

The Arab Jew

The Ontological Narrative under Attack

To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize “how it really was.” It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.

—WALTER BENJAMIN

A DIFFERENT KIND OF QUESTION

Is it possible to consider Jews who were born and raised in Arab countries “Arab Jews”?

The previous chapters were based on questions that assessed the respondents’ knowledge of topics related to representation and inequality. A comparison between the participants’ impressions and empirical data served as a starting point for discussions.

This chapter deals with a question that differs from the previous ones in two important ways. First, the question does not ask about something that is merely factual, nor is it even clear what the relevant facts would be: what components are essential to determining an individual’s Arab or Jewish identity? Second, there is, likewise, no agreed-upon facts on the basis of which it would be possible to determine the “truth value” of the subjects’ answers.

The concept of the “Arab Jew” has had a tremendous impact on the critical discourse on the representation of the Mizrahi subject. This thesis of the Arab Jew presents a sharp challenge to the identity of the rooted Mizrahi subject, but it has not been examined either from the point of view of the Mizrahi subject who is at the heart of the great paradox or from the point of view of the complementary Arab subject. That is what we do here, by asking the rooted Mizrahi subjects to look at the Arab side of their identity, tugging at the Gordian knot of religion and nationality at the center of their identity.

I begin this chapter with a brief review of the appearance of the concept in the academy and public discourse in Israel in the 1990s and discuss some of the research on this question. I then move on to a presentation of surprising statistical

findings, which brings us to the discussions in the focus groups composed of Jews and Arabs from the lower and middle classes (Jewish men and women, Arab men). I conclude with a summary of our insights and a presentation of additional findings that describe the conditions of possibility for Mizrahim and Arabs living together with deep differences. This will shed new light on the meaning of peaceful and respectful coexistence, beyond the liberal imagination, for religiously rooted subjects from both sides of the divide.

FROM OBJECTIVE POSSIBILITY
TO POLITICAL POSSIBILITY:
AN EXERCISE IN POLITICAL IMAGINATION

Ostensibly, the question of the Arab Jew should be an empirical question. There is no a priori reason to believe that the concept does not at least partially capture the lived experience and perhaps even the identity of Mizrahim throughout the long history that preceded their arrival to the Jewish state.¹ Methodologically, the term *Arab Jew* seems to perfectly meet Weber's standards of "objective possibility." According to Weber, "a thing is 'objectively possible' if it 'makes sense' to conceive it as empirically existing entity. It is a question of conformation with the logical conditions. The question whether a phenomenon which is in this sense 'objectively possible' will actually be found with any significant degree of possibility or approximation, is a logically distinct question."²

A Radical Deconstructive Tool

And yet, from the moment the question of the Arab Jew was raised, the ensuing discussion was never merely about theory or methodology. When it first burst into the discourse at the end of the 1980s (Shohat, 1988), supporters and detractors alike identified the concept as a radical deconstructive tool aimed at dismantling each and every stone in the foundation of the Zionist project of collective identity and the historiography dominant in Israeli academia. As Yehouda Shenhav (2006, p. 8) has noted, "Recognition of the Arab Jews as a collectivity (and not only as individuals) would require rearticulating Israeli society's basic assumptions and its reorganization." Critical investigation, which has consistently aimed to destabilize and even entirely break up the coherence of the Zionist narrative, enlisted the term *Arab Jew* as a definitive tool in their campaign of exposing the manipulative and deceptive nature of Zionism, which subsumed the Mizrahim into Jewish nationalism and distanced them from the purportedly dangerous and polluted Arabness of the enemy.

But while this subversive argument had an electrifying impact on critical academics and activists, it enraged others in academia and life. In response to his provocative article "Bond of Silence" (1996), which questioned the dichotomy

between Arab and Jew in an effort to bridge the Arab-Mizrahi divide, Shenhav was accused of fomenting “hatred” and “rage” and creating antagonism between the communities, and he was personally attacked as “crass,” “extremist,” and “sick.” The intensity of the response, Shenhav believes, was indicative of the extent to which this political possibility posed a threat to the Zionist ethos. “The outburst of reactions”, he noted, “proved to me how strongly naming these dynamics violated a social taboo” (p. 8).

A “Theft of History”?

Pioneering academic Ella Shohat was the first to bring the concept of the Arab Jew into the critical academic discourse. According to Shohat, Zionism was a colonial act, and the story it tells hides the story of colonized Mizrahim (or Arab Jews) and Arabs. In Shohat’s words, hiding this story was nothing less than “the theft of history” (1988, p. 7). The Zionist “cover story” manipulatively incorporated the Mizrahim into the dramatic and epic, the “Ingathering of the Exiles,” which is a story of Jewish continuity (22). In contrast, the colonial story is one of discontinuity and rupture, the disconnecting of the Mizrahim from themselves, their Arabness, and their organic lives in Arab space. To fit the Zionist narrative, and “for their own good,” the Mizrahim had to be cleansed of any sign of Arabness and refashioned into the secular, modern “new Jew” that Zionism had invented. The organizing principle of this separation and purification, Shohat argues, was based on the broad orientalist distinction between East and West: “Distinguishing the ‘evil’ East (the Moslem Arab) from the ‘good’ East (the Jewish Arab), Israel has taken upon itself to “cleanse” the Sephardim (Mizrahi Jews) of their Arabness and redeem them from their ‘primal sin’ of belonging to the Orient” (p. 7–8). This “theft of history” enabled Zionism to create a solid wall between Arabs and Jews in the minds of the colonized Mizrahim and to keep their identity within the Jewish realm.

In a similar vein, Shenhav describes how the process of “religionization” inflicted on Mizrahim by the Zionist establishment was meant to enhance their religiosity as a means to enlist them successfully in the Zionist project. Yet, while the religionization mechanism successfully deepened the Arab-Jew dichotomy, it did not bring them fully into the Zionist collective. A “residue” of their Arab ethnicity and culture remained, marking them with an orientalist stigma. As Shenhav (2006) observes, religionization brought them into the collective Jewish fold, while simultaneously designating them as “others,” so that they would not be “exactly like us.”

According to Shenhav (2006), the Zionist identity comprises three fundamental categories—nationalism, religion, and ethnicity. All three categories are needed for maintenance of a coherent Zionist identity, and they are not mutually exclusive. The relationship between any two of these categories, including the categories

of Jew (religion) and Arab (ethnicity), is not binary. In fact, on this point, Shenhav is critical of Shohat's binary approach to the Arab-Jewish category, which, he contends, "paradoxically is buying into the Zionist party lines" (Shenhav and Hever, 2012, p. 108).

The Bond between Identity and Narrative

Despite their differences, however, these two prominent Mizrahi critical scholars, Shohat and Shenhav, have both sought to deconstruct the Zionist narrative. They hope to smash the seemingly inextricable bond between identity and narrative that Mizrahim in Israel uphold and turn the Arab Jews from an objective possibility into a political possibility.

Here, I find Margaret Somers's (1994) formulation of the bond between narrative and identity to be particularly illuminating. The notion of the Arab Jew as a political possibility is aimed at the heart of what Somers refers to as the *ontological narrative*. Asserting the purported Arabness of the Jew poses a challenge to fundamental questions of nuclear sense of self, such as "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" Drawing on Charles Taylor's work, Somers contends that the ontological narrative is a precondition for our moral orientation and political loyalty (p. 618). Creating a bond between Arabness and Jewishness disrupts the basic Zionist creed about what is "good" and what is the "common good," posing such fundamental questions as "To what do we belong?" and "Who is 'us' and who is 'them'?"

Once the ontological narrative has been shaken, the *public narrative* is also disrupted. Somers means those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations that are larger than the individual, including intersubjective networks and institutions. These range from the family to the workplace (including organizational myths), church, government, and nation. By challenging the public narrative, the concept of the Arab Jew presents the Zionist nation-building project in a completely different light, challenging the "Ingathering of the Exiles," and the epic story "From Holocaust to Redemption."

The critical Mizrahi discourse attempts to subvert the *conceptual narrative*, to again use Somers's terms, of hegemonic sociology and the social sciences. Conceptual narratives are "the concepts and explanations that we construct as social researchers. Because neither social action nor institution-building is solely produced through ontological and public narratives, our concepts and explanations must include the factors we call social forces" (1994, p. 620). In this case, the critical discourse sought to undermine the conceptual world of the social sciences through which "non-critical" or "establishment Israeli researchers" construct history and social reality, radically deconstructing the very idea of "Jewish history" along with notions of "progress" and modernity. Critical researchers contend that the concept of "Jewish history" as a unifying grand narrative, an epic "chronicle

of the Jews” through periods of hardship until their redemption, has flattened the richness and diverse lived experiences of Jews throughout history in different places and contexts (Levy, 2011).

Furthermore, this narrative has left very little space for comparative studies on the relationship between Jews and other minorities, especially in Muslim areas (Levy, 2011, p. 107). Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (1994) points to the centrality of the concept of the “Negation of the Diaspora,”³ by which Zionist historians have enlisted the Mizrahim into the Zionist project (Piterberg, 1996). “Jewish history,” Raz-Krakotzkin argues, is organized into a progressive redemptive narrative, according to which Zionism, adopting the historical model of nationalism, seeks a national solution through the “negation of the Diaspora” (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2013). As a critical historian, Raz-Krakotzkin challenges the equation of progress with the redemption of the Jews from their lives in the Diaspora. He proposes a fascinating historical reading of how the national narrative, written within Zionist time, appropriated the idea of redemption, which is rooted in mythical time.

From an economic-class perspective, Swirski (1981) challenges the very concept of progress. A cornerstone of early modernization theories and the organizing principle for the relationship between the first and third worlds, the idea of progress, he argues, assumes stages of development along a linear and universal course, with Western culture serving as the locomotive that pulls the entire process along. The Mizrahim (Arab Jews) and the Arabs were both positioned along this broad developmental schema by students of modernization theory. In Swirski’s view modernization creates relationships between the first and third worlds characterized by dependency and exploitation. For their part, post-colonial scholars emphasize the suppression of Mizrahi identity and culture on the basis of modernization theories (Khazzoom, 2003; Shenhav, 2006; Shenhav and Hever, 2012; Shohat, 1988).

Somers’s concept of *metanarrativity* as the master narrative within which ontological, public and conceptual narratives are anchored helps us frame the entire discussion. The critical discourse on Arab Jews has been part of an overarching critique that presents an ontological, interpretive and political alternative to Jewish identity as envisioned by the Zionist narrative. It disrupts the Zionist narrative’s ontological, inter-subjective, and conceptual foundations, and the axioms that serve the research field in the process of knowledge production, which ultimately contributes to shaping individual and public consciousness.

As the idea of the Arab Jew thus offers an alternative identity to the dominant Zionist one, many critical researchers and activists on the radical left have ardently embraced it. In academia its influence has extended beyond the field of critical sociology into historiography, and the idea continues to be of interest

to historians and researchers of Islamic culture. Tzur (2010a), a historian of Jews in Islamic countries, offers a nuanced description of the involvement of the Jews in Muslim environments through an examination of such categories as shared language, cultural and musical consumption; material consumption; and integration in commercial life. In contrast to the full integration of Jews during the classical period, however, he demonstrates the negative changes in the patterns of participation in high culture by the end of the eighteenth century (2010a, p. 46).

