

A Reading in the Zionist Theory of Knowledge “Epistemology” Through the Writings of Yehouda Shenhav Shahrabani

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Yehouda Shenhav Shahrabani. *The Arab Jews: A Post-Colonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*. Translated by Yasin Al Sayed. Ramallah: the Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies; Madar. 2016, 372 pages

About the problematic naming, and the importance of the writer

There are many intertwined studies and literature that discuss the subject of the Oriental Jews, and try to portray a picture of them, before and after their arrival to Israel. Many researchers have defined the Jews of the Orient by calling them similar names. Shlomo Svirsky says: “usually, the Israeli public in general, and particularly researchers of social studies call these Jews “the Oriental group or community” (Edot Hamizrach, Mizracheem). On the other hand, other researchers portray a different image, in contrary to the popular Israeli academic conceptions, trying to question and counteract the Zionist epistemology.

Yehouda Shahrabani is a professor of sociology and anthropology at Tel Aviv University and a researcher at the Van Leer Institute. Shahrabani emphasizes the importance of naming this group the “Arab Jews”, for his conviction that the Arab state of being among the Arab Jews was manipulated and obliterated through what he defines as the “national methodology”, which we will tackle through this review. Although he believes that the concept of the Arab Jews is ambiguous and characterized by suspicion and perplexity (p. 37) as a result of the rift in the Jewish-Arab relations, nonetheless, one cannot overlook the history, customs, and culture that the two parties share.

Based on Max Weber’s approach “objective probabilities”, Shahrabani asserts in the introduction trying to refute the national methodology, that depriving the Jews of their Arab being reveals the contradictory practices of the Zionist ideology, that attempted to preserve its European being and the Jewish character at the same time

A transit ticket to Zionism; Jews of the Orient as a repository of experience

Shahrabani opens his book titled “History Begins at Home” by moving from his subjective history to the collective history, while highlighting many aspects of his family’s private life, upon the arrival and settlement of his father to Palestine. Shahrabani found that the differences between his accent and lifestyle and those of the other children in his neighborhood have affected their relationships. However, after the recruitment of his father to the Israeli intelligence service, which he considered a winning transit ticket to the Israeli society, everything has changed (p. 28). We find here a clear and revealing paradox. Nordau says: “the Western Jew who came out of his solitude in the ghetto has hoped to be welcomed and accepted in the society he lives in, however, he is disappointed”. We believe that what has happened with the Western Jews in exile, manifested in the writings of the early Jewish historians, i.e. changing their appearance and lifestyle to be accepted within the European society, is re-projected upon the Arab Jews that were brought to Palestine, or in their encounters with the Jewish envoys that went to Iraq and Abadan and other countries inhabited by Oriental Jews, under the British Colonial umbrella, through “Solel Boneh” company.

Shahrabani says that his grandfather traveled to Palestine several times, but he did not stay there and returned to Iraq (p. 27). This was the case of many Arab Jews who left Palestine after seeing the cultural, economic and social formation that was imposed on the Arab Jew (during the period prior to the Zionist demographic crisis), in an attempt to redefine their formation from a Western Colonial European Jewish perspective, in accordance with the perspective which Zionism has defined itself. Frantz Fanon takes the problem of the victim and the executioner even further: “how can the oppressed become the oppressor of a new victim, and a tool in the hands of the oppressing executioner, and a victim that identifies himself with the executioner, thus transforming into another executioner”. This way, the perception of the Western Jew of his own suffering as a victim reproduces the tool which was used against him, however, the victim now is different; it is the “Oriental Jews”.

The concept of dominance, in this case, is characterized differently in the writings of Gramsci: “the supremacy of a social group over the rest of society, and the hegemony of one group in a society, means that this group assumes command and control over the rest of the groups in society”. Thus, the conflict became an instrument of domination and power, transforming into a structural conflict, in order to become a tool used by the Ashkenazi Zionism to “melt and mold” other components of the emerging society. Fanon projects Sartre’s famous saying: “the anti-semitic is the one who creates the Jew”, over blacks and whites by saying: “the

white man is the one who creates the black man”, therefore, the white man’s thought system or anti-Semitism would not have existed if their direct contrast would not have existed.

Amid this dialectic relationship, we can say that the Zionist debate and the Ashkenazi hegemony over the Mizrachi would not have existed, had the Mizrachi not been a pillar stone in the modern construction of the state and its institutions. Moreover, one cannot understand the social erasure that was practiced against them unless one understands the ideological constructions Zionism has been formed upon, and the cultural integration and identification that was forced upon the Arab Jew, in accordance to the pre-assumed general theme.

