The effects of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue meetings on the self-conception of Sephardic women in Israel in terms of identity and gender

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Abstract

The present thesis deals with the influence of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue meetings on the identification patterns of Sephardic Jewish women. The thesis elaborates extensively on theoretical fields such as post-colonialism and feminism. The project analysis possible cultural links between the Palestinian and the Sephardic Jewish population and questions to what extent these common cultural patterns could constitute an alternative way to reach a genuine Israeli-Palestinian discourse.

Introduction

One of the most dominant remembrances that I have from my first encounter with Palestinian youth, is an evening of the Palestinian cultural event, which took place in Germany, not far from Köln, in 2005. The Palestinians presented their traditional wedding ceremony and the meeting between the families of the groom and the bride. I sat there, and looked at the Palestinian women, who participated in the production, and I was stunned by the behavior of the Palestinians, which was like to see my grandmother, my mother and my ants acting on the stage. A familiar way of acting, which before that fulfilled me with shame outside my home, suddenly appeared as warm and legitimate. These women acted without any inhibitions, presented in the most natural way the customs of their homes. I believe that the cultural traits of the Palestinian piece were perceived by other Israelis in the group entirely differently from my experience. Therefore, there was no place to analyze and to comprehend, not to speak about identifying with, my personal experience.

In the last few years I continued to participate and later to facilitate dialogue meetings between Palestinian and Israeli women. My activity is in feminist organizations and in an independent initiative of a small number of youth from 'both sides'. My experience in those meetings, from the very beginning, raised many questions about women's position in the conflict in general, and about the Sephardic women in Israel in particular; and brought me to a complex approach of the 'fabric of identity' in these meetings. As a Sephardic woman, (Sephardim- Jewish communities in Israel that has roots in the Middle East and North Africa), whose family is originally from Iraq, my place in these meeting is essentially different from the discourse which is conducted today concerning dialogue meetings. Thus I would like to inquire this identity system which in my view, is 'caged' today in definitions that answer only partially to the complicated reality that surrounds us.

Many are wondering on the outcomes of dialogue meetings between Israelis and Palestinians, and on the extent of its influence on the reality. One way to answer to this question is to examine the goals of these meetings which are set by the meetings' coordinators. An examination of such dialogue meetings in 'Neve-Shalom' reveals that the working approach sees the meeting as an encounter between two national identities, which needs to recognize this difference and from here, to reach to a more equal position. This identity politics' approach leads necessarily, to static perception of identities and to categorization which is not correct in my view. The meeting, as it is formed today according to this theory, is problematic because a person's identity is more complex than a model of one static identity.

My research question is: whether Palestinian- Israeli dialogue meetings influence on the cultural and ethnic self-conception of Sephardic women. (In framework of the paper I will deal with this terminology/ definition of Sephardim in the Israeli society as a key concept in understanding and clarifying my question). If so, what are the means and the ways in which dialogue meetings effect the self conception of Sephardic women in Israel in terms of identity and gender, and how can we change it so that this identity would be respected and could be respected in these meetings?

The analysis of the question can bring a complex and interesting look on the nature of Sephardic identities in the meetings with the Palestinian side. In addition, there is a large importance, for my part, for hearing the voice and point of view of Sephardic women, which is not heard usually in the conflict's frame, neither in the academic nor in practical fields. Finally, perhaps it will enable a change in the presumption of the conventional separation in terms of 'national- ethnical' among the two sides, seemingly in conflict. I'm well aware that my project touches upon crucial questions, which refer to a much broader context than the dialogue meetings themselves. Though, I do intend to grant the necessary

analysis of the existing literature on the issue, I do not strive to make an overall analysis of the 'place' of Sephardic Jews in the Palestinian- Israeli conflict. However, my wish is to influence the formulation and the position of Sephardic Jewish identity inside Israel, as well as to conceive it as a key matter in terms of the existence of Israel in the Middle East.

In the framework of my research I will be assisted in academic writing in three main realms: research on dialogue meetings which was developed in Israel since the nineties; and feminist theories and sociology of identities regarding the "Sephardic" Jewish discourse.

The present research was carried out in the framework of Gender Studies for a number of reasons. First and foremost, my academic interest is essentially influenced by my personal experience and therefore the reason of the present work dealing with Sephardic women is, to a certain extant, self-explanatory. Furthermore, I believe that the feminist perspective enables us to work for a radical socio-cultural change, which in my view, is needed very much. The frame of Gender Studies allowed me to provide the feminist theoretical context its deserved position, and a more subjective approach of mine: my personal voice motivated by the desperate call of environment for change.

I would like to thank Prof. Andrea Pető for the caring guidance and assistance in my work in the CEU, as well as for Dr. Meghan Simpson for her comments and her precious input for my project. I would like to express my deep acknowledgment to Prof. Daphna Golan, from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, for her belief in me, and for her academic and social stand in Israel for values human rights and social change.

I would like to thank the women who were interviewed in the framework of this thesis, for their immediate readiness to contribute to my research, and for who they are.

Dialogue Meetings in the framework of the Israeli Palestinian conflict

There are two main approaches to meetings between groups in the framework of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The first approach moves on the range between 'interpersonal relations' workshops to 'conflict resolution' workshops. In workshops of 'interpersonal relations' the focus is largely on the psychological aspects of the experience in the meetings; and the goal of the meetings, according to this approach, is the emphasis on mutual issues between the participants, and 'pushing' the conflicting issues to the margins. On the other hand, in workshops for 'conflict resolution' the assumption is that the conflict between two groups has roots in the reality, and the way for solving it requires searching for ways to bridge between the goals of the two groups; and the emphasis is on seeing the participants as the representatives of their groups, less on a psychological ground.[1]

The second approach in group dynamics in conflict moves on the range from the 'touch approach' to the 'inter-group' meeting. The first approach assumes that the mere fact that we bring people from the various sides of the conflict to sit together and creating interactions between them on a personal basis, apart from their group belonging, reduces hate and stereotypes. The assumption is that conflicts between people derive from the lack of knowledge of each group regarding the other, and personal connections can fix the relationships. On the other hand, the 'inter- group' approach claims that it's exactly the emphasis on the collective identification of the participants and 'inter-group' relations which have to be the ground of a useful meeting. According to this approach, only in the

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[1] Rabach Halabi and Nava Zoneshein "Todaa, Zehut, veitgur hametziut, gishat ha'avoda be'beit hasefer leshalom" [Consciousness, Identity and Challenging the Reality- the work approach in the school for peace"], in *Dialogue between Identities*, ed. Rabach halabi (Tel- Aviv: Ha Kibbutz Ha'Mehuad, 2000), 16.

case of 'inter-group' meetings there is an option for to implantations of the personal experience from the meeting in the reality.[2]

Neve- Shalom (Oasis of peace) is an education institute, which organizes meetings between Palestinians and Israelis, has developed a model which is closer to the second approach. It focuses on the strengthening of 'group-ness' and inter- group interaction. The reason for it is the understanding that the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is a conflict between two people, between two national identities and not between individuals. Therefore the goal of the meeting can be achieved only by sharpening these two identities. The massage, which is transmitted to the participants, is that "the meeting is between two groups, to nations, two identities and it leads to a dialogue between these two identities."[3] One of the basic principles which lead the interventions of the facilitators in the group is that this meeting is between two national identities and they see the group as an essential entity. They explain that "there are many personal interactions between the participants, since people sit in the group and talk. As far as we concern these interactions are out of target, and we treat these interactions as a 'noise'".[4]

The work-approach of 'Breaking-barriers' is similar to that of Neve- Shalom, which sees the meeting as an encounter between two national identities that need to recognize this difference and from here, to reach a more balanced position.

This approach of identity politics leads necessarily to a static perception of identities and to a categorization which is not correct in my view. The meeting, as it is formed today, according to this theory, is problematic because a person's identity is more complex than a model based on one static identity. In the framework of the conclusions of the present project I would like to suggest a slightly alternative attitude which would enable the respect of additional identification patterns, belonging to the same participants.

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[2] *Ibid*, 17
[3] *Ibid,* 19
[4] *Ibid,* 20

The seminar 'Breaking barriers'

'Breaking Barriers' is an independent initiative which is active from the year of 2001. Keren, a young Israeli woman from Tel-Aviv, and Rami, a young Palestinian from Jerusalem, established it. Meeting in the framework of an international delegation they came to the idea of this initiative, whose goal is to provide to youth from both sides an opportunity to meet and to hear the one, which so far, was a stranger and even an enemy for them.

Today, nine years later, the initiative takes place as a result of the cooperation of youth participating in a mutual team. Until now, two seminars took place in Germany every summer, and some 600 people from all around Israel and the West Bank have participated in them.

Since 2005 I'm part of the facilitators and the organizers of the seminars of "Breaking Barriers".