Other works in this field have contributed to an understanding of the complex interface between Jews and Arabs in the Muslim environment over the generations, or examined the complexity of subcategories of Jews who today are lumped together as a monolithic category of “Mizrahim.” Jacobson and Naor (2016) have explored the diverse categories of Jewish groups who lived in Muslim regions at different times, attempting to trace the conditions that allowed these ostensibly stable categories to persist into the present (Hochberg, 2007). Hillel Cohen (2015, 2023) has traced the conditions of possibility for the formation of a Jewish Arab identity in Palestine during the early twentieth century, which failed to come to fruition because of the formation of both Jewish and Palestinian modern nationalities.⁴ Gil Anidjar’s (2002) historical and genealogical account suggests that the emergence of both nationalities appears to have grown out of a dialectical development within European political and theological thought.

Disciplinary, Historical, and Political Divisions

As we see from this brief review, there is no consensus answer to the crude and somewhat naïve question whether there was or continues to be an Arab Jew. Sophisticated critical researchers do not claim that the “true” Mizrahi identity is Arab. For Shenhav (2006), for example, there is subversive power in the very concept of the Arab Jew as a political possibility, independent of its actual existence. It is an exercise in political imagination.

It is worth noting that there is a disciplinary gap between the critical researchers, on the one hand, and historians and cultural researchers, on the other, with regard to this issue. As Lital Levy (2011) notes, the Mizrahi critical discourse has only flimsy empirical support, while the historians’ approach is richer but at times merely descriptive. Accustomed to thick description, some historians have doubts about the empirical basis for many of the critical assertions, arguing that most of the critical researchers have little knowledge of the Arabic language and cultures.⁵ Even for historians sympathetic to the critical discourse, the disciplinary gap can be significant. For example, Yaron Tzur (2010b, p. 54) appreciates the contribution that the critical school has made to Middle Eastern studies, but notes that, as a historian, he cannot accept as credible assertions based on a single theoretical-genealogical analysis.

In addition to the disciplinary divisions, political disagreements among scholars of the history and culture of Islam add to the tension over the possibility of an Arab Jewish identity. A recent special edition of *Jam'aa* Magazine addressed the question whether an Arab Jewish identity and culture still exists and whether it is relevant today.⁶ Snir (2020), a senior scholar of Arab language and literature, argues that Jewish Arab culture existed over time and in contexts where Jews were immersed in the Arabic language and culture; however, today it is dying or already dead. His four opponents argued that Arab Jewish identity and culture are fluid and should not be limited to time and place. This culture, they maintain, is alive and kicking, with many diverse and ever-changing manifestations and despite attempts to “bury” it.

Clearly this is not merely a theoretical and methodological dispute about evidence and interpretation, but rather a debate between scholars who belong to different political camps. The one camp consists of those who take a critical approach and seek to promote the Arab Jew thesis, welcoming any supporting evidence, while their opponents doubt the validity of their arguments. Each side remains suspicious of the other side’s political motives. It is, in fact, difficult to disconnect the heated academic debate over the existence of the Arab Jew from the question’s broader political significance.

TURNING TO THE MISSING MIZRAHI SUBJECT

In this chapter, we will turn our attention to the very people ostensibly described by the term “Arab Jew,” who have been missing from the debate until now: Mizrahim and Arabs. For the first time in our focus groups, Mizrahim responded to a concept that has served as an interpretive and political challenge to Zionism and nurtured a particularly enticing story in the critical discourse. For critical researchers, this story is meant to shed light on the ostensibly paradoxical political behavior of the Mizrahim. Their support for the right and their hawkish positions toward Arabs, the story contends, does not reflect their “true consciousness,” but rather their repressed Arab identity. The position of the Arabs with regard to the Arab-Jewish dichotomy today, which has received even less attention in the critical discourse, will complete our discussion below.

Ella Shohat (2003) provides a striking example of present-but-missing Mizrahi subject in the critical discourse when she talks about her grandmother. She explains that it was only in Israel that her grandmother adopted the rhetoric of “us” (the Jews) and “them” (the Arabs) and only in Israel that the term “Arab Jew” had become an oxymoron in her grandmother’s mind. It would appear that Shohat did not think it was important to learn what her grandmother thought about that dichotomy or how she experienced it, so her consciousness and lived experience remain an empty signifier in her own story. The story resonates with Orlando

Patterson's note on "liberal paternalism," and it reminds us of the interpretive risk lurking in every critical observation when the fine line between emancipation and paternalism is blurred. When acting from a position of certainty and motivated reason, even as sensible and skilled a scholar as Shohat, unable to detect nuances and unexpected revelations of power relations, will end up silencing her own beloved subject.

I am very familiar with this interpretive trap from situations in which I had adopted a position of paternalistic advocacy toward many beloved family members. At the time it appeared to me as the only reasonable response to these discordant voices from the people nearest to me, whom I sought to liberate. Ironically for us as activists and Mizrahi researchers, this silence was a way to free them from themselves. In other words, the act of liberation of the Mizrahi subject paradoxically entailed emptying that subject of his or her own subjectivity. The actual Mizrahi's unwillingness to embrace the role assigned to him by the critical scenario was discomfiting; we were often loath to risk our precious story by confronting it with contradictory voices and counterevidence.

We were only able to read the Mizrahi subject through the liberal grammar according to which exercising autonomy and free will are considered the only authentic human choice and the only sign of agency, as indicated by the following assertion that Shohat makes (2003, p. 55):

In the case of Arab Jews the question of will, desire, and agency remains highly ambivalent and ambiguous. The very proliferation of terms suggests that it is not only a matter of legal definition of citizenship that is at stake, but also the issue of mental maps of belonging within the context of rival nationalisms. Did Arab Jews want to stay? Did they want to leave? Did they exercise free will? Did they actually make a decision? Once in Israel, did they want to go back? Were they able to do so? And did they regret the impossibility of returning? Different answers to these questions imply distinct assumptions about questions of agency, memory, and space (my emphasis).

Shohat is cautious with regard to the limited use of the assumptions of citizenship, since she takes these from a different political space. However, a review of her conceptual narrative reveals that it is deeply ingrained in the liberal grammar that provides the "real" definition of agency as the exercise of free will. She reads the significance of the historical event of immigrating to Israel through the liberal grammar, a clear example of the failure to conduct what Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004) refers to as the fusion of historical horizons. Shohat writes from her own historical horizon in the present, which imposes itself on the historical horizon of the past phenomena she is considering. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that even in the most wonderfully harmonious accounts of Jewish life among Arabs in past centuries, this was not taking place in a democratic liberal

framework within which two communities of equal universal citizens shared a neutral society.

Shohat could have fused these historical horizons and achieved a richer reading of rooted Mizrahi subjects if she had deliberately assumed a position of self-parochialization, to use Saba Mahmood's (2005) term. This would have enabled her to see that the individualistic practice of free will was not necessarily part of the lived experiences or sense of agency for these people. For them, meaning and agency was not based on the individual who exercises free will, but rather the complete Jewish or Muslim whole to which they belonged.

To be sure, opening an interpretive space for the fusion of historical horizons does not mean that a critical reading has no basis in reality. In fact, a critical reading might very well represent the experiences of some members of that generation of immigrants. There can be no doubt that, for example, some intellectuals and cultural figures from Iraq might have connected harmoniously and coherently with the critical Mizrahi narrative.

As a cultural researcher, Shohat focuses on a critical analysis of conceptual genealogy, as in her most recent paper on the Judeo-Arab language (2015), which maps identity through the study of language. In contrast, my investigation focuses on the sociological and political possibility of the term "Arab Jew" in the present. I will attempt to examine the meaning of the dichotomous identity with the limited tools at my disposal. As noted above, it is clear that the picture would not be complete without the point of view of Palestinian subjects, who must also confront the disruption represented by the dichotomy of Arab/Jew that has taken hold of the consciousness of both sides. At the same time, it is important to note that the Arab subject serves here as a shadow case, whose own reading of the possibility of an Arab Jewish identity contributes an essential but complementary dimension.

The initial results of the research presented a surprise: the image of the Arab Jew seemed to appear before us as an actual possibility in the here and now. The statistical results seemed to indicate that both Arabs and Jews recognize the Arab Jewish identity as a possibility, and perhaps even a political possibility. We are about to unmute the voices of the subjects who helped to produce these results.

THE ENCOUNTER

Surprising and Puzzling Findings

As in the previous chapters, we began this part of the discussion with a presentation of the statistical findings from the survey. We had asked, "Is it possible to define Jews who speak Arabic as their native language and who were born and raised in Arab countries as Arabs?"

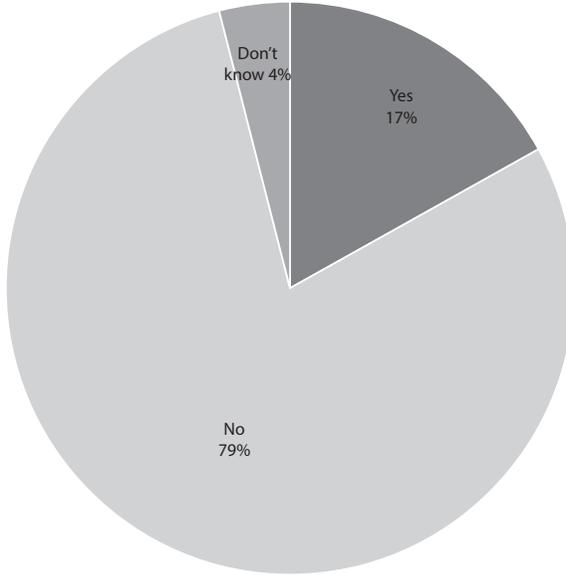


FIGURE 4. Percent distribution of Jewish respondents' answers to the question, "Can you define Jews who speak Arabic as a mother tongue and were born and raised in Arab countries as Arabs?"

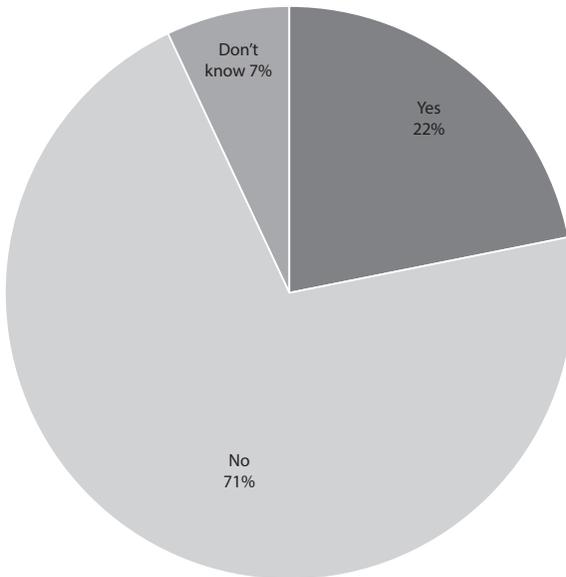


FIGURE 5. Percent distribution of Arab respondents' answers to the question, "Can you define Jews who speak Arabic as a mother tongue and were born and raised in Arab countries as Arabs?"

The charts presented in figures 4 and 5 describe the distribution in the groups' responses to the question. This was a striking statistical result. I had not expected that a fairly significant proportion of both Jews and Arabs would accept the apparently subversive possibility of an Arab Jew. Indeed, the initial reading of this finding might reinforce our perception that there is a deep, if hidden, connection between Mizrahim and Arabs. If we add the percent of "don't know" responses, we arrive at one-fifth of Jewish participants (21 percent) who did not reject this possibility. If we go even further, we might imagine that this points to a latent political consciousness waiting to burst forth and forge a Mizrahi-Arab alliance. We can identify a similar state of consciousness among the Palestinian citizens of Israel, since nearly one-third of the Arab participants (29 percent) did reject this possibility. Yet again, I was tempted to ask: were we about to witness the burst of liberation that heralds the fulfillment of the post-colonial fantasy?

