

Seventh Conversation

Chapter Eleven: J'accuse 1999



Precis

This chapter deals with the rise of the Oriental Jews (Mizrachim) in a process that began in the early 1970's but rose to its zenith in the 90's and the first years of the new millennium. Most chapters in this book do not have one star figure, but in this chapter, there is no mistaking the star, Aryeh Deri, the founder and old-new leader of the Shas party, the traditional/Charedi Mizrahi political party that first appeared in 1984 winning four seats in the Knesset, a number that had grown to 17 seats (450,000 votes) by 1999.

Shas was the first major Mizrahi political party. It rode on a ticket of ethnic Mizrahi pride and traditional religious observance - everything that pre and early state Zionism was not. Deri, whose meteoric rise to power electrified the society as a whole, was later jailed for corruption. Shavit's story and interview with Deri tries to understand what that rise and fall represented to the community of non-Ashkenazi Jews in Israel.

Supplemented by an extra narrative from T.V talk host and journalist Gal Gabai, also Mizrahit but more secular and modern than the Shas constituency, Shavit realizes how deep the Deri phenomenon struck into the hearts and souls of this large disenfranchised community. The rise of Shas the party and Deri the individual created a new point of identification and pride for many Mizrachim whose family traditions had been alienated from mainstream Zionism, historically reserved for Ashkenazim.

Gabai felt betrayed by his corruption. She suggests that he was a role model and a point of identification and through his own personal faults he fell and disappointed. In so doing, she suggests, he condemned his whole constituency back to the ranks of the negative stereotypes they had been so keen to break. The breakthrough remained, at least partially, virtual. The revolution had not been completed.

Quotations and Questions

“Now secular Israelis are afraid that Shas will change the secular character of the state. They call themselves Zionists, but they are not really Zionists. Their movement is a movement of heresy. They see our fathers and mothers as primitives. They want to convert them. They sent them to remote towns and villages where life was hard. They gave their children a good-for-nothing education. Until we came and began taking care of all these people who were suffering in all these remote places. That’s why they are afraid of us. That’s why they persecute us. And this persecution is both ethnic and religious. But the more they humiliate us, the more we will grow. We shall change the character of the State of Israel.”

- ◆ Does this sound like Deri is calling for reform or revolution?
- ◆ Can Deri be heard as constructive or destructive?

“There is one thing that does make me angry: the spiritual aspect of absorption. When it built the immigrant camps, the housing estates and the remote factories, Labor had no malice in its heart. But in spiritual matters it certainly did. The veteran Ashkenazim of Labor thought that most of the people who emigrated from the Arab world were primitive and therefore had to be put through a process of secular European indoctrination. The melting pot was a Western melting pot that was supposed to totally transform us. Those Labor Ashkenazim didn’t honor our civilization. They didn’t see the beauty of our tradition. That’s why they severed us from our roots and our heritage. That was a terrible, vicious mistake. What these people did was to destroy, not build. They took the soul we had and did not give us another in its place. And since they didn’t really give us a new culture or identity they left us with nothing. Facing extreme economic and physical hardship, we found ourselves standing in the world spiritually naked.”

- ◆ Deri’s accusation of spiritual emptiness echoes that of the settlers in chapter eight. In what you have read of Shavit’s account so far, do you believe there is something to this accusation?
- ◆ Bearing in mind Shavit’s expectation that Zionism will ensure the continuity of non-orthodox Jewry, how do you respond to Deri’s critique?

“Only then, in office, did I truly leave the closed world of ultra-Orthodox Judaism and come to know Israeli society. And suddenly I realized that of the hundreds of municipalities I was responsible for, the weak ones were almost all Arabic or Oriental. I suddenly realized that most of the suffering in Israel is Oriental suffering. In every remote development town I visited, I found neglect. In every impoverished neighborhood, I found Oriental Jews who had lost their pride and their identity. I found communities destroyed, families torn apart, their honor and tradition taken away, and the spark in their eyes extinguished. While on the surface Israel was thriving, just below the surface there was an Israel that was fatherless and rabbi-less and hopeless.”

- ♦ Mizrachim still make up the lion's share of Jews in Israel's jails, and are a tiny minority of Israel's academia. Is this account of Mizrachi Jews' experience in Israel new to you?

When I listen to Wallerstein and Etzion, I realize that they did not have a well-defined doctrine regarding the Israel did a favor to those it extracted from the Orient. The Jews there had no real future... Had they stayed, they would have been annihilated. But forcing them to forgo their identity and culture was foolhardy, callous, and cruel. To this day, many Oriental Israelis are not aware of what Israel saved them from: a life of misery and backwardness in an Arab Middle East that turned ugly. To this day Israel is not aware of the pain it inflicted when it crushed the culture and identity of the Oriental Jews it absorbed. Neither Zionist Israel nor its Oriental population has fully recognized the traumas of the 1950s and 1960s. Neither has yet found a way to honor it and contain it—and make peace with it. This is why the wound lingers on.

