Critical Heritages of Europe
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Chapter 12

Mizrahi memory-of and memory-against ‘the people’
Remembering the 1950s

Hilla Dayan

Introduction

At the onset of sovereignty in 1948, the state of Israel set in place two apparatuses of population control: one for denying citizenship to and blocking Palestinian refugees’ return after the 1948 war, and another for pulling in and using immigrants from the Middle East region to capitalize on the territorial and economic possessions from that war. Zionism universalized the European identity, making the Ashkenazi-Israeli diasporic experience normative but repressing the experience of Jews from the Middle East, which became overly visible as well as ethnically and politically charged (Shohat 1988; Ben-Dor 1997). ‘Absorption’ of new immigrants post-1948 meant that all traces of ‘the Arab’ had to be erased in order for their process of socialization as generic Israelis to succeed (Chetrit 2009; Shenhav 2006). The de-Arabization project was highly successful in pushing underground all expressions of cultural specificity that didn’t conform to the Ashkenazi-Israeli norm. In hindsight, as this chapter goes to show, what began in the formative decade of the 1950s as a project of assimilation failed to achieve an agreement on who the ‘people’ of Israel are and on the centrality of a European heritage.

Mizrahi heritage and popular culture existed for decades only as a marginalized culture unworthy of public attention. Yet today mainstream discourse and popular culture in Israel is dominated by Mizrahim, Israeli Jews of Middle Eastern descent. Expressions of Mizrahi heritage are highly visible as well as heterogeneous and complex. They share neither one form of politics of recognition nor do they convey a particular habitus or class position. The backdrop of this explosion of Mizrahi heritage is hegemonic constructions of the Jewish settler as simultaneously a native of the land and European. The body politic in the Zionist construction came into existence in ‘waves’ from the vanguard of Russian-empire settlers, then European refugees, then Holocaust survivors after World War II, then – only after state sovereignty was established, considered neither pioneers nor refugees – Jews from the Middle East. In Zionist discourse the notion of a society gradually expanding, fulfilling values of Jewish solidarity and in-gathering, obscures the structural inferiority or absence of Middle Eastern Jews from the Zionist official narrative. Mizrahi genealogy
does not neatly fit a tale of pioneering heroism, of state building, or of Jewish redemption. Its invocation constantly throws these discursive foundations into disrepute.

Independent researcher and Mizrahi icon Shoshana Gabay has shown in her studies the populist bent of ‘culture wars’ supposedly raging between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim today (Gabay 2014, 2015, 2016, in Hebrew). Culture wars, rather than expressions of genuine political struggle, she argues, tend to generate ratings and profits and do not threaten Israel’s structures of power. This conflict, which for decades was depicted as ‘ethnic cleavage’ (Ihesa adati, Smooha 1994), has been newly framed as the clash between the authentic voice of the majority – ‘the people’ – and the minority, or ‘elites’. A central figure in this polarization, typical of populist discourse, is Miri Regev (Urbinati 1998). Regev is a de-Arabized name – substituting for Siboni, a Jewish-Moroccan family name – of the minister of culture from the governing Likud party. Enfolded in her persona and rhetoric are all the facets of the figure of the new Mizrahi: in power, representing the common people, promoting herself and Mizrahi heritage as a hot brand (Najad 2018).

Instead of criticizing populist appropriations, what I wish to open up is the question of the democratizing/de-democratizing power of Mizrahi memory. Rather than speaking of a monolithic Mizrahi collective memory, I address the manifold representations and the visibility of Mizrahim as a memory surge which has no discernable center or political aim. In my reading, it nonetheless unleashes deep-seated grievances revolving around contestations over ‘peoplehood’. As a political principle, in Pierre Rosanvallon’s dialectic reading, ‘the people’ is both power and enigma: ‘the word “people” necessarily means too much or too little’, he quotes the French Revolution contemporary the Marquis de Mirabeau (Rosanvallon 2007: 83). Chantal Mouffe advances the idea that radical democracy is never about social unity, a goal that is ultimately ‘killing’ democracy, but about the articulation of difference and ethico-political relations to others (Mouffe 1992). The memory surge conveys the power and the enigma of ‘the people’ and constitutes an open-ended and radically democratic articulation of difference, yet at the same time, it erases the other – Palestinian existence and memory – and affirms Jewish exclusive claim to the land. I ground this analysis by returning to stories about the 1950s in the city I grew up in, Holon, a suburb to the south of Tel Aviv. The local story enables the reconstruction of the immediate post-Nakba context of the Mizrahi primary site of formation as ‘people’ – the ma’abarot, the Hebrew name for ‘absorption’ camps constructed in the 1950s. I shall begin then from a reconstruction of the quintessential 1950s to ponder its endurance in living memory.