'Breaking Barriers' is not an NGO or a official organization. At the moment it gets its economic support from the German organization "The Committee for Basic Rights and Democracy".[5] The committee focuses on work with children from the Balkans, and has decided to support 'Breaking Barriers" out of its desire to be more involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is important to mention, that the members of the committee do not take an active part in the workshops or in the facilitation of the seminar itself.

In the brochure of the seminar, which is given to the future participant, is explained that the goal of the seminar is to enable Israeli and Palestinian youth to meet, in a distant environment from the region of the conflict and to enable an open discussion about issues which "occupied us and about the reality we live in". This is from the basis point that says

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[5] The Committee for Basic Rights and Democracy is a Non- Governmental Organization which is supported by private donors from Germany and from all over Europe to whose heart the issue of human rights is close. The address of its website is: www.grundrechtekomitee.de

that in this reality there is hardly a possibility to a meeting of this kind, unless it is part of the power game between the two sides. When such a meeting takes place in Israel or in Palestine, such a meeting does not allow open and sincere communication. The goal is to give an opportunity to listen and to talk. The discussions touch directly upon the issue of the "conflict" since we believe that avoiding or bypassing the core issues will be not be honest and will not fit the emotions of the participants and the places that they are coming from. The initiative's approach is that till we do not meet the "other side" face to face and we do not have the opportunity to know another side of the truth, we will live in a partial picture only. If out of the seminar friendships are created its good but this is not the main goal.

The seminar is designed to young women and men, Palestinians and Israelis from all Israel, the West bank and East Jerusalem in their twenties, who are not necessarily involved in formal political frameworks and they have, naturally, the readiness to meet.

The work in the seminar is carried out in mixed groups of fourteen or sixteen women and men, Palestinians and Israelis, half and half. Each group has two facilitators: one Palestinian and one Israeli.

The group meet before the seminar separately (Palestinians and Israelis alone) for acquaintance and to discuss about expectations, fears and wishes from the meeting with 'the other side'

Regarding the language of the seminar it is important to mention that the participants have the freedom to choose the language they want to speak or the language that is more comfortable from them to use. It is common that during the workshops the participants use not only English but Arabic and Hebrew as well. In addition, there is translation since most of the Israelis and the Palestinians don't speak the others' language.

The structure of the seminar:

The seminar is two weeks long and it has three main parts. The first part takes place in the first three days and in its framework there is an 'ice breaking' activity and activities of personal acquaintance. This is a pretty depth acquaintance between the participants inside the group about the reality in Palestine and in Israel, as well as a place to tell personal and family stories. During this part there is also a place for expressing expectations of most of the group, both Palestinians and Israelis. From previous years one can observe that the participants wish the same things: to get to know each other, to create a sincere dialogue and to have some rest from the 'daily life'. The Palestinians explained that they wanted two weeks without check- points, for example, and the Israelis wanted vacation from the stress back at home.

The second part, the next three days, deals with the collective identity and historical narrative of the Palestinians and the Israelis. This part includes a discussion around 1948 as a central event in the history of the two nations.

In the third part the various aspects and issues which constitute the conflict, occupation etc., in the present and in the past are discussed.

Throughout the entire seminar uni-national meetings take place as well, which is also a frame for working and processing the issues which are brought up in the workshops but in a uni-national environment.

In addition, during the seminar, each group, the Palestinian and the Israeli, organizes a cultural evening which goal is to present the other side its own culture.

Methodological Chapter

In my research I have chosen the qualitative method and in this framework, my theoretical paradigm is the feminist paradigm. The critical form of this paradigm allows dealing with social issues as gender, race, class, emotions and life experiences as political ones.[6] As the researcher, Shulamit Reinhart emphasizes, the feminist paradigm enables "doing research with people rather than on them; having women do research; doing research in ways that empower people; valuing experiential knowledge; honoring female intelligence; and seeking the causes of oppression"[7]

I assisted by the analytical case study method and I will focus on interviews of 10 women with Sephardic ancestry. The analysis of descriptive and interpretive thick description is the analytical background which allows the analysis of the lived experience of the interviewees.[8]

The methodological tool that I'm going to use is in-depth interviews, which have a significant advantage since they enable a relatively equal relationship between the researcher and the interviewee. In the case of this tool the power to define what is relevant and what is not, is not totally placed in the researcher's hand, as frequently happens in the case of the quantitative method.[9] In the case of interviews there is a similar concern, but in can be solved by a free and less constructed way of the interview.

The interviewees are women who participated in dialogue meetings organized by "Breaking Barriers"- an initiative of Israeli and Palestinian youth- in Germany in the past

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[6] Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, "Introduction. Entering the Field of Qualitative Research", in *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials,* ed. Norman Denzin K. and Lincoln Yvonna S. (London: Sage, 2003), 12-14.

[7] Shulamit Reinharz, "The Principle of Feminist Research, a Matter of Debate," in*, Disciplining Feminism. From Social Activism to Academic Discourse*, ed. Ellen Messer- Davidow (Duke University, 2002), 426.

[8] Norman K. Denzin*, Interpretative Interactionism* (London: Sage, 2001), 113-114.

[9] Andrea Fontana, and James H. Frey, "Interviewing, The Art of Science" ", in *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials,* ed. Norman Denzin K. and Lincoln Yvonna S. (London: Sage, 2003), 63-66.

three years. Therefore we have previous acquaintance since I've facilitated these meetings. The one-hour long interviews took place in Israel.

Since I would like to understand the effect of the meetings with the Palestinians on their self- conception I prefer to use a semi structure interview in order to focus on the strong and meaningful influence of the seminar on their self identifications specifically- for the purpose of the present thesis general impressions about the seminar are not relevant. The interview plan is as follows:

The questions:

1. Could you tell generally about yourself?

2. Could and point of view you tell about your experience in the dialogue meeting that you participated in?

3. Tell about your relation with the participants of the Israeli group. Did you have disagreements?

4. Tell about your relation with the participants of the Palestinian group.

5. Describe your feeling during the cultural evening of the Israeli group.

6.   Describe your feeling during the cultural evening of the Israeli group

Concerning ethical dilemmas - Since this issue is close to me, perhaps a problem of bias as an interviewer might occur; in the wording of questions and the language that I use. This bias means also that specific opinions would be 'more' welcome than others, and the interviewees won't answer the questions during the interview only according to the way they think and believe but would also add or maybe even change their answers in order that it will suit to my interest, to my research question. One possible way to cope with these difficulties, is first to explain the concept of the research and in addition to that, to clarify that the answers to the research question are not necessarily valued as positive or

negative and therefore they do not have to feel in any sense obligated to answer the questions that it would fit the research question. Finally to explain, that above all it is meaningful to me, as researcher, to understand how they see the reality through their own lens, and it is important to me to understand actually their subjective understanding of the situation. Based on interviews with Sephardic women I will be able to strengthen my claim that in dialogue meetings the ethnical identity becomes stronger, and it is a move which can lead to a different and meaningful discourse and to and alternative understanding of the conflict and its probable solution.

Sample

The women who were interviewed for the present paper were participants in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue meetings in the framework of the initiation "Breaking Barriers" in the last three years 2006- 2008. They were chosen to take part in these seminars by the organizers of the seminar through a classification process. It is important to explain here that a directed effort has been done by the organizers, especially myself, to look for Sephardic women for the seminars. I've turned to various NGOs who work with a Sephardic community in Sderot, for instance. This effort was highly necessary since in the above period of time only 14 Sephardic women took part in the seminars (out of 160 Israelis). The absence of these women from the seminars can be understood, first, as a result of the means, by which the publication about the existence of the seminars is made. It is mainly published through the social net of previous participants and the connection of leftist NGOs in Israel, which Sephardic women, generally, are not exposed to. Second, the basic social distance of this kind of meeting from the Sephardic community leaded to this limited amount of Sephardic participants in the seminars.

 In terms of their biographical details: all of the ten women are between the ages of twenty to thirty years old. They live in Israel and their parents are from Sephardic ancestry. It is important to mention that for all of them this was their first time meeting Palestinians in this kind of frame and participating in a dialogue meeting of this kind. They did not have any political awareness on the Sephardic critical discourse. Their political interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was, and is to a decisive extent till today, congruent with the political views of the socio-cultural context they arrive from. Meaning, that there voting patterns are traditional right wing orientation, an

orientation which, in my view, is entirely the result of an orientalist image construction of the Ashkenazi elite. This fact enhances the significance of the cultural experience of these women during the meetings, which were explicitly contradicting to their political views.

Alternative Understandings of the Feminist Discourse

Contemporary feminist scholars criticize the model of 'identity politics', based on the examination of its role in the social- political and economic dynamics in the feminist movements particularly, and in societies generally. Nira Yuval- Davis in her book "Gender and Nation", stresses on this difficulty. She explains that the feminist model of 'consciousness- raising' did not take into account various socio-cultural traits and adopted a homogenous understanding of feminine identity:

"Women's individual identities have become equate with women's collective identity, whereas differences, rather than being acknowledged, have been interpreted by those holding the hegemonic power within the movement as mainly reflections of different stages of raised consciousness".[10] Yuval- Davis clarifies that this erroneous understanding discussed above was recognized in women's movements in the last few years. However the answer which has been found focuses on essential differences as race and class: black and white women, middle class and lower class women. She explains that 'identity politics' ossifies identities.[11]

Iris Marion Young explains that all these criticisms are misleading in their analysis by interpreting group differences as part of an 'identity politics' discourse. Young argues that this mistaken understanding is based on the logic of substance in defining groups. In this frame a group is understood as "a set of essential attributes that constitute its identity as a group".[12] Meaning, that in order to identify a group of Latinos or gay, for instance, we need to find specific essential attributes in all its members. Young counts the problems of this understanding and stresses on the main one, which according to her, is the tendency

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[10] Nira Yuval- Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997),119.
[11] *Ibid,* ibid.
[12] *Ibid*, 87.

of normalizing some of the group members' experiences and perspectives, and in the same time marginalizing or silencing others'.[13] Similar arguments are claimed by Judith Buttler as well. In addition to that, affixing of the group identity leads to denial of similarities of the group's members with other members which are not considered as part of their group and also to the denial of differentiations within the group.[14]

If so, Young argues that the way to understand and to preserve a definition of social group differentiation 'without fixing it', is through a relational logic rather than a substantive logic. The key form of social difference, from Young's part, is structural difference. Structures in the society place people unequally in practices of power, resource distribution or hegemonic discourse, and as a result- structural social groups are created, and these are, in fact as follows. "Collection(s) of persons who (are) similarly positioned in interactive and institutional relations that condition their opportunities and life prospect. This conditioning occurs because of the way that actions and interactions conditioning that position in one situation reinforce the rules and recourses available for other actions and interactions involving people in structural positions".[15] Consequently, different positions in social structures lead to different experiences and perception on the social relationships.

As an alternative to the discourse in the framework of "identity politics" Yuval-Davis suggests to adopt "transversal politics". The conceptual frame of "transversal politics", according to Yuval-Davis, is a suitable alternative to that of "identity politics", employing "unfinished" identity concepts instead of fixed notions of identification.[16] Three main appreciations stand in the basis of this politics. First, it is the understanding of feminist epistemology of 'standpoint', which enforces to acknowledge that different positioning

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[13] *Ibid*, 89.
[14] I*bid, ibid.*
[15] *Ibid,* 97
[16]Nira Yuval- Davis*, Gender and Nation* (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 125-130

leads to different knowledge, hence, in order to create a sincere dialogue there is a need for participants from genuinely different positionings.[17] The importance of this approach is in terms of the creation of knowledge through dialogue between groups. As Patricia Hill- Collins stresses: "Each group speaks from its own standpoint and shares its own partial, situated knowledge. But because each group perceives its own truth as partial, its knowledge is 'unfinished' (to differentiate from invalid)"[18]. The second idea of transversal politics is the accepting of the principle of differences without the existence of hierarchy. There should be a respect for the varied locations which the members of the groups are coming from. The third concept refers to the understanding of positioning and identity inside the group as Yuval- Davis explains: "People who identify themselves as belonging to the same collectivity or category can be positioned very differently in relation to a whole range of social divisions (e.g. class, gender, ability, sexuality, stage in the life cycle etc). At the same time, people with similar positioning, and/or identity, can have very different social and political values."[19] This concept contributes to the acceptance of different categories which are relevant to different members of the group, and to the rejection of the notion of homogeneousness of the group which is influenced by the hegemonic discourse.[20]

In developing this kind of politics, Yuval- Davis suggests a major change in the ways that struggles against oppression and discrimination and conflict resolutions could be conducted today. In practice, this politics enables the option of finding common values which can be transversely "differential positionings and identities".[21] In this way there are various alternatives for the creation of coalitions inside the society.

[17]Nira Yuval- Davis, "What is 'Transversal Politics'?," *Sounding issue* 12 (summer 1999): 94-95.
[18] Nira Yuval- Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 129
[19] Nira Yuval- Davis, "What is 'Transversal Politics'?", 95.
[20] Nira Yuval- Davis, *Gender and Nation*, 127.
[21] *Ibid*, 131.

Considering the above discussed, Yuval- Davis stresses on the possibility that transversal politics can not be implemented when there are contradictory interests between people. However "when solidarity is possible, it is important that it is based on transversalist principles, so as not to fall into the pitfalls of 'identity politics' of the feminist, nationalist or anti- racist kinds".[22]

Yuval- Davis deals with dialogue meetings between women and challenges the traditional identity politics. It is highly relevant for the discussion on the encounter of Sephardic women with their Palestinian counterpart on two grounds. First, the fact that in the case of the Israeli group of women, there are various dimensions inside the group in terms of class, ethnic identitification, and gender. I refer here, mainly, to the acknowledgement and the respect of Sephardic identity inside the Israeli Jewish one. Second, the possibility of inter-ethnic common cultural values, not necessarily political, which could not feasible according to the traditional schemes of identity politics. Yuval-Davis suggests forming political coalitions on the basis of common values, indeed, I believe that this suggestion is extremely important for my thesis, and I will elaborate on in the final stages of this paper. A specific case of 'post-traditional' identity politics is presented by Gloria Anzaldua, in her book, "Borderlands/ La Frontera",[23] where the author raises the issue of the feminine and hybrid identity, as well as its political consequences. In order to stress on this issue I will present the main principles of the argument of Anzaldua. I will try to understand the actual and a possible socio-political identity of Sephardic Jews in Israel on the theoretical basis of the political premises suggested by the three scholars.

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[22] *Ibid, ibid.*
[23] Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera.*(1987), 1017-1030

Gloria Anzaldua and a new understanding of the concept of 'borderlands'

Anzaldua opens the discussion with the assumption that culture is constructed by men, in fact "Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them".[24] Based on this assumption she continues with her analysis which aims to diagnose the problems of this situation and tries to provide an alternative to it.

Anzaldua focuses on women who live in the borderlands, and she explains that they feel in an unstable and unsecured place in their own culture and in the dominant culture of course. Anzaldua demonstrates her claim through the situation of women of color, who suffer from men in their own as well as in other cultures. The problem that Anzaldua points out is the affixed place which is set for women and their difficulty to take action since "(their) cultures take away (their) ability to act- shackle (them) in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, (they) can't move forward, can't move backwards. That writhing serpent movement, the very movement of life, swifter than lightning, frozen".[25]

She goes against the affixing of identities which is made in this conceptual frame and explains that persons have more than one identity and the existence of the above rigid categorization is problematic. The various definitions in a variety of instances of Anzaldua's own ethnic group the Chicanos demonstrates the point. As a linguistic group the ethnic collectivity defines itself Spanish. In a Western social environment the Chicanos call themselves Hispanic, or Spanish- American or Latin American or Latin. An additional option, in the American context, is the definition Mexican- American, meaning that they are not Mexican and they are not American either- they are "a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness".[26] Anzaldua points out the dynamics of identity which leads also to a new understanding of the borderlands. This new understanding describes borderlands not only as a term which depicts a separation

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[24]*Ibid*, 1018
[25]*Ibid*, 1021.
[26] *Ibid,*1029.

line between states, between cultures, but as a space in which new identities and different definitions to culture and belonging have emerged.

In this sense her writing suggests a new perspective on identity as a multifaceted and multi-belonging one; and a different way to understand identity and the location of groups inside the dominant society and the reference to it.

The Sephardic Identity- Post- colonial thought

The following theoretical chapter is important in terms of situating Sephardic Jews in the context of the Zionist project and vis-à-vis the "Palestinian population". The perception of the Mizrahi Jews of the Palestinians cannot be understood without taking into consideration the historical development of the Zionist idea and its relationship to Arab populations in general and to the Jewish population in Arab countries in particular.

