

# Why I am Angry

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I AM ANGRY WITH the Mizrahi elite. Very angry indeed.

Mizrah is the Hebrew word for East. Eastern Jews are those who lived for many centuries in the Islamic world. Western Jews are those who lived in Christian Europe.

The words are, of course, misnomers. Russian Jews are “Westerners”, Moroccan Jews are “Easterners”. A look at the map shows that Russia is far to the East of Morocco. It would be more accurate to call them “Northerners” and “Southerners”. Too late, now.

Westerners are generally called “Ashkenazim”, from the old Hebrew term for Germany. Easterners were usually called “Sephardim”, from the old Hebrew term for Spain. But only a small part of the Easterners are actually descended from the flourishing Jewish community in medieval Spain.

IN TODAY'S Israel, the antagonism between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim is growing stronger from year to year, with vast political and social repercussions. It is no exaggeration to see this as the determining phenomenon of current Israeli society.

Before I continue, allow me to state (once again, I am afraid) my personal part in this.

My last few years in Germany, before we fled, were spent in the shadow of the ascent of the Swastika, the last half year already under Nazi rule. I came to hate Germany and everything German. So when our ship reached the port of Jaffa, I was enthusiastic. I was just ten years old, and the Jaffa of 1933 was in every respect the exact opposite of Germany—noisy, full of exotic smells, human. I loved it.

As I learned later, most of the early Zionist “pioneers” who arrived in Arab Jaffa hated it on sight, because they identified themselves as Europeans. Among them was the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl himself, who did not want to go to Palestine in the first place. On his only visit here, he hated its Oriental character. He vastly preferred Patagonia (in the Argentine).

Fifteen years later, during Israel's war of independence, I was promoted to the lofty rank of squad-leader and had the choice between new immigrant recruits from Poland or Morocco. I chose the Moroccans and was rewarded by

them with my life: when I was lying wounded under fire, four of “my Moroccans” risked their lives to get me out.

It was then that I got a foretaste of things to come. Once, when we got a few precious hours of leave, some of my soldiers refused to go. “The girls in Tel Aviv don't go out with us,” they complained, “for them we are blacks.” Their skin was just a little bit darker than ours.

I became very sensitive to this problem, when everybody else still denied its very existence. In 1954, when I was already the editor-in-chief of a news-magazine, I published a series of articles that caused a huge stir: “They (expletive) the Blacks”. Those Ashkenazim who did not hate me before, started to hate me then.

Then came the riots of “Wadi Salib”, a neighborhood in Haifa, where a policeman shot a Mizrahi. My paper was the only one in the country to defend the protesters.

A few years later the small group of Mizrahim started an unruly protest movement, expropriating the American term “Black Panthers”. I helped them. Golda Meir famously exclaimed: “They are not nice people”.

Now, many years later, a new generation has taken over. The Internal conflict dominates many aspects of our life. The Mizrahim make up about half the Jewish population of Israel, the Ashkenazim form the other half. The division has many manifestations, but people don't like to talk about them openly.

For example, the great majority of Likud voters are Mizrahim, though the party leadership is predominantly Ashkenazi. The opposition Labor Party is almost completely Ashkenazi, though they just elected a Mizrahi leader, in the vain hope that this will help them to overcome the profound alienation of the Mizrahim.

MY OPPOSITION to the treatment of the Mizrahim was primarily a moral one. It sprang from the desire for justice. It also sprang from my dream that all of us, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, would eventually be submerged in a common Hebrew nation. But I must confess that there was another motive, too.

I have always believed—as I believe now—that there is no future for Israel as a foreign island in the Oriental sea. My hopes go much further than just peace. I hope for Israel's becoming an integral part of the “Semitic region” (an expression I invented long ago).

How? I have always entertained a monumental hope: that the second or third generation of Mizrahim will remember its heritage, the times when Jews were an integral part of the Muslim world. Thus they would become the bridge between the new Hebrew nation in Israel and its Palestinian neighbors, and indeed the entire Muslim world.

Being despised by the Ashkenazim as “Asiatic” and inferior, would it not have been natural for the Mizrahim to reclaim their glorious heritage, when the Jews in Iraq, Spain, Egypt and many other Muslim countries were fully integrated partners in a flourishing civilization, at a time when Europeans were mainly barbarians?

Jewish philosophers, mathematicians, poets and medical doctors were partners of that civilization, side by side with their Muslim counterparts. When the persecution and expulsion of Jews and the inquisition were facts of life in Europe, Jews (and Christians) enjoyed full rights in the Muslim world. They were accorded the status of “Peoples of the Book” (the Hebrew Bible) and fully equal, except for being exempted from army service and paying a tax instead. Anti-Jewish incidents were rare.

When all the Jews were expelled from Christian Spain, only a small minority immigrated to Amsterdam, London and Hamburg. The vast majority went to Muslim countries, from Morocco to Istanbul. Curiously enough, only a handful settled in Palestine.

HOWEVER, WHEN masses of Oriental Jews arrived in Israel, my hopes were dashed. Instead of becoming the bridge between Israel and the Arab world, they became the most ardent Arab-haters. The centuries of Muslim-Jewish culture were erased, as if they had never existed.

Why? Being despised by the “superior” Ashkenazim, the Mizrahim started to despise their own culture. They tried to become Europeans, more anti-Arab, more super-patriot, more right-wing.<sup>1</sup>

Yet no one can escape from himself. Most Mizrahim in Israel speak with an Arab accent. They love Arab music (presented as “Mediterranean” music), and have no love for Mozart and Beethoven. Their features are different from European ones. All the more reason to hate the Arabs.

The erasing of the Eastern-Jewish culture is all-encompassing. Israeli children of Eastern descent have no idea of the great writers and philosophers of their heritage. They don't know that the Christian Crusaders who conquered the Holy Land butchered Muslims and Jews alike, and that Jews defended Jerusalem and Haifa shoulder to shoulder with their Muslim neighbors.

Rabbi Moses Maimonides—the great Rambam—is well known, but only as an important rabbi, not as the friend and personal physician of Saladin, the greatest of Muslim heroes. The many other medieval Sephardic intellectuals are hardly known at all. None of them appears on our paper money.

YET I am an optimist, in this respect also.

I believe that a new Mizrahi intelligentsia will search for its roots. That with the rise of its social status, social complexes will give way to a normal patriotism. That a fourth or fifth generation will come forward and struggle not only for equality, but also for peace and integration in the region.

As our Arab friends would say: Inshallah.

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<sup>1</sup>Though one Mizrahi friend once told me: We don't want to be a bridge. A bridge is something people trample on.