

My Father at Seventy-Nine

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A few weeks ago I sat in a coffee shop with the writer Nurit Zarchi, who knows me from about the age of five: both of us hail from that terrible city, Petach Tikva. While the two of us were talking, an old acquaintance of Nurit approached our table and wanted to know if I was Ronit Matalon, the writer. Then she immediately launched into a confession: She said that she counts herself among the well-established Israeli "Mayflower" elite who was brought up to ignore and disparage Oriental Jews (Sephardic Jews from Arab countries). She admitted that she started to read my book "The One Facing Us" only out of a kind of anthropological curiosity and intense desire to introduce herself to the Jewish Oriental reality. To her surprise, she said, she found that the book was simply good literature and wanted very much to tell me this personally. Silence reigned for a while. Nurit spoke first and said: "You know, Ronit's parents were also "Mayflower" people; a different "Mayflower" but a "Mayflower" just the same." Again there was silence but this was a different kind, like the stillness after the act. I smiled, mainly in order to hide my excitement over the simple, uninhibited solidarity that Nurit had extended to me. For two minutes I even thought, this time I've escaped. But from what and from whom?

This is the real point, I thought to myself: to escape from the iron fist of racism, with or without kid gloves, in order to wind up right smack in the middle of the Zionist pioneering vision, the "Mayflower"??

This "Mayflower" thing is not simple at all when it comes to the Jewish Oriental context, not simple at all. Sometimes it seems to me that all of us Orientals are gripped in a no-win situation regarding what may be called "our place in the Zionist enterprise." We waver between the diametrically opposed intellectual and historical possibilities: Do we play the game or remain outside it, are we victims of the Zionist enterprise or its unsung heroes, were we brainwashed as babies away from our real heritage or were we true associates of Zionism and trailblazers? In other words, are we also "Mayflower" people or are we something else, with a different genealogy altogether? In conclusion, we ask: If, indeed, we *are* the "Mayflower," then in what sense?

I went to consult with my father on this important matter. My father, Felix Matalon, is a veteran activist in his own right for the Jewish Oriental case. He has been living for a number of years in protected housing for the elderly in the Shchunat Hatikva [neighborhood], courtesy of the local project for urban renewal, and communicates directly with the American contributors. A strong, innate distrust prevents him from communicating with anyone who might be a representative of the Israeli establishment—and this includes the Ezra U'Bitzron Company that maintains the place, the social workers or relief workers of the Tel Aviv municipality—but he wastes no time in writing to America on any and all matters, to unfold his shopping lists of defects and faults.

My father really liked this business about the “Mayflower.” For long minutes I examined his long, gaunt face with the somewhat tortured twitch on his lips, and I thought: What am I doing? What right do I have to come and rip off this medal of honor called the “Mayflower” from his lapel and trample it with my heel, in the name of whatever it is?

I thought to myself that my father, together with Jacqueline Kahanoff and others, acted from a strong perception of elitism. A cultural and social struggle demands heaps of a sense of justice and righteousness but no less, possibly even more—it requires a powerful conception of self worth. It mandates heroes, symbols, ceremonies and even medals. How else can one understand the inflamed emotions of the Orientals and my father among them, when Ehud Barak made his famous pleas for forgiveness, on behalf of the elitist Labor Ashkenazi political party to the “downtrodden” Orientals? It was more than the slogan “Actions, not Words!” that was the root of the indignant Oriental response. This hard kernel of anger was grounded, in my opinion, in casting the Orientals in the stance of the victim. Once more—humiliation, once again—a piece of the sense of self worth was stolen. Again.

This brings me back to the same knotty, desperate dialectic between the Oriental voice and the Zionist enterprise: How can the Orientals speak from a position other than that of the victim, how can they put speech to work for them when they don't share the Zionist image or metaphor in their bloodstreams? Is it even possible?

I learned two models of Oriental speech. Ever since I was old enough to know the difference, I moved between these two models like a pendulum between two objects: My father, Felix Matalon, and the author of novels and essays, Jacqueline Kahanoff.

Both of them reached Israel at the beginning of the 1950's, were not satisfied with what they encountered and expressed their discontent, each in his or her own way. Kahanoff published her essays on the generation of Levantines in the literary periodical “Keshet” under editor-in-chief Aharon Amir, who also translated the periodical into Hebrew. These essays, which were later collected in the book “From the Eastern Sun,” resonated deeply within the community of readers and writers of Keshet, but did not extend further than that. Kahanoff's cultural project, in a nutshell, was the dismantling of the concepts of “Levantine and Levantinization.” In those days the terms had negative overtones, and Kahanoff's aim was to inject them with new, positive meaning. The end result was that Kahanoff succeeded not so much in illuminating the Oriental identity but instead, in laying one of the first building blocks on the question of the Israeli identity from an entirely different perspective. In short, Kahanoff did not delve into the essence of Mizrachism but rather, into the essence of Israelism and what it should be.