Ella Shohat argues:

“Zionism claims to be a freedom movement for all Jews. Zionist ideologists have spared no effort trying to make the terms “Jew” and “Zionist” synonymous. However, Zionism was in fact essentially a freedom movement for European Jews (and this is questionable as far as we know), and more precisely for that small minority of European Jews who reside in Israel. Although Zionism claims that it offers a homeland to all Jews, this homeland was not offered to everyone at the same level. The Mizrachi Jews were initially brought to Israel for special European Zionist reasons. Afterwards, Zionism systematically discriminated against them by distinctively allocating energies and material resources permanently in favor of the European Jews, and permanently against the Mizrachi.”

Until the pre-Holocaust era and the events in Russia and the Nakba, Zionism regarded the Arab Jews in an ambiguous and non-serious manner and tended to consider them as an important intelligence repository, because they spoke Arabic fluently and looked like Arabs. Shahrabani says: “The Arab Jews were employed by the state as people with immense expertise” (p. 32), therefore, it is not surprising that the percentage of Mizrachis in Palestine between 1919-1948 did not exceed 13%, while the Ashkenazi constituted 87% of society, due to the absence of any organized effort by the Zionist movement to recruit them as it did with European Jews. After Zionism faced crises in its demographic struggle with the Palestinians, Arab Jews were once more seriously reconsidered as an important demographic repository, through Ben Gurion’s “People of One Million Jews” Plan, which we will discuss and elaborate upon through this review.

Shahrabani describes the writings of the Ashkenazi academic circles such as Hannah Arndt and others, who wrote about the Jews of the Orient, through descriptions stemming from their European centrality, as they considered the Arab Jews uncivilized and lacking Western Jew’s culture. For example, she describes the Arab Jews during the Eichmann trial as a “mob” that does not obey the rules and does not appear in a respectable manner (p. 33). It is clear that the Orientalist perspective that Europe has developed of the east, which was manifested in Edward Said’s critical writings, was now redefined and redirected in a different context called “Jewish Orientalism”.

Looking deep into the Zionist epistemology, one can understand the intertwining and interconnected relationships that lay underneath it. Zionism has formed a set of criteria and determinants in one package that one can be a Zionist only through it. Shahrabani considers it a triangle that depends on three main pillars: religion, nationality, and ethnicity (p.43). These three components are not closed and unique systems, but systems that undergo continuous hybridization, upon which the Zionist knowledge system is formed and constructed. Shahrabani tries to understand how this system works, therefore he adopts Althusser’s concept of interpellation in which ideology is utilized to recruit individuals and to turn them into actors within it (p. 51). For example, a religious person can enter this “package” only through acquiring a national identity, and a secular person is bound to be identified with and enter into a relationship with the political theology, and a Jew of Arab origins must abandon his Arab being by acquiring a religious national identity to be a part of this Zionist epistemological formation.

If we wish to approach the National State Law that was recently passed in Israel with the above mentioned, we see that the definition of this law the state is based on an ethnic, religious and national approach, therefore, the answer to the question what is Israel? does not depend on the answer to the question who is Israeli?, i.e., the model of civil citizenship is officially excluded after it was previously excluded in the daily practice. On the other hand, there is a bias to define the state/nation according to privilege enjoyed by specific groups only, thus people who do not fall within this package are treated as second class citizens only and are treated with special treatment

In his analysis of the identity of the Arab Jews in the Zionist debate, Shahrabani goes on to put forward two different methodologies; Essentialism, and neo-Marxism (p. 41). According to essentialism, they are described as a natural phenomenon rooted in the culture of Arab Jews, whereas neo-Marxism relies on class determinants and the material struggle over lifestyles and labor markets

and place of residency. In both cases, Shahrabani claims that each method suffers from “intrinsic self-blindness” (p. 41). The first methodology ignored the ideological structures within the Jewish state that form the individuals’ identity and attempts to mold them in it, while the second methodology overlooked their Arab origin and denied their history, and considered them a group impossible to understand outside their class identity. Sabri Jiryis quotes from Sirkin to present an evaluation of the Zionist idea:

“Zionism, as the Jewish constructive movement, does not contradict with the struggle between the classes, but stand above it. All the Jewish classes can accept it without considering the differences between them.”

Thus, Sirkin’s position will tend to negate the neo-Marxist approach and will intersect with both approaches, considering Zionism a fixed determinant, and ignoring the Arab Jew being and other determinants that Zionism has erased and dissolved through its apparatus

The case of Abadan, as the first systematic encounter between the Jews of the East and the Jews of the West:

Abadan is a city located on the Iraqi-Iranian border, on the Iranian side. It was re-interpreted as a settlement by the workers’ battalion affiliated with Solel Boneh construction company. This hybrid area formed a center for understanding the contradictory and complementary relationships in a British colonial context, and a Zionist nationalist context simultaneously, and an overlap of the relations between Arabs and Jews, and the European Jews who came as envoys of Solel Boneh under colonial British umbrella. It falls neither within the borders of the national homeland nor is it part of exile. It was not called a Yishuv, nor was it called a ghetto, therefore it was constituted as a hybrid colony, so to speak. Shahrabani claims that the case of Abadan was the first systematic encounter between the two sides, although other previous encounters took place, although they were ephemeral encounters (p. 57). Therefore, Foucault considers Abadan as the historical zero point, because it was the beginning of direct formation of the relationship between the Arab Jews and the Zionists.

The book confirms the idea that the objectives of Solel boneh were not economical as Zionism claims but were rather more than that. It was a company that had British colonial interests, in addition to another important thing that we will focus on, which is the Zionist nationalist character that was camouflaging its orientations, embodied in the “People of the Million Jews” plan (p. 70). These important milestones took place precisely between 1941-1945, a period I call “the Zionist demographic crisis”. The events of the Holocaust and the confinement of Jews in Russia, accompanied by the negative outcomes of the Vichy rule between 1940-1942, and the violent change in the relations with France, and the Alliance retreat from their pro-France policy, has all convinced the Zionist leadership that the European demographic repository they used to rely on was no longer the same, therefore the Arab Jewish population became the center of attention, and attempts to bring them to Palestine were made.

Thus, Abadan formed a place in which all the elements unite together, forming a component that was marginalized in the Zionists texts, which Shahrabani calls “the colonial phenomenology” (p. 61). On the one hand, there is British colonialism, and on the other there is a Zionist national model, and both interact in a process of forming an identity for the Jewish Arabs, and contradict each other at the same time. The colonial model describes them as easterns, while the national model considers them an integral part of the authentic Jewish formation. A third determinant emerges, the Jewish Orientalism, shaping itself according to the “Ashkenazi Zionist being”, while imposing its European characteristics and model upon the Arab Jews, trying to erase their differences. Nevertheless, a colonial model remains and is considered the protective framework of the Zionist national model.

Shahrabani says: “Zionism is the adopted daughter of the colonial mother state, Britain” (p. 75), thus, he agrees with Sabri Jiryis’s thesis that claims that the Zionist idea has embodied itself under almost ideal circumstances, especially as it was protected by an empire like Britain, the mightiest empire of that period. However, and in another direction, Ilan Pape has called this the double colonialism (p. 77). Pape claims that although there was a state of harmony, it was interrupted by struggle and contradiction and hostility in many cases, which Zionism has surpassed by following a strategy of self-restraint in Palestine, or through Abadan project, which neutralized the rivalry through an economic framework that benefited both sides and urged them for cooperation.

In a meeting the included senior Zionist leaders in 1942, headed by Ben-Gurion (p. 70), the latter addressed the rest of the leaders by talking about the “People of One Million Jews” plan, bringing forward the Zionist discourse that addressed the Jews of Europe about the danger of anti-Semitism and Jewish erasure, and redirected it differently to the Jews in the East, warning against the imminent dangers of Arab obsession, and urging that Jews from the eastern regions must be annexed as soon as possible before they are not eradicated by the same means that Hitler used. But once again, in the debate within the Zionist circles of that time, the mentality of the Jewish orientalist reappears, and a group of members of the Executive Council of the Jewish Agency opposed this initiative, considering that the annexation of Arab Jews in such a delicate time could lead, as Verns David says, to destabilize

the qualitative value of Jews in Palestine.

In the context of the feeling generated among Zionists that Jews must be brought from Arab and Muslim countries, a famous incident in 1941 called the Farhud has happened, which was a fundamental opportunity for both the Zionist nationalism and colonialism, and served the interests of both sides. Khaldoun Al Barghouthy says:

“Britain tried to hold the Iraqi patriots and Nazi propaganda responsible for this incident, but the Zionist movement exploited it to incite the Jews of Iraq to emigrate to Palestine”.¹

This massacre led to the intensification of Zionist activity in Iraq, with the help of Solel Bonneh that was operating there, and began their relentless attempts through the Hamosad La'aliyah B' organization, and through sending sums of money by the National Council to the Jewish communities in Iraq (p. 89). However, despite all that had happened, the Zionist organization had been disappointed, because Jews of Iraq had formed a temporary memory of the massacre and were not motivated to emigrate. “Ezra and Nehemiah did not get us out of here,” said the rabbi of Basra to one of the Zionist envoys, “what power do you have that brought you to us” (p. 92).

