Between Others and Brothers

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Some fifteen years ago, the Israel Museum exhibition "To the East: Orientalism in the Arts in Israel" featured a photograph by the Israeli artist Meir Gal entitled "Nine Out of Four Hundred: The West and the Rest." At the center of the photograph was Gal, holding the nine pages that dealt with the history of Jews in the Middle East in a textbook of Jewish history used in Israel's education system. As Gal viscerally argued, "these books helped establish a consciousness that the history of the Jewish people took place in Eastern Europe and that Mizrahim have no history worthy of remembering." More damningly, he wrote that "the advent of Zionism and the establishment of the Israeli State drove a wedge between Mizrahim and their origins, and replaced their Jewish-Arab identity with a new Israeli identity based on European ideals as well as hatred of the Arab world."[1]

For me, as a graduate student in Middle Eastern and Jewish history, Gal's photograph was a stark reminder that the moment was ripe for a radical reconsideration of Jewish experience in the Middle East and an alluring promise that the field was wide open. Mirroring the internally oriented ethnocentrism of the wider field of Jewish studies, few works had considered Jews as part of their broader Middle Eastern landscape.[2] Ammiel Alcalay's *After Arabs and Jews* (1993), an exploration of Jewish-Arab cultural interpenetration, Joelle Bahloul's look at Algerian Jewish domestic life in *The Architecture of Memory* (1996), and Joel Beinin's multisite *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry* (1998) shifted the field perceptibly.[3] These works opened up heretofore understudied themes, shattered the Jewish/Arab binary, and revealed local indifference or hostility to Zionism rather than its universal adoption. Moreover, through their triangulation of history, cultural production, and collective memory, they enabled scholars to highlight, and perhaps break free from, the ideological and political shackles of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian-Arab conflict.[4]

Today, barely a generation later, the scholarly landscape is almost unrecognizable. Major research monographs have been written on most Jewish communities of the Middle East, drawing on a more expansive source base than Jewish communal sources and engaging with broad conceptual themes and theoretical literatures. These works show how profitable rereading "traditional" sources with new lenses can be, while also revealing extensive new archival sources on Middle Eastern Jewry. Above all, these works underscore that the history of Jews in the Middle East cannot be approached simply as "add Jews and stir," but instead necessitates a broader rethinking of major narratives in Middle Eastern history.

The origins of my own book, *Ottoman Brothers*, dates back to one afternoon at the Ben Zvi Library not long after viewing Gal's photograph, when I sat down to read two Ladino newspapers published in Jerusalem in the years before World War I.[5] Between bitter polemics about the chief rabbinate contest, reports on educational and economic affairs, and sensational local gossip, I was puzzled to come across extensive discussion

of the 1908 Ottoman revolution, including the journalists' hopes and visions for "la Nueva Turkia"; this engagement with the empire was not reflected in any of the extant secondary scholarship. After additional digging through the Hebrew and Arabic press, Ottoman government records, and many archives and libraries in the Middle East and Europe, what began as a local Jewish story turned into a broader study of political reform and imperial citizenship in the Tanzimat and second constitutional periods.

As I argued in *Ottoman Brothers*, Ottoman Jews and their Muslim and Christian neighbors were deeply invested in the civic Ottomanist project, exercising their new political rights and responsibilities, tackling the challenges of ethnic and religious diversity within the body politic, and debating the future of the empire and their role within it. My work has contributed to a growing body of research on how Jewish, Armenian, Greek, and other "hyphenated Ottomans" engaged with the Ottomanist project and made it their own, in the center as well as the provinces, and this scholarship continues to challenge and flesh out our understanding of late Ottoman political culture.[6]

My reconsideration of the vertical ties between the Ottoman state and its subjects-cum-citizens went hand in hand with a reevaluation of the horizontal ties they shared, an approach that owed an unmistakable intellectual debt to earlier "relational history" works in Israel/Palestine studies.[7] Beyond the discursive celebration of "Ottoman brothers" that was rampant in the multilingual press, I also examined institutional (Masonic lodges), economic (business partnerships), and civic (municipal boosters) ties that brought together and bound Jews, Christians, and Muslims together in their local space. New works on Ottoman and Middle Eastern urban studies more directly examine the intertwining of religion, ethnicity, space, and intercommunal relations in the late Ottoman city.[8] Other recent works of intellectual history and cultural studies examine the complex relationships that Jews had with their non-Jewish neighbors in other places and through different lenses, as intellectual interlocutors, literary inspirations, cinematic and musical partners, and more.[9]

Ottoman Jews' reimagination of their place within their state and vis-à-vis their neighbors required a reconsideration of their identities and loyalties as Jews, including to the nascent Zionist movement. Although Sephardim across the empire debated and fought over Zionism, in Palestine the matter was complicated by the presence of Jewish immigrants, Zionist institutions, and Zionist ambitions. I argued in *Ottoman Brothers* that we must accommodate divergent, local views and practices of Zionism and, further, that we must examine Zionism(s) and anti-Zionism(s) in conversation with Ottomanism, Arabism, and localism. Some Palestinian Jews, such as Albert Antebi, were vehemently opposed to the Zionist ideology of nationhood and the destructive political demands of Zionists while at the same time helping with the "practical Zionist" project. Other Jews saw their Zionism as a Jewish cultural pride rooted in Hebraism, and yet saw no contradictions between it and their cultural and political Arabism (the journalist and schoolteacher Nissim Malul comes to mind); still other Jews saw it as their duty to involve Sephardi and "Eastern" Jews in the Jewish national revival, whether because of a sense of competition with their non-Jewish fellow citizens or their Ashkenazi coreligionists, a desire to develop the land of Israel, or the conviction that they had a different set of insights, tools, and expectations to offer the predominantly European movement.[10]

Numerous bookshelves have now been filled with critical revisionist works on the history of Jews in the Middle East. And yet it seems clear from this new scholarship

that replacing one politicized ethnic category with another would be a mistake. The term "Arab Jew" is the product of particular times, places, and sociopolitical discourses. We cannot assume its universal applicability as a historical condition of Jewish life in the Middle East, and in fact, in doing so, we distort the local context.[11] Giving Middle Eastern Jews back their historical agency also means recognizing their participation in the historical processes that undermined their cultural, political, and ultimately territorial rootedness in the Middle East, including colonialism, global economic transformations, migration, and nationalism.

NOTES

[1]http://meirgal.squarespace.com/nine-out-of-four-hundred-the-w/ (accessed 14 March 2014). Gal's work was part of a broader political challenge issued by activists, intellectuals, and artists in Israel who the previous year had organized themselves into the "Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow," which viewed the Zionist state through the lenses of Franz Fanon and Edward Said and linked the historiographic erasure of Mizrahim with contemporary social and political inequalities. See Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19–20 (1988): 1–35; Sami Shalom Chetrit, "The Ashkenazi Zionist Eraser," *News from Within*, December 1997; and Gabriel Piterberg, "Domestic Orientalism: The Representation of 'Oriental' Jews in Zionist/Israeli Historiography," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23 (1996): 125–45.

[2]Daniel Schroeter's and Gudrun Krämer's books stood out for the way they normalized and contextualized Jews rather than exceptionalized them. Daniel Schroeter, *Merchants of Essaouira: Urban Society and Imperialism in Southwestern Morocco, 1844–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914–1952* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1989).

[3]Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Joelle Bahloul, *The Architecture of Memory: A Jewish-Muslim Household in Colonial Algeria, 1937–1962* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Joel Beinin, *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1998).

[4]Ammiel Alcalay, "Behind the Scenes: Before *After Jews and Arabs*," in *Memories of our Future* (San Francisco, Calif.: City Lights, 1999).

[5]Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early Twentieth Century Palestine* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011).

[6]Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Eyal Ginio, "Mobilizing the Ottoman Nation during the Balkan Wars (1912–1913): Awakening from the Ottoman Dream," *War in History* 12 (2005): 156–77; Vangelis Constantinos Kechriotis, "The Greeks of Izmir at the End of the Empire: A Non-Muslim Ottoman Community between Autonomy and Patriotism" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2005); Masayuki Ueno, "'For the Fatherland and the State': Armenians Negotiate the Tanzimat Reforms," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013): 93–109; Milen V. Petrov, "Everyday Forms of Compliance: Subaltern Commentaries on Ottoman Reform, 1864–1868," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46 (2004): 730–59; Yuval Ben-Bassat, *Petitioning the Sultan: Protests and Justice in Late Ottoman Palestine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

[7]These early works include Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–48* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1996); Baruch Kimmerling, "Beʿayot Kontseptualiot ba-Historiografiah shel Erets u-va-Shne ʿAmim," in *Erets Ahat u-Shne ʿAmim bah* [One Land, Two Peoples], ed. Danny Yaʿakobi (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999); and Salim Tamari, "Ishaq al-Shami and the Predicament of the Arab Jew in Palestine," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 21 (2004): 10–26. Recent scholarship includes Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem between Ottoman and British Rule* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2011); Johann Büssow, *Hamidian Palestine: Politics and Society in the District of Jerusalem, 1872–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Louis Fishman, "Palestine Revisited: Reassessing the Jewish and Arab National Movements, 1908–14" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2007); Yuval Ben-Bassat, "Local Feuds or Premonitions of a Bi-National Conflict? A Reexamination of the Early Jewish-Arab Encounter

in Palestine at the End of the 19th Century" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2007); and Jonathan Marc Gribetz, "Defining Neighbors: Religion, Race, and the Early 'Zionist-Arab' Encounter" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2010).

[8]See, for example, Amy Mills, "Critical Place Studies and Middle East Histories: Power, Politics, and Social Change," *History Compass* 10 (2012): 778–88; Sibel Zandi-Sayek, *Ottoman Izmir: The Rise of a Cosmopolitan Port, 1840–1880* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Emily Gottreich, *The Mellah of Marrakech: Jewish and Muslim Space in Morocco's Red City* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2007); and the ongoing work of Paris Papamichos-Chronakis (on Salonica), Murat Yildiz (on Istanbul), and Dina Danon (on Izmir).

[9]Orit Bashkin, *The New Babylonians: A History of Jews in Modern Iraq* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013); Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, "The Possibility of Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41 (2014): 1–19; Lisa Lital Levy, "Jewish Writers in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863–1914" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007); Maureen Jackson, *Mixing Musics: Turkish Jewry and the Urban Landscape of a Sacred Song* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013); Deborah Starr, "Masquerade and the Performance of National Imaginaries: Levantine Ethics, Aesthetics, and Identities in Egyptian Cinema," *Journal of Levantine Studies* 1 (2011): 31–57; Mark S. Wagner, *Like Joseph in Beauty: Yemeni Vernacular Poetry and Arab-Jewish Symbiosis* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

[10]A healthy debate has emerged about the nature and meaning of Sephardi vs Ashkenazi Zionism(s) in this time period. See, for example, Jonathan Gribetz's comments on Abigail Jacobson's work in this roundtable, and also the work of Arieh Saposnik. More broadly, see the debate between Esther Benbassa and Yitzhak Bezalel in *Pe'amim* 73 (1997): 5–40.

[11]Lital Levy, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Mashriq," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98 (2008): 452–69; Emily Benichou Gottreich, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98 (2008): 433–45.