Along with resurgent identity politics in the United States and Europe, there is a growing inclination to frame the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of race. According to this narrative, Israel was established as a refuge for oppressed white European Jews who in turn became oppressors of people of color, the Palestinians.

As an Israeli, and the son of an Iraqi Jewish mother and North African Jewish father, it’s gut-wrenching to witness this shift.

I am Mizrahi, as are the majority of Jews in Israel today. We are of Middle Eastern and North African descent. Only about 30% of Israeli Jews are Ashkenazi, or the descendants of European Jews. I am baffled as to why mainstream media and politicians around the world ignore or misrepresent these facts and the Mizrahi story.¹ Perhaps it’s because our history shatters a stereotype about the identity of my country and my people.

Israel, the world’s only Jewish state, was not established for just one type of Jew but for all Jews, from every part of the world — the Middle East, North Africa, Ethiopia, Asia and, yes, Europe. No matter where Jews physically reside, they maintain a connection to the land of Israel, where our story started and where today we continue to craft it.

The likes of Women’s March² activist Tamika Mallory,³ Temple University professor Marc Lamont Hill⁴ and, more recently, Rep. Rashida Tlaib (D-Mich.)⁵ falsify reality in their...

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¹ Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews are, to this day, almost always absent from foreign media depictions of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
² The Women’s March began in 2017 as a mass protest against Donald Trump’s assumption of the office of president of the United States. Nearly 500,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C., and millions gathered around the United States and across the globe to express popular dissent to the new regime. In particular, protesters objected to Trump’s open misogyny and his long record of sexual assaults. Leaders of the Women’s March, however, have repeatedly issued public anti-Zionist and, in some cases, anti-Semitic statements, causing many Jewish women in particular to feel excluded from the March and the movement it represented and leading to the March’s fragmentation in later years. One of the initial organizers of the Women’s March, Vanessa Wruble, was sidelined because of her Judaism and left the March to engage in more inclusive feminist work.
³ Tamika Mallory, one of the co-leaders of the Women’s March in 2017, has been criticized for her relationship with and public admiration of the anti-Semitic leader Louis Farrakhan.
⁴ Professor Hill is a controversial figure who lost a contract with CNN after public comments that implied support for violent extremism and an explicit endorsement of a model of “Palestine from the river to the sea.” The phrase “from the river to the sea,” referring to the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, is a shorthand for the total obliteration of Israel. Hill publicly slammed Mazzig’s article in the Los Angeles Times in a Facebook post riddled with historical inaccuracies. Mazzig unpacked Hill’s response to the present article in a Tablet Magazine essay entitled, “Who Gets to Speak for Mizrahi Jews?”
⁵ Tlaib is a Congresswoman from Michigan who is famous for her anti-Zionism and for accusing Jewish Members of Congress of dual loyalty.
discussions of Palestinians’ “intersectional” struggle, their use of the term “apartheid” to characterize Israeli policy, and their tendency to define Israelis as Ashkenazi Jews alone.

I believe their misrepresentations are part of a strategic campaign to taint Israel as an extension of privileged and powerful white Europe, thereby justifying any and all attacks on it. This way of thinking signals a dangerous trend that positions Israel as a colonialist aggressor rather than a haven for those fleeing oppression. Worse, it all but erases the story of my family, which came to Israel from Iraq and Tunisia.

For most of history, the Mizrahim have been without sovereignty and equality in the Muslim world. In Iraq, despite being “equal citizens” on paper, my family experienced ongoing persecution. The first organized attack came in 1941, the brutal Farhud, a Nazi-incited riot that claimed the lives of hundreds of Jews and forced the survivors to live in fear. My great-grandfather was falsely accused of being a Zionist spy and executed in Baghdad in 1951. My mother’s family was permitted to emigrate that same year, but with only one suitcase.

Any erasure of the Mizrahi experience negates the lives of 850,000 Jewish refugees just like them, who, even in the successor states to the Ottoman Empire of the early 20th century, were treated as “dhimmis,” an Arabic term for a protected minority whose members pay for that protection, which can be withdrawn at any time. Demographic ignorance also works to deny the existence of almost 200,000 descendants of Ethiopian Jews who were threatened by political destabilization in the early 1990s and airlifted to Israel in a daring rescue operation.

One of Judaism’s central themes is a story of national liberation in the face of imperial powers. Israel is a place where an indigenous people have reclaimed their land and revived their ancient language, despite being surrounded by hostile neighbors and hounded by radicalized Arab nationalists who cannot tolerate any political entity in the region other than their own. Jews that were expelled from nations across the Middle East, who

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6 The idea of “intersectionality” is a key underpinning of leftist American discourses today. “Intersectional” activism focuses on the experiences of people who hold multiple marginalized identities, and on the ways in which various forms of oppression (e.g. racism and patriarchy) shape one another. Anti-Zionists in the United States have appropriated a version of intersectional politics to argue that any intersectional justice movement must necessarily adopt extreme anti-Zionist positions.

7 See Orly Levy-Abekasis’s Knesset address on Holocaust memory.

8 Mazzig argues elsewhere for conceptualizing the stories of Jews who migrated from various Arab and Islamic countries to Israel as a single refugee crisis. In particular, he emphasizes the institutional unity of the Arab League and commonalities of experience among members of different Mizrahi and Sephardi communities. It should be noted that most academic scholarship on Mizrahi and Sephardi migration understands this history differently, as a series of separate, if related, migration processes that involved both push-factors (including violence and expulsion orders, but also including poverty, which was, in turn, often linked to the particular social and economic status of Jews in the Arab and Islamic world) and pull-factors (including economic incentives, religious reasons, and the ideological appeal of Zionism).

9 Mazzig turns the anti-Zionist narrative of Israel as a colonialist regime on its head. To Mazzig, Zionism is a remarkable indigenous reclamation project, and it is Arab nationalist opposition to the legitimate return of Jews to their historic homeland that represents colonialism. Mazzig thus articulates a feeling that is common in Israel (and consistent with Zionist thought and history), but that is rarely expressed so clearly in the terms of the American political debate.

10 Here, Mazzig alludes to Arab nationalist campaigns (often violent) against the Kurdish nationalist movement and other non-Arab nationalisms in the region.
sacrificed all they had, have been crucial in building and defending the Jewish state since its outset.

Without a doubt, the creation of Israel provided a haven for Jews who survived the Holocaust and extreme oppression in Europe. However, we cannot acknowledge that history at the expense of Mizrahi Jews, who with so many others, regardless of skin color, shared the desire for a Jewish state long before the establishment of Israel.