Leaving Casablanca

Yaron Tzur
A Torn Community:
The Jews of Morocco and Nationalism, 1943-1954
Am Oved, 520 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Avi Picard

In the ongoing debate over how morally the leaders of the Zionist movement acted when facing the challenges of establishing the State of Israel, one of the most contentious issues has been the treatment of Jews from Islamic countries in the years leading up to, and just after, statehood.

Two extreme views have dominated the debate. The first, which we may call the "egalitarian" approach, is that the Zionist movement, the Jewish Agency, and later the State of Israel treated Sephardi Jewry in a manner that was altogether consistent with the ideals of egalitarianism and mutual respect. Zionism, the argument goes, was a unifying national movement, which taught that the diverse Jewish communities should be seen as parts of a greater whole—and which therefore placed Jewish solidarity among its highest aims. The clear social and economic disparities that emerged between Ashkenazim and Sephardim in Israel over the years resulted not from systematic discrimination, but rather from the great cultural and educational differences between new immigrants and veterans, and between Jews who arrived from Europe and those who came from Asia and North Africa. Adherents of this approach point to the educational and economic background of the Ashkenazi immigrants, which enabled them to integrate far more effectively into an Israeli society that was essentially modern and Western.

This view, which once dominated the social sciences in Israel, has fallen out of fashion in recent years, due in large part to the trend among Israeli scholars toward adopting a harshly critical attitude to Zionist history; though traces of it can still be found,

the solidarity approach is clearly the odd man out in the academy today.

The competing view, which we may call the "exploitative" approach, sees Zionism as a colonialist enterprise in which contempt for Sephardic culture was inherent. This view draws a parallel between the sense of superiority the Zionists felt toward the local Arabs, who were treated like primitive natives, and their attitude toward the Jews from Arab lands. The absorption of Sephardim in Israel, the argument goes, was not a matter of national identification but one of economic exploitation: The country needed a labor force to facilitate its transition to an industrial economy in the 1950s, and Jews from Arab lands were brought to the country to serve this purpose. The inferior status of Sephardi Jews in Israel today is therefore the result of a deliberate effort by the Zionist movement to relegate them to the lower rungs of the societal ladder in Israel. This view, which found its first academic expression in Shlomo Swirsky's 1981 book, *Not Weak But Weakened*, enjoyed great popularity during the 1980s and 1990s and emerged as the dominant view among sociologists in Israel.

The more radical expressions of this approach tend to be anti-Zionist in tone. A salient example is Ella Shohat's tellingly titled essay "Zionism from the Viewpoint of Its Jewish Victims," which appears in her new book, *Forbidden Memories*. There she accuses "European Zionism" of "a multidimensional (exploitative) scheme of enormous proportions aimed at destroying the self-confidence and annihilating the culture" of Sephardi Jews. Sammy Shalom Sheetrit, an outspoken proponent of this view, has asserted in *The Ashkenazic Revolution Is Dead* (1999) that Jews who immigrated to Israel from Islamic countries actually were worse off for the move, because "in truth, in no Arab or Eastern country did Sephardic Jews suffer personal humiliation and cultural oppression comparable to what they suffered, and continue to suffer, from their European brethren."

It is the uncompromising nature of these two approaches that makes Yaron Tzur's new book, *A Torn Community: The Jews of Morocco and Nationalism, 1943-1954*, a fresh and important contribution to the debate. Employing a wealth of sources, Tzur documents in detail the changes that took place within the Jewish community of Morocco during the middle of the twentieth century due to the influence of Zionism and other nationalist ideas. In sharp contrast to the highly politicized, one-dimensional discourse that has prevailed until now, Tzur employs elements of both approaches to offer a more balanced, and better reasoned, account. His book is therefore likely

to have a major impact on the way we understand one of the most sensitive chapters in Israel's history.