Sephardim- A discursive category

In is important to stress on the various terms 'Sephardim', 'Mizrahim' (Eastern Jews), etc., which are used in the present thesis and in the Israeli political discourse, and to understand their political connotations, and to consider political positions connected to them respectively. Chronologically, immigrant Jewish communities from countries in North Africa and the Middle East were referred from the very (European) beginnings of the Zionist movement as Jews with an ancestry from Arab/Muslim countries. The Jews residing in Arab countries were not the primal target population of the Zionist movement, out of racial considerations the immigration of Jews from these territories to Palestine was not considered as potential contributors to the Zionist project. It also shows, that the situation of Jews in Arab countries, in general, did not warn the Central European theoreticians of Zionism to an immediate action as in the case of Eastern European Jews. The dominant terminology from the 1950s on, in the Israeli State, was Sephardic, based on the basic differentiation between Jews from a European descent Ashkenazi – and between Jews whose origins could be traced back to Spain, before the 1492 expulsion of the Jewish population from the Iberian Peninsula. The word Sepharad in Hebrew refers to, originally, the geographical unit of Spain. (Of course, this term could not stand for, if

taken literally, Jewish communities from Middle Eastern countries or Rome for example, which communities were not descendents of the 1492 expulsion.)[27]

In the 1990s a alternative category, 'Mizrahim' – meaning in Hebrew, literally: Eastern – was introduced by radical Israeli non-Ashkenazi theoreticians, as an act of protest, provocation in order to substitute the above term of "Sephardic" used by the traditionally Ashkenazi Zionist elite- and as a consequence also by the 'Sephardic' Jews themselves.[28]

Till recently, the terms 'Sephardic' and 'Mizrahi' were used interchangingly by Jews in Israel. The term 'Mizrahi' did not achieve its goal in constituting a challenging term in the eyes of the establishment. Furthermore, the origins of the term 'Mizrahi' itself became blurred, and it became associated with the Ashkenazi establishment as a derogatory term. In-between terms as 'Mediterranean', though referring mainly to the cultural contribution of Jews, commenced to be used, but the genuinely radical terminology appeared only at the beginning of 2000s: "Arab-Jews". This term indeed alludes to the common socio-cultural heritage of Jews from Arab countries with the societies they dwelled in the midst of. The radical nature of the term derives from the fundamental incongruence with the Zionist narrative of a homogeneous Jewish society, exactly, in the face of its Arab surroundings.[29]

I'd like to emphasize that Jews from non-Ashkenazi ancestry in Israel today, will identify themselves as, either 'Sephardic' or 'Mizrahi' Jews. The term 'Arab Jew', though I personally might agree with its message and its political, sociological and historical rightness, is considered deeply radical in the Israeli context, if at all known outside academic institutions, for sure not accepted but by a tiny fraction of the Jewish academic

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[27] Shlomo Svirski, *Lo Nechshalim Ela Menuchalim: Mizrahim ve Ashkenazim Be Israel* [Not faltering but weakened: Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in Israel], (Haifa: Mahbarot LeMehkar ve Bikoret, 1981), 18-20

[28] Ella Shohat, "The invention of the Mizrahim." *Journal of Palestine* 29, No.1, University of California Press, (1999): 13-14

[29] Hanan Hever and Yehuda Shinhav, "Hayhudim-aravim, gilgulo shel munach" [The Jewish –Arabs, Metamorphosis of a term], *Peamim* 118, (2009): 5-7.

establishment. Therefore, in the framework of this paper, I use the terms 'Sephardic', 'Mizrahi' and 'Arab-Jew' as viable equal alternatives. I believe that it is not the semiotic aspects, meaning which term I adopt, especially since there is no unequivocal clarification of the terms, rather the overall understanding of non-Ashkenazi Jewish reality that counts. This understanding of mine, is indeed justified by the usage of, seemingly, prerogative terms by non-Ashkenazi Jews themselves.

Understanding the cultural-political position in Israel and Palestine trough the lens of post- colonialist

In order to discuss the figure of the 'other' in the frame of the Israeli society, it is necessary to begin to recall the historic narrative of the establishment of the Zionist society and to follow the creation of its discourse. According to the Israeli sociologist Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, transformation in the discourse about Jews can be marked out back to the early modern period, subsequent the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the genesis of the Marranos. Raz- Krakotzkin explains as follows:

 "it was then that the Jewish- Muslim link, which had been first made earlier in the Middle Ages, was cast terms of an ethnic and a religious difference. The discourse generated by the question of the Marranos who maintained or were perceived to maintain Jewish qualities despite conversion to Christianity, marked the transition from theological discourse and Christian- Jewish disputation to discourse based on notions of ethnicity, race and culture".[30]

The rise of the Enlightenment and the age of modern nationalism brought about a debate over the civil status of the Jews in the newly formatted European nation-states. Its conceptual basis, according to Raz-Krakotzkin, was non other than the Orientalistic discourse. The negative characteristic of the Jews were taken from the orientalistic other.

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[30] Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "The Zionist Return to the West and the Mizrahi Jewish Prespective," in *Orientalism and the Jews*, ed. Ivan Davidson Klamar and Derek J. Penslar (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2005), 162.

The Jews in turn, strived to get rid of these orientalistic characteristics and become western as their host societies demanded from them.[31]

This background helps to understand the role of orientalism in the shaping of the Zionist discourse, as a significant characteristic of the nationalization and the, seemingly, secularization of the Jewish discourse. It is likely to see an orientalist dimension in Zionist thinking and in its practices. Zionism elaborated various attitudes towards the Orient and towards the Arabs in particular, from romantic aspiration to an overall denial. Based on Edward Said's[32] theory about the construction of the European subject in contrast with the oriental one, Raz-Krakotzkin asserts that the orientalistic concepts served to create the figure of the "new Jew", whom the Zionists hoped to define as a new European, and not an oriental.[33]

Based on this orientalist aspect in the frame of Zionist ideology another division was summoned: between Jews whom had roots in Europe and Jews whom had roots in the Middle East and North Africa. The descendents of non-European Jewish communities became known in the Israeli society as "Mizrahim": 'Eastern'.[34] (On the significance and on the development of the term "Mizrahi" I intend to elaborate further, later in the present chapter.) Since most of the Mizrahim identified themselves as Jews but not in contrast with Arab culture, based on the understanding, that they speak Arabic in its different dialects, and feel part of this culture, it created difficulty in the implementation of the Zionist project. One clear explanation for this difficulty that Raz-Krakotzkin points out is that the identity of 'eastern' Jews contradicts the image of the 'new Jew', the European

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[31] *Ibid,* 163-165.
[32] Edward. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books,1979)

[33] *Ibid,*167.
[34] Aziza Khazzoom, "The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel," *American Sociology Review* 68, No. 4 (2003): 482-483.

Jew.[35] Second, I believe that the Zionist elite was afraid from a connection between the Palestinians and the Middle eastern Jews on a cultural basis, a connection that could be a challenge to the existence of a homogeneous Israeli culture.

The Zionists therefore constructed the image of the "other" in the Israeli society through various practices, by the same means, which Michel Foucault[36] and Edward Said pointed out in their critic on the bourgeois and on the colonialist discourse, respectively. The connection of Foucault's theory, about the position of the science of medicine in the bourgeois society, could seem somewhat odd in the context of Zionism. But taking as example Zionist practices from the beginning of the 1950s might help us to see it in a different way. Middle Eastern and North African Jews were medically checked, upon their arrival the State of Israel, and treated as a community who carries with her different diseases. For instance, most of the children of this community were considered as carriers of the dermatitis of 'tinea capitis' and for that reason they got a rigid and exaggerate treatment.[37] (It is important to mention that this disease was common in North Africa that time, and this community took care of it through folk remedy, which was not respected and accepted in this orientalistic, pseudo-scientific atmosphere.)

Another example of exploiting the pretext of science and experts was in the Israeli education system. Karl Frankenstein, who was born in Germany and studied philosophy and psychology in Berlin University came to Palestine in 1935, worked as an educator in the Israeli education system. He argued in discussions on children of oriental Jews, that they suffered from a "secondary retardation", but their situation is not "absolute" and it is

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[35] Amnon, Raz-Krakotzkin, 172-173.

[36] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* Vol. I, (New York: Random House, 1978), Part 2, 3

[37] Relly Sa'ar, "Adding insult to injury", in *Haaretz,* 14.11.2006 http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/features/adding-insult-to-injury-1.205174

the result of oriental culture, which caused their stagnation. He continued this analysis by describing their "primitive mentality" and compared it to "the primitive expression of children, the retarded and the mentally disturbed".[38] Another educator who contributed to this discussion was Reuven Feurstein who got his PhD in psychology from Geneva University. Referring to the question whether there is a possibility to integrate these children to the "universal", "modern", "progressive" and "democratic" Israeli education, he claimed that "the north- African should not necessarily remain a north- African".[39] It is important to mention that these were the dominant assumptions in the Israeli education system since the 1950's.

Indeed, the figure of the non-European Jew fulfilled a similar task in the nation and culture building process in Israel in the 1950's as the figure of the non-European who served as the 'Other' in the construction of figure of the European. As Theodor Herzl, the visionary of the Zionist state described: "the transformation of the exilic Jews through his emigration to Palestine: (is like a) process of regeneration that will lead ultimately, to the creation of a Europe in the Middle East."[40]

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[38] Amnon, Raz-Krakotzkin, 174

[39] *Ibid, ibid*
[40] *Ibid*, 170

Findings

In the present chapter I intend to argue that there are features of common identification, its nature is to be defined, ethnic, cultural, etc., for Palestinian and Israeli Sephardic women. This identification is based on common cultural patterns which are discernable through elements of meta-communication, habits, tradition, musical orientation, culinary customs, etc. I have in mind to focus on the Israeli side; a future research on the Palestinian side would be inspiring and important as well. After dealing with some essential conceptualization around Israeli-Sephardic identity and its history, I would like to advance to the analysis of the experience in the dialogue meetings themselves. I intend to focus on the cultural aspects of the interaction, aspects whose political connotations are not necessarily realized, though they are deeply connected to the conflict. (On the political context of the cultural mutuality between Sephardic Jews and Palestinians I will elaborate in the following theoretical background, as well as in the conclusions to the present paper.) I would like to organize the analysis of the evidence from the seminars around three main topics. First, the issue of the cultural similarity between Sephardic Jews and Palestinians. Second, the denial of any sort of identification with the Arabic cultural sphere by the Israeli group. Third, the political division of right and left between the participants as a consequence of the historical development.

