Mizrahiut and the Arab-Jewish Divide: Contemporary Challenges to Israel’s Ethnic Boundaries

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PART I:
The Building and Breaking of Boundaries in the Modern Middle East

Chapter 1

Introduction

The self-proclaimed social movement HaKeshet HaDemokratit HaMizrahit (the Eastern Democratic Rainbow)\(^1\) was established in 1996 in Israel by second generation Jewish immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries. In its Daf Akronot ("Principles"), the members are described as:

Academics, workers, business people, bureaucrats, teachers, artists, intellectuals, community activists, students, and cultural and social organisers.

As described in its Principles, the movement’s aims include:

To work to uncover official and unofficial bureaucratic processes responsible for the bad economic situation of the Mizrahim and other populations, and to remedy the economic gap and the cultural oppression of the Mizrahim in Israel.

A just and open distribution of resources among all groups in the Israeli population.

To work towards the radical democratisation of all aspects of life and independence for all citizens, residents, workers and women; all oppressed groups.

The Principles further state that its goals are:

In accordance with the values of justice and equality that HaKeshet believes constitute the basis for democracy, multiculturalism and solidarity: HaKeshet believes that a society that functions with respect for democracy, justice, equality and recognition of the different cultures it incorporates is able to contribute to the establishment of brotherly relations between its members and to peace with its neighbours.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Referenced as HaKeshet in the remainder of this dissertation.

\(^2\) My translation, Principles, HaKeshet website, entered 29.09.2003. This text has now changed slightly in the wording but the message is the same: http://www.ha-keshet.org.il/, under the heading Mi Anahnu (Who Are We).
In 2002, HaKeshet petitioned the Israeli High Court of Justice to appeal the implementation of the Israel Land Administration (ILA) decisions to rezone agricultural land. This land has been leased to Jewish agricultural cooperatives (kibbutzim and moshavim) and the ILA wanted to pay its leaseholders in order to free the land for other use. With the slogan “This Land is Also Mine” HaKeshet opposed the ILA decisions, arguing that they would benefit a small and predominantly Ashkenazi (European originated) section of the Israeli population by giving them great economic advantages.

Following HaKeshet’s petition, the High Court of Justice voided the decisions of the ILA and ruled that future land distribution must be conducted in accordance with the principles of social justice.

However, HaKeshet was unable to integrate Palestinian citizens of Israel in this legal campaign for land in Israel to be distributed “fairly” among its citizens. To Nabih Bashir, a former and the only Palestinian member of HaKeshet, the campaign slogan epitomised the inability of the movement to adhere to its purported universal values:

This land is mine, too - may my friends the members of the movement excuse me, but I am incapable of becoming, even for a moment a pioneer, a settler or a Zionist.

The conflict between the purported universal values of HaKeshet and the limitations of its practice raises important issues worthy of further investigation. To understand tensions between Palestinian citizens, such as Bashir, and the Zionist framework in which HaKeshet operates, further consideration of Israeli state and society relations is required.

In Israel, “national” distinctions separate Jews from Arabs, whereas “ethnic identity” is used to describe divisions among Jewish Israelis. Israeli Jews are divided into two main groups: Ashkenazim, originating in Europe, from the Hebrew word for Germany, Ashkenaz; and Sephardim, derived from the Hebrew word for Spain, Sepharad, or

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3 According to the legal definition in the Cooperative Societies Register (The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see website: http://www.mfa.gov.il), the main difference between a kibbutz and a moshav is that a kibbutz is “[...] an organization for settlement which maintains a collective society of members organized on the basis of general ownership of possessions. Its aims are self-labour, equality and cooperation in all areas of production, consumption and education.” A moshav is a smallholders’ cooperative.

4 Referenced as Palestinian citizens in the remainder of this dissertation.

5 Quoted from “An ‘assertive’ group flexes its Mizrahi muscles”, Haaretz, 28.05.2004, by Mazal Mualem.

6 To complicate matters further, the term Sephardi/m has two previous connotations (prior to its use in the state of Israel): it refers to descendants of Jews who fled from the Spanish Inquisition, or to Jews who
Mizrahim, meaning “Easterners” or “Orientals” from the Hebrew word for east, Mizrah. Both “Sephardim” and “Mizrahim” are used to describe people from Middle Eastern, North African and Mediterranean countries. In the perspective of the early Zionist establishment, Sephardim/Mizrahim\(^7\) were considered as internal Others in a state of Israel conceived as “a project of European civilisation in the barbaric East” (Shafir and Peled, 2002:75). The first term used by the Ashkenazi Zionist establishment to describe immigrants from Arab and Muslim countries was edot haMizrah, “communities from the East”. Orientalist in nature,\(^8\) this categorisation represents the understanding of regional Jewish groups by the Ashkenazi-dominated establishment at a certain time.\(^9\) Thus, this categorisation does not convey anything about who these “Eastern” Jews were, beyond the fact that they were not European, nor does it say anything about their self-perceptions.

Statistics show that in terms of level of education, occupational status, income and housing, the so-called “ethnic gaps” between Ashkenazim and Sephardim/Mizrahim have been persistent and growing since the 1950s (Shafir and Peled, 2002:83). Since their immigration to Israel, Jews from Arab and Muslim countries have protested against these gaps, against the use of ethnic categorisation in state policies, and against the way this categorisation has encouraged general prejudice and discrimination. The major public protests were the Wadi Salib riots in 1959,\(^10\) the demonstrations by HaPanterim

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\(^7\) “Sephardim/Mizrahim” is not meant to indicate that these terms mean the same, as made clear by the etymological explanations, but their previous use to describe Jews from the Middle East and North Africa. Today the term Sephardim is associated with the party-movement Shas, as discussed in Chapter Two.

\(^8\) One of the latest developments in Israeli historiography relates to representations of and research on Mizrahim and their identity and application of post-colonial theory and in particular, Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, the representations of the “oriental Other” in western writing and culture. Many scholars drawn on in this dissertation are part of a discourse that discusses Israeli history as a social-historical encounter between the western and the eastern and portrays the construction of Mizrahim as the “internal Others” in Israeli Zionist discourse and its historical narrative: “Orientalist attitudes by Israelis target not only Arabs but also the Mizrahi (‘Oriental’) Israelis with roots in the Arab world” (Kalmar and Penslar, 2005:xv).

\(^9\) The Ashkenazi category was constructed by the people it categorised and refers to a place of origin (Europe) that coincides by and large with the Ashkenazi tradition of Judaism. As such, this term has been used also outside Israel and is not imposed or controversial in the same way that edot haMizrah and its successive terms are. Recently, Israelis of Ashkenazi descent have become increasingly interested in their historical and cultural background, as indicated by the new Movement for Ashkenazi Identity. Also, two documentary films about young Israelis discussing their Ashkenazi identity recently appeared (Rachel L. Jones’ Ashkenaz, 2003 and The Ashkenazim by Dalia Mevorach and Dani Dothan, 2005).

\(^10\) The demonstrations in the slum neighbourhood Wadi Salib in Haifa, housing poor mainly Moroccan Jews, were initiated when the police shot a man and were organised by the neighbourhood’s Union of
HaShkhrorim (the (Israeli) Black Panthers)\textsuperscript{11} in the 1970s, and the religious-political party-movement Shas, Sephardi Torah Guardians,\textsuperscript{12} established in 1993.

Only since the latter part of the 1980s have studies of the construction of the Sephardi/Mizrahi categorisation, of the “ethnic gaps”, and of the various protests and organisations representing these Jews, been incorporated into critical studies of Zionist ideology and practices. Prior to this change, Israeli social scientists developed and perpetuated the stereotypes of Sephardim/Mizrahim as “traditional” and of “primitive mentality” (Uri Ram, 1995:38-9). In this modernist line of thought, Sephardim/Mizrahim needed to be socialised into becoming “modern” individuals in order to close the gap between them and the Ashkenazim. Moreover, it has been established that the terms “ethnic” and “ethnicity” have been used to describe “Eastern Jews” and almost never to describe European or American Jews (Hannah Herzog, 1984:518).

In the contemporary political context of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, so-called “Mizrahim” are stereotypically viewed as right-wing Arab-haters,\textsuperscript{13} based on the assumption that Middle Eastern and North African Jews (MENA Jews)\textsuperscript{14} vote for right-wing parties.\textsuperscript{15} Research has shown that MENA Jews who vote for Likud explain this in relation to their socio-economic situation, and not necessarily in support of right-wing stances on the occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territory or North Africa Immigrants (Massad, 2006:65). Violent clashes between the police and immigrants from Muslim and Arab countries spread to other similar neighbourhoods and to immigrant camps (ibid).

\textsuperscript{11} The Israeli Black Panthers Movement will be further presented in Chapter Two and in Part Two.

\textsuperscript{12} Shas is an abbreviation for Sephardim Shomrei Torah which means “Sephardim Observing the Torah” in Hebrew (originally an abbreviation of Shisha Sedarim, which defines the six chapters of the Mishnah, the oral Torah, also used to describe the Talmud, the commentary to the Mishnah).

\textsuperscript{13} In Israel, “right-wing” and “left-wing” generally refer to views on the conflict with the Palestinians and Arab states and on conflict resolution, and not to socialist and capitalist ideologies.

\textsuperscript{14} In this dissertation MENA Jews will be used to describe Jews from these regions who live in Israel. However, when referring to other research about these Jews, the terms used by the authors will be used. This will be further discussed when presenting previous research on MENA Jews below (see Studying Internal Others).

\textsuperscript{15} A relevant example is the PLO representatives to the Mizrahi-Palestinian meeting in Toledo in 1989, the first large-scale official meeting between Palestinians and MENA Jews, presented in Chapter Two. The Palestinian representatives questioned if MENA Jews were interesting or worthwhile their time and efforts, taking into consideration that they lacked political power and because the majority of MENA Jews vote for the right-wing and were thus perceived by these Palestinians to be against a peaceful resolution of the conflict. According to MENA Jews who participated (Levi and Hamo, interviews), this understanding of “Mizrahim” was adopted by the Palestinians from the Ashkenazi Left and elite. An example of the stereotypical understanding of Mizrahi Jews beyond the borders of Israel is expressed by Fawzi Mansour (1998) in Al Ahram weekly; “[...] aren't Israel's Sephardic Jews the section which most heavily tips the electoral balance in favour of the ultra-chauvinist, ultra-Zionist Likud?”
a peace settlement (Swirski, 1989:52, Shafir and Peled, 2002:89). Furthermore, according to Shlomo Swirski (1989:55), the assertion that Mizrahim are “Arab haters” is largely produced and upheld by the media, and to the extent this claim has any base in reality it is a result of policies made by the ruling Ashkenazi-dominated Zionist elite, and not based on a “latent drive in Orientals”.

Building on the latest developments in studies of Israeli state and society that employ critical theory and post-colonial perspectives to question the official Zionist narrative, the present dissertation will analyse the development of Mizrahiut – the sum of bottom-up reactions by MENA Jews to their social, economic, cultural and political marginalisation. The analysis will focus on how contemporary activist groups, dominated by MENA Jews, relate to their other “others”: the Palestinian citizens of Israel.16

The main research question investigated in this dissertation is: Why does an elite group of Mizrahim, professing universalistic values encounter difficulties in breaking out of their narrow circle, and especially in creating ties to the Palestinian citizens? This will be examined by paralleling the social movement HaKeshet and its members with the grass-root organisation HILA - HaVa’ad HaTziburi LeMa’an HaHinukh BiShkhunot VeBelriyt HaPitukh (translated by the organisation as “The Israel Committee for Equality in Education”) and its parent activists. Unlike HaKeshet, HILA is able to include Palestinian citizens at all levels of its activities.

In June 2005 several groups of Jewish and Palestinian citizens participated in a weekend seminar on education organised by HILA. This was significant for two reasons. First, interactions between Jewish and Palestinian citizens beyond bureaucratic relations and business are uncommon. Second, the weekend seminar took place during a period marked by heated discussions and protests throughout Israel against the government’s impending “disengagement” from the occupied Gaza Strip. This issue increased the sense of insecurity and tension between Jewish and Palestinian citizens.17 The “disengagement”

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16 This dissertation does not focus on Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territory, which also includes the approximately 170,000 Palestinian inhabitants of East Jerusalem (Sharif and Peled, 2002:110).
17 “Added” because there are always feelings of insecurity between these groups as will be further presented in the following historical account of MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens. The lack of confidence was moreover exacerbated after 13 Palestinian citizens were killed in October 2000 in the beginning of Intifadat al-Aqsa.
was understood to hold direct consequences for the participating Jewish parents from the peripheral town and Likud-stronghold of Sderot, located on the northern border to the occupied Gaza Strip. Sderot had been under especially heavy attacks by Qassam rockets from the Gaza Strip since the Israeli “disengagement” and six people had died, of which four were children. Several people had also been wounded, physically and with suffered shock.

The Palestinian participants came from the village of Jaljuliya, on the border between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank, and from the Islamic Movement-dominated town of Arara. Jaljuliya is known to most Jewish Israelis (if at all) as a place where “terrorists” cross into Israel from the West Bank, and its inhabitants are thus considered as complicit in “acts of terror”.\(^\text{18}\) Arara and Jaljuliya are deprived areas, over-crowded and with poor infrastructure. The latter village has a population composed mainly of “present absentees”,\(^\text{19}\) Palestinians who fled from other places inside Israel during the war in 1948. In interviews conducted for this study, these citizens describe themselves as living at the mercy of their colonisers in a state that considers them a threatening fifth column.\(^\text{20}\)

In the first session of the weekend seminar, one person from each group volunteered to give a presentation on their activism over the past year. The head of the Parent Council in Arara told the Jewish parents about how the Principal of one of the local schools had ordered the police to forcefully evacuate him and the rest of the Parent Council members when they attempted to participate in the school's pedagogical meeting. Despite the fact that it is parents’ lawful right to participate in such meetings, the police arrived at the meeting and detained the Parent Council members at the local police station until the meeting had finished. The Jewish members of the audience appeared to be shocked by this story.

In response to this incident, the seminar participants from Sderot, Ashqelon and Jaljuliya decided to write a joint letter with Arara Parent Council to the Ministry of

\(^{18}\) For example, from the official webpage of the Embassy of Israel in Washington, a story under the category “Terror against Israel” has this title: “Israel Uncovers Jaljuliya Terrorist Cell and Explosives Laboratory”, (http://www.embassyofisrael.org/terror_against.html, entered March 31, 2003.)

\(^{19}\) To be discussed in the sub-chapter below on Palestinians as Citizens of Israel.

\(^{20}\) To be discussed in Part III on HILA.
Education and to the Ministry of Interior to complain about these violations of rights. In response to the letter, a representative from the Ministry of Education reportedly telephoned the Head of the Sderot Parent Council and asked her why they, Jewish parents from Sderot, were involved in the concerns of the Arab residents of Arara. According to the Head of the Sderot Parent Council, the ministerial representative was stunned that Jewish and Palestinian citizens knew each other and were working together and he wished to learn more about their relationship. She described the development of the conversation as follows (Batya Katar, Head of the Sderot Parent Council, interview):

- Ministry representative: Why have you written a letter together with people from Arara? Why do you care about their issues?
- Head of Sderot Parent Council: We are all parents and all Israeli citizens and as such all are entitled to the same rights.
- Ministry representative: How do you know Palestinians from Arara?
- Head of Sderot Parent Council: Through the organisation HILA.
- Ministry representative: What is HILA?21
- Head of Sderot Parent Council: It is the union of all parents in Israel.