However, a second glance at the data complicates the story. We did not find any statistically significant difference between the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews who answered "yes" to this question. So, we were left with only speculative hypotheses. It could be that the data do not signal a distinct Mizrahi consciousness, but rather the success of the Jewish melting-pot ideology for both Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. While these findings do not indicate a hidden Mizrahi consciousness waiting to erupt, they also do not attest to an Ashkenazi ethnic demarcation, or an expression of Ashkenazi orientalism. Hence, the meaning of this finding remains unclear.

With regard to the Arabs' responses, it would appear that they have internalized the national divide at least as deeply as the Jews. Most of the Arab respondents were not familiar with the designation of "Mizrahi Jews." For many of them, the fact that nearly half of the Jewish population speaks Arabic as a mother tongue and came to Israel from Arab countries was not important enough to identify the Mizrahim as "Arab Jews." Nor did it lead them to distinguish between the Mizrahim and the Ashkenazim, who, according to the predominant Palestinian national narrative, came to Palestine from Europe as part of the colonial project.

Methodologically, in order to ensure that all Arab respondents fully understood the question, we reformulated it in the final survey questionnaire. I should remind the reader of an initial significant finding that we will address later. In the pilot question formulation, we asked whether Mizrahi Jews could be considered "Arab Jews." In the survey version, we further specified what we meant, so that even people who were unfamiliar with the term "Mizrahi" could understand the question. This subsequent question was worded: "Is it possible to define Jews who speak Arabic as their native language and who were born and raised in Arab countries as Arabs?"

The statistical findings pointed to a sizable proportion of Arabs and Jews who appeared ready to view “Arab Jew” as a possible identity. How would the Mizrahi and the Arab subjects respond to this provocative finding that they helped create? We will discuss here four groups: Mizrahi women without a college education; Mizrahi men with a college education; Palestinian men without a college education; and Palestinian men with a college education. We will begin with the group of Mizrahi women without a college education, whom we met in the previous chapters. Once again, Riki played the role of the natural representative of the critical discourse, challenging the other women with her critical readings and dismantling their system of classification.

Mizrahi Women without a College Education

Facilitator A: I now want to raise the next issue, one of the things that surprised us in the survey. There was one survey question—Is it possible to define Jews speaking Arabic as their mother tongue, who were born and raised in Arab countries, as “Arabs”?

Ahuva interrupted the facilitator’s introduction, shouting:

Ahuva: The Moroccans [Jews] are Arabs? No way! They also speak Arabic, true, but they’re not Arabs.

This was the moment: the radical notion of the “Arab Jew” had entered the discussion. The facilitator continued.

Facilitator A: What’s so surprising? Twenty percent of the Jews, one out of five, answered “yes.” This means that 80 percent have responded like you just said: “no way”.

Ahuva: Absolutely not!

Facilitator A: But there were those 20 percent, the participants who didn’t show up probably . . .

Riki: I think yes.

Facilitator A: You think yes?

Riki: Yes, I had an argument about it with my dad.

Facilitator A: Please explain.

Ahuva: Riki, you’re driving me crazy!

Riki: No, listen, my father is Algerian, and I had an argument about this with him and with my mom; [I told them that] Kurdistan is a territory controlled by Arabs. [The argument was about] how we define an Arab Israeli today. What does this term mean? It’s someone who came from Arab countries. Kurdistan is like an Arab country.

Riki was disrupting the ontological narrative that protects the identification nucleus of the group, and she was aware of the intensity of the opposition. She tried to calm the storm by shrinking the social distance between herself and the rest of the group by referring to a similar argument she had with her parents. She attempted to mitigate the damage by framing the argument as a legitimate debate within the organic community of the family. By doing so, she set the stage for completing her move, which entailed decoupling nationality from religion in order to reassemble the Jewish and Arab identities.

Riki: They're Arabs . . .

Leah: An Arab is not a Jew, and a Jew is not an Arab. [. . .]

Riki: That's completely irrelevant—you have Muslim Arabs and you have Christian Arabs. [. . .]

Hanna: But if you say "Arab Jew," that's simply a contradiction in terms.

Riki: Why?

Ahuva: That's really twisted.

Riki: What is an Arab?

Ahuva: A Jew is a Jew forever.

Riki: Wait a sec, I'll tell you what I told my mom. My mother was shocked when I said such a thing. I told her, "Mom, you have negative associations with the word 'Arab.'"

Hanna: Muslim.

Riki: Our enemy—that's your definition. What is an Arab? An Arab is a person born in an Arab country. What is an Israeli?

Ahuva: Not "born." Who gave birth to him?

Riki: What is an Israeli?

Leah: No, it's also his faith.

Riki: It has nothing to do with faith. Muslim is faith. I want to ask you a question, what is an Israeli? How would you define an Israeli person?

Ahuva: As a Jew, if he's a Jew—he's a Jew!

Riki: You have Israeli Arabs. That's also a twisted definition. I thought about that too. What is an Israeli?

Leah: One who was born in Israel.

Riki: Fine; he has Israeli citizenship.

Leah: You have an Israeli Jew and an Israeli Arab.

Riki: True, and it's a twisted definition. Because what is an Arab? That's our definition, according to people. It's not an accurate definition.

The other participants, especially Ahuva, battled to rebuff what seemed to them to be the dangerous threat coming from Riki. “A Jew is a Jew is Jew!” Ahuva shouted at her.

Ahuva: Darling, we are Jews, followers of the religion of Moses and Israel.

Riki: True.

Ahuva: But they follow Muhammad.

Riki: They’re Muslim. What does this have to do with anything? I didn’t say they weren’t. I didn’t tell my mom she was a Muslim. I told her she was a Jew, [and] an Arab.

Hanna: Do you agree with the definition “Israeli Arab”?

Ahuva: He’s an Israeli Arab.

Hanna: Wait a sec, do you agree with this definition?

Ahuva: Yes, but he is first and foremost an Arab.

Hanna: OK, you agree with the definition “Arab Israeli”?

Ahuva: “Arab Jew”—no. Never! We’re unique, we’re a unique nation.

Riki: But this definition scares you.

Ahuva: Too bad.

Riki: But it’s not negative.

Ahuva: It is. Very much so.

Riki: Why?

Leah: You can’t say that a Jew is an Arab.

Ahuva: Because you have to convert to become a Jew.

Riki: You’re a Jew, that’s irrelevant. Irrelevant. Arabs are not necessarily Muslim, you also have Christian Arabs.

Riki’s efforts to deconstruct and then assemble national and religious identities were met with fierce and highly emotional resistance. The group, especially Ahuva, aggressively objected to any attempt on her part to return the hyphen that connects the “Arab” to the “Jew.”

Their response echoed Ella Shohat’s grandmother’s dichotomy between “us” and “them.” The threat Riki posed to Ahuva was clear. When Riki accused her of being afraid, she did not deny it. And Ahuva may have become even more fearful as Hanna, in an attempt to make sense of Riki’s shocking message, gradually changed sides.

Hanna: You can say “Egyptian Jew,” for example . . .

Ahuva: Honey, the Jews are the chosen people.

Riki: How is this relevant? It’s irrelevant.

Ahuva: I would say that he's first of all a Jew but as it happens, he was born in Egypt. [. . .]

Hanna: Just for example, you have someone [. . .] who's Iraqi . . .

Ahuva: But in my mind I associate it first of all with his Jewishness.

Hanna: It's emotional.

Riki: You're associating the definition of Arabs with negativity.

Ahuva: No, no . . .

Riki: That's why you're not willing to be defined as an Arab country.

Leah: No, may the Arabs be healthy and may the Jews be healthy. The Arabs—[she is cut off].

Riki: Arabs and Jews are not contradictory.

Leah: . . . The Arabs' religion stands on its own right.

Riki: That's no contradiction.

Leah: Jews are a different religion.

Riki: You have a Muslim Arab and a Christian Arab—no contradiction there.

Leah: There's no such thing as an Arab Jew.

Riki: There is—people who've emigrated from Arab countries are Arabs, right?

Ahuva: You're shocking me!!!

Riki: Listen, I have a friend whose father is Syrian—Syria is not Arab?

Ahuva: He was *born* in Syria.

Riki: He's a Jew, nobody said he's not, but he's Arab.

Leah: No, no. He's not Arab.

Ahuva: Arab is not Jewish, you can't mix them.

Riki: There's no contradiction, it's not black and white.

Hanna: You're in the state (of Israel)—religion is related to the state.

Riki: That's right.

Ahuva: And it should be.

Leah: There are nationalities: you have Jewish, Arab and Christian nationalities.

Summoning all her might, Ahuva tried to make it clear to all that Jewishness as an identity takes precedence over country of origin, which is coincidental and determined by circumstances. Unlike the nationalism of the Jews of the Diaspora, which is secondary to their nuclear identity, Ahuva viewed the connection between nation and religion identified by Leah as natural and true, an organic part of the Jewish whole.

Riki continued this argument, looking for cracks in Ahuva's defenses.

Riki: OK, I have a question. Is there such a thing as a French Jew?

Ahuva: Yes, a Jewish Frenchman, not a French Jew.

Riki: Is there such a thing as a Russian Jew?

Leah: Yes, you also have Russian Jews.

Riki: So there is such a thing as a Syrian Jew?

Ahuva: Syrian Jew?

Leah: No.

Ahuva: A Jew first, and a Syrian second.

Hanna: Syrian Jew, yes.

Riki: Syrian Jew, is there such a thing?

Ahuva: There is.

Riki: Right, so Syrians—it's Arab countries?

Ahuva: Yes.

Riki: So you [do] have such a thing as an Arab Jew.

...

Ahuva: I don't mind being Moroccan or English, I don't mind that. But you're confusing things here.

Leah: You're confusing between nationality and the country he was born in.

Riki: Nationality *is* the country he was born in. You are a citizen of that country. This is your nationality.

...

Ahuva: There's religion and nationality. This country is only ours. We are the only ones who see it that way.

Ahuva: And [that's] how it should be.

Leah sharpened the distinction between “nationality” and “country of origin.” Riki's response was precise: nationality is determined by country of origin. In other words, for Riki, a person's “citizenship” is part of their nuclear identity, along with their religion. Leah, speaking for the others, identified Jewishness (the religion) as related to peoplehood,⁷ much broader than “citizenship.” That is, belonging to a nation is greater and supersedes citizenship in a specific country.

The facilitator attempted to focus on the group emotions:

Facilitator A: I want to explore something that is more emotional. Let's leave this argument for a while.

Ahuva: No, I'm not ashamed of it.

Hanna: You don't need to be ashamed. Why should you be?

Ahuva: No, this is a first for me . . . she's ruining a lot for me.

Facilitator A: What does it ruin? This is what I would like to explore.

Ahuva: I mean she is young, she's going to be a lawyer, and *she's* going to tell *me* that those born in Arab countries are Arabs!

Facilitator A: Ahuva, what does it ruin? Because I really have this feeling now that she's destroying something beautiful. [. . .] I want to understand this. I really care about how Ahuva feels.

Ahuva: I'm sorry, but this survey had a *purpose and it was far from innocent*. Why? Because they were led to give such answers.