- ♦ Shavit would seem to be in danger of calling Mizrachim ignorant and ungrateful. Is this a fair assessment of his comments? And if so, does this strike you as a useful tone?
- ♦ Shavit offers an interesting opposition: “Zionist Israel” as opposed to “its Oriental population”. Where do you think this places Mizrahi Jews in the Zionist narrative?

“There was a feeling that there was something wrong with us, with Oriental Jews,” Gabai says. “That there was something tainted and inferior. That’s why we bowed down to the Ashkenazis and abased ourselves before them. There was a subtle, complicated sort of self-loathing, a deep unease with one’s self. Until Deri came and proved that we could stand tall and proud—walk among the Ashkenazis as equals. Deri brought North African Jewish tradition to center stage. He said we were just as good, if not better... He let us lift our heads high...He meant we could succeed in the West without betraying the East.”

- ♦ Do you recognize any parallels of the Deri story with other stories of minorities in your country?
- ♦ How do you think that telling the Mizrachi story through the “metaphor” of Deri colors the Mizrachi strand in the Zionist narrative? What might it expose in the way Mizrachim continue to be viewed?

Additional Sources

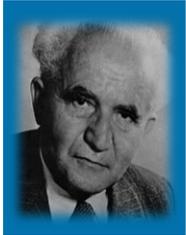


Here are three additional sources that you might want to use in your discussion.

The first source is a poem by Israeli poet, Erez Biton, born in Algeria in 1942. Written in the 1970's, the poem talks of the failed attempt of a Mizrahi man to find acceptance in Israeli society. He opens a shop in the fashionable Dizengoff street, full as it was then of many Tel Aviv society coffee shops, including the Café Roval.

I bought a shop on Dizengoff to strike some roots to buy some roots
to find a spot at the Roval but
the crowd at the Roval I ask myself
who are these folks at the Roval,
what's with these people at the Roval,
what's going on with the people at the Roval,
I don't face the people at the Roval
but when the people at the Roval turn to me
I unsheathe my tongue with clean words,
Yes, sir, please, sir,
very-up-to-date Hebrew,
and the buildings looming over me here tower over me here,
and the openings open here are impenetrable for me here.
At dusk I pack my things in the shop on Dizengoff
to head back to the outskirts
and another Hebrew.

From "Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing" ed. Ammiel Alcalay (City Lights 1996)



The second piece comes from a speech made by David Ben Gurion (1886-1973) in 1951 about the need to build the nation by replacing the identity of the hundreds of thousands of new immigrants with the new pioneering (Ashkenazi) identity that for him and so many others, marked the desirable identity of the new, secular, Israeli. The speech was aimed at all of the immigrants from post-Holocaust Europe and from the Arab world, but as Gal Gabai suggests in the chapter, in many ways it was easier for the European immigrants to find their way in the new society.

The immigrants must be taught our language and a knowledge of the land... They must conceive what the first settlers did with their bare hands... Being privileged to enter Israel, the newcomers must be told that they too must toil; if perhaps, less than their forerunners... We must melt down this fantastically diversified assembly and make it afresh in the die of a renewed nationhood. We must break down the barriers of geography and culture of society and speech, which keep the different sections apart and endow them with a single language, a single culture, a single citizenship, a single loyalty, with new legislation and new laws. We must give them a new spirit, a culture and literature, science and art.

David Ben Gurion, 1951



The third piece is taken from “In the Land of Israel” by Amos Oz (born 1939) on Israeli society in the early 1980’s. Here is a conversation that he reports from an encounter with Mizrahi second generation Israelis in the (then) poor Israeli town of Bet Shemesh.

“Really, think about this. When I was a little kid, my kindergarten teacher was white and her assistant was black. In school, my teacher was Iraqi and the principal was Polish. On the construction site where I worked; my supervisor was some redhead from Solel Boneh [the government building company]! At the clinic the nurse is Egyptian and the doctor Ashkenazi. In the army, we Moroccans are the corporals and the officers are from the kibbutz. All my life I’ve been on the bottom and you’ve been on top. I’ll tell you what shame is: they gave us houses, they gave us the dirty work: they gave us education, and they took away our self-respect. What did they bring my parents to Israel for? I’ll tell you what for, but you won’t write this. You’ll think it’s just provocation, but wasn’t it to do your dirty work? You didn’t have Arabs then, so you needed our parents to do your cleaning and be your servants and your laborers. You brought our parents to be your Arabs. You brought a million donkeys here to ride on, but they should live in the stables, far away from your houses. So our stink won’t reach your living room. That’s what you did. Sure, you gave us food and a roof over our heads—you do that much for a donkey—but far away from your children.”

Amos Oz 1982. From “In the Land of Israel” (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1983)

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you might want to have a look at...

<http://makomisrael.org/blog/mizrachim-in-israel/>

<http://www.euronews.com/2013/10/07/tributes-paid-to-rabbi-ovadia-yosef-founder-of-israel-s-shas-party-and-leader-of-sephardic-jews/>