**The 1950s as a black box**

Michael Warshavsky once said that Zionism is one massive factory of repression (Mifal Hadkhaka). Factory is the literal translation of the word mifal in Hebrew but also a cynical allusion to the Zionist pathos of a grand endeavor: ha-mifal ha-Ziyoni or ‘the national endeavor’ (Warshavsky 1999, in Hebrew). The period of the 1950s, for example, is as valorized as much as it is subject to organized erasure: the state is guarding access to, and even destroys, relevant archives of the period (Akevot 2016). While censorship in relation to the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is normalized and defended on security grounds, state-led repression of the history of the ‘absorption’ of Mizrahim is a much less straightforward and a particularly contentious affair. Why is it repressed? What happened?

In the 1950s, a primarily European society called the Yishuv suddenly transformed into a new society. Palestinians became overnight an enemy–minority group not included in the new sovereignty (the exodus was of around 700,000 people, 80 percent of the Arab population; about 160,000 or 20 percent remained and were denied citizenship until June 1966). The Jewish population swelled from approximately 500,000 to over a million just between 1949 and 1950 and a half a million more by the mid-1950s. As a result of conditions of war with countries in the region, their Jewish communities were uprooted and their civilization was destroyed. The depopulation of Palestine and its repopulation with Jewish immigrants from the region are thus the two intimately interlinked socio-historical processes that have set the stage for all that followed (Behar 2007); in Shohat’s words: ‘As the Palestinians were being forced to leave, the Sephardim underwent a complementary trauma, a kind of image in negative, as it were, of the Palestinian experience’ (Shohat 1988: 12). As is long established in the pioneering studies of Mizrahi history, how to deal with the ‘human material’ or ‘human dust’, as the immigrants were labelled, preoccupied the orientalist European establishment of the new state: newcomers could hardly be distinguished either from the Arabs of their countries of origin or the local Arabs that were just (partially) ethnically cleansed (Morris 1987; Pappe 2006; Hirsch 2009, 2014, in Hebrew).

The powerful Mapai party (first prime minister David Ben-Gurion’s party) had dominated the government and the Zionist establishment. Implementing grand plans required subservience, or in the words of central planners, ‘all our economic plans pertaining to the mass Aliyah (immigration) are conditioned upon control through sovereign rule’ (Krampf 2015: 60, in Hebrew). To advance its national goals, the state established military rule over Palestinians and civil-authoritarian rule over Middle Eastern immigrants. The state coerced policies in the 1950s are the subject of the documentary series Salah, Here Is Erets Israel (the title in English is The Original Sin, but I shall henceforth call it short Salah). The series, as part of the memory surge, got prime-time airing in 2018 by a commercial channel and was shown in public screenings all over the country and widely commented on. The series paints a shocking picture of the period’s zeitgeist as reflected in state protocols, exposing the racial panic and authoritarianism of the Mapai establishment.

The zeitgeist of the era was also to enforce namalchatut (statism) in Zionist parlance, commonly understood as an equal demand from everyone, but...
particularly from newcomers, to worship the Yishuv-state and put its goals above their individual considerations (Ben Porat 2013). The self-proclaimed republicanism of the statist approach should be taken with a grain of salt. Israel of the 1950s was run in a manner more akin to a Mafia state, demanding loyalty to the family-run mishaf. As Smadar Sharon shows, all major operations were run by a tight-knit formal and informal network of few, and very powerful, scientists, administrators, planners, and decision-makers, chief among them the charismatic first prime minister David Ben-Gurion. The network often operated outside democratic frameworks. Sharon further sheds light on knowledge transfer and a warm reception in Israel in the 1950s for the model of fascist internal colonial policies implemented in the south of Italy in the 1930s, when the state forcefully dislocated and relocated poor populations in an attempt to re-educate them and make them more productive and loyal to the new regime (Sharon 2017b: 140, 144, in Hebrew; see also Sharon 2017a).

Writing on Venezuela, Rafael Sánchez depicts a ‘ceaseless process of collection and dispersion’ that accompanied the radically democratic postcolonial moment of the end of Spanish rule in the nineteenth century and the European settler-society fear at this juncture from ‘highly heterogeneous, intensely mobile, delocalized populations’ that early on set the political stage for a ‘populist governmentality’ to emerge as the dominant form of sovereignty in Latin America (Sánchez 2016). Like in Venezuela, the Mapai government embarked on a policy of population collection and dispersion – collection by directing immigrants to the ma’abarot, the transit camps, and dispersion to the periphery and to government locations. The policy of dispersion went by the ominous name ‘population scattering’ (pizur uchastiya). The new immigrants were thus directed by decree to sites of depopulated Palestinian villages and towns or hastily constructed, often entirely new locations where there was nothing at all, neither community structures nor state infrastructure. Being forced to construct their own shacks and dwellings is a recurrent story of former ma’abarot residents (see Image 12.2).