The identity of Sephardic Jews in Israel, hybrid identities in a post-colonialist setting
In the framework of Eurocentric / Orientalistic approaches which are the hegemonic ones in the Israeli cultural scene, the vital demand from the Sephardic community was to eliminate every Arab/ Eastern element of its identity mosaic. This lead to a wide range of reactions in this community: denial, repression or explicit rejection of their ways of life

according to which they used to live in their native Arab countries. I believe that under these conditions it was and still is extremely hard for a Sephardic Jewish woman to participate in political activities with her genuine self-identification- in its various possible embodiments.

In my understanding, Gloria Anzaldua's[41] interpretation can be very useful as a basic guideline to the necessary social (self)-understanding of Sephardic women. The socio-cultural position occupied by these women is indeed elementary in perceiving the Israeli reality in the right way. The interpretation of Sephardic Jewish identity as a 'borderland-identity' is highly appropriate. The cultural legacy of the Sephardic Jews in Israel, and in any other social context, could not be conceived otherwise. The identity of Arab Jews is inherently hybrid, being an amalgamation of a Jewish core element and a not less essential aspect of linguistic, mental and social identification with the Muslim society. This hybrid identity is at a genuine contradiction with the fixed, rigid and homogenous identity myth the Zionist national movement propagated from its very beginning. The origins of modern Jewish nationalism in the European national ideologies explain the strife for a universal but uniform membership in the Jewish national body; and does not leave space for any discrepancy from the classic French model. Sephardic Jews live exactly 'in a borderland' situation, portrayed by Anzaldua, experiencing an essentially different vision of self-identification from that of Jews with European origins in Israel

The interviews:

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[41] Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera*.(1987), 1017-1030

In this part I present the findings from the in-depth interviews that I've conducted with Sephardic women who'd participated in dialogue meetings organized by "Breaking Barriers" in the past four years. For all the women it was the first participation in a meeting of this kind.

The interviewees were asked to explain about the meaningful events, moments that they experienced during the meetings with Palestinian women. Later, they were asked about their relation with the Israeli group, and their relation with the Israeli participants. Then I have asked them to relate specifically to the cultural evenings[42] and to describe how they felt during the Palestinian's cultural presentation and during the Israeli's cultural evening. I have chosen these events since I thought that these were critical instances in which political/ideological stances did not necessarily interfere with the 'cultural' identification of the participants. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew.[43]

<u>The feeling of cultural resemblance between Sephardic Jews and the Palestinians</u>

The cultural similarity was apparent between Mizrahi Jews and the Palestinians in many instances of the meetings. These instances were explicit during the cultural evening of the Palestinians, but it was not an exclusive example. The matter of this cultural likeness is intriguing, especially, because its manifestations are far from being constrained to specific cultural events, rather it is an all-embracing experience.

The account of Yifat Toledo confirms the instinctual cultural linkage despite the obvious political contradictions:

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[42] Described above.
[43] The translations to English were made by myself. In addition, I would like to mention that the names of the participants are fictional, but they were chosen still as to represent their cultural background.

> The opening shock was in the first workshop, the thing that they were most interested in was to know if we had been in Check-Points. Later on, the acquaintance grew to be more personal- not only between Israelis and Palestinians - we knew to separate between the national attacks in the workshops and the personal matters. For example, when we had an argument in the workshop and we disagreed and hard things were said by them, I haven't felt that I was attacked personally. It was mutual, they also felt the same.
>
> It started to a great extent from the songs, the music, it was a kind of a common denominator that we succeeded to find and it was basically mine and Eliran's (a Sephardic man) connection with them.

The following accounts describe a cultural mutuality, which the Sephardic Jewish participants were not aware of before the seminar**.** They referred to the cultural evening of the Palestinians in a highly sympathetic tone, recognizing numerous patterns of behaviour and culture which they were familiar with from their very homes. It is important to emphasize that these cultural patterns were frequently ashamed of in the Israeli public space- especially children used to, and sometimes even today, be embarrassed because the mentioning of Sephardic names in their family trees, or bringing traditional Sephardic meals to the school. Beyond the Sephardic way of pronouncing Hebrew, which is much closer to the Arabic linguistic patterns than that of Ashkenazi Jews – like the usage of guttural letters etc. – the behavior and the social outlook of Sephardic Jews – speaking in a theoretical level, though very much discernable on the practical level as well - is radically different from the parallel European patterns. The basis of the social understanding of Sephardic Jews is not the nuclear family, seen as more of a characteristic of the European seen, rather a broader family scene. In addition to that, we might argue that Sephardic Jewish families are less prone to follow, speaking again in

largely theoretical terms, a pattern of the 'alienated bourgeois' society, which is more of a western type of social organization, very much typical of the Ashkenazi population of Israel. (The previous differentiation is quite dichotomist for sure, nevertheless it does reflects significant differences amongst the different populations of Israeli Jews. In the same vain, one might argue, that the basic cultural attitude and formal cultural expressions of Sephardic Jews bear essential similarities to the Middle Eastern socio-cultural context. Musical forms, rhythms and language of Sephardic Jews is a result of a cultural co-constitution of Sephardic Jewish population and the North African and Middle Eastern non-Jewish populations they lived in the midst of. The striking familiarity of cultural and behavioral patterns that the Sephardic participants saw in the meetings from the Palestinian side, were reminding them simply of their family scenes, as the following quotes say below:

> it was something that you know from home, in terms of culture: the songs,
>
> the music, the dancing". (Sharon Swisa)

> It was not that far from us, not that different from ours. (Irit Iben Ezra)

> they presented their customs, for example the Henna ceremony, they made
>
> exactly like a family celebration and it was lovely. We felt a family. It really
>
> connected us. (Keren Alfasi)

A few interviewees pointed out even, that the meeting with the Palestinians was a decisive event for them, bringing about a reconnection with their familiar traditions which they did not acknowledge before. It might be the subject of a future research what was the legitimizing factor, for embracing Mizrahi culture, in the context of the meetings. I would

argue, that the mere possibility that these cultural patterns could be adopted by an entire society – the Palestinian one – and not be considered solely in negative terms – as in the case of the Israeli society – was such the decisive influence in this sense. The following three experiences demonstrate the warm familiar feelings that the encounter with the Palestinians arose in the heart of the Sephardic Jews. The cultural event especially, touched upon family occasions, which, in the case of Sephardic Jews in particular, are extremely significant in the life of an individual. These occasions are fundamentally family occasions, and they are the main junctures of social interaction.

> It was wonderful, they presented their traditional things, they exposed us to the beautiful side and it warmed the heart. It also connected me to the Mizrahi side in me which till the seminar I did not know that it exists – and it warms my heart from this aspect, the specific ceremonies that they presented I did know them from my home, but it was Mizrahi. (Yifat Toledo)

> I very enjoyed, dafka, the wedding that they made. Possibly it can be linked to the fact that I'm Mizrahit. I personally enjoyed it very much (Liat Karo)

> They did a Henna ceremony, and it was a common thing between us, also they have these ceremonies (Hadar Azulai)

When describing feelings of family connection, the Sephardic participants expressed their concern about the absence of these feelings inside the Israeli group.

> I have the cultural connection, I felt little bit at home in the wedding and at the Henna ceremony that they presented. I really loved the music.

But it was also really hard for me because I compared with our group- they brought something homogenic, strong; this was the strongest experience for me (Ronit Maimon)

I was amazed, it was (the Palestinian cultural evening) invested, and I felt a pinch in my heart. It emphasized to me their nationalism, their uniqueness, the peace between them, all the things that I wish that we could have. I really enjoyed. Moreover, I was very connected to it, my parents are from a Moroccan background, and I'm extremely connected to it. I'm connected to the music. They dressed up in their traditional dresses which are very similar to the Moroccan traditional dresses in the Henna. It turned out, that I know the songs that they played and I felt very much connected (Nofar Elbaz)

It can be observed that the connection between the Sephardic Jews and the Palestinians was not constrained to the cultural events. I intend to point at a general similarity in the mentality of Mizrahim and Palestinians, a similarity, which was most visible in times in between the workshops, in the evenings and during the days-off.

