

‘Arab Jews’ after structuralism: Zionist discourse and the (de)formation of an ethnic identity

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We revisit the term ‘Arab Jews’, which has been widely used in the past to depict Jews living in Arab countries, but was extirpated from the political lexicon upon their arrival in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s. We follow first the demise of this discourse and then its political reawakening in the 1990s, which was carried out mostly by second-generation Mizrahi intellectuals and activists. We review this surge of the 1990s, distinguishing between structural and post-structural interpretations of the concept, although we also show that they are often interwoven. According to the structural interpretation, the term ‘Arab Jew’ was founded on a binary logic wherein Jews and Arabs are posed as cultural and political antagonisms. The post-structural interpretation rejects the bifurcated form in lieu of a hybrid epistemology, which tolerates and enables a dynamic movement between the two facets of ‘Arabs’ and ‘Jews’. We spell out the differences between these two heuristic modes of interpretation and speculate about their relevance to the political conditions in the Middle East today.

Keywords: ethnicity; Arab Jews; nationalism; structuralism; post-structuralism; Zionism; Arab nationalism; Jewish studies; postcolonialism; Hebrew literature

In January 2008, a Reuters dispatch cited Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former Saudi ambassador to the United States and the United Kingdom, who argued that a comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace would be rewarded by the Arabs with normalization, at which point the Arabs ‘will start thinking of Israelis as “Arab Jews” rather than simply as Israelis’.

Published in *Forward*, a Jewish weekly in New York, the quote was perceived by commentators and readers as offensive to Jews. In a subsequent polemical essay, Yossi Alper (Alper, 2008), a former advisor to the Israeli prime minister, provided a placating interpretation of the term ‘Arab Jews’, suggesting that Turki’s comment should be read in a positive manner: ‘he (Turki) threw in the “Arab Jews” reference for the benefit of his Arab audience . . . many of whom . . . saw the Israeli state as a European entity imposed on Arab land after World War II’. He went on further to belittle the usage of the term in the Israeli context:

There is also a specifically Israeli context to the Arab Jew debate. A very small minority of post-Zionist Jews in Israel does indeed envisage Israel so closely integrating into the region that we become *Arab Jews* . . . Then there are some Israeli Jews of eastern origin

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who harbor strong resentment of Ashkenazi dominance of Israeli life – which is hardly an item any more in view of the degree of integration in Israeli institutions like the military and the Knesset – or simply long for the language and culture of their or their grandparents' land of birth, and call themselves *Arab Jews*. No one gets very excited over this; you almost certainly will not encounter them on a flight to Cairo or at the bridge crossing into Jordan.

These derogatory remarks certainly stand for the views of the political mainstream in Israel today, whose ardent desire is to live in a Jewish state cleansed of Arabs or of Arab culture, of any kind. They certainly correspond with the bounds of the Zionist ideological lexicon, which proscribes against the mixing of Arabs and Jews, either in practice or in language and culture. The Israeli political consultant cited above relieves his anxious Jewish-American readers that 'no one gets very excited over this ... [in Israel]'

In this essay we wish to revisit the term 'Arab Jews' and examine the discourse around it in theory and practice in the Israeli context. We first briefly describe the 'Arab Jewish' option as it existed in Arab or Muslim countries prior to the immigration of Jews to Israel. Then, we identify two phases in the interpretation of the term 'Arab Jews' in the political culture in Israel and sketch out the cultural and political differences between them. We end with a discussion about the relevance of this analysis to the current situation in Israel and the Middle East.

A brief biography of the term 'Arab Jews'

Prior to the establishment of Israel in 1948 there were approximately 750,000–850,000 Jews living in North Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Today, they constitute approximately 20% of world Jewry, and approximately half of the Jews in Israel (Goldberg, 1996). These Jews were given in Israel different labels, mainly 'Sephardi Jews', 'Oriental Jews', 'Middle Eastern Jews', 'Mizrahi Jews' and 'Arab Jews'. The construction of these categories was a product of history, countries of origin, and the politics of the present (Shenhav, 2006; Goldberg & Bram, 2007). In this article we address the category of 'Arab Jews' as it was developed and deployed in the Israeli context, showing that it was not a stable category and that it was subject to variations. Therefore it is essential to clarify from the outset that the identity of 'Arab Jews', used throughout this article, is neither natural and essential nor necessarily consistent and coherent. It is a splicing together of two categories whose relations are at best ambivalent, given the long history of rupture between them. As a viable option of practice and discourse in Israeli society, 'Arab Jews' was short-lived, and the label was edited out by historical circumstances, particularly the rise of Zionist and Arab nationalisms.

Claims about Arab-Jewish identities, and the so called 'Jewish-Arab symbiosis' (Goitein, 2005) appeared throughout the Middle East and North Africa, most noticeably in metropole centers such as Baghdad, Cairo or Beirut. Levy qualifies this argument stating that the usage of this hybrid identity was not necessarily widespread, but nevertheless she argues that from the 1920s through the 1950s:

as the concept of Arab identity permeated the public sphere, the collocation 'The Arab Jews' did enjoy a period of currency in which it was employed by both Jews and non-Jews in the Arabic press. (Levy, 2008, p. 461)

In other times, she qualifies, the term was used for political purposes, for example by stating support for the Palestinian cause in Palestine (Levy, 2008).

In any case, numerous Jewish intellectuals, writers, poets and journalists in the Arab world have published in Arabic and participated in Arabic culture, and in so doing transgressed the boundaries between the two identity categories (for comprehensive descriptions of the use of this option in various contexts see also Udovitch & Valensi, 1984; Cohen 1989; Levy, 2008). For example, Tunisian Jew Albert Memmi used the term most explicitly, saying:

The term Jewish-Arabs or Arab-Jews is not a very good one, of course. But I have found it convenient to use. I simply wanted to remind my readers that because we were born in these so-called Arab countries and had been living in those regions long before the arrival of the Arabs, we share their languages, their customs, and their cultures to an extent that is not negligible. (Memmi, 1975[1974], p. 29)

Memmi, added that the Arabs did not respect the 'Arab Jews', and that 'it is far too late to become Jewish Arabs again' (Memmi, 1975[1974], p. 20). This disclaimer affirms the reality of this category.

