

17.21x19.67	1	5	עמוד	haaretz-front	11/01/2018	61830437-2
בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לציונות - 80790						

Uri Avnery

Why I'm mad at the Mizrahim

I'm angry with the Mizrahi elite. Genuinely angry. In today's Israel, the hostility between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews is growing. It's not exaggerating to say it's the most salient attribute of contemporary Israeli society, more than the difference between Jews and Arabs, rich and poor, men and women or right and left. Before I continue, let me state (for the umpteenth time) my part in this.

My last years as a child in Germany were overshadowed by the swastika, the last six months under Nazi rule. I came to hate Germany and everything German. So when our ship approached Jaffa, I was overjoyed. I had just turned 10, and in 1933 Jaffa was in every respect Germany's polar opposite: noisy, human, smelling of exotic spices. I loved everything about it.

Years later I heard that the early Zionist "pioneers" who arrived in Arab Jaffa hated it on sight. One visitor to Jaffa was the founder of Zionism, Theodor Herzl, who never intended to bring Jews to Palestine. On his only visit, he hated its Oriental character. He preferred Patagonia (the relevant chapter in "The Jewish State" is called "Palestine or Argentina?").

During my military service, in the 1948 War of Independence, I was promoted to the lofty rank of squad commander. I had to choose between new immigrants

from Poland or from Morocco. I chose the Moroccans, and they saved my life: As I lay wounded, exposed to the enemy, four of them risked their own lives to rescue me under fire.

It was then that I got a foretaste of things to come. One time we had a few precious hours of leave. While climbing into the truck to Tel Aviv, a few of my soldiers refused. "The girls in Tel Aviv don't want to go out with us," they complained. "They say we're black."

I became very sensitive to this problem, even when everyone else denied its existence. In 1954, as editor of the news magazine HaOlam HaZeh, I published a series, "Screwing over the Blacks," that exposed the discrimination and caused a stir. I was accused of fabrication, people said it didn't exist. The few Ashkenazim who didn't already hate me began to hate me.

Years have passed, a new generation is here. The Mizrahi-Ashkenazi conflict dominates many aspects of our lives, but people generally don't like talking about it openly. For example, the great majority of Likud voters are Mizrahim, although the party leaders are Ashkenazi. The Labor Party, in contrast, is almost entirely Ashkenazi. It recently chose a Mizrahi leader, in the vain hope that this will change Mizrahi attitudes to it.

My opposition to discrimination against Mizrahim

was rooted in my desire for justice and the dream for all of us, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, to merge into a single Hebrew nation. But I must admit to another motive.

I have always believed that Israel has no future as a foreign island in the sea of Middle Eastern nations ("villa in the jungle"). I don't stop at peace. I dream of Israel blending into the "Semite region" (a term I coined 70 years ago).

How? I had great hopes of the second or third generation of Mizrahim remembering that its forebears were an integral part of the Islamic Golden Age, that they would act as a bridge between the new Hebrew nation and its Palestinian neighbors and the entire Muslim world. It seemed natural to me for Mizrahim to recall their glorious heritage, the time when Jews in Iraq, Spain, Egypt and other Muslim countries were full partners in a flourishing civilization — while most Europeans were still savages.

Educated Jews — philosophers, mathematicians, poets and physicians — were partners in that civilization, alongside their Muslim counterparts. When European Jews were subject to daily persecution, forced to live in ghettos, expelled from country after country while facing the terrible Inquisition, Jews (and Christians) in Muslim countries enjoyed full rights. They were accorded the status of "peoples

of the Book" (the Hebrew Bible), with full rights apart from exemption from the military. Instead, they paid a special tax. Pogroms were rare.

The erasure of Mizrahi Jewish culture is pervasive. Israeli children of Mizrahi descent no nothing about the authors and philosophers in their past. They don't know that the Crusaders who conquered the Holy Land massacred Jews and Muslims alike, and that Jews and Muslims defended Jerusalem and Haifa together. Rabbi Moses Maimonides (the Rambam) is well-known, but only as an important rabbi, not as the friend and personal physician of the great Muslim leader Salah al-Din. Israeli streets are named after Medieval Spanish Jewry's great intellectuals; few people know who they were and none of them appears on our paper currency.

The pinnacle of this phenomenon is in the area of religion. Israel's important "Sephardi" rabbis dress as Lithuanian rabbis did centuries ago. The late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, an authentic Mizrahi Jew, was an exception. His political heir, Arye Dery, wears the wide-brimmed hat of Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Still, I'm optimistic. I believe a fourth and fifth generation will arise, struggling not only for equality but also for peace and integration into the region. If God wills it, as they say.