They set with the Argeela[44] and I joined them and I felt at home (Sharon Swisa)

We had two options for activity in the day- off in Strasburg. To go to a museum, or to walk around the city with one of the German staff member. All the Israelis went to the museum but I and Keren joined the Palestinian group, we preferred to see the city (Irit Ibn Ezra)

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[44] Argeela- a word for waterpipe which is common in the Middle East

> In the day off, for example, only I and Ma'ayan went with the Palestinians to the
>
> amusement- park, and it was fun (Hadar Azulai)

The cultural affinity between the Sephardic Jews and the Palestinians was discernable through many instances. This commonness has to be understood not in terms of an explicit political or cultural self-identification from either side. Rather, it should be seen, as 'natural' manifestations of daily behavior entirely disconnected from a conscious political behavior. That is to say that the fact that in terms of interpersonal attitude the Sephardic Jews felt very close to the Palestinians does not suggest that there political stances were any closer than that of the non-Sephardic Jews to the Palestinians.

<u>The denial of Arabic identification</u>

The interviewees were asked to describe what they remember from the Israeli cultural evening, what did they feel during the preparations for it, and in the evening itself.

The second issue that was raised by the participants of this project was: the tension of the presentation of the 'classic' Israeli culture and the ways of challenging it. I refer here to the Ashkenazi position of invalidating all together the legitimate position of Sephardic cultural elements inside Israeli culture. (Indeed, 'Mizrahi' music and customs, are frequently referred to by the intellectual elite of Israel as a 'subculture', depriving it from the possibility of viewing as equal to the culture of the establishment.)

Ronit Maimon portrays the difficulty:

> I remember that it was not easy for us to work on it (the Israeli cultural evening)
>
> because we have pluralism. We have the Israeli roots and we emphasize them,

we look for the common Israeli symbols. But there was a question mark on the Jewish identity, and me myself, I'm a secular person who runs a secular way of life but I am connected to the religion, my grandparents are religious people. In the seminar, people somewhat eliminated Judaism.

The evening was assembled from Sing-Along and folk dances[45]; there was no much of a discussion about it, which way I like them."

But there were arguments and tension when they, the Mizrahi women, tried to suggest their musical choices. Means, they aspired to challenge, though not in the ideological sense, and we might say not even consciously, the Ashkenazi dominance. I would like to emphasize, that, in my opinion, the resistance of the Ashkenazi participants to accept any Sephardic cultural patterns is not necessarily as conscious deed. I see it, as an internalized orientalistic view of culture, which does not necessarily functions as a guiding principle in all instances of social interaction. Ashkenazi Jews in Israel will uninhibitedly dance at a wedding to Mizrahi music, but the discussion about the Israeli cultural evening involves a certain declaration about "the official" culture of Israel, which has to be presented as the classic Zionist culture. The conscious discussion about the issue 'activates' the unconscious orientalistic beliefs.

We had an argument concerning the Mizrahi music[46]. They asked: 'Why, all of a sudden, Mizrahi music?' But, in the end of the day, in both of the cultural evenings, everyone danced to this music (Nofar Elbaz)

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[45]Sing-Along and folk dances are customs, which were developed in the Kibbutzim in Israel. Throughout the years, under the umbrella of the Zionist cultural establishment it became one of the main elements of the constructed consensual culture of the" Israeli society" as a whole.

[46] Mizrahi music is the term, which has been given to the musical style of the Sephardim in Israel. This musical genre was influenced by Arabic and Yemenite, Greek and Turkish music as well.

The members of the group have decided to focus on the Jewish holidays and traditions, for example, Passover and Rosh Hashanah, and also the Bar- Mitzvah ceremony[47]. I and my friend were excited about the Bar- mitzvah and we wanted to add to this presentation the Henna ceremony which is held for the boy. The next morning, after breakfast, and before the beginning of the first workshop, Yair (a male Israeli participant) asked all of us, all the Israeli participants, to gather for one minute. Then he explained, that last night he, and few other people from the group, thought again about the presentations for the cultural evening and they came with a new structure for it. He read the list of the presentations and we discovered that the Bar- mitzvah was erased. My friend asked him why did they change the program of the evening and why did they not include the Bar- Mitzvah ceremony? And he just said that there is no time for it in the program. I did not understand why they decided to cancel particularly this ceremony. The head of the Israeli group came to me and to my friend during the day and asked us, if we still want to present the Henna ceremony, and if we do so, we need to tell it to the rest of the group. And this is what we did. And then in the next day Yair came again with a new idea, he said, that he and few members of the group, thought to cancel the original plan of the cultural evening and instead of it they suggested to organize a Drag show. He said, that it will be funny for us and for the Palestinians as well. During the day we spoke about it a lot, but the Israeli facilitators intervened, and eventually we did our Henna ceremony in the evening. We asked from the Palestinian women their dresses from their cultural evening. Their traditional dresses look very similar to the Moroccan dresses that we wear. We put on some kerchiefs as well and we put Moroccan music, it was very beautiful in the end. (Hadar Azulai)

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[47] Bar- Mitzvah is a ceremony in Judaism which is conducted at the age of 13 for a boy or at the age of 12, it is the celebration of the 'entry' of the person to adultness, to the age of duty of keeping the commandments.

The Eurocentric discourse in Israel – A discourse of denial

Before advancing, I would like to elaborate on the theoretical background of the development of the orientalistic disposition of the culture of the Israeli establishment. "The desire to assimilate into the West"[48] was a central idea in the Zionist ideology. We can learn about it through the vision of Theodor Herzl, but also from other leaders and Zionist thinkers as Ahad Ha'am (his Hebrew pen name) – Asher Zvi Hirsch Ginsberg- the key theoretician of the current of cultural Zionism. In the opinion Ahad Ha'am, what Herzlian Zionism "understood is that only by leaving Germany and settling in the Jewish state could the Jew finally become a real German".[49]

That being the case, the Zionist narrative is lacking a genuine critical approach about its Eurocentric attitude, which can be seen through various manifestations. For example, in Israeli schools the students are "condemned to study a history of the world that privileges the achievements of the West, while effacing the civilization of the East."[50]

Furthermore, this approach is integrated with the denial of the Sephardic culture, similarly to the legacy of colonialist thought. The Israeli cultural researcher Ella Shoat, stresses on the established Israeli historiography, which focuses mainly on the experience of European Jewish communities, and dedicates a disparaged place for the history of Sephardim. She illuminates on the deceptive representation of the Sephardic culture in the Zionist narrative, as "static and passive"[51], which needed to adopt western Zionist values for its 'modernization'. Second, the description of the history of Sephardim in the Muslim countries through a European understanding was incorrect, since the Sephardic communities lived a convenient way of life in Muslim surroundings, not similar to the

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[48] *Ibid*, 166

[49] Aziza Khazzoom, "The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel," *American Sociology Review* 68, No. 4 (2003): 500

[50] Ella Shoat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text*, No. 19/20, Duke University Press (1988): 7

[51] *Ibid*, 9

European- Jewish experience. Similarly to Shohat herself, I do not intend to paint a rosy picture about Jewish existence in the Arab world. I do intend to emphasize the basic dissimilarity between the place of Jews in the Christian European environment and that of the Muslim Arab one.[52] As a consequence of the above discussed, Israeli society has practically no acquaintance with the common life, and mutual cultural experience of Jews in the Arab- Moslem world.

Furthermore, throughout the accounts of the women, one can observe the 'belittling' attitude of Ashkenazi Jews toward the Sephardim.

Nofar Elbaz describes her experience:

> It was very hard for me. The Palestinians were really nationalist and our participants got united with them instead of being unified with us. And this was the most difficult thing for me, it bothered me the most, that I felt that the Israeli participants reflected that 'everything is nice and we want peace' but there is no peace among us.

I asked her to elaborate and to explain what does she mean when she states that the Israeli participants did not unite 'with us' and she added:

> every time I set next to the participants from our group and they laughed, there were ethnical jokes about Mizrahim, about colored skin Jews. All the time. It was a complete rejection of the 'different'. There was a division into groups inside the Israeli group. I felt kind of 'bleeding hearts' because they say that they want peace and they were really nice to the Palestinian women but what about the women that is next to you? I felt that this was not sincere. It gave me a slap. Before the peace with the Palestinians, if we would not accept our neighbor,

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[52] *Ibid, ibid.*

how will it be with them (the Palestinians)? I felt a strong anger for not being accepted, as the other, inside the Israeli group. It showed me in micro terms, what happens in our country. The separation. This is the strongest memory from the Israeli group.