Matalon, on the other hand, from his first weeks in Israel dived right into the depths of what he called the “political system.” At the beginning of the 1950's he organized the first “Bread-Work” demonstrations and captured the attention and affection of the late Yigal Allon, who rushed to appoint Matalon as a special advisor for minority affairs. However, Matalon abandoned his new post pretty quickly and traveled to Europe in the hopes of mobilizing supporters and contributions for his political struggle. He went on to serve as reporter for the French newspaper La Monde and as translator for the United Nations. At the beginning of the 1960's Matalon moved to the Shchunat Hatikva neighborhood

in Tel Aviv from ideological motives. He wanted to identify with the plight of the Orientals in the neighborhood and to initiate political activity near them and from within their community. There, in Shchunat Hatikva, Matalon established a political-ideological club with a semi-underground bent called the *Socheba*. (In Arabic, “sochev” means a friend, or the group of friends that surrounded Mohammed the prophet). For many years, Matalon published various bi-lingual journals (Hebrew-French) such as “The Awakener,” “Echo of the Awakener,” and “Connection” that all dealt with the Oriental theme.

Matalon and Kahanoff did not meet one another; there was no reason that their paths should cross, since they both traveled in different circles that were poles apart. Kahanoff attended the literary-intellectual circles whose focus was the Keshet periodical, while my father occupied the dregs of the pot of the political parties and the neighborhoods. Their different viewpoints represented their measures of closeness and distance towards Israelism: while Kahanoff occupied those margins that were closer to the Israeli center and was careful to converse with that center and with its values, my father turned his back on any possibility of dialogue. Instead he retreated to fringes that were so distant, that his only purpose could be to declare war on Israelism and its representatives.

My father and Jacqueline Kahanoff share a few similarities and an abyss of differences. These discrepancies were expressed in tremendous gaps in political and cultural temperaments, in world outlook, in personality and in gender. They were both born in colonial, pre-Nasser Cairo in the 1920’s, within the community of heterogeneous minorities that created what Jacqueline Kahanoff called the “Levantine man,” that which equally appreciated and valued the two cultures, Eastern and Western. “Within us was a strange blend of pretence together with desperate frankness, an immense thirst for truth and knowledge together with a nebulous desire for revenge. This revenge-wish was directed against the arrogant sovereignty of Europe, on the one hand, and against the Muslim majority that despised the minorities in its midst, on the other,” writes Kahanoff, and adds in irony: “From generosity of the spirit we will achieve a compromise with the Moslem masses, because we will educate them to hygiene and Marxism.”

The key phrase in Kahanoff’s discourse which, in my opinion, symbolizes the difference between her and Felix Matalon and dictates their different political-cultural conclusions is “the Moslem masses.” This is the focal point of their differences in relationship to the Arab-Moslem component of their cultural identity. They chose different ways with which to digest this component, and suggested different cultural proposals as a result.

My father, as opposed to Kahanoff, read and wrote Arabic fluently—an achievement that was not self-evident even in the enlightened Jewish-Egyptian cultural milieu. During his university years in Cairo my father became involved in pro-Nasser and anti-colonial Marxist-Moslem circles. These identifications were not eroded over the years or as a result of moving to Israel—on the contrary. His encounter with Zionism only served to sharpen his former allegiances and even strengthened his affection for Nasser. This is what he wrote about the Sinai Campaign of 1956 in “The Awakener” in the latter years of the 1950’s: “The overthrow of the feudal-monarchic regime as a result of the 1952 revolution in Egypt and the rise of President Nasser to power, was a critical factor in changing a significant portion of the facts on the ground regarding our Pan-Arabic policy, the problem of refugees

and the Palestinian entity. Thus was born a new Bible in the Middle East, Nasserism. The Nasser doctrine spread and progressed throughout the years of Nasser's existence and especially during the beginning of his rule in Egypt, and encompassed thousands of believers and sympathizers in the entire Arab world. In light of this, Ben-Gurionism saw itself as a counter-weight to Nasser and embodied the antithesis of Nasser's doctrine. When attempts at rapprochement between Nasserism and Ben-Gurionism did not bring fruit, all dialogue and attempts to bridge the two sides were abandoned and instead, the cannons roared . . . When taking into account the ethnic background of our region, declaring war on Nasserism was a disaster. In addition—this kind of war carries the seeds of racial animosity.”