Ahuva made a connection between Riki's positions and her social status. Riki is an outsider: she is young and will be a lawyer. I refer to this as a moral distinction. Ahuva has marked Riki as someone who belongs to a different social network, from which her political and moral positions stem. This strategy allowed her to rebuff Riki's positions without attacking her personally or offending her.

To Ahuva, Riki wasn't merely making an intellectual argument; this was a test of loyalty. Her suspicious attitude toward the purposes of the research stemmed from this same position. Riki was quick to try to ease her suspicions, and the conversation continued.

Riki: No one led toward anything.

Ahuva: Saying that someone born in an Arab country is an Arab Jew, and you were born in England so you are an English Jew. So what are you, American first or Jewish first?

Riki: Nobody said "first." It's both together.

Hanna: Or maybe even Jewish first.

Riki: Jewish first, you were born a Jew. You're a Jew first.

Ahuva: First of all, that's the most important thing.

Riki: You're a Jew first. I have no problem with that. You're a Jew first.

Facilitator A: So, there's one thing we all agree on. Jew first?

Ahuva: First of all, Jewish.

Riki: Yes, first of all Jewish.

Facilitator A: We can move on now.

Riki: Religion and faith come first.

At this stage, we could see the first signs of agreement: Jewish identity supersedes national (civil) identity. Would this agreement serve as a foundation for broader agreement? Ahuva continued to emphasize that civil nationality is merely a coincidence of negligible importance when compared to a wider and deeper identity—even if she was still finding it difficult to define its nature.

Ahuva: And the person's country doesn't matter. Suppose I wasn't a Jew and was born in Morocco, then why did I immigrate here? Because I don't want Morocco. It's this country that I want.

Riki: No problem, nobody argues with that. I agree with you. I just think that anyone born in an Arab country is by definition an Arab. It doesn't matter, it [the word "Arab"] just sounds like a curse [she sounds despairing].

Facilitator A: Wait a minute, Riki . . .

Riki: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt anybody's feelings, I really didn't.

Facilitator A: Wait a minute, Riki, I see that Ahuva is offended. What are you offended by?

Ahuva: To group me with the Arabs? With those who want to exterminate me?

Riki: But not all Arabs want to exterminate you.

Ahuva: You don't say?

Facilitator A: Wait a sec. Leah, is that what offends you? Are you also offended by that?

Hanna: Offended? No. I just want us to get to the point where she'll be a little willing to open the . . .

Facilitator A: What bothers you?

Leah: It bothers me that she groups the Jews and Arabs together.

Facilitator A: What's bothersome about it?

Leah: It bothers me because I was born and raised as a Jew, and I'll keep on being a Jew. They can't tell me that I am 20 percent Arab. I'm not. So what if I was born in Morocco?

It seems that Leah misunderstood the statistic. The facilitator corrected her:

Facilitator A: You mean it's a minority opinion? These things can't go together?

Leah: No. Absolutely not.

The discussion had become highly emotional. Ahuva spoke out of pain and vulnerability. Riki was frustrated but sensitive to Ahuva's pain. Hanna tried to help by encouraging the facilitator.

Facilitator A: I want Hanna's help. I feel that you've withdrawn a bit. What do you say?

Hanna: I want to say that for us, this word or adjective—Arab—is emotionally charged. For us it's the enemy, the Arabs are associated with hate, and we're not willing to accept the fact that they're saying [this about us], it's like a curse.

Ahuva: No, I've never heard that there's even such a thought.

Hanna: But this is just theoretical. Even when they asked me, I'm certain I said 'no.' I was one of those who said 'no', but after hearing Riki . . .

Ahuva: I said "no" two or three times!

Hanna: The truth is I think she's right. Because it's like saying German Jew, Russian Jew, Yemenite Jew.

Ahuva: All right, you can say Moroccan Jew, but don't ever say Arab Jew.

Hanna: You can also say European Jew.

Ahuva: You can.

Hanna: A Jew from America, you can say that.

Leah: You can, but not Arab Jew or Jewish Arab.

Hanna: Why? Because "Arab" does something to us emotionally, so that we . . .

Riki: Something bad, that's right.

Ahuva: Because "Arab" means a different religion.

Riki: It's not a different religion, it's not! "Muslim" is a different religion. [. . .]

Ahuva: There are no Jews among the Arabs.

Riki: All right, what does this have to do with it?!

Ahuva: And there are no Arabs among the Jews. [. . .] Why do you want to burden us with this term "Arab"?

Riki: It's not that I want to, I just think that it's . . .

Hanna: A Jew from Arab countries, it's like the Arab countries are a block of states. You have Jews from Europe, you have Jews from Africa, you have Jews from America.

Leah: American Jew, African Jew. But not Arab Jew.

Leah and Ahuva strongly opposed the attempt to equate the American and European geopolitical space with that of the Middle East. It appeared that Hanna was closer to Riki's social world. She is a friendly younger woman who does not "look Mizrahi" and speaks without an identifiable Mizrahi accent. Her habitus was quite middle class.

The facilitator made another attempt to break through Ahuva and Leah's wall of opposition.

Facilitator A: Wait a moment, Ahuva, I would like to check something.

Ahuva: By all means.

Facilitator A: I'll tell you what I understand. I see that there's a view here that 20 percent of the respondents . . .

Ahuva: They must have been from Peace Now.

(Laughter all round)

Facilitator A: God forbid! (in jest)

Ahuva: They [the Left] can be with them [the Arabs], we're not.

It is important to recall, once again, that there was no statistically significant difference between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim with regard to this question. The facilitator was identified as a left-wing, Ashkenazi man, and his self-deprecating humor revealed that he was completely comfortable in the group, despite his cultural and political identity.

The atmosphere in the group of non-college-educated Ashkenazi women was much less pleasant when this topic was discussed. The participants responded similarly to the danger of a blurring of the boundaries of Jewish identity. One participant was particularly dissatisfied with the behavior of the facilitator, a Jewish Israeli who was grown up in Germany and who identified himself as a German. She was not satisfied with protesting during the discussion; she later wrote a letter of complaint to the coordinator of the research project. With regard to the Arab-Mizrahi, the participants in the parallel Ashkenazi group also objected to the attempt to challenge the boundary that divides Mizrahim and Arabs (see appendix 1).

However, unlike the Ashkenazi protester, Ahuva showed affection for the facilitator during the discussion and in the informal interactions between sessions.

The session continued:

Facilitator A: Their frame of mind is probably very similar to what Riki's saying here, and Hanna also tends to agree—but I see that with you two it's very difficult.

Ahuva: Extremely [. . .]

Facilitator A: I'd like to find out what exactly is so difficult to accept here. What I understand is that you can think about the word "Arab" as something that describes a territory.

Ahuva: A territory?

Facilitator A: A territory.

Ahuva: No.

Facilitator A: Just a sec, just a sec . . .

Ahuva: A type.

Facilitator A: Perhaps this is the bone of contention.

Riki: That's the problem.

Facilitator A: Here's the conflict: Riki is saying, let's say, that there are Arab countries that include Algeria, Morocco, Tunis[ia], Egypt, and so on and so forth.

Ahuva: Right, accepted.

Facilitator A: In this sense I can say, if I'm thinking of "Arab" as a term that designates a territory, I would perhaps also want to add culture, language, tradition, heritage, history.

Ahuva: Yes.

Facilitator A: Then I can actually say that when I say "Moroccan Jew" [. . .] I can also add the word "Arab" to the word "Moroccan" in the sense that Morocco is an Arab country, just like Tunis[ia] is an Arab country, Kurdistan is an Arab country. That is, I think these words are interchangeable.

Ahuva: Why do you need to add?

Riki: I'll tell you why.

Hanna: Let *him* respond.

Facilitator A: One sec, one sec. I understand, that's the way Riki sees it, and Hanna can probably agree with that.

Hanna: I agree with that, yes.

Facilitator A: I believe that your difficulty accepting it is because in your experience, in what you learn here in Israel, "Arab" does not designate a territory, but something else—it's a type, like you said.

Ahuva: Yes.

Facilitator A: What does this mean—"type"? An Arab as a type, what does this mean?

Ahuva: I'll give you an example. It disturbs me greatly to think that we could belong together—they are so bloodthirsty, everybody knows that. . . . They murder their own daughters for family honor.

Riki: Who's "they"?

Ahuva: The Arabs. The Arab is an Arab.

Riki: Not everybody is like that.

Ahuva: What do you mean "not everybody"?

Riki: Not everybody.

Ahuva: Then where does it happen?

Facilitator A: Just a moment, Riki, we're trying to understand her point of view.

Ahuva: It does happen, in the Arab sector, for example.

Riki: But fathers kill their daughters in the Jewish sector, too.

Ahuva: Because of family honor?

Riki: Because he just freaked out because he had a fight with her mother.

Ahuva: This one is insane, forget about him.

Riki: This one is insane, so Arabs are also insane? They're not insane, they're just like that, and Jews are insane if they're like that.

Facilitator A: Wait a minute, Riki, let's hear Ahuva out. [. . .] It's not about right and wrong. We're trying to understand a worldview.

Ahuva: I'll tell you the truth: I never would have thought there would be such a question. Because I think it is deliberately biased, it's not right. [. . .]

A progressive ear could not help but hear Ahuva's last comment as a clear expression of racism or crude, overarching orientalism. In the past, when I would hear similar comments from traditional working-class Mizrahim, whether in my family or in public, they made me uncomfortable, since I wasn't used to hearing these discordant sounds in my academic and social circles. These attitudes frustrated me, especially when I knew the people who were expressing them, and I knew that they had warm and respectful relationships with Arabs in various areas of their lives (see Bronshtein, 2015; Mizrachi, 2016b). We will return to this issue at the end of this chapter.

An alternative reading of Ahuva's statements would not see it as stemming from crude racism that perceives Arabs as lesser humans, but rather as an attempt to differentiate between the primordial, elusive "Jewish" entity, which is not completely encompassed by religion or civil nationality, and the primordial "Arab" entity. She did this by drawing a border between these two entities, using broad cultural stereotypes that disparage Arabs.

To a certain extent the facilitator channeled her in this direction—that is, toward a place where she could not find any meaningful distinguishing characteristic of "Arabness" other than a broad collection of stigmatizing generalizations. In the final section, I will return to Ahuva's statements and situate them in a broader framework. In the interim, and in the immediate context of the interaction, it seems that Ahuva fell into this trap, and Riki's response was quick. Ahuva continued her attempts to clarify her position.

Ahuva: For instance, why do we not call them—they're Israeli Arabs, that is, they're not Muslims, but Arabs.

In response to Ahuva's comment, Riki continued to deconstruct, although this time from a surprising angle:

Riki: I would like to tell you something. This is where it starts. This is where I started to ask myself that question. Because why do we say "Israeli Arabs"? There's an entire population here that's called Israeli Arabs, who have nothing to do—perhaps their parents are Israeli Arabs, it's like they'd call me a Kurd—I'm not. My mother—not even my mother, but her mother. That means my grandmother. So, I'm Israeli, but an Israeli Arab person that is from my generation, let's say, he's called an Israeli Arab but has nothing to do with Arab countries. Absolutely nothing. He's

a Muslim Israeli. Hence the question about “Arab Jews;” also from the fact that in our society most people tend to think that “Arab” is, like, derogatory.

Hanna: That’s the point.

Leah: I’ll tell you what: we can’t tell who’s Muslim and who’s Christian, so we group them all as Arabs.

Riki: But why? You have many Christians that nobody calls Arabs.

Leah: We can’t tell whether he’s a Christian or a Muslim.

Riki: But it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to be able to [tell the difference], it’s like defining a Jew—[she is interrupted]

Facilitator A: Riki, how did you come to adopt such an unusual perspective?

Ahuva: She drives me nuts. [. . .] I’ve never seen . . .

At this point, Leah pulled out the ultimate test:

Leah: Would you marry an Arab today?

Riki: No. If an Arab is Muslim, then I can’t marry him and you don’t have Jewish Arabs. So, I can’t marry [him]. I have the utmost respect for the Jewish religion. I’m a Jew.

Leah: So, he’ll tell you what matters—“I’m an Arab.” You’re also a Jew.

Ahuva: . . . [respect for] your right to be a Jew.

Riki: I’m a Jew. I’m proud of that. I respect that. It doesn’t matter.

Facilitator A: What we know so far is that at least for Leah and Ahuva, the term “Arab” designates something that threatens a Jew. In other words, if I become an Arab, then I’m giving up on what’s dear to me in my faith, in my religion, in my belonging to this country as a Jew. Am I right? Is that what it means? [. . .]

Ahuva: One hundred percent. I don’t even want to hear about being associated with the Arabs. You can group me with the Moroccans, I don’t care. Not the Arabs.

Facilitator A: OK, we have made all the positions clear.

Leah: I want you to understand, I’m not a religious woman.

Ahuva: This has nothing to do with it, no way.

Leah: And I’m not ultra-Orthodox, I’m traditional. But there’s the Jew in me, I’m Jewish.

The others continued the test. Leah presented religion as an obstacle despite the fact that she’s not observant. The women used this question in an attempt to capture the root of her claim that “Arabness” and “Jewishness” cannot

be reduced to either religion or nationalism. Riki, a secular young Jewish woman who strongly believes in universal citizenship and a neutral state, still could not conceive of a marriage to an Arab citizen of her own state. As we will see below, this is not merely a one-directional Jewish stance or an expression of the racism of a hegemonic ethnic group. Crossing the Arab-Jewish boundary in the familial sphere is also considered taboo in Arab society, especially among Muslims.⁸

In sum, Ahuva's and Leah's position can be easily read as pure racism or broad and vulgar orientalism. A somewhat more compassionate reading would view them as victims of colonialism who are afraid to "contaminate" their Jewish identity, the most valuable civil resource in the Jewish state, with Arabness, since Arabness, from a modernist-Orientalist, Zionist-Ashkenazi view, is associated with the enemy and a backward culture (Shenhav, 2006). We cannot exclude this possibility. The alternative reading I suggest does not necessarily preclude Shenhav's observation that for Mizrahim, their Jewishness in the Jewish state is a most precious resource and being identified with the Arabs is therefore a threat. However, as I have argued all along, relating to the tie that the Mizrahim make between Jewish nationality and religion as solely a reactive response misses their independent stance as whole subjects—that is, as rooted Mizrahi subjects, whose core identity is rooted in the greater whole of Jewish peoplehood.⁹

Once again, the profound linkage to Jewish peoplehood appears to be greater than nationality, which is merely a coincidence of birth that has no bearing on core identity. It is even greater than religion, which is seen as an attribute, one among others in the neutral political body of the state. Most importantly, this type of peoplehood—i.e., the Zionist-national and the mythic religious—fuses the two historical narratives and temporalities. From their position as rooted subjects, Ahuva and Leah struggled to defend the Jewish whole from Riki's attempt to deconstruct it. In their view, the deep-seated animosity between these two "wholes" only exacerbated the threat that Riki's deconstruction posed to their core identities. For them, the Arab threat to the very existence of the Jewish state is a threat to the Jewish whole in which their identity is embedded, and they therefore saw it as a true, direct existential threat.

However, even Riki's processes of deconstruction go only as far as the family. We discovered this through the ultimate test of loyalty that Ahuva and Leah demanded of her: would she marry an Arab? The very question itself brought up the deeper religious dimension. At that point, Riki's subversive process came to an end. Without hesitating, she answered that she would not. The familial sphere was revealed to possess an impermeable boundary. This border perhaps attests to the strength of the kinship affiliation between the familial sphere and the imaginary notion of "peoplehood."

As the chapter proceeds, we will observe how these boundaries made their appearance among the Mizrahi men with a college education and Arab men with

and without a college education. We now turn to the focus group comprised of college-educated Mizrahi men.

Mizrahi Men with a College Education

The college-educated Mizrahi participants were presented with the same formulation of the survey question, together with the survey's results (pie charts), and asked to interpret the charts.

This group was made up of Amos, an accountant in his 50s who lives in Jerusalem; Nadav, a construction engineer in his 30s who lives in a *moshav* outside of Jerusalem; and Gadi, a computer technician in his early 50s who also lives in Jerusalem. Gidi is another participant who belongs to the group of men without college education.

Facilitator B presented the survey results from the question about Arab Jews.

Amos: [. . .] I'm saying that it's impossible to say that a Jew is an Arab despite the fact that he was raised in an Arab country [. . .]

Facilitator B: Why not?

Amos: Because "Arab" means the Arab nation. We're talking about the Arab nation. And for a Jew, it's the Jewish nation, which has been educated differently, unrelated to the Arabs. Although you do have [it's true that] their [i.e., Mizrahi Jews'] mother tongue is Arabic. [. . .]

Amos began the discussion by making a distinction between Arabness as a culture and as a nationality.

Facilitator B: What do you say, Nadav?

Nadav: You're talking about those people who haven't immigrated to Israel? If they haven't, then I'd say they . . .
[Everyone was talking at the same time]

Facilitator B: Let's pursue this line of thought.

Nadav: I don't know, if you ask, I don't know, you go to Algiers or Morocco, someone who's a Jew there and you ask whether he's an Arab or a Jew, then I would think he would be more Jewish than Arab, but he will still belong to the Arab nation.

Facilitator B: Will he, if he lives there?

Nadav: [If he] serves in the army? Like you have the Bedouins and Druze here? He will, but he's not a Jew, he's a Druze,¹⁰ try to see it from the other side. He belongs to the Israeli nation—same thing, just the opposite, that's the way I see it.

Facilitator B: You mean to say that if I participate in all spheres of life [in the Arab country], this makes me an Arab. Let's say, if I live in an Arab country and vote, and I'm a citizen and I fulfill my

obligations as a citizen, then this means I'm an Arab? Is that the basis of your argument?

Nadav: His nationality is Arab, yes. I'm looking at this from the other way around.

We note the difference between the position of Facilitator B, who spoke in terms of liberal citizenship, and Nadav's republican perspective, which makes a connection between his identity and his loyalty to the state and thus permits Jews to be Arab, and Druze and Bedouins to belong to the Israeli nation.

Amos: You also have Arabs who are Israeli.

Nadav: This is why I said that if you take a Druze who lives here now, who could have served with me and you in the army, he still wouldn't be considered a Jew. He would be a Druze, but an Israeli.

Amos: True. [. . .]

It would appear that there was agreement between Amos and Nadav with regard to military service as the ultimate test of loyalty in the republican discourse. However, as we found in the above-described group of women, here we also found the "organic" critical-progressive Mizrahi ready to make a connection between Arabness and Mizrahi-Jewish identity.

Gadi: I see things differently. It all comes back to me now. I don't see . . .

[They are all talking at the same time]

Gadi: I don't see it the way Amos does. When I look at it, I call it "Arab" within quotation marks. [. . .] with my parents, today it's not so much so. Let's say that thirty years ago, they were different from their surroundings. [. . .] They'd listen to Arabic songs, [Egyptian singers such as] Um Kultum and Farid al-Atrash and all that. So, we can call them Arabs within quotation marks, I don't mind the word.

Facilitator A: . . . culture.

Gadi: Yes, they came here with this culture. Their foods are different from Western foods. I don't consider it a derogatory term and I don't mind it. It makes me laugh a little because I've never considered that terminology, "Arabs." It sounds funny to me but yes, if you ask me, yes. I don't mind calling my parents Arabs, and I'm a son of Arabs despite being a Jew and the son of a Jew.

Facilitator A: But you wouldn't be offended?

Gadi: I don't mind that terminology, Arab within quotation marks, I really don't.

Facilitator B: Why don't you mind? I want to explore that. You don't mind, you hear [from others] that it bothers them very much—even Amos and David¹¹ said, “no way.”

Gadi: You know what, maybe [. . .] I'm just guessing here—maybe it's because they're both wearing skull caps [i.e., they are religious] and it bothers them because an Arab has another religion. I don't know, maybe that's why, I don't know. [. . .]

Amos: This has nothing to do with wearing skull caps, if you ask me. It's just a matter of . . . it's not just a matter of mentality. True, my grandfather lived in a remote village in southern Morocco—it's true that he was . . . maybe there was no difference in the way he was dressed.

Facilitator B: And the way he talked.

Amos: Compared to the neighbor who was a Muslim Arab. But no. He spoke Arabic, but he also spoke Hebrew. He had customs that 99.9 percent of the Jews who grew up in those places had. They were all religious or at least very traditional. [. . .] I remember what they used to tell me about my grandma's sister, who was abducted by an Arab sheikh in this village, abducted and raped and converted to Islam, and then all her brothers and sisters mourned for her [as if she was dead]. I mean it's obvious that from what I understand, the way I grew up, in the reality I grew up in, I see there is a tremendous difference between an Arab and a Jew, despite the fact that [a Jewish person is] living there. It's not the same as a French Jew, because you can have an American Jew and an English Jew and a French Jew. He identifies with the place he lives in; he chooses and is chosen. There's no difference in that regard, the only difference is that he's a Jew and the other is not—that's all.

Amos immediately tried to undo the connection that Gadi had established between Arab and Jew. He pulled out the stereotypes at his disposal and presented the historical picture of the deep chasm between Jews and Arabs in Morocco, which of course did not fully represent the complex reality that has been documented by historians. Then, as he concluded, Amos attempted to distinguish between civic belonging—that is, citizens who belong to different religions but live in the same liberal democratic state (England, France, the United States) and are therefore defined as British/French/American citizens—and what he was trying to define as tribal-primordial citizenship, or peoplehood, which cannot be reduced to civic nationality or solely to religious belonging. For Nadav, Gadi's position was bizarre and disconnected from the Mizrahi common denominator that he had found in the group.

Nadav: I want to ask Gadi a question which is sort of [. . .] sarcastic, big time. [. . .] Why does this guy [referring to Gadi, in third person] look to me like [. . .] he's landed from a different planet? He also has a Mizrahi background; you have set up this Mizrahi lobby here; it was probably deliberate. But Gadi looks to me like some kind of an alien.

Facilitator B: He said he's Ashkenazified.

And then, once again, the ultimate test:

Nadav: Would you mind it if your son or daughter married an Arab? Would you mind?

Gadi: I wouldn't want that. I wouldn't, but I don't know why. Prejudice.

As in Riki's case, what began here as a simple process of breaking down and reconstructing the Jewish and Arab identities concluded abruptly when the discussion reached the family sphere. Gadi rejected the possibility of intermarriage, without presenting any reasoned argument ("But I don't know why.") Then he added, "prejudice," a form of self-criticism that revealed that he was aware of the significance of his "submissive" and "tribal" attitude as viewed from the progressive-universalist position that serves as his reference point for political and moral decisions. He did not use any religious or nationalist argument to justify limiting the ability his children—autonomous equal individuals—to choose an Arab as their partners, and it seemed that he could not explain his response—not even to himself. There is a reason why both Riki and Gadi took the process of deconstruction only so far. Intermarriage is an almost impermeable border, beyond which they will not go, a boundary supported by demographic data on inter-religious marriage, which is almost non-existent in Israel.¹²

Arab Men without a College Education

From here, we move on to the Arab groups, since the possibility of a "Jewish Arab" identity obviously requires Arab participation. The ontological question "Who am I?" (Somers, 1994) includes the questions "Who am I not?" "Who are we?" and "Who are They?" (Jenkins, 2014). The question of where others—in this case, Arabs—set the boundary is also part of the definition of the "we" of Mizrahi Jews. This may have different meanings and implications in different contexts. For example, in a context in which Jews lived as a minority in an Islamic state, the meaning of "Arabness" would have been influenced by the inverse positions and relations of dominance, access to administrative positions, and the definition of "elite culture" that stems from the relationship of elites to Islam (see Tzur, 2010a).

In the current context, we have already been surprised twice. The first time was when we discovered that approximately 40 percent of the Palestinian citizens of Israel do not recognize Mizrahi Jews (those who came in the first wave from

Arab countries and spoke Arabic as their native language) and do not distinguish between them and other Jews. We were surprised again when a not-insignificant percentage of Palestinian citizens of Israel responded positively to the question whether Jews who were born in Arab countries and speak Arabic could be considered Arabs. Here, too, the statistical data left us wondering and full of curiosity as we began the Arab focus groups.

As noted above, the Arab focus groups were composed solely of men (one for those with and one for those without college education). Unfortunately, we were unable to recruit a focus group of Arab women from among those who participated in the survey.

The focus groups were facilitated by two Palestinians, a man in his 40s (Facilitator C) and a woman in her late 30s (Facilitator D), both of whom are academically trained and experienced group facilitators.

We begin here with the group of Arab men with no college education. The participants were Tariq, a 50-year-old merchant; Mustafa, a 64-year-old who previously owned a small business and is now living on disability benefits; and Fahmi, a 54-year-old who works in the janitorial department of a school.

As we began, the group members were asked to respond to the findings in the survey regarding the question “Is it possible to define Jews who speak Arabic as their native language and who were born and raised in Arab countries, as Arabs?”

Tariq: They [the Jews] don’t want to . . . it’s like a Jew whose daughter is marrying an Arab, and until forty years ago when we married and afterward they came here, and they returned them to the Jews, for example, those girls who got married and had children and called them Mohammed and Mahmoud, and the Jews came and took them and returned them to the Jews.

Facilitator C: But why?

Facilitator D: [Unclear]

Tariq: Yes, it’s true . . . It’s hard for them if you remind him that he was once an Arab.

Facilitator D: Why?

Tariq: Because he doesn’t want this, he’s in Israel.

Facilitator D: But why?

Tariq: When we come out and say that we are Palestinian Arabs . . .

Facilitator D: Yes.

Tariq: And for him, it’s the same thing. He defines himself as an Iraqi Jew.

Facilitator D: But why . . .

Tariq: No, he’s the one who says this . . . that he’s an Iraqi Jew.

Facilitator C: In your opinion, is he saying this so far . . .

Tariq: Yes, he is saying it . . . he defines himself as an Iraqi Jew.

In his effort to make sense of the question, Tariq alternated between placing responsibility for viewing nationalism as a defining principle on the Jews and the Arabs.

Facilitator C: Why shouldn't he say he's an Arab? Why doesn't he respond that he's an Arab?

Tariq: No way that he would say that he's an Arab, because he isn't an Arab.

Facilitator C: Why?

Facilitator D: But why?

Tariq: Because he is a Jew!

Mustafa: He's Jewish.

Mustafa lays down an ontological distinction: A Jew is a Jew.

Tariq: His source is Jewish. . . . His source is Jewish.

Facilitator C: His religion is Judaism.

Tariq: That's true.

Facilitator C: But why [not clear] Arab?

Tariq: Religion. . . . Religion. . . . Arab is a nationality.

Tariq complicated the picture by differentiating between religion and nationality.

Facilitator D: [unintelligible . . .] Jew or Arab . . . what is he . . . [unintelligible]

Tariq: He's a Jewish Jew. . . . Listen, when he's in the Jewish state, and don't forget that it's a strong state, too.

Facilitator D: Yes.

Tariq: And it's a state that controls the whole world, he's proud when people say that he's a Jew who lives in the Jewish Israeli state like, I'm a Jewish Jerusalemite.

Tariq remained on the Jewish terrain, explaining the importance of a strong Jewish polity in the construction of the Jewish identity of "Arab Jews" and identifying the state as a source of pride for the Jews. He showed full awareness of the fusion between religion and nationality among Mizrahim.

Facilitator C: That's the . . .

Tariq: But if he [unintelligible] or your origin . . . he'd tell you his origin . . . like me, for example, my origin is Iraq . . . I'm an Iraqi.

...

Tariq: Even if [unintelligible] to a place in Iraq? He wouldn't be an Arab, he would be an Iraqi Jew. . . . He would be Jewish.

Tariq distinguished between civic nationality, based on country of origin, and a broader national-religious identity. Like the Jewish subjects, he found it difficult to define this.

Facilitator C: The question that was asked wasn't for nothing and it is: Can a Jew who came from an Arab country—

Facilitator D: (cutting Facilitator C off) What do you think about that?

Fahmi: No, no.

Facilitator C: That they define him as an Arab?

Fahmi: No.

Facilitator D: Why?

Fahmi: Because . . .

Facilitator C: Mustafa?

Mustafa: No.

Fahmi: We define him as a Jew only. . . . He came here from an Arab country, that means that—

Mustafa: Listen to me—

Fahmi: He is a Jew there, and he's a Jew here . . . that's what I know.

Fahmi joined Mustafa and reinforced the ontological position: a Jew is a Jew, irrespective of where he is.

Facilitator C: Tariq, what's your answer to his question?

Tariq: I say something else, I say that he's a Jew who came from Iraq, Iran or Tunisia or Libya. . . . It's written on his ID card that he was born in Tunisia.

Fahmi: What does that matter?

Tariq: OK . . .

Facilitator C: Yes?

Tariq: That is, it doesn't matter if he's a Arab, Tunisian or Iranian. . . . It's written on his ID card . . .

Once again, Tariq holds on to the bureaucratic categories of the state as an expression of identity.

Facilitator C: It doesn't matter what's written . . . how do you think he can be defined? Can he be defined as an Arab Jew?

Fahmi: No.

Tariq continued, insistently.

Tariq: As a Jew, yes, if he knows the Arabic language really well, then yes. But not as an Arab . . . because . . .

Facilitator C: Why, in your opinion . . .

Tariq: But not as an Arab. Why should he be defined as an Arab?

Facilitator C: Why shouldn't he be defined as an Arab?

Facilitator D: What is the difficulty for you here, Tariq. That what?

Tariq: Arab means that he knows how to speak Arabic, but his nationality isn't Arab. . . . He's a Jew.

Facilitator C: How would you explain that some of them define themselves as Arab Jews?

Tariq: Arab Jews? That's a problem.

Fahmi: That's a mistake . . . in my opinion . . .

Tariq's classification implied that the "Arab Jew" is an objective possibility but would be politically problematic. For Fahmi the roots of the dichotomy (Arab/Jew) lie deeper; for him, these are two distinct entities, and confounding or conflating them would constitute a category error.

Facilitator C: But the way I understand the three of you, even if we are also refusing to define them as Arab Jews, we are not refusing that there are Western or Iraqi Jews . . . or . . .

Fahmi: I call him a Tunisian Jew or an Iraqi Jew, I don't call him an Arab Jew . . .

Facilitator D: What is the difficulty? What makes it hard for us to define him as an Arab Jew, with the conflict that you are talking about . . .

Fahmi: Because there are two nationalities here, Arab and Jewish.

Facilitator D: [Unclear]

Fahmi: If a person defines him as a Jew and an Arab, that is, if he has two nationalities. . . . Jew and Arab isn't possible . . .

Fahmi moved on to nationality as the source of the Arab-Jew division. At this point Facilitator D attempted to examine the emotional roots of their resistance.

Facilitator D: That is, we are afraid that he will be too close to me, or that . . .

Fahmi: No, no . . .

Facilitator D: That . . .

Fahmi: It's not like that, it's not like that . . .

Tariq: But they can't define themselves as Arabs . . .

Facilitator C: Why?

[. . .]

Mustafa: There's no connection, but . . .

Fahmi: No one can be an Arab and a Jew at the same time . . .

Facilitator C: But why?

Fahmi: He's either an Arab or a Jew.

Fahmi's stubborn reiteration may have been a sign of his distress.

Mustafa: [Can't be heard]

Fahmi: There's no connection . . .

Facilitator B: Because there's a conflict, we can't define them?

Mustafa: No, no, no.

Tariq: Absolutely.

Fahmi: No, no, no.

Mustafa: All this isn't connected to the conflict.

Facilitator B: What do you think, Mustafa?

Mustafa: No connection to the disagreement.

Facilitator C: In the definition of an Arab Jew?

Mustafa: No connection.

Fahmi: Yes.

Fahmi and Mostafa insisted on a primordial difference between "Arab" and "Jew" that was unrelated to and deeper than the political conflict, a tectonic difference that cannot be bridged. Tariq, on the other hand, consistently expressed a contextual perspective on the issue and viewed these categories as the product of nationality and politics.

Arab Men with a College Education

We now move on to the group of Arab college-educated men. The group was composed of Samir, a 31-year-old social worker; Zuheir, a 51-year-old construction engineer; Ziad, a 47-year-old who holds an MA in geography and urban planning and owns his own company; and Ibrahim, a 38-year-old physicist.

After a preliminary discussion about the precise meaning of the statistical responses to this question, Ibrahim began the conversation by making a conceptual distinction between Judaism as nationality and Judaism as a religion.

Ibrahim: First of all, we'll first turn to the answers given by Jews to this question. We should first of all make it clear that in Israel, "Jewish" refers to a nation and to a religion at the same time. Arab countries.

Ziad: But Judaism isn't a nationality.

Ibrahim: In Israel it is.

Ziad: Judaism is a religion.

Ibrahim: No, Judaism here is a nationality and a religion.
[silence]

Ibrahim: What is the nationality of the Jews? Jewish. Because Judaism is a nationality and a religion.

Ziad: No, there are different opinions on the subject.

The discussion among the college-educated participants was more abstract and began with a systematic clarification of the meaning of the terms. Ziad's comment revealed that he was aware that there is a variety of perspective on this issue.

Facilitator C: Explain a bit about a Christian. . . . That is, Facilitator D is registered as an Arab and they [the state authorities] registered me as an Arab. They registered Ziad as an Arab, they registered Mohammed as an Arab, and you also as an Arab, okay?

Facilitator C pointed to the role of the state bureaucracy in lumping together Christians and Muslims as "Arabs."

Facilitator D: What you're saying is that religion doesn't distinguish him [i.e., Arabs]. That is, Arabs . . .
[. . .]

Ibrahim: Now, if we say that the Jews, by religion, who were born in an Arab country, I would classify them as Arab Jews. Their nationality is Arabic and their religion is Judaism.

Zuheir: Yes.

Ibrahim: I want to explain that.

Facilitator D: That is, you're saying that the definition is possible.

Ibrahim: The definition is correct.

Facilitator D: For Ibrahim . . .

Ibrahim: Yes, I think that this is the correct definition because they are considered "Jewish Arabs."

Ibrahim made a logical conclusion, which led him to recognize "Arab Jews" as an objective possibility.

Facilitator D: Why? Can you explain that to me?

Ibrahim: Their religion is Judaism . . .
[. . .]

Facilitator D: Yes. [But] why did only one in four answer that way?

Ibrahim: Every Jew born in an Arab country refuses to accept this definition. He wants to forget that he's an Arab. Who does he call an Arab? The person he hates.

[General laughter]

Ibrahim: The one who hates them, that is, 20 percent of the Jews, you can call them "Arab Jews." Isn't that correct?

[General laughter]

Facilitator D: You mean those who answered . . .

Ibrahim: They hate the Jews [unclear, everyone talking at the same time]. . .
[. . .]

Ibrahim: He tells you "I'm Arab? Heaven forbid, no!"

Ibrahim recognized the feasibility of an Arab Jewish identity and held Mizrahi Jews responsible for resisting it. Ziad, however, viewed their position as harmoniously consistent with what he considered to be the desirable Arab position.

Ziad: That's good from an Arab point of view.

Ibrahim: Now the Arabs . . .

Ziad: Seventy-five percent of those who love them . . .

Ibrahim: Do you call them Arabs? Do you include these Jews among Arabs? Heaven forbid . . .

Ziad: Now (to the) 25 percent . . .

Ibrahim: Twenty-five percent understood the situation . . .

Ibrahim: But those that like them said they were Arabs . . .

Ziad: No . . .

Ibrahim: And the rest hate them.

[. . .]

Ibrahim: No, listen to me. . . . Seventy-five percent of the Arabs are telling you that they don't want them to be Arabs; what brought them to be Arabs? After all, they're Jews. . . . They're not Arabs; those [sic] with me—I can't stand them. What do you want, to bring me Jews that you define as Arabs? Now, those who understand the situation, that they are Jews who were born in Arab countries, are therefore Arab Jews.

Ibrahim maintained that while there is a logical validity of the definition of an Arab Jew, most Arabs (75 percent) had a "lack of understanding" or unwillingness of to recognize that logic and accept them into the Arab collective because of the animosity that they feel toward Jews.

Samir: I say that as long as Jews are found in Arab countries they can be defined as free Arabs.

Ziad: Arab Arabs. [Laughter]

Samir: [. . .] Put simply, when he arrives in this land, he stops being an Arab.

Samir pointed to the role of the Jewish state in defining the distinctions in identity between “Arabs” and “Jews,” including for those Jews who came from Arab countries. When nationalism is laden on to religion, the Jews stops being an Arab, according to Samir.

Facilitator C: He’s defined like that by whom? He’s defined that way or are you calling him that or is the state defining him like that?

Samir: I’m not defining him; I’m joining the 75 percent who don’t accept the category of “Arab Jew.”

Facilitator D: Why?

Samir: No, because it’s something . . .

Zuheir: Because it’s self-contradictory.

Samir: He’s either a Jew or an Arab.

It would appear that Samir, following Zuheir, returned to a more primordial distinction.

Facilitator C: There are still Jews living in the west; how do you define them?

Facilitator D: What does it do to you? Let’s [try to] understand how it affects you, Samir. What does this definition do to Samir? Why do you find it so difficult?

Samir: Because it doesn’t sound right to me, that is, there are things that a person can’t agree to, or straight thinking by a thirty-one-year-old who, from birth, was raised [to think] that there are Arabs and there are Jews, that there’s the occupation . . . there’s . . .

Facilitator C: Leave that aside in the meantime.

Samir: There’s evidence . . . that is, if you go to Egypt and claim that you’re an Arab Israeli, their response will be: “You’re a Palestinian Israeli? Why are you putting us on? There’s no such thing as an Arab Israeli, or a Palestinian Israeli. How can such a thing be possible?”

[. . .]

Samir: Just like an Arab Jew . . .

Samir supported the dichotomous position, but, unlike the men without a college education, his ontological narrative was well-reasoned and contained a contextual and political explanation. He explained the meaning of the political construction that he experienced in his childhood.

Facilitator D: What are you trying to say, that it's because of the situation here? Samir, is this category particularly difficult for you to accept?

Samir: Yes.

Facilitator D: If I understand you correctly, you mean that because of the existing conditions here, of the current struggle, this category is very hard for you [to accept].

Samir: That's right.

Facilitator D: For you personally.

Samir: Exactly.

Facilitator C: How would you explain the Jews' identity?

Samir: That they agree that they are Arabs?

Facilitator C: Because just one out of five . . .

Samir: Based on a racist rationale, you have one against the other . . .

Samir asserted that the social and political logic that led him to accept the Jewish-Arab dichotomy could not be the same process that Jews experience when they come to the same conclusion. In his words, racism is the source of the dichotomy—an accusation that he threw out, as if for no particular reason.

Facilitator C: Now you're joining Ibrahim . . .

Facilitator D: But the majority isn't interested in this definition. How do you explain that the majority says that this definition is incorrect? They also explain (it) just like you do? That is, do you think that the difficulty you have is shared with them? Or do they have other types of difficulties?

Samir: No, that they don't accept this category doesn't mean they the necessarily agree with one coming from the other direction, because there aren't very many possibilities.

Facilitator C: Do they [Mizrahi Jews] define themselves as Arab Jews?

Ziad: No, they're not proud of it.

Facilitator C confronted them with the radical position of the Mizrahim from the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow.

Facilitator C: There's a specific social movement in this country that has Jews who are Mizrahim, and one of them is a great researcher, he's even written a book called *The Arab Jews*.

Samir: Who is it? Sammy Smoooha?

Samir cited the name of a prominent Jewish sociologist of Iraqi origin who is not connected with the Rainbow. The group did not know anything about the activities of the Rainbow, nor did they appear to be particularly interested. The discussion returned to focusing on the Jewish majority.

Facilitator C: Is it possible that that they want to hurt them because they're Arabs, they'll call them Jews and not Arabs?

Ibrahim: Yes, those 80 percent.

Zuheir: Yes, yes.

Ibrahim: The 80 percent that love the Land of Israel.

Facilitator C: And they want to insult them [the Mizrahi Jews].
[. . .]

Ibrahim: That is, for them, we're talking about a curse, they're being Arabs.

Facilitator D: That is, (if) they call him an "Arab Jew," then it's a curse . . .

Ibrahim: A curse . . .

At this point, the discussion turned to Zuheir and Ziad.

Facilitator C: What is your explanation as to why they do say, Moroccan, Iraqi, or Yemenite? Could it be that, while they are fewer than in the past, there are still some who express themselves this way? That he doesn't belong to the Arab [people], but still uses this term? How do you look at these things, Zuheir? And what about the question that I've already asked?

Zuheir: I think that you can't say Jewish Arab, because those are two contradictory things. Either he's an Arab or he's a Jew. These are two nationalities. It's one or the other, it's impossible together. Now, the Jew who lives in Iraq . . .

Facilitator C: Why? Why? Why? Why the Arab . . .

Zuheir: You can define him as an Iraqi Jew . . .

Facilitator C: Why would the Jew whose mother tongue is Arabic [be . . .]

Zuheir: Iraqi Jew.

Facilitator C: His nationality is Jewish.

Zuheir: What's that?

Facilitator C: A Jew whose mother tongue is Arabic and his culture is Arabic?

Zuheir: Why would his mother tongue be Arabic?

Facilitator C: Why . . .

Zuheir: Arabic?

Facilitator C: Because the Jew who comes from Iraq would not know Hebrew, he would know Hebrew only as the language of the Torah.

Zuheir: Mother tongue.

Facilitator C: It's . . .

Facilitator D: But Zuheir . . .

Facilitator C: The language called “mother tongue” is the language that he grew up on, in his house . . .

Zuheir: Yes?

Facilitator C: And in his school, and in all those things . . .

Zuheir: It could be . . .

Facilitator C: Even the writers would write in Arabic.

Zuheir: That’s a scientific explanation . . .

Zuheir raised another possibility: the Jews who wrote about a possible Jewish Arab identity are Jews from Arab countries who are proud of their previous national identity, in the Arab nations from where they came.

Ziad: He (the Jew) is proud of his nationality. . . . He says it because he is a Tunisian, a Moroccan, an Egyptian, or a Halabi.¹³ He’s proud of this, but he doesn’t say he’s an Arab, because there would be a conflict about being an Israeli Arab, but he is proud of his homeland, where his roots are.

An argument developed between Zuheir and Ziad:

Zuheir: Naturally, because they come from Arab countries and speak Arabic, they would claim that they are Arabs . . .

Facilitator C: You mean because 20 percent are Mizrahim?

Zuheir: They are the ones who responded . . .

Facilitator C: Completely opposite from Ibrahim’s rationale.

Ibrahim: I am telling you, they are disgusted by the Arab nation!

Ziad: No, no, no!

Zuheir: No, exactly the opposite, they are proud.

Ziad: They are proud, believe me . . . they listen to Um Kultum . . .

Ziad: They miss their homeland.

Zuheir: Exactly. They miss the homeland.

Facilitator C: This is the last time I am asking you, Ziad. . . . My question is clear . . .

Ziad: I am telling you, my answer is that they miss their homeland, not that they are Arabs.

Zuheir: Not to being Arabs.

Facilitator C: My question is clear.

Ziad: They miss their country, not the state.

Ibrahim: Listen man, they curse in Arabic. . . . Is he proud of being an Arab?

Ziad: I'm telling you he's an Iraqi, or a Moroccan.

Ibrahim: So that means that they [the ones who curse in Arabic] aren't the ones who answered [that it's possible to be an Arab Jew].

Ziad: Yes . . .

[. . .]

Ziad: That's the group of Jews.

Ibrahim: No, I'm talking with Zuheir.

Ziad: No . . .

Facilitator D: Ah . . .

Ibrahim: Because they are cursing themselves when they say Arab. Could he define himself as an Arab?!

Zuheir: No, they are cursing one another. It's a sort of provocation.

Factually, Zuheir and Ibrahim were both wrong. The approximately 20 percent of the Jews who responded that a Jew could be an Arab were not mostly Mizrahim. From a critical Mizrahi point of view, the identity of the 17 percent of Jews who accepted the possibility of an Arab Jew, together with the additional 4 percent who responded "Don't know," is particularly intriguing. If there were a clear Mizrahi majority in this group, it could hint at a "hidden Arab identity" waiting to be "liberated." This would be consistent with Zuheir and Ibrahim's interpretations. A second possibility is that there is an Ashkenazi majority among the Jews in this group of respondents, in which case the critical reading would interpret the finding as evidence of an orientalist attitude, a common accusation in Mizrahi critical discourse. However, as noted, both of these hypotheses were disproved, and we found no difference between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim within this group of respondents.

In both Arab groups the discussion was lively, and the participants were clearly interested in the question. To a great extent, the group discussions resonated with the statistical finding among Arabs, since in each group one respondent expressed openness to the possibility of an Arab Jewish identity. Of course, we had no statistical reason to expect that the focus groups would produce results similar to the representative survey.

We also observed disagreements within both groups. Ziad, from the college-educated group, was open to the possibility of the existence of an Arab Jewish identity, and Tariq, from the group without a college education, rejected the possibility of its existence in Israel for contextual and political reasons. In this, they differed from the other participants, who viewed the Arab Jewish identity as a categorical error. In general, for most of the participants in both groups, the categories of Jew and Arab are separate and unbridgeable. The members of

the group without a college education presented a primordial view of Arabs and Jews as two stable identities, different from each other in essential ways that are neither related to historical circumstances or current conflicts. The opponents in this group presented an axiomatic, rather than reasoned, explanation, unrelated to context, time, or place. In contrast, the opponents to the idea of an Arab Jewish identity in the college-educated group provided historical and political context for their broad objections. At the same time, they, too, viewed these categories as stable and definitive, and thus they, too, were actually presenting a primordial position (based on kinship, blood, race, land, and other essential characteristics of belonging).

