged to my family and the al-Shech's. They covered 700 years of Halachic law, Kabbala, history, philosophy, court protocols, astronomy, poetry and the writings of the Rambam, Maimonides. We also had original documents from the age of Rabbi Saadia Ga'on of Babylon, 950 years ago. They were priceless.

My family put our manuscripts in wooden boxes and sent them to the port of Tel Aviv. When they arrived, the port authorities wouldn't let us collect them for four months. Then they said the documents had been destroyed in a fire. It was a lie. I found two of the manuscripts which were supposed to have been burned in a shop in Jerusalem afterwards. We also have testimony from people in the port that there was no real fire. Several times, we went to the police but they insisted that there'd been a fire. We couldn't fight the police and the government.

Some of the manuscripts were sold abroad. They're now in the Vatican Library, the Baltimore Library, the Schechter Institute, and the Rabbi Kook Institute here in Jerusalem. The really rare manuscripts like Saadia Ga'on's, you will never find anywhere. But I saw manuscripts which once belonged to my family – with our signatures on them – in the basement of a synagogue in Haifa. They weren't important ones but still we weren't allowed to take them. Personally, I think that we should go to the synagogue, break down the door and take them by force.

After 950 years of looking after those manuscripts, it's a racist *chutzpah* to suggest that we were incapable of taking care of them.¹⁵ Should the government take the paintings of Chagall from the collectors? And what about our wealth that was also stolen? Some big families in Sana'a deposited their money with an English bank and got it to Israel via London. But those who took their money with them were robbed in Aden by the Jewish Agency. Sometimes, immigrants were told that airplanes wouldn't be able to fly with gold on board. Yemen was

Even their jewelry & money was stolen, wow

14. As the waves of Jewish migration to Palestine accelerated in the early twentieth century, so did anti-Jewish feeling in the Arab world. In the slums of Aden, 82 Yemeni Jews were killed in riots that followed the announcement of the UN Partition Plan in 1947. In September 1948, the British authorities said that they would allow Yemeni Jews to travel to Israel. However, it was not until June 1949 that they decided to do so, and 'Operation Magic Carpet' began.

15. Yemeni activists say that Yitzhak Ben Tsvi, the second President of Israel, defended the theft of their manuscripts and scrolls on the grounds that they were national treasures, which could not be entrusted to the care of the Yemeni Jews themselves. Activists claim that the same logic was responsible for the abductions of their children.

at the technological level of the Bible, and people seeing an airplane for the first time could be told anything. Robbing Mizrahim of their culture I think part of the reason for the thefts was to rob us of our distinct cultural identity. A power system rules over our culture and they wanted to weaken us culturally. In 1948, the Yemenite community was 50,000 out of 600,000 people and it had much political power. We could have prevented Ben Gurion becoming prime minister if we'd wanted. So there was political fear, cultural fear, a demographic fear and racism all mixed up in the state's reaction to us.

Just talking about it makes me feel 100 years older. After we arrived in Israel, my family spent a month in Koshia Ein before moving to Jerusalem. Two days after we got there, my eight-month-old sister Bracha caught a cold. She wasn't too sick, but we called a nurse and she took Bracha to the camp's infirmary.

The next day, we went there to pick her up. They said 'come back tomorrow'. They kept saying this. One day we came and they said they'd taken her to a hospital and she'd died. We went there and tried to make noise and protest but nothing helped. We went to the police and they wouldn't even log our complaint about what we believed was a kidnapping.

We were weak. We stood in front of the government bureaucracy and nobody would take us seriously. The authorities didn't want to show us the body. They said she underwent surgery and seeing the body would distress us. We wanted to believe them. Still, we were never given Bracha's body to bury. The authorities said they buried it. Only a fool would believe them. They took us to the 'grave', a place with no other graves and said, 'it's here'. They put a wooden stick in the ground but it was just a piece of land like your backyard. Their disrespect and contempt was much worse than a physical beating.

So we went to the press, and asked for a public inquiry. There were three. The Yemeni community staged demonstrations but we had no power to fight the system. I believe that my sister was abducted and sold. I wonder how her new mother can embrace her and love her after inflicting such cruelty on her biological parents.

I don't want to say the state is my 'enemy', but our disappointment was enormous because we came here expecting to meet our brothers and we met something else. The state broke our leadership, stole our children, attacked our cultural values, discriminated against us and deliberately ruined our society. At first, we wanted to mix in the Kur Hitukh and be one nation. Now many of us want to turn inwards and deal with our problems alone. He is in pain!

No political parties represent us. If I had the time – if I were an Ashkenazi – then I would consider the Palestinians' problems. As it is, nothing I express will be important in Israel. My existence here feels meaningless. Since I am nothing and nothing that hurts me counts, nothing that I say counts and

nobody will listen. Someone else decided these things, so someone else should deal with the problem.

I feel a connection to Israel but not to the state. The land of Israel – and the Bible – is home. Its not like land, it's a spiritual home, a holy land. But the quality of life was better in Yemen in every way. If you're looking at poverty, we have poverty in Israel. If you're talking about second-rate citizens, we're second-rate citizens here. When we immigrated to Israel there were almost no criminals amongst us. Now there are many and it's a result of the destruction we went through in the country's early days.