This article, which focused on the Sinai Campaign, signaled the beginning of my father's course as a publicist in his various journals, and already established the basic coordinates of his outlook on the Oriental theme. He perceived Israel's involvement in the Sinai Campaign as a colonial act, thus linking Israeli colonialism in the Arab context with the State of Israel's position vis-à-vis Oriental Jews. He insisted on a perspective of discrimination as a political system and not merely as isolated, painful incidents. He was no less stubborn in referring to the “Ben-Gurionism doctrine” and not an “Ashkenazi conspiracy.” Nowhere in his articles did he ever succumb to the temptation of referring to the classic dichotomy of Ashkenazim (European-born Jews) versus Sephardim (Oriental Jews). This was the very essence of racism to him and instead, his watershed of the “good” and the “bad” was represented by Ben-Gurionism and the opponents of Ben-Gurionism.

I contemplated many times about my father's apparent obsession with Ben-Gurion, and how his Oriental perspective took the form of viewing the entire Israeli social-cultural reality through the prism of politics and political power. It seems to me that by focusing the Oriental discourse on the dimensions of political power, he succeeded in avoiding the trap of assuming the position of victim. Thus he was able to appear not as a whiner or malcontent who protests and complains, but instead, as one who analyses a given problem and offers a key for its solution. I have no idea what impression his words made, with their obligatory grandiose notes, on his audience of Oriental readers. His audience was not large: the journals, which he himself funded out-of-pocket, were handed out for free once every month in the kiosks, coffee houses and synagogues, and the responses were muted. For many years my father enjoyed a kind of eccentric halo in Shchunat Hatikva, and because of it he was forgiven everything: they even swallowed his opposition to the conquering of the territories in the Six Day War and his insistence on the necessity of returning them immediately. His pantheon, which included Moshe Sharet (political opponent of Ben-Gurion) and Gamal Abdel Nasser, was enlarged to include one more hero—Professor Yeshayahu Leibovitz, who also advocated the return of the conquered territories.

From the latter years of the 'fifties through the early 'eighties, my father and his Socheba cohorts continued to put out journals that were printed by second-rate printing presses on cheap paper in order to save on expenses. Once, when my father wrote strong words about the Lavon Affair (the exposure of a Jewish sabotage network in Egypt), the authorities forbade the dissemination of the journal and arrested my father for a few days. Yigal Alon paid for my father's bail (so my father claims) and freed

him from arrest. At the same time, he also extricated a promise from my father that he would leave the matter alone and not resume his struggle.

The journals were, in fact, the main form of expression of the ideological-political circle, the Socheba . This is how my father described the group:

“The Socheba was always active in its attempts to bring its message to the wider public. Sometimes the magazine “Echo of the Awakener” would carry our articles. When others wanted and needed us, we made sure to appear and make our presence felt . Our headquarters or staff would function on their feet—that is, while walking or traveling—like soldiers in field conditions. We lived in our communities and were immersed in the poverty and suffering: the people galvanized us and we instructed them on their rights. Our officials would meet in one of the houses in the neighborhood and conclude its discussions on one of the side streets or one of the popular coffee houses in the markets and in the suburbs. We would meet with Socheba colleagues in most parts of the country. They would inquire on what was being done, clarify, and make practical suggestions. The Socheba members were a diverse group and included native-born Sabras, Ashkenazim and members of all the Israeli ethnic groups. We, on the other hand, never related to the issue of party affiliation; it never interested us at all. Every new member had to know one simple thing: that the Socheba represented solutions, and the solutions that we espoused were the solutions to peace—internal peace and external peace.”

Both the Socheba and the journals that my father printed in its name were anomalies even within the context of other Oriental journals. These other journals generally were financed by establishment entities such as the Sephardi Committee or the Jewish Agency. They also ascribed strong links between the Oriental and Arab-Arabic issues. My father totally renounced this connection in practically every article that he wrote, and this served to reduce the influence and dissemination of his journals to the bare minimum. Regarding his Arabic identity, my father realized that even he could not dare cross the red line: hence the journals were written in Hebrew-French and not Hebrew-Arabic. When I asked him about this, he replied: “The Oriental readership might look askance at the Arabic language.”

Jacqueline Kahanoff’s literary works were diametric opposites of my father’s. What were mere tactical considerations for my father became, in Jacqueline Kahanoff’s works, a spiritual center of gravity of tremendous strength and as well as tremendous blindness. Kahanoff’s essay, “Returning to the East,” describes her visit to East Jerusalem immediately after the Six Day War in 1967. Her essay displays the same kind of fusion that she herself would call “Levantine”—in her scathing social-cultural observations regarding the status of women in the East as a kind of litmus test for the entire society, and in her extreme cultural and political short-sightedness regarding the occupation and its repercussions.

“Here,” she writes, “Last summer, masses of Israelis poured into an area that had previously been off-limits. The “morality guards” were shocked at the mass folk hysteria to buy bargains and novelties, thus forgetting that buying and selling are basic forms of communication, the simplest kind. Both sides exchanged smiles and glances as they scrutinized the wares, while the children peeked at each other. Even if nothing was actually said, it is very possible that many women on both side, hoped that with the passage of time, these children would not return to kill each other on the battlefield. The women

revealed a much more developed political sense than the men, and seemed to naturally choose a policy of living together peacefully. But Islam returns to stabilize its domination through the use of men who cannot seem to overcome their resistance to change. Now curiosity turns into hatred and fear. Even though the Fatah is waning from day to day from a military point of view, there is always the chance that it will succeed in impressing its intrinsically backward blueprint of Moslem conformity on the generation that is growing up today. This is exactly what we must oppose when we refer to the children that are growing up side by side, those that still do not exchange a single word.”

Kahanoff’s liberal-humanistic vision places the Eastern woman in its very focal point, but it also co-exists with the tangle of contradictions and contrasts of its identity. Thus this vision serves to impede Kahanoff’s understanding of nationality, national identity, and aggressive confrontation between two national identities. She can afford to say, “The Israelis will bring progress,” only because what really bothers her is what she calls the “intrinsically backward blueprint of Moslem conformity.” When Kahanoff goes to the occupied territories armed with her cultural sensitivities, a somewhat naive feminism and scathing observations, the bottom line is that she assumes the role of a colonialist. But she is not an Israeli colonialist: she is a Jewish-Egyptian Levantine who has unwittingly absorbed colonialist values, despite all her attempts to expunge them from her system.

Kahanoff and my father each conducted a love-affair with the issue of Israeli national identity, an identity that for them, included their Arab identity as well. But this was a love-affair that was twisted and paved with contradictions. Both Kahanoff and my father basically grew up without a mother tongue as they wandered ceaselessly from language to language; both grew up in a multi-cultural colonial society that blurred cultural distinctions exactly as it strengthened these same differences. But the main common denominator is that the issue of national identity was pushed aside for both of them like a discarded shell, in favor of the magnificent falsehood of universal identity, of being a citizen of the world. Thus they were both smitten again and again with the large boulder of nationality that remained a place of darkness to both of them. Kahanoff did not understand Palestinian nationality while my father never understood Israeli nationality, its symbols, fears and hopes.

This stumbling block regarding nationality was common to both of them, and is what allowed them to be so critical of the Israeli political and cultural experience vis-à-vis the Orientals and the East. As people who came from a place of cultural and intellectual multiplicity, they could not stop speaking in the name of plurality and they celebrated its advantages over and over, in contradistinction to the Zionist monolith. They projected a Levantine perspective of multiplicity and not an Israeli one of unity, and they certainly rejected victimization. They conceived of a global cultural vision and not a local one, and all this put them squarely in opposition to what my father called “the Ben-Gurionism doctrine.” However, even more significantly, it placed them in the direct firing line of the entire Israeli society.

If tinges of heroism or of some sort of “Mayflower” emerge from my words, they must be placed in the proper perspectives. Both Kahanoff and my father are each examples of resounding failures, each in their own way. Both are immigrants who never really assimilated into Israel and its culture.

Kahanoff is an author who has no authentic existence in any language. She wrote her essays in English and they were published only in Hebrew, by the translation of Aharon Amir. A number of years ago I had the opportunity to talk with Kahanoff's sister in Paris, and I learned how Kahanoff felt so terribly oppressed by the limitations and disability of her literary existence in Israel, as she could not write in Hebrew. She made peace with the situation only grudgingly, with gnashing of teeth and a sense of humiliation. Her limited literary recognition was not in any proportion to her considerable talents or the dimensions and vigor of the cultural enterprise that she proposed. My father, on the other hand, continues to wage his minor battles from the small, perennially heated room in the protected housing for the elderly in Shchunat Hatikva—but now he battles against the renegades who turned to Shas (an ultra-Orthodox, Oriental political party that gained a lot of political strength in the 1990's). Most of his friends from the Socheba have already died, and those that remained have "repented" and turned to Shas. With astonishment and anger my father blurts out, "They have made the nation crazy, these, just for a bit of food." When he gets especially quarrelsome he says, "These strange characters with the Torah scrolls, the amulets and the Sabbath candles—they dance on my grave." Sometimes he hopes that the long-awaited day has come and that they are losing political strength. I realize that his "they" has changed: he had skipped from Ben-Gurionism to Shasism without missing a beat. The magnificent victory of Shas among the Orientals continues to rub salt in my father's gaping wound, day by day and hour by hour, and this wound was caused by the failure of his conception: his dream of a democratic, secular and leftist Oriental movement. Once I asked, just to provoke him: What do you have against religion? He thought for a minute: I don't have anything against religion. They are simply not a democratic movement, he said.

Lately my father has begun to administer "entrance exams" to the various caregivers from the neighborhood that come to assist him. He invites the caregiver to come on Shabbat, and if she refuses to turn on the light, he fires her immediately. Actually he was happy with the last one: "I asked her to make me a cup of tea after the festival had started and she did it, so she's OK," he reported to me with victorious happiness.