To put things in some chronological order, the policy of ‘scattering’ was implemented in various stages throughout the decade. In the initial phase (1949–1954), newcomers were directed to ma’abarot with the idea of gradually moving them into government-built housing projects. Since many of the ma’abarot were erected near urban and existing settlements, this meant that despite the abject conditions there was still a social fabric the immigrants landed into. Matters got worse from 1954 onwards as the policy took a twist under the title of ‘from the boat to the settlement’, skipping the ma’abarot and sending immigrants straight to remote locations (Picard 2013). The ma’abarot achieved neither the goal of organizing populations in preparation for ‘scattering’ nor the goal of creating only temporary ‘absorption centers’. In many urban areas ma’abarot turned into depressed poor neighbourhoods with social housing blocks. To use an apartheid-era terminology, Israel’s map is still dotted with urban ‘sore spots’, pockets of poverty of third and fourth generations of Mizrahim (see Image 12.1).

Newcomers moreover landed into a settler-colonial context and were expected to further settler colonialism in Israel’s frontiers, well beyond the designated partition lines. Those sent to the periphery were often instructed or expected to form small agricultural collectives. It is difficult to explain in hindsight the rationality of this plan: most immigrants were not familiar with Zionist collectivist ideas developed in Tsarist Russia; most were urban dwellers but orientalistically mistaken for peasants, while having no experience whatsoever with agriculture; and the plan further stood in contrast to economists’ push for rapid industrial development. Most strikingly, the Yishuv-society itself had lost interest in following the footsteps of pioneers. The will to bow to collectivist goals was in rapid decline in the 1950s (considered in Zionist mythology still a period of ‘idealism’). In Zionist sources, veterans post-1948 are depicted as ready to ‘take care of themselves’ or to ‘rip the fruit of earlier sacrifices’. The Yishuv-society expected, in other words, to be simultaneously uplifted from hardship by their state and to socially reproduce a pioneering way of life (Picard 2010: 116, fn. 24, in Hebrew; Goldstein 2017).

Ruled by a civil-authoritarian apparatus, the immigrants were not asked if they wished to be or become ‘pioneers’, a concept wholly removed from their life-world and immediate devastating conditions. Their situation was of political limbo: ‘not yet ready’ for citizenship, their status was de facto ‘suspended’, even if on paper they were full-fledged citizens. This stood in sharp contrast to the boost of power their very presence as a demographic block in the land gave to the Yishuv-state, as I shall henceforth call it, essentially enabling it to fulfil veteran’s expectations of reward and uplifting. Note that I am using terms like Yishuv-state and Yishuv-society that are not in common use in relation to Israel as a sovereign state. If normally the term ‘Yishuv’ is referring to pre-state Jewish society in Palestine, I address it as the ruling minority (Yishuv-society) controlling the state (Yishuv–state) to emphasize the continuity of a governmental power that benefited the European governing minority most in the context of the existence of an overwhelming majority of disenfranchised populations post-1948 – Palestinians and Mizrahim (Lavie 2018).

Although state power in the 1950s appeared unlimited and executing grand plans was a top priority, in practice, implementation proved difficult since immigrants resisted state plans. Despite enforcement of restrictions of movement and heightened policing, immigrants frequently abandoned locations or attempted to refuse to leave the buses and trucks that carried them to their designated locations (Kemp 1998, 2002). The majority of North Africans, however, stayed put in locations that later became ‘development towns’, essentially reservoirs of cheap labor, because they were coerced to, as Adriana Kemp showed, by threats to deny provisions they depended on for basic livelihood, by police monitoring, extortion, bribes, and worse – for instance, the hair-raising threat that the state would deem them neglectful parents and take their children away to foster care if they abandoned locations. Mizrahi marginalization in the country’s periphery continues to date (Cohen 2002; Lavie 2018). The segregated nature of the
'scattering' stood moreover in blatant contradiction to the myth of Israeli society as a 'melting pot', a point not lost on some members of the Mapai establishment that regardless pushed it forward in the name of statism (mamlachtiut).

The afterlife of the 1950s

In the 2017 hit TV series Zagouri Empire, depicting a turbulent North African family in a remote development town, the father is scolded by his son, the soldier, who is shocked by his vulgar refusal to pay respect to the sacred rituals of Holocaust Day. 'This is the history of the Jewish people!' the son shouts, and Beber Zagouri lashes out in return: 'And I am not the history of the Jewish people? Do they have any clue what happened with me here?' - a rhetorical question, of course, since unlike the memory of the Holocaust, 'what happened' to Beber is still 'taboo memory', as Shohat argued, that under the active racial formations of Zionism must be silenced and repressed (Shohat 2000, 2006). Yet much of the content of the memory surge today does center on 'what happened' to the Mizrahi in the 1950s: (1) Permanent minority rule: Then, the masses were ruled by decree as the out-group of the Yishuv-society. Today, Israel's Ashkenazi-dominated establishment constitutes a continuation of minority rule - an insult for the Mizrahi 'majority'. (2) Permanent disenfranchisement and misrecognition: Then, the state determined the conditions for the inferior destiny of individuals and entire communities for generations, and today it refuses to recognize and rectify this historical injustice. (3) Permanent racial insult: Subject to orientalist racial rejection, which informed practically all state policies, Mizrahi still suffer from a racialized Eurocentrism that deems them inferior. (4) Permanent class resentment: Mizrahi still constitute Israel's Jewish working class. Without disregarding the impact of a large and affluent Mizrahi middle class, inequality and the legacy of an engineered underclass remains a thorny heritage.

The story of the Mizrahi that keeps resurfacing in documentary series and cultural productions is, to sum up, a story of destitution in and by the 'state of Ashkenaz'. The expression 'state of Ashkenaz', although currently ascribed to the young, radical Mizrahi poet Roy Hassan, is not a new figure of speech. Yet unlike its old use by first- and second-generation immigrants to express their exclusion, today its poise is lodged in the name of 'the majority' or 'the people'. To demonstrate the discursive transformation with another example, in the late 1970s and 1980s the Mizrahi struggle gave birth to a curious dichotomy between the first Israel and the second Israel (Israel ha-nihona ve-Israel ha-shnia). The first and the second imply both a strict order of hierarchy and, importantly, a temporality: some were 'the people' first, Yishuv-society and its descendants. The claim today is that the second Israel is the only Israel there is, rendering both the hierarchical distinction and the relevance of temporality obsolete. This is simultaneously an expression of a Mizrahi radical democratic imagination and of a Zionist common sense of loyalty to the state that Mizrahim widely share. The desire to abolish the 'state of Ashkenaz' in no way contradicts the indoctrination to worship the state. In fact, it affirms it. This begs the question, how can we speak of a radical democratic imagination when a Mizrahi memory surge asserts a Jewish claim to exclusivity in the state, disregarding all 'others'?

Jacqueline Rose, carefully dissecting Freud's thinking about collectivities and particularly the Jewish people, considers his deep resentment of group identification in general and suspicion of Jewish nationalism in particular, and neatly sums it up - 'nothing simply belongs' (Rose 2017: 161). In Rose's reading, Eros and trauma both separate and unite. For Israel-Palestine, this spells hope: if Israeli society only accepts that the Palestinian other and its trauma (the Nakba) is as constitutive of its self as the quintessential Jewish trauma (the Holocaust), unity will follow. But what if there is no such agreement on the foundational trauma of the then new, post-Nakba Israeli society and no coherent (European) 'self' of Israeli Jewish society to speak of today? The Mizrahi trauma is not even registered as defining the Israeli psyche, while its afterlife in the obsessive return to the 1950s can hardly be ignored. This points at both the implausibility and the Eurocentricism of any imagined dualism or bi-nationalism of the 'Palestinian' and the 'Jewish' peoples.

In what follows I confront Zionist myths I grew up on in the 1980s with my hometown Holon's Mizrahi heritage of the 1950s that came to my attention only in recent years. True to Rose's adage that 'nothing simply belongs', I choose not to make any bold assertions regarding Mizrahi collective memory in telling the story of Holon (Shenhav 2002, in Hebrew). I take from sociologist Gil Eyal the critique of memory, the impossibility of validating assertions that societies have too much or too little of it or lend themselves to abuse or distortion of memory (Eyal 2004). Eyal suggests that we speak instead of a human 'will to memory', a concept that seems to capture well the multidirectional and open-ended spirit of the Mizrahi memory surge. Yet what cannot be glossed over is that a Mizrahi 'will to memory' always unfolds in the context of repressive racial structures (Ashkenazi hegemony) and an ongoing Nakba - the dispossession and erasure of Palestinians and their memory. Is Mizrahi memory then a democratizing force? Why should we remember at all? In recalling her own personal attempt to bring memory back from a frozen past, Shohat poses the ultimate gut-wrenching question: 'Can memory exist apart from the desire to memorialize?' (Shohat 2017: 354). Below I further explore both the Mizrahi heritage of my city and the politics of memorialization.