The term was used also by Jews in Palestine itself, prior to the establishment of the state of Israel (see Jacobson, 2003; 2006). For example, an influential prototype of an 'Arab Jew' appeared in the early twentieth century in the prose of the Jewish author Yitzchak Shami in Palestine, mainly in his *Revenge of the Fathers* (Hever, 2006, pp. 120–139). Shami crafted an Arab-Jewish narrator so eloquently and persuasively that Zionist literary researcher Gershon Shaked labeled him 'An Arab-Jewish author who is writing in Hebrew' (Shaked, 1975, p. 5; see also Hever, 2006, pp. 120–139). Likewise, Alberto Antebbi, a leader of the Palestinian Jewish community in Damascus at the turn of the nineteenth century, who challenged the prevailing Zionist policies 'remained unequivocal in presenting plans that he thought would meet the requirement of a local population of which he *considered himself an integral part*' (Alcalay, 1996, pp. 52–54; emphasis added).

One of the richest contexts in which this option was employed was Iraq (Rejwan, 1985; 2004).¹ Rueven Snier provides a thick description of the immersion of Iraqi Jews, mainly authors, poets, editors and journalists (mostly men) in Arab culture. Intellectuals such as Salman Shina, Anouar Shaul, Murad Michael, Ezra Haddad, Menashe Zarur or Ezat Sasson Mualem were prominent from in the 1920s in Baghdad (Snir, 2005, p. 42). These intellectuals did not see a contradiction between their Jewish religion and Arab culture, promoting a vision in which religion and national culture could be hybridized. As one said: 'Religion [belongs] to God and the nation to everybody' (Snir, 2005, p. 43). Jewish intellectuals in Iraq established newspapers and periodicals in Arabic such as *Yeshurun*, a literary weekly which was founded in 1920 and was published in both Arabic and Jewish Arabic; or *El-Msbach* (*The Lamp*) which was established in 1924 and its title was published both in Arabic and Hebrew. In the late 1930s, Iraqi Jew Ezra Haddad stated that 'We are Arabs before we are Jews' (Rejwan, 1985, p. 219). Likewise, in 1938 a group of Iraqi Jewish professionals who supported the Palestinian cause released a press statement in which they coined themselves 'young Arab Jews' (Levy, 2008, p. 461; Wien, 2006, p. 45).

Snir adds that in many cases Arab historiographers did not mention their Jewishness as distinct or unusual and treated them as Arabs for all practical purposes (Snir, 2005, p. 4). A similar argument was made by Arab researchers such as Shiblak (2005) and Abd Al-Salam (2008).

More so, several Iraqi Jews who arrived in Israel after the establishment of the state kept defining themselves as 'Arab Jews' despite the hostile political culture they encountered. The first vocal voice was probably that of the author Shimon Ballas. Referring to his move from Baghdad to Tel Aviv in 1950 he said: 'I came from the Arab environment, and I remain in constant colloquy with the Arab environment'. Ballas added: 'I also didn't change my environment. I just moved from one place to another within it. The whole project of a nationalist conception, of Zionist ideology, of the Jewish point of view, the bonds between Jews in the diaspora and Israel, all of this is quite marginal for me and does not play a major role; it's not part of my cultural world' (cited in Alcalay, 1996, p. 189). Ballas made similar arguments in the Arab world in Arabic (Rnaim, 1997) as well as in Hebrew in Israel (see Hever, 2007; Evri, 2009). Following him, Israeli author, Sami Michael, who was born in Iraq and immigrated to Israel in the 1950s, recollected: 'We perceived ourselves as Arabs of a Jewish descent. Just as there are Christian Arabs, we were Arab Jews' (cited in Snir, 2005, p. 46). Two other noticeable authors who kept their identity as 'Arab Jews' were Yizhak Bar-Moshe (Evri, 2003) and Samir Nakash (Rejwan, 1985). The latter kept writing in Arabic after his immigration to Israel up to his death in 2004. He defined himself as an 'Arab Jew', and used to state that 'Arabic is his first language and he will always keep it as such' (Snir, 2005, pp. 202, 245). In an interview with Amiel Alcalay he explained:

The choice [to be an outsider] is very personal and connected to the whole story of my family and my father's attempts before he died – along with a group of other Arab Jews – to leave the country, to get international citizenship. (Alcalay, 1996, p. 108)

Given this 'Arab Jewish' heritage, it is not surprising that Zionist emissaries who visited Iraq in the early 1940s to recruit local Jews for immigration described them as 'Arab Jews'. To their chagrin, they found 'different Jews' from those they usually met in European societies. They used succulent Orientalist depictions to characterize the 'Arab Jews', arguing, for example, that:

Their whole life is in cafes. There is no family culture. The man is not to be found with his wife and children, but sits in the café and plays at taula [backgammon] or cards for hours on end. In every corner are brothels and arak [hard liquor]. There are clubs of the rich that are frequented by wealthy families. This is the center of matchmaking and gossip, but if they want a good time – they go to a café. The theater has no culture. The talent develops according to the needs of the audience. This culture is largely that of Jews, it is *total assimilation in the Orient*. (quoted in Shenhav, 2006, p. 72)

What the Zionist emissaries found troubling was not these Jews' lack of cultural skills or misdemeanors, but the fact that they were bearers of 'Arab' culture, which negated the very premises of Zionist ideology. For example, one of the emissaries protested:

It is said that they are Zionists. None of this is Zionism, but the most terrible hypocrisy, Levantism, and Arabness at the height of its development. (quoted in Tsimhoni, 1989, p. 242)

Likewise, Enzo Sereni, who served as organizer of the Zionist underground in Baghdad (and was later executed in Auschwitz), observed that:

The Jew lives like an Arab. His culture is Arab, he uses Arabic figures of speech ... (quoted in Shenhav, 2006, p. 75)

The 'discovery', by emissaries of a European descent, of Jews who are also Arabs, or could be considered Arabs, was intimidating to the Zionist project, which was founded on a sharp binary distinction between Arabs and Jews.

