

Intersections of Antisemitism, Racism, and Nationalism: A Sephardi/Mizrahi Perspective

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To describe antisemitism, imagine a triangle with the white European Christian elite on top, some European Jews in the middle, and those with less money and/or racial privilege on the bottom. When those on the bottom are dissatisfied with the status quo, they look directly above them to those who are being used as agents to implement and carry out policies responsible for their oppression. This is why white Jews have been perceived as socially and economically privileged regardless of their class position. Rather than addressing the ruling class's policies as the problem, white or white-passing Jews in the middle are blamed for the oppression of the lower classes. Jews are used to divert the anger of the oppressed away from the ruling elites, which has repeatedly led to direct violence against Jews in Europe whether by collective punishment, expulsion, or attempted genocide. This serves the ruling class well, because they are not targeted. The elites can then remain in place until the next group is used for scapegoating. This is primarily an Ashkenazi Jewish experience. Jewish discourse sometimes gives a false impression that antisemitism operates alone, that it is not interdependent with other systems. Though my Sephardic Jewish ancestors experienced antisemitism in Christian Spain, it was part of a Christian- and European-centered orientalist ideology that was directed at Muslims as well. Focusing on a European Christian context also fails to give a sense of Sephardic Jewish lives in Muslim and Arab lands. Nor does this history address the kinds of Jewish orientalist and racist thinking that determines which Jewish people are worthy of power and which are seen as inferior. It is imperative that we understand our safety as deeply linked to combating racism, white supremacy, and Christian hegemony.

Antisemitism does not operate alone. It only exists in the context of other oppressions, since its purpose is to act as a pressure valve for the anger of the oppressed majority. In Europe this was about white Christian peasants and workers. In the United States, the racialized class system means that it's integrated into white supremacy, but it is also used to divert the anger of white working-class Christian people while the Christian ruling class gets off unscathed. As a Sephardic/Mizrahi Jew I was taught that there was only enough room to be a victim of antisemitism, not racism or Orientalism. I internalized a specific Jewish victim point of view. The discrimination I experienced was minimized and my history erased. Growing up, I understood clearly that I had a limited space in which to be a Jew, which did not sit right with me. I had many family members who perished in the Holocaust, and in my experience attending a Jewish day school, antisemitism and attempted genocides of Jewish people were central themes that we learned from early childhood. But I could never explain the targeting I felt from within my community. I knew to be wary of the outside world, but as a young person I did not expect the constant dislocation because of my Sephardic identity. Yet I was proud to be Jewish because I was Sephardic. The Atlanta Jewish world where I grew up was inconsistent; it claimed to be an accepting community while it denied my heritage and experiences. Ashkenazim enjoyed our food, made fun of our superstitions, occasionally appropriated our prayers or traditions, and even commented jokingly in racist and hurtful ways about our "inferiority"—they actually still do this; even close family friends of mine are guilty. Meanwhile, this marginalization gave me insight and a feeling of connection with Palestinians who resist and struggle against discrimination and

oppression. Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews continue to be targeted in visible and invisible ways by both antisemitism and Orientalism/racism.

Mainstream US and Israeli Ashkenazi consciousness is not concerned with identifying and addressing orientalist and racist behavior, attitudes, and actions with the same rigor and hypervigilance as they do antisemitism. This indifference can produce a lack of sympathy for claims against antisemitism and also further marginalize Jews of color, including Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews, as well as non-Jews of color because Ashkenazi dominance is not disrupted. When Jewish fear is used to justify strategies of domination toward non-white Jews and other people of color, I believe white Jewish people, in some way, lose their right to claim a victim status. Being vigilant about racism is a critical component of addressing antisemitism.

Antisemitism, Palestine, and the Mizrahi Question

Tallie Ben Daniel

I want to offer an alternative narrative to the one so roughly outlined above: A Jewish community develops in Iraq after the destruction of the Temple and for thousands of years flourishes in the major metropolitan areas. Jewish Iraqis are found in nearly every sector of society, while maintaining a unique cultural and religious identity. They have deep cultural connections to other Jewish communities, notably in India and France. When the British colonize Iraq after World War I, anti-Jewish sentiment is imported along with a different set of colonial hierarchies. In 1941, the Jews of Baghdad experience the farhud, an anti-Jewish riot that was, according to historian Orit Bashkin, a result of “German propaganda disseminated into the Iraqi print market,” “an intense debate among intellectuals concerning Nazism and fascism,” and the general conflation of Zionism with Judaism in a nationalist, postcolonial era of Iraqi politics. After the State of Israel is established in 1948, a backdoor deal with the government of Iraq expels the Jews from Iraq, making them leave their possessions behind; they are then put in refugee camps (ma’abarot) and are marginalized as uncivilized, too close to the Arab neighbors of Israel in language, culture, and demeanor. Israeli identity continually valorizes Western European Jewish culture in all segments of society, including the anti-occupation left. The experiences of Iraqi Jews are unique, but they connect to the experiences of Jews from Yemen, Syria, Egypt, Iran, India, Morocco, and other Middle Eastern and North African countries in that they are continually marked as “other” in Israeli society. The term “Mizrahi” is symbolic of that otherness—a Hebrew term that translates literally to “eastern.” While Mizrahi Jews constitute a majority of Jewish Israeli society, Ashkenazi Jewish culture and history dominates. Mizrahi Jews are told that the history of European Jews is the history of all Jews, everywhere.

The narrative above may be just as overly simplified as the one I began with, but I am using it to make the following point—that when talking about antisemitism, one cannot focus only on the experiences of white Ashkenazi Jews. To do so is to contribute to the ongoing erasure of Mizrahi Jews in Jewish communities in the United States and in Israel, and to perpetuate the idea that European Jewish history is the history of all Jews. At the same time, it is equally problematic to assume that antisemitism as it presented in Europe can be “found” in the histories of Mizrahi Jews. In some cases, when we start with the assumption that antisemitism is a natural and eternal part of the Jewish condition, or the human condition, it can lead to orientalizing the Mizrahi experience, by attempting to “discover” the equivalent of a pogrom or a ghetto in Mizrahi history, essentially analyzing Mizrahi history through the lens of European history. We assume that the status of Iraqi Jews in the early twentieth century must have been similar to those of Polish, German, or Bavarian Jews, when in fact, they were living in a totally different political context, and grappling with totally different histories. If one focuses only on antisemitism as the primary, or only, way Jews have been oppressed throughout time, and define antisemitism through the events of European exclusion and discrimination, then one is perpetuating a Eurocentric understanding of history and erasing the exploitation of Mizrahi Jews at the hands of Ashkenazi Jews.

Attempts to theorize antisemitism “from the left” equally ignore the impact of whiteness and white supremacy on Jewish communities. In the past few years, I’ve come

across a common theory of antisemitism in leftist organizing that often perpetuates Mizrahi erasure and assumes that all Jewish people are white and of European descent. For the purposes of this essay, I'm going to focus on one iteration of this theory, April Rosenblum's 2007 zine, "The Past Didn't Go Anywhere: Making Resistance to Antisemitism a Part of All Our Movements." I chose this zine because it is incredibly popular in leftist spaces, and precisely because it tries—and fails—to think about the experiences of Mizrahi Jews and Jews of color.

Who am I to Speak?

Aurora Levins Morales

Because I have sifted and compared my own experiences as a mixed heritage Jew of color, it's more than an intellectual exercise for me when I hold racism and anti-Jewish oppression, one in each hand, and weigh them, when I watch them move through the world, distorting the air around them, when I recognize their behaviors, their camouflages. Racism is like a millstone, a crushing weight that relentlessly presses down on people intended to be a permanent underclass. Its purpose is to press profit from us, right to the edge of extermination and beyond. The oppression of Jews is a shunt that redirects the rage of working people away from the 1%, a hidden mechanism that works through misdirection, that uses privilege to hide the gears. Unlike as with racism, at least some of the targets of antisemitism must be seen to prosper, must be well paid and highly visible. The goal is not to crush us, it's to have us available for crushing. The white, male Christian rulers use us to administer their power and set us up in the window displays of capitalism for the next time the poor pick up stones to throw. What is hard for the angry multitudes to see is that Jews don't succeed in spite of our oppression, but as part of it. We are kept insecure by our history of sudden assaults, and as a strategy of survival, some of us accept the bribes of privilege and protection offered to us. Bestowing privilege on a visible segment of us is the only way to make the system work. Then, when the wrath of the most oppressed, whether Russian peasants starving on potatoes or urban US people of color pressed to the wall, reaches boiling point, there we are: the Tsar's tax collector, the shopkeeper and the pawnbroker, the landlord and lawyer, social worker and school administrator. And whether it's a Polish aristocrat watching the torches go by on pogrom or the Episcopalian banker discreetly out of sight while working class people tell each other that Jews control the economy, the trick works. Agent of the rulers, scapegoat for their crimes. This was our history in Europe.