Three different national identities competed for the allegiance of Moroccan Jewry in the 1940s: Identification with the French-speaking world, Moroccan nationalism, and Zionism. In describing these movements, Tzur debunks the romantic myth of a "golden age" which the Jews in Muslim countries enjoyed in the years prior to their emigration to Israel, according to which life under Islam was characterized by cooperation and harmony between Jews and Muslims, which would have continued if not for the disruptive force of European-inspired Jewish nationalism. In fact, the truth was very different: Although Tzur is careful to avoid portraying the relationship between Muslims and Jews in Morocco in too harsh a light, it is clear from his account that relations were frequently tense and occasionally belligerent, stemming mostly from the different ways that Jewish and Islamic traditions viewed the status of the Jewish minority—a tension that was exacerbated by the spread of modern European ideas in the first half of the century.

In the eyes of the Muslims, the Jews were *dhimmis*, "protected peoples, obligated to complete submission to the Muslims." When the Jews began to make substantive social and economic gains under French rule, the Muslim majority became increasingly incensed. Their resentment was further kindled by the growing support for Zionism among Moroccan Jewry, as well as news of violent clashes between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. The result was systematic incitement and assaults on Jews in Morocco, including rioting, such as the attacks on the towns of Ujdah and Jarrada in 1948, in which 41 Jews were murdered and many more injured, and homes and other property destroyed.

But it was not only the Muslims who viewed the Jewish minority in Morocco as living a separate historical existence: Traditional Jews living in that country considered their life there to be punishment for the sins of the Chosen People, and longed for the day God would redeem them "in an act that would prove their superiority over the gentiles." Few Jews in Morocco felt any real loyalty to, or sense of common purpose with, their Muslim neighbors. In the eyes of the Jews, writes Tzur, "this was not the land of their own religious community, but of members of a separate, competing Muslim community. In their religious imagination, the Judean kingdom and the land of Israel aroused deeper longings, and touched more deeply on their own identity, than did their actual country of birth."

Moreover, the penetration of modern Western culture into Morocco further divided Jews and Muslims. The Alliance Israelite Universelle educational network, which was established by French Jews and spread throughout North Africa from the second half of the nineteenth century and on, played a crucial role. The Alliance's network in Morocco, which in the 1940s comprised 46 schools in 32 cities and towns, offered Jewish students a Western education and promoted Western values, while sharpening their feelings of alienation from Muslim society. "French Jewry embarked on a cultural enterprise that distanced Moroccan Jewish pupils from their traditional identity," Tzur writes, "while the attitudes they cultivated in their students toward the majority society were in fact the opposite of those implied by the model [of integration] to which they themselves subscribed." Indeed, whereas in Europe the Enlightenment had meant a lowering of barriers between Jews and the non-Jewish world, in Morocco the result was quite the reverse: Enlightenment ideas did not lead Jews to seek integration into Muslim society—which they perceived as backward—but rather to find a way to become a part of French civilization, which they saw as progressive.

The only significant exception to the trend separating Jews and Muslims in Morocco was the Moroccan nationalist movement, which emerged in the 1930s and stressed the idea of a unified nation that Arabs, Berbers, and Jews were to be partners in building. In this spirit, the Independence Party (*al-astaqlal*), founded in 1943, tried to win the support of Jews by offering a party platform that promised them complete equality, such that "they will no longer be Moroccan Jews, but simply Moroccans." But the Islamic overtones of Moroccan nationalism, which centered on the figure of the sultan, along with its support of the Arab struggle against the Jews in Palestine, made it difficult for local Jews to find their home in this movement.

The separatism of Moroccan Jews—whether out of identification with French culture or out of attachment to Jewish tradition—contributed greatly to the emergence of Zionist sentiment there in the 1940s. Whereas Jewish nationalism struggled in Europe against religious traditionalism and a widespread desire to integrate into European culture, both of these forces acted in the Islamic countries as catalysts for the spread of Zionism. By teaching Moroccan Jews about nationalism, European civilization offered a model for Jewish national emancipation. And once the European role in the Holocaust—and in particular that of France—had made identification with French culture far less attractive for Jews, Zionism became the

dominant ideology among educated Jews in Morocco; indeed, graduates of the Alliance schools stood at the forefront of Zionist activism in that country. More traditional Moroccan Jews, too, were open to Zionist ideas, which struck a chord with the national beliefs inherent in the traditional Jewish worldview. Thus, while there were points of conflict between traditionalist Jews and Zionist activists in Morocco, these were mainly a response to the secularization that Moroccan Jews saw as the fate of religious emigrants to Israel, rather than any principled opposition to the creation of a Jewish state or to *aliya*.

With the emergence of Zionist idealism among Moroccan Jews, however, came the realities of dealing with a movement that had been built by Europeans and was alien in many respects to the Moroccan experience. The most important contribution of *A Torn Community* is its discussion of relations between the Zionist leadership and the Jewish state, on the one hand, and the Jews of Morocco, on the other, a discussion which rejects the extreme views that have until now dominated the debate, and offers a third, more complex view.

Tzur's model, which we might call one of "elitist solidarity," points to the endemic tension between two basic features of historic Zionism: Its European-style paternalism and its nationalism. In scholarly discussions in the past decade, it is the former which has enjoyed the lion's share of attention. The tendency among many Europeans to distinguish between European and "native" cultures, which was based on a belief in the cultural and social superiority of the former, had a considerable impact not only on the European Jews who laid the ideological foundations of Zionism, but also on Jews from Arab countries, of whom many—and especially those who had been exposed to European culture—internalized a belief in their own inferiority. Their treatment at the hands of the Ashkenazi leaders of Israel in the early years of statehood cannot be understood independently of this context; rather, it was a clear function of the Eurocentric worldview that has prevailed in the West until the last few decades.

At the same time, however, Zionism's nationalist element worked as a check against Eurocentric paternalism. Nationalism, after all, elevates national identity above divisive factors such as regionalism, class consciousness, or ethnic and tribal identity; it celebrates the idea that all members of a nation are equal by virtue of their membership in the same collective. Zionism, which developed in a European context but was meant for a nation dispersed throughout Africa and Asia,

was drawn to each of these poles, and constantly found itself torn "between the hierarchical attitude of the colonial heritage, and the national ethos which was egalitarian and unifying." At times these conflicting attitudes would find expression in a single turn of phrase. Tzur quotes, for example, remarks made by David Ben-Gurion at a meeting of the Steering Committee of the Histadrut labor federation in late December 1943: "With regard to two or three fundamental issues, the education of these [Sephardi] Jews is more difficult than that of those from Poland or Romania. It is not hard to teach them to use weapons, but to teach them Jewish pride or Jewish courage is harder than with Polish Jews, because they have been more downtrodden and humiliated." Statements such as this one may have contained more than a trace of arrogance, but it would be a mistake to call them racist: Ben-Gurion describes a significant difference between the communities, but one which arises from their collective experiences, not their genetic profile. Such statements, moreover, came in a context of intensive efforts on the part of the Zionist movement to include the Jews from Arab countries in the national vision by bringing about their immigration to Palestine. "Ben-Gurion articulated a position calling for the integration of the Sephardi diaspora within the Zionist enterprise," Tzur emphasizes, "without allowing his own negative ideas about the quality of the immigrants or their compatibility with the pioneering ideal to get in the way of his enabling their immediate inclusion in the nascent national body."

It was these same two tendencies, nationalist and Eurocentric, which underlay what often appeared to be conflicting policies of integration and discrimination regarding the Jews of North Africa. One major expression of the nationalist element was the policy of sending emissaries to encourage Zionist activity in Muslim countries. Substantial immigration from these countries was limited prior to statehood by the strict policies of the British government in Palestine, and by the fact that the plight of Europe's Jews in the 1940s demanded that their immigration be given top priority. But with the creation of Israel in 1948, tens of thousands of Jews from Arab lands began streaming in, with the encouragement and funding of the state as well as of diaspora Jewish organizations such as the Joint Distribution Committee.

However, the dramatic increase in the number of Sephardim in the young State of Israel gave them far greater representation there than in the Jewish world as a whole (Jews from Muslim countries constituted less than 15 percent of world Jewry, but more than

half the immigrants during the first years of statehood), and raised fears among many veterans of the Jewish community in Palestine about the "native" character this influx would give their state. Moroccan Jews in particular aroused suspicion, largely because many of the early immigrants from that country came from the marginal segments of Moroccan society. "The number of… young people from the westernizing sector, who had grown up in the youth movements, was insignificant when compared with the flood of large, poor families and the other youth, most of them from the margins of *mellah* society…," writes Tzur. Very quickly, "the impressions they left began to have their effect [on the Ashkenazi Zionists], forming a firm basis for the creation of a negative stereotype." As a result, Moroccan Jewry as a whole was stigmatized. An example of this attitude can be found in an article by the journalist Aryeh Gelblum, which appeared in *Ha'aretz* in 1949, in which apprehension about growing Moroccan influence is presented together with a fear of the rise to power of Menachem Begin's Herut party. Gelblum felt compelled to call for nothing less than a temporary halt to immigration from North Africa:

> To raise the general level [of North African Jewry]… is a matter of generations! Perhaps we should not be surprised that Mr. Begin and Herut wish to bring all these hundreds of thousands to Israel immediately, because they know that ignorant, primitive, and poor masses are the best material for them, and only such an *aliya* is likely to bring them to power.

Even if such extreme statements were not a reflection of the views or policies of the Israeli leadership, there is no doubt that the rise of exclusionary attitudes contributed to a deceleration of immigration from North Africa in the years that followed, and later to a policy of selective immigration that prevented many Moroccan Jews from coming to Israel.

Indeed, the difficult absorption that Moroccan Jews experienced in Israel left a bad impression on their relatives who remained in Morocco, who consequently lost much of their enthusiasm for Zionism. The number of applicants for immigration declined, among both the wealthy and the poorer segments of the population. Improvement in the status of Jews under French rule in Morocco in the early 1950s further diminished the incentive to move to Israel. As a result, when the Jewish state again sought to encourage the large-scale *aliya* of Moroccan Jews in 1953, they were no longer in such a hurry to immigrate. "When Israel eased the limitations, and even tried in different ways to bring about the immigration of entire villages… they were unsuccessful.

Neither the religious and Zionist elites nor the broader Jewish public stopped identifying with the Jewish state, but an awareness had grown of the difference between the Zionist ideal and its realization in practice...."

Tzur's measured analysis in *A Torn Community* injects a needed sense of balance into the acrid debate which has dominated discussions about the origins of the ethnic divide in Israeli society. He avoids sweeping accusations against the Ashkenazi "establishment," and offers none of the apologies for Israel's treatment of Sephardim in the state's early years which until recently were a commonplace of Israeli discourse. Rather, he portrays a Zionism that was not free of prejudices or injustice, but was nonetheless motivated by a sincere desire to foster solidarity among the disparate parts of a long-dispersed nation. The immigration of Moroccan Jewry to Israel was not part of a conspiracy to import cheap labor, but rather an intensive effort to gather the Jewish exiles into a state of their own—a dream that was shared by both the Ashkenazi leadership and the Jewish community of Morocco.

A Torn Community, like Tzur's previous works, reveals the author's impressive ability to sketch a broad picture without skimping on the complexity of the details. Combining the tools of sociological analysis with those of a first-rate historian, Tzur paints a portrait of one diaspora community during a brief but fateful period, and in the process sheds light on some of the most divisive questions regarding the history of the Jews in the twentieth century. *A Torn Community* is therefore indispensable for any serious discussion of the relationship between Ashkenazim and Sephardim in Israel and in the diaspora.

Avi Picard is a doctoral student at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva.