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: Time to change the narrative in Zionist education

# Time to change the narrative in Zionist education

• By ASHLEY PERRY

As we mark the Day of Commemoration for the Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries and Iran, there is a growing recognition that something fundamental is missing in the way we teach Jewish and Zionist history. Whether in Israeli schools or in Jewish classrooms across the Diaspora, the dominant historical curriculum still centers almost entirely on the European Jewish experience.

Zionism is taught as a movement that arose in the late 19th century among Jews in Central and Eastern Europe, and the story of return to the Land of Israel is framed through the familiar sequence of First to Fifth Aliyah, each defined by arrivals from Europe. What is rarely mentioned is that these aliyot do not reflect the whole story of Jewish return, or even its earliest chapters.

The standard textbooks still treat the Jews of the Middle East and the Mediterranean as if they simply arrived after 1948, as refugees who needed to be absorbed into a project created elsewhere. Yet many of these communities lived for centuries with a deeply rooted practical attachment to Zion, expressed not through ideological pamphlets or congresses but through active aliyah, political organizing, and attempts at sovereignty.

Rabbis Jacob Berab, Yehuda Bibas, and Yehuda Alkalai, and Dona Gracia, were all practical Zionists, working actively toward Jewish political sovereignty in the centuries before the first World Zionist Congress. Theodor Herzl stood on the shoulders of these pioneers, and his ideas for a Jewish state can be traced directly to them.

The modern cities of Tel Aviv, Rishon Lezion, Petah Tikva, Gadera, Rehovot, and others were first populated or bought by Jews from the Middle East, frequently decades before Ashkenazim arrived en masse.

Their aliyah was not a reaction to Herzl or European antisemitism but the natural expression of a continuous Jewish connection to the land. They did not need to be taught Zionism because it was already baked into their Jewish lives.

Jews across the Middle East and the Mediterranean, including in the Land of Israel, held

familial, political, religious, and national ties to each other. Many of the most important figures of the Medieval period and beyond lived in multiple countries, including in the Land of Israel, demonstrating how physically fluid and integrated these communities were.

UNFORTUNATELY, IN our modern Zionist narrative, the story of the Jews of Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Yemen, and other lands, is routinely reduced to a single chapter: the dramatic and often traumatic departure in the 1940s and 1950s when rising antisemitism, persecution, and state-sponsored expulsions pushed nearly a million Jews to flee. That story deserves to be taught fully, yet it is only half the picture.

It overlooks the fact that many of these communities had always understood themselves as part of the wider story of the Land of Israel, and saw their migration not as an uprooting, but as a homecoming. The idea that Jews from Baghdad, Fez, Djerba, or Sana'a had to be "Zionized" is historically false and culturally insulting. They saw themselves as children of Jerusalem even when they did not live there.

The erasure of this history has consequences. In Israel, it reinforces the perception that Zionism is essentially an Ashkenazi project, with Mizrahi or Sephardi Jews entering the story only at the stage of absorption and social struggle.

Those who begin the story of Zionism with Herzl unconsciously play into this narrative and present a shallow understanding of Jewish history. Every day, the articles and books being written, as well as the conferences and initiatives organized on and about Zionism, only begin in Europe in the 1890s, with nary an understanding or the ability to move beyond this standard.

We need a new educational framework, not a supplemental paragraph. The story of Jewish return must begin not only in Basel, Odessa, and Kishinev but in Sana'a, Baghdad, Tlemcen, and Shiraz. The chapters of aliyah should not be taught merely as numbered European waves but as a tapestry of Jewish returns across continents and centuries.

The words "ingathering of the

exiles" take on an entirely different meaning when students learn that Jewish communities from the Middle East and North Africa were not late arrivals to the Zionist idea but bearers of a Zionism expressed through action toward regaining Jewish sovereignty in Israel, practical steps, including mass immigration, and the constant utilization of the Hebrew language, even on the streets of the cities in the Land of Israel, long before Herzl wrote *The Jewish State* or Eliezer Ben-Yehuda "invented" modern Hebrew.

That change begins with textbooks, but it does not end there. It belongs in Jewish day schools in New York, Toronto, and Paris, where Jewish students rarely learn that half of Israel's Jewish population descends from communities that never lived in Europe.

It belongs in teacher training colleges, in youth movement programs, in Birthright itineraries, and in Israeli civics classes. It belongs in synagogue sermons, Zionist conferences, and Jewish museums. It belongs in the curriculum because it already belongs in the truth.

On this day of commemoration, we must remember the trauma of expulsion and dispossession that uprooted Jewish life across the Arab world and Iran in the mid-20th century.

We must also remember something else. These Jews did not come to Israel as strangers. Their history is Zionist history, even if it has not yet been written that way, and that specific term was not known to them.

The time has come to correct that record – not for the sake of political balance or identity politics, but for the sake of historical honesty and Jewish unity. It is also a powerful antidote to those who claim that Zionism is a form of European colonialism.

To tell the full story of the Jewish people is not merely an obligation to the past. It is an investment in the future of Jewish belonging.

*The writer is a former senior government adviser and international campaigns and communications strategist. He is also the president of Reconectar and has worked on the issue of recognition and redress for the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in the Knesset, the government, and around the world.*