After their mass immigration to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, the term 'Arab Jew' became present-absentee in the dominant strand of the mainstream Israeli discourse, and was used sporadically and inconsistently by Jews of Arab descent as described above. An intriguing depiction of this silent option was made in 1961 by Hannah Arendt, who visited Jerusalem in 1961 to cover for the *New Yorker Magazine* the trial of the Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichmann. Hannah Arendt writes in a letter to Karl Jaspers:

Fortunately, Eichmann's three judges were of German origin, indeed the best German Jewry. [Attorney General Gideon] Hausner is a typical Galician Jew, still European, very unsympathetic, boring, constantly making mistakes. Probably one of those people who don't know any language. Everything is organized by the Israeli police force, which gives me the creeps. It speaks only Hebrew and looks Arabic. Some downright brutal types among them. They obey any order. Outside the courthouse doors the oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country. (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992[1985], pp. 434-435)

What Arendt does here is more than just mark the Arabness of 'Arab Jews'. As a European Jew (of German origin), she expresses a quintessential Orientalist and essentialist reading of Israeli society, one that might have come directly out of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. She ranks Jews on a scale based on the distinction between 'Occident' and 'Orient', with 'European' at one end and 'Arab' at the other. At the top, she places the German enlightenment, whose moral status had not been compromised in her view despite its tragic history in the twentieth century. Below that, she places the Israeli Attorney General Hausner, who is still European, as a Galician who is 'constantly making mistakes'. She probably wonders how an Eastern European Jew, the 'Asian of Europe', became the 'European of Asia', as it were. Below that, she ranks the 'Arab Jews', who speak Hebrew but look like Arabs, and, above all: she argues that they would obey any order, importing an analogy from German history. At the bottom of the scale she places the 'oriental mob', right out of the classical Orientalist descriptions of Cairo, Baghdad, and Istanbul. The Israeli police force and 'the oriental mob' gave Arendt the creeps because they exposed a concealed feature – and the unusual mixture – in Israeli society: the 'Arab Jews'. Constrained by the Zionist lexicon, however, Arendt lacks the terminology to define these despised hybrids.

In contrast to the language gap in Arendt's letter, Israel's prime minister Golda Meir did not shy away from using explicitly this category in an interview with Oriana Fallaci, in the 1970s:

We in Israel have absorbed about 1,400,000 *Arab Jews*: From Iraq, from Yemen, from Egypt, from Syria, from North African countries like Morocco. People who when they got here were full of diseases and didn't know how to do anything ... and still we took them. And built hospitals for them, and took care of them, we educated them ... (Fallaci, 1976, p. 104; emphasis added)

Yet, this statement was uncommon at the time. The various categories of the Zionist lexicon did not include a national hybrid which did not bear or affirm the 'natural' and historical conflict between 'Jews' and 'Arabs'. Instead of 'Arab Jews' they were labeled – upon their arrival in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s – as '*edot ha'mizrach*', which literally meant 'Eastern (or Oriental) communities'. It should be noted that even though Israel is a racial state (e.g., Goldberg, 2008; Shenhav & Yonah, 2008), the term 'race' is hardly used, mostly due to World War Two and its aftermath. The term '*eda*' means literally a community of people, and it directs attention to a range of political and folkloristic issues. In Israeli anthropology of the 1950s and 1960s, the term '*eda*' replaced the term 'tribe' which was used in classical anthropology and translated it mainly to primordial Jewish contours. The '*eda*' is identified with country of origin, food, music and customs – making ethnicity a cultural rather than a political category and one which contravenes national boundaries. Over the years there were several outbursts of Mizrahi discontent – among them the Wadi Salib revolt in 1959, and the formation of the Israeli Black Panthers in 1971 – but the discourses around them were largely confined to matters of social and economic inequality and remained committed to the Zionist cause.

It was not until the 1990s that a broader Mizrahi discourse surfaced. It involved greater participation of the second- and third-generation children of Arab-Jewish immigrants, who aspired to challenge the ideal of a homogenous Israeli identity. They founded organizations, political movements, newsletters and periodicals – all of which called for major changes in three complementary spheres of action: culture, politics, and social justice (for a review of these efforts, see: Yonah, Na'aman, & Machlev, 2007). These efforts – arguably shaped by New Left politics and post-colonial perspectives in North America and Europe – challenged the modernization paradigm that dominated academic discourse, particularly during the first three decades of the Israeli state, and planted the seeds for the development of a wider critical theory which combines class, identity and color, offering a tough challenge to Zionist discourse (Swirski & Bernstein, 1980; Shohat, 2001; Shitrit 2003; Behar, 2007; Yonah, Na'aman, & Machlev, 2007).