Holon: 'the city that grew from the sand'

Holon is today a large urban metropolitan area south of Tel Aviv. It has a very short history, beginning as late as 1940, when in a ceremony on behalf of 'her majesty Queen Elizabeth', the British governor Sir Robert Edward Harold Crosbie declared five isolated and thinly scattered Jewish settlements in the
area known as ‘the southern dunes’ united under the name Holon (from holot, sands). Growing up in the 1980s we never heard of anything existing ‘before’ Jewish settlements, despite the fact that the area was heavily populated by Palestinians. I also didn’t know about Moledet (homeland), where one hundred Yemenite families lived in the early 1930s. Holon, we were told, simply ‘grew from the sands’. There was nothing but sand as far as the eye can see. Evidently, the first settlers were not surrounded only by sand since during the 1936 Arab revolt they had to be evacuated from the area to the nearby agricultural school ‘Mikve Israel’ to be protected from Arab attacks. After the crushing of the Arab revolt, all residents were allowed to return, but the Yemenites didn’t: Moledet was abandoned. This disappearance is mysterious and connected to the exceptional history of Yemenite settlement in Palestine, which began early on in the nineteenth century. The Yemenites were not part of the Yishuv-society but its Black (Jewish) labor (Nini 1996, in Hebrew). According to the city historian, Rami Aharoni, they did not return to Moledet because their meagre workers shacks were quickly covered in towering sand dunes and they had indeed nothing to return to, a sensible explanation that underlines their disconnect from the Zionist settling apparatus that made sure all other residents were able to return.8

After 1948, the city annexed Palestinian land surrounding it. The annexation is documented in a 1949 letter sent by Dr Kugel, Holon’s first mayor, to the department of planning. Kugel writes:

In our letter to the Custodian of Absentees Property with regard to the annexation of new territories to Holon we raised the issue of two areas, Yazour and Tel-Arish [the former Palestinian villages]... [S]hock neighborhoods and blokonim [ma’abarot type of small-houses] were erected without any consultation with us (Swartz 2005: 34).

It is not clear who was erecting shacks without city permission; but what I learned from city chronicles and veterans’ books is that eventually three huge ma’abarot locations were erected in Holon. This fact, that ma’abarot ever existed in my hometown, came as a shock to me: I never knew about their existence and the pivotal role they had played in the city’s urban development. With 7,000 ma’abarot residents at its peak (in 1952), it soon became one of the biggest shack towns in the country and eventually developed into one of the most densely populated cities in Israel. In other words, if in the Zionist myth the city grew naturally and organically from the pioneering settlement into a big city, what happened in this post-Nakba locality was nothing short of a dramatic turn of events: before 1948 Jewish presence in the area was thinly spread and rather precarious. A chain of events – war, depopulation, land annexation, and the decision to direct mass immigration to it – made Holon the jungle of concrete, the solid permanent presence as we know it.
This begs the question, if the town's ma'abarot were so critical to its development, why is their memory repressed in city mythology? According to Holon native and historian Dalia Gavrieli-Nuri, conditions were abysmal, with abject poverty, lack of water infrastructure, sewage, and electricity, flooding, and outbreaks of diseases. In many respects, Holon's 1950s history is no exception to the general rule: a city ruled by a Mapai establishment to which thousands of immigrants were directed and in which they lived under dire circumstances. Yet, in memoirs of city veterans, quite a complex picture emerges. Ma'abarot in Holon seemed to have acquired a rather good reputation among immigrants. A kind of civil army worked on a daily basis to assist the new residents pouring into the city. Holon apparently recruited local professional cadres to serve the national mission of 'absorption'. Services such as the welfare office, a post office, a bank, and a municipal services office, including services specifically catering to the needs of children, were built on-site, as opposed to other ma'abarot where people had to make long and arduous journeys on foot to receive basic services. Holon's educational institutions incorporated all the children of the ma'abarot into the schools in the city, unlike other cities that segregated them. Another hugely important factor was the level of unemployment, which was relatively low in Holon, whereas everywhere else unemployment in ma'abarot was a particularly explosive issue that led to riots and expressions of collective hostility against the Mapai establishment. Not just the fact of being adjacent to the metropolitan Tel Aviv helped. Holon quickly developed its own industrial infrastructure, and the city supported small businesses. In one of the memoirs, the ma'bara resident Yosef Cohen recounts:

My family was among the first families to settle in ma'abarat Holon. Because it was close to Tel Aviv many of the olim aspired to get to ma'abarat Holon and not to any other ma'abara. The privilege to get there was difficult to obtain. Fortunately, I could, thanks to my Zionist activities in Iraq (Swartz 2005: 35).