In the present study the circumstances that facilitated joint activism between these Jewish and Palestinian citizens and parents and those that resulted in the exclusion of a Palestinian perspective in HaKeshet’s Land Struggle are examined based on material collected during fieldwork in 2004/2005. In addition to the main research question, the present study will also critique the approach by which MENA Jews in Israel are conventionally studied. This is done in two ways: First, as indicated by the main research question, instead of studying the MENA Jews as internal Others in relation to the dominant Ashkenazi group and/or establishment, this dissertation will examine the relationship of MENA Jews to the Palestinian citizens. It thus intentionally relates the study of MENA Jews to the historical and contemporary conflict between Zionists and the Palestinians. Consequently, it avoids what Baruch Kimmerling (1995:53-54) has called the “Jewish bubble” referring to the exclusive Jewish perspective in research of Israeli state and society that disregards both the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict and

21 This question is peculiar because the HILA organisation is well known to the Ministry of Education from its 19 years of activism. Thus, the explanation for posing this question might be that this particular representative was new or for other reasons unaware of HILA, that the representative wanted to provoke the Head of the Sderot parental council, or for others reasons to see what she answered.
the existence of Israel’s Palestinian inhabitants. Consequently, according to Kimmerling (1995:54):

[…] within Israeli history and the social sciences the Arab population of Israel has been almost unanimously neglected. When historians and social scientists analyse ‘Israeli society’, they include only Jews in their research samples.

Second, by studying MENA Jews in relations to Palestinian citizens, this dissertation also includes views presented by Palestinian citizens on MENA Jews generally, and specifically on the practical exclusion of Palestinian citizens by HaKeshet and the inclusion of these citizens by HILA. The main Palestinian interviewees are members of the Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) Mossawa - the Advocacy Centre for Arab Citizens in Israel (“Equality” in Arabic) and Adalah - The Legal Centre for Arab Minority Rights in Israel (“Justice” in Arabic), in addition to individual Palestinian activists, academics and parent activists in HILA. As far as I am aware, this approach has not been employed in any previous study.

Moreover, by focusing on two contemporary and different social activist groups dominated by MENA Jews, this study departs from previous analyses of “Mizrahim,” which have presented the latter as homogenous. Despite the acknowledgement of other researchers that such a departure is necessary, including in recent critical studies, “Mizrahim” are still presented as belonging to a group with certain common characteristics and are typically juxtaposed against Ashkenazim. In the present study, MENA Jews are both grass-root parent activists and intellectual members of HaKeshet, illustrating that the overarching category “Mizrahim” is simplified and simplifying, and thereby disguises the diversity of individuals and groups assumed to belong to it.

In the remainder of Part I of the present study, a historical background of MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens and an introduction to earlier studies of MENA Jews will be presented to further contextualise the field of analysis. In Chapter Two, theoretical perspectives and approaches used in the examination of ethnic and national relations and methodological considerations are presented.

22 The research questions will be further presented and discussed in Chapter Two.
23 For example by Shafir and Peled (2002), this will be further discussed in the sub-chapter entitled Studying Internal Others – Previous Research on MENA Jews.
Part II will discuss *HaKeshet*. Chapter Three and Four will introduce the movement, its members and their thoughts about it. Chapter Five will provide a detailed account of the Land Struggle where the contradiction between *HaKeshet*’s discourse and its practice will become evident. In Chapter Six, possible backgrounds for this contradiction will be discussed, by using theories about identity construction.

Part III will present and discuss *HILA* and its methods. Chapters Seven and Eight will introduce the organisation and its parent activists. Chapter Nine will describe the inclusion of Palestinians in the organisation and its activities, illustrated by the joint activism undertaken in weekend seminars. Chapter Ten will discuss how *HILA* is able to cross the ethnic and national boundaries between MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens. Finally, Part IV of this dissertation draws conclusions from the two case studies.

**Regional Jews and Indigenous Arabs – Becoming Citizens in the Jewish State**

Writing history is not a neutral endeavour. Sometimes it is explicitly political, and even if an author does not believe that he/she is politicised, history is written within a paradigm of thought that influences the way in which the scholar presents his/her facts and connections between them. In a conflict area such as Israel-Palestine this is all the more prevalent. Therefore, before presenting a short historical background of the two main groups studied here, a note on historiography is necessary.

In his article “Academic History Caught in the Cross-Fire: The Case of Israeli-Jewish Historiography” Kimmerling (1995:54) uses the “bubble” image to describe how Israeli sociologists and historians both reflect and reinforce “the political and legal perception of Israel as the state of the Jewish people residing both within and outside its boundaries, rather than as the state of its citizens (which would also include Arabs)”. According to Kimmerling (1995:56;57):

Historiography in general, and academic discourse in particular, are embedded in an active form of knowledge that shapes collective identity by bridging between different pasts (recovered, imagined, invented and intentionally constructed) and creating meanings and boundaries or the collectivity.
“[...] any historiography is part of a socio-political hegemony and is committed to serving it. [...] Israeli historiography is not only an active and central actor in the process of shaping Jewish-Zionist hegemony, but also a subject of this shaping process.

In the case of Israel, Kimmerling (1995:47) identifies that in contrast to the general scholarly value put on the separation between one’s convictions and one’s scholarship, the majority of Israeli academics are not only Zionists, but “also ‘proudly’ attached’ to their Zionist conviction when producing their historiographic output. Those who do separate and challenge the Zionist historiography are thus called “post-Zionists”. 24

Michael Shalev (1996) points out that the post-Zionist critical scholarship in addition to offering new perspectives on narratives of historical events, also supplements the discussion of analytical and methodological approaches. This is done by transferring the focus from intentions to actions, from studies of how the ideology has been enacted and what helped or hindered its success, to studies of the inter-dependent relationship between ideology and reality. Moreover, as will also become evident in this empirical study, post-Zionism has become a public debate. It takes place in the media as much as in academic writing, and the general public interest and participation in the debate complicates the boundary between scholarly and political approaches and motivation. 25 This boundary-crossing will become apparent in the following chapters where academic studies and activism are closely linked.

As stated above, this dissertation builds on studies of Israeli state and society that use critical theory and post-colonial perspectives when re-examining the ideology and

24 Post-Zionist scholars do not, however, necessarily hold a post-Zionist conviction, as exemplified by Benny Morris’ latest declaration of his Zionist stand. As one of the first post-Zionist historians, next to Avi Shlaim and Ilan Pappe, Morris (1987, 2004) has written extensively about the atrocities against Palestinian Arabs before, during and after the 1948 war, and described how more than 700 000 Palestinians became refugees at the responsibility of the Jewish leadership. Notwithstanding his own studies, Morris, in 2004 declared that he had always been a Zionist and that people had mistakenly labeled him a post-Zionist, and moreover, that they were wrong if they assumed that his historical study on the birth of the Palestinian refugee problem was conducted and written with the intention to damage the Zionist enterprise: “Under some circumstances expulsion is not a war crime. I don’t think that the expulsions of 1948 were war crimes. You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs. You have to dirty your hands,” Morris said in what has become an in-famous interview (Quoted from Shavit, 2004). For more on the post-Zionist debates see Silberstein (1999).

practices of Zionism. For perspectives on Israeli citizenship the present study has drawn on the comprehensive book *Being Israeli; The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship* by Gershon Shafir and Yoav Peled’s (2002), and for further perspectives on studies of Israeli society I have relied on Uri Ram’s (1995, 2002, 2006) analyses of Israeli social science. Additionally, this study takes as point of departure the approach of the Israeli geographer Oren Yiftachel (1999) who describes Israel as an “ethnocracy” defined as a [...] regime governed by two main principles: (a) despite several democratic features, ethnicity (and not territorial citizenship) is the main organising logic for the allocation of state resources; and (b) a dominant ‘charter group’ enjoys a superior position over other ethnic groups; this group appropriates the state apparatus, and dictates the nature of most public policies. The combination of the two principles typically generates ethno-class stratification and segregation. Given these ‘ethnic rules of the game,’ and given the dominance of the *Ashkenazim* as the Israeli ‘charter group,’ the Israeli polity has been characterised by on-going practices of ethnic control over both Arab and Jewish minorities.

The following sub-chapters introduce the groups of people considered in this study, and provide background for understanding the historical connectedness between the continued Zionist colonisation of Palestinian land and people and the predicament of MENA Jews. An introduction of general themes in the histories of Jews in Arab and Muslim countries prior to Zionism’s entry into the Middle East and North Africa is followed by a summary of issues that pertain to MENA Jews’ mass immigrations to Israel, and of their reception and treatment in Israel. This is followed by an introduction to the situation of the indigenous Palestinian Arabs who remained in the new state after 1948.

**Jews in Arab and Muslim Countries and Immigration to Israel**

Between 1948 and 1956, 450,000 Jews arrived in Israel from Asia and Africa, compared to 360,000 Jews from Europe and America (Swirski, 1989:4). Of these, 130,000 were from Iraq, 45,000 were from Yemen, and 35,000 were from Libya, in addition to substantial parts of the Jewish communities from Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Iran (ibid). MENA Jews constituted the majority of Jewish citizens in Israel until

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26 From web version of article: http://www.geog.bgu.ac.il/members/yiftachel/paper2.html
approximately one million immigrants arrived from the former USSR in the mid-1990s and thus increased the number of Ashkenazi Jews.

There are four contested issues regarding the immigration and integration of MENA Jews of which it is important to be aware, and these all relate to the Zionist narrative. The first is the Zionist claim that Zionists and Israel saved the MENA Jews from their hostile Arab countrymen and states (Swirski, 1999:84); the second is the belief among European Zionists that MENA Jews were uneducated and primitive and were introduced to modernisation after immigration to Israel (Ram, 1995:38-9; Shafir and Peled, 2002:77-8); the third is the observation made by recent academic studies that Zionist interest in MENA Jews only developed when the Zionists realised they needed more Jews in order to have a majority in the population and work-force in Palestine (Shafir and Peled, 2002:76-7); and the fourth is the presumption that MENA Jews are right-wing and Arab-haters (Swirski, 1989:55). In the following paragraphs these issues will be illuminated by briefly presenting the history of MENA Jews.

Before Zionism and Western colonialism, Jewish existence in the Middle East and North Africa was to a large extent determined by their status as a minority in Muslim societies. According to Islamic law, the shari’a, Jews and Christians are defined as ahl al-kitab, the People of the Book. This definition implies recognition of these religions as dhimmi (“non-Muslim subject of the Muslim state”) (Lewis, 1984:14). The dhimmi-status characterised the relationship of the People of the Book with the state by giving them certain rights and duties. These minorities were tolerated and people belonging to each of them were allowed to practice their religions as long as they paid a poll tax, and accepted and obeyed the Muslim authority, including restrictive rules regulating their behaviour and visibility in public (Lewis, 1984). In addition to limiting their official positions and lifestyles, dhimmi-status protected Jews and Christians as citizens of the Islamic empire and gave them shelter from persecution (Scheindlin, 2002:319).

Joel Beinin (1996) describes the dhimmi system (the millet system in Turkish) in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Ottoman Empire as “communitarianism”, an arrangement that provided Jews (and other non-Muslims) “[…] a high level of toleration, communal

autonomy, and cultural symbiosis among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Individual Jews achieved high positions in the political and economic arenas in late Ottoman and monarchical Egypt.” Concurring with this description, Sarah Abrevaya Stein (2004:55) portrays the Ottoman society as “functional coexistence” and Scheindlin (2002:323) emphasises Jewish regional pride in times of successful assimilation and acculturation, such as the “Golden Age” of Jewish cultural achievements in Spain in the 10th and 11th centuries.

As always when considering the legal, social and political situation of a minority group, it is important to keep in mind that rules and regulations in practice varied between places and at different times. Depending on the socio-political and economic situation of the state or empire, and on the position of the wielders of power, as well as on their need to act authoritatively, the dhimmi laws were enforced more or less rigorously. Therefore, when studying the situation of Jews in Islamic countries, one must differentiate between the actual law, interpretations of it in specific contexts, and the emphasis put on these legal interpretations in different societies at different times, plus the actual level of enforcement by individual judges and courts.28

Prior to European involvement in colonial times, Jewish political activity in the Middle East and North Africa was largely confined to administrating their own community and representing it to the ruling authorities (Simon, 2003:166). The colonising powers used the local Jews in their divide-and-rule game and according to Stillman (1979:95), no groups benefited more from colonialism than the dhimmis. As “mercantile interlockers”, Jews received protection from the colonial powers and in many cases became naturalised citizens in European countries (ibid). Simon (2003:166) describes how Algerian Jews from 1830 shifted from their identification with the Muslim state and society towards that of the colonial power. But it is important to remember that the Middle East and North Africa is a vast region in diverse cultural and political

28 To heed the warning above regarding awareness of politicised history, the representation of Jewish life under Muslim rule written in the nineteenth century by European Jewish intellectuals presented this history as one long success story of integration as epitomised by the “Golden Age” in Spain. This representation had less to do with Jewish life under Muslim rule and more to do with the contemporary circumstances of these Jewish intellectuals who also created what is known as the “lachrymose conception” of Jewish life in medieval Christian Europe as only suffering (Cohen, 1996:50).
circumstances and, as will become further evident below, the reactions by local Jews and Muslim citizens to European powers and nationalism, Zionism included, differed from place to place.

Simon (2003:166) emphasises the difference between modern political Zionism and the traditional “love of Zion” among Jews in the Middle East and North Africa, which involved the traditional concept of aliyah (the Hebrew for “ascension”, the term used to describe Jewish emigrations to Eretz Yisrael, “the Land of Israel”). She further describes rabbis who opposed Zionism on both political and religious grounds, fearing it would endanger their communities, and rabbis who welcomed Zionism as part of a cultural revival (ibid). According to both Joel Beinin (1996) and Shiko Behar (2001), most Jews in Iraq and Egypt were neither Zionists nor anti-Zionists. “Instead, they were simply indifferent non-Zionists who were hoping to make sense of their daily lives in the political border zone between Arab and Jewish nationalisms,” as Behar (2001: 210) writes about Iraqi Jews. He explains that, unlike in Europe, the “Jewish question” did not exist for Jews in the Middle East, and thus a national Jewish consciousness did not develop. Therefore, he argues that Jews in Arab and Muslim countries were “non-Zionists almost by default” (Behar, 2001:221).

Beinin (1996) takes issue with both the Zionist claim that Egyptian Jews lacked any affinity with Egypt and with the Egyptian claim that the Jews of Egypt were equal sons of the country. Instead, Beinin (ibid) describes the complex relationship of these Jews’ multiple identities made up of class, ethnic origin, religious practice, level of education, political viewpoint, personal situations and national loyalties. There seemed to be an amorphous sense of belonging, as many Jews in Egypt in the 1930s saw no contradiction between being an Egyptian patriot and a Jewish nationalist simultaneously, and Beinin adds to his complex description Egyptian Jews who would choose neither Israel nor Egypt if forced (ibid).