In the context of these efforts, Mizrahi intellectuals have re-presented (rather than 'represented', see Spivak, 1988) the term 'Arab Jew' – which had been considered taboo in the Hebrew language since the early 1950s. The fact of the matter is that the term 'Arab Jews' and the discourse around it elicits vehement, not to say violent, reactions from Jews inside and outside Israel. In a recent conference on Iraqi Jews held at Tel Aviv University, Sami Samocha, a professor of sociology born in Iraq himself, argued that the term 'Arab Jew' bears no correspondence to reality. He assured his audience that, according to opinion polls, most Arab-born Jews living

in Israel would not subscribe to such an identity. His compatriot Sasson Somech, a professor of Arab literature, added that ‘those who define themselves as Arab Jews are motivated by political reasons . . .’. These disclaimers drew an enthusiastic round of applause from the audience (Lee, 2008). The uproar seems to have been in response to the disconcertion, indecisiveness and semantic unease confronting the average Jewish reader upon exposure to the term.

Samocha was accurate. Most Mizrahi Jews living in Israel today do not identify themselves as ‘Arab Jews’, and reject any attempt to label themselves as such. In a random sample, consisting of 1022 respondents representing varied groups and classes in Israeli society, Nissim Mizrahi has found that most of the Jews (78%) and Arabs (71%) rejected the idea that a Jew could be defined as Arab (Mizrahi, 2009). Yet, in focus groups he ran, he found that Mizrahi participants showed greater openness to the idea when Arab identity did not constitute a threat to their dignity and their worldviews. Some of them even indicated that once their Jewish identity is secured, they perceived the Arab dimension of their identity advantageous (Mizrahi, 2009). In Max Weber terminology, this can be seen as an ‘objective possibility’ opening an option for future political co-existence in the region.

We argue, however, that in order to fully grasp the challenging potential of ‘Arab Jews’ to the hegemonic discourse in the context of Israel, we need to rescue the term from the binary structural interpretation, which dominated the discourse until the early 2000s. In order to do so we present two different interpretations of ‘Arab Jews’: structural and post-structural. The two interpretations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as one does not substitute for the other, but rather they coexist in theory and in everyday life.

In keeping with the structural interpretation, customary epistemology strikes a binary distinction of negation between Arabs and Jews. It offers them as distinct and unambiguously antagonistic camps with which ‘the political’ can be easily spelled out and articulated. In post-structuralism, epistemology is much more nuanced and does not offer, on the surface, a clear political identification. The conventional argument suggests that post-structuralism curtails, blurs and sterilizes political positions in exchange for theoretical (and political) intricacy. Recently, however, there have been stringent attempts in the critical literature to rescue the possibilities for politics in post-structural epistemology (e.g., Malesevic & MacKenzie, 2002; Hoy, 2004). In this vein, we show that the concept of the ‘Arab Jew’ is embedded in an archive of patched political histories, which the structural interpretation tends to ignore.

The structural interpretation and its binary foundation

The first phase represents a moment in political history in which Mizrahi intellectuals posed an epistemological and political challenge to the Zionist identity regime. In this ‘structural’ phase, the distinction between Jews and Arabs was structured as binary, in a form of ‘strategic essentialism’ which was an exact negative mirror image of the Zionist discourse itself. This ‘strategic essentialism’ is clearly evident in Ella Shohat’s essay ‘Reflections of an Arab Jew’ (1999).² Shohat writes about her grandmother who learnt in Israel to speak in terms of ‘we’ (the Jews) and ‘they’ (the Arabs); she emphasizes that the term ‘Arab Jew’ forms a logical

contradiction, an oxymoron. This becomes even more apparent in her talk about ‘a profound and visceral schizophrenia’, which the binary logic of the war generates. Shohat stresses in particular the sturdy Israeli mnemonic technologies, which prohibit the crossing of cultural party lines and impose taboos on performing contradictory identity locations. ‘It was precisely the policing of cultural borders in Israel that led some of us to escape into the metropolises of syncretic identities’, she argues.

In so doing, Shohat, an ardent critique of Zionism, is paradoxically buying into the Zionist party lines, which preach that Arabs should not be mistaken for Jews and that the two should not be mixed, aggravating the binary incommensurability between the two identities. In another article (‘Columbus, Palestine and Arab Jews’, 1997), Shohat emphasizes the subtle process by which the hyphenation between the Jew and the Arab was obliterated, which forced the ‘Arab Jews’ to choose unequivocally between Arab and Jewish identities. This was mainly because the Arab-Israeli conflict made boundary crossing – in culture and society – virtually undesirable. Although Shohat’s analysis offered a sharp critique of Israeli culture, it nevertheless rested on a binary structure, which does not provide room for either hybrid identity constellations or categorical flexibility in interpreting political past and present. Hybridism was clearly ruled out as an identity option since it is rested on ambivalence, incongruence, and the possibility of messier histories and identity options (see also Bethlehem, 2006).

More importantly, in the structural phase the sociological practice known as ‘de-Arabization’ – which was carried out by means of the Israeli cultural machines – was associated mainly with erasure: of history, of language, and of Arab culture (Shohat, 1988). The argument goes that state institutions, which were attempting to accomplish a Zionist homogenization of the Jewish people, could not fit Jews who are also Arabs into the national container. Land settlement, the school system and the army were institutional instruments of de-Arabization. The success of the Zionist project was to depend, to a large degree, on the incommensurability between the two categories of ‘Arabs’ and ‘Jews’. One typical example was the effort made by the Israeli state to keep ‘Arab Jews’ and Arabs apart in mixed towns (Nurieli, 2006). Attempts of this kind reflect deep-seated concerns about the likelihood that the boundaries between Arabs and Jews might crumble, with spatial segregation consequently being used as a key state policy tool. It was a struggle against the hyphen. The hyphen produces a semantic explosion that challenges the very assumptions upon which the national Jewish discourse is founded. That is also the source of the clamor it makes in the average Israeli ear.

Admittedly, the binary division between ‘Arabs’ and ‘Jews’ in Zionist discourse reduces the ambivalence that the hyphenation and its semantic derivatives threaten to restore. Thus, as opposed to many places in the world – where multiculturalism was made possible by the minting of numerous hyphenated appellations, such as African-American or Irish-American – in Israel the option of the Arab-Jew was virtually obstructed. The term ‘European Jews’, on the other hand, was widely used.

