Jewish Orientation
Hen Mazzig, 9/18/2017
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My North African Jewish-Berber grandparents came from Djerba, Tunisia, to Israel in the early 1950s. Although my grandparents are not alive to tell me, upon their arrival in Israel, when they were asked for their family name, they likely thought that the question was which tribe or community they belonged to. Their answer was, most probably, “Amazigh” (literally “Berber,” or “free person”).

The i-Mazigh-en, or Berbers, are an indigenous people of North Africa. Research on the Jewish Berbers dates them back thousands of years. The only defeat of the Prophet Muhammad happened in the 7th century CE, at the hands of the Jewish Berber queen “La Kahina.” The Jews of the Berber tribe descend from her. Leading Arab Historian Ibn Khaldun wrote that at the time of the Arab-Islamic invasion of North Africa, many Berber tribes were Jewish, and that “this was true of the Jarawa in the Aures mountains, the tribe of the Kahina.” Yet because our story doesn’t fit the prevailing stereotypes of Jews, Arabs and North Africans, Jewish Berbers have been largely ignored and excluded from public discourse.

In 1951, around the same time that my father’s parents arrived in Israel from North Africa, my mother’s parents came to Israel from Baghdad, Iraq. They were also forced out of their country. They had been part of an ancient Jewish community that thrived in Iraq from Babylonian times and before. When they arrived in Israel, their stories were erased, partly by the attempt to create a cohesive Israeli identity. They felt as if their suffering was worthless in comparison to the atrocities perpetrated upon the Jewish communities of Europe. While Jews had long been oppressed in the Arab-Islamic world, upon the founding of the State of Israel their status had quickly been transformed from tolerated minority to enemy.

850,000 Middle Eastern Jews were expelled from Arab-Islamic states in the early 1950s just for being Jewish. In Israel they didn’t feel comfortable either.

Not only did they speak Arabic, the language of Israel’s enemies, but also their culture, costume and identity were highly similar to those of the countries attempting to destroy the newly reborn Jewish state.

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1 With this story, Mazzig emphasizes that Mizrahi Jews have roots in many parts of Southwest Asia and North Africa that predate Islam and, more importantly, the 7th Century Islamic conquests that shaped the “Arab world.”

2 The process of creating one unified, Israeli identity, often termed “the melting pot,” was advocated by some Mizrahi leaders, like Yisrael Yesh’ayahu, but was decried by Eliahu Eliashar and others. Decades later, Mazzig writes with hindsight that many Mizrahi identities, histories, and cultures were effaced, with disastrous consequences. This is an important critique of Israeli policies.

3 In a sense, Mazzig depicts Mizrahim who were harmed or expelled from Arab and Islamic countries as martyrs for the Zionist cause.
In the midst of this massive pressure from both sides of their identity, they largely decided to hide their past, look to the future and do everything possible to assimilate into the newly emerging Israeli community.

Yet for as much as my family has assimilated, these layers of my identity are triggered as I encounter the ideas held by some in the Western (mostly North American) Jewish communities. By and large the articles, the Jewish publications, the speakers and the Jewish academics see “World Jewry” as an exclusively Western phenomenon. They gloss over the history of the Jewish People in the Middle East.

To them, the Jewish world is centered in North America, with its origins in Europe.

While they may see Israel and Jerusalem as their homeland, they present the Jewish community as belonging to the West. It seems they are the only ones who really matter. My story, the story of almost a million Jews from the Middle East and Africa, is often ignored, or looked down on in a way that mimics a post-colonial approach. Although some scholars have begun to realize the diversity of our global Jewish community, the main voices, as well as the majority of ideas espoused by English-speaking Jews, are still centered in the European/North American hegemony. Discourses on the meaning of Judaism, Jewish peoplehood, Israel and the Middle East seem to come from a naturally superior standpoint: that of the Westerner.⁴

It is as if knowledge about Middle Eastern and African Jewish communities is generated not from facts, but from paternalistic tendencies. Preconceived archetypes envision all the Jews of the East as fundamentally similar to one another and alien to the Western Jewish community.

While I disagree with much of Edward Said’s writings, his descriptions of “Orientalists” remain accurate.⁵

According to Said, these are people who study the East, but not purely as scholars attempting to understand other cultures. Intermingled with their scholarly pursuits are self-serving political biases that undermine the actual needs of the Middle Eastern communities they study.

⁴ Mazzig seeks to address two related but distinct problems in American and European Jews’ views on Middle Eastern and African Jewries: on the one hand, many “Western” Jews behave as though Mizrahim do not exist or are marginal to the global Jewish community; on the other hand, those “Western” Jews who do recognize the existence of Mizrahim often look down on them. Mazzig identifies the influence of colonialist paradigms in both of these attitudes.

⁵ Edward Said was, in many ways, the father of the field of Middle East Studies in the United States in its current form. His 1978 book Orientalism shattered many popular notions about both the Arab and Islamic world in general and European literature and scholarship on the Arab and Islamic world in particular. His writing about the relationship between knowledge and cultural production and colonialism shaped, and continues to shape, decades of later scholarship and thought. Said, however, was also a powerful spokesman for anti-Zionism, as he articulated in his 1979 book The Question of Palestine and from his position as a member of the Palestinian National Council.
Orientalism converted the “Orient” into a legitimate academic field, about which the West invented facts. According to Said, these thinkers and scholars were politically driven. Through their discussions of the Middle East, they fashioned themselves into the self-appointed representatives of the Orient.

They actively misrepresented the Middle East and its people, creating stereotypes and perpetuating false characteristics.

The global Jewish community is diverse and multicultural.

In Israel alone, almost 60% of us are descendants of Middle Eastern and African Jews.

Regardless of our origins, we should be united in the constant struggle for global equality and against antisemitism. But we must also remember that the Jewish world is centered in the East. It is in the East that the Jewish People began, and where today, in Israel, our peoplehood is maintained and continues to blossom. More Jewish writers and thinkers need to understand this key fact, and re-orient their scholarship with it in mind. The rich history of Eastern Jews should not be nullified by the superficial biases of Western scholars.

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Mazzig thus brings together his argument about the importance of recognizing Middle Eastern and African Jewish heritage with the broader Zionist claim that Judaism is fundamentally bound up with its “Eastern” origins.