An issue of the journal The Jerusalem Quarterly File entitled “When Native Jews Ceased to be Arabs” was devoted to topics concerning Palestinian Jews. The editor and Palestinian sociologist Salim Tamari (2004) contributed an article titled “Ishaq al-Shami and the Predicament of the Arab Jew in Palestine”, discussing the complex compositions
of these native Jews. Tamari depicts a diverse and politically disunited Jewish community in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century, composed of three main groups: the Arabic-speaking Jews from Syria and Iraq, the Ladino-speaking Sephardim and Yiddish-speaking Jews. Only the latter exhibited Zionist sympathies. For all, the common language between them and with other groups, mainly Christians and Muslims, was Arabic (ibid). Furthermore, all groups mixed socially and in business with their non-Jewish neighbours.

Tamari (ibid) asserts that Sephardi Jews resisted the imposition of Zionist identity, a reaction born more out of cultural Arab belonging than out of political reasoning. Moreover, for these Palestinian Jews, a return to Zion, the most central concept in Zionism, was irrelevant to them, as they had lived in the Holy Land for generations. The encounter between the Sephardi Palestinian Jew, modernisation and Zionism, is exemplified by the life of the Jewish Hebron-born Ishaq al-Shami. His parents communicated with him in Arabic and Ladino; he was secularised by choice before he moved to Jerusalem where he was exposed to Western culture and the ideas of the Jewish Enlightenment in Hebrew; and he finally became a Jewish expert on Arab affairs in the Histadrut (the Zionist Labour Federation) and Jewish Agency (ibid).

After the war in 1948 and the establishment of the state of Israel, many Jews left their homelands in the Middle East and North Africa. The situation of many Jews in the region became very difficult due to a variety of factors; the most significant of which were the colonisation of Palestine by European Zionists and the concurrent development of Arab nationalism. The latter engendered an atmosphere of exclusivism and narrow-mindedness which was enhanced by modern anti-Semitism, itself a cultural import to the region from Europe. This new antagonism was fuelled by existent hostility and envy of Jews rooted in the economic privileges they enjoyed under colonial rule. Most Jews chose to leave their countries and many, but not all, immigrated to Israel (Stillman, 1979; Simon, 2003; Behar, 2001; Beinin, 1996, Shiblak, 1986).

There is still controversy and uncertainty about Zionist involvement in this exodus. Shenhav (2003:514-16) examined the practice of sending Zionist agents to inspect local Jewish populations in Arab countries in the 1940s and 1950s disguised as traditional
shadarim ("emissaries"). The original emissaries go back to Roman times and the main reason for the Jewish emissaries’ visits to Jewish communities in the region was traditionally performed in order to raise funds for the Jewish communities in the Holy Land (ibid). Shenhav explains that these later inspections were to gather workers for the Zionist project.

Another more controversial issue concerns the supposed agreements between the Zionist Movement, and later the Israeli government, with some Arab states. Shiblak (1986:168) concludes that there is no evidence that the Iraqi Jews left due to some secret agreement between the Israeli and the Iraqi governments. He does, however, describe how the bomb attacks on Baghdadi synagogues in 1950-51 were conducted by Zionist agents in order to scare Jews to immigrate to Israel (Shiblak, 1986:151-156).

Of all these factors, the most significant was the Zionist progress in Palestine that increased Arab hostility towards the local Jewish population, as was particularly evident after the UN Security Council Resolution on the partition of Palestine, and after the establishment of the state of Israel (Simon, 2003:176).

**After Immigration: Development Towns and Marginalisation**

When they arrived in Israel, MENA Jews were first housed in cramped living conditions in *maabarot*, transit camps or immigrant camps. There are many stories from immigrants of patronising treatment by the Ashkenazi management, such as being sprayed with DDT on arrival, and being given new Hebrew names in the registration office or by school-teachers in the camps. The general recollection is one of shock over the poor circumstances, and disbelief regarding shabby treatment. Most came as refugees, having left behind all their valuables and properties (Swirski, 1999:83). From the immigration camps they were settled throughout the country. According to Shafir and Peled (2002:78), immigrants from the Middle East, primarily from Iraq and Yemen, were

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29 For more on these incidents see Massad, 2006: 194, footnote 76.
30 See for example photograph of immigrants being sprayed in Kislon immigrant camp in Shenhav, 1997 (*News from Within*:18), and Dahan-Kalev (2001:1) who describes how the teachers in the immigrant camp “took my name – Henriette – from me and gave me in its place the awful name ‘Ahuva’. She did this because ‘Henriette’ is difficult to pronounce – both for me and the other children”. Dahan-Kalev changed her name back to “Henriette” on her 18th birthday (interview).
settled in cities in central areas and immigrants from North Africa, chiefly from Morocco, were settled in peripheral areas in so-called Development Towns.

Development Towns are peripheral small towns, largely in the north and south of the country, established by the state in the 1950s, and are still today largely inhabited by North African Jews, now with the addition of Ethiopian and Russian immigrants. The 27 Development Towns were originally built for three purposes: to house new Jewish immigrants as part of the official “population dispersal” strategy (Yiftachel, 2000)31; to “develop” the nation’s production halls for labour-intensive industries (Swirski, 1989:32); and to impose state authority in border regions, especially in places inhabited by Palestinians before the 1948 War (Shafir and Peled, 2002:80).

Clearly indicating the connection between Zionist colonisation of Palestinian land and the predicament of MENA Jews, when they were established the Development Towns were described as important both for Israeli security and nation-building. This statement by Arye Sharon, Israel's government planner in 1958, serves as an example (Yiftachel, 1999):

The development town is not only an essential component in our national urbanisation strategy which will strengthen Israel's peripheral regions, but it is also a way of absorbing the masses of immigrants who recently arrived, ready to take part in the settlement activity which is at the heart of building this nation, this country, this land...

This policy document of the Jewish Agency plan from 1978 states the continued need to settle the frontier (Yiftachel, 1999):

We must continue and bring Jews to the Galilee and the Negev. The rapid increase in the numbers of Arabs in these regions and their wide-spread practices of seizing state land illegally, presents us with two main options: let the situation evolve naturally so we lose these regions, or reinvigorate the tradition of Jewish settlement and save them from Arab hands...

In addition to the strategic and colonising policy of the Development Towns, MENA Jews were settled in neighbourhood that used to be Palestinian before the 1948 war, such as Wadi Salib in Haifa and the Musrara neighbourhood in Jerusalem, from which the 1959 riots and the Black Panthers respectively emerged.

31 Web version of article.
Yiftachel (2000) explains how the Development Towns, due to state policies of channelling labour-intensive and economically insecure industries to them, became dependent on the central state apparatus. This dependency was enhanced by state supply of mass-constructed cheap public housing that furthered the peripheral social status of Development Towns. These towns acquired an image of having disproportionate social problems and crime. Due to this stigma there developed a process of “negative filtering”, and a considerable population turnover occurred within Development Towns (Yiftachel, 2000). By consciously creating what Yiftachel (2000) describes as “ethnic enclaves within mixed regions”, with Ashkenazi pioneers and Zionists in kibbutzim and Mizrahim in Development Towns, the state also ensured that social services, as well as population groups, remained segregated. For example, according to Swirski (1989:39), a medical service in a Development Town is of a lower standard than that of a central area, with fewer doctors per capita and less medical equipment. As Yiftachel (ibid) explained, it is in these data that sources of the regressive social division of space in frontier areas from the 1950s can be found.

While Yiftachel called attention to the Orwellian use of the word “development”, Swirski (1989:41) described government policy in Development Towns as the “underdeveloping” of these towns and their inhabitants. Up until the 1970s the management of these towns consisted of external Ashkenazi-dominated investors and party functionaries who controlled the “underdevelopment” (Swirski, 1989:41). The typical example is Ashkenazi mayors commuting to their offices from their residences outside of the Development Towns. Similarly, culture was exported from the centre to the periphery based on Ashkenazi-controlled taste that did not necessarily correspond to that of the Arab-Jewish culture of many of the inhabitants. Swirski (ibid) labels this “cultural imposition” and describes how this system ignored local talent. Thus, Development Towns developed into “a poor, isolated and distressed sector of Israeli-Jewish society” in the 1950s and 1960s (Yiftachel 2000).

Up to today, Development Towns are not only peripheral in their geographical location, away from the country’s urban centres and commercial hubs, but they are also socially marginal and less desirable locations. This is due to high unemployment, coupled
with the fact that existing employment opportunities mainly consist of low-paid industrial jobs, and cheap labour for Ashkenazi-dominated kibbutzim and moshavim in the nearby areas (Shafir and Peled, 2002:80). Before Russian immigration in the 1990s, 75 percent of the population in these towns were Mizrahi (Shafir and Peled, 2002:80). Yiftachel (2000) concludes that the policies for settling the frontiers of the Israeli ethno-state, including settling marginalised Mizrahim in peripheral, low-status and segregated localities, constitute the structural conditions that help explain the persisting disparities between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews.

As described above, the stereotypical images of MENA Jews as right-wing and Arab-haters are largely based on the assumption that Middle Eastern and North African Jews (MENA Jews) vote for right-wing parties and on prejudiced of MENA Jews. MENA Jews have participated in the Israelis politics where they up to the establishment of Shas by and large have voted for Ashkenazi run and established parties that do not represent their interests or identity. Shafir and Peled (2002:87) describe “The story of Mizrahim in Israeli politics, therefore, as one of struggle to possess and master the rights they formally hold.” They further describe how MENA Jews have been channelled into the left-right division and then the secular-religious division (ibid). In Israel there exists an idea that certain “ethnic parties” attract voters among MENA Jews. Challenging the very idea of “ethnic voting”, Herzog (1984:518) identified that:

The term ‘ethnic’ is used to refer to groups that are considered weak or in a ‘minority’ situation in the sociological sense, whole the dominant groups has become representative of ‘the society’ or ‘the Israelis’.

Furthermore, there were already early attempts by MENA Jews to organise in opposition to the channelling of their votes, such as the Union of North Africa Immigrants that organised the Wadi Salib riots in 1959 (Massad, 2006:65). The Union was established to prevent Ashkenazi political parties manipulating these immigrants (ibid). This then refutes both the image of politically passive MENA Jews and the mainstream description of the Wadi Salib riots as “impulsive” and “unorganised” (Dahan-Kalev, interview).
In 1977 MENA Jews were given the credit for forcing the Labor party from power for the first time since 1948 and this also earned them their right-wing status. Shafir and Peled (2002:89-90) explain that over fifty percent of MENA Jews voted for Likud between 1973-1996 due to a combination of structural and ideological factors of which the main are economy, status, the rise in unemployment from the late 1960s, the new challenges to Israeli Labor rule caused by the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza that also brought more Palestinians into the Israeli labour market. Again the colonisation of Palestinian land and people and the predicament of MENA Jews is directly linked: when the Military Government of Palestinians in Israel\footnote{To be presented below.} was annulled this opened the previously closed Jewish labour market to these Palestinians, as did the occupation in 1967 to Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Both these political and military decisions had direct negative consequences for MENA Jews, who had difficulty meeting the low-priced Palestinian workers in competition for employment in the secondary sector of the Israeli labour market (ibid). On this background, helped by clever rhetoric, symbolic MENA Jews in representative positions and its ethno-nationalism, Likud won the disappointed and marginalised MENA Jews’ vote in 1977. Since the early 1990s Likud has increasingly lost voters to the Sephardi religious party-movement Shas to be further presented in Chapter Two.

Inequality in distribution of land between MENA and Ashkenazi Jewish Israelis is presented in Part II, and the differential education system is presented in Part III. Based on statistics from 1993 and 1998, Shafir and Peled (2002:82-4) show that Mizrahim are behind Ashkenazim in all socio-economic characteristics and the gaps increase with the second generation born in Israel:

In 1988 close to 40 percent of the foreign-born Ashkenazim were in the three top occupational categories (professionals, managers, and technicians) compared to 20 percent of the foreign-born Mizrahim. The gap between the Israeli-born members of the two groups was even wider: 50 percent to 21 percent. In 1995 72 percent of the second-generation Ashkenazim worked in white-collar occupation, and 28 percent were blue-collar workers; among second-generation Mizrahim the figures were 46 percent and 54 percent, respectively. Unemployment among second-generation Ashkenazim in 1993 was 4.9 percent, and among Mizrahim 13.2 percent. In 1988 the average Mizrahi head of household earned 80 percent of the income of an Ashkenazi one, only 64 percent per capita. And, at least among the income wage-earner the
income gaps have been widening: an Israeli-born Mizrahi wage earner earned 79 percent of the income of an Ashkenazi wage-earner in 1975, 70 percent in 1982, and 69 percent in 1995. […] whereas in 1975 the income of an Israeli-born Mizrahi employee with a college degree was equal to that of a similarly qualified Ashkenazi, in 1995 the former’s income was only 78 percent of the latter’s.

Palestinians as Citizens of Israel

During 1947-48 about 700,000 Palestinian Arabs, or seven-eighths of the inhabitants in the territories that became the state of Israel after the war, were expelled or fled (Morris, 1987). According to Shafir and Peled (2002:110) 60,000 of the 150,000 Arab Palestinians who remained in what became the state of Israel in 1948 were granted citizenship, and the rest had to wait to meet certain requirements. Some did not receive citizenship until 1980. All Arab Palestinians in Israel were under Military Government (MG) until 1966.

The MG was undemocratic and caused added suffering to an already distressed indigenous population. Under this military rule, Israel confiscated more than half of the land belonging to the Palestinian remaining in Israel, in addition to that of the those who were in exile, and systematically marginalised this population economically and politically (Robinson, 2005). According to Shafir and Peled (2002:112), the military administration’s real duty was to perform the two most crucial tasks of the colonisation project: to control Palestinian labour and confiscate land. In addition, Israeli political parties used the MG to acquire Arab votes. The MG was abolished in 1966 because it was no longer considered an efficient way to control this population (ibid). The abolition finally gave Palestinian Arabs in Israel the opportunity to travel freely within the country, to organise themselves politically, to be tried in the same legal system as Jewish citizens, and to participate in the country’s economic and social life. According to Adalah (“History of the Palestinians in Israel”):33:

Of the 150,000 Palestinians who remained in the new state, approximately twenty-five percent were displaced from their homes and villages and became internally displaced persons as the Israeli army destroyed over four hundred Arab villages.

As described above, in many cases their homes and the locations of their hometowns were populated by MENA Jews and other Jewish immigrants. According to Yosef Jabareen the perception of Palestinians who remained in the state after 1948 as “a potential fifth column, a Trojan horse, and often simply enemies of the state” Yosef Jabareen (2005:105). In addition to the continuous Judaisation of land, which will be further discussed in Part II, and the discrimination in the education system discussed in Part III, the economic disadvantages experienced by Palestinian citizens is well-documented and is reflected in the inferior income of Palestinian workers (Peled and Shafir, 2002:117). Nadim N. Rouhana (2006:65) explains how “Arab citizens’ demographic growth, economic strength, land ownership, and even educational and academic achievements are by and large considered an existential threat to the ‘public good’ (read Jewish).” According to Rouhana, the Israeli definition of “public good” is defined by the ethno-religious identity of the state, thus excluding Palestinian citizens (ibid). As described by Shafir and Peled (2002:129), there is a limit to citizenship rights for Palestinians; the Jewish-defined public good is “located at the transition point between struggling to have their liberal rights respected, even expanded, in the conduct of official policy, and attempting to challenge the prevailing notion of the common good of society.”

