

Aviad Moreno, Noah Gerber, Esther Meir-Glizenstein, and Ofer Shiff, eds., *The Long History of the Mizrahim: New Directions in the Study of Jews from Muslim Countries. In tribute to Yaron Tsur* (Jerusalem: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2021), pp. 551 [in Hebrew].

by *Emanuela Trevisan Semi*

This work is a tribute to the great scholar Yaron Tsur, the author of *Qehillah qeruah*,<sup>1</sup> which remains an outstanding and generous work, a proper treasure of sources, insights, analytical skills and information. Tsur is also the author of a seminal article entitled “Carnival Fears: Moroccan Immigrants and the Ethnic Problem in the Young State of Israel,” and is quoted in most of the articles in this collection.<sup>2</sup> Tsur pioneered the study of the history of Jews from Muslim countries and defined the concept of “sectorialization” (*migzarim*) within Moroccan Jewish society, a vastly illuminating notion for anyone who has done research about the Jews of Morocco. The challenge presented by this collection is taken up by 23 scholars, among whom we find the main authorities on this subject as well as a new generation of researchers, all offering new insights into “the long history” of *mizrahim*. The “long history” in the title hints at the aim of this text, namely to demonstrate that the current history of the *mizrahim* is a continuity of their history in the lands they left and not a rupture. By using this term, the authors challenge the narrow boundaries of current Israeli historiography.

The lengthy introduction by Aviad Moreno and Noah Gerber describes the milestones in the research on Jews in Muslim countries from the 1970s and introduces the reader to the main issues of this fascinating chapter of Jewish history and also to the core themes of this volume. After recalling how until the 1970s this story was considered completely marginal in comparison to the European narrative, they show how this trend continued for a long time. This explains the importance of this collection, and its fresh look at relations between *ashkenazim* and *mizrahim* and more generally at migrations that are explained not through the birth of the State but as signs of a wider crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Yaron Tsur, *A Torn Community: The Jews of Morocco and Nationalism, 1943-1954* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishing, 2001 [in Hebrew]).

<sup>2</sup> Yaron Tsur, “Carnival Fears: Moroccan Immigrants and the Ethnic Problem in the Young State of Israel,” *Journal of Israeli History* 18, no. 1 (1997): 73-103.

The introduction traces the history of *mizrahim* studies. Initially, the authors of the first studies were not interested in the *mizrahim*'s recent past and in any case thought that it was not worthy of interest. The ethos of the reunification of the diasporas (*kibbutz galuyot*) was potentially subversive because it opened the door to ethnographic cultures. However, Zionist ideology considered it necessary that the links with the diaspora be severed after emigration to Israel. This influenced research on the *mizrahim* and gave rise to disputes between historians and social scientists.

No attention was paid to sectorial social divisions within the countries from which the migrants originated. According to the introduction's authors, a change can now be perceived in the new millennium with the publication of an issue of *Pe'amim* on the topic: it includes important articles that take stock of previous research and suggested new paths of investigation.<sup>3</sup> In the 94/95 issue, an article by Tsur was published, that proposes a separation between Israeli historiography and research on the "ethnic question." That was the beginning of a move away from the logic of a monolithic, unitary Jewish culture that supposedly runs through the Jewish people's entire history of. Postcolonial studies (and in particular Ella Shohat) would later help influence Israeli academia by questioning "Judeocentric" categorizations, starting with that of *mizrahim*.

The fact that the debate on the encounter, in Israel, between Jews from Muslim countries and European Jews involved only social scientists precluded, according to Moreno and Gerber, an in-depth historical analysis, and contributed to a dichotomy between past and present.

An important development for the debate on these issues took place in 2011-2014 and subsequently in 2015-2017, thanks to a research-group called "Jews of the *Mizrah*, an Orientalist question and modern awareness" to which the authors of the introduction participated.

As already pointed out, Tsur was among the first to point out the problem represented by the gap between studies of Jews from Arab countries in their countries of origin and research on those Jews in Israel. Today, on the contrary, there is a whole generation of young historians who are aware of the importance of bridging this gap and many of them have contributed to this volume.

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<sup>3</sup> *Pe'amim: Studies in Oriental Jewry* 92 (2002)

It is impossible to review all the twenty-three articles in this volume. These are organized in three parts: the first deals with inter-ethnic relations in Israel (Harvey Goldberg and Orit Abuhav, Nissim Leon and Uri Cohen, Hila Shalem Baharad, Daniel Schroeter, Amos Noy, Malka Katz, Yuval Haruvi, Avi Picard and Almog Behar); the second with Migration as a border line (Gur Alroey, Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, Menashe Anzi, Zvi Zohar, Yosef Yuval Tobi and Yoram Bilu); and the third with regional and super-regional history (Ethan Katz, Jessica Marglin, David Guedji, Tsivia Tobi, Yaron Harel, Guy Bracha, Yaron Ben-Nach and Tamir Karkason), with an epilogue on the works of Yaron Tsur, written by Aviad Moreno and Noah Gerber.

I have found some articles particularly interesting or innovative compared to others. One of these is Schroeter's "Moroccan Jews and the Idea of Moroccan Exceptionality in Israel." The author, having shown that the denial of the diaspora also involved Ashkenazi Jews, argues that while it was not possible to avoid dealing with European history, it was perfectly feasible to avoid the history of Arab countries, and this is precisely what happened. Schroeter points out that, ironically, the denial of the identity of Jews from Islamic countries did not interest the establishment, which routinely celebrated the glorious Jewish past in Spain but not the immigrants who descended from that past.

In this article Schroeter tackles a well-known issue, the so called "tolerance" of Morocco compared to other countries. He argues that the idea of the uniqueness of Morocco with respect to other Arab countries is partly due to the discriminatory attitude towards Moroccan Jews in Israel: this made them think of their Jewish past in Morocco as better than their situation in Israel. According to Schroeter, this explains their great nostalgia for Morocco. He adds, however, that there are two narratives concerning the Jews of Morocco. In the first we witness sad historical memories, since the 1912 Fez *traité* and the 1948 *Oujda* deny the uniqueness of Morocco in comparison to other Arab countries. The second narrative argues that the Alawite kingdom protected Jews even under Vichy, despite criticisms of this claim. There are, therefore, two readings, one that sees uniqueness and one that denies it. The paradox, Schroeter says, is that they are two sides of the same coin, which is to say they are both part of Moroccan Jewish identity.

To this I would add that the narrative of Moroccan Jews in Israel refers to a recent past, undoubtedly influenced by the Israeli situation but also affected by the position taken by the kings of Morocco, with—last but not least—the inclusion of Jews in the 2011 Moroccan constitution, the acceptance of the Jewish legacy as one of the components of Morocco’s heritage, the recognition of citizenship for Jews who left Morocco and the preservation of the Jewish heritage.

In “From the Rehabilitated *Mizrahi* Middle Class to the Renewed Israeli Center: Rethinking Center and Periphery,” Nissim Leon and Uri Cohen offer an interesting analysis of the changes in *mizrahi* middle class and its flourishing in recent decades. In particular they speak of the “creolization” of Israeli society because of the mixing of *ashkenazi* and *mizrahi* cultures: if once their conflict was viewed as a war between center and periphery, now we should speak of a war between two strong groups at the center at both a symbolic and everyday level. According to the authors of this article, *haredim* and Israeli Arabs are also interested in joining the battle at the center. Bat-Zion Klorman (“Jewish Emigration from the South Arabian Peninsula: The Broader Context of the 19th and 20th Centuries”) offers new insights into the issue of emigration from Yemen. She highlights the importance of the great powers’ penetration into the Red Sea basin (Great Britain in Aden in 1839, the Ottoman Empire in Yemen in 1872, and Italy in Eritrea and Ethiopia in 1885), which she presents as a major factor in the significant changes that occurred in the area. As a consequence, South Arabia became connected to the global economy and this affected the traditional Yemeni Jewish economy. Jews who lost their livelihood were driven to emigrate to Aden, East Africa, Egypt and India, but also to Palestine, that like Yemen was part of the Ottoman empire. Her analysis shows that until the creation of the State of Israel, the emigration of Jews from Yemen was unrelated to the Zionist movement, challenging the meta-Zionist narrative which makes no distinctions in the narrative of Jewish emigration from Muslim countries. It is also particularly interesting to note what she writes about the politics of the Italian colony of Eritrea, that created one legal status for the Jews from Aden, who as British citizens were considered European, and another for the Jews from Yemen, who were treated as natives. This distinction had a great impact on the lives of the two groups.

Avi Picard (“Colonialism, Nationalism and the Deep Perspective: Insights into Israeli Ethnicity in the Wake of Carnival Fears”) bases his paper on two concepts defined by Yaron Tsur, the colonial order and the national order. He discusses the opposition between the Zionist order, that emphasizes what is common to Jews, and the colonial order, that underlines what divides rather than what unifies. Jessica Marglin (“Jewish Law across the Mediterranean: The Last Will and Testament of Caid Nissim Shemama, 1873-1883”) provides, as usual, a fascinating article, that will be fully developed in her forthcoming book. She writes about a debate around the will of a Jew from Tunis who died in Livorno. Starting from a legal document concerning the validity of the will according Jewish law, she analyses different interpretations of Jewish law from both sides of the Mediterranean. She demonstrates that these different interpretations do not follow the classic divide of *Sephardi* versus *Ashkenazi* or Europe versus Middle East, and offers a more complex outline of a period characterized by a process of modernization. This process sought new paths of interpretation of Jewish law and resisted traditionalist figures on both shores of the Mediterranean. Another very innovative paper is that by David Guedje (“And so our culture and languages spread throughout all the communities: the Hebrew Network in Morocco during the first half of the 20th century”). Guedje uses Niall Ferguson’s, theory of networks in order to trace and illustrate, most convincingly, the construction of a Jewish network in Morocco from the early twentieth century to the mid-1950s.<sup>4</sup> He considers the communities of Fes, Meknes, Sefrou and Oujda as one geographical cluster, and Casablanca, Saleh, Rabat and Ouazzane as another. Starting from the concept of the three sectors proposed by Tsur, namely the European, the native and the one that wishes to become European, he analyzes how clusters of people and institutions distant from each other attempted to establish networks in terms of a linguistic (Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic and French) and cultural affiliation, creating sector clusters. Guedje shows how cultural components reached different Jewish communities in Morocco through cultural agents.

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<sup>4</sup> Niall Ferguson, *The Square and the Tower: Networks and Power, from the Freemasons to Facebook* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

He demonstrates that while at the end of the nineteenth and at the beginning of the twentieth centuries there were only isolated cultural islands in Morocco, it is only with the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century that a significant change occurred in the creation of the cultural clusters which linked Moroccan communities and Jews in the diaspora. In that way a small Jewish world emerged in the form of a network of cultural agents, and social and cultural institutions.

To conclude, this collection contributes to the advancement of studies in this field along the lines proposed by Tsur, opening up new lines of thought and indicating a path for future research. It is hoped that it will be translated into English to allow a wider audience access to such a wealth of perspectives.

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**How to quote this article:**

Emanuela Trevisan Semi, review of *The Long History of the Mizrahim: New Directions in the Study of Jews from Muslim Countries. In tribute to Yaron Tsur*, by Aviad Moreno, Noah Gerber, Esther Meir-Glizenstein, and Ofer Shiff, eds., *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 22, no. 2 (2022), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/13718