At least in Yemen, we were called Jews. Here we are 'Yemenites'. If Jews were free to travel to Yemen – without fear of Muslim extremists – about 20 per cent of us would return. I know people who were so disappointed with Israel that they had heart attacks in their first year after arriving.

Rabbi Al-Shech and the elder ones have said that we are now living in exile in Israel because, before 1948, we were all Jews. Now we are Moroccans, Yemenites, all the nations of the world. I would add to that: Before, when we were apart, we loved each other. Now, we are physically close but we feel only hate.

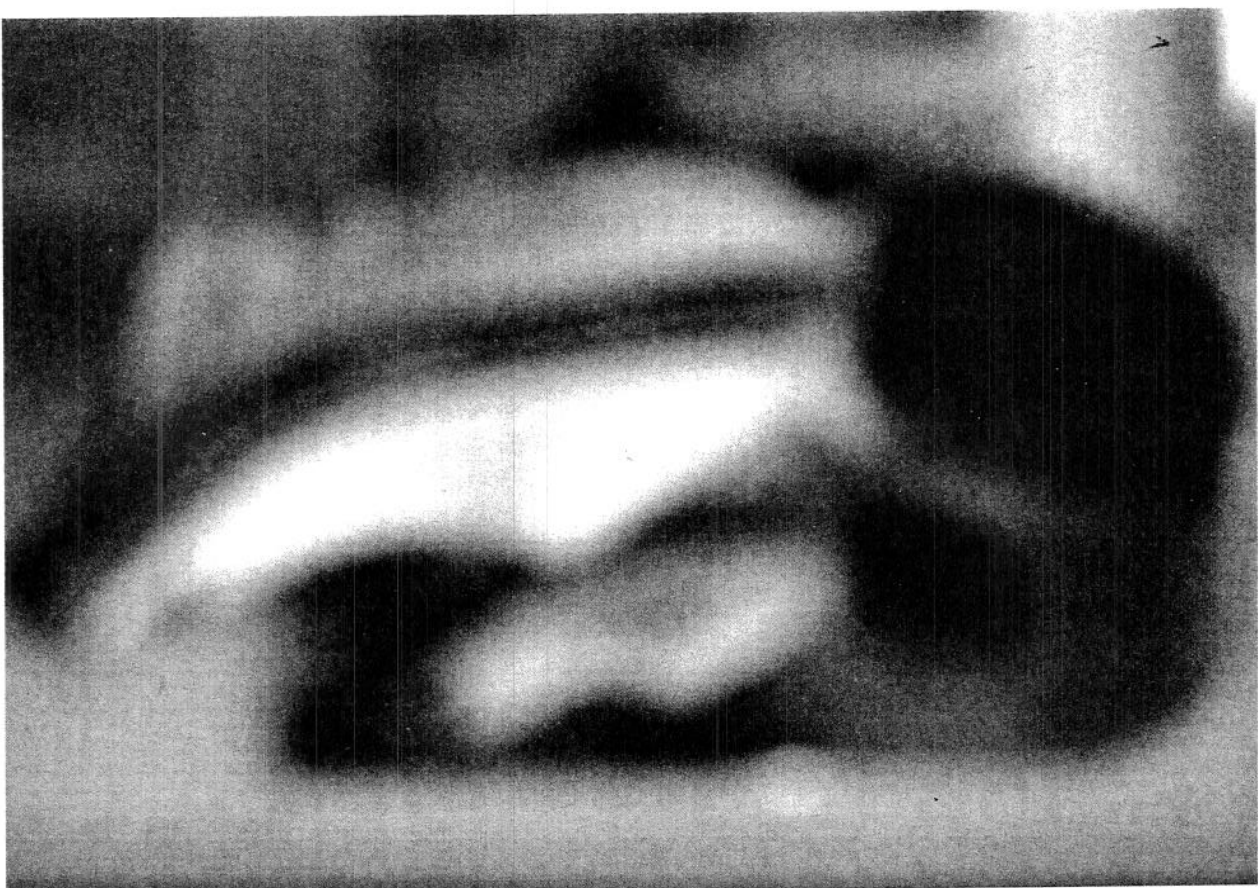


LIMOR

The fear that someone will recognise me

Betar Jerusalem Football Club is an icon for young Mizrahis in Jerusalem. In the days of the Yishuv, the football team was one outcrop of the wider Betar movement¹⁶ founded by Jabotinsky's Revisionists (the forerunners of the Likud party). A rival football team, Hapoel Tel Aviv,¹⁷ emerged from the Labour party. Competition between the two teams was fierce. More recently, Betar supporters have become associated with racist chants at visiting fans and players, and crowd trouble. In one incident in 2004, supporters even stoned their own team's bus. However, it was the relentless racism at the team's Teddy Stadium that prompted Limor, a diehard Betarnik, to start providing report-backs for The New Israel Fund on their behaviour. I spoke to her a few days after the death of Yasser Arafat.

16. Betar was the Revisionist movement formed by Vladimir Jabotinsky in Latvia in 1923. It called for the subordination of everything towards a movement for Israeli statehood within biblical borders. 'Betar' was the scene of Bar Kochba's last stand in the uprising against the Romans in 135 CE.
17. Hapoel Tel Aviv means 'Tel Aviv Workers'.



Limor. Photo by Arthur Neslen