Excluded from the political community whose “common good” the Israeli state and society promotes, Palestinian citizens are consequently excluded from political and civilian participation the republican sense, however, since 1966 they have had civil and political rights as individual in the liberal sense (Peled and Shafir, 2002:125). Thus, they are “[…] more or less secure in the exercise of their individual rights, as long as these rights do not conflict with the national goals of the Jewish majority” (ibid). Resultantly, as Shany Payes (2005:57) describes, even though “Arab” political parties exist and are part of the parliament, their influence is limited, they have never been in any coalition and they have been relegated to the status of “permanent opposition.” When Mr Majadele was appointment Minister of Arab Affairs in 2001, Israel gained its first ever Arab Minister.
The attitude of the state towards its Palestinian citizens is evident in the obstacles the state has put up to control and at times thwart Palestinian organised civil society and NGOs. Through her investigation into why Palestinian NGOs have been unable to bring about real equality for Palestinian citizens, and in pursuing this goal, why Palestinian NGOs have not managed to establish an effective social movement, Payes (2005) provides a critical analysis of the multiple webs of constraints hindering the Palestinian national minority to influence the majority-controlled Israeli state, its political system, and public discourse.

The dilemma for these NGOs is how to best present and argue their cause: by demanding regime-change or by focusing on specific interests? And, if choosing the latter approach, are they legitimising and thus supporting the system that excludes them? Payes concludes that joint Jewish and Palestinian activism and co-operation is never able to rid itself of the set power-relations between Jews and Palestinians in Israel. As such, drawing on Gramsci, Payes (2005:190) states that Israeli civil society mirrors instead of challenges the power structure of the state-system.

This power structure is anchored in the ethnocratic rule of Israel, and is reflected in the divide-and-rule policy towards the Palestinian indigenous minority (Abu-Saad, 2006:187). The state has divided the Palestinian population into smaller groups along religious affiliation, Druze, Christian and Muslim; and into geographical regions, the “Triangle” in central Israel, “southern ‘Negev’”34 and northern Galilee; and separating out the Palestine Bedouin tribes in the south from other Palestinians (ibid). In Abu-Saad’s (interview) words:

[…] if they also called the [MENA] Jews “Arabs,” they could work together with the Palestinian Arabs, but in order to create a way to “divide and rule” it is much easier for the authorities to rule when the population is cut in small pieces – it was in the interests of the people who established this country to divide among Jewish and Christians and Muslim Arabs. The second stage, after dividing the Arab minority in the country [into] Muslims, Christians, Druze and Bedouin, and they had a policy of not giving these groups the opportunity to work together. If all Arabs in this country did join forces they would be the majority! Not that I think this will even happen due to the political situation.

34 Abu-Saad uses quotation marks to highlight that to Palestinians this desert is known as the Naqab (Arabic).
The Israeli sociologist Sammy Smooha describes Palestinian citizens as “working class community within a middle-class society. About 90 percent of them live in Arab villages and towns and the other ten percent live in separate neighbourhoods in Jewish cities. The Arabs do not share power and suffer from discrimination in allocation of state budgets, in appointments and in obtaining work and housing in the private sector” (Smooha, 2005:11). As indicated by this description, there is generally little contact between Palestinian and Jewish citizens, especially beyond professional realms.

Jewish-Palestinian Relations

In the biannual *Index of Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel for 2004* (2005:20) produced by Smooha, he explains that in addition to the foundational circumstances of the war, evacuation and coercion in 1948 and the imposition of the MR until 1966, contemporary segregation between Jewish and Palestinian citizens is continued because:

Arabs and Jews differ in language, culture, religion, level of secularity, nationality, and nationalism, and as a result reject any assimilation between them. They are equipped with all the necessary means to preserve a separate existence and identity such as separate communities, education systems, and families.

In terms of images of the Other, according to the *Index* (2005:23):

The proportion of Jews who see most of the Arabs as not trustworthy and violent is similar to that of Arabs with a similar view of the Jews. For example, 48.2 percent of the Arabs and 57.8 percent of the Jews feel it is impossible to trust most of the members of the other people. Between 35.0 percent and 39.8 percent of the Jews think that most Arabs are not intelligent, are culturally backward, and are not law-abiding. Although these numbers are certainly significant, they are similar to those among the Arabs.

Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Teichman (2005:1) use socio-psychological studies to interpret how Jews and Arabs (beyond Palestinians) view each other, based on the assumption that group members act on the basis of knowledge, images, attitudes, feelings, and emotions about their own group and other groups. Their main research was conducted in the peace process years between 1992 and 1999, and it shows that “overall Jewish Israeli children and adolescents hold very negative repertoire about Arabs” and moreover that this repertoire “includes stereotypes, prejudice, affect, emotions and

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behavioural intentions, is acquired at a very early age and despite periodical moderation, is maintain through the developmental trajectory into young adulthood” (Bar-Tal and Teichman, 2005:10). More specifically, according to the authors, the main reason for Israeli Jews’ low trust in Arabs is due to their belief that Arabs are “anti-Israeli” and that the “goal of the Arab people is to destroy Israel” as (ibid:229).

Al Haj (2001) stresses the paradox that, despite the fear of Palestinian citizens as a non-Jewish fifth column, and the fact that the majority of Arabs in Israel live segregated from Jewish Israelis and are segregated in Arabic and Hebrew schools, Arabs in Israel have not been allowed cultural or other autonomy. While this dissertation was being written, the National Committee for the Heads of the Arab Local Authorities in Israel published The Future Vision of the Palestinian Arabs in Israel (2006:5), where they call for:

a Consensual Democratic system that enables us to be fully active in the decision-making process and guarantee our individual and collective civil, historic, and national rights.

The response from Israeli Jews has been surprise and mostly negative responses, as exemplified by the right-wing Ha’aretz journalist Avraham Tal’s article “This Means War” (Ha’aretz, 09.12.2006). A more sympathetic perspective was presented by another Ha’aretz columnist, Uzi Benziman (Ha’aretz, 06.12.2006), who can be said to represent a “dovish” Israeli viewpoint. Benziman is anti-occupation, but unwilling to consider changing the Jewish character of the state. Benziman wrote that Jews and Arab “Palestinians” (his quotation marks):

[…] have been sentenced to live together, and they must find a way to do this in the most harmonious way possible. The Jews must understand that the positions now expressed in the Arab sector indicate the extent of the discrimination and exploitation it experiences. The Arabs must understand that the Jews cannot give up the Zionist identity of Israel, since they see it as the sole refuge the Jewish people have left in the world, and react harshly to what they see as a threat to their national existence.

Autumn 2000, thirteen Palestinian citizens were shot dead by Israeli police during demonstrations in support of the Palestinians in the occupied territory after the onset of Intifadat al-Aqsa. This was the bloodiest event for Palestinian citizens since the Kafr Kassem massacre in 1956 when 49 villagers were killed by Israeli police for breaking the
curfew they were not informed about (Shafir and Peled, 2002:134). At this darkest hour of Israeli citizenship, the connection between “internal” issues of Israeli state and society and the “external” conflict became clearer than ever to Palestinian citizens of Israel.

**Studying Internal Others – Previous Research**

The two case studies in this dissertation, HILA and HaKeshet, offer different social reactions to the predicament of MENA Jews in Israel, a group which is simultaneously included in the nation based on their Jewish identity and experience being excluded from Israeli social, cultural, economic, and political arenas based on what is described as their ethnic category of identification. As such, both case studies are considered to be reactions to imposed boundaries of a national, ethnic, cultural, physical and imagined character. Therefore their struggles are here considered to be bottom-up, as they represent marginalised citizens who are reacting to a predicament that they largely understand to be created by imposed categorisation and its socio-political consequences. In this dissertation the author will contend that these struggles constitute the substance of Mizrahiut: reactions of MENA Jews to their many-fold marginalisation as internal Others.

The previous studies of MENA Jews relied upon in the present dissertation all belong to what Ram (2002) describes as critical Israeli social science that is a reaction to the functionalist modernist nation-state perspectives of Israeli social science up to the 1980s. Ram further (2002:115-116) divides the critical research into three “revolutions”: the equality paradigm, the identity paradigm and the post-structural paradigm. The equality paradigm was dominated by academics with normative commitments, attacking the positivistic methods and belief in the scientific neutrality of sociology. These academics flagged their political banner of equality, and declared their interest in social change based on their sociological analysis. According to Ram (2002:115), Swirski belongs to the “Neo-Marxist paradigm of class analysis” within the equality paradigm, and his seminal book *The Oriental Majority* (1981)36 “turned on its head the modernisation paradigm”.

36 The English version came out in 1989.
Swirski (interview) coined the term “Mizrahim”, following his analysis of the institutional marginalisation of MENA Jews. Swirski’s (1981) Mizrahim share the experience of being positioned at the bottom of Israel’s social, economic and political hierarchy, when compared with their fellow Jewish Ashkenazi citizens. This positioning furthermore made them a new class dictated by their ethnic identity. This analysis presented in The Oriental Majority was very contentious when the book was published, because it completely rejected preceding theories that explained the inequality between Ashkenazim and MENA Jews with the sociological make-up of Oriental Jews and with the economic disability of the young Jewish state. With regards to the latter claim that the immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa were a heavy burden on the young Israeli economy, Swirski demonstrated that Israeli capital in the early days of the state was spent on agricultural settlements, and not on the new immigrants. He further showed that the new immigrants in fact constituted the necessary work-force without which Israel would not have been able to develop its agriculture or industry. In sum, these immigrants played a crucial role in Israel’s development into a modernised differentiated society.

The second revolution in Israeli sociology was post-modern and focused on identity and culture (Ram, 2002:116). Ram (ibid) describes this phase as a critique of both the nation-state focus of the conservative functionalists and the socialist society focus of the critical social scientists of the first revolution, as “modernist grand-narratives, totalistic and oppressive”. Ella Shohat was one of the first MENA Jews in Israelis to write on this topic with the seminal article, “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims” (1988), as an advancement and critique of Edward Said’s article “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims” (1979). Shohat looks at Zionism from the perspectives of MENA Jews, who in her analysis are the “Jewish Oriental others”. Thus, Shohat extends the critical debate about Israel and Zionism that usually focuses on the Jewish-Arab conflict beyond this dichotomisation and incorporates Arab or Oriental Jews, Sephardim or Mizrahim.

37 By adding this perspective and introducing MENA Jews as orientalised by Western and Zionist Jews, her article also criticises Said for not seeing or mentioning this relationship when writing about Palestinian victims of Zionism.
Shohat’s main claim is that in the Zionist master narrative, *Sephardi* Jewish history is distorted and denied.\(^{38}\) She analyses the way *Sephardi* Jews as a Third World people have been victims of the “positional superiority” of Western Zionist discourse, in which they are presented as underdeveloped, inferior and abnormal in need of rescue by the rational, developed, superior and humane Zionists. Shohat reminds the readers that prior to Zionism, Arabness and Jewishness were not antonyms, something they became when Jewish and Zionist were made synonymous, and in response she emphasises the hyphen in Arab-Jews.

In what Ram (2002) describes as the third revolution in critical Israeli social science, the deconstructive analysis of Michel Foucault, post-colonial and post-structural theories are the foundations of the analysis of Israeli identity and inter-group relations. Academics such as Sami Shalom Chetrit, Yehouda Shenhav, Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Yossi Yonah, Yossi Dahan, Pnina Motzafi-Haller, Smadar Lavie, and Itzhak Saporta,\(^{39}\) all connected to *HaKeshet*, generally present themselves as outsiders, the (internal) Others, and the political minority, in their writings.

In addition to these *HaKeshet*-affiliated academics, there are Israeli academics who have studied the construction of MENA Jews as internal Others in relation to European Orientalism and its influences on Zionism. The American sociologist Aziza Khazzoom (2003) focuses on how European Zionists reacted to being the Oriental “other” in Europe: on the theoretical level by constructing Zionist ideology, and on the practical level by emigrating to Israel. There, as epitomised in the title of Khazzoom’s article, “The Great Chain of Orientalism: Jewish Identity, Stigma Management, and Ethnic Exclusion in Israel”, Eastern European Jews categorised Jews who emigrated from the Middle East and North Africa in the 1950s and 60s as their Other.

One of the latest addition to the study of MENA Jews and Palestinians in Israel is Gil Eyal’s *The Disenchantment of the Orient* (2006), whose thesis of the focus of *mizrahanut* (literally “Orientalism”); the study of the Middle East, Islam, Arab language and literature at the Hebrew University, is directly connected with the establishment of the

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38 In this article (1988) Shohat uses the term *Sephardi* Jews.
39 Their relevant works and perspectives will be presented and discussed in Part II and Part III about *HaKeshet*. 

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state of Israel. According to Eyal (2006), the creation of the state of Israel started the process of separation of “Arabs outside” and “Arabs inside”. Prior to the state, Middle Eastern studies at Hebrew University focused on the Orient as composed of Arabs, Islam, Arab Jews, Bedouins, certain aspects of Judaism, Palestinians; all together in an organic whole constituting one cognitive entity. Then, after the state was established, its national borders and ethnic boundaries were reflected in the subdivision of the previously united Orient into different domains and Arab Jews ceased to be Arabs and became Jews and later Israelis. The former autonomous discourse about the peoples, places, traditions and cultures of the region were separated into new categories that concurred with the Zionist ideology. “This is the disenchantment of the Orient,” Eyal (interview) concluded. Eyal argues that it is significant to understand this disintegration in order to comprehend the contemporary experience of interaction that he describes as created “out of the ruins” of this disenchantment (Eyal, 2006:2).

Joseph Massad (1996:54) pointed out the irony in the fact that Mizrahim internalised the Mizrahi identity created by the Ashkenazi establishment and subsequently presented their ethnic struggle based on this very identity. Both Swirski (1989) and Yiftachel (2000) explain that the reason why Mizrahim have not been able include Palestinian citizens in their activism (to any significant extent), is that despite the shared background as marginalised groups within Israeli ethnocracy, the nature of their marginalisation causes them to act on different issues and in different ways. So, their responses are directed towards their respective inclusion in or exclusion from the nation, as are the development of their collective identities. In short, the state of Israel has not provided opportunities for Palestinians citizens and Mizrahi Jews to create platforms for common voice, thus the separation between the two groups is the result of a conscious policy of the state (Swirski, 1999). Yiftachel (2000) describes MENA Jews as trapped inside the ethnocratic system of Israeli state and society, whereas Palestinians are trapped outside it. In his analysis of peripheral MENA Jews, Yiftachel found that their protests concern socio-economic issues and that their collective identity is marked by a strong desire to assimilate into Israeli culture.
Similarly, Shafir and Peled (2002:88) describe social reactions by MENA Jews as inhibited by their position;

As a semi-peripheral group, “sandwiched” between Ashkenazim and the Palestinians, they have sought to ally themselves with the Jewish state and with the Ashkenazim who control it, rather than with the subordinate Palestinians, with whom they share many socio-economic and cultural attributes. As a result, Mizrahi protest has usually not contested the existence of multiple discourses of citizenship, but has sought rather to enhance the status of the ethno-national discourse at the expense of the republican and liberal ones.

In her article “Mizrahim, Mizrahiut, and the Future of Israeli Studies,” Khazzoom (Khazzoom, 2002:94) suggests to “separate the study of Mizrahiut from the study of the people who are now know as Mizrahim”. She defines Mizrahiut as the concept of “easterness” that, according to her, is one of the central elements in Israeli society (ibid). Khazzoom holds that this separation will solve two problems: “it enables us to talk about identity and authenticity as constructed without denying Mizrahim the very real connection to their cultures, histories and identities. Second, it structures discussion about who should be researching what” (ibid). Khazzoom argues further that new studies need to look into the discomfort of the Mizrahiut of European/Westernised Jews. Specifically, she recommends to further study the three broad areas: the Jewish history of orientalism; the relationship between people and categories, conceptualising Mizrahiut as a class and as resistant to marginalisation; and the cultures of the groups who were and became Mizrahi thus giving voice to the silenced histories (2002:97-102).40 Khazzoom does not mention the any integration of the Arab and Muslim homelands in her suggestions of study approaches, nor does she include the Palestinians, the other Others, in her outline of issues to be studied in order to better understand the predicament of MENA Jews and the construction of their Otherness. Thus it seems that she is suggesting an approach that is confined within the “Jewish bubble”, to use Kimmerling’s term. This is different from the present study where the other Others are considered central in order to understand the predicament of MENA Jews and the constraints they face when addressing their predicament.

40 Khazzoom goes into much more detail on each of the three broad areas outlined here.
The approach of the present study concurs with Khazzoom on the relevance and interconnectedness of the three broad areas she outlined, but it diverts from her initial remark regarding separating studies of Mizrahim from studies of Mizrahiut. This research was conducted based on the assumption that the connection between the noun and the verb is fundamental when attempting to understand the actions of constructing, deconstructing or reconstructing of categorisations. In other words, there is no Mizrahiut if there are no Mizrahim. Separating the people from this process will in my opinion obstruct our ability to investigate how Mizrahiut plays in when these Jews are trying to become comfortable with being or having been MENA Jews. It is the author’s contention that without this connection it is not possible to find out why these Jews are reacting as they are to their imposed categorisation.

The connecting between the categorisation and the categorised is also what makes this study different from other former studies. While building on the studies of Shafir and Peled, Yiftachel and Swirski, unlike their approaches that focus on limitations imposed on MENA Jews by the state, this study is taken further and beyond these constrictions. Thus, this study includes limitations emanating from the social organisations of MENA Jews and from choices these have made in their responses to treatment by the state and the social hierarchy in Israel. As such, the main entity analysed in the present study consists of the multiple and at times contradicting concerns addressed by MENA Jews in the social movement HaKeshet.

Moreover, unlike the studies of Khazzoom and Eyal, this study is based on empirical research of two contemporary manifestations of MENA Jewish identity. Thus, it is a study of people’s knowledge of who they are, and why they are who they are, and the way they choose to use this knowledge, what conclusions they have drawn from it and how they act based on those conclusions. Whereas previous research explains how MENA Jews became Mizrahim and why European Jews viewed and treated them as they did, the main contribution of the present study is its focus on the relationship between those categorised as Sephardi/Mizrahi Jews and their other “others”, the Palestinians citizens of Israel.
In the present study, the terms Sephardim and Mizrahim are avoided for several reasons. First of all, because of the inherent controversies in these categorisations, and secondly since one of the case studies is an organisation calling itself The Mizrahi Rainbow Movement, I avoid using this term in order to avoid confusion between my use of terms and that of my interviewees. Thirdly and most significantly, Mizrahim is here not considered to constitute a singular or useful category with which to describe the political actions undertaken by Jewish Israelis originally from Middle Eastern and North African countries. Even though Shafir and Peled (2002:78) and Baruch Kimmerling (2001:173) comment that the Mizrahi category is too vast and general, they nevertheless continue using it. In general there seems to be a preoccupation in Israeli academia with categorising the Israeli population.

Contemporary relations in Israeli society are usually described as “tensions” between different categories of citizens. Kimmerling (2001) for example uses these categories: Ethiopian, Russian, orthodox religious, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi and national religious. However, these categories are not comparable but are based on religious, ethnic, national and political affiliations. While interesting on their own when presented as equivalent categories this seems puzzling. Moreover, this division of Israelis seems to confirm the taken for granted major distinction between “Jews” and “Arabs”, and thus contradict Kimmerling’s call for bursting of the “Jewish bubble”, here interpreted to as a critical remark on the lack of discussion of these categories, and of the overwhelming concentration on divisions between different Jewish groups.

As the two case studies examined here show, the intellectual MENA Jews in HaKeshet and the working class parent activists in HILA act differently in relations to their feelings of belonging. Moreover, these case studies show that stereotypes of MENA Jews do not coincide with the behaviour of MENA Jews. And, what is more, this study demonstrates that stereotypical understandings of MENA Jews are also prevalent among intellectuals in HaKeshet. These facts indicate that the term is inadequate for describing MENA Jews in Israel.

Therefore in this dissertation MENA Jews, meaning Middle Eastern and North African Jews, will be used to describe Jews from these regions who live in Israel. Albeit a
new term to describe many people, as a descriptive term “MENA Jews” it is not meant to signify anything more about these Jews other than that they came from these countries. Rather, it is meant to provide an analytical distance from the terms that are fought over in the society studied.

MENA Jews’ reactions to their predicament are considered to constitute the content of *Mizrahiut*. Thus, *Mizrahiut* inherently also contains *Ashkenazi* Jews’ Orientalist perceptions and attitudes towards the MENA Jews they made into their “internal others”. MENA Jews’ reactions revolve around two possible contesting and competing processes: an emerging and complex development of identification and the development of a pluralistic social-political consciousness. *Mizrahiut* can thus be characterised as a collective identity for MENA Jews and also be used to describe a new social and political consciousness among MENA Jews. This latter is based on an understanding of their place and role in Israeli Zionist history and the connection between this and their socio-economic situation and status. In both cases, *Mizrahiut* is an Israeli-constructed form of identification and social reaction. *Mizrahiut* is thus considered to be part the on-going process of social and historical struggles by marginalised people over power to set and change boundaries between state and society, as well as between groups within society.

This study acknowledges that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is the framework within which *Mizrahiut* is being played out and may even reach its potential as a conciliatory cultural and political voice. In other words, those taking part in the construction of *Mizrahiut* are dealing directly with Zionism in its contemporary political manifestations, both in its physical forms, and in its discourse. Because *Mizrahiut* challenges Israeli historical narratives, studying it will illuminate the process of narratives that continuously struggle to be part of the construction of society. This challenge in a larger framework represents a challenge to the understanding and conceptualisation of different ways of categorising Israeli(nes)s. A need that, moreover, relates to the act of categorising Jewish Israelis.

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41 I owe my choice of using the active verbal term “identification”, instead of the passive noun “identity”, and thereby emphasising the study of the construction of categories, to Yehouda Shenhav (MA seminar “Nationalism and Ethnicity in Postcolonial Theory”, Tel Aviv University, autumn 2004).
Chapter 2

Theoretical Considerations of Ethnicity in Conflict

As stated in the Introduction, the main research question of this dissertation is why HaKeshet was not able to support what its goals and discourse promised, and ended up excluding Palestinian citizens in the Land Struggle Case. In other words, the puzzle investigated is why the members social movement was not able to support its universally anchored goals and discourse, and include their “other Other” in their struggle for equality. The MENA Jews in HaKeshet are reacting to the imposed category if identification and its socio-economic, cultural and political marginalisation. Two types of response to the imposition of categories of identity can be:

a) to create alternative categories of identification that empower groups rather than oppressing them, and imbue them with a feeling of belonging, or

b) to opt out of categorisations altogether and argue for rights as citizens.

In 2002 Uri Ram asked whether the post-modern identity paradigm of “Mizrahiut”, of which HaKeshet and its members are the main articulators, has a future, or whether it only offers past-leaning nostalgia. He asked if the politics of identity could ever reach beyond “resistance identity” and thus become universally inclusive and open for pluralistic democratic politics. This study will attempt to address this question by examining the relationship between MENA Jews, their actions and discourse (labelled Mizrahiut), and the Palestinian citizens of Israel. Moreover, this will be paralleled by considering how the organisation HILA is able to cross these boundaries by including Palestinian citizens in its organisation and activities.

The paradox Massad pointed to regarding the identification by MENA Jews of their social reactions as “Mizrahi”, is thus studied by examining what this identification means to members of the social movement HaKeshet. To identify their actions as “Mizrahi” seems paradoxical on two levels: first because they chose the Orientalist category that has been imposed on them in the same way that racial identities have been imposed on colonised peoples and African-Americans or “blacks” in the United States, and, secondly,
because *HaKeshet* seems to have been unable to reconstruct this category into one that is inclusive and extends the boundaries inherent in the imposed category.

As the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth recommended in 1969, in the present study of ethnicity in conflict, the focus is on the “boundaring” and not on the cultural content of ethnicity. In other words, the focus is on the use of culture in the acts of “boundaring” that take place between groups. Thus, ethnicity is considered something negotiable and situational (Eriksen, 2002). Eriksen (2002:78) further suggests concentrating on how the process of “ethnogenesis” emerges in a specific geographical context, by studying change over time. In the present case, this means studying how the members of *HaKeshet* and *HILA* activists understand the development of the ethnic category *Mizrahi*. More specifically, what does this identification of the social movement *HaKeshet* as *Mizrahi* mean to its members and for its actions?

This emphasis on ethnicity as something continuously produced is in line with another earlier social scientist, Norbert Elias (1969), who suggested studying society as a developing process by looking into how and why it develops the way it does. In his “socio-history”, Elias combines different social sciences into a dynamic understanding of society. From him and from Barth we learn that to study society and culture is to study change, its order and directions. Ethnic “boundaring” and culture are in constant flux, and if one can say anything about the nature of culture, it is in the change that continuously reproduces itself in the three contrary processes of controlling, silencing, and eradicating experiences, or of dominance, suppression, and erasure (Barth, 1995).

These processes take place in a specific context made up of state and society. In his state-in-society approach Joel Migdal (2001) emphasises interactive dynamics and processes. In Migdal’s (2001:16) view, the power of the state rests on its capabilities to implement its leaders’ policy, that is, its ability to infiltrate society, control social relationships, and extort and use resources; a strong state is that which is successful in enforcing its leaders’ strategies for action. The central issue is social control, to have citizens act in accordance with the leaders’ plan for social interaction. This plan is in its most basic form the laws of the state. Migdal’s main question is why some states are

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42 *The Civilising Process* was published in German in 1939, but was only translated into English in 1969.
more successful than others in governing their populations. As stated in his Introduction (Migdal, 2001:12), to answer this requires an understanding of the resistance to state leaders’ policies. This resistance can be in the form of social organisations that struggle to change established strategies for social control in opposition to this image presented by the state. An important point in the approach of Migdal is that citizens are not passive recipients of rule(s). Rather they are participants in the ongoing struggles concerning influence over rules and regulations governing social behaviour. As such, Migdal describes the state as a simultaneously unified and disintegrated body. These are seemingly two contradicting characteristics, yet this description includes (groups of) people who possess different narratives through which they understand and possibly aim to change the nature of the state, so there are tensions and confrontations that create the sometimes confusing circumstances in which people live and that academics study.

As defined in the Introduction, the specific context of HaKeshet and HILA is the Israeli ethnocracy, where MENA Jews are included in the nation as Jews, and feel excluded due to their non-European background, and in which Palestinians citizens are excluded from the nation as non-Jews. In most cases national boundaries include or exclude individuals and groups and national categorisations thus have political, economic and social advantages for those included, and disadvantages for those who are excluded. It is today established that national and other identities are constructed and that in the process of construction, imposed stereotypes are used to categorise and classify identities, and in this manner the boundaries of what constitutes the nation are established (Eriksen, 2002:65). John Lie (2004:86) concludes his discussion of the concept of “modern peoplehood” by asserting that it is presupposed by the modern construction of race and racism.

It is here suggested that Sephardim/Mizrahim is a racialised ethnic category based on the studies of the imposition of this category examined above that showed how Jews from Arab and Muslim countries were made Israeli by the dominant European Zionists through suppression and erasure of their Arab and other identities. In his study of citizenship and

43 Based on the understanding of ethnicity as boundary-processes that in Israel is used to distinguish between Jews, whereas Arabs are national Others, maybe a more precise term for this hegemonic system of control would be “religioocracy” or “Judaocracy”?
struggles over natural resources in Thailand, Peter Vandergeest (1996) uses the concept of radicalisation to examine the connections between identity and resource politics. What is similar with the Thailand case and the Sephardi/Mizrahi Israeli ethnic identification is that in both cases territorial space is a main component in the logic of the constructed categorisation. “The production of space through cadastral mapping, forest reservation, and community forests has all been racialised to the degree that these spaces are also associated with naturalized and essentialised ethnic identities,” Vandergeest (1996:19 ) writes about Thailand. There are clear links between this and the Judaisation of Palestinian land with the accompanying settlement policies for MENA Jews, as described by Yiftachel above.

In Vandergeest’s (2003:20) Thailand case, there is a question over what strategy is most useful for the indigenous population when arguing for rights to resources: to argue based on their rights as an indigenous people, with possible complicated linking of community-based rights to territory, and the concepts of ethnic and indigenous identities, or to argue based on rights as citizens? In the case of MENA Jews, their racialised ethnic categorisation is made even more complicated by the fact that this imposed category is meant to include them in the nation thus giving them rights to the territory in question.

To further contextualise the significance of modern concepts of peoplehood in Israel and related racialised ethnic categories and boundaries, three main issues indicate the relevance of categorisations of the Israeli population: the abovementioned socio-economic and political “ethnic gaps” between Ashkenazi and MENA Jews and the stereotypical discourse that accompanies these disparities; the demographic perspective on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and with the greater Arab Middle East, in this respect presented as a struggle between Jewish and Arab birth-rates; and the rationalisation of ethnic categorisation by genetic tests and research on different Jewish groups. All of these issues indicate the use of identity in the Israeli state and society.\footnote{Another example of use of ethnic categorisations is the genetic test of Ashkenazim offered by the Israeli Hadassah Medical Center: “We offer genetic tests aimed to detect couples who are at risk of having children with specific hereditary diseases. These tests are also intended for individuals before marriage.” The relevance of these tests to this discussion is that they reinforce ethnic categories and provide them with legitimacy and authenticity.}

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The preoccupation with categorisation of population is observable in the newspapers’ yearly Rosh HaShanah (New Year) supplements that provide demographic statistics of the Israeli population. The figures in the 2004 report in Ha’aretz (24.04.2004) presenting the status of the population were: total 6,780,000, of which 81 percent are registered as Jews and 19 percent registered as Arabs. The article further specifies that the “pioneer communities”, defined as “communities built by Jews who immigrated in the 1880s” are among the 14 largest cities. Further, it reveals that the percentage of Jews born in Israel is sixty-six, a reversal of these figures from 1948 when thirty-five percent of the Jewish population was indigenous. Of Israeli Jews not born in Israel, 1.2 million were born in the former Soviet Union; 500,000 in Morocco; 245,000 in Iraq; 240,000 in Romania; and 220,000 in Poland. Of the 21,000 new immigrants in 2004, 11,000 came from the former Soviet Union; 2,600 from Ethiopia; 1,600 from France; and 1,200 from Argentina (ibid).