This account makes a subtle allusion to the Mafia-like state: it appears that Holon was generally an attractive destination, and that Mizrahim who took part in Zionist endeavours in Arab countries in some ways tried to make their record acknowledged upon arrival (which of course does not suggest they succeeded, more frequently they failed). Another resident, Yosef Yavin, tells us about the circumstances of his family's migration from Iraq. They first land in the Sha'ar Aliya absorption camp, and there they are told they will be sent to Halasa ma'abara in the upper Galilee (see endnote 6), bordering with Lebanon:

We were notified that we will be sent to Kiryat Shmona to Halasa ma’abara. I consulted friends and they told me immediately: 'don't dare [going there] try to get to Holon'. I came to the station chief [state official] and told him: 'we are not going'. He started shouting and threatening, and then I remembered the little note I had in my pocket. I went to the Histadrut workers' council and looked for the man whose name was on my note. He gave a note to the station chief and this way, from note to note, we were sent to Holon (Swartz 2005: 36, my emphasis).

‘From note to note, we were sent’: what we learn here is not only about the desperate attempts to remain close to the country's center and resist being 'scattered' to the periphery but also something crucial about the way the governmental apparatus functioned.

To illustrate what these 'notes' were all about, we can pick at a document I encountered during a one-off visit to the archives of the Holon workers' council (moetzet hapoalim) (see Image 12.3). The document, like thousands of others stored in decaying paper files, has a small note attached to it. The 'notes' (ptakim) were attached to official forms filled by prospective applicants for housing, in this case Histadrut 'veterans housing'. Again, the story of Holon is no different than that of other cities where the Histadrut, the most powerful governmental labor movement union at the time, built housing projects for veterans. Applicants were ranked chiefly on the basis of the number of years in the country, and as certified members of this or other Zionist institutions (as in Image 12.3: four persons = 4 points, fifteen years in the country = 15 points, twenty years of membership in Histadrut = 10 points, total = 29 points). This system became infamous known as Mapai's "notes method" (Shitat Haptakim), invoking associations of injustices, corruption, and abuse of power.

The process of dismantling ma'abarot started as soon as they were erected, but it took most of the 1950s, and in some cases well into the 1960s and 1970s, to finally erase the last physical remnants. By 1958 tents, shacks, and badonim (a type of shack) vanished almost entirely in Holon, replaced commonly by the modernist housing blocks popularly called shikunim (dwellings). I grew up near the former Palestinian village of Housmasa in a less abysmal late 1960s shikun, in an environment saturated with traces of 1948 battles and Palestinian ruins. Palestinian ruins are the hyper-visible yet 'silent' testimonies of the drama of 1948. By contrast, there was not a trace left of the history of the ma'abarot: 'I know the city well, I grew up in it, and despite that, only after a long search I thought I found one tin shack from those days' (Gavrieli-Nuri 2015, in Hebrew).

Following her footsteps out of sheer curiosity, I ventured to look for traces of the ma'abarot myself, and following general directions from Rami Aharoni, the city historian, I visited together with archaeologist Gideon Suliman a neighborhood close to where I went to high school, where to my great surprise we saw a Swedish wooden cabin from that era still standing intact (see Image 12.4).
The wooden cabin seemed spacious and its garden lush and beautifully kept. The cabins were a one-time gift from the government of Sweden to the new state. In 2015 there were still traces of the era's material culture in Holon, rarely found elsewhere.

Mesmerized by the sight of the cabin, we learned of its resident, 102-year-old Nagwa Shalev (formerly Shalo, a Jewish-Iraqi name), who lived there with her migrant-worker caregiver, from her son. He recounted that the family arrived in Holon in 1952 after a long journey, passing through many ma'abarot, including Pardes Hannah, Ramat Hachayal, and Jaffa.9

The experience of encountering actual material evidence of the ma'abarot brought forth questions of framing and narrative. It was difficult to find any written stories of the ma'abarot in veterans' memoirs. Aryeh Krishek's *Written on the Sand: The Story of Holon* is one of the most comprehensive city chronicles I encountered, written with poignancy and unique Zionist pathos. Krishek was born in 1952 in Israel to a family of Polish immigrants. He summarizes the ma'abarot epoch thus:

The ma'abara . . . this temporary station . . ., is where the young country experienced its main melting pot - the shaping of the nation . . . . Were the ma'abarot a low point, leaving a [moral] stain? Were there injustices done that are unforgivable? These are difficult questions that have no simple or straightforward answers. One thing is clear beyond doubt: a city where there was a ma'abara was in permanent danger of being backward . . . . Holon was open to absorb, assist, and increase its
Krishek is conveying straightforwardly the Ashkenazi fear of degeneracy, fear that gripped the Yishuv-society at large in the face of Middle Eastern masses. That he sincerely believes people aspired to move from modern 1950s Baghdad to the abysmal ma’abarot is not easy to comprehend. But Krishek has a point about the city, which had high-level contacts in the government and put relentless pressure on the highest echelons of Ben-Gurion’s government to build housing projects for the immigrants. The pace of resettlement was so fast in Holon that Mordechai Namir (originally Namirovsky, of Russian origin), the next minister of labour, declared festively in 1956 that Holon will be the first town to eliminate its ma’abarot.