Liat Karo tells about her experience:

There was no union and connection like in their case (the Palestinian group). I didn't feel consolidation in our group. It came to expression in many situations. There (in the Palestinian group) was much more solidarity

I asked Karo to elaborate on these situations of no consolidation:

"For example, in the uni- national meetings of our group, there was the issue of Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. Personally it didn't anger me but you could see people from our group recruit themselves for the Palestinian favor, but for the Hatikva Quarter[53] – they would never recruit themselves. Moreover, I remember that in our cultural evening I put a kerchief on my head, it was right before our presentation of the Henna ceremony[54] in the frame of the Bar-mitzvah, and Eran, (an Ashkenazi) someone from my group was looking at me dressed like that. Then I explained him: 'See? This is how the Moroccan women look like in our place', and he said to me: 'I'm not sure that if I will bring a woman from there to my grandmother she accepts her'. And it was strange. It was strange since I didn't understand what is he doing there, in the seminar, because what is there in between Israelis and Palestinians? It is racism.

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[53] Hatikva Quarter is a neighborhood in the south of Tel- Aviv- Yaffa. This neighborhood was established by Sephardim in the in 1930th. The majority of the population was constituted by immigrants from Yemen, Iraq, Iran and Egypt.

[54] The Henna ceremony is a traditional custom for good luck which is held before the wedding in Muslim and Sephardic Jewish communities. The Jews, who lived in North- Africa, also celebrate it in the frame of the Bar mitzvah in favor of the Bar- mitzvah's 'groom'.

It is connected to the issue of inferiority. So what are you doing here? – I was

asking myself"

The political division of right and left between the participants, the historical development of the ethnic tension in Israeli politics

Most of the interviewees began with the explanation about their experience in the

seminar, with their self-positioning on the 'political map' of Israel. Most of them

described themselves as right- wing. [55]

> I came with an open mind, even though my opinion is a right wing political
>
> understanding, there (during the seminar) I understood their pain. (Sharon Swisa)

All of them argued that despite their political believes, they understood the pain of the

Palestinians:

> It is important to mention that I came with a right- wing opinion, like the way I
>
> was brought up, the way that I know. I was the most rightist, till today I'm like
>
> that, but now I know what is going on with them. It devastated me when they
>
> cried. I did know these stories and it touched me. I remember the most the
>
> situations that Wafa told us about the physical checks in the Check –Points, how
>
> they touch you. (Keren Alfasi)

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[55] The division of Right and Left in Israel refers, mainly, to the stands toward the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. The left- wing represents more of a stance of compromise toward the Palestinian side and to the shaping of the solution. The right- wing generally supports a more rigid approach and is in favor of the settlements in the territories beyond the 1967 borders.

The experiences of the interviewees with the Israeli group can be differentiated into two prominent paradigms. The first is the division of 'right and left': the Sephardic women positing themselves as more right wing then the other participants of the Israeli group. The second issue was expressions of racism inside the Israeli group toward the Sephardim.

First, it can be understood, that the Sephardic women considered the Israeli group having a leftist orientation in comparison to them.

> I felt, otherwise, good with the Israeli group, except for their political stances. Only me and Shlomi (another Sephardi participant) came with rightist political opinions and demonstrated it in the group's discussions.(Sharon Swisa)

Most of the interviewees defined themselves as right wing persons (six out of the ten interviewees), one described herself and her group as "neutral- not right wing nor left, we were not extremists like the two other Israeli groups in the seminar."

Ronit Maimon describes:

> "I had an easy time – I found a good connection with the women in my group. The group was of high quality. Back home, in the environment that I'm coming from, there are people who don't accept my opinions. At my home, I don't have a strong backing, a meaningful support to me in this. I'm the one who waves the 'flag of peace', and this is seen negatively by my family. I'm considered here as an 'extremist'. There, among the Israeli group I was the 'moderate'."

The political approaches of Sephardim

Ella Shoat in her article "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims"[56] describes the background for the belonging of the majority of the Mizrahim to the right- wing side of the political map of Israel.[57] First, Shoat explains that in the framework of the Zionist ideology which asks to deny presence of the Arabs indigenous- the Palestinians and cherishes the Western existence- "Arab-ness and Oreintal-ness were consistently stigmatized as evil to be uprooted".[58] As a result of this hypothesis of the Zionist theoreticians, the Sephardim encountered a schizophrenic state, meaning "mingling stubborn self-pride with an imposed self-rejection, typical products of a situation of colonial ambivalence …The ideological dilemmas of Sephardim derive from the contradictions inherent in the situation where they are urged to see Judaism and Zionism as synonyms and Jewishness and Arab-ness as antonyms (for the first time in their history)". Shoat elaborates on the shame among Sephardim about their heritage in Arab countries and its expressions- the throaty language, the oriental music and the dark skin on one hand-, and their will to become a 'sabra, on the other hand'. Sephardim, in fact needed to shed any Arab characteristics from their identity. First, since Arab-ness is identified with the enemy; and second, because it is identified as lagging motifs and the Sephardim wanted to belong to the superior side in the colonialist situation. Shoat explains the self- hating process that caused "many Sephardim (to internalize) the Western perspective and turned (them) into self-hating Sephardim. Thus not only did the

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[56] Ella Shoat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text*, No. 19/20, Duke University Press (1988): 1-35

[57] The division of Right and Left in Israel refers, mainly, to the stands toward the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. The left- wing represents more of a stance of compromise toward the Palestinian side and to the shaping of the solution. The right- wing generally supports a more rigid approach and is in favor of the settlements in the territories beyond the 1967 borders.

[58] Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," 25

'West' come to represent the 'East', but also, in a classic play of colonial specularity, the East came to view itself through the West's distorting mirror… In fact, Arab- hatred when it occurs among Oriental Jews is almost always a disguised from of self- hatred".[59] The above tension is highly relevant to the relationship of Mizrahim to the Palestinians.

The second dominant issue is the voting patterns of Sephardim in Israel which tend to the right-wing parties, especially the Likud party. This voting pattern has a lot to do with the will of Sephardim to express their protest against the Labor party's disparaged attitude toward them, and less with their stance on the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. However there is no difference between these two parties regarding the policies that they carried out in the issues of Sephardim and of the Palestinians, it was only on the level of the discourse: one "populist" (Likud) and one "condescending" (Labor) on the Sephardic issue, and one aggressive- nationalist (Likud) and the other humanist- liberal (Labor)" on the Palestinian issue.[60] It is important to explain that the Sephardim don't have a real alternative in the political discourse which is conducted and represented by the political parties since all of the parties are based on European roots- from the religious parties till the secular parties, except for Shas – an ultra- orthodox party which was established in the middle of the eighties. Shoat stresses on the historical causes which led to the isolation of Sephardim from the political arena: "The historical legacy of the Ashkenazi domination of the institutional party apparati prior to the arrival en masse of Sephardim; the inertia of a hierarchical top-down structure that leaves little room for major shifts in direction; the delegitimization of the traditional Sephardic leaderships; objectively harsh conditions, in the fifties and sixties, which left little time and energy for political and communal re-organization; and the repression as well as the cooptation of Sephardi revote".[61]

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[59] *Ibid, ibid.*
[60]*Ibid,* 28.
[61] Ibid, ibid.

In this discourse of 'Right' and 'Left' in the Israeli society the Sephardim are conceived, in the frame of an Oreintalist view, as innocent, impulsive and "easily manipulated by patriarchal demagogues"[62], specifically in the view of the Israeli 'left' as the 'problem of the peace': "'they' have destroyed beautiful Israel; 'they are turning Israel into a right-wing anti-democratic state; 'they' support the occupation".[63] These representations of the Sephardim help to maintain the images of the Israeli 'left' as liberal and one pursuing peace and dialogue with the Palestinians, in its own eyes and in the eyes of the world. In this system of public relations, there is a sincere belief in the willingness of the 'left' to solve the conflict. However, the 'left' in Israel hardly promotes peace, rather it presents a false impression of acting toward achieving it.[64]

Political difficulty

As we can study from the following accounts, the Sephardim did not change their political disposition as a result of their experience in the seminar. The perception of cultural vicinity to the Palestinians did not result in a radical change in their political stance. I believe, that the fact, that the Sephardim did not alter their political understanding due to a number of reasons. The ultimate factor which influences Sephardic Jews in their political views is their socio-cultural conditions- a marginalized existence in the cultural and social sense, generally in areas of conflict, like in Sderot for example. It could be stated that the position of Ashkenazim is basically different. The claims of Sephardim against Palestinians about a militant ethnic conflict, is based on a genuine personal experience. The interpretation of this conflict is than influenced by the above described Zionist approach to Palestinians and to the position of the Sephardim in

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[62]Shoat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," 27
[63] *Ibid, ibid*
[64] *Ibid, ibid*

this situation between the Ashkenazi Jews and the Palestinans, serving as a social 'buffer zone'. In many terms it's not only social but even a geographical 'buffer-zone', like in the border areas of Israel, or on the borderline between West and East Jerusalem, or in the settlements themselves in the West Bank, where Eastern Jewish populations settled for various reasons. In the border areas they were settled by the state itself, whereas there moving to the settlements can be explained by economical necessities determined by their social position. We can learn about this political difficulty from the interviewees:

