

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyzes modes of expression that form the “voice” of SCWANA (South, Central, West Asian, and North African) Jewish women. By expanding the definition of voice, my study engages with multiple modalities which SCWANA Jewish women use to create work about their experiences. There have been several waves of Jewish exodus from South, Central, and West Asia, North Africa, and the Balkans. Each chapter discusses the development of SCWANA Jewish women’s voices in multiple contexts, noting the ways in which travel and geography influence their experiences and expression. My first chapter will examine the development of *musiqah Mizrahit* as a result of mass migration to Israel. My second chapter will investigate the subsequent creation of *Mizrahi* as a disenfranchised class (as opposed to a rite/prayer order) and review SCWANA/*Mizrahi* activist movements in Israel and abroad. Finally, I will interpret these histories via a lens of women’s experiences in their communities, ultimately seeking out modes which form a literal and figural “voice.” The findings of this review suggest that there is no one way in which SCWANA/*Mizrahi* women use their voices in pursuit of self-imaging, imagining, and healing from structures of antisemitism (in the case of their former states in SCWANA; and other states in which Jews have a minority status) and Orientalism/racism (in the case of Israel, the United States, and France). Ultimately, music is a consistent thread in these processes, even as melodies evolve and change, with ‘canonical’ liturgical tunes (including *piyyutim*) drawing inspiration from the world around these singers. I also engage with questions regarding the inclusivity of ‘*Mizrahi*’ as a label, in order to examine the origins of the term and investigate how SCWANA and (some) Balkan Jewish women have reclaimed this term, while others have not.

**Anaḥnu Tannaiot (We Are Reciters):**  
**South, Central, West Asian, and North African Jewish Women's Voices**  
**As Resistance in Art, Music, and Writing**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 .....	5
<b>Radio Waves: The Early Years of SCWANA Jewish Women in Global Pop Culture</b>	
Chapter 2.....	18
<b>Pens: SCWANA Jewish Women in Activism, Academics, and Cultural Work</b>	
Chapter 3.....	39
<b>Eggs: SCWANA Jewish Women in Focus, in Art, Onscreen and Off</b>	
Conclusion.....	67
Bibliography.....	69



## INTRODUCTION

*Jit la 'indish hariba. W'anti ḥasabtini haeja.  
 Jit la 'indish ha-ariba. W'aḥasabtish la dar alenja.  
 - Tair, Liron, and Tagel Ḥaim, Hana Mash  
 Hu Al Yaman  
 (I came to you a stranger. You saw me as  
 primitive. I came to you fleeing. I saw you as a last  
 resort.)*

The above lines form the devastated, climactic cry of the band A-WA in their 2019 single “Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman” (Here Is Not Yemen). In their song and related music video, A-WA recounts a feminine oral history of immigration from Yemen to Israel. In “Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman,” Tair, Liron, and Tagel Ḥaim, three Yemenite, Moroccan, and Ukrainian Jewish sisters, describe multiple facets of the traumatic experiences of SCWANA<sup>1</sup> and Balkan Jews in Israel; from arrival, through the transit camps, and into newly founded Israeli society. More specifically, A-WA’s album *Bayti fi Rasi* (“*My Home [is] in my Head*”) tells the story of the sisters’ grandmother, Rachel.

The ma’abarot, temporary housing for refugees, live on as one of many ‘original sins’ committed by the newly founded Israeli state with regards to its treatment of minorities: Jews from South, West, and Central Asia; North Africa; and the Balkans. According to Dalia Gavrieli-Nury, “[i]n 1951, a quarter of a million people were living in ma’abarot,<sup>2</sup> 80 percent of them from Islamic lands” (Gavrieli-Nury 2015). Two years later, in 1953, that number increased to 90 percent. The camps were an environment of squalor, with multiple families assigned to one tent, little to no access to facilities such as running water and electricity - “and filthy public toilets often serv[ing] dozens of people” (Gavrieli-Nury 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> South, Central, West Asia, and North Africa

<sup>2</sup> Heb. pl. of ma’abarah, from ma’avar, meaning “transit”

While more SCWANA and Balkan Jews were funneled into the ma'abarot, immigrants from places such as Poland were put up in hotel rooms. This large and formative decade of the ma'abarot is not talked about by influential castes of Israeli society, nor is information on it widely accessible. “To learn about transit camps, you’ll have to poke around in archives or listen to old wives’ tales” and that’s exactly what the Haim sisters did (Gavrieli-Nury 2015).

The music video for “Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman” confronts the viewer with the reality that the skeletons of ma'abarot are still standing. The sisters dance in front of flimsy tin shacks that rattle against harsh wind. A-WA combines both their music and their fashion as a reclamation of this part of their history: “The iconic look with the pots on the head in ‘Hana Mash’...we looked at old photos of Yemeni immigrants,” Tair says. “They used to go with the pots to carry water or food — so we turned it into a modern iconic look [and] a fashionable thing. Always with a sense of humor” (Burack, 2019).



A-WA in their outfits for Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman (left); kubaneh pot (right)

Through the alchemy of music and fashion, the sisters prioritize and give voice to an experience that many SCWANA and Balkan Jews would rather forget, and that Ashkenazim<sup>3</sup> have often sought to downplay or erase. Thus, A-WA perform a recovery and embodiment of history. Their grandmother's narrative confronts denial of multiple SCWANA/Mizrahi stories. While Yemenite Jews were some of the first to migrate in waves to Israel/Palestine in the late 1800s, for the sisters' grandmother, Rachel, it was "[a] last resort."

People from around the world have responded emotionally to the music video for "Hana Mash" in the comments section of the video post.

"Yemen Jews always creative, thanks to all our brothers."

"I love my brothers Jews Yemen."

"These ladies literally all look like my relatives, and I'm Mexican (Sephardi jew). Shalom to all."

"From Morocco with love. Yallah."

"As a Yemeni Muslim, I want to say I Harbour nothing but love ❤️ my fellow Yemenis of all religions and colors! Yemenites have always enriched Yemeni culture. كل الحب والمودة"<sup>4</sup>

"So much love for Yemeni Jews We miss them we need them back in Yemen"  
(Various, 2019-present)

One would be hard-pressed to find a single antisemitic comment. People from all over the world point out the little details baked into the video, from the specific uses of the pots on the sisters' heads (used to make kubaneh, a Yemenite pull-apart bread) to the tassels on their sunglasses. From Kuwait to Kurdistan, people are remembering "their" Jews on a larger scale - and mourning their absence - for the first time.

Music is the original driving force of SCWANA and Balkan Jewish women's voices and efforts for social change, and is a consistent thread that runs through SCWANA and Balkan Jewish women's activism. The first chapter of this paper works backwards from A-WA and their peers' contemporary success to the origins of the genre, and examines how *musikah Mizrahit*

<sup>3</sup> Yiddish-speaking Jews of European origin.

<sup>4</sup> Ar. "All [the] love and affection."

was a genre that created space for SCWANA Jewish women's voices. The second examines how SCWANA Jewish activist movements developed concurrent with *musiqah Mizrahit*. It also investigates points at which women singers of *musiqah Mizrahit* inspire SCWANA Jewish women activists. The final chapter looks at a whole picture of 21st-century SCWANA Jewish use of music and aesthetics (including fine arts and fashion) as practices of cultural recovery, historical preservation, and healing reclamation of identity/(ies). Within the worlds of academia; art; and creative writing, music - its preservation, appreciation, and performance - anchors SCWANA/Mizrahi women's self-expression and feminist practice.

Presently, "Mizrahi" is a contentious term among Jews in and outside of Israel. Many people find the category or label to be offensive, while many other people have reclaimed it. Here Mizrahi is used to describe Jews who face intra-communal Orientalism as opposed to a term that signifies any biological or liturgical reality (i.e. *Nusah Sefarad*,<sup>5</sup> 'Edot HaMizrah').<sup>6</sup> The origins of the term Mizrahi are based in coercive and Orientalist thought. I try to ensure that I only identify individuals or collectives as Mizrahi who self-identify/ied as such. In order to avoid reproducing a coercive and often painful application of this label, I use SCWANA/Mizrahi to refer to individuals and groups in which some members would self-identify as Mizrahi, some members would not, but all would face Orientalist violence or discrimination.

Within the above framework, Mizrahi is both a passive and active term - Mizrahi is something done to Jews from SCWANA and the Balkans. It is an inherited memory and at times lived present of political and physical trauma and marginalization, especially during what are known as "the mistakes of the 50s"<sup>7</sup> - and knowing, if one happens to be in Israel, France, or North or South America, that in the eyes of dominant Jewish institutions and structures, that is

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<sup>5</sup> The "Rite" or prayer order of Sefaradi communities.

<sup>6</sup> Communities of the East.

<sup>7</sup> Abuse and neglect of SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews by the Israeli government during the 1950s.

how one is seen. It is a class born out of being expendable - denied a seat at the table of Jewish humanity and normative ideas about Jewishness. It is also a reclaimed term and signifier of shared experience, culture, and struggle. As a result of both my own coercive intra- and extra-communal experiences of Orientalism and shared culture/history with some MENAT<sup>8</sup> Jewish cultures, I do work with organizations and am a part of communities which self-identify as Mizrahi. This work informs my study in the following ways:

I refer only to self-identified feminists as feminists, acknowledging that, historically, self-identified “feminist” causes and movements have been excluded and ignored those who are not white, not cis, and not middle class or wealthy.

I draw on oral, written, and musical histories; I draw on writing that exists outside of the academy, as well as online articles.

This project also acknowledges that Arab/ized<sup>9</sup> Iraqi, Arab/ized North African, and Persian experiences have come to form the bulk of narratives surrounding SCWANA Jewish experiences, often at the expense of South Asians, Central Asians, Imazighen, Kurds, and Kavkazim.<sup>10</sup> This understanding is held along with appreciation for the activist work of these aforementioned Arab/ized and Persian communities.

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<sup>8</sup> Middle East, North Africa, Turkey. MENAT is used to refer more specifically to Ottoman and post-Ottoman Jewry.

<sup>9</sup> Used to reflect multiple forms of self-identification; see Moshe Behar’s “What’s In A Name.”

<sup>10</sup> Jewish communities from the Caucasus Mountains, i.e. Dagestani, Georgian, and Azerbaijani Jews.

## **RADIO WAVES: THE EARLY YEARS OF SCWANA JEWISH WOMEN IN GLOBAL POP CULTURE**

It was 2015, and I was about to turn sixteen years old. Clicking through Albanian and Yugoslavian tallava<sup>11</sup> music, as well as related YouTube videos from Israeli-American band Balkan Beatbox, I came across a video titled “A-WA - Habib Galbi.” Upon clicking on it, I saw women who looked a lot more like my Muslim aunts and the wider, diverse Muslim-American community of which they are a part than any of the women in my (Ashkenazi) Jewish family. These women were Jewish, Israeli, and they were not white. Not only that, but the language in which they sang was unmistakably Arabic.

Over the next year, A-WA took the world by storm. Despite the wider Arab-Islamic world’s general shunning of Israeli cultural exports, A-WA climbed the charts on an international level, including in their grandparents’ home states of Yemen and Morocco. Tair Haim, the frontwoman of the three-sister band, shared that “[A-WA] gets lots of comments from Yemen and Morocco and it’s amazing, that people know that we’re from Israel, and still, they like the music, and they feel connected and they enjoy it” (Artsy, 2016). They talk about the actualization and transmission of their culture via their grandparents, who raised them with Yemenite-Arabic folk melodies in a rural, agricultural community in Israel. Their traditional cadences and their use of an Arabic dialect made them accessible to a wider Arabic-speaking audience. Suddenly, my generation began unearthing memories and asking questions. Jews used to be here - where did they go? And when will they come back?

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<sup>11</sup> Popular music originating in Roma and Albanian communities in Kosovo and North Macedonia

A-WA's success was fifty years in the making. Before them came singers (sometimes also Yemenite) like 'Ofrah H̄azah. Her pop hits, influenced and inspired by the musical tradition of her culture, also topped international charts - but did not spark as much debate and acknowledgment within the MENAT world as A-WA has.

A-WA and Balkan Beatbox led me to research North African, Middle Eastern, and Balkan Jewish communities in more depth than I had at thirteen, a few years prior, and deepened my Jewish awakening. What I found were communities and cultures far more similar in their aesthetics, etiquette, and cultural touchstones to my Muslim father's side of my family than my Ashkenazi mother's side. I learned that there are Jewish people who say "mashallah" as often as they say "mazal tov," just like me. Like my father's family, they revel in henna nights, gold coin-jewelry, intricately embroidered traditional clothes, and refer to prayer as "s'la" and "dua/doa". Their existence proved I could be this kind of person, too, and that my father's culture was also my Jewishness.

I started looking into Turkish (as well as more broadly Anatolian) and Albanian Jewish cultures in particular. There were scant online resources, exacerbated by my lack of proficiency in Hebrew. As I skimmed articles on Jews in the Ottoman Levant, Anatolia, and Balkans, I continued to see overlap between our traditions. I started to dream of a Jewish life in which I could pray using melodies more similar to the ones from my father's culture, and practice my Judaism without feeling ashamed of my Muslim family. I could speak and sing in Hebrew, having learned by extrapolating from the Arabic (Quranic and vernacular phrases) that I had grown up with, and later studied in college.

As A-WA gained popularity, so did bands like the aforementioned Balkan Beat Box, whose frontmen are of Romanian, Yemenite, and Ashkenazi Jewish descent. This opened the

door to discussions with my family. As Jews who shared culture with my Muslim side moved into the mainstream, I became more relatable to both sides of it.

Many cultures considered to fall under the SCWANA umbrella do not have the backing of institutions that seek to enshrine them. Ashkenazi cultures enjoy the preservation of Yiddish newspapers, music, and books, protected by institutions such as the Yiddish Book Center and the Yad Vashem. By contrast, SCWANA communities transmit culture via oral histories, family heirlooms, rituals, community-run and academic papers, community centers, and most crucially, songs (folk and liturgy). This was familiar to me as someone who primarily understood her history in the Balkans as an oral or lived one. Stories, memories, folk dances, melodies, and recipes are passed on generationally. They serve as a conduit for SCWANA consciousness, revitalization, and resilience.

SCWANA Jews preserve and live culture in the face of a world that promises settler privileges if they assimilate into Europeanness. The initial image of the Israeli state was that of the liberated Ashkenazi staking out a claim in the “desertous wilderness” of Palestine; a highly militarized New Jew;<sup>12</sup> the New Jew being civilized enough to colonize on his own behalf. In the words of David Sarna Galdi, “The Zionist project...stamped out the image of the Jew as a weak, hunched victim of the ghetto — corrupted by exile. It sought to transform drastically diverse, far-flung Jews into a powerful nation of robust worker/fighters speaking a single language” (Galdi, 2018). SCWANA resistance to being assimilated was, and at times still is, seen as a threat to the national identity and priorities of the Israeli state (as is investigated in Chapter Two, which provides an overview of SCWANA/Mizrahi protest movements).

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<sup>12</sup> The “New Jew” is an image that was a part of Israel’s early militarist and nationalist mythos-building. See Galdi 2018.



Organizations such as the American Sephardic Brotherhood have created incredible databases such as [zemirot.org](http://zemirot.org), and continue to digitize their song recordings and siddurim.<sup>13</sup> The Israel Museum has done the same for cultural and social-historical artifacts from global Jewry, though some of their objects lack sufficient description and contextualization.

Finally, [Piyut.co.il](http://Piyut.co.il) is another website which provides recordings from Jewish communities around the world, though their reach is limited in part by their lack of English translation. Beyond this, networks of individual activists and academics, grassroots collectives, synagogues, and community centers preserve and honor much of SCWANA Jewish knowledge. This is largely because that knowledge is held by attending community members, especially elders. SCWANA Jewish cultures are not the default idea of what it means to be Jewish. Language is a barrier when it comes to making the aforementioned content accessible. Despite being two of the most commonly spoken languages, few of these online resources in Hebrew have translations in either Spanish or English.

In some ways, the decentralization of SCWANA Jewish cultural knowledge and experience prevents any one institution from claiming and controlling information or primary sources of knowledge. Thus far, SCWANA musicians and political thinkers have prioritized communal and individual oral histories without relying on academic institutions for validation of experiences (which may try to establish singular or unifying narratives). One must carefully seek out relevant information, often interfacing with multiple small institutions, individuals, and groups who sponsor and lead such work.

During the summer of 2020, with the aid of Lynk funding, I began a journey to transcribe Jewish SCWANA songs based on Abraham Zvi Idelsohn's thesaurus of Hebrew Melodies, focusing on the five volumes encompassing Mesopotamia, Persia, Bukhara, Dagestan, Syria,

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<sup>13</sup> Heb. plural, prayer books.

Turkey, Morocco, the Balkans, and Yemen. These musical traditions, all of whose practitioners are Orientalized, are not the same. Yemenite Jewish music does not use *maqamim*,<sup>14</sup> while Syrian music does - and on a weekly-rotating basis. Bukharian Jewish music has more influence from Persian music than the music of their Turkic neighbors; and some varieties of Kurdish liturgical Hebrew have the same amount of consonantal spirantization<sup>15</sup> as Yemenite Hebrew.

Just as important is Idelsohn's position as an Ashkenazi ethnomusicologist. Oral histories contradict his transcription of Persian and Turkish pronunciations of Hebrew. As of this writing, I am working on the digitization of the music of Mesopotamia (Iraq and Kurdistan) and Morocco. I struggled to respond to Idelsohn's writing, in which he alternates between pulling from SCWANA and Balkan Jewish communities for inspiration, and speaking about them using highly ethnocentric and often racist language.

In his own brief autobiography, Idelsohn reflects on his *Thesauruses of Hebrew Melodies*. A devoted Zionist, and the eventual composer of *Havah Nagilah*, Idelsohn's work was a search for an ancient, Ur-Jewish sound. He was raised with a love of synagogal songs and modes, as well as folk songs, and cared little for German music, even when it was written by Jews. By his own admission, he considered Jewish music to be "an amalgamation of Jewish and non-Jewish elements" but what elements were "non-Jewish" he never clarified (Idelsohn, 1935). Awash in German music theories, composers, and assimilationist Jews, Idelsohn was searching for a Jewish sound uncorrupted by the lands to which Jews were exiled: "The life of the Jews in Germany, too, was Germanized. This was not only true for the Liberals, but also of the Orthodox," he writes of German Jewish melodies and composers (Idelsohn, 1935). The prefaces of his *Thesauruses* hypothesize a common set of modes that lived on in Jewish music after

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<sup>14</sup> *Maqam* (pl. Heb. *maqamim*; pl. Ar. *maqamat*) are the scales within which songs are sung.

<sup>15</sup> Weighting of consonants: *bege* vs *vege*; *ke* vs *he*; *pe* vs *fe*.

expulsion in 70 CE. He also found that these modes were similar to ancient Greek modes.

Idelsohn dug for kernels of 'pre-lapsarian' Jewish music that could create the national sound of a future state.

These songs lived on, with folk songs and other traditional melodies forming the basis of some of Israel's most popular music. In spite of the continued popularity of the music that SCWANA and Balkan Jewish communities produced, they still remained on the margins in most contexts - and still do. As Gavriely-Nury says, "we [do not] have a 'Museum of Ma'abarot.' We have an Israel Air Force museum and a Yitzhak Rabin museum and a Palmach museum and a Ya'ir Stern museum (commemorating the founder of the pre-state underground organization Lehi)"<sup>16</sup> (Gavriely-Nury, 2015).

But, what else happened when all of these Jews from such a vast geographical area - spanning four continents - all flooded into one place? They shared space - literally:

Mizrahi is the subsequent result of Egyptian Jews befriending Moroccan Jews who married other eastern Jewish communities from Algeria to Dagestan within the ghettos of peripheral Israel, creating the Israeli 'ethnic other'..communities, uprooted, destitute and further victimised in a state that told them not to be 'too Arab'...built on Ashkenazic foundations, under a Eurocentric educative system that sought to pressurise Mizrahi Jewry into...adopting a new Ashkenazi-Israeli identity (Ohayon, 2014).

Between 1949 and 1959, a Mizrahi consciousness began to form in response to their survival of multiple traumas: poor living conditions; racism from Ashkenazim; the Yemenite, Mizrahi, and Balkan Children Affair;<sup>17</sup> and the Ringworm Affair,<sup>18</sup> all of which are touched on in A-WA's aforementioned song "Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman." These events were significant because they were the most visible and widely felt acts of racism from the Ashkenazi world, and

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<sup>16</sup> Lehi is officially designated a radical terrorist group by the Israeli state.

<sup>17</sup> Mass kidnapping of Yemenite, Mizrahi, and Balkan children from the ma'abarot, by medical professionals such as nurses.

<sup>18</sup> The irradiation of children and other vulnerable age groups to kill ringworm, resulting in cancers and other long term and terminal illnesses.

from European Israeli society. The Ringworm Affair left many with permanent or terminal health problems. As for the Children's Affair, even today, I see posts shared by friends of individuals seeking now-grown siblings, cousins, and childhood friends. There is a line in "Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman" in which Tair's sisters echo "an la yshilu 'alaysh albnaya" (don't let them take your daughter). The Haim sisters are challenging national narratives of 'aliyah<sup>19</sup> by talking about the ways in which the move from their homelands to Israel was sometimes a descent in quality of life for SCWANA and Balkan Jews.

The psyches of SCWANA/Mizrahi women were particularly damaged by the denial of their agency, primarily during the 1940s and 1950s. Their children were taken from them as they worked menial jobs, making a living at the bottom rung of Ashkenazi-supremacist Israeli society. Being seen as "Oriental" rather than Jewish came with negative baggage and stereotypes about hotheadedness and primitiveness. Their justified anguish, as a result of expulsion, their underprivileged position in society, and the pain of losing their children, was framed as a violent sentimentality. 'Edut Amram is an organization devoted to cataloguing the testimonies of victims. Many of them describe being gaslit, mistreated, and told that they could simply have more children; the stealing of their babies was framed as if they were being released from the "burden" of having to care for another child, who would be placed with an Ashkenazi family who could ensure a "better" life. SCWANA women's trauma in relation to these events validated the state's framing of them as irrational and undeserving of agency over their children and themselves. They were "te'unei tipuah" - needing to be fostered; needing to be saved from themselves (Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

Over the course of two decades, a new identity emerged and a grassroots musical movement found its way to the mainstream. The very sentimentality that SCWANA Jews were

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<sup>19</sup> Heb. ascent, in reference to moving to Israel

racialized for formed the melismatic basis for the music they created - “[Ashkenazi] ears are accustomed to the less wavering, more linear pitches of European major and minor scales...European Jewry's liturgical traditions are melismatic, especially the prayers for somber occasions such as Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av, [but] they do not contain quarter tones” (Horowitz, 1999). In many ways, the very foundation of musiḳah Mizraḥit “...emerging in the Mizraḥi neighborhoods was perceived as a challenge to the cultural policies of the new state” (Horowitz, 1999).

Working within the framework of Amy Horowitz, we can “[presume] that cultures are in contact, most likely on unequal terms, that some traditions are dominant and others are marginalized, and that musical institutions are controlled by a dominant culture” (Horowitz, 1999). Even within spaces where SCWANA Jews lived with one another, tensions emerged between ethnic groups who may have had a contentious relationship in their homelands (e.g., Persian and Arabized Jewish perceptions of Kurds as barbaric; the sidelined position of South Asian Jews). This is exemplified by a quote from Ariel Sabar’s book *My Father’s Paradise*, his biography of his father, Yona:

“Man, you really haven’t heard? Let’s see: the Romanians are thieves. The Polish are unclean. The Yemenites - that’s our family - are peasants. The Moroccans are brutes. And the Kurds have it worst of all: They’re just morons.”

“Rubes,” Reuven said.

“Dumb fucks,” Tzion added, helpfully, and Yona blushed. “Can’t think for themselves. Do whatever they’re told. Ana Kurdi!”

“Get it now, Kurdi?” Reuven said. “The printer didn’t know you were a Kurd. He just said you were acting like one.” (Sabar, 2009)

It is not uncommon for SCWANA Jews to quickly locate one another according to surface-level stereotypes about one another’s communities, even today. Two generations later, you can meet someone who is unaware of this history - who self-defines as a quarter this, half

that, and another quarter something else. They may playfully joke about the stereotypes as outdated. In Yona's story, there is a cynical acceptance of the gaze of others, but this gaze is not entertained as legitimate or accurate. This quote expresses the uglier side of nuanced cultural interactions between communities whose state overseers did not see as being distinct from one another. Hadar Cohen and Bryan Roby elaborate on the complicated nature of solidarity in the face of continued homogenizing Orientalism.

Even within the Iraqi community, tensions developed between Iraqi Kurdish and Iraqi Arab groups...The police's description of [an] incident [of conflict] indicates that cultural frictions already existed between the two groups, and this particular issue further ignited the feud. (Roby, 2015)

"It didn't matter if 'the Arab' was Jewish or even Arab at all (as those who were not Arab including Kurdish and Persian Jews were included under this umbrella). What mattered is that a positionality of power is maintained. (Cohen, 2021)

This raises questions with regards to whose experiences are being centered in discussions about SCWANA Jewish experiences. Often, SCWANA/Mizrahi activists point to their perceived Arabness as the reason they are Orientalized. While this is true, the idea that 'Arab' is the only type of Middle Eastern inhabitant is a type of Orientalism in and of itself; it produces a new hegemony in which those with proximity to 'Arabness' may be seen as more authentic relayers of what it means to be 'Mizrahi.' Those who do not want to be described in relation to Arabness may not be able to voice their experiences, seek shared cultural spaces, or seek help.

To a degree, ethnic conflicts fell away when creating music - "renowned Iraqi qanun (zither) and oud players performed at Iranian, Libyan, Egyptian, and other Mizrahi community weddings. Yemenite singers became fluent in Iraqi and Kurdish" (Horowitz, 1999). Despite intra-class discrimination, there was a general, if not begrudging agreement on some shared cultural influences and trappings among MENAT Jewry.

These ancient communities reacting to the decimation of their culture began to learn and borrow from one another. The Arabic ‘Oud and the Darbouka met the electric guitar, with lyrics sung in Hebrew, alongside the usual Judeo-Arabic dialects, Greek, Turkish or Farsi, creating a musical genre authentic to the Mizrahi experience, Mizrahit. (Ohayon, 2014)

SCWANA musical artists quickly challenged the Judaism of the Ashkenazi establishment, holistically combining “literary Hebrew with Hebrew and Arabic slang, describing both sacred and secular themes” as opposed to strictly separating liturgical themes from popular music (Horowitz, 1999). The latter framing represents a common Ashkenazi understanding of Jewish religiosity, which is considered ‘separate’ from any influence by local gentiles, such as Idelsohn’s feelings that his community was tainted by Germanness. The idea is that there is something un-Jewish, or corrupting, about perceived external influences.

He is not alone in this. In my experience, today’s Ashkenazi ‘de-assimilationist’ activists are eager to deny that their braided challah developed in relation to German Easter breads; and that their bagels emerged in conversation with gentile Polish bread shapes. The idea of a culture that can be created on its own, and not in conversation with neighboring cultures, is unrealistic. Jewish communities and cultures do not develop in this manner. In the same way, Jews in, say, Aleppo contributed to Syrian classical music while utilizing developing maqamim for their own religious purposes. Musika Mizrahit itself thrives off of interrelationships, borrowing, and melding. The same goes for SCWANA/Mizrahi activist inspiration drawn from African-American protest movements and SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist inspiration drawn from African-American/Black feminisms (including Womanism).

SCWANA refugees lost many traditions in transit from their homelands to Israel, which complicates the ways in which these communities experience their cultures/“Mizrahiut.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mizrahiness.

However, together, “the ingathering created the conditions for intensified musical interaction between North African and Middle Eastern Jewish musicians through their...marginalization by... Eurocentric power structures” (Horowitz, 1999).

Further exchange occurred with the introduction of Turkish musical stylings via Israel’s Turkish and Syrian Jewish community who, even prior to the founding of the state, had engaged in intense cultural exchange. Some individual singers embraced this multiplicity in identity: “Mediterranean music singer Ofer Levy personifie[d] these dynamics, proclaiming himself an “Iraqi, Turkish, Syrian Israeli” (Horowitz, 1999).

If the Syrian people requested, do you think Israeli singers would come to perform for us personally? I am trying to learn Hebrew so I can understand the words to all your beautiful songs. I ask God that an agreement will be reached between our two countries so that we will be able to see you. What do you feel when a Syrian person writes to you?

read a letter from an anonymous Syrian listener (Horowitz, 1999).

Without support from a mainstream Ashkenazi establishment, and without radio time, SCWANA singers recorded music via cassettes, distributing them at bus stations, convenience stores, and community centers and events. Two singers who quickly gained popularity were the Yemenite-Israeli Haim Moshe and the Moroccan-Israeli Zehava Ben, whose “...voice blared from loudspeakers, her cassettes selling by the tens of thousands, well before radio editors, journalists, and record company executives even knew her name” (Horowitz, 2008). Imitating the aforementioned popular Middle-Eastern styles of music, these musicians were entirely self-made and the first manifestations of *musiqah Mizrahit* (also known as Israeli Mediterranean music) bleeding into Israeli popular culture.

Its origins were immediately recognizable over airwaves, though it was not considered suitable for the radio - until its appeal undeniably began transcending boundaries of ethnicity and



race. The voices of women rose from cassette tapes sold at bus stations and supermarkets. Within their communities, they had a creative voice, and were able to make money via a creative profession. They were self-starters, unable to rely on the studios granted to Ashkenazi stars. This may have even offered them financial independence.

Musiḳah Mizraḥit could no longer be ghettoized, thanks in part to the crossover appeal of Zehava Ben's study of Umm Kulthum and successful performances by singers such as the aforementioned Moshe, which "... drew crowds at New York's Towne Hall and entertained 1,500 Israeli and Palestinian visitors to Donald Trump's Taj Mahal casino in Atlantic City" and aided in 1980s-90s Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts (Horowitz, 1999).

Singers pushed ahead in spite of European Israeli marginalization of their genres, in which "authentic" "ancient" or "heritage" aspects of SCWANA music were cherry-picked for nationalist uses. Often, the 'authentic' 'ancient' melodies were pointed to as evidence of Jewish claim to the land of Israel, championing some of the Jews who had been living in the Middle East continuously for hundreds of years. Otherwise, there was no engagement with the people from such regions who were continually crafting an evolving genre. Meanwhile, SCWANA Jews refused to be static.