It is thus ironic that our desire today is to memorialize ma’abarot, while abolishing them at the time was celebrated as a great achievement and rightfully so. Interestingly, and perhaps this is a unique aspect of the epoch in Holon, the city ‘scattered’ the population within its municipal borders in an organized fashion. The plan was to spread people across six to seven distinct areas of the city in order to integrate and mix them up well with the veterans. As a result, for decades the city maintained a form of educational and infrastructural ethnic diversity and integration, hence its bland indistinctness and lack of Mizrahi character. Holon is a flourishing suburban middle-class city, and perhaps the most average town in Israel, ranking 5 out of 10 in Israel’s socio-economic scale. Why, then, remember Holon’s ma’abarot at all? Why should people be educated about it? For most Mizrahim, Gavrieli-Nuri as an example, the Nakba and the history of the annexed land is not part of the story of either the city or the Mizrahi. What would an imagined ‘golden era’ of historical recognition of the Mizrahi past then bring? Mizrahi heritage appears to be in direct contradiction with the desire to preserve the Palestinian heritage and memory of 1948. After all, Palestinian claims of return to lands where Mizrahim were settled severely undermines Mizrahi righteousness and memory-against ‘the people’. Of course there is no straight answer. What is clear is that the will to memory is intimately connected, both psychologically and materially (a connection the makers of the series Salah willingly choose to ignore), to the Palestinian question and to the question of the decolonization and the final status of Israel-Palestine. Such memory work that connects people’s genealogies rather than separates them is not, and can never be, either a state project or censored by the state, which is why it is both radical and radically open.

Epilogue

Elaborating on Hannah Arendt’s thoughts on the concept of the people, her biographer and close friend Margaret Canovan traces four categories that Arendt comes up with to describe the difference between what Arendt considers ‘real people’ — conceptually and phenomenologically — and ‘non-people’, for which she reserves disparaging terms such as ‘the Mob’, ‘the Masses’, and the ‘nationalist tribe’ in The Origins of Totalitarianism and the ‘starving multitude’ in On Revolution. For Canovan, the most important distinction Arendt makes is between people who are united around mutual goals (‘world’ in Arendt’s terminology) but still capable of retaining difference and plurality, and fascist mobilization, people acting as one or mobilizing around racist ideologies that proclaim them superior to others. The more noble sort of peoplehood of the first kind is actually extremely rare for Arendt, and the more common phenomenon is that of mobilized mobs, masses, tribes, and starving multitudes. Yet a recurrence or sudden formation of ‘real people’ is always a historical possibility. In that, Canovan argues, Arendt is a ‘populist’ who believes not in permanent entities with distinct memberships but in the diffuse and always available political possibility of a republican version of the people emerging: ‘the people’ is not in itself a democratic concept, but it can always potentially democratize (Canovan 2002). Stubbornly sticking to this possibility, I have explored the democratic potential of Mizrahi claims to peoplehood and their radical democratic imagination. I argued that there is no clear trajectory to the memory surge, neither in the direction of generating fascist mobilizations nor in the ‘good’ or democratizing direction. The surge simply plays out in the realm of a politics of reclaiming, recognition, and memory-production. Devoid of immediately apparent practical implications, I therefore argued that rather than treating it as ‘collective memory’ we should see it as indicative of an alive and well Mizrahi will — a will...
which remains wholly unsatisfied and is heavily repressed – to come to terms with what happened in the 1950s and their discrimination by the state.

The potential of the current memory surge to develop into a real challenge to the existing Zionist hegemony must not be exaggerated, however. As ‘people’ Mizrahi are a sociological and political enigma, to recall Rosanvallon, that the current political landscape in Israel barely reflects. It is an enigma that has not yet found a power or a unified political expression. The story of Holon allowed a glimpse into the messy picture of the formative years, introducing complexity to the entire righteous story of Mizrahi grievance and victimhood. It is a reminder that remembering the 1950s can also generate conformity to Zionist myth-making that sanctions the erasure and disappearance of the Palestinian people. Another aspect of its de-democratizing power is fantasies of Mizrahi exclusive superiority (in an obvious inversion of Mizrahi genealogy) that expose the extent to which the contemporary Mizrahi struggle is a fantastic playground for the extreme right. Unfortunately, memory as a phenomenon of power is much more easily identifiable than its elusive emancipatory impulses. It is much more difficult to pinpoint what is democratic about it.

This chapter’s case study points at the way memory work is interwoven with a bifurcated concept of ‘the people’ and hence both populistically democratizing and subject to de-democratizing right-wing appropriations at the same time. It explored the desire to both disrupt a social unity and affirm it through the work of memory, hence memory-of and memory-against ‘the people’. In particular, against the dominant perception that the Zionism and the state of Israel emancipated the Jews and enabled them to establish a democratic polity, this chapter dealt with the authoritarianism of a Eurocentric state in the past and its continued democratic insult to its non-European ‘people’, 40 percent of the Jewish society in the present. Canovan reminds us that while ‘the people’ is a dangerous myth no matter what context, it is still a necessary one for democratic struggles. And so, too, the case of Israel-Palestine with all its excesses of nationalism and claims to peoplehood ought not to damn it. The way forward, in other words, is dependent on our will to remember the story of ‘the people’ in ways that resist memory’s obvious foreclosures.

Notes

1 The influential Mizrahi blog Haokets engages in such analysis regularly. See especially all essays by Shoshana Gabay, and more recently the eye-opening critiques of right-wing political appropriations by Omri Najad (in Hebrew, though some articles may be also available in English), see www.haokets.org.

2 This is from the introduction to a booklet dedicated to Shohat’s (1988) essay, issued by the Alternative Information Center in Hebrew in 1999. The booklet features Ella Shohat, Mothe Behar, and Zvi Ben-Dor and first appeared in English as special supplement of the Alternative Information Center’s journal News From Within Vol. XIII, No. 1, 1997.


4 Linking the dispossession of Palestinians and of Arab-Jews rather than treating it as a domestic or ‘internal’ issue was the breakthrough analytical framework in Shohat’s work in the late 1980s, and it is central in works of Lavie, Behar, Ben-Dor, Shenhav, and others. This chapter builds on the pioneers of Mizrahi studies, and I wish to thank Ella Shohat especially for commenting extensively on an earlier draft.

5 The name ‘Salah’ is a common Arab first name, the name of the father of the series maker David Deryi. It is also a reference to the famous Israeli film directed by Efraim Kishon in 1962, Salah Shabati, whose protagonist is a Mizrahi patriarch – Salah – who lands with his family in one of the ma’abarot. On the film and its history, reception, and critical analysis, see Shohat (1989).

6 The case of the township Kiryat Shmona, whose early beginning was the Halasa ma’abara in the upper Galilee on the northern border with Lebanon, is a fascinating example of what I mean by disenfranchising at the time. The Galilee was depopulated of Palestinians and was politically dominated by kibbutzim organized into regional councils. At first the kibbutzim pushed back against the pressures of central planners to send new immigrants to the region. When they finally conceded to play a role in the national goal of ‘scattering’, they dominated both the plan and its execution. Their leadership established the Halasa ma’abara and determined the number of immigrants and its boundaries. The ‘representative’ of the ma’abara vis-à-vis state agencies was a member of the kibbutz. The relation between the township and its surrounding kibbutzim is historically fraught with tension and animosity. Amir Goldstein depicted it in detail (see Goldstein 2017). Goldstein also initiated a permanent exhibition in Kiryat Shmona museum in recognition of the ma’abara founding families, framing the population as Habutzim (pioneers). For another important Zionist Mizrahi perspective on the scattering policy, see the work of Avi Picard. In Picard account (2010, in Hebrew), the lack of pioneering will of the veterans is described on p. 116; see also fn. 24.

7 See Adriana Kemp (2002, in Hebrew). Sociologist Eitan Cohen (2008, in Hebrew) suggested looking at the phenomenon of mostly Moroccan Jews remaining put in development towns from a culturally sensitive perspective. He deemed it a form of active resistance to the settling-establishment to actually stay put. According to him, Moroccans in particular were traditionally anti-authoritarian and particularly defiant of the Mapai regime. The distance from any central authority enabled a collective escape from state control, Cohen argues. Those who stayed were thus uniquely able to sustain a Moroccan ways of life and spirituality against the erasure of Zionism and the pressures of Israeli mandatory secular culture. For a political economy analysis, see also Guy Ben Porat (2013).

8 Raam Alkabes began this interview, 21 June 2015.

9 There seems to be a wealth of visual and other traces of the ma’abarot in Zionist and city archives. I suspect that this extensive state visual documentation exists because in the 1950s the ma’abarot were presented proudly to sponsors as evidence of the heroic effort to build the new state, and Holon was considered a model city for it.

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