In the process of being transformed into ‘*Edot Ha’Mizrach*’, the ‘Arab Jews’ were subjected to a process of Orientalization. While the euphemistic term was used to dismiss the Arabism of the ‘Arab Jews’, it also affirmed, at the same time, their forbidden origin. The practice of Orientalization was not only repressive, but

also enticing, as is the case with every form of hegemonic control. It carried the promise of assimilation through modernization and intermarriage. This tempting (and deceiving) logic promised the 'Arab Jews' a golden nugget at the end of the process: incorporation into the Israeli melting pot. However, this was articulated as a promise which could never be fulfilled, since any such fulfillment would rock the very foundation of Israel's cultural boat. It is therefore the case that as long as the Zionist discourse is founded on the hierarchical dichotomy of 'East' and 'West', it demands the Orientalization of the 'Arab Jews', as well as their subjection to cultural and economic inequality. It should be emphasized that 'de-Arabization' did not necessarily result in the erasure of Arabic heritage. Rather, we view it as a process which involves both erasure and re-presentation simultaneously. These two are never at odds with each other, neither in language nor in cultural practices in general.

However, when critical intellectuals of the structuralist mode of thought criticize de-Arabization practices they assume too, as does the Zionist discourse, that de-Arabization means the complete obliteration of Arabness from their identities and consciousness. Formulated in this paradigmatic way, the proposition entails a strong assumption about the existence of an absolute boundary between Arabs and Jews. Accepting this bifurcation, it seeks to challenge these boundaries and provide new forms of hybridization between the two categories.

It is rather striking, and paradoxical, that critical theory – in the structuralist stage – remained handcuffed to the structural dichotomy differentiating between Arabs and Jews and accepted it as a given. Not surprisingly, this critical phase was easily contested by critiques. The term 'an Arab Jew' does indeed generate clamor in the Hebrew language, but at the same time it is founded on internal contradictions, making it easy for it to be annulled and rejected. After all, the younger Arab-Jewish generation does not speak the Arab language, and the different ingredients of their identities have been transformed and hybridized over time to such an extent that their relationships with the Arab remains are fragmented, at best. Intellectuals who hold a binary interpretation put a great premium on knowledge of the language. Here is what Sasson Somech, a professor of Arabic literature and Iraqi-born Jew, has to say:

For me, an Arab Jew is a person who was born in a Jewish Arabic speaking home, lived in an Arab-Muslim environment and is literate in the language which is the basis of all Arab culture. According to these criteria, it is clear that all those who use this term today never studied Arabic, never spoke Arabic and do not know how to read the language. (Lee, 2008)³

At the end of the day, structuralist representations produced a sharp distinction between Arab and Jew, which is the major breadwinner, so to speak, of the hegemonic framework. It imprisons political thought in a petrified form of categorization and eases the task for those who would like to reject its relevance to Israeli culture and politics. Before turning into the poststructuralist interpretation, we wish to stress that these two interpretations are neither mutually exclusive, nor do they form a linear historical progression. They co-exist as heuristic devices to examine the epistemological proximity between Jews and Arabs as we show below.

The poststructuralist interpretation as an archive of representations

In post-structuralism the relationships between Arabs and Jews are not viewed as binary constructs. It is never assumed that there is a single clear or thin boundary line that separates Arabs from Jews. To the contrary, it is assumed that the interval is wide (Hochberg, 2007, p. 37; Eyal, 2006), representing an archive of movements in time and space, which cannot be captured by the thin line imagined by the first generation of critical thinkers. One facet of this is the fact that Mizrahi identity is not solely linked to Arab identity, but maintains with it ambivalent relations of closeness and distance at the same time. A typical manifestation of this ambivalence can be found in Yitzhak Gormezano Goren who argued that: ‘while I have no problem, for instance, defining myself as an Arab Jew, my Balkan ancestry betrays me’ (Alcalay, 1996, p. 166). Evidently, most of the boundary work around these identities is subsumed within the parameters of this wide line, as they never emerge in a purified binary form, a non-essentialist position. Politically speaking, erasures always leave traces, and erasure in itself is – at the same time – an act of re-marking forbidden histories. It leaves numerous traces within the broad shoulders, which are deployed around the thick boundary lines of ethnic formations. Moreover, the category of ‘Arab Jews’ does not *represent* the ‘Arab Jews’ sociologically, and here we remind the reader of Mizrahi’s (2009) findings but rather *re-presents* them in the political and cultural spheres as a political option waiting to be rescued (Spivak, 1988).

Saussure established the theory of language on the diacritical nature of the sign, which is a combination of binary difference between adjacent signifiers and the arbitrariness of the relation between the signifier and the signified. The significance of the signifier is determined by the binary difference between it and the signifiers surrounding it, as well as the arbitrary pedigree between the signifier and the signified. Derrida (1982[1972], 1998) further developed the diacritical relation between the two and acknowledged the deferral – a suspension which is embedded in the very act of signification. The neologism which Derrida employs does not recognize in French the linguistic discrepancy between *Diffe’rance* and *Diffe’rence*, therefore denoting the precedence of writing over speaking. Even more, it emphasizes that every binary contradiction is flexible since it includes a strong element of temporality.

Gil Anidjar (2003) has contributed to this, non-binary, form of the ‘Arab Jew’, pointing out that the roots of enmity between Jews and Arabs as a field of discourse are to be found mostly in Europe. It is therefore the case that the connection between Jews and Arabs is discursively determined and cannot be separated or connected by means of simplistic binary forms. Anidjar poses the reverse question. Instead of asking who is a Jew, who an Arab, he asks what Europe is and how it distinguishes itself from both Arabs and Jews, revealing Europe’s role as definer and arbiter of these relationships, hidden behind the scenes. Anidjar shows how an enemy becomes one, and how the complicated – and polarized – racial identities of Jews and Arabs are carved out. In other words, Anidjar delineates a process in which erasing and marking are at work simultaneously (Anidjar, 2003, pp. xi–xviii; see also Alcalay, 1993). This discussion suggests that ‘Arab Jews’ cannot be transparently represented by the recognition of identity through language (e.g., does the person speak fluent Arabic?), because this fails to include the rather thick interval in which the ‘Arab Jew’

represents both the Arabs and the Jews but at the same time is neither an Arab nor a Jew.

Gil Hochberg has pointed to the hyphenation, which is placed within the thick spatial interval that ‘separates’ the Jew from the Arab:

Not only the one hidden in the case of Mizrahi, but rather that this particular instance of erasure joins a long genealogy of hidden or erased hyphens, connecting and separating the Jew and the Arab: hyphens that stand for an always already forgotten link between Arab and Jew, a link that is erased at the very moment it is staged, whether in European colonial discourse, in modern anti-Semitic expressions, in current Western anti-Arab/Muslim politics or in the Zionist project of Jewish recovery. (Hochberg, 2007, p. 39)

At this stage, we wish to explain the transition between the two phases and to examine the interpretive power of the latter phase, as applied in the works of Ella Shohat (1997), Galit Saada-Ophir (2006), Gil Eyal (2006), Hannan Hever (2007), Yehouda Shenhav (2006), as well as Gil Anidjar (2003), Benny Nurieli (2005), Yuval Evri (2008) and Shlomit Benjamin (2006) – among others. In the first phase, the epistemology of the ‘Arab Jews’ hardly included the option that the dichotomy of Arab versus Jew could be an imagined one, in the phenomenological sense of the word. By contrast, we argue that the term ‘Arab Jew’ is mostly a discursive juxtaposition which needs to be maintained, and that it is indeed maintained within the parameters of a wide interval. It is therefore within this line that every attempt to erase or deny its relevance to identity politics re-presents it afresh in language. However, the very act of denial has the same effect: it re-emphasizes rather than de-emphasizes the term’s existence. These are the opening lines of an autobiography written by Esperance Cohen:

Despite the fact that I am a bilingual author, who writes in both languages, Arabic and Hebrew, I do not define myself as an Arabic or Iraqi Arab-Jewish, as some Iraqi-born authors like to identify themselves. (Cohen, 2006, p. 12)

Cohen announces loud and clear that she is not an ‘Arab Jew’, contributing to the thick sheaf of testimonies which refuse to undertake this identity category. That has always been the case when Jewish-Arab relations are exacerbated. As Joel Beinin (1998) shows, in the period following the 1967 war, it was difficult for Egyptian Jews to reiterate Morris Farjun’s 1943 pronouncement that ‘We are Arab Jews’. Cohen’s disclaimer, ‘I am not an Arab Jew’, is common to many Jews from Arab countries, such as Alber Memmi (‘Who is an Arab Jew?’ Memmi, 1975[1974]), who made an effort after the 1967 war to reject this possibly objective option.

The persistent maintenance of and political work around the binary structure renders this binarism obsolete. Critical theory in its early stages accepted the binary structure as given. When critical intellectuals criticized de-Arabization processes, they did so in binary form. The truth of the matter is that there never was a full-fledged de-Arabization process which came to completion. It was mainly a process of Orientalization, which assumed new labels such as ‘*eda*’ (singular) or ‘*edot*’ (plural). What is conspicuous about the Jewish Arab intellectuals of the first phase, notably Shimon Ballas (Alcalay, 1993, p. 244) and Ella Shohat (1999), is that their claim has become an exact negative of Zionist discourse. That is not, however, the

only paradox involved here. The term 'Arab Jew' itself is subject to multiple interpretations.

As the post-structural literature argues, the efforts to erase and reject this juxtaposition are specifically what eventually preserve it in the language and in culture. These efforts leave remains – an 'archive', so to speak – of representations and significations for which there is no room in the empty boundary line that ostensibly distinguishes unambiguously between Arab and Jew. As Haviva Pedaya has noted 'there is an inkling of Arabic in the Hebrew language, an inkling which is the shadow of what was once an original ...' (Pedaya, 2004, p. 120).

The remnants of signification and the archive of movements which crop up in the voluminous space between the two categories point to the limitations associated with the structural binary logic. First, that is because their association in the term 'Arab Jew' never constitutes an essentialist identity category of its own, reliant on 'authentic' characteristics of an identity, or on proficiency in language. It is a discursive category which plays a role in various cultural domains, and its footsteps are hard to wipe away in the language. But it does not represent any homogenous or distinct ethnic/racial group – namely, there is no simple or positivist mode of representation. Rather, it is a representation of an imagined community of a few intellectuals. According to the post-structural epistemology, the distinction between 'Arabism' and 'Jewishness' does not cut across categorically sharp lines. In between the two signifiers exists a broad twilight zone where traffic takes place in numerous directions, not least the resistance the term generates in the Israeli public sphere. Instead of a thin boundary line, we should speak about a voluminous space (hybrid broad shoulders) which encompasses movements in time and space. Instead of a unidirectional process of de-Arabization, we speak about the movement of the sign which paradoxically manufactures the object by the very act of erasing it. Let us go back now to the observations of Zionist emissaries who observed and reported their observations about the Jews of Iraq back to the Zionist establishment in Palestine in the early 1940s. The lenses of the post-structuralist perspective become useful here.

When Zionist emissary Enzo Sereni arrived in Baghdad in 1942 he expressed a strong sense of ambivalence toward the local Jews. He described the local Jews' traits and customs as Arab, but insists on a 'difference', on the existence of a Jewish marker that defines these Jews as part of the Jewish nation, differentiating them from the Arab nation and thus making it possible to incorporate their history into Zionist history. It bears notice how the text skips back and forth between the Arab aspect and the 'difference'. On the one hand, the Jews of Iraq are Arab:

The way of life of the Jews in Iraq is an Arab way of life. One does not find here, as in Egypt, a Jewish bourgeoisie that 'lives' in a European language and does not mix in the least with the Arab surroundings. The language of every Jew in Iraq is Arabic. To understand the character of the Jews in Iraq, we should not forget that until 1917, Iraq was the only Arab country, with the exception of Arabia, that had no contact with Europe. The Alliance school in Baghdad was at the time the first and only institution that shone a bit of cultural light in *the darkness of Iraq*. (quoted in Shenhav, 2006, p. 72; emphasis added)

On the other hand, Sereni feels a need to stress that the local Jews are different from the Arabs:

Nevertheless, there are *differences*, both in the way of life and in the linguistic-cultural area, between Jews and Arabs. We, who come from the West, do not always understand these subtle *differences*. For us the Oriental world is a solid bloc, but the local people feel *differently* and that is decisive. I have had a few occasions to walk out with local Jews and ask them about the 'origin' of passersby (I am unable in Iraq to distinguish between Jew, Arab, and Christian), and my companion always replied with certainty, after simply hearing the passerby's voice, whether he is Christian, Jew, Arab. (quoted in Shenhav, 2006, p. 75; emphasis added)

Sereni emphasizes the Arabness of the local Jews, regretting that 'our children attend a school that is supposedly Jewish but is subject to Arab supervision and is oriented toward the full Arabization of its students'. (Shenhav 2006, p. 74). On the other hand, he is unable to adjust to the Jews' Arab features and looks for the differentiating sign between 'Jews' and 'Arabs', a difference he assumes exists even if one can't always put one's finger on it. Note how many times the term 'difference' or 'different' is used in the following:

Despite this assimilation in way of life and culture, the Jew feels that he is a Jew. The Jew lives like an Arab. His culture is Arab, he uses Arabic figures of speech, but nevertheless there is something that *differentiates*. A Jew knows that he is a Jew and that he is 'different' from an Arab. To say what makes him *different* is difficult. Even in the social sense, there is no vast *difference*. Certainly a Jew is *different* from a fellah and from a Bedouin, but he is not *different* from an Arab effendi (in Iraq, city dwellers are called effendis). Yet there is a *difference* nevertheless. (quoted in Shenhav, 2006, p. 75; emphasis added)

In other words, Sereni insists on the existence of the 'difference', but is unable to pin it down. Sereni's remarks cannot be read only in a strict Orientalist framework, which sees in identity a binary relationship between the speaker and the 'object'. The identity of the 'Arab Jews' implicit in Sereni's observations is an ambivalent one that blurs the classic subject-object dichotomy of the colonialist concept. It corresponds to Bhabha's epistemology, which finds the discourse of colonial power to be an unfinished product, one that is constructed around a 'boundary dispute'. What Bhabha suggests is that 'the construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse demands an articulation of forms of difference' (Bhabha, 1990, p. 72). 'Difference' blurs the categorical distinctions and creates permanent ambivalence. Sereni's remarks reflect an attempt to cope with an impossible trap. The 'other' is not the black person of classic colonialism, but 'one of us', a necessary category within a homogeneous imagining of nationhood. At the same time, as Sereni discerns, this 'other' is not exactly 'like us'. Hence, neither of the categorical distinctions – 'us' versus 'other' – is wholly apposite in the situation he faced. Sereni navigated along a seam line. He marks the Arabness and simultaneously erases it. He defines the 'Arab Jews' as part of the national collective, but leaves a 'marker' that afterward becomes an ethnic category within 'Israeliness'. This example shows that early Zionist observers, probably to their chagrin, could not identify Jews from Arabs or come up with a cultural yardstick which magically distinguishes one from the other.

Re-presentation of this category suggests that the relationship between the two categories is not just spatial (that is, the distancing of Jewishness from Arabness after immigration to Israel), but much more intricate. At the temporal level, Arabness

appears as a category that follows Jewishness, or the other way around. The temporal dimension of the *Diffe'rance* enters the binary structure and generates fruitful dynamics between the two juxtaposed categories. For example, in Ballas's novel *Outcast* (2007[1991]), the author describes a Jewish intellectual who stayed in Iraq and decided to convert to Islam. The book spells out the hesitations, misgivings, contradictions, and mainly the nonlinear processes which were manifested in the Iraqi national sphere. It offers a prospect of migration between national discourses (be they Zionist or pan-Arabic), which are hybridized into each other, to a greater extent than is readily admitted (Hever, 2007). To use Bruno Latour's framework, these are hybrid categories which become purified in epistemology and discourse. If de-Arabization means purification (of Jewishness from Arabness), we know, following Latour (1993), that purification never reaches an end, and that every act of purification results in new hybrids. Shohat herself rejects such a purification process when she argues that identities which preserve the purity of nations are incapable of identifying new options with remnants from the past (1997).