> In the second day of the seminar we discussed in the workshop about our personal and family narratives and I have chosen to tell about my great grandmother who immigrated to Israel from Yemen. I told this story through a Zionist frame and how it was really hard for her, and I got ricochets from the Palestinians and I cried - they said something like 'How can you even sit here?' Since Zionism, as I understood later, is little a bit equal to Nazism for them, because of the hierarchy that they feel and the fact the they are inferiors, I stayed shocked. (Ronit Maimon)

> I felt the need to apologize that I was in the army. I'm coming from a patriotic environment and I'm proud of my army, but there I felt ashamed. I felt the need to apologize. They did not except it. A soldier is a terrorist from their point of view. For me as a person, as Nofar, they did not give a place for me. They judged me as an ex-soldier (Nofar Elbaz)

> I remember that one guy who studied in Sderot[65] spoke about the Kassam rockets, and they said 'you deserve this- we suffer as well', and I understand that

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[65] Sderot is a city in the southern part of Israel, Located in the vicinity of Gaza. The City was established in the 1950th and was and still today populated mostly by immigrants from Morocco.

all of them have been through a traumatic experience, you could see it since all on them were united in this experience. They said 'you are in Israel, you don't suffer as much we suffer' and then I said 'I suffer as well: on my parents house fell a Kassam rocket, look, the sufferance is mutual. 'But they did not accept it. (Hadar Azulai)

We set and talked in the group (Palestinians and Israelis), it was after few days of process and work in the group. And then they talked (the Palestinians) about a 'Shahid' and a soldier, and in one part of the conversation they said that "the Shuhada are our soldiers", and this was stressful and strange thing in my view. Because our purpose is to go against violence and they are fighting against civilians, it was miscommunication and misunderstanding between us. I did not understand them. (Liat Karo)

The meeting with them was a really strong experience for me, for the good and for the bad. Before the departure to the seminar we were asked 'what are we expecting from the meeting with the Palestinians?", and I said that I'm afraid that the other side will present himself as the 'miserable' and that we are the conquerors. I did get pretty much what I have expected concerning the opinions; I felt a situation of being stuck from the political aspect. We, the Israeli group tried to move forward- 'what is happening today' – and there was a situation of embedding. (Nofar Elbaz)

Loneliness

This difference in political orientation leaded in many cases to the feeling of loneliness for the interviewees. Most of the interviewees testify that they felt loneliness amongst the

Israeli participants. When I asked about the relationship with the Israeli group, the first sentence that I have received from few interviewees was, that they felt alone.

> I felt alone, only me thinking like that, it seemed that we were not in the same group. And now, that I'm thinking about it, it is little strange that all of them (the Israelis) were of the same mindset." (Keren Alfasi)

> Also in the Israeli group I felt pretty alone. Lonely. I've arrived to the seminar without a fixed opinion, I've thought that I know, more or less, my political orientation and then I arrived to a group that everybody was more extreme than me. (Nofar Elbaz)

> What is burned with me is that every noon break, generally after the lunches, me and another participant went upstairs to our room to rest. And they played music in the club. It was their anthem and more Arabic music in high volume. And I remember that during the seminar it began to enter my dreams. It derived from jealousy of their nationalism. And I felt extremely lonely compared to them. This was the most meaningful experience for me. They put their songs and I was curved in my bed crying. Not because I was afraid but because I felt alone, every afternoon (Nofar Elbaz)

Conclusions

I intended to argue throughout my thesis, based on the theoretical sections as well as with the help of the personal accounts of the participants, that there is an essential cultural connection between Sephardic Jews and Palestinians. This connection manifests itself in the framework of the equal and sincere, to the extent that it's possible, meeting between them. I would like to assert that this link might allow a more complex understanding of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I claim, that this alternative understanding is reachable through two steps. First, there is a need of the reevaluation of the place of the 'Mizrahi' Jew in the Israeli society and the historical development of its position. Afterwards, this critical understanding would illustrate the general disposition of Zionism to the Arab world as a whole. I believe, that the Zionist outlook, which determined the cultural and the social position of Sephardic Jews in the Israeli society, is the same orientalistic vision, which defined the standpoint of Israel vis-à-vis the non-European environment in the Middle East.

Unfortunately, the process that I suggest above cannot take place, neither in seminar of dialogue meetings nor in the Israeli society as a whole. The framework of the seminar is a meeting between only two national identities, which does not permit to observe and to reinterpret additional identification patterns, which are present as well. As in the Israeli society, in the seminar as well, there are four main dichotomic tensions of identifications. These conflicts of identity are: Jews vs. Arabs, Right wing vs. Left wing political forces, Ashkenazim vs. Sephardim and seculars vs. religious Jews. To challenge the existing discourse, I believe that there's need of adopting the approaches of post-colonialism and feminism, attitudes, which might bring about a true change in terms of the discourse. I would like to challenge these rigid identities and to argue that this discourse of identities, which was established by the Zionist elites, does not fit the Sephardic Jews, since they are Jews *and* Arabs, their political understanding is different from that of the classical

European divisions – they are on the borderland, to borrow Gloria Andaluza's notion – and their religious conceptions are different as well, from those Ashkenazi ideas. The central feature of the seminars in Germany, namely that it deterritorializes the conflict[66], in a certain sense, encapsulates my idea of an alternative 'Mizrahi' identity, which would transcend the territorial constrains of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and would establish the conditions for a new discourse of Jews with Palestinians and not Jews vs. Palestinians. The possible common cultural platform of Sephardic Arab Jews and Palestinian Arabs could indeed constitute a bridge for a genuine dialogue between Israel and the Middle East. I would like to emphasize that this alternative understanding of 'Mizrahi Jews' is not a new cultural creation, rather a return to a cultural reality, which existed for hundreds of years in the countries of the Maghreb.

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[66] I thank Prof. Pető for this observation on the nature of the seminar.

Appendix

<u>The Sample</u>

The women who were interviewed for the present paper:

Sharon Swisa- A Social-Worker who lives in Beer- Sheva - a city in the southern part of Israel, the main city of the Negev desert. She is 29 years old. Swisa's parents immigrated to Israel in the late 1950's from Morocco and they settled down in Dimona, a development city in the southern part of Israel, according to the central population policies of the Ashkenazi establishment. Swisa participated in the seminar in 2006.

Yifat Toledo- A statistician and MA student in the statistic school in Haifa University. She lives in Haifa (a city in the northern part in Israel). She is 30 years old. Toledo's parents immigrated to Israel from Yemen and Libya. Toledo participated in the seminar in 2007.

Ronit Mimon- A Social- Worker, who studies for her MA in the Social Work Department in Ben-Gurion University and lives in Beer- Sheva. She is 30 years old. Mimon's parents immigrated to Israel from Iraq and Yemen. Mimon participated in the seminar in 2007.

Hagit Zaguri- a social worker living in Beer- Sheva. She grew up in kibbutz. Her parents were born in Israel, but the grandparents are from Lebanon, Iran and Lithuania. Zaguri is 30 years old. She participated in the seminar in 2007.

Shlomit Levi- a student in the Sapir College in Sderot. She is originally from Rehovot (a city in the center of Israel). Her grandparents immigrated to Israel from Yemen and Russia. She is 30 years old. Levi participated in the seminar in 2007.

The fact that they are from a heterogeneous background in terms of Ashkenazi and Sephardic ancestry, had a specific influence on their outlook, in my view.

Liat Karo- an administrative worker in Amdocs (high-tech company) and an MA student for business management. Karo lives in Sderot (a development city near the Gaza strip) where her parents were settled at the beginning of the 1960s. They immigrated to Israel from Morocco. She is 27 years old. Karo participated in the seminar in 2008.

Nofar Elbaz – a youth worker who lives in Haifa. She is originally from Sderot, where her family settled down. They immigrated to Israel from Morocco. Elbaz participated in the seminar in 2008. She is 27 years old.

Hadar Azulai- an administrative worker in an education college in Jerusalem. She originates originally from Sderot, where her parents were brought to by the immigration authorities in the 1950s. They immigrated to Israel from Morocco. Azulai participated in the seminar in 2008. She is 26 years old.

Keren Alfasi- A student for education in Ben- Gurion University. She lives in Beer-Sheva. She is 23 years old. Alfasi's father immigrated to Israel from Libya, her mother was born in Israel to Libyan parents. Alfasi participated in the seminar in 2008.

Irit Iben Ezra- a student for education in Ashkelon College. She lives in Beer- Sheva. She is 23 years old. Her parents immigrated to Israel from Iraq. Iben Ezra participated in the seminar in 2008.

The questions of the interviews:

7. Could you tell generally about yourself?

8. Could and point of view you tell about your experience in the dialogue meeting that you participated in?

9. Tell about your relation with the participants of the Israeli group. Did you have disagreements?

10. Tell about your relation with the participants of the Palestinian group.

11. Describe your feeling during the cultural evening of the Israeli group.

12. Describe your feeling during the cultural evening of the Israeli group

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