In films such as the Israeli Office of Information's 1953 film *The Carpet*, SCWANA Jews are encouraged to abandon aspects of their cultures and minhagim<sup>21</sup> perceived to be irrational and to instead museumize them. The film's protagonist, a young Kurdish girl named Maran Ela, spends the film's duration making sly digs at the superstitions of her culture and shows a fondness for Hedva, the Ashkenazi social worker who comes to visit her in the ma'abarah. According to Maran, Hedva is "a good woman, who knows modern life" (Lahola, 1953). When

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<sup>21</sup> Heb. plural of "minhag" Eng. "custom" - traditions done by Jewish communities, in relation to their practice of Judaism, which are not necessarily shared by all communities.

her husband is killed during a border dispute, Maran takes Hedva's advice to begin selling her Kurdish carpet work in a nearby city:

But there were people who were interested in my work, and in myself. First there was Hedva, and then all her friends. They thought I was very good at stitching, and could even become famous in the city. They thought people would like to pay for my work, pay money! More money than a groom would pay for a young bride! Maybe they're right. Everything is different here, even for a widow. I made this carpet. I, Maran Ela, I made it with my own hands. It is a good carpet, they say. **If it pleases you, I am happy.** [emphasis mine] [13:49-15:11] (Israel Office of Information, 1953)

In the minds of 1950s Ashkenazim, SCWANA Jews would decide that their interests and experiences aligned totally with those of European Zionists.<sup>22</sup> Hedva, in this story, “fosters” Maran - and Maran “saves” herself - by rejecting the folk parts of her Kurdish culture and embracing Ashkenazi-crafted modernity. The folkish aspects of SCWANA Jewish cultures would become relegated to the past - not a carpet as a mode of story transmission or the wall of a sukkah, but a carpet as something to walk on or to hang on the wall of a museum. Decorative, or relic. Otherwise, it was an argument for the indigeneity of all Jews to Israel/Palestine,<sup>23</sup> or a mode of recovering “ancient, authentic” Jewish traditions.

While early on, the separation between the New Jew and the “Oriental” was a necessity for the justification of and garnering of sympathy for the Israeli state, the need to prove Jewish claim to the land made SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews useful for self-Orientalizing and self-indigenizing campaigns. The state continues to have trouble reconciling the reality that its aims of assimilation are often a death sentence for the traditions of its marginalized Jewish populations. The “you” in Maran’s final line implicitly refers to an Ashkenazi consumer and viewer, who seeks to “foster” her while feeling repulsed by her in the same way one feels pity for

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<sup>22</sup> There were and are non-Ashkenazi Zionists; this is not within the scope of this thesis.

<sup>23</sup> This has been referred to by anti-Zionist activists, Palestinian and Mizrahi, as “brownwashing/Mizrahi-washing.” See Yona, 2020, for 972+ Mag.

someone of an older generation. She is the “Oriental” they are afraid of being seen as; she represents their fear of being looked at by European society in the way that they look at Maran. Unless willing to shed most of her Kurdish culture, including traditional dress and superstitions, she is an obstacle to modernity, unification, and the national project.

SCWANA artists’ music and cross-cultural engagement continued to progress throughout the 1970s. Zehava Ben’s reclamation of Umm Kulthum’s classic Egyptian aesthetic was concurrent with the rise of ‘Ofrah H̄azah, a Yemenite pop singer who initially became famous for her song “Shir HaFreḥah” featured in the 1979 film *Schlager*. H̄azah did not write the song, in which the stereotype of the “freḥah” - a usually-SCWANA/Mizraḥi woman who is thought of as a bimbo (tacky fashion, immodest, loud, working class) - is examined and, in some ways, solidified in Israeli consciousness. This song, written by an Ashkenazi man, featured in her first album, *Ahavah Rishonah* (First Love), which produced multiple radio hits in 1980s Israel (Shahar, 2009). Without this context, it may appear that Hazah was reclaiming the stereotype. The idea that she was falls away upon learning the identity of the song’s true author. It is not self-aware; it simply fetishizes and shames.

H̄azah nearly won the 1983 Eurovision contest with her song “H̄ai” three years later. The grand performance, in which backup singers and dancers are dressed in bright yellow, complements a visibly brown-skinned Jewish woman singing about being alive during the same year Eurovision was hosted in Germany. Her music had a broad appeal, earning her the nickname “the Madonna of the East” and her popularity did not wane even when she began to release albums explicitly oriented around her Yemenite identity, such as *Shirei Teimani* (Yemenite Songs) (Shahar, 2009). However, the explicit preservative focus of the album meant that it initially saw little response in Israel:

The record was met with bewilderment. Not until the album was released in England to great acclaim, and European club-goers began hopping to the same Yemeni beats I had danced to at family weddings, did Israeli media take notice. (Tsabari, 2019)

Again, European responses to Israeli cultural exports determines whether or not those exports have value - and, by extension, whether or not those exports' creators have value. Synths and electronic music staples soar in Ḥazah's "'Im Nin' Alu" (If the Doors are Locked), one of many songs based on the poetry of 18th-century Yemenite Rabbi Shalom Shabazi. Her music and dress are deeply spiritual for her. She is modern, holy, traditional, and normal all at once. She is not the face of Israel in Theodore Herzl's original, secular Zionist vision.

Much like singers before her, Ḥazah sang "...songs...evok[ing] nostalgia, touching parents' and grandparents' or in some cases the composer's own memories of daily life in Yemen, Morocco, Kurdistan, or Iran" with influence from "Greek, Turkish, Spanish, and Italian songs referenc[ing] Israel's Mediterranean location - a site for musical straddling...between Europe and the Middle East and mediates Eastern and Western music styles" (Howoritz, 1999).

The international popularity of her Yemenite-focused albums brought Yemenite Jews - and SCWANA/Mizraḥi Jews more broadly - into the global consciousness. Combining disco glamor, fragile femininity, and traditional Yemenite clothes, 'Ofrah Ḥazah captivated Jewish/Arab audiences alike and became the most famous Mizraḥi woman in the world (aside from the Syrian-American Paula Abdul, with whom she collaborated). Her thoughtful, humble, and earnest persona defied the coercive stereotype of the "freḥah" and her art served as a method for recovering and sharing her culture and humanity. A few years before her untimely passing, she even featured on the soundtrack for *The Prince of Egypt*, a multifaith, multinational, animated collaborative work, as the voice of Moses' mother, Yoḥeved.

This success happened in spite of states in MENAT expressing open hostility to the Israeli national project - thus, the cassette tapes of early “underground” Mizrahi artists like Ben and Argov were not only being sold at bus stations and in the market but being smuggled beyond national borders. SCWANA artists posed a threat to pan-Arabist and pan-Islamist regimes by reminding them and their populaces that their nationalities, histories, and ethnicities encompassed Jews, whether they liked it or not. “Jew” and “Yemeni”, “Iraqi”, “Turkish”, “Algerian” could not be antonyms in the face of these songs. This happens in the same way that the Mizrahiut of SCWANA Jews challenges Israel as an “outpost of civilization against the barbarism of Asia” (Herzl, 1896). They were a threat to the entire identity of these newly formed nation-states. In majority-Islamic countries, erasure of SCWANA Jews is stoked by religiously influenced, nationalist publications.

According to Horowitz, “the portable cassette recorder allowed Mizrahi entrepreneurs to mass-produce and distribute music excluded by the mainstream industry” (Howoritz, 1999). Thus, Syrian nationals sending letters to their favorite Israeli artists - and, in 1990s Egypt, the quiet but growing popularity of the transfeminine “Sa’ida Sultana”, Dana International (non-stage name: Sharon Cohen) (Swedenburg, 1997).

Dana International’s success, and the responses to her success, illustrate the logical conclusion of and relationships between Orientalization, antisemitism, and transmisogyny. Dana is viewed as a woman infiltrating womanhood [and heterosexuality], an “Arab” and Mizrahi infiltrating Jewishness; and a Jew infiltrating Arabness. Yet, much like her precedent SCWANA/Mizrahi musicians, music is a space for Dana to assert her right to exist - and to do so joyously, with full recognition of her humanity.

Dana was born in Israel and grew up in a Yemenite family, with one Romanian Jewish grandparent. Her first instinct to sing, and her first memorable images of femininity, came from witnessing 'Ofrah H̄azah's aforementioned performance of "Hai" on Eurovision in 1983. This is representative of the establishment of a covert feminine SCWANA/Mizraḥi legacy that spanned forty years by the time Dana began to make music at eighteen.

At first, she had a cult following, releasing hits like "Sa'ida Sultana" and "'Arusa",<sup>24</sup> as well as covers of songs such as "The Show Must Go On" (Swedenburg, 1997). The influence of African-American women in pop is apparent in Cohen's explicit, loving parody of Whitney Houston's "My Name Is Not Susan." In a 2013 interview, Cohen describes her success: "Listen, it was [a] hysterical success in Egypt in 1995-1996, millions of cassettes have been sold" (Israeli TV Channel 24, 2013).

<i>One day not long ago</i> <i>I fell for you</i> <i>Too easy to let go</i> <i>She was one from your past</i> <i>One of a few</i> <i>You said it didn't last</i> <i>My name is not Saida</i>	<i>One night not long ago</i> <i>I fell for you</i> <i>Too easy to let go</i> <i>She was one from your past</i> <i>One of the few</i> <i>You said it didn't last</i>
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<sup>24</sup> Arabic wedding song.

“We did funny songs in the beginning that no one had ever done before,” she says of her early music, which parodied clubs and club hookups, and were generally melodramatic and fun - but “...behind this happiness was also pain, humor” (Israeli TV Channel 24, 2013).

Dana’s rise to stardom was cemented with her performance of “Diva” during the 1998 Eurovision contest. With dark lipstick; glittery dress; and striking silver eyeshadow, she sang about divas throughout history, from Aphrodite to Cleopatra - some lyrics in Hebrew, some in Spanish/Italian (“Viva Victoria!”). The multilingual nature of the song is a reference to Israel/Palestine as a Eurasian and Mediterranean crossroad.

In Dana’s case, transmisogyny manifests uniquely with regards to Egyptian elite and governmental responses to her. Reactions across MENAT were similar. Using frameworks provided by both Edward Said and Jewish transfeminist writer Joni Alizah Cohen, we can extrapolate that European antisemitism (which has now been globally exported) is related to Orientalism. Both Orientalism and antisemitism effeminate the Jewish and/or Oriental man, and Dana is coercively assigned to both categories (Said, 1971). In Muhammad al-Ghayti’s article, *A Scandal Whose Name Is Sa’ida Sultan: Danna the Israeli Sex Artist*, classical antisemitism melds with a bizarre, supposedly anticolonial politic.

Joni Aliza Cohen’s discussion of alt-right writer Kevin Macdonald applies to al-Ghayti: “he attributes a vast amount of social power to Jews, essentially placing Jews as the clandestine agents behind such varying movements as Bolshevism, Social Democracy, and later...gay and trans liberation, feminism and the Black Power movement; all of which are designed in order to undermine Western culture and societal norms” (Cohen, 2018). Within this framework, a Jewish goal in and of itself is effeminization of non-Jews. According to al-Ghayti, “although the

Zionists failed in their efforts to conquer Egypt politically, they have now succeeded, through the agency of Danna International's sexuality, in invading Egypt's bedrooms... due to the support of Zionist power brokers...her music was able to "penetrate" Egypt via the Sinai peninsula and "master" the ears of twenty million youths” (Swedenburg, 1997).

On the flip side - instead of Jews infiltrating and destroying Western culture - it is Euro-American and SCWANA/Mizrahi-Israeli pop culture that becomes the Jewish and Zionist scheme: “...we learn that, according to her gynecologist, Madonna is not a 100 percent biological woman. “Can you imagine,” [Al-Ghayti] asks, "Madonna, the global symbol of the naked woman, is not a complete female?” (Swedenburg, 1997).

The SCWANA/Mizrahi woman artist is, in the words of al-Ghayti, “[a] devilish blend” of Arabic (in various regional dialects), English and Hebrew” - quite similar to early Ashkenazi critiques of Mizrahi music (Swedenburg, 1997). In the eyes of the wider MENAT sphere, Dana is so shamefully feminine that her open sexuality and “orgasmic shouts” are obscene and shameful, but also arouse genuine desire; she is masculine enough to “penetrate...like a plague” the circles of innocent Arab youth; she is feminine enough to destroy the hypermasculine, Israeli mythology of the “New Jew”; barbaric enough to dare to sing “[t]he songs with Arabic...even more an extreme statement, because that was unacceptable in pop music then in our country [Israel]”; and through it all, she is hypersexualized not only as a SCWANA/Mizrahi woman, but as a Mizrahi trans woman (Swedenburg, 1997; Channel 24, 2013). To be specific, “the opposition press and word-of-mouth assert that AIDS is being broadcast in Egypt by prostitutes dispatched there for that purpose by the Israeli government” plays, on an absurd level, into classical antisemitic tropes of Jews as plague-spreaders and serophobic canards about trans women (Swedenburg, 1997).



And, like her other SCWANA/Mizrahi musical contemporaries, “...these corruptions of beloved Egyptian classics by Israeli singers manage at once to “penetrate” Arab youth and to destroy the Arabs’ deep-rooted musical heritage” (Swedenburg, 1997). The MENAT world, when faced with a reality of MENAT/Mizrahi Jewish indigeneity to parts of the region, implodes - with the SCWANA/Mizrahi woman, the new “belle juive”, at its arrested heart.

Within the Jewish religious sphere, rabbis debated about Cohen’s ability to pray with any *kehilah*.<sup>25</sup> According to one, “Once a man, always a man, so [she]<sup>26</sup> should be counted in a minyan. But since [she] is also now a woman, she can’t sing in front of the community,” since that would violate the Orthodox proscription of *kol isha*” (Schifrin, 2014). Within the Jewish community, Nazi thought, and anticolonial Egyptian-Islamic thought, “the trans woman is a woman without the concrete biological content of womanhood...woman in the abstract, separated from her biological foundation...she is everything that is detestable about womankind...without any of the redeeming biological expediencies...she represents the worst excess of the cultural degeneration of modernity and contemporary capitalism” (Cohen, 2018).

But it is precisely *because* of Dana’s embodiment of these contradictions, and her ignoring of attempts to malign and humiliate her, that she is beloved. Her authenticity and continued success brings out of the woodwork the fraught relationship between MENAT and its Jews. Her shameless irreverence, passion for art, fashion, fun, rebellion; her serious advocacy for LGBT+ people; is a powerful projection of this confluence of positions, whether in Yemenite couture or a pink, latex dress.

Music is one of the most important, original forces of SCWANA/Mizrahi liberationist self-imaging and assertion of humanity, especially for women. It is one of many routes for

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<sup>25</sup> Synagogue/religious community.

<sup>26</sup> The cited article misgenders Dana, and this writer has amended that.

SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews to remind the world that we are not Jews infiltrating Arabness, Kurdishness, Persianness, or Turkishness; we have claim to our cultures, entwined with our Judaisms. On cassette or onscreen, a SCWANA/Mizrahi woman says that she is here, and that she is not going anywhere - *Hineini!*<sup>27</sup> As the next chapter explores, SCWANA Jewish resistance via demonstration and written word developed concurrently with musikah Mizrahit. Women were, and are, a driving force for their desired social changes.

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<sup>27</sup> Avraham's response to God's call - "Hineini" - I am here.

## **PENS: SCWANA AND BALKAN JEWISH WOMEN IN PROTEST AND PAGE**

SCWANA Jewish leftist aspirations developed simultaneously with *musikah Mizrahi* in the 1940s and 1950s. In order to understand gaps in SCWANA/Mizrahi narratives, this chapter begins by exploring what happened before Wadi Salib,<sup>28</sup> and between Wadi Salib and the creation of the Israeli Black Panthers. This section also explains how Israeli society and SCWANA/Mizrahi activism moved from these events to the explosion of SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist academic publishing in the 1990s and 2000s (concurrent with SCWANA/Mizrahi *piyyut* revival). Finally, it explores SCWANA/Mizrahi women's multiplicity in modes of expression.