Admittedly, the cultural discourse described above does not fully resemble Israel's ethnically stratified society. No one would deny, however, that it shapes the conditions under which these processes take place. Suffice it to look at the divide between 'Arab Jews' and European Jews in education (Saporta & Yonah, 2004), politics, prison, academia, industry, urban architecture, or in the military. Empirical evidence also attests to persistent gaps in the political economy in Israel today, including huge gaps in income and educational achievements. Only one in four recipients of an undergraduate degree is a descendent of 'Arab Jews' (Cohen & Habersfeld, 1998). This ratio has not changed during the last four decades, and there is no prospect of change in the near future. The findings with regard to income are worse. During 1975–1995, income inequality widened by approximately 10% (Cohen & Habersfeld, 1998; Cohen, Habersfeld, & Kristal, 2007). Likewise, there are sharp differences in the intergenerational transfer of wealth and property ownership. Similar persistent differences characterize the relationship between Israeli Palestinians and Israeli Jews.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that very few Jews of Arab descent, in Israel, would label themselves 'Arab Jews'. It has turned out to be the marker of a cultural and political avant-garde. Most of those who used it, did so in order to challenge the Zionist order of things (i.e., 'methodological Zionism'; see Shenhav, 2006) and for political reasons (Levy, 2008). This challenge to Zionist discourse shows that there was an historical moment, or juncture, in which Arabs and Jews could share cultural assumptions, social networks, and common political horizons (see Levy, 2008). That moment has long been eradicated with the construction of the conflict as 'natural'. In many respects, 'Arab Jew' is a category which was reinvented and re-presented in identity politics in Israel. The use of 'assertive' categories of identity for the purpose of political and cultural protest is not exclusive to the 'Arab Jews' in Israel. It is reminiscent of the motto used by political activists in France when Daniel Cohn-Bendit declared 'we are all German Jews', despite the fact that they were mostly French.⁴ The employment of a non-binary form of Arab-Jewish identity by intellectuals and activists provides us with a political strategy that challenges not only the existing cultural matrix in Israel, but also Jewish histories in the Arab world, and hopefully will bring back remnants of the repressed, and with it the possibility of Jewish Arab coexistence. Such prospect bears relevance to the

political conflict between Jews and Palestinians. Here we face two political options. One is the two-state solution, which envisions a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip side by side with an Israeli (or Jewish) state. The consensus among Jews in Israel today is that a failure to achieve this political outcome – namely the separation between the two people – will lead to the other option, a bi-national state in which Arabs and Jews live together under one political regime. This, in fact, can be defined as the Israelis' ultimate nightmare.

As Yossi Alper (2008), a former consultant to the Israeli prime minister who was mentioned at the outset, succinctly puts it:

... [N]othing could be farther from the minds of 95% of Israeli Jews, who insist on continuing to live in a Jewish state. Most want it to be Jewish and democratic and therefore have supported withdrawing from the West Bank and Gaza. Even those settlers who have no problem subjugating Palestinians in order to hold onto the territories insist that the latter remain second-class citizens and that Israel remain Jewish, not Arab.

Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (2005, pp. 179–180), who systematically advances the idea of bi-nationalism, has conceptualized the Mizrahim as a hybrid organ made up of Arabs and Jews, thereby challenging the European and colonial determination of Jews and Arabs as natural antagonists. This political-semiotic challenge, according to Raz-Krakotzkin, affords political hope, for the Middle East in general and for the end of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in particular. In contrast to the widespread desire for a 'two-state solution' among the Israeli Zionist left and the supporters of the Palestinian government of Fatah, bi-nationalism rejects a political structure founded on a clear – material and cultural – boundary. It views the Jews and Arabs as enmeshed, an analysis which undercuts the Zionist distinction between a Jewish national state and a Palestinian national state (Hochberg, 2007).

Despite all the dangers accruing to this bi-national option, we believe that in the long run it is the only viable solution (see also Shenhav, 2010). Post-structuralism foresees this option in a much clearer way than the binary structural perspective which dominated the political discussion prior to the 1990s. Structuralism defines 'Arab Jews' using the epistemology of nationalism, post-structuralism using the epistemology of post-nationalism or bi-nationalism. The powerful reaction this latter 'Arab Jewish' option elicits from the Zionist language is again evident in Alper's (2008) rejoinder in *Forward*:

[S]uppose, following the failure of the current peace process, the international community does indeed decide to try to impose a bi-national state solution on Israelis and Palestinians – a contingency we should make every effort to avoid. If it comes to pass, it is inconceivable that the Israeli political mainstream would agree to negotiate its own national suicide.

Israel's relations with its neighbors and the world might suffer a severe blow, but Israelis would hardly agree to trade a Jewish state for the status of 'Arab Jews'. This, no doubt, is the most convincing evidence attesting to the challenge that the category of 'Arab Jews' poses to political discourse in Israel. Whereas for many Israelis, like Alper, the enmeshment of Arabs and Jews is undesirable, for us it is a viable option in the conflict between Jews and Arabs.

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Notes

1. We make an assumption that there is a discord between modern nineteenth century discourse and this of Muslim Spain in the Middle Age (Cohen, 1994). We focus therefore on 'Arab Jews' in the backdrop of modern nationalism, including the emergence of Zionism and National Pan-Arabism. Nevertheless, it is crucial to admit that in Andalusia (Muslim Spain) and in Christian Spain there was an intimate connection between Arabic and Hebrew. Arab culture was dominant and its influence on the Jewish culture was beyond question. It was manifested in literature, philosophical text, in the interpretation of ethics or in poetics. Major Jewish texts were first written in Arabic and were only then translated to Hebrew. The power relationships between the two languages were apparent, for example, in the translation of texts from Arabic to Hebrew and in the linguistic forms that were chosen. Mati Huss (1995) has pointed to the difference that existed in the Middle Ages between two forms of translations: the verbal form (*verbum e verbo*) of the Tibbonids, and the form of free translation that re-invents in the language, like that of Yehuda El-harizi. He attributes this difference to the power relations between the two languages as they are perceived by the translators: the dominance of Arabic in the verbal form, and the dominance of the Hebrew in the case of a free translation.
2. As becomes clearer below, we do not classify Shohat into this phase exclusively, as she has other works in which she promotes a post-structuralist perspective on several issues, including the 'Arab Jewish' option.
3. It is interesting to note that Somech's book was published first in Hebrew without the term 'Arab Jew' in the title which appeared only in the English version.
4. For an analysis regarding the German-Jewish option see Dinur (2009).

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