Another article in Ha’aretz (15.09.2004) by Lily Galili discussing the 2004 yearly statistics was entitled “The New Elite, State of the Nation”. She explained that the yearly statistics describe the Jewish population by origin, with the exception of those born in Israel or those whose father was born in Israel. As pointed out by Galili, it is interesting that the ethnic statistics are based on the father’s background, whereas Jewish identity according to the Halakha, the Jewish religious law, is based on the Jewishness of the mother.

The “demographic fear” about the demographic balance between Jews and Arabs in Israel, also concerning the occupied territory, has been debated since the establishment of the state. It is the fear that the Jewish character of the state might be challenged by a majority of Arabs. This topic was an issue in the discussions prior to the latest Knesset elections and the background for Ariel Sharon’s unilateral disengagement from Gaza. Ilan Pappe (2006) solemnly commented that only Palestinian and Ashkenazi ultra-orthodox parties refrained from entering this debate. Others participated with suggestions of how best to preserve and increase a Jewish majority in the state. In its nature a chauvinistic debate, it has turned even more explicit lately with the agenda of the Israel

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Beitenu (Israel Our Home) Party Chair Avigor Liberman, who advocates a transfer of Palestinian citizens to the occupied territory in exchange for incorporation of Israeli illegal settlers in the occupied West Bank to Israel. His inclusion in the present Israeli government further reveals that his opinions are acceptable in contemporary Israel.\footnote{As of January 2007, Liberman is the current Transportation Minister.}

This study of MENA Jews is a study of ethnicity in conflict. Ethnicity in conflict is often studied with the presumption that the conflict is between two or more ethnic groups, such as in the bird’s-eye perceptive of Donald L. Horowitz (1985) who seems to perceive ethnicity as the reasons behind the conflicts. Horowitz (1985:5) looked at the state system in the post-colonial period as the framework for ethnic conflict, defined by the involved groups’ goals to control the state. His quandary was why so many conflicts have ethnic character, and his study assumed that ethnic affiliation is powerful, passionate and pervasive (Horowitz, 1985:14). Thus, the perception in Horowitz’s study was that ethnicity in conflict is about gaining power, usually at one’s opponent ethnic group’s expense.

Here, however, the perspective is that the ethnic “boundaring” is produced by and during the conflict. Moreover, corresponding to the theories introduced above, ethnicity is here not considered to describe the definite border of a group or its members’ characteristics, but is rather understood to have flexible and constantly changing boundaries. And, as pointed out before, in the confusing case of MENA Jews in Israel, their “ethnic” categorisation includes them into the nation and simultaneously excludes them from certain areas of society, whereas the conflict is with the Palestinian and Arab nations. Furthermore, unlike the bird’s-eye perspective applied by Horowitz, this empirical study focuses on both interaction across assumed ethnic categories and reproduction of ethnic categories in a long-term violent conflict situation.

As Karen Brodkin (1998) showed in her study How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America, in studying constructions of identifications, one can and should also study how these constructions affect intra- and inter-racial/ethnic/group relationships. In other words, the studies of how MENA Jews became Mizrahim, and the current study of MENA Jews’ reactions to this construction and its
consequences, are connected to the other groups in the context: the Ashkenazi Jews and the Palestinian Arabs (certainly also to the Ethiopians Jews and all other groups in Israel-Palestine that due to reasons of limitation will not be discussed here). Furthermore, Brodkin emphasises the complexity in the interconnectedness of all issues related to racialised identities. To summarise, one can say that identification must be studied in context: historical, political, popular, discursive, local, regional, global, scientific, cultural and other contexts. It is of course difficult to manage and cover all the contextual levels and topics in one study, but is it nevertheless important to keep this broad contextualised perspective in mind. In this study, the interconnectedness between the personal and the political, the emotional and material, is considered central to understanding the cases and question examined.

Five Paths for MENA Jews

The following paragraphs will introduce five possible courses or paths for MENA Jews. The intention is to present alternative ways to use history, culture, traditions, and ideological positions when acting as MENA Jews in the context of Israel-Palestine. In relation to the two types of response to the imposed categories of identity presented above, these paths are based on real reactions by MENA Jews and are thus meant as operationalisations of the ideal types a) and b). These alternatives will be drawn on in Chapters Six and Ten when discussing HaKeshet and HILA using additional theories and studies of identity, recognition and the danger of re-production inherent in post-modern approaches to identification.

The five alternative paths presented are:

1. to be Zionist as a positive choice, by re-creating or modifying the meaning of Zionism, and positively relate to past history and own identity;

2. to be Zionist/Israeli by negative default or lack of other choice: “We are here and caught in this situation and are better off making the best of it”;

3. to leave Israel and the category of Mizrahi altogether;

4. to fight for equality of all citizens of Israel and for Palestinian freedom from occupation and right to self-determination; effectively anti-Zionism;
5. to use cultural community actively and positively in order to integrate Israel into the region by drawing on a Jewish regional past that shared its culture with other groups in society, whether Muslim, Christian or other.

1. The New Sephardi Jewish Israeli

The political party and religious movement Shas is the only political and cultural expression by MENA Jews that has succeeded in becoming a mass-movement. Established in 1983, Shas’ self-defined New Jewish Israeli identity is specifically Sephardi, something which enables the party-movement to offer its supporters both a reaction to feelings of socio-economic and political marginalisation and a positive self-reform based on their regional Jewish religion and culture. In the name of indigenous Sephardi Jewish tradition and culture, Shas fosters self-discipline and integration in modern Israeli society. “Sephardi” here provides a revivalist identity based on Jewish tradition and pride by combining old traditions in new circumstances in order to create a satisfying cultural answer to a situation of socio-political deprivation (Rosmer, 2004).

The positive alternative identity Shas provides for individuals and groups is as Sephardi Jewish Israelis. Shas does not refer to a specific “Mizrahi” culture or to “Mizrahim”. Rather, its leadership has created something new and Israeli, based on the Sephardi religious tradition. The Sephardi Jewish identity of Shas engages with the three connected issues: Judaism or Jewishness, Israeli categorisation of identification, and status and position in Israeli society. As Sephardi Torahni (from the Torah, “Torah-based”) Shas distinguishes itself from the Ashkenazi Haredi (ultra-orthodox) Jews; from the negatively charged Mizrahi immigrant identity; and from the secular Zionist identity embodied in Ben Gurion’s New Israeli. In my study of Shas I found that the party-movement has four major objectives: to reform the Sephardi tradition; to increase the observance of the individual Jew in accordance with the Sephardi edition of the Halacha; to improve the socio-economical situation and social standing of the Sephardim in Israeli society, including Sephardi women; and to increase the position and status of Judaism in the state (Rosmer, 2004). These associated objectives, coupled with the impressive institutions by which Shas provides its supporters with education and other social welfare
assistance in its supporters’ local environments, have ensured that the party-movement draws large numbers of voters.

Thus, the identity and cultural connotations of Shas’ New Sephardi Jew fulfil the role identified by Ernest Gellner (1991), wherein a local tradition is made compatible with the modern world and provides its adherents with a sense of dignity. At the centre of the self-reform advocated by Shas and embodied in its Sephardi identity, is the ability to imbue pride through the Sephardi tradition and culture. According to Gellner (1991:285) “...the drive towards self-discipline and self-reform can be imposed, not in the name of emulating the alien or in the name of a less than fully convincing idealisation of the local folk culture, but in the name of a genuine indigenous tradition, which at the same time has a kind of dignity and acceptability by the criteria of the modern world.” Moreover, according to Gellner, this reformed local tradition can have the same function as nationalism, namely to be the “high culture” that constitutes the mainstream culture of the modern society in question.

With the emphasis on the religious rather then the Israeli ethnic Sephardi connotation, Shas was able to do two things simultaneously: first, with its Sephardi Torahni character, Shas is able to relate to the socio-political marginalisation of MENA Jews and, secondly, it is inclusive beyond the Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide in Israeli society. Thus, Shas is open to all Israeli Jews and unlike many haredi (“ultra-orthodox”) movements, Shas’ Torahni denominator is flexible and less strict in terms of the level of observance required (Rosmer, 2002). Shas’s main office is in central Jerusalem, but the movement has a grass-roots organisation wherein local synagogues function as meeting-points and effectively as Shas support offices (Rosmer, 2002 and 2005). In addition, supporters can get in touch with Shas politicians at their local political office, the municipalities and town halls. Also, Shas is present through its school network, its “soup kitchens” and all its other organised social work activities (ibid). Moreover, the New Jewish Israeli identity of Shas is Zionist by positive choice. Through its Sephardi religious perspective, Shas has created a Zionism based in a regional and local version of Jewish tradition and has thus redefined the original European Zionism.
2. If I wasn’t here – were would I be?

Whereas *Shas* has reinvented Zionism with its Sephardi traditions and connotations, many Jewish parent activists in *HILA* from Sderot, Ashqelon and other Development Towns can be described as “default Zionists”. They did not choose the state of Israel or their marginalised position in this state, but they became Zionists because they had to. Furthermore, they have very little positive to say about Zionism or the state. Particularly parents from Sderot who do not feel they are receiving enough protection from the state in response to the Qassam rockets that land in their backyards and in their children’s schools.\(^{48}\) The effects of living under the threat of Qassam attacks will be further discussed in Chapter 7 when presenting *HILA*. For now it suffices to say that the inhabitants of Sderot, predominantly MENA Jews, express that they feel let down by the state.

As citizens they voice their complaints to the state and its institutions and they do not consider other alternatives outside of these realms. Rather, they try to change and influence the system in order to improve their lives and that of their families. Their point of departure is arrival in Israel as Jewish citizens and the marginalisation they have been subjected to as MENA Jews. As Jewish citizens they fight for their rights that they compare with those of other Jewish citizens. Because they have (in most cases) grown up in Israel and have children and grandchildren in Israel, and they do not have any other place where they belong, they are willing to fight for their lives in Israel.

Another type “default Israeli” is Palestinian citizens. As described above, the dilemma for these involuntary citizens is how to fight for their rights. An example of the complex and contested nature of their Israeli identification was the controversy over the support by three heads of Arab local councils to send their students to the College of Judea and Samaria (*Yehuda ve-Shomron* College) in the occupied Palestinian West Bank. *Ittijah* – Union of Arab Community Based Associations in Israel, demanded a denouncement of a paid advertisement in *Ha’aretz* signed by Khalil Kasem, mayor of al-Tira; Sami Issa, Head of the Kufur Kasem Council; and Fa’ek Odeh, Head of the Jaljuliya Council.\(^ {49}\)

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\(^{48}\) Also Ashkenazi kibbutzim and moshavim in the area are hit by these rockets.

\(^{49}\) In the advertisement (*Ha’aretz*, 02.05.2005) the Palestinians are presented saying that they wish “to congratulate the Academic College of Judea and Samaria in Ariel on its opening this coming academic
3. Self-imposed Exile

The third alternative path of reaction to marginalisation and imposed categorisation is to leave Israel. Ella Shohat (interview) explained how she left Israel in order to be able to write the dissertation she wanted because she believed it would be published in Israel. This lack of opportunity had two connected elements: the ideological and the academic. In terms of the latter, Shohat described how the methodology of what is today called Cultural Studies and post-colonial theories in the United States, and at the time called Third World theories, discourse analysis, black studies, ethnic studies, was not available in Israel in the early 1980s.

With regards to ideology, she explained that her work was unusual in its critique of Zionist discourse and that due to this she would have never been able to write her dissertation about the orientalisation of MENA Jews in Israel, nor gain an academic position in Israel. In the documentary film *Forget Baghdad* (2002) by Samir about (former) Jewish Iraqi communists, Shohat explains how her book *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989) “shook the political elite” because it described racism against Mizrahim and Arabs in the same terms.

Naiem Giladi is another Iraqi Jew who lives in New York. He was active in the Black Panthers and in the radical left in Israel. Giladi argued strongly against Zionism for its effect on the Jews from Arab and Muslim countries and to Palestinians. He explained how his eyes were opened when he was recruited to a governmental position in 1950 for an office that sent Palestinian refugees to Gaza. Shocked by this practise and the discrimination he felt as a Jew of Arab origin, he decided to become a journalist in order to expose what he called these crimes (interview). Giladi was unable to publish his polemical book, *Ben Gurion’s Scandals: How the Haganah & the Mossad Eliminated*. 

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year” and added that “hundreds of students from Arab villages out of thousands…are a sign of the College’s achievements in developing higher education, which decreases social and economic gaps and adds to the ‘closeness/familiarity’ among all different sects of the societies in Israel.” *Ittijah* condemned the acts in the name of the Palestinian nation and emphasised that those who signed the advertisement represent only themselves, and not the Palestinian community in Israel: “We are ashamed of such voices, which may sound Arab but are in fact Israeli and occupational.” See *Ittijah* website: http://www.ittijah.org/newsletter/newsletter01.html

50 Samir is described as the child of Iraqi immigrants in Switzerland. In addition to Shohat, the film includes the four older former Iraqis Shimon Ballas, Professor of Arabic in Tel Aviv; Moshe (Moussa) Houri, a wealthy kiosk-owner and building contractor in Tel Aviv; Samir Naqqash, an author who still writes in Arabic; and Sami Michael, who is one of Israel’s most famous and best-selling authors.
Jews, about Iraqi Jews and crimes committed against them by Zionists in the 1940s and 1950s. He now lives in New York with his wife, both U.S. citizens who by choice no longer hold Israeli citizenship: “I am Iraqi, born in Iraq, my culture is still Iraqi Arabic, my religion Jewish, my citizenship American” (1998).  

In the 1980s Giladi, Shohat and others established the World Organisation for Jews from Islamic Countries (WOJIC) as an organisation with representative status before the UN. It was a response to the Organisation for Jews from Arab Countries (WOJAC) that was established in 1975 with the goal to connect the loss of property and status among Jewish refugees from Arab countries around and after 1948 to the losses of the Palestinians: “Between 1948 and 1951 there were two refugee movements in the Middle East. One was the exodus of about 600,000 Arabs from the Palestinian areas that became Israel. The second was the movement of about 1 million Jews from Arab countries into Israel.” Its aim is to “document the assets Jewish refugees lost as they fled Arab countries following the establishment of the state of Israel” (ibid). The WOJIC oppose these claims mainly based on their understanding that Jews were not forced to leave their Arab or Muslim homelands, or, if they were forced, the coercion came from predominantly Zionist institutions, or deals the Zionists made with Arab governments (Giladi, interview).

WOJIC further held that if the Jews were forced out from their Arab countries, the Palestinian people were not responsible for this, and moreover, even if they had been responsible, they (the Palestinians) still live in refugee camps, now also on land occupied by Israel, whereas the Jews from Arab and Muslim countries are well-integrated in Israel at these Palestinians’ expense (Shohat and Giladi, interviews). According to Shohat (e-mail communication), in the 1980s WOJIC became a member of the NGOs on the Question of Palestine, and the organisation presented its perspective next to Palestinian scholars Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughoud. Shenhav (2003:27) describes the WOJAC as engaging in a fight over collective memory and conducting politicisation of history. He notes that in terms of ethnic identity and Israeli national identity, it is interesting that the state of Israel is not enthusiastic about the WOJAC initiative, because

51 See interview The Link website: http://www.inminds.co.uk/jews-of-iraq.html
52 See WOJAC website: http://wojac.com/
if it did it would acknowledge that these Jews were Arabs prior to immigration (ibid, 29-31). Such an acknowledgement would undermine the ethnic national Jewish identity and expose Zionism’s colonial nature, Shenhav (ibid) argues. WOJIC was disbanded due to lack of resources and energies, but Shohat (email communication) emphasised that the former activists maintain their beliefs and continue to work with related issues individually.

4. For Equality and Against Occupation

The fourth alternative is the struggle for social justice in Israel and against the occupation of Palestinian land and people. This alternative is thus potentially anti-Zionist, in that it fights against a Jewish state and for a state for all its citizens, whether the solution of the conflict is a Palestinian state next to an Israeli state, or a one-state solution. It will be exemplified by organised meetings between MENA Jews and Palestinians from the occupied Palestinian territory, and by individual MENA Jews who have crossed the political and physical border lines alone and been punished for this.

In an article in *The Middle East Research and Information Project* (MERIP) in 1983, Tamari (1983:23) assesses that even though they are not reported, and thus not widely known, since 1975 there has been “steadily growing contacts between a number of Palestinian and Israeli progressive groups and individuals.” To indicate the controversial nature of this solidarity, after the intellectual Committee for Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue was established in 1986 and involving, among others, the Iraqi Jewish scholar Sasson Somekh, the Israeli government passed the “Counter Terrorism Act” that forbade Israelis to have any contact with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) (Giladi, 1990:319). Therefore later meetings were forced to take place out of Israel and the occupied territory.

Among the Israeli groups mentioned by Tamari is the (Israeli) Black Panthers. This movement emerged in the Musrara neighbourhood in Jerusalem at the end of the 1970s with the goals to eliminate the slums; to provide free education and housing for those in need; to eliminate juvenile delinquency institutions; to increase wages for those with large families; and to increase representation of MENA Jews in all institutions (Massad,
The Black Panther movement connected its struggle with the Palestinian struggle for the end of the occupation. In the words of Kochavi Shemesh (ibid):

We were a generation ahead of Israeli society. In 1972 we already met with the PLO leaders and recognized them as the leaders of the Palestinian people. We understood their need for the end of occupation and independence and we agreed that both our and their problems integrate. No equality for Mizrahim while occupation exists. And Palestinian fight will not stop while Mizrahim are used as an anti-Arab lever.

There was a Sephardi-PLO meeting in Budapest in 1986, and fifteen members of the Black Panthers participated at the second Sephardi-PLO meeting in Romania in 1987 (Giladi, 1990:322). The Mizrahi-Palestinian meeting in Toledo in 1989 was the first large-scale official meeting between Palestinians and MENA Jews. The two-day conference was entitled “Jews of the Orient and Palestinians: A Dialogue for Arab-Israeli Peace”, and it was sponsored by the Spanish academic institute Foundation for Peace Studies and International Relations (Giladi, 1990:324-5). Giladi (1990:325) emphasises the significance of the location symbolising the former Judeo-Arabic culture of “the Golden Age” described above. According to Giladi (1990:320), the PLO entered these dialogues with what they understood as:

[...] individual Jews and Israeli democratic forces which support the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination and an independent state and which consider the PLO the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) opened the Toledo talk with this statement (Giladi, 1990:324-5):

While the Ashkenazi Establishment of Israel is refusing to negotiate with the PLO, it is important to deal directly with the Sephardi Jews who represent the masses of the Israeli people. Since the Sephardi Jews are the majority in Israel, matters of peace and war will be dependent on them. They are an organic part of our culture, the Arab Islamic society, part of our history and memory. We ought to renew our memory to use our common cultural dimension in order to overcome the present and plan for the future.

53 Drawing further connections between groups of activists, Michael (Mikado) Warschawski (2005:42-3) writes that the Black Panthers learnt how to organise their social struggle from The Socialist Organization in Israel, Matzpen (“Compass”). Matzpen was founded in 1962 by individuals who had been expelled from the Israeli Communist Party and was committed to “a socialist revolution based on councils elected by the workers, opposed to Zionism and called for recognition of the Palestinian people’s national rights.” It had Jewish and Arab members.
Tikva Levi (interview) participated at the conference and described the Israeli participants as “hard-core Mizrahi activists,” numbering about forty from Israel, in addition to Ella Shohat, Naiem Giladi, the Jewish American “scholar, critic, translator and poet” Ammiel Alcalay,\footnote{For this description of Alcalay see his Queens College City University of New York website: http://qcpages.qc.cuny.edu/eval/faculty/ammielalcalay.html. Alcalay participated in Toledo as a Sephardi-originated Jewish academic-activist. He came to Israel in 1978 where he joined the MENA Jews in organised social protests such as the Ohalim ("Tents") Movement (interview). He described observing similarities in the oppression of Palestinian citizens and MENA Jews. In Israel he met activists like Tikva Levi and Eli Hamo.} and the Jewish Moroccan-Israeli-French film-maker Simone Bitton\footnote{Born in Morocco, Bitton immigrated to Israel as a child and has lived in France since 1976. She has directed about fifteen documentary films for television, about varied topics such as the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (The Language as the Land); the Palestinian citizen of Israel and politician Azmi Bishara (Citizen Bishara); the Moroccan opposition figure Mehdi Ben Barka (Ben Barka: L’équation marocaine), the Egyptian singers Oum Kalthoum, Farid el Atrash, & AbdeWahab; the history of Palestine (Palestine, Story of a Land); Palestinian bombers and their victims (Bombing), and her last film Wall (2004) is about the separation wall Israel has built illegally in occupied Palestinian land.} from abroad. In addition to Abu Mazen, the Palestinian author Mahmoud Darwish, representatives of Palestinian refugees, and representatives from Egypt and Syria participated (Levi, interview). Levi recalled how in their speeches MENA Jewish speakers would address issues regarding “Mizrahi” identity, policy, and foreign policy.\footnote{Not all participants were as left-wing as those presented here. For example, Sephardi American Professor and later founder and President of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Daniel J. Elazar, described many of the Mizrahi participants as “what Americans call ‘bleeding-hearts’ so uncomfortable over the present situation of the Palestinians that they must attribute all fault to the ‘mean old Israeli government’ and its supporters”(http://www.jcpa.org/dje/articles2/zionwonder.htm). Elazar described Shohat and Bitton among the “extremists” and disregarded them as Sephardi “self-hating leftists” (ibid).} According to Giladi (1990:325), many of the MENA Jews held their speeches in their mother-tongue Arabic instead of Hebrew or English.

Levi (interview) further recalled that although Abu Mazen described it as the most successful meeting of all meetings with leftist Israelis in the 1980s, there were two problems: the first is epitomised in this comment by the Israeli social activist and filmmaker Eli Hamo (interview): “We came to talk with the Ashkenazim of the Palestinians.” What he meant was that whereas MENA Jewish participants were activists, the PLO and other participating Palestinians belonged to the Palestinian elite. The second problem was related to the first, namely that Palestinian representatives questioned whether meeting with MENA Jews was worthwhile their time and efforts, taking into consideration that they lacked political power.
As examples of individual MENA Jews who have crossed the imposed boundaries, Mordechai Vanunu and Tali Fahima are described by my interviewees as people who have “gone all the way” or “crossed the border”. Significantly for this study, they are considered to have paid especially severely for their border-crossing to the Palestinians, both physically and politically, due to their MENA background and are today regarded as heroes by the radical left in Israel who describe them as brave and unselfish. Their stories are significant in order to understand and appreciate the reluctance of HaKeshet members and other MENA Jews to be outspoken or active in supporting Palestinians and their causes.

Both are of Moroccan origin and from Likud-voting, poor families in Development Towns. Vanunu was kidnapped abroad and imprisoned by Israeli security forces after he blew the whistle on Israeli nuclear arms production. His activism began at Ben Gurion University where he became involved in Palestinian student groups and began linking the repression of Palestinians to that of MENA Jews (Vanunu, interview). Vanunu served seventeen years in prison, much of it in solitary confinement. He currently lives in occupied East Jerusalem and cannot leave, as he wishes to, because Israel is refusing to give him his passport and keeps him under surveillance (ibid).

Fahima was a legal secretary from a southern Development Town who, prompted by curiosity, contacted Palestinians in the refugee camp of Jenin in the occupied West Bank during the last Intifada. She was inspired by the film *Arna’s Children* about Jewish Israeli Arna who established a theatre group for youth in Jenin. Wanting to help the contemporary youth in Jenin after the Israeli military incursions in April 2002, Fahima attempted to establish an enrichment programme for children. She was arrest in the West Bank and imprisoned from August 2004 to January 2006, held in administrative detention for several months, and then held in isolation. She claims to have been tortured and sexually assaulted under interrogation. The allegations against her concern alleged translations of sensitive Hebrew military papers for Palestinian militants. In the Israeli media Fahima has been generally portrayed as a young inexperienced woman who was

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57 See for example this article by radical activist and AIC initiator Warschawski: “My Personal hero Tali Fahima”, *AIC website*, 04.01.2007, http://www.alternativenews.org/index.php
charmed by the Palestinian leader of the Al Aqsa Brigades, Zachariah Zbeidi, who, according to the newspapers tricked her into committing the alleged crimes.\(^{59}\) Fahima rejects this and continues her activism from inside Israel.

5. Levantine and Mediterranean Culture

A fifth alternative path is cultural and indicates ways to use MENA Jews’ pasts and cultural pluralism. Keeping in mind that in pre-modern times culture was not distinguished by nation or perceived to belong to particular groups (Lie, 2004:86), the alternatives below show how culture can be drawn upon to integrate Israel into the region, unlike how the modern nation-state of Israel has applied culture to manifest its Jewish collective identity as something apart from other groups. In the late 1970s there developed a trend called Levantinism in Israel, led by Egyptian literary figures who promoted creative Levantine culture, combining progressive post-enlightenment European ideas and Egyptian civilisation (Beinin, 1998). This reassertion of collective identity and history among Egyptian Jews was brought about by the atmosphere of the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel (ibid). As part of this trend, Joel Beinin (1998) describes a construction of new social roles for these Jews as intermediaries. Based on these Jews’ dual perspective as Jewish Israelis and Jewish Egyptians, they could draw on their Jewish regional history in attempts to integrate Israel into the Middle East. In the 1980s, several Egyptian Jewish initiatives were instigated both in Israel and in the USA.\(^{60}\) The main purpose was, according to Beinin, to remember and record the history of the Egyptian Jewish community.

Levantinism’s leading figure is the author Jacqueline Kahanoff. She was brought up in Egypt and educated in French institutions. She immigrated to New York in 1940, to Israel in 1950, and wrote mainly in English. According to Beinin (1998), “Kahanoff was a

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\(^{59}\) For more on Tali Fahima see Lin Chalozin-Dovrat, “Who it Tali Fahima? Who are “We”? News From Within, Vo 1. XX, No. 6, September 2004; Rona Kena, “Interview with Tali Fahima,” Kol Ha’Ir, translated to English by www.oznik.com; and the activist website for Tali Fahima: www.freetalifahima.org/

\(^{60}\) For example the ASPCJE in France established in 1979, by leftist non-Zionists who supported national rights for Palestinians and in the US the Historical Society of Jews from Egypt, established in 1995, focusing on documentary film, historical writings and newsletters (Beinin, 1998).
Levantine by cultural and social formation, as were many **Mizrahim**.”  

61 Alcalay (1993:119) describes her sense of the Levant in her own words in *From the East the Sun*:

A prism whose various facets are joined by the sharp edge of difference, but each of which, according to its position in a time-space continuum, reflects or refracts light

Sasson Somekh (2006) described the importance and surprise with Kahanoff’s employment of the term Levantine:

[… ] it was not necessarily a derogatory epithet for the shallow emulation of Western mannerisms. On the contrary: Real Levantinism could be a fertile blend for the emergent Israeli society (and not only for it). True, Israeli society's roots were "European," but the hundreds of thousands of immigrants arriving from the "Levant" (the Arab world, Turkey, Persia and so on) had brought with them the potential for what we would now call "multiculturalism," a disparate society that can be united by its diversity.

However, at the time, Levantinism was fervently rejected by all the parties in the Zionist movement, as it did not conform to their idea of the modern, Hebrew culture they were trying to create (Beinin, 1998).

62 The opportunity to be proud of the past in an uncomplicated way, as displayed by non-Israeli Levantism and *Shas’ Sephardi* New Israeli, is also relevant for the *Sephardim tehorim* (the “Pure Sephardi”). They are descendants of *Sephardi* Jews who lived in Palestine before Zionist immigration. For example, the Israeli author A. B. Yehoshua espouses pride of being a Jew from the Holy Land. Interviewees from *HaKeshet* (interviews) have described these *Sephardi* Jews as regarding themselves as a Jewish upper class.

In addition to Levantism and *Sephardism*, some argue that Mediterraneanism can provide a new view on the complexity of Israeli circumstances (Nocke, 2006). Focusing

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62 The significance of cultural alternatives is to a large degree determined by their political contexts. Many contemporary advocates of Levantinism are of other nationalities that Israeli and their Levantinism is not necessarily related to Zionism or Israeliness (Dahan-Kalev, interview 17.02.2004). They considered themselves Westernised due to their education and as Jews from the Levant in terms of culture (ibid). Thus, a significant difference between these articulators of Levantism and Mizrahi activism is that the Levantinists are not reacting to the experiences of being marginalised as Mizrahim. An example of an American Levantinist is David Shasha. An academic and an activist of Syrian descent he has written about his past and the broader history of Sephardi Jews in various forums, he is the Director of the Center for Sephardic Heritage in Brooklyn.
on music in her analysis of the meanings of geographical space and locality, Alexandra Nocke (2006:145) describes *Yam Tikhoniut* (“Mediterraneanism” in Hebrew) as an “inner-Israeli discourse […] often linked to an open conflict over the meaning of Israeliness, the specific Israeli identity.” She explains that Mediterraneanism is emerging and, as a result, undefined. However, it is unclear from her article whether this Mediterraneanism is a new concept with its own characteristics, or merely a new label for the already-existing “*Mizrahi* music”, also called “Black music” by which this older ethnic categorisation is re-characterised or disguised in order to appear less Arab and Middle Eastern and more Jewish and European. If the latter scenario is the case, Nocke’s (2006:154) claim, that this new label symbolises openness and inter-mixing across ethnic boundaries, is quite incorrect, because to re-label something in order to make it acceptable is, if not the opposite, certainly not an act or expression of openness. One question that emerges is how this concept relates to Jewish culture from the region that is not Levantine. Furthermore, since all of Nocke’s sources focus on only the “inner Israeli” conflict between different groups of Jewish Israelis, it does not appear that Mediterraneanism holds the potential or intention to include Palestinian citizens or to address the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

**Fieldwork and Methodological Considerations**

In this sub-chapter I will present my preparation for and collection of the empirical data from my fieldwork in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory from September 2004 to August 2005. In this qualitative study of *Mizrahiut* through the two case studies, the educational organisation *HILA* and the social movement *HaKeshet*, I have used a multi-faceted approach, combining interviews and observations with additional sources such as TV programmes, newspapers articles, academic and activist conferences, and popular culture such as film and art. Here I give proof of my method of gathering material, argue for my choice and use of sources, discuss opportunities and complications related to my expectations and actual experiences, as well as obstacles due to external situations such as heightened intensity in the violent conflict.
To all my interviewees in this study I introduced myself as a Norwegian PhD student studying Israeli society. This is in line with the ethical guidelines for research in social science, law and humanities (NESH Forsknigsetiske retningslinjer for samfunnsvitenskap, jus og humaniora, 1999, paragraph B.9), that states that the researcher is obliged to inform the informants about the purpose of the project and the consequences of participation.

Almost all my interviews were recorded, and in most cases it has not been necessary for me to keep the identities of my interviewees hidden. First all of, many have spoken to me in a formal or official capacity. Secondly, especially regarding interviewees in HaKeshet, Adalah and Mossawa, they are used to discussing their activism and being quoted or interviewed in the media and other places. As for the HILA parent activists, nobody asked me to keep their identities hidden, and only in a few instances was I asked not to record interviews.

The multi-faceted approach adopted in the present study to research the way Mizrahiut is expressed in contemporary times, it utilises the method of “triangulating”, which involves using observations and other written sources in addition to the primary interviewees (Kaijser and Öhlander, 1999:26). There are three sets of sources: primary, secondary and additional. The primary sources used in this analysis are delimited to interviews and observations conducted by me; collected written material by the movement and the organisation; and written and other material by HaKeshet members and HILA activists, such as artistic productions. Secondary sources are writings about HaKeshet and HILA by other non-involved academics or others. Additional sources are interviews and discussions with academics, intellectuals, activists and others about HaKeshet and HILA specifically, and about MENA Jews generally. Furthermore, TV programmes and newspaper articles related to the case studies and the issues are drawn upon and are considered an important part of this contextualised study.

Qualifications for Research

The single most significant qualification for the conduct of this study is my knowledge of Hebrew. I would not have been able to communicate in English with most of my
interviewees in *HILA* and many in *HaKeshet* in any other language. Moreover, a large part of the written primary material is in Hebrew, though both *HaKeshet* and *HILA* also have documents in English. All interviews and informal conversations are translated by me. In the process of translation, I have concentrated on making the answers and statements of my interviewees understandable, and when interviews were conducted in English I have corrected obvious grammatical mistakes. I have endeavoured to be true to my interviewees, and academic standards, when translating and using their words in my dissertation.

Most interviews were conducted in Hebrew. Exceptions were the interviews conducted in New York with Palestinian activists from *Mossawa*, the Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel (“Equality” in Arabic) and the legal human rights organisation *Adalah* (“Justice” in Arabic); interviews with Palestinian academics in Israel and Palestinians from the occupied West Bank; and interviews with a few *HaKeshet* members. With regards to Palestinian academics and activists, their English is generally very good and, as I do not speak Arabic, it was natural to communicate in English and not in Hebrew (for them the language of their coloniser or occupier).

In addition to necessary language skills, I have extensive experiences of living in Israel. I volunteered at a *kibbutz* after high school in 1994-1995, took Hebrew language courses at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1999 and 2004, and conducted fieldwork for my MPhil thesis on *Shas* in 2000-2001. During this fieldwork I familiarised myself with the universities in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, met some future interviewees, and made connections with central organisations such as the Alternative Information Centre (AIC). The AIC is a joint Palestinian-Israeli organisation that focuses on political advocacy, critical analysis and information sharing about both Palestinian and Israeli society and about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.63

Moreover, as I had to interrupt my fieldwork on *Shas* in autumn 2000 when Intifadat al-Aqsa erupted, I had experienced conducting fieldwork under tense and unstable

63 “AIC promotes responsible co-operation between Palestinians and Israelis based on the values of social and political justice, equality, solidarity, community involvement and respect for the full inalienable national rights of all Palestinian people” (AIC website: alternativenew.org).
political and military circumstances.\textsuperscript{64} The present fieldwork was conducted without any such dramatic interruption but the political situation was constantly changing. The preparations for the “withdrawal” of Israeli settlers from Gaza especially influenced my interviewees in Sderot, who experienced heightened insecurity from Qassam rocket attacks. This will be discussed further in Part III.

In addition to the period during which I worked at a \textit{kibbutz}, I have lived in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Haifa. I believe it would have been very difficult to conduct this fieldwork without the in-depth knowledge I have acquired through years of studying and living in this society. After concluding one year of fieldwork for the present study, I lived in Ramallah on the other side of the separation wall, rendered contrary to international law in the Advisory Opinion of The Hague, The International Court of Justice 09.07.2004,\textsuperscript{65} and military checkpoints, and this experience further contributed to broaden my perspective and provided me with intimate experiences of this conflicted place and its peoples.

\textbf{Choosing the Case Studies}

\textit{HILA} and \textit{HaKeshet} are here considered as two sites where \textit{Mizrahiut} is being played out. \textit{HaKeshet} was an obvious choice for a study of contemporary and secular manifestations of \textit{Mizrahiut}. I discovered that the majority of the MENA Jews who have written about the construction of the imposed collective identification and its consequences on individual, personal and general levels, have been or are members of \textit{HaKeshet}.\textsuperscript{66}

Moreover, \textit{HaKeshet} featured relatively often in the media where the movement and its members were presented as intellectual \textit{Mizrahim} who changed the discourse. However, one of my main concerns regarding the study of \textit{Mizrahiut} through \textit{HaKeshet} was that I

\textsuperscript{64} In 2000 as a result of the new circumstances the general atmosphere was tense and it became increasingly difficult to meet people. The political situation was constantly changing and it was complicated for me to travel due to fear of bomb threats on public transport. Many of my appointments were cancelled because my contacts and interviewees preferred to stay at home.


\textsuperscript{66} During fieldwork in 2000 and 2001 when I conducted research for my MPhil thesis about the party-movement Shas, I was introduced to the writings of and made connections with members of \textit{HaKeshet}. For example, I read Sami Shalom Chetrit’s articles on Shas in the AIC journals and interviewed him about his views on the party-movement.
observed, as members of *HaKeshet* would readily convey, that the movement was not a grass-roots movement. Therefore studying *Mizrahiut* by only focusing on *HaKeshet* would mean merely to study the main producers of the public discourse about *Mizrahiut*, as displayed in the media and academic studies. However, I wanted to include other and “non-intellectual” MENA Jews (for the lack of a better description). Consequently, the choice to study *HILA* and *HaKeshet* simultaneously offered an opportunity to look at the situation as experienced by those who are not producers of the discourse that is supposed to describe their history and circumstances. Moreover, the choice of *HILA* as the second case study is connected with the focus on the relationship between MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens, as *HILA* was one of the first and is still one of the few organisations that works with MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens.

Albeit numerically small, both *HILA* and *HaKeshet* have had, and to an extent still have, significant discursive and political influences. As Lauren Basson (2002) showed in her PhD dissertation, *Defining Americans: Nation, State and the Politics of Racial Mixture, 1885-1905*, an empirical case study does not need to be large in size in order to be significant, and studies of marginal groups offer significant insight into society.

The choice to focus on the Land Struggle is due to two related issues: my contention is that when studying the relationship between MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens, land is the most significant issue in contemporary and historical perspective. Additionally, the Land Struggle is the principal struggle conducted by *HaKeshet* and through which it gained public attention. Largely due to its success in the High Court, the amount of efforts and discussion this issue created inside the movement, and due to the media attention attributed to the Land Struggle, this was the case most of my interviewees referred to when discussing *HaKeshet*. It thus seemed logical to single out this issue from among the issues dealt with in *HaKeshet*’s activism, in addition to its members’ feelings of belonging, and political and social perspectives that constitute a significant part of the analysis of *HaKeshet*.

*HaKeshet* does not work with parents or pupils in local communities, and thus, even though it is engaged in issues in the realm of education, its activism is of a different nature to that of *HILA*. But generally, the perspectives on education presented by
HaKeshet (on it website) in later years are very similar to those of HILA, attacking the educational system for discriminating against MENA Jews and arguing against the privatisation of state education.

The two cases studies are connected and relate to each other in direct and indirect ways, directly through activists who are involved in both HaKeshet and HILA, and indirectly because both deal with issues of marginalisation of MENA Jews. However, as the main research question involves HaKeshet, the larger part of the discussion is devoted to this case. HaKeshet is presented and discussed before HILA because the main puzzle should be investigated first. However, since HILA was established approximately ten years before HaKeshet, and most of the issues it deals with regarding education and MENA Jews to varying degrees are relevant to many of the interviewees in HaKeshet, either personally or in terms of their activism or academic writings, HILA could have been presented first. In other words, the material about MENA Jews in Part II and Part III constitute parts of the same history and relate to the same marginalisation, and these presentations in this perspective feed off each other.

There are several differences between the two case studies, in their historical development, their ideology and methodology. HILA can be described as a one-issue organisation, whereas the social movement HaKeshet focuses on several issues. In addition to land, HaKeshet identifies education, housing, and culture as its main areas of concern. As described in the Introduction, the present study offers a parallel examination of how HILA was able to do what HaKeshet was not: to include Palestinian citizens in its activism and organisation. Both case studies begin by focusing on MENA Jews, and thus, by looking at how HILA was able to open up for MENA Jews’ other “other”, it might become clearer why HaKeshet was not.

Getting Started – Being Acquainted with HaKeshet and HILA

As related above, the choice of HaKeshet and HILA as case studies was based on considerations about how best to research the way Mizrahiut is expressed. I knew of HaKeshet and some of its members from my previous studies on Shas and from the movement’s web site. I was not familiar with HILA when I commenced this research; the
organisation was pointed out to me as a site for Mizrahiut by interviewees in HaKeshet, by others who have researched MENA Jews, such as Ella Shohat, and by employees of the AIC in whose journals, HILA initiator Shlomo Swirski, among others, has published several articles on education, class and ethnicity. These interviewees also described HILA as invaluable for understanding the historical development of the situation of MENA Jews in Israel. Thus, the choice of HILA as my other main case was a result of getting to know the field while in Israel. With the main focus on HaKeshet and HILA, my list of interviewees is a result of both prepared selection and unplanned circumstances.

I did not live in the same community as the interviewees, as an anthropologist would have done. There are several reasons for this. First of all, the interviewees do not live in the same place. HaKeshet members live mainly in and around Tel Aviv, Haifa and Jerusalem, whereas the Jewish parent activists of HILA that I interviewed live in the southern Development Towns Sderot and Ashqelon, and the Palestinian parent activists live in the so-called “Triangle” in the centre of the country. Moreover, this is not intended to be a close study of people’s everyday lives, but of their activism and how this relates to who they are, and what they want and hope to achieve. Furthermore, because I lived in centrally located cities (Tel Aviv and Haifa) I had to travel out to the peripheral Jewish Development Towns and Palestinian towns and villages, and this contributed to my understanding of the socio-geographical circumstances of the interviewees.

The fieldwork was divided into two stages. Part of it took place in New York where I conducted interviews with MENA Jews, academics and activists, and the other and main part consists of interviews and observations in Israel. I met Prof. Yehouda Shenhav in New York, and he became an important facilitator as well as one of my main interviewees. As former Head of Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tel Aviv University, Shenhav was kind enough to arrange an affiliation for me with the department. This affiliation proved significant in three ways: it was invaluable in getting a visa to stay in Israel for a year; it gave me access to the university and its resources, especially the library; and the opportunity to attend Shenhav’s MA course on

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67 The AIC journals MiTzad HaSheni in Hebrew (“From the Other Side”), News from Within in English and Rou‘ya Ukhra in Arabic (“An Alternative Vision”) have regularly published articles about MENA Jews.
“Nationalism and Ethnicity from a Postcolonial Perspective”. Furthermore, Shenhav introduced me to HaKeshet, thus bestowing my presence and research with an important measure of trust.

In the following sections, conditions around my interviews and observations are presented together with discussions of ethical considerations. My fieldwork in both case studies is a mixture of interviews and observations.

**Interviews with and Observations of HaKeshet**

After Shenhav had introduced me at a HaKeshet meeting (19.11.2004), getting in touch with and interviewing HaKeshet members was uncomplicated. Additionally, most members are academics, activists, artists or media workers, and are used to and comfortable with talking about their activism.

An interview is defined by Eva Fägerborg (1999:57) as a way of communication wherein someone is relating a story and answering questions to another person who registers what is being told. I used a “theme guide” to structure my interviews instead of specific questions, because such a guide provides the researcher with an opportunity to follow-up the natural development of the conversations instead of having to stick to an order of precise questions (Fägerborg, 1999:64). I prepared the theme guide prior to the fieldwork, but altered it during course of the fieldwork as I became better acquainted with my interviewees and learnt about the topics that usually came up during interviews. This is a natural part of the development of the continuous interpretation during fieldwork, because reality often looks different from what we expect from our presuppositions. My interviews were thus not very strictly structured on my role, and I tried to keep in mind what Lena Gerholm (1993:42) wrote about the researcher’s part: namely to be an interested listener, but not to control the conversation.

I conducted some interviews in the HaKeshet office in Tel Aviv, others in coffee shops in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem, and some at interviewee’s homes. All interviews with HaKeshet members were recorded. According to Anders Gustavsson (1999:4), one of the

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68 The seminar was conducted in Hebrew at Tel Aviv University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology.
69 See appendix I.
most important elements in order to be able to have a relaxed conversation is that the interviewees feel comfortable, and preferably are in their own environment. All my interviews were conducted at places suggested by or convenient for my interviewees. In many cases I was a guest, whether in offices or in homes, something that presumably contributed to the relaxed atmosphere of the conversations.

My knowledge and use of Hebrew was another significant factor in the sociological context of the interviews. The Jewish interviewees expressed delight and were comforted by the fact that I had made the effort to learn their language. For these interviewees, it was an advantage to speak in their everyday manner, which increased their ability to express themselves. Most of HaKeshet’s members were open in discussing their activism, their personal relations with regards to their activism, and in answering critical questions. Without this open exchange, this research would have been impossible to conduct.

I was also invited to HaKeshet’s weekend seminar in the Arab-Jewish village Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam (“Oasis of Peace” in Hebrew/Arabic)\(^{70}\) in celebration of the ninth anniversary of the movement. During the weekend, the members discussed HaKeshet’s activism, ideas about identity, and the road ahead. It was a unique opportunity for me to learn more about the organisation, interact with the members, and observe their activism. Similarly, I was invited to attend an informal meeting between HaKeshet and Adalah in HaKeshet’s office in Tel Aviv, where the two organisations discussed possible future actions. In addition, I participated in several meetings in the movement, and in public talks organised regularly in its office in Tel Aviv.\(^{71}\)

Furthermore, I visited HaKeshet’s stall at the Alternative festival for NGOs in Israel, where some members spoke about their activism, and there were discussions and artistic performances.\(^ {72}\)

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\(^{70}\) The Oasis of Peace has a conference centre where this weekend took place. The Oasis of Peace describes itself on its website as: “A village, jointly established by Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, that is engaged in educational work for peace, equality and understanding between the two peoples” (website: http://www.nswas.com).

\(^{71}\) Some of these issues and talks will be further described and discussed in Part II.

\(^{72}\) The Alternative Festival is organised by and for NGOs in Israel every year over a weekend. All the NGOs have tent-like stalