

YEMENITES IN ISRAEL - IN SEARCH OF A CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Prologue

Reuben Ahroni, the honoree of this issue of the *Hebrew Annual Review*, had decided some years ago to embark on an extremely difficult and challenging task of consolidating and summarizing into one volume the known aspects of Yemenite Jewish history and culture. His book, *Yemenite Jewry*, touches on many important facets of the Jews of Yemen in their country of origin, as well as in Israel. This volume is still the only compendium on the subject in the English language.

In my first meeting with Reuben Ahroni in 1985, we spoke at length about the settlement and absorption of Yemenite Jews in Eretz Israel, a subject that I had researched for many years. We have since participated together in many academic forums and continue to share this common interest. It is a privilege to offer this article in honor of his sixtieth birthday.

Introduction

Yemenite Jews were not isolated from the Jewish world, despite their geographic and topographic remoteness for hundreds of years. Through the centuries they received all the major news and *halachic* literature and documents, while they developed a distinct folklore due to their unique surroundings.¹ The Yemenites held tenaciously to religious and social observances and tended not to deviate from age-old traditions ingrained in their culture. This exclusive cultural legacy was brought to Jerusalem by the immigrants from Yemen.

1. There are several somewhat different Judeo-Yemenite traditions: Sharab, Sanaa, Haydan, and others. For this article we considered a single generic Yemenite culture because the distinctions were rarely perceived by the non-Yemenites of the Israeli *Yishuv*.

The issue of cultural diversity is not new within the Jewish nation, neither is it only a contemporary issue. In 19th century Palestine, particularly among the Jews of Jerusalem, who constituted more than 50% of the Jewish population in the Holy Land prior to World War I, cultural and ethnic differences were not only a social phenomenon, but were actually institutionalized into communal organizations. The religious organization called the *kolel*, the sole administrative unifying structure, was a unit composed of families whose common denominator was their land of origin and, consequently, their legacy of traditions. *Olim*, new immigrants, came from all corners of the world, and the distinctions between them were multi-faceted, not only in terms of the contrasts between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. Socially, economically, and religiously, the newcomers developed their own communal life, adhering to their ethnic traditions; their institutions varied in size according to the community's strength.² It was into this social matrix that Yemenite Jews arrived at the turn of the 20th century.

The first *aliyah* from Yemen in significant numbers was made in 1882, coinciding with the East European "First *Aliyah*." Additional waves of Yemenite immigrants arrived in Eretz Israel in the early 1890's and 1900's. By the year 1914, fully one-tenth of the Jewish population of Yemen had made *aliyah*, an extraordinary proportion in comparison with other diasporas. On the eve of the First World War, they numbered about 5000 in Eretz Israel. Of these, some 3000 lived in Jerusalem, another 1100 in agricultural settlements (*moshavot*), and about 900 in Jaffa. In 1914, Yemenite Jews were about six percent of the Jewish population in Palestine, while in the Jewish world they were less than one-half of one percent.³

Yemenite Jews in Israel decidedly resisted any change in religious ritual or socio-cultural practices, but they were not the only group of immigrants to remain steadfast in their traditions. Accordingly, Jewish cultural pluralism was part of the pre-Zionist and the pre-State era. Moreover, one's ethnic heritage was recognized as a legitimate expression of Jewish identification in Eretz Israel.

However, a change was imminent. The change - actually a revolution in the concept of cultural pluralism within the Jewish community in Eretz Israel - first appeared as a desirable Zionist ideology and only later was translated

2. For a detailed description of the Jewish community in Jerusalem, see Ben-Aryeh (1984, 1986), Eliav (1988), and Halper (1991).

3. See Druyan (1981).

into deeds, when it became rather coercive. This change was to transform those who stubbornly clung to their ethnic culture into outsiders. Such was the image appended to the Yemenite immigrants in Israel, creating a reputation that scarred them for generations to come.

Traditional Culture Abandoned

The Zionist leaders in Eretz Israel assumed the leadership of the *Yishuv* after World War I. They adopted the ideological stance that had emerged earlier within the movement, namely, that in order to further the renaissance of the Jewish people in its homeland, it was essential to create a new image of the Jew as an individual and of the Jewish society as a whole. In their own words:

We want our hands alone to create our future and forge new life for us in this land. We must not only build a new life in our land, but also - and particularly - a new society. Our fervent desire is to create a new, humane, Jewish society - Jews who are healthy in body and in spirit, cultured people who are worthy of that name.⁴

What form would this singular Jew assume? A Hebrew character? An Israeli character? This new and anti-diaspora Jew would emerge, they thought, only by turning one's back on the past and by abandoning one's familial culture and tradition - indeed, abandoning one's ethnic background. At the same time, the new Jew was asked to free himself or herself of what was then described in Zionist intellectual circles as the "degenerate lifestyle of the Diaspora." Each was expected to become economically productive, secular rather than religious, and to change thereby his quality of life.

A gap then began to yawn between the two groups of immigrants who were slowly moving to Eretz Israel. For one group, *aliyah* was a call of rebellion against the traditional and ethno-religious values which, in their opinion, had constrained the Jews during the long years of Diaspora living. The second group, which also came to Eretz Israel **להבנות ולהבנות בה** "to build it and be built in it" as a nation, saw no contradiction between the new life they had come to create and the cultural tradition and religious commandments that had been the heritage of their forebearers in their countries of origin. Thus the Yemenites were not the only ethnic group who clung to the old ways. Moreover, the line dividing these two groups of immigrants cannot be

4. Kolar (1935, p. 287).

drawn sharply between those coming from Europe and those from Asia and Africa, since there were immigrants from Eastern Europe who were also devoted to their Jewish ritual way of life. There is, however, no doubt that the overwhelming majority of the Jewish immigrants from Moslem lands, and especially all Yemenite Jews, belonged to the traditional camp.

In fact, it rapidly became apparent that the leadership in the country during the post World War I years - the emerging Zionist leadership - belonged almost exclusively to the "revolutionary" group. They believed in secularism, idealized the concept of communal living compared with the family unit, and held as essential the abandonment of the Jewish languages of the Diaspora in favor of renascent Hebrew. In addition, a working-class ideology was the core of their philosophy. All other cultural (ethnic) traditions were seen negatively and as belonging to the "old country."

What happened to those immigration waves that had come from Yemen, and were faced with such demands for a cultural transformation from an elite leadership? Were they able to integrate into the developing national Jewish society or the existing leadership framework? Or did they remain voluntarily or involuntarily on the periphery?⁵

It must be remembered that the leaders of the Jewish community and the Zionist social elite, in the pre-State period and in the early years of the State of Israel, wanted to emphasize national unity and solidarity. The common denominator in their eyes was that all the immigrants were Jews that had come to settle in Eretz Israel and be part of the Zionist Revolution. This elite did not in any way view settlement as an activity that was destined to express the values of the Jewish traditional culture (embodied in religion as well) that had been brought from the immigrants' countries of origin. On the contrary, their aim was to change those values that were so closely tied to religion, tradition, and ethnicity. In the name of the new pioneering and secular values, Zionist ideology demanded that the immigrants make a decisive change in their lifestyle and culture. The ideology of the Zionist/labor movement held that such a change was necessary for social unity and partnership in building the

5. Some of the cultural developments described herein refer also to Sephardim and other Jews from Muslim countries. A discussion on the inclusion of the Jews from Muslim countries in the Zionist dynamics in Eretz Israel can be found in Druyan (1985). While undoubtedly they were mostly the rank and file and not the leaders of the *Yishuv*, they certainly took an active part in the Zionist enterprise, both in aspiration and deed. However, a discrepancy developed between their self-image and the way they were viewed by the rest of society in Palestine and Israel. See also Druyan (1982b, 1986a, 1986b, 1990).

country. The Zionist/labor movement was the dominant group during the British Mandate period and in the early years of the State of Israel, even if it did not always constitute a numerical majority among Eretz Israel Jews, and therefore its leaders' plans for cultural transformation were actually realized.

Thus, the abandonment of the tradition and cultural heritage of one's forebearers for the good of the new and nascent society whose values were to be different was a demand made of *all* immigrants. Some arrivals from European countries and even some Sephardim, however few, were very satisfied to remain separate from the Zionist endeavors in Eretz Israel. Others were prepared to shake off their cultural and ethnic past and opt for a new beginning (because of events and social processes in their countries of origin or, later on, because of the trauma of the Holocaust). However, the immigrants from Yemen, particularly in the first generations after their arrival, were not so disposed. Some remained indifferent to this new Israeli approach, while others resisted it more actively.

The groups that resisted the Zionist acculturation, among them the Yemenites, were involuntarily seen and labeled as outsiders to the process of rebuilding the nation on its own land, even when their economic activities were consistent with Zionist concepts of productivization. On one hand, this negative image as outsiders was constantly reinforced in Zionist historiography that described the pre-1948 era. On the other hand, the Yemenite community never accepted the implication that its members were peripheral to the Zionist revolution. However, its leaders were well aware of being excluded from having a major role in the developing Eretz Israel society. An examination into both the activities and thinking of Yemenite *olim* reveals a more complex description of their self image. The immigrants and some of their descendants never relinquished their right to adhere to all of the facets of their rich ethnic heritage. At the same time, they were deeply hurt for being misunderstood. For many years they remained bitter that their traditionalism was falsely interpreted as a declaration of self-exclusion from the Zionist enterprise.

When could Yemenite Jews extricate themselves from being "outsiders" and enter the national workers' society in Eretz Israel? Only when they totally accepted the cultural elements of the absorbing society, identified with its values and, by doing so, abandoned their parents' traditional identity. Indeed, those who did so merged with the absorbing frameworks and functioned within them according to their abilities and talents, without any regard to their country of origin.

This revolutionary fervor to create both a new Israel and, within it, a new Israeli Jew, was very demanding. The custodians of this vision, and those

who formed the ideological base for the new State of Israel, were unwilling to tolerate under any circumstances cultural pluralism or any expression of ethnicity. Ethnic customs of the "*Golah*"/ the old country were seen as a threat to the "new cultural order" that was being created. Thus it eventually became clear to Yemenite Jews that adherence to their traditions separated them against their will from the developing Israeli national identity.

A New Identity

The reminiscences of Yitzhak Nadav provide documentary evidence of a Yemenite Jew who succeeded in striking roots in the new society and its ideology, but who paid the heavy price of completely leaving his family and previous cultural identity. Nadav, whose parents had come from Yemen to Jerusalem at the end of the 19th Century, was to become one of the early members of *Hashomer*, an elite, Jewish self-defense organization which included some of the future leaders of Israel. He wrote of his transition from the Yemenite *kanis* (traditional one-room religious school) to the fields of Meshah, a workers' village in Lower Galilee:

In my heart, the heart of a young boy, the desire swelled to transform my life - to stand guard, herd sheep, create.... On the other hand, doubt entered my heart...would I have the strength and courage to realize my intentions? Then, miraculously, like an angel proclaiming an encouraging message...members of *Polei Zion* (a pioneering Zionist group) came to Jerusalem to learn the stonemason's craft.... They opened a clubhouse in the Mishkenot neighborhood....

I was very impressed by every small detail. I envied everyone in the group. Yet I often saw the people - Jerusalem Jews - who were prepared to spit in their faces. Many of the Ashkenazi Hasidim called them "hooligans," and they did not receive better treatment from the Yemenites. I did not understand what the word meant. On the other hand, the Arabs called them "Muscovites" and that word I understood, and I longed to be called that myself.

The existence of the group, and the opening of the clubhouse in my neighborhood was a source of great attraction.... I would slip into the club frequently, and leave full of wonder. But what could a small Yemenite boy do, when he still wore his traditional garb and his curled earlocks? I restrained myself and waited for a second miracle that would introduce me into that inner circle, among those strange "Muscovites."

They frequently held lectures on a variety of topics. I was among the regulars who attended, although to tell the truth, I did not understand it all. [They spoke Yiddish or Russian - N.D.] When I entered, I would hide at the end of the room, fearing that someone would pass by outside and notice me.... When the lecturer arrived, I would forget my own world for a short while: every word I heard from his lips would calm

the storm within me. Every new idea would win my heart and find a resting place in my mind.... Each and every day brought with it a change in my life and my habits....

The regular visits to the clubhouse got me into trouble at home. Nevertheless, I was drawn back there ever more strongly. I began to distance myself from my family, and to seek what I was looking for in that group.... In those days, the Yemenites regarded me as a renegade apostate, because even on the Sabbath I devoted myself to the prayers for only a very short time, and I spent most of the day in the company of the *Poalei Zion* group who lived near our home....