In both groups the discussion generally focused on the Arab Jewish identity as an objective possibility but did not even consider this identity as a political possibility. During the discussions, the participants did not draw any connections between the theoretical question of the possibility of an Arab Jewish identity and Mizrahim in Israel as a distinct, identifiable group. I note again that in the pilot stage of the research, we found that a significant percentage of Palestinian citizens of Israel were unfamiliar with the concept of “Mizrahi.” During the discussions, Facilitator C, who had been exposed to critical Mizrahi academics and activists during his studies and activism, used the term. But the term was not in common usage among the research subjects, and they tended to view the Arab identity of Mizrahim through the prism of the specific Arab country from which they came (Iraqi Jews, Moroccan Jews, and so forth). In other words, the Arab discussants did not use the comprehensive term “Mizrahim” and did not recognize Mizrahim as a “group.” They did not express any connection to those Mizrahim who have an Arab background and they did not even hint at a possible political connection between Mizrahim and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel.

When Facilitator C mentioned the Mizrahi Rainbow, the political organization that promotes the Arab Jewish political identity, to the educated group, they had not known about the organization or its message. Nor did they express any particular interest in hearing more about the it or the political possibility it presents.

The focus groups echoed the survey findings. Overall, it would appear that the subversive political meaning of the Arab Jew has not reached the hearts and minds of Palestinian Arabs in Israel.

RETHINKING GROUP BOUNDARIES

We began our examination of the question of an Arab Jewish identity as an objective possibility from a historical perspective. From there, we continued into the present. As in the previous chapters, this empirical section began with a presentation of the statistical results of the question we were exploring. In this case, we explored the positions of Jews and Arabs regarding the possibility of

this identity and followed up with Jewish and Arab focus groups who interpreted the findings and cast additional light on their meaning.

Permeable and Impermeable Boundaries

In the Jewish focus group, emotions flared when the possibility of an Arab Jewish identity was raised by the “organic” representatives of the progressive-critical discourse (Riki and Amos). However, even for them, the dissolution of identities went only as far as the family sphere and they could not accept the possibility of inter-religious marriage. We see in the demographic data that a taboo on inter-religious marriage in Israel exists on a broader scale: the percentage of marriages between Jews and non-Jews and between Palestinian Muslims and Palestinian Christians is minuscule.

This does not mean that in Arab Jewish encounters we do not find shared ethnic and cultural symbols. In Israel’s dense and crowded environment, Jews and Arabs meet frequently in public space—at work, at cultural events, in the media (Lamont et al., 2016; Lamont and Mizrahi, 2012; Mizrahi and Herzog, 2012). These meeting points are spaces that are open to negotiating social and symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnar, 2002), part of the strategies used by the social players, especially Arabs and Mizrahi Jews, in the making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries (Wimmer, 2013).

In previous research, I examined situations in which boundaries between Mizrahi Jews and Arabs are flexible in some spheres of life and almost impenetrable in others. Left-wing and human rights activists find this difficult to comprehend. Over a decade ago, I first presented the ostensible paradox of the evidence of friendly and respectful relations between Mizrahim and Arabs in the workplace. In my article “Sociology in the Garden: Beyond the Liberal Grammar of Contemporary Sociology” (2016), I presented a human rights activist’s confusion as she tried to make sense of a Mizrahi contractor’s genuine and human concern for his Palestinian workers and their living conditions, even though he held right-wing political views. Subsequently, research conducted by Vicki Bronshtein (2015) on the relationships between Jews and Arabs at mechanic shops in Israel’s geographic center, which was part of her MA thesis under my supervision, showed that relationships between right-wing Mizrahi workers and their counterparts among Palestinian citizens of Israel were proper, respectful, professional, and even friendly.

Progressive left-wing activists have long assumed that if the two sides were to meet in a common and relatively equal space, they would recognize their shared humanity as equal and free individuals and, as a result, all other identity boundaries (religious, national, ethnic, and so forth) would break down. However, according to evidence in the field, Jews and Arabs do indeed express their shared humanity in the workplace, but this remains in the work sphere and does not cross the boundaries of belonging and loyalty to the political collective. In the familial and political sphere, both sides define themselves in absolute terms of “us” and “them”

(Jenkins, 2014). Most do express a “universal humanity” in Enlightenment terms, but this does not lead to embracing a “politics of universalism,” which downplays the meaning of the group boundaries of religious and national identity. As Rogers Brubaker has noted, nationhood is not merely a “subtype of ethnicity” (2014), let alone peoplehood, in which religion and nationhood are fused and in which the rooted Mizrahi subject is ingrained. These boundaries remain intact, even in situations in which right-wing and traditional Mizrahim appreciate and identify with Arab culture.

About a decade ago, an Israeli television show provided a striking example of this when Nasrin Kadri, a Muslim singer, won first place on *Eyal Golan is Calling You* (2012), a variation of *American Idol*, in which Golan, a well-known Mizrahi star, searches for the next star Mizrahi singer. Kadri won thanks to high ratings from the audience and from Golan and his team of judges, who were delighted by the technique in her performance of Arabic songs, excitedly declaring that she is “the real thing.”

For decades, musicians working in the popular Mizrahi genre fought for recognition and representation within mainstream Israeli music (which was largely Ashkenazi). But an increased recognition of Arabic music did not provide evidence of a crossing of familial and political boundaries, and the Arab-Jewish connection remained contained within the boundaries of the cultural sphere.

This division between the different spheres of life provides an additional perspective on the limits of the liberal grammar that I have been discussing throughout this volume. As I will show in the following section, emancipation from the liberal grammar allows us to turn our questions from the “inconsistent Mizrahim” to progressive activists and critical researchers alike. The question we should be asking is: why do the differences in Arab-Mizrahi relationships in various spheres seem so strange? So enigmatic? Why do progressive researchers and activists view this as an unexplainable contradiction?

The Limits of the Liberal Grammar

The poet Robert Frost (1914) wrote that “good fences make good neighbors.” He captures a key part of the liberal grammar from which critical activists and researchers draw their political and interpretive positions. They start out from the individualistic ontology, which sanctifies the autonomous individual who is equal and has free will and rises above religious or national boundaries, all of which are perceived as secondary or a hindrance. From this, they draw the assumption that if the two sides would only “know each other” they would find their shared humanity. Our findings show that signs of common humanity among traditional and nationalistic communities do not require them to erase the groups’ religious, national and/or familial boundaries. Rather, maintaining group boundaries allows for recognition and even an embracing of common human unity.

Research intended to examine the manner in which Jewish and Muslim religious groups view peace and shared life reveals the significance of boundaries for both groups. This earlier research (Mizrachi and Weiss, 2020) was based on meetings between Mizrahi ultra-Orthodox Jews with right-wing political orientations and religious Muslims who belong to the Islamic Movement. An ethnographic scene captures the essence of the encounter. The scene took place after a four-day dialogue between these two groups held in the ultra-Orthodox city of Elad, where the authors were participant observers:

The atmosphere starts to prickle once Rabbi Aryeh Deri, the controversial and charismatic leader of the ultra-Orthodox Shas Movement and a former Minister of the Interior, bursts into the room, together with his entourage. As Deri enters, the speakers immediately vacate the dais for him. After describing his many endeavors as a government minister, highlighting the mobilization of resources for projects aimed at reducing institutional discrimination against Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel, he animatedly rattles off the similarities between the two communities while reminding the audience of their deep common roots in a highly religious, traditionalist Middle Eastern culture that respects its elders. He employs their shared linguistic heritage to support the creation, if only momentarily, of a shared warm and comfortable milieu. One theme resounds above all others: “We do not want to assimilate!” Deri’s proclamation earns loud, across-the-board applause. By “we” he means Jews and Muslims alike. Deri’s partiality for clear, stable social boundaries powerfully resonates with the audience in their use as foundations for a shared peaceful and respectful political space. In any typical peace forum convened by leftist secular liberals, Deri’s statement declaring the necessity of walls would be considered offensive, implying as it might ethnic prejudice, racism, or fractured intergroup relations. So why did Deri say what he did in the midst of this open, warm and friendly setting? Why would he suggest reinforcing the walls between Arabs and Jews? And why would anyone celebrate separation precisely at a moment of bonding? (p. 172–73).

From within the safety of religious and national borders, the two groups (which included both men and women) show clear affection for each other, including body language and warm handshakes, embrace shared humor in both Hebrew and Arabic, and hold similar positions on the education of children. The participants from both groups viewed themselves as the representatives of their wider communities, and not merely as individuals speaking solely for themselves, when they addressed vital, controversial political issues.

We compared this observation with observations conducted among liberal-secular peace activists and rural Palestinians that took place in the South Hebron hills in the West Bank (Mizrachi and Weiss, 2020). First, the social and cultural distance between the peace activists and the rural Palestinians led to an awkwardness that characterized the whole meeting, while the inter-religious meeting was characterized by a sense of social ease. Second, at the inter-religious meeting

there was a shared belief that religious boundaries constitute a sacred marker that should not be questioned, and this was reflected in the seating arrangements: the genders were separated (with the exception of married couples, who were seated next to each other), in accordance with customs and religious observance in both communities. However, in the southern Hebron Hills, the Jewish peace activists expressly requested that everyone mix together and sit on the floor. The Palestinians refused, and the Palestinian women brought themselves chairs and sat outside the circle.

While the liberal imagination views religious and national borders as an obstacle to recognition of shared humanity, because they prevent the autonomous and free individual from fulfilling his wish to cross group boundaries in all areas of life, including in the familial and the political spheres, in the traditional-communitarian model, maintenance of the religious and political boundaries is a condition for the recognition of the other's humanity and the creation of shared lives.

As we moved from the past to the present, we learned that Arab Jewish identity is an objective possibility. However, probing the conditions of possibility reveals that the rooted subject, whether Jewish-Mizrahi or Arab-Muslim, draws clear lines between different spheres of life. While friendship, mutual respect, and cultural affinity can be maintained in the public sphere, in work, and in culture, the familial sphere (marriage) and the political sphere (loyalty to the political community) remain impermeable. The progressive-critical discourse that is based in liberal grammar and predicated on sanctified individual autonomy demands complete behavioral consistency across all spheres of life. Indeed, in many progressive communities, the refusal of one individual to marry an individual from another religious community is seen as racism. The theological roots of this position will be discussed in the concluding chapter. For now, I will say that recognition of the meanings of the rooted subject in general, and of the Mizrahi subject in particular, is necessary not only in order to understand the limitations of the liberal-progressive interpretive position, but also to broaden the political imagination and face the challenge of living together with difference.

For the rooted Mizrahi subject, maintaining the familial boundary and political loyalty to the Jewish people and the Jewish state serves as a defense of their connection to the Jewish whole and Jewish continuity. The distinction between work and cultural spheres, on the one hand, and the political sphere, on the other, along with the defense of the familial and political spheres, enable the rooted Mizrahi subject not only to "discover" the humanity they share with Arabs but also to experience a deep emotional connection to some aspects of Arab culture, with which they are intimately familiar in their personal and communal lives.

In the next chapter, we will examine the significance of defiance, which is another tenet of the liberal grammar, once again through the eyes of the rooted Mizrahi subject.