Because the relationship between the Iraqis, particularly the Arab Jews, and Britain was not at its best, especially since the Arab Jew defined himself as being the other different from the British European, the workers' battalion, whose western character was present, evaded between the two models, the western and the national Zionist, in addition to dropping the religious factor as they were one nation.

From Foucault to Appadurai: the human material, and how does space become a “heterotopic” component

In his description of the Zionist system, Shahrabani claims that it is a formula that is not devoid of colonial characteristics as a research determinant in a historical framework. However, the difference in the case of the hybrid space Abadan is that Zionism has dealt with it differently. By projecting Foucault's concept of “Heterotopia”, Shahrabani was able to provide a clearer picture of this space. It is not an imagined utopian place, but a place that exists. However, it is contradictory to the extent that it is a place in nowhere; it does not fall within the mother state Israel, nor it is classified as being in exile.

This has brought together spaced out times, from the European time to the local, Zionist and colonial time, constituting together a contradicting space that explains the activity of the Zionist organization at that region, and the nature of the declared discourse.

The traditional colonial activity claims that it tries to civilize and prepare the native population, but in the case of Abadan, the colonial Zionist and the native share the same religion. To understand this, he had to discuss Appadurai's ethnic scene, through which ethnicity is understood in a context of heterogeneous identities, to be reformulated. In the case of nationalism witnessed in the modern era, nationalism has become a determinant of ethnic reformations, which has forced the Zionist mission in Abadan to clash directly not only with the oriental thought that differs from the white man's thought, but also with the Arab national system which formed and tagged the Arab Jews.

The situation in Palestine was the same, however, in a different context. What was considered a hindrance in Abadan, became the main determinant of the creation of the new Zionist society. The national vision that was considered to be a formation tool and a space for understanding ethnicities, enabled Zionism to include and adapt the new immigrants successfully and became the arena in which the identity of the new Jew was formed. Shahrabani says: “Israel did not welcome the Ashkenazi and the Mizrachi, it has created them” (p. 112). Subsequently, the identity formation process becomes a series of orientalizations operations that make one group ascend to the detriment of another group and become capable to shift the path of identity to serve its interests. Accordingly, what distinguished Abadan from the mother state is that it was an area not subjected to the same path of identity formation that took place in Palestine. It was a space that enabled the formation of a different and more complex type of identity, not only to its residents, but for the Zionist envoys who came to it as well, as they were affected by factors, such as money, and their assignment, which led to dispute in their correspondence with the mother state, regarding the assignment they were entrusted with.

The individuals within the Zionist organization talk about the human material in parallel. It is moving towards two models after a constant controversy about the human material of the Arab Jewish population. One model considers the Mizrachi as only group of rabble with Arab culture who need years of modernization to keep up with civilization, as Arieh Sheel says: “the Jews here are degenerates and stubborn, they are claimed to be Zionists, but this has nothing to do with Zionism” (p. 138). On the other hand, the other model considers them as the true ancient Jewish people, and part of the ten lost tribes.

The debate went to another direction after a dispute between the envoys and the Zionist organization has risen as a result of financial-national reasons, and because of the complexity that Zionism faced in its attempt to include the Arab Jews at that time. I mentioned the human material that went to Abadan, and said that it was a material suitable to carry out the missions assigned to it, trying to justify the ethnic gap that it encountered. This indicates the ambiguity that surrounded the Zionist process in Abadan, and in the rest of the Arab areas, and the overlap that has led to the absence of a clear strategy for dealing with the Arab Jewish population at the time. This also uncovers an important part of the Zionist Arab Jews relationships that most Israeli academic studies have ignored.

Notes and conclusions

Shahrabani was able to provide a more exhaustive and clear understanding of the official Israeli narrative and succeeded in deconstructing the Zionist epistemology by presenting approaches of different theorists in sociology, especially postmodern theorists, thus presenting a thought different from the thought prevalent in the Israeli academic sector. Also, Shahrabani introduces a new premise that enables us to understand the Mizrahi population in Israel today, as well as the social infrastructures that have turned them into the social and political composition that they construct today.

I present in this review a selective reading from the book, focusing on the Zionist narrative, the Zionist theory, and Shahrabani's attempt to conduct a sociological dialogue between himself and other researchers. I think that other topics in the book are worth to read and understand because they contain connotations that help the reader to understand the lifestyle of Mizrahi before and after the establishment of the Zionist state. The book is important not only because of its Israeli context, but also in the Palestinian and Arab contexts, within the many scholar models that tried to deconstruct and explain the method in which the Zionist narrative was written.

Translated by: Muna Abu Baker

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