At the end of 1906, eight of the members set out to walk from Jerusalem to Risbon le-Zion...and I joined them. It was the first time I had ever been outside of Jerusalem. That day they took me to the barber and cut off my beautifully curled earlocks. When we reached Lifta (at the outskirts of Jerusalem) they removed my Diaspora-style Yemenite garb and dressed me in what they considered pioneer clothing.... I still remember that they laughed all the way. But I was the happiest of them all!

I went to Jaffa.... While still in Jerusalem, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (later, Israel's second President) had given me his address in Jaffa, and when I appeared there, his joy was unbounded. I lived in his room for some time, and he took care of me and helped me. I spent all my spare time in his company.... He also included me in all the meetings and discussions of *Poalei Zion*.... I will never forget Ben-Zvi's warm and friendly attitude toward me both then and thereafter....⁶

Once adhering to the dominant ideology, Yitzhak Nadav was part of the group. His devotion to the ideals of Jewish labor and self-defense is an integral part of the history of the Second *Aliyah* at the turn of the century. Later in his reminiscences, he writes of his experiences with *Ha-Shomer* in Meshah. The rest of his memoirs merge with memoirs of other *Halutzim* (pioneers), without the slightest hint that they refer to a Yemenite Jew who had a very traditional education and upbringing.

It should be remembered that the vast majority of the immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Europe accepted the cultural thesis of the Zionist movement, whether they immigrated before or after the establishment of the State of Israel. Thus, the outsiders became a small minority within the *Yishuv*. However, among the Yemenites there was a hard core, reinforced by trickles of immigration through the decades, that stubbornly maintained its opposition to the Zionist secular acculturation.

6. Nadav's recollections were first published in *Sefer HaShomer* (Nadav, 1957). See there also the memoirs of Yeheskel Nissanov from Georgia in the Caucasus. Other documentation can be found in Druyan (1981, 1982a).

The desire to abandon the Diaspora Jewish character with its traditional culture necessitated the creation of a new Israeli identity with new characteristics. While contemporary Israeli modes of identification included the rejuvenation of Hebrew as a colloquial language and the encouragement of a secular lifestyle, a certain paradox had also evolved. It was clear that even the new Israeli needed some group identification with his traditional roots. With the rejection of recent Diaspora culture, tremendous emphasis was given to the distant Jewish past in the Land of Israel. Both the biblical and archaeological aspects of Israeli culture were given prominence. The Second Temple period was revived as a symbol of nationalism. When the holidays were partially stripped of their religious meaning, agricultural and new chauvinistic meanings were emphasized. Yemenite traditionalists objected to the negation of religious ritual and thus found it difficult to be part of this new cultural identity.

The Yemenites were further alienated from the new Israeli culture that was reflected in school curricula and informal educational programs because their own cultural heritage was completely ignored. It did not escape their attention that historical and literary reference was made to other diaspora cultures, especially from Europe. The reason for the omission was either because Yemenite ethnic culture was too often closely associated with religion, or because very little was actually known about it by the educational leadership and its image consequently seemed inappropriate or undesirable.

Jews from Yemen (and from other Muslim countries) were particularly victimized by this approach. When the new Israeli identity emerged from its intellectual roots, the history of their creative contributions in poetry, prose, and philosophy was completely overlooked. On the other hand, what had always received attention were the folkloric aspects such as food, dance, music, embroidery, etc. These contributions are, of course, significant in their own right, but they represent only the outward trappings of the cultural life of Yemenite Jews and not the inner, deep substance. Cultural diversity in Israel was therefore not recognized beyond some shallow aspects of folklore. Accordingly, a cultural definition transformed the Yemenites (and other "resisting" immigrant groups) into somewhat segregated communities.

A New Generation Discovers Ethnic Culture

The cultural constraints fostered by the Israeli leadership and directed at new immigrants, both in the pre-State era and afterwards, led to unexpected repercussions. From the beginning, there were those who found the demands for cultural transformation to be difficult and undesirable; nonetheless the younger or second generation of immigrants surrendered to this cultural pressure. As a result, throughout decades of *aliyah* a deep gap opened between the Yemenite newcomers and their descendants who grew up in Israel.

In 1949-1950, mass immigrations from Asia and Africa changed both the statistics of Israeli/Jewish society and the cultural visage of the country. Some 50,000 Jews from Yemen joined an almost equal number of their brethren already residing for generations in the Land of Israel. The newcomers had not yet undergone secularization, modernization or any cultural assimilation. They reinforced within the existing Yemenite Jewish community the core of traditions being maintained by a minority of the old guard.

Soon thereafter, in the late 1950's, 1960's, and early 1970's, the "Israeli generation" of the immigrants gradually began to climb the socio-economic ladder and achieve key positions, although they were few in number. Consequently, the process of change also filtered to the cultural and educational realm. Suddenly there came an unanticipated vocal awakening of identification with the traditional Jewish culture (traditional/ethnic, though mostly not religious) that had been lost. This was in part a spontaneous outburst by those who felt a sentimental yearning for ethnic music, for the religious poetry of their fathers, for the cuisine of their families, and for the traditional festivities and folklore of their communities. These second, third and even fourth generation individuals, Israelis in every way, began to ask themselves what price they were willing to pay in exchange for Israeli-Zionist "assimilation" and ignorance of their forefathers' traditions. These were individuals who had been exposed to an Israeli education (anti-Diaspora and anti-ethnic culture in every aspect), were integrated into "Israeli" culture in their daily lifestyle and values, and, in some cases, had reached leadership levels in the society. Yet, at a certain point, they began to wonder about the place of their community's traditions in the general Israeli culture, in the curricula of the schools, and elsewhere.

At that point, children of veteran settlers from Yemen joined forces with newer immigrants who were no longer prepared to accept the second-class label that had been applied to their culture for many years. This attitude gained impetus through association with the contemporary socio-economic

protest movements of the Sephardim. The two were so closely associated that it was often difficult to distinguish between their very different goals. In any case, the new cultural trend was to renew acquaintance with neglected ethnic heritage. This trend was particularly characteristic of, although by no means unique to, children of immigrants from Yemen. They were then ready to cooperate with veteran traditionalists who had never accepted the abandonment of their own heritage as a "just price" for developing a new Israeli cultural identity.

The creation in 1977 of *Ha-Merkaz le-Shiluv Moreshet Yehadut Sepharad ve-ha-Mizrach* (The Center for Integration of Sephardic and Oriental Jewish Culture) is an example of an official effort by the Israeli government to recognize ethnic heritage as a legitimate component of the developing Israeli culture. The Ministry of Education thus provided, via this Center, a measure of remedy to the problems discussed above. The aims of the Center were to promote and promulgate Sephardic and Oriental culture in both formal educational programs and informal channels. As a direct result, more research activity was supported, more books were published, and exhibits, art shows, and folkloric happenings were also encouraged. Yemenite Jews took full advantage of the dynamic programs of the Center in order to acquaint the general Israeli public with their cultural agenda.

In addition to the political response, there was also a response in the sphere of voluntary social organizations. For example, *Ha-agudah le-Tipuach Hevrah ve-Tarbut* (The Association for Society and Culture) has gained extraordinary momentum and popularity within the last two decades. The Association, based in Natanya, sponsors a museum of Yemenite heritage, several university courses on Yemenite Jewry, and a center for research and documentation equipped with computerized archives and publications. In addition, the Association organizes many popular social activities (weekends, concerts, lecture series, etc.) that can be characterized as living laboratories of Yemenite traditions. The pinnacle of its accomplishments was co-sponsorship of The Second International Congress of Yemenite Studies in Princeton in June 1992.⁷

Indeed, many arguments and justifications for reinstatement of the multi-dimensional Jewish ethnic culture in education and ways of life surfaced in the Israeli milieu. However, it was first limited to a narrow view that can

7. The other co-sponsor of the Congress was The Institute for Semitic Studies in Princeton, whose director is Dr. Ephraim Isaac.

be paraphrased as follows: "Let the ethnic communities who desire to cling to some traditions - popular, sophisticated, folkloric, or even literary - do so." But, there was not yet recognition of the Yemenite cultural heritage as a building block in the formation of the total Israeli identity. To counter this inertia, more and more Yemenite Jews began to challenge the implied contradiction between the maintenance of their traditions and being authentic Israeli-Zionists. Moreover, they often chose to express their Israeli cultural identity via their own customs and traditions, eventually without being involuntarily classified as outsiders. This is the current situation. The search for cultural identity may still come full cycle. The new attitude of quasi-tolerance towards Yemenite culture may yet be transformed into acceptance of Yemenite heritage as a worthy component of the traditional/historical roots of an emerging, overall Israeli/Jewish identity.

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