The lack of widespread knowledge surrounding SCWANA/Mizrahi insurrections (and at times direct association with Palestinian interests) is mostly due to brutal government suppression of these protests and their architects. Because of the tight control of the new Israeli government over the *ma'abarot* (with regards to everything from food, to medicine, to repair supplies) activists with perceived insurrectionary goals were "...penalized by the withholding of their food-rationing cards and work permits...preventing them from acquiring any sort of livelihood or sustenance" (Roby, 2015). The stereotype of all SCWANA Jews/Mizrahim as conservatives is not necessarily true. Rather, those who refused to align with national/ist agendas were murdered or neglected to death. This is possible because of a marginalized individual's lack of social standing or stability in the first place. At the same time, not all SCWANA emigres in the 1950s were leftists. For each sentence not prefaced with "leftist" as an adjective, it is also understood that SCWANA Jews/Mizrahi Jews run a political spectrum, just like any other group of people.

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<sup>28</sup> 1959 Mizrahi protests in response to police brutality.

Initial SCWANA/Mizrahi protests as early as 1949 revolved around “lehem ve-’avodah” or “bread and work”, demanding basic dignity and livelihood for recently-arrived SCWANA/Mizrahi and Balkan Jews. Responding to activities of Knesset-storming, forceful protests, and clashes with repressive police forces, the Israeli government deemed it necessary to use police to spy on these leftist organizers in the ma’abarot. Later, the government would work to integrate the police force in order to deflect from accusations of profiling and racism (Roby, 2015). SCWANA Jewish intellectual centers and gathering places, no matter how small (i.e. cafes, community centers), became targets of police suppression because they were sites at which anti-MAPAI<sup>29</sup> and explicitly Communist material was being distributed - often not in Hebrew, but in dialects of Arabic and Farsi.

SCWANA Jews demonstrated for employment, food, proper housing, sanitation, paved roads, and access to education. Each time, a small delegation of demonstrators were selected to be “heard”, minimally appeased, and then ignored. Cutoffs of the water supply resulted in mass rebellions across parched ma’abarot. Angered and united, SCWANA/Mizrahi Jewish intellectuals published in “Voice of the Ma’abara” and “Forward” among other SCWANA/Mizrahi-run journals that petered out due to state censorship and repression. Their writing about anti-SCWANA Jewish/Mizrahi discrimination was published by Palestinian newspapers in solidarity.<sup>30</sup> The only parliamentary positions held by SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews during the decade were two - ministers of police and post - established for the purpose of controlling and surveilling the ma’abarot.

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<sup>29</sup> MAPAI - “Mifleget Po’ali Eres Yisrael”, Israel’s democratic-socialist party. Specifically, many SCWANA Jews/Mizrahim protested MAPAI and MAKI (HaMiflega HaKomunistit HaYisraelit) because they did not consider them Left-wing enough (Roby, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> One challenge that this writer continues to face with regards to early and even modern Mizrahi activism, is the scant material from non-Arab/ized and non-Persian Jewish activists: namely that she can find little on South Asian, Kurdish, and Central Asian activists.

One obstacle to SCWANA/Mizrahi access to universities and the “official” academic realm in Israel was the purposeful funneling of SCWANA Jews of all ages into vocational schools. The aforementioned “*te’unei tipuah*” policies separated children from their parents and placed those children into schools, but not to prepare them for higher education. Rather, they were placed in vocational schools so that they might learn trades. There was little social mobility for those designated Mizrahi during the 1960s and 1970s.

Incidents at Wadi Salib are often thought of as *the* catalyst for SCWANA/Mizrahi activism in Israel, but it is one of many “ebb and flow” moments - of suppression and then rebellion - that constituted a cycle of SCWANA/Mizrahi protest in Israel. It is, however, one of the most well-known expressions. Summarized, in July of 1959, police responded to a noise complaint at a cafe in Wadi Salib and found a young man, Moroccan-Israeli immigrant Ya’akov Elkarif, in an intoxicated state. Alleging instigation, they fired on him, paralyzing him for life. Rightfully enraged by racial profiling and violence by the police toward SCWANA/Mizrahi citizens, as well as continued poor circumstances incurred by one’s status as SCWANA/Mizrahi, SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews (mostly North Africans) stormed local Ashkenazi neighborhoods, setting fires and smashing in store windows. Similar protests erupted across Israel, especially in SCWANA/Mizrahi-majority cities, though some Iraqi and Persian activists condemned the “mostly North African” protests (Roby, 2015).

The decade was soaked in conflict, and different groups used unique tactics, not necessarily in coalition with one another. Indian Jews “[used] protest tactics...during the 1950s and 1960s...traced directly to the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolent resistance” (Roby, 2015). Specifically, in 1952 Be-er Shev’a, a group of 150 Indian Jews sat outside of the Jewish Agency and “began a hunger strike to the death” asking to be sent back to Mumbai (Roby, 2015).

Persian immigrants marched on employment offices demanding work. Iraqis published in newspapers, in coalition with other Arabic-speaking groups. In the 1960s, organizations such as CSCJ (Council of the Sefaradi Community of Jerusalem) published anti-discrimination pamphlets. MAPAI members made public speeches against racial and ethnic discrimination. As SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews demanded to be a part of the “official” Israeli Left, its Ashkenazi-dominated constituency pitted them against one another and refused them.

Directly inspired by African-American protest and militancy, in 1971, a group of mostly North African SCWANA/Mizrahi youth in East Jerusalem’s Musrarah neighborhood formed the Israeli Black Panthers. In spite of being refused demonstration permits, the Black Panthers produced leaflets and hosted demonstrations that attracted thousands. They drew direct connections between surveillance and policing they experienced and the experiences of African-Americans. Ashkenazi allies tried, paternalistically, to push the Panthers in directions they found most “ideologically pure” or “consistent” rather than listen to Panthers themselves, while facing few consequences. The Black Panthers’ politics were, in part, to reject the idea of being “approved” or “legitimized” by the presence of Ashkenazim. According to Panther Reuven Abergel (also known as Reuven Abarjel):

When we began our struggle as the Black Panther movement, what we actually did was launch a head-on confrontation with the Israeli political system. We didn’t know how to “formulate” texts, organize protests, publish manifestos, or put out press releases. If we wanted to write anything, we would all huddle together over the single typewriter we managed to find...As we faced waves of arrests and as police violence intensified during our struggle, we were desperate for any kind of support or even just empathy...

Only two things were clear to us: first, all these leftist activists were Ashkenazi, the establishment’s own flesh and blood...that some of them were our friends...using their power to impose their perspectives and thinking they knew better than us what needed to be done (Abergel, 2020).

In spite of tensions between Panthers and Ashkenazi allies, the Israeli Panthers made a lasting impact on social policy with regards to Jewish citizens in Israel. Their largest

demonstration, in which they renamed Zion Square “Eastern Jewry Square” drew 7,000 protestors. While the government was hostile to them, it did launch investigations into widespread discrimination in Israel. Budgets to address inequality were enlarged, but were quickly depleted in the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur War - another instance of SCWANA/Mizrahi Jewish needs being ignored because of more “pressing” issues.

There is no one SCWANA/Mizrahi narrative. Different communities took unique paths to combating racism in Israel - in the aforementioned Indian protests, they requested to be sent home (in this case, to Mumbai) while “the Afghani community requested relocation...to more developed areas of the country rather than emigration from Israel” (Roby, 2015). Even when united regardless of gender lines, SCWANA/Mizrahi responses to adversity are diverse.

Concurrent with the MBP movement, but far removed from it and its priorities, Ashkenazi feminists began theorizing around gendered oppression - namely, arguing for the validity of feminist causes in the first place. Per Professor Pnina Motzafi-Haller, “[t]he first hesitant essays [by Ashkenazi feminists] were concerned with establishing the legitimacy of their subject matter” in mid-1970s Israel and the United States (Motzafi-Haller, 2001). Their issues included their desire to enter the workforce, to have frontline positions in the army, and to have access to birth control. The 1980s “gap” demonstrated academic proclivity for writing ethnographic material that was about SCWANA/Mizrahi women, but not necessarily by them.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, thinkers like the late Dr. Vicki Shiran (z”L) began publishing in journals and magazines about SCWANA/Mizrahi women’s interests and experiences. Many of these papers existed outside of official academic publications. In many ways, the independence of SCWANA/Mizrahi feminists was a blessing and a curse; not beholden

to university interests, but lacking the finances and establishment credibility that would accompany institutional support.

Epistemic violence is the open aggression directed by those who define their systemic knowledge as the only "true" kind of knowledge against any other claims...**The small community of scholars and activists who are engaged in Mizrahi intellectual feminist discourse have struggled against a very powerful hegemonic discourse. Their (our) initial subversive act has been to define ourselves as feminists and Mizrahi.** [emphasis mine] (Motzafi-Haller, 2001)

Before this, SCWANA/Mizrahi women were on the frontlines of almost any of the protests previously discussed in this chapter. SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist struggles could not be fully disentangled from the interests of SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews of all genders. Middle-class and poor SCWANA/Mizrahi women, newly entering academia and publishing, used their platform to advocate for destitute, disenfranchised, and racially profiled Mizrahi women *and* men. The very issue of SCWANA/Mizrahi women and children having access to non-vocational education was a pressing issue. As Motzafi-Haller summarizes, “We have so few Mizrahi feminist women in academe not because we are stopped at the door of academic institutions...but because so few of us ever make it to such a door” (Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

In relation to Kimberle Crenshaw’s theory of Intersectionality, the gendered struggle faced by SCWANA Jewish women is compounded by the effect of Orientalism on their lives already; they sit at an intersection of gendered and racial/ethnic struggle. Crenshaw hypothesizes that Black women sit at an intersection of race and gender, both of which affect their experiences and the way their societies class them. Their oppressions are enmeshed. There are also systems created by the state designed to push Mizrahi women into vocational trades as a result of long-entrenched ideas about SCWANA Jews as “natural workers” suited for manual labor.

The ability to raise children safely is a core issue of SCWANA Jewish/Mizrahi women’s activism. Because of dire economic straits facing many single Mizrahi mothers, and the harmful



influence of social workers and state workers in their lives, SCWANA/Mizrahi women's activism was inherently class-conscious and aimed to empower the SCWANA/Mizrahi woman worker. The aforementioned Children's Affair and Ringworm Affair were still fresh in the minds of many.

A 1999 SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist conference concluded with the following goals of:

- 1) expanding the circle of feminists to include working women and those who lived in peripheral settlements;
- 2) integrating class politics with the varied and complex identity politics of many groups in Israeli society—Jews, Arabs, Ethiopians, Russians, Mizrahim, and women in general;
- 3) giving immediate assistance to low income women, particularly in the area of legal counseling as to their rights;
- 4) bringing the current discourse between Jewish and Arab women factory workers into Israeli feminism; and
- 5) disseminating information on a variety of issues of particular importance to working women—for instance, the rights of pregnant women, sexual harassment in the workplace, how to read a pay slip, and how to join a labor union. (Dahan-Kalev, 2007)

Some of these goals, namely inclusion of multiple disparate groups under the Mizrahi feminist umbrella, are thwarted by diversity of thought within Mizrahi feminist coalitions. At the first Mizrahi feminist conference, Arab, Druze, and Palestinian women were disturbed by a singer who declared Jerusalem to be the united capital of Israel (Madmoni and Khazzoom, 1997). In spite of these challenges, SCWANA/Mizrahi feminists of the 1990s and 2000s organized across ethnic and racial lines to tackle even broader issues of assigned class, whether by economic and/or ethnocentric circumstances. Writers like Smadar Lavie and Tal Dekel, theorizing during the 2010s, created even more expansive definitions of Mizrahi:

Mizrahim, Jews with origins in the Arab and Muslim world and on the margins of Ottoman Europe, constitute 50 percent of the citizenry in the State of Israel (Lavie, 2012).

The category “Mizrahi” refers to many ethnic groups in Israel, such as Ethiopian,<sup>31</sup> Moroccan, Iraqi, etc., that are politically affiliated and mentioned together as being non-Ashkenazi subjects (implementing “strategic essentialism”) (Dekel, 2015).

Utilizing both large-scale direct action - factory closures and barricades;<sup>32</sup> walking out of stores without paying for items desperately needed to feed their children; and marches on the capital to demand social welfare - as well as academic theorization - SCWANA/Mizrahi women engaged in self-advocacy on behalf of improving quality-of-life for all.

“We have decided to take direct action to fill our shopping carts with food and bring it to our children. It’s time to stop being shy and silent. If you’re a single mother, join us. Together we’ll succeed.” (Dahan-Kalev, 2007)

While theorization surrounding SCWANA/Mizrahi experiences was not the only thing that SCWANA/Mizrahi women made central to their activism, Mizrahi feminist presence challenged ideas of epistemic knowledge. Establishment and assimilation also played a role in SCWANA/Mizrahi access to higher education, making the academy a new route of liberationist expression. Many SCWANA/Mizrahi women entering academia had also been through the humiliating process of the vocational school pipeline, including Moroccan-Israeli feminist Henriette Dahan-Kalev: “I was held back a grade and then sent to a vocational school to become a good cook” (Dahan-Kalev, 2001).

The inherently subversive nature of SCWANA/Mizrahi (especially reclamation of Mizrahi) as an identity - calling back to the co-operation between SCWANA/Mizrahi and Palestinian subjects - was, in part, replaced by a desire to be included within the Israeli nation-building project. Some anti-Zionist SCWANA/Mizrahi feminists, including Ella Habiba Shohat, swung in an opposite direction, seeking inclusion in the project of Arabist identity formation.

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<sup>31</sup> Many Ethiopian women’s rights activists feel their causes are unique and distinct from those of the SCWANA/Mizrahi feminists’ by virtue of the anti-Blackness they face.

<sup>32</sup> The Mitzpe Atzmaut Textile factory shutdown executed by Mizrahi women demanding to be its managers.

Not all Mizrahi women share similar ideas and perspectives, certainly not around “feminism,” or around such contested terrain as the “Jewishnation,” “Zionism,” and “Palestine.” I think that we still have a long way to go in terms of a coherent Mizrahi agenda and vision that moves beyond immediate school and neighborhood issues to a full understanding of our identity... (Shohat, 2017)

In response to the trauma of growing up as an Iraqi Jewish woman in Israel, Shohat has written pieces such as *The Invention of the Mizrahim* and *The Question of Judeo-Arabic*, wherein she ponders the inclusion of Arab/ized Jews in the various nation-building projects of “Arab” states and identities in the Middle East and North Africa. Shohat focuses on a campaign in which Iraqi Jews were used as test subjects for biochemical weapons developed by the Israeli government; this happens because they are considered genetically similar to Arabs (Shohat, 1997). Shohat is stranded. She was not considered in the project of building Iraqi Arab identity; nor was she considered in the project of building Israeli identity, which explicitly seeks to strip her of her culture and perceived backwardness. If Shohat has one blind spot, it is that she exceptionalizes her experiences as an Arab/ized Jew. In *The Invention of the Mizrahim*, she writes:

But in the case of Jews, because of the aggressive advance of Zionism, Arab-Jewish identity was always intensely “on trial” in a way that was not true of the other minorities. All the minorities [Imazighen, Kurds, Copts] faced the insecurity engendered by marginalization, but Arab-Jews had to also face the basic question of final allegiance... (Shohat, 1997)

Some of these minorities were not given a trial in the first place - due process was skipped over in favor of total annihilation, in the case of Kurds in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq; total assimilation, in the case of Imazighen; or in the case of Copts, sporadic terrorism and lack of government representation or protection. The overarching multifunctionality of Arabness (as political; as religiously defined; as a colonial force) is not questioned, and assigned a somewhat

positive value. Shohat misses out on a potential opportunity to connect with non-Arab subjects and cast a wide net of solidarity.

Shohat's racialized trauma is visibly processed through her rhetorical campaign to be included in Arabness. The route she uses for this processing is academic. The academic structure of thesis, supporting argument, and conclusion distilled becomes: *If I am similar enough to you as an Iraqi [Muslim, Christian], why would you cast me out? Here, I will lay out how I am similar to you. This is why and how we should work together and reunite. Here is why I am human.* [summary mine]

Other SCWANA/Mizrahi women used publishing routes in order to explore themselves and the world around them via creative writing. Esther Shkalim, a Persian Jewish woman, enters her writing in dialogue with her conservative Persian community, asserting her presence as a religious woman and a feminist. She does this via her creative and nonfiction writing, namely her poetry book *What Every Woman Needs To Know* and her autobiography *Sharkia* (Eastern) wherein Persian Jewish knowledge and mysticism are expounded upon through the chemistry of poetic and creative lenses. In *Sharkia*, she recounts fraught episodes from her upbringing in an Israel hostile to Persians (1, 2, 3). Esther 'Eillam, a Greek Mizrahi activist, writes about sexual violence against young girls in her short story *Esperanza*, which was published by a Mizrahi feminist university press. Creative writing (including metafiction) is another, rapidly expanding outlet for reflection, SCWANA/Mizrahi women's works in dialogue with one another. For example, there are varying opinions between feminists such as Ella Shohat, Rachel Wahba, and Loolwa Khazzoom (all Iraqi, with Wahba's family hailing in part from Egypt) with regards to whether they can, or should, self-identify as Arab, or with Arabness. Pressed on either side by trauma - of being excluded from the initial project of building Arab nationalist identities, or of

being excluded from dignity as Jewish people by Ashkenazi Israelis for being ‘too Arab’ - dichotomies form.

Common themes in SCWANA women’s writing include:

1. memoir;
2. reflections on race and ethnicity;
3. on marginalization as a result of race, ethnicity, gender, and class;
4. on the simultaneous beauty and discomfort of embracing one’s culture(s);
5. developing pride or self-acceptance of one’s self and one’s culture(s);
6. recounting of episodes in one’s cultural/historical background, both fictional and non-fictional;<sup>33</sup>
7. and flowery exploration and incorporation of one’s aesthetic cultural trappings, normalizing fixtures such as henna, traditional foods, and traditional dress

Not every work by a SCWANA/Mizrahi woman is a Mizrahi feminist work. One way of gauging whether or not a work has a SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist/women’s liberationist approach is to examine whether the subject matter engages with the above ideas - and how. They respond to images of their own identity that exist on an intra and extra-communal level, while developing that identity via writing.

Ilana Sugbaker Messika, of Indian background, grapples with her invisibility even within parts of Israeli society that are aware of Jews from Muslim majority countries (1, 2, 3, 4, and 6).

“In the eyes of many, I’m a “Yemenite” because of the color. Once, years ago, when women soldiers used to hitchhike, this conversation [guessing Ilana’s ethnicity] repeated itself again and again” (Messika, 1996)

In “Memories of an Indian Upbringing” Sugbaker Messika reflects on the conflation of “modern” with “Ashkenazi” and “Israel.” She also explores the complication of both admiring

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<sup>33</sup> For example, a Moroccan Jewish woman writing a book whose setting incorporates Moroccan Jewish history/historical figures and mythology/legends.

and loving her culture and family, while knowing in the back of her mind that it is exactly what she loves about her community that marginalizes it - even within the broad “Mizrahi” class.

Referencing the aforementioned Indian protests of the 1960s, Messika wryly critiques the ambivalently subversive politics of the era: “We got what we wanted. We demonstrated. Quietly, in exemplary order, precisely following the commands of the police” to attempt to gain entry into and respect from the establishment (Messika, 1996). Her piece is loving, humorous, and critical, all at once - and no one is “safe” from hearing her voice. The pit of her piece is that, if the Bene Israelim<sup>34</sup> are now just Israeli - having disproven the racist accusation of a “primitive nature” by stubbornly adhering to every law, even during protest - why are Indian Jews so invisible? Or, why can’t one be Indian, Israeli, and Jewish?

For poet-activist Adi Keissar, creative writing also opens up a space for connection and sharing without the hoops involved in the publishing world (1, 2, 3, 4, 6). She is the founder of the *Ars Poetica* movement, a play on the word “ars” an Arabic word for “pimp” that found its way into Israeli slang in reference to “stereotypical” SCWANA/Mizrahi men. In many ways, it is the masculine counterpart of “frehah.” She organizes poetry readings at which anyone is welcome to share their story.

Keissar’s poem *Black on Black* focuses on the broken chain of transmission between her grandmother’s Yemenite Arabic and her own Israeli Hebrew, and has been translated into multiple languages (1, 2). In writing, a sense of multiplicity in transmission remains. Stories of SCWANA Jewish women are musical, written (academic and creative), and spoken. In many ways, this blending of fiction/creativity and reality is a call-back to the aforementioned tendency

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<sup>34</sup> One of several South Asian Jewish communities (Bene Israelim, Cochinim/Malabar Jews, Baghdadi-Indian Jews, etc.)

of musiḳah Mizraḥit to blend the sacred and the secular, the humorous and the painful - and highlights the importance of having a voice of one's own.

Ayelet Tsabari is another Yemenite feminist writer who has begun publishing her writing in English, thereby reaching an even wider audience. But who is her audience? "I try not to think about audience when I write. I worry it will ruin the magic. But if I had to choose, I'd say people who love books as much as I do" (Firestone-Teeter, 2015). Tsabari herself credits a degree of her inspiration to the late 'Ofrah H̄azah: "Ofra's humble beginnings gave me hope, for I wanted to be a singer and an actress when I grew up, just like her" (Tsabari, 2019).

This writing is created for SCWANA/Mizraḥi, Ashkenazi, and non-Jewish audiences alike. For an Ashkenazi reader, there is an opportunity for empathy, self-reflection, and humanization of the "Other" SCWANA/Mizraḥi woman, who is able to tell her story in her own words. For a SCWANA/Mizraḥi Jewish reader, there is a diminished feeling of loneliness in engaging with intra-cultural pressures and an extra-communal, often discriminatory gaze perpetrated by, for example, Ashkenazi Jews. A shell of invisibility is broken. And for non-Jewish SCWANA readers, there is an opportunity for reading, relation, and reconciliation. The very reality of "crossover appeal" of SCWANA/Mizraḥi women's creations defies the idea that their experiences and cultures are too specific to be identified with or engaged with respectfully, breaking a wall.

"Do the freha," my friends would implore. And I would, enjoying the laughter, high on the attention. Not once stopping to think about the girl I was mocking. My own inner freha began escorting me everywhere, my sidekick, always ready to make an entrance. While I was often insecure around new people, she was chatty, and too stupid to care what people thought of her...I'd slip into her momentarily for laughs, making a comment or an inarticulate observation accompanied by a hair toss. People who didn't know me sometimes confused her for me...I was mortified, and quickly made sure they knew I was kidding. That wasn't me. I wasn't her. (Tsabari, 2019)

In the above passage, Tsabari touches on a common reality for Mizrahi Jews: holding multiple selves in one body. What is perceived to be Mizrahi is relegated to the private sphere, or else is externalized by the person bearing the Mizrahi image. Tsabari makes fun of the *frehah*, but knows, in the back of her mind, that the reason she can be “mistaken” for one is because even in her attempts to distance herself from the role, she must perform it. Tsabari has also written meta-fiction and fiction centering on both her own life, people like her (Yemenite, Mizrahi) and people unlike her (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Presupposed barriers of language and identity disintegrate in the wake of Tsabari’s easy and cynical voice, in which she swoops into various places, peoples, and cultures over the course of a lifetime of travels. The above excerpt is from her 2019 memoir, *The Art of Leaving*, composed of essays on her life. In this excerpt, the most salient barrier - the two selves she describes - is acknowledged, and dissolved.

Music - both traditional Yemenite and *musiqah Mizrahit* - play a role in Tsabari’s belief in her own authorship and feature in her understanding of her cultures, choices, and positionalities - for example, as a teenager, her loud voicing of contempt for *musiqah Mizrahit* as a way of fitting in with her Ashkenazi peers (1, 2, 5, 6). What one sings, and furthermore what one writes/recites/transmits (or doesn’t), are all integral parts of self expression, self preservation, and (if one wishes) cultural preservation.

I strutted with my trays across the floor, hips swaying, and belly-danced to Arabic pop much like the Mizrahi music I had once snubbed, embracing the sensuality of the dance, allowing the natural movement of my body to take place, for my body to take up space.

Tsabari also touches on the right to safely raise children. In “Yemenite Soup and Other Recipes” she allows herself the space to rage about the complicated relationship between her mother and herself. She does this while acknowledging her mother’s love, and the sacrifices she made as a working-class woman (1, 3). There is a reference to a film made for similar purposes



as *The Carpet*, about Yemenite women and child-rearing, recalling the “te’unei tipuah” inspired policies. In the video, Yemenite girls are referred to as “primitive.” Per Tsabari:

A fundraising film from the fifties, meant to highlight the work of *Moetzet HaPoalot* (Working Women’s Council), said Yemeni women are “fruitful and multiply but they need proper instructions” – instructions given by Ashkenazi women, as the film demonstrated. (Tsabari, 2018)

SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist writing (and writing at large) is also not geographically confined. Tsabari writes from multiple homes, from Israel to eastern and western Canada, and her experiences and culture travel with her wherever she goes. There are also SCWANA/Mizrahi-American feminist writers such as Loolwa Khazzoom (Iraqi-American); Esther Chehebar-Levy (Syrian-American); and various contributors to small publications such as the Persian Jewish and Rojhelati<sup>35</sup> Kurdish Jewish-run *Zaman Collective*, who are SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews born in America; France; Israel; and Jews still living in their “home countries” of India, Morocco, and Turkey.

Sometimes, SCWANA/Mizrahi women writers are acting as intra-communal anthropologists. Esther Chehebar-Levy wrote a feature length article about “The Bangles”, a staple of many Jewish cultures in SCWANA, her focus being on Anatolia, the Levant, and North Africa (Yemen is also mentioned). The bangles are a material/fashion item, the type of gold jewelry that would mark a SCWANA Jewish woman for contempt because of its perceived tacky flashiness. Within the context of Chehebar-Levy’s beloved Syrian Jewish community, they are a circle continuously connecting women’s pasts, presents, and gendered roles. This is one of many expressions of SCWANA/Mizrahi women’s visual and aesthetic cultures.

For many young women, the transition into the early teen years is fraught with fear and concern over changing bodies. One’s initial reaction to a developing figure might be to cover it. Suddenly, charges such as “immodest” and “improper” enter our lexicon and

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<sup>35</sup> Eastern Kurdistan/Western Iran.

urge us to reexamine the way in which girls present ourselves to the world. Schrem had this to say about the subversive power of bangles: “The noise that bangles create is *everything*. You can hear them from a mile away. Even the most modest of women want to be noticed when they enter a room.”

In fact, while our ancestors started wearing bangles to mark the commencement of adulthood—marriage and motherhood—our generation has them removed at the same juncture (Chehebar-Levy, 2020).

In a turn of SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist musical continuity, one of Chehebar-Levy’s friends comments: ““I stopped wearing my bangles many years ago when I started working because they made noise and I got comments about them...I love the sound they make and they remind me so much of where I come from and who I am. **The music they make is my favorite part**”” [emphasis mine] (Chehebar-Levy, 2020). The bangles are an extension of a Syrian Jewish woman’s body as well as an extension of her voice. Chehebar-Levy also comments on the shift of the bangle (used as an engagement gift in the same vein as an American diamond ring) from practical to symbolic. The bangle, as a fashion item, becomes an expression of one’s lineage as a Syrian Jewish woman, and a way to connect to the past while looking to the future.

Iraqi-American Loolwa Khazzoom combines traditional Iraqi prayers with riot grrrl punk, engaging intra-communal issues of domestic violence alongside issues of wellness. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, she worked as a multicultural educator for Jewish communities, while also living everywhere from Washington State to Be-er Shev’a and attending the inaugural SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist conference, *Anahnu Kan Veie Shelanu*<sup>36</sup>, in 1996. Additionally, she published one of the first English-language SCWANA/Mizrahi feminist anthologies, *The Flying Camel*, in 2003.

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<sup>36</sup> “We Are Here and This Is Ours”.

Most of the pieces in *The Flying Camel* expressed distress over being *border-crossers*; whether fleeing from one country to another (Rachel Wahba, Gina Bublil Waldman, and Ella Shohat); pulling out a seat at the man-dominated table of Jewish religious practice and theory (Ya'el Arami and Bahareh Mobasseri Rinsler); hunger for belonging (Caroline Smadja and Kyla Wazana Tompkins); or pushing for an equal *voice* in the matters of their communities.

The vignettes chronicle near-deadly flights from Libya during the 1967 war between Israel and neighboring countries; struggle for justice in Israel; and the fight to be able to sing in synagogue. It was groundbreaking, and became a part of multiple curricula surrounding women's studies departments, especially in California, whose population of Sefaradi/SCWANA Jews is on par with New York City's.

A few years later in her online article "Who Stole My Judaism?" Khazzoom speaks from the inside about her frustration at the turn in her Iraqi community toward a Judaism that looks and acts more similar to that of Ashkenazim; a Judaism that doesn't allow her to ask questions in synagogue without "men clamor[ing] in an uproar" (Khazzoom, 2006). For Khazzoom, her love for her Iraqi heritage and its traditions is not at odds with her critical nature or her engagement in feminist discourses - rather, it is a prerequisite for both of those things, just as it is for the authors in *The Flying Camel*.

In traditional Mizrahi and Sephardi synagogues...the women generally sat upstairs in the gallery...where they were welcome to sing at full volume along with the male congregants. I vividly remember the passion of women with white lace head coverings and colorful dresses, praying from the bottoms of their hearts and the depths of their souls, closing their eyes while holding their hands open and in front of them, as if to gather the energy being raised by the congregants, then bringing their hands to their faces and kissing them – as if they were kissing G-d. (Khazzoom, 2006)

Within Khazzoom's framework, embodiment and connection with God is deeply attached to the literal voice - song, prayer, recitation. Her music is a vehicle for advocacy vis-a-vis respect and visibility for SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews, but also for issues of violence against women, and immigration, which are intracommunally intertwined. For Khazzoom, too, the music is her favorite part - maybe the most important part.

Truth is, I didn't even know what it felt like to have a role model. I didn't know what the whole concept was about. Only at age 19, when Ofra Haza burst out on the international music scene, did I understand. I was a young Mizrahi woman; she was a young Mizrahi woman. I was a musician; she was a musician. I wanted to make Mizrahi heritage mainstream and popular; she did it. I wanted to be famous; she was. For the first time in my life, someone who reflected my identity was further down my path than me.  
(Khazzoom, 2000)

In the work of Khazzoom and Tsabari, the divide between "public" and "private" is also fearlessly dissolved via the discussion of "unrespectable" intra-communal issues - polygamy, favoritism, invisibility domestic violence, and sexual assault. Like Tsabari, Khazzoom cites 'Ofrah H̄azah's visibility as an emotional turning point in her own self-imaging and self-actualization. Even if the transmitter does not always self-identify as feminist, song is a liberatory mode of self-realization and expression, as well as a means to connect with and love other people and God, intra- and extra-communally. The existence of "women's songs" is touched on in Tsabari's "Extra Content" page on her website. Gila Beshari sings Yemenite women's songs, and Tsabari mentions that Beshari will be teaching her to sing them, too. H̄azah's appearance in several Mizrahi feminist texts indicates the influence of pop culture on the psycho-social sphere of Jewish life on an international scale. Beshari will teach Tsabari to sing the women's songs, and 'Ofrah inspired Tsabari.

Victoria Hanna, a Persian-Egyptian singer, performs what has been dubbed “ḳabbalistic feminist rap” remixing *Sefer Yeṣirah*, the opening lines of the *Zohar*, and embodied practice with letters, violating any prohibition on a woman’s voice. In Ashkenazi cultures, ḳabbalah is typically studied by men who have been studying Torah for at least thirty years. In Hanna’s world, ḳabbalah is constant, for everyone, and imbued from a young age. In *The Aleph-Bet Song*, Hanna acts both as a Hebrew school teacher using one of many SCWANA methods of Hebrew alphabet instruction, and as a young girl learning it. Religious women have an explicit voice and place in Mizraḥi art and music (terms with which Hanna self-identifies, according to her replies to YouTube comments). Hanna retains a breathy *ḥet* and back-of-the-throat *ayin*, as do many SCWANA Jewish pronunciations. In *The Aleph-Bet Song*, Hanna creates something explicitly new. She is building on an existing tradition, but her fervent chants and whispers toe the line between music and spoken word.

Ilana Eliya, a Kurdish musical academic and musician, presents a unique case study of what it may look like to holistically preserve the past of one’s culture while being a part of its present development. Eliya hails from Baṣurî (Southern) or “Iraqi” Kurdistan, and her community speaks multiple dialects of Neo-Aramaic. Even the Neo-Aramaic that Kurdish Jewish women spoke was sometimes a little bit different. Zakho-born scholar Yona Sabar describes the phenomenon of “women’s speech” in his 2002 Neo-Aramaic Dictionary, wherein women had words and phrases unique to their vocabulary when speaking with other women (Sabar, 2002).

In fact, many of these phrases related to the specialized labor that Kurdish Jewish women engaged in throughout preparation for holidays such as Pesah, called ‘Eḏ Praṭile, or “The holiday of hard labor” a clever pun on one of its other Neo-Aramaic names, ‘Eḏ Paṭire, or “Holiday of

unleavened bread” (Sabar, 2002). Taboo Neo-Aramaic words are also much more common in women’s speech, emphasizing a lived memory of women’s candidness with one another via the mechanism of their voices (Sabar, 2002). One review of Eliya places her in this category: “[Eliya] conveys her message [of liberation for women and Kurdistan] easily and with rare honesty and **frankness**” [emphasis mine] (FMBC, 2016) complicating dichotomic images of women as either perfect or worthless (see Rinsler’s chapter, “Vashti”, in *The Flying Camel*).

Eliya names herself as coming from a long line of Kurdish Jewish women who are theologians, creatives, and singers - including 17th-century Mûsil<sup>37</sup> yeshivah leader Asenath Barzani, who “[wrote] a great number of piyutim and...an interpretation of the Book of Proverbs[.]...[t]he respect given to her...evident in letters sent to her by rabbis, who referred to her as, “our respected reacher<sup>38</sup> [sic] and rabbi” and “our mother and teacher” (Shezaf, 2013). Barzani was also referred to as “tannait” or “reciter”, carrying on the legacy of the “Tannaim” - the sages who crafted the Oral Torah known as the Mishnah. Finally, she also penned a piyyut called “Ga’agu’a L’Şiyon” (Longing for Zion). Thus, as mother, teacher, and artist, Eliya is a part of a long line of women whose multiple identities exist as one and defy compartmentalization.

Storytelling is a central part of this feminine line of transmission:

“Before there was any radio or television, the minstrels and songsters of the Kurdish people were actually story-tellers. They have documented the stories of the village through their songs. The concern and unconditional devotion of the mother has [sic] toward her son or daughter is well known to everyone. That’s an old Kurdish lullaby that a mother sings to her son Jabaliyo” (Eliya, 2013)

This slide appears in one of her self-made and uploaded YouTube videos, wherein she sings Jabaliyo (“Son of the Mountains”) the eponymous song of her 1992 album. Eliya passes no

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<sup>37</sup> Kurdish spelling of Ar. Mosul

<sup>38</sup> “Teacher” as misspelled by author

value judgement on the traditional (sometimes read as conservative) structure of her community, while organically uplifting the underappreciated roles that women take on. She is an open advocate for women's emancipation (Radio Fullmoon, 2019). In Eliya's world, a mother is a teacher and a scholar of oral and written histories spanning centuries. No job, from raising the next generation to debating the stars about God's words, is more or less important than another, and all labor is holy. Asenath Barzani was tannait, scholar, singer, writer, mother, wife, daughter, and - most importantly - communally beloved.

“The Jewish community in Kurdistan was unequivocally traditional, but its history shows that it was also liberal toward women...Many researchers emphasize that this was a society that did not discriminate against women – if men sat and sang, women did so too. Both men and women even participated in traditional Kurdish dancing, hand in hand or shoulder to shoulder. They remained true to every word of the Torah, and because they maintained the tradition in its original form, they were actually more liberal.” (Shezaf, 2013)

Eliya is not the only person reminding the wider Jewish world of the often-egalitarian histories and traditions of different SCWANA Jewish communities. Many communities had and are reviving women's holidays, such as the Kurdish Lel Purim (Purim Eve), a night of dancing, communal bathing, and henna art amongst Kurdish women, while North African, Salonikan, and Istanbuli Jewish women are reviving 'Eid Al-Banat/Hag Habanot (Festival of the Daughters) (Brauer, 1947; Rahav-Meir, 2020). Eliya takes these fixtures to their logical conclusion of women's total inclusion in song, dance, devotion, and spiritual leadership.

Eliya infuses traditional Kurdish instruments into non-Kurdish songs she loves. Her Hebrew cover of Kate Bush's "Army Dreamers", accompanied by baglama and posted to YouTube, reads as an anti-war sentiment. When she sings "Az Kevukem" (Like A Partridge)<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Popular Kurdish song, often sung at weddings; the chukar partridge is the national bird of Kurdistan

crowds of Kurdish concertgoers - Jewish and gentile - erupt with joyous cries. She brings people together, reflecting and refracting history and present back to them.

She is also a part of a larger project to preserve Kurdish piyyutim. While she acknowledges that many Kurdish piyyutim are still sung today, "...today no one treats the music as an asset... We don't have budgets, everyone does the best he/she can, but this [is] our mission and our culture. We won't give up on it" calling back to aforementioned issues of whose culture is considered worthy of "preservation" work (Shezaf, 2013). One of her co-preservationists, Yaniv 'Ovadia, shares her simultaneous hope and anxiety: "Over the last few years we have been attempting to record as many *paytanim* (piyut reciters) in order to preserve the tradition...but the songs that were sung at home are disappearing; they were not treated as a cultural asset and as time goes on, we are losing knowledge of them" (Shezaf, 2013).

"Participant" does not quite encapsulate what Ilana Eliya, A-WA, and other SCWANA/Mizrahi singer-academics are doing, as simultaneous preservationists and innovators. New songs are created from words written by Yemenite poets hundreds of years ago, as Hazah sets them to synths and electronic drums. A-WA takes the folkloric music they grew up with and create music videos wherein they fight back against the very men their lyrics lament, while creating new lyrics, such as the ones in "Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman." Victoria Hanna is reciting, but her musical arrangements are new and bold.

There is no fetishism and no concept of a "dying" culture - only a culture that would be better off with more music, and not less; with more voices raised, not fewer. Between Euro-American positivism and assimilation, SCWANA/Mizrahi women choose a middle ground.



Theirs is a “masorti”<sup>40</sup> project of embodiment, preservation, and recitation. It is a project that respects their cultures of origin while nudging their communities to change organically, never striving for an unattainable, pre-lapsarian (and at times toxic) “authenticity.”

As discussed in the next chapter, precedent SCWANA/Mizraḥiot contributions to cultures in and outside of Israel also influence SCWANA/Mizraḥi women’s artistic self-imaging today. The piyut revival combined with emergent artistic visual languages of the 2000s and 2010s manifest SCWANA/Mizraḥi women’s activist work in the now, while asking what it will do in the future. In its past and ever-expanding present, languages of pop, folk, religious, and recent compositions - musical, written, and artistic - intertwine. Whose voices are included, and whose are silenced?

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<sup>40</sup> “Traditional” or Conservative Judaism; reflecting classical Sefaradi/Mizraḥi modes of Jewish thought

## EGGS: THE FULLNESS OF SCWANA AND BALKAN JEWISH WOMEN'S SELF IMAGINING

“But the meaning of the eggs goes beyond the literal. In many cultures, eggs are a symbol of fertility, and they are used in Yemenite wedding rituals to bode for a healthy reproductive life. In more than one way, the eggs represent the importance of feminine labor.” (Goldman, 2020)

In her 2015 article, “Searching for My Indian Roots, From Kabbalah to Bollywood,” Sigal Samuel chronicles her return to her family’s home city of Mumbai. In part, her visit is inspired by a kabbalistic ritual she witnessed as a child. Her grandmother would make sure that not a single shard of a boiled egg’s shell was lost in the process of discarding it. This is a practice “...rooted in the mystical idea of *Shvirat Hakelim*, the Shattering of the Vessels...when the light of the divine poured down into the 10 vessels that gave rise to all of creation, the force of its holiness shatter[s] them. Bits of the broken vessels — kelippot — [go] tumbling down into darkness. [This is] the beginning of evil” (Samuel, 2015).

Nearly a hundred years prior, before the shattering and scattering of the majority of its Jewish community, Mumbai was home to thousands of Jews who had lived there for up to thousands of years. This includes the Baghdadi, Bene Israel, and Cochin Jewish communities. The Bene Israel washed up on the western shore of India soon after they fled the destruction of the Second Temple, around 70 CE. The Cochin Jews migrated to the Kingdom of Cochin during the reign of King Solomon, according to the community’s historians. They are also known as Malabar Jews. Some Jews fleeing Spain also settled in parts of India after 1492. The Baghdadi Jewish community arrived the latest, moving to India during the 19th century along trade routes

that made many of them incredibly wealthy. In picking up the pieces of these communities' histories, a researcher finds women's voices at its center, especially in the 20th century, when South Asian Jewish women (especially Baghdadis) dominated the Bollywood screen.

The cataclysmic formation of Israel/Palestine in the late 1940s was almost foreshadowed by the Partition of India and Pakistan one year prior. Soon after, all four nations - Israel, Palestine, Pakistan, and India - struggled with national narratives and cultural values onscreen and off. Per Danny Ben-Moshe's documentary *Shalom, Bollywood!*, during Bollywood's early years, Hindu and Muslim women's communities prohibited them from appearing onscreen. Instead, Jewish women stepped in and became the first actors, speaking and silent (Ben-Moshe, 2018). Actors like silent star Sulochana (Ruby Meyers), party-loving Miss Rose (Rose Ezra/Musleah), vampy Pramila (Esther Victoria Abraham), and sultry Nadira (Farhat/Florence Ezekiel) stole the hearts of Indians everywhere (Ben-Moshe, 2018). A pregnant Pramila became the first Miss India in 1947, in a timely parallel to Jewish beauty queen Renee Dangoor's crowning as the first Miss Iraq in the same year. Both were Baghdadi Jewish women at the forefront of their home states' visual cultures. However, despite their open self identification as Jews and, at times, visible synagogue attendance, few of Nadira, Pramila, or Miss Rose's fans knew that they were Jewish.

It was both the choice of these actors to become performers in the first place, and their stunning beauty and sexuality on screen, that made them beloved and controversial. Whether raising their voices in song or a speech to tempt a male protagonist, these actors provided a formidable bedrock of tropes and characters for generations of Indian performers to come (Ben-Moshe, 2018). Jewish stories become Indian stories in the case of *Yahudi Ki Ladki* (*The Jew's Daughter*), a historical drama set in Roman-occupied Israel, in which the Jewish fight for

liberation from Rome becomes an allegory for Indian anticolonial aspirations. At the same time, no known Indian Jewish actors star in *Yahudi Ki Ladki*. However, Jews also worked behind the scenes, in production and direction, thus contributing to the start of Bollywood. This included Pramila, who created her own company “Silver Productions” Bollywood’s first female-owned production company. She produced sixteen films. A distinct relationship had emerged between Indian cinema and Indian Jewish community, reality, imagination, and creativity - with women “in focus.”



Nadira, pictured bottom right, in an advertisement for *Shree 420* (left poster); Pramila, stunt star and actor in the *Ulti Ganga* promotional poster (right)

Like the prophetess Miryam, Bollywood’s Jewish actors enchanted audiences and united people in the enjoyment of voice and art. In the meantime, offscreen, women like Samuel’s

grandmother became the authorities of their own mysticisms, peeling eggs and saving family photos; holding ḳabbalah in their palms.

Samuel's personal writing and journalism opens a window for her narrative, and the narratives of women in her communities. She also turns ideas of exactly where Jews have a right to return to on their heads. Over the course of her stay in Mumbai, she winds up participating in an Indian commercial in which she has to dance. During and after the shoot, she reflects on the director choosing her because she looked as if she were 'part Indian, part something else' because of her light skin - a common story for SCWANA women whose racializations can be complicated:

On the bus ride home, I finally get a second to think about the racial implications of all this. At first I was amused that the scout had taken me for a Westerner, when my family actually comes from India. Ha, I thought, the joke's on them! It also seemed ironic that this status made me a good candidate for a Bollywood shoot. Back when it was verboten for Hindu and Muslim girls to appear on celluloid, Baghdadi Jewish girls were cast precisely because they resembled Indians enough to serve as believable audience proxies. Now I was being cast because I was deemed a not-quite-believable proxy. **I looked just Indian enough to make Indians relate to me, and just not Indian enough to make them want to buy a product that would, in turn, make them look less Indian. Because, as I later learned, the commercial we were shooting was for a Nivea lotion. A Nivea whitening lotion. Clearly, the joke was on me.** [emphasis mine] (Samuel, 2015)

Samuel's search for identity places her in a position in which she must reckon with both her privileges and her invisibilities in different contexts. She belongs, but she doesn't belong - her family is frozen or forgotten in the memories of neighbors, and of the new inhabitants of the homes they left behind. Jewish presence exists, but it begs to be remembered. And for South Asian Jewish women, especially Baghdadis, what it means to be "Indian" is complicated by origins in regions perceived as Semitic, Arab, or Muslim in character. Samuel's journey begs

these questions: What does it mean to be, or to become Indian? What does it mean to return to a place that you and your community remember, but that barely remembers you?

Samuel also reflects on intra-Indian Jewish relationships, which many other SCWANA Jewish women writers, aside from Sugbaker Messika, do not: “Baghdadis looked down on the Bene Israel, taking darker skin color as evidence of intermarriage and so of a less “pure” Jewish lineage...Over the years, factors other than race — like economic disparity — have created divisions not only between the Bene Israel and Baghdadis, but also among Baghdadis themselves” (Samuel, 2015). Most importantly, she reflects on the Indian Jewish communities’ defiance of terms like ‘syncretism’:

The resulting customs, rituals and, yes, superstitions have immense value, and not just the sentimental kind. They remind us of the full breadth of Judaism — that our culture can look many different ways, can thrive on its relationships with other cultures, can include the usual Hebrew Torah readings and Shabbat songs but also saris and marigolds and knuckle-cracking. (Samuel, 2015)

This writer is reminded of both the embroidery of Balkan and Turkish Jewish women that is shared with their Christian and Muslim neighbors but, within these communities, is remembered and conceptualized as entirely Jewish. The same goes for the contents of the Balkan and Turkish dowry chest that a new bride would bring to her husband’s house. What other South Asian Jewish women are raising their voices today, and what shards are they picking up? Which ones are religiously mystical; musical; and artistic? Aside from Samuel, notable examples of South Asian Jewish women shaping aesthetic, as well as written, memories and cultures include Bene Israel women Siona Benjamin, a visual artist, and Liora Yitzhak, a vocalist. Their media and aims are different, but both express a synthesis of visual, linguistic, and musical cultures - all of which relate to and are rooted in recitation and song.



The documentary “Blue Like Me: The Art of Siona Benjamin” touches on Benjamin’s journey through the same Christian schools that Samuel’s female family members attended. These are schools also populated by Muslim and Zoroastrian students, whose cultures become part of her integrative art. Like Samuel, Benjamin’s art is a search for identity. According to her website: “With her transcultural background, the desire to “find home,” spiritually and literally, has been a persistent theme. **Her feeling of being unable to establish deep roots anywhere unnerves her yet also pulls her toward a seductive spiritual borderland**” [emphasis mine] (Benjamin, 2021). Her paintings, which incorporate Jewish, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Muslim, Mughal, comic, classical, pop, and folk imagery abstract the communities around her.



Finding Home #74 (Fereshteh) “Lilith” 30” x 24” Gouache on wood panel 2006 (left);  
Finding Home #75 (Fereshteh) “Lilith”, 30” x 26”, Gouache on wood panel, 2005 (right)

The blue people in Benjamin's art are both alienated and integrated. The documentary discusses the characters in her art as "haunted by violence, searching for peace and home" (Rifken, 2014). Benjamin's blue person is the other, and the other is us; the blue person is everywhere and nowhere, everyone and no one, just like the abstract, Jewish God. A sense of play also runs through all of Benjamin's work, especially in her miniature-inspired paintings and her collaged portraits of her Bene Israel community. In several paintings, a Jewish woman with tefillin wrapped around her arm is attached to a burqa-clad Muslim woman as if they are two branches coming from the same tree. In another, Benjamin depicts the same figures in various phases of rising from a prostrated position of prayer.<sup>41</sup> Judaism developed in relation to and alongside Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam; so does Benjamin, and her Judaism. Perhaps Benjamin's feeling of being unable to establish roots anywhere speaks both to the history of Jews as *'ivrim* (travelers, crossers) and to an always-moving, globalized world.

Some of Benjamin's most popular art is her portrayal of Lilith, the scorned first wife of Adam. For many women in the Jewish world, amulets were created to ward off the presence of Lilith, because of a belief that she was the cause of hard labor, death in birth, the death of children, or the disappearance of children. The story of Lilith has evolved over time, but was fleshed out the most during the medieval ages, when it became canonical that she had chosen to leave Gan 'Eidan<sup>42</sup> after having sex with the angel of death, Samael.

In Benjamin's art, Lilith becomes a figure wronged, not cursed. She is punished for her egalitarian aspirations, not for any real wrongdoing, and two different paintings showcase her in conflicting states of emotion. In one, she prays in a miniskirt, telling an unknown figure that

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<sup>41</sup> Some Jews include prostration as a part of the 'Amidah (Standing) prayer.

<sup>42</sup> Heb. literally "Garden 'Eiden" or Garden of Eden.



“You must save us from their wrath.” In another, she glowers at the sky, exclaiming, “A thousand years have I waited, keeping the embers of revenge glowing in my heart!” In this way, Benjamin explores an individual’s multiple, conflicting emotions and multifaceted natures. And in her recasting of Lilith, Benjamin practices ‘tikḵun ‘olam’ - repairing the world, by creating the world she wants to see - and putting the pieces back together. She rewrites the story so that it is a tale that she will love. Benjamin’s art picks up the shards that Samuel’s grandmother was worried about.

Her incorporation of multiple canons, often overlapping, speaks to earlier critiques of SCWANA and Balkan Jewish cultures by Ashkenazi-supremacists during the 1950s - mixing mundane (the mini skirt), with holy (a tallit on a woman’s head), with what is perceived by Ashkenazim to be ‘un-Jewish’ (South Asian clothes). South Asian Jewish communities were scrutinized, along with other SCWANA Jewish groups, for not presenting themselves within the guidelines of an Ashkenazi status quo. Benjamin’s art acknowledges Jewish peoples’ rich history of cross-communal exchange and pushes Jews from all regions to self examine whether Jewish communities truly, totally separate from their non-Jewish neighbors. Will a myth of Jewish communities as walled, as opposed to membranous relationships, finally be examined and destroyed via Benjamin’s work?

Benjamin also photographs and manifests love for her community and its practices in her *Faces* series. One of her subjects, Rachel Ruben, is Rose “Miss Rose” Ezra’s granddaughter, and her interviews feature throughout *Shalom, Bollywood!*. Benjamin surrounds the border of Ruben’s portrait with a film reel of her grandmother, a loving nod to Ruben’s modelling and acting aspirations. In this context, those aspirations are the legacy of many cinematically inclined and vocally expressive women in her family and community.



Fulbright Series #25- Rachel Reuben (Nawgaokar) 35” x 35” Photo-collages with gouache and acrylic paint on Hahnemuhle paper 2012-2013; Fulbright Series #8 Hannah (Munmun) Emanuel Samuel (Pezarkar) 35” x 35” Photo-collages with gouache and acrylic paint on Hahnemuhle paper 2012-2013

In “Hannah (Munmun) Emanuel Samuel (Pezarkar)” even the title is a giveaway to the joint Hebrew-Marathi, linguistic identity of the piece’s subject. Munmun is the chef of the Bene Israel community that Benjamin visits in Mumbai for her Fulbright Art Series. A majority of the people portrayed in the series are women. Munmun is transformed both into the familiar image of a many-armed Hindu God, Shiva, but this is only one facet of her appearance. She is also a human menorah, much like the one in the Temple in Jerusalem. Each of her arms, including her head, is a flame; and each hand offers nourishment to whichever member of the community reaches out. Her nourishment serves as a literal fuel for the light of her community.

By telling her own stories, rewriting mythology, and telling the stories of her community (especially its women), Benjamin uses not just her own voice, but becomes the voice of many. Her voice is her art.

Liora Yitzhak (Pezarkar) is, perhaps, the most widely known artist of the three discussed here. Her family is Bene Israeli from Gujarat. In the 2018 music video for her hit song “Ma’alah Ma’alah” the viewer first sees Yitzhak sweeping at the entrance of a flower shop. Delicate henna winds up her hands and wrists, and a glittering gem sits between her eyebrows. Multicolor metal bangles collapse back and forth on her arm as her hands dance. She chases after a mysterious and handsome man through the market, who has left a sketch of her on a stool near the spot where she was sweeping. The extras in Yitzhak’s video perform the choreography of a large, Bollywood dance number. The viewer gets to see Yitzhak’s bell-ornamented anklets; sitar-players; as well as shots of shoppers gathering behind Yitzhak, their arms erupting into an image reminiscent of a multi-armed God. In this way, Yitzhak normalizes aesthetics that combine Indian Jewish imagery and Hindu imagery.

The song was such an enormous hit in India that she released a second version in Hindi. Incorporating both “Hindu” and Indian Jewish imagery in the context of Jewish places, Yitzhak serves as a bridge between groups of people. In 2018, she sang “Jana Gana Mana”, the national anthem of India, and “Hatikvah”, the national anthem of Israel, before Prime Ministers Netanyahu and Modi. Yitzhak’s melding performance, while celebrating her own identity, is also a tool she uses to unite two nations with differing political structures but, perhaps, similar political aims. Both countries have come under scrutiny for their treatment of Muslim citizens (Kaul, 2020; Larudee, 2018). Each inarguably seeks to create a homogenized national culture by downplaying or erasing its religious and/or ethnic minorities. But, perhaps, their legitimacy as states, and their goals, are stronger when they stand together as allies. Yitzhak received positive responses from Indians and Israelis regarding her performance.

Whereas Samuel and Benjamin pick up the pieces in New York, Mumbai, and California, so does Baghdadi-Israeli artist Vered Nissim. In one of her pieces, her parents literally carry her up one sandbank after another beneath the scorching desert sun. The piece is called “Midbar B'Tokh ‘Ir” - “A Desert Within A Town.” It is a metaphor for Israel’s working-class struggle in raising their children and providing them with a better future (Nissim, 2013).

“Vered, Vered...I can’t lift you up, it’s hard for me...I didn’t dream that...In my life I didn’t dream I would be cleaning...and life forced me...I used to sit sometimes until two o’clock at night...It was always important to me that you would rise within your souls...That no one will say that you are lice, that no one will say that you are dirty,” gasps Nissim’s mother, Beni, holding her hands out as if praying beneath a vast sky. “How hard is for me...It was like this in life...I have no strength. I love you, love you, Vered you are my life” (Nissim, 2013).

Nissim is silent throughout the film. It is her mother who talks the most, apologizing and encouraging as she breathlessly carries Nissim up the dunes. As she speaks of both her regrets and proud moments as a working-class parent, Nissim’s mother collapses into the sand several times. Pleadingly, she voices a particular class experience of being caught between the demands of work and the demands of her family, specifically her children, all the while alight under the microscope of anti-SCWANA racism in Israel and beyond. Vered is her parents’ responsibility. They love her, while understanding that choosing to have children while working class is to be perpetually exhausted and stressed - sometimes at the expense of their beloved children’s quality of life. It is her body and her art that are a platform of humanization for working-class SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews.

The ideas of ‘social mobility’ and ‘bootstrap theory’ that Israeli, European, and American societies promote evaporates under Holon’s desert sun. Any viewer can hear in Beni’s voice, and see in the film, that the challenge of raising children as a working-class person is as hard as carrying someone on your back up and down a sometimes-burning landscape that never ends. In a world so difficult and unforgiving, it is no wonder that some things are left behind on the journey; some things are put down; some shards escape.

Shula Keshet, a first-generation Mashhadi-Israeli artist, challenges the very fabric of the Israeli state’s founding mythology in her piece “L’Tiferet Medinat Yisrael” (For the Glory of the State of Israel). Micrography is the art of creating images out of up to thousands of tiny words, and is a historically Jewish art form. Keshet forms the faces of the founding fathers and mothers of Israel using their racist words against SCWANA Jews. According to *The Window* these quotes include:

“We need people born as workers... the Yemenis and the Spaniards, whose standard of living and demands are lower than those of a European worker and can successfully compete with the Arabs"..."The Jews from Yemen, the Moroccan Jews, the Iraqis, the Kurds, all these young people, some of them perhaps almost savages, come to the army and study"..."[said by David Ben-Gurion]” (Sheffi, 2014)

The “glory” of each portrait - and of the “achievement” of Israel itself - are undermined and deflated upon closer examination. Keshet illuminates the destruction and harm done in the creation of both the state and Israeli identity. In the footsteps of SCWANA activists mentioned in the second chapter, Keshet also creates art in solidarity with Palestinians, voicing both her dissent as a Jewish, Israeli person, and her vision for a future of justice and peace. She opens up space for Palestinian and SCWANA/Mizrahi Jewish women to make art about their experiences. Experiences are shared both among themselves and in relation to those of other women who

hope that real and imagined borders will dissolve. According to Tal Dekel, “[a]lthough relating to [these] issue[s] as feminist Mizrahi women themselves, these women define Mizrahi identity as a political affiliation rather than as an ethnic factor that relies on an essentialist logic” (Dekel, 2015). They defy easy categorization; borders; and attempts to pit them against one another and other groups of people. Perhaps this is why Esther ‘Eillam, aforementioned Greek feminist, is identified as Mizrahi.

Women of all geographical regions participate in these ever-expanding discourses and visual languages, and the dissolution of boundaries. Riff Cohen is a Maghrebi (Algerian and Tunisian) Jewish singer, and one of the only women in this study to sing distinctly Maghrebi music in French (in addition to Hebrew and Arabic). Her music is not identified solely as *musiqah Mizrahit*, but as a style sung by SCWANA singers in Israel who may or may not identify as Mizrahi. “Rai” “Gnawa” “rock” and “Mizrahi music” are all labels applied to Cohen’s music. Her hit single *A Paris (In Paris)* features Cohen dressed in a childlike manner, focusing on parts of Paris visibly inhabited by Maghrebi people of many religions. The casts of her music videos feature people of many races and backgrounds, but always have a distinctly Jewish egg hidden within. *A Paris* features a North African belly dancer.

In *J’aime (I love)*, Cohen’s fingers are stained with red henna, wrapped in cotton secured by red string. She dances in a cafe serving Arabic coffee, whose wall bears the portrait of a famous Sefaradi rabbi. At the climactic bridge of the video, she exclaims joy in a delighted ululation. Cohen, too, delights in the mixing of the ‘modern’ and the ‘left-behind’ (or, rather: what Europeans, Jewish or otherwise, may encourage her to leave behind). She delights in the mixing of “Jewish” with “non-Jewish” or what is perceived to be in competition with her communities’ Jewishness in a modern world:

J'aime D. qui existe	I love God who exists
J'aime D. qui n'existe pas	I love God who exists not
...	...
Ceux qui parlent le Latin	I love those who speak Latin
Ceux qui parlent avec les mains	I love those who speak with [their] hands
...	...
J'aime le raw food, j'aime Bollywood	I love raw food, I love Bollywood
Jouer le oud, j'aime	To play the oud, I love
...	...
Ceux qui mangent avec des baguettes	Those who eat with bread
Ceux qui mangent avec les doigts	Those who eat with fingers

Cohen's world is an exercise in perpetually-expanding chosen family and love. Whether French, not-French, un-French, refusing to be French, or assimilating into French culture, Riff Cohen loves you. Her henna stained hands, also decorated with nail polish, speak in the same way that her voice sings. The egg in the hands of SCWANA Jewish women raising their voices, from Samuel to Cohen, is a new visual culture, in which cultures past become and are attached to cultures present; in which continuities from the states, pre-states, and stories of grandmothers morph into the present.

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, SCWANA Jewish women creators have found new and unique ways to use their voices. Mizrahi-American feminists Hannah Aliza Goldman (Moroccan and Ashkenazi), Coral Miro Cohen, and Annabel Rabiya (Iraqi) collaborated on a pandemic-era project called "B'Mitbah" ("In the Kitchen"). Initially, Goldman's play was supposed to take place in person, and was cancelled due to the pandemic. A recipe box and recording of the audio-play was sent to those who purchased a "ticket" creating a safe, immersive, and multi-sensory experience (Labi, 2020). "Hello to my friends, the ones who are near and the ones who are far away," sings Goldman, in the Moroccan tradition of *muwwal*, or vocal improvisation. The voice, and the song, is salient. The piece is a recitation. Just a few

months before the release of “B’Miṭbah”, Goldman published an article about one member of A-WA going solo.

Goldman writes about Tair Haim’s newest video, a solo song called *Mitbashalet Leaṭ (I Simmer Slowly)*, in which mixture, play, mysticism, nourishment, and activism are fully realized. The music video opens on a laminate or tile floor, panning upwards to reveal Haim seated on a throne, surrounded by jewel tones, reds, whites, and wearing pearlescent jewelry reminiscent of shining, peeled boiled eggs. “Kheli ya, kheli ya hali,” (“My beautiful love, my beautiful love”) echo distant voices in Yemenite. Dancers in velvet delicately hold brown eggs while making sharp, hip-hop inspired movements. Per Goldman,

“[Haim is] not saying “no” outright, but instead refusing the frame of reference altogether...[T]he playful destruction of ‘50s era symbols is a familiar rejection of misogyny...But the imagery that the video celebrates is timeless. The abundance of gold jewelry is a nod to Mizraḥi women who have been wearing them for centuries...Tair’s embrace of an old-school Mizraḥi aesthetic suggests that her music is rooted in the past as much as it innovates in the present.” (Goldman, 2020)

In addition to refusing the framework of European definition and convention altogether, Haim nods to SCWANA women singers before her. Like them, she mixes the mundane and the holy. She mixes regular life with set-apart, holy time. In an instant world, she takes the time to listen to elders (especially women elders), to care about her family (chosen and birth), her community, and herself. Her lyrics, “Millah ḳidoshah o millah nidoshah / Ani m-’arbevet otan b’li boshah” (“Holy words or cliché words / I mix them shamelessly”) recall early criticisms of musiḳah Mizraḥit as mixing sacred and secular themes. For Haim, they are the ingredients that form both the legacy of voices before her, her art in the present, and the voices that are to be raised after hers fades away. They also speak to the authentic experience of a Jewish woman



living alongside secular and sometimes non-Jewish people who influence her, and may also be friends and loves of hers.

Her control over her image, her music, and her future is a statement in and of itself. The world must change for her, for women like her, and for the benefit and safety of future generations - including Haim's own heirs. Everyone must be bold and shameless to ensure a world in which SCWANA Jews are not seen as defective or lesser. At the end of the video, she turns sideways to reveal her own "egg" - visible pregnancy. She is a regal Shabbat bride<sup>43</sup> who is deserving of the rest and care that most SCWANA Jewish women are refused. The egg is death, the egg is life, the egg is broken, the egg is evil, the egg is a chance to repair, and so is the voice. The egg is the manifestation, and the voice is a vehicle.

Ani mitbashalet leat K'mo hamin shel Shabbat Be-'olam shel instant Ani mitbashalet leat ... Ateh roshah oti k'var b-'ivrit Aval halev sheli shir b'Teimani ... Lo qalah l'ikul Bah 'im hasilsul hateimani Zot ani, zot ani ... Millah kidoshah o millah nidoshah Ani m-'arbevet otan b'li boshah 'Ad shani hamah Rotehet Nisrefet k'ma'at Ani mitbashalet leat	I simmer slowly Like hamin of Shabbat In an instant world I simmer slowly ... You want me in Hebrew already But my heart sings in Yemenite ... I'm not easy to digest I come with the Yemenite trill This is me, this is me ... Sacred words, or cliché words I mix them shamelessly Until I'm hot Boiling Sizzling I simmer slowly
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"It's not my revolution if you won't dance at my henna party," writes Kyla Wazana Tompkins, paraphrasing Ashkenazi Jewish revolutionary Emma Goldman in *The Flying Camel*.

<sup>43</sup>The personification of the Jewish holiday, Shabbat, as a bride

Who is invited to the dance? Who will join this dance? Who will raise their voices there? These questions have yet to be fully addressed by even the most visible SCWANA/Mizrahi Jewish women writers, singers, academics, and spaces. In the meantime, change simmers slowly, resting, warm in the *ruah*, and the spiritual breath of women, reciting to themselves; to one another; to the past; and to the future.

## CONCLUSION

This study is only a small slice of the sheer number of SCWANA/Mizrahi stories that exist in the world, or have yet to be spoken. The influx of post-Soviet Jews to Israel and the United States means that the stories of Jews from Central Asia and the Caucasus are surfacing in English and Hebrew-language contexts in greater numbers than ever before. Jewish communities indigenous to Central Asia<sup>44</sup> and the Caucasus<sup>45</sup> primarily live/d in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Dagestan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. When these countries were colonized and ruled by Russians (including Russian Jews), they became part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. These countries' majorities are Turkic Muslims, but their Jews speak Persian-influenced dialects and trace their origins to cities that are now in modern day Iran. Soviet Jews often self-identify as "Russian-speaking Jews" in order to socially locate one another and seek community, whether they are "Russian" Ashkenazim or Central Asian Jews.

Brutal repression characterizes the experiences of Jewish communities from Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, for example. "Russian women" are a commonly named category along with SCWANA/Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews in discussions about inequality and discrimination in Israel. Whether these women hold dual Russian-speaking and Central Asian Jewish/Mizrahi identities is often ambiguous or unstated. Notable examples of self-identified Mizrahi women singers from the Caucasus include Sarit Hadad (formerly Hudadatov) whose family immigrated to the state of Israel in 1976.

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<sup>44</sup> Preferred wording of activist R. Shimonov regarding description of Jewish communities from Central Asia as opposed to Russian Jewish settlers in Central Asia.

<sup>45</sup> Heb. *Qavkazim* / *Qawqazim*.

Notable advocates for social change is another story. In “I’m a Lesbian Bukharian Jew. Can I exist?” an anonymous writer discusses her experiences of simultaneous anger about racist statements made about her community, while experiencing genuine pain over the accurate label of ‘homophobic’:

Inside, it was like my heart was tearing. Everything he said felt true. We did build big houses, we did work as jewelers and barbers, we did love to gossip loudly. Yet before he mentioned it, I didn’t find anything wrong with those things. My people are family-oriented, hospitable, and connected. Yes, we are different from other Jewish communities, but I love my people and my culture.

Except for that whole homophobia thing.

...In some families, gayness felt like a disease, and when someone came out, a spectacle. (Anonymous 2017)

Anonymous eventually describes finding a community in which she belonged: the Sephardic-Mizrahi Q Network, a “grassroots movement that works to build a vibrant and supportive community for an often overlooked segment of the Jewish world: LGBTQ+ Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews” (Anonymous, 2019). Founded by a Bukharian Jewish LGBTQ+ activist, Ruben Shimonov, the space holds the experiences and stories of SCWANA Jews from all over the world. So, why is the writer of this piece anonymous? According to the article:

Update 12/29/20: While initially published under her name, the author of this piece requested to have the byline changed to Anonymous due to the sensitive nature and effects its [sic] had within her community. (HeyAlma, 2017)

A reader can conclude that for LBT+ women and woman-aligned people,<sup>46</sup> there is an increased sense of urgency in seeking safety, justice, and belonging. Some of our communities aren’t ready for our stories. They aren’t ready for change. This holds particularly true for

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<sup>46</sup> Used to connote woman-aligned nonbinary people. Nonbinary people who experience misogyny (including transmisogyny-affected people) also fall under this umbrella

SCWANA/Mizrahi trans women/fems. I spoke to one activist-artist, Mx. Enigma, about her experiences as a Yemenite and Ashkenazi nonbinary transfemme womxyn raised in an Orthodox community in New York City. I wanted to know how she felt about and related to the idea of voice. She identifies as a womxynist, not a feminist, because of the historical class and race bias enacted by self-identified feminists. “I am expected to be masculine in ‘primarily cis women’s’ spaces. Cis women want to be equal but they think femininity is theirs. But no one owns femininity or masculinity,” she says.

Mx. Enigma’s work is vibrant, tactile, made from found and purchased objects. She is also a performance artist and activist. She has even had her body scanned and digitally imposed onto the bodies of Russian LGBT+ people speaking about their experiences, acting as a human shield. Her art explores her life experiences as a Yemenite, transfemme womxyn and her rootedness in Queer Judaism. Their artist statement describes their art as intersecting queerness, American culture, and public reaction, Mx. Enigma uses she/her and they/them pronouns, as well as queen pronouns. Early in our interview, she says, “You could give me the biggest platform in the world to have a voice. But what matters to me is that I’m heard in a restorative justice kind of way - that my voice is not disappearing into the air, that my voice pushes and influences and makes people more enlightened, awakened, and empathetic. I’m scared my voice is just wasting energy, that people are not listening.

“I sometimes feel like not saying anything because I feel like I’m speaking in a world where there isn’t a soundboard for me,” they add. **“I’m sometimes screaming for help and I feel like I can’t.”** [emphasis mine] Mx. Enigma has been ignored by a wider LGBT+ community and Jewish community that do not care about transfemmes. “Art is the only place I feel more heard because I have more control,” she continues. Weirdness is a label that comes from around

her, not from inside her. She doesn't want to be labeled as adult content just for existing. She wants, basically, decency.

She describes her art evolving over the course of ten years, from the time she was playing a closeted and cis role to being an out transfemme. "I want to speak without there being repercussions...I have to pipe down and be silent to be safe," she says. She's sick of cancel culture. "If there's anything people don't like about me, **they harm me so I can't use my voice.**" [emphasis mine] This type of ritual disposability has been discussed by trans women such as Porpentine Charity Heartscape in her piece "Hot Allostatic Load." In the article, Heartscape describes the networks that discard trans women perceived by their communities as problematic or awkward, or say something that their community dislikes. Mx. Enigma wonders who is going to care about what she has to say and make - who is going to listen; who is going to watch?

Still, they say, "To suffer in silence is a bigger burden." Mx. Enigma is labeled as a complainer when she speaks up, as if she's "starting a fire that wasn't there" in sharing their thoughts, observations, and experiences. She feels helped by no particular political camp, left or right. They want to help people use their own voices, but as a result of multiple marginalization - transness, queerness, racialization, disability - her avenues to positions of influence are blocked off. They want alternatives. She's currently working on pieces about her experiences during COVID-19, including with domestic violence. "In terms of voice," she concludes,

**"The voice is mine. It is in my control. It is not for someone to claim me, or say that they know what's best for me."** [emphasis mine]

What of other ignored and denied groups?

In “Everyone Knows Yemenites Are Great in Bed” Yemenite-Turkish writer Yonit Na’aman describes her experiences fighting with her brother at a young age. “Loads of times, in the heat of a fight, I would call my brother, my own flesh and blood, the same insulting name, and he would gloat over me with unconcealed triumph: idiot, you are also [N-word]. Maybe, but you're more so!” she writes (Na’aman, 2006). However, Na’aman does not address in the piece whether or not she identifies as Black - or with the visible struggle of one of Israel’s most recent and visibly Black immigrant groups, Ethiopian Jews. In an important piece about racism and colorism, Na’aman doesn’t address whether she is being harmed in relation to Black people, or whether she, herself, is a Black woman.

Do Ethiopian Jewish women feel included in the aims of SCWANA/Mizrahi activist movements? Do they feel heard? Political Blackness is a concept which has existed since the 1960s, during large civil rights protests by Black and South Asian British people. In a talk given in February of 2021, Dr. Shula Mola, an Ethiopian-Israeli activist; Bryan K. Roby, historian of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish histories in the modern era; and Yuval Evri, professor of Middle Eastern and Sefaradic Jewish histories discussed symbolic and concrete Blackness in Israel. According to Dr. Mola, Ethiopian Jews are Black in a way that SCWANA and Balkan Jewish immigrants, coercively labeled Mizrahi, are not. “With the Mizrahim, it was an absorption crisis, a cultural gap and not a race problem. But with the arrival of Ethiopian immigrants to Israel, the discourse needed to change. The dark color body made ‘aliyah. It is not anymore the symbolic Blackness of the North African immigrants. It’s about the concrete Blackness, concrete color and clear color of [the Ethiopian] body.”

She continued, “The last two years - especially the last year as an activist - I see more and more linkage between Ethiopian Israeli activists and Mizrahi activists, who describe themselves

as shahorim.<sup>47</sup> And sometimes we're fighting - who is shahorim b'emet?<sup>48</sup> Who's really Black? But anyway, in the end, we understand we have to fight together" (Mola et. al., 2021). While Mola says coalition is important, she describes differences between the treatment of non-Black Mizrahi Jews and Ethiopian Jews, who are marked differently in Israeli society as people who are often more visibly Black.

Additionally, how does the aforementioned Mizrahi feminist movement engage with the narratives of Palestinian women? According to Smadar Lavie, a Yemenite and Ashkenazi feminist, "Mizrahi communities...silence their own feminists as these activists attempt to challenge the regime or engage in discourse on the Question of Palestine. Despite historical changes, the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi distinction is a racialized formation...[that sustains itself] through challenges rather than remain[ing] a frozen dichotomy" (Lavie, 2011). Aforementioned in this thesis was a Mizrahi feminist conference in which a singer, claiming Jerusalem to be the capitol of Israel, disturbed Druze, Palestinian, and Arab women attendees.

Lavie elaborates that "[Mizrahi feminists'] grassroots advocacy work is funded by diaspora Zionist sources, and Mizrahi feminist NGOs know that cutting these strings would provoke the Ashkenazi hegemony to inflict further losses on Mizrahi communities...Mizrahi activists do not collaborate with Palestinian feminists of lower socio-economic status within Israel or the West Bank because of their affiliations with Hamas" (Lavie, 2011). She shares, however, that Mizrahi activists, including women's rights activists, run the gamut from Socialist Zionist, to post- and anti-Zionists. Lavie theorizes pasts, examining why many SCWANA/Mizrahi Jews have moved to the right over the course of the state's founding. She also

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<sup>47</sup> Heb. pl. "Black."

<sup>48</sup> Heb. pl. truly/"really" Black.



theorizes multiple futures: one- and multi-state solutions, Islamist regimes, and secular Ashkenazi aristocracies. She meets with Ruben Abergel, aforementioned former Israeli Black Panther, to discuss just this. “We calculated and hypothesized that in this potential future state, 90 percent of the citizens would be of non-European origin, half of them women” (Lavie, 2011).

How are Palestinian women, some of them Jewish themselves, complicating narratives surrounding Mizrahiut - especially via music? Nasrin Qadri is a Palestinian/Arab woman who rose to fame on a reality TV show. The show, similar to an Israeli version of American Idol, focused mainly on *musiqah Mizrahit* - in the words of author Matti Friedman, “That’s Hebrew for “eastern” and refers to an Israeli blend of Middle Eastern pop with Greek and Western influences” (Friedman, 2020). Like Zehava Ben, Qadri got her start learning Umm Kulthumm’s repertoire. Her hit songs in Arabic and Hebrew, “[blend] both blended both languages in a way that seemed completely natural” (Friedman, 2020). According to Miri Regev, “...Arabic music “has something to offer Israeli culture”” (Friedman, 2020). Just like *musiqah Mizrahit* of old.

Yaron Ilan, an influential Mizrahi radio host, sees a generational change. People around his age, 50, still call the music Mizrahi or Mediterranean. “They still think of the Mediterranean sound as something different from Israeli music,” he said. But that has changed among younger listeners. To them, what Nasrin is singing is Israeli music — and she’s doing it not in small clubs in south Tel Aviv but in the Menorah Arena, the biggest indoor venue in the city. (Friedman, 2020)

Qadri converted to Judaism in 2018, taking on the name Brakhah. In many ways, she faces the same “dual-loyalties” backlash from some Israelis that Jewish people from Arab and Muslim-majority countries faced before and after moving away from their countries of origin. She has to find a way to respond to “...some Jewish Israelis...[who] sometimes tell her that because they love her she’s not “really Arab”) and...Muslims who see her as a traitor” (Friedman, 2020). All of this is happening “...[in] a country that is simultaneously more open to its own

Arab spirit and more suspicious of Arabs...the country that recently passed the “nation-state law,” which downgraded the status of Arabic as an official language” (Friedman, 2020).

Who champions those laws? Aforementioned politicians such as Miri Regev, who is Moroccan-Spanish-Israeli. In the meantime, women like Qadri - converts from Islam to Judaism, children of interfaith, Muslim+/Arab-Jewish families and worlds - complicate narratives surrounding belonging, ownership, and faith. If ‘Mizrahi’ is understood as ‘Jew who faces Orientalism internal to her community’ Qadri is indisputably Mizrahi; and under extra scrutiny for perceived dual loyalties as a convert from Islam.

These difficult conversations will continue to take place in SCWANA/Mizrahi and Sefaradi Jewish communities, and the communities impacted by them. They will continue to take place in nations, state-backed or stateless, whose populations are growing and changing. SCWANA/Mizrahi women, and women adjacent to their communities, will continue to engage in work via writing, song, and art. In order for these dialogues to happen - in order to see a future of justice and peace for all - every person must raise and be able to raise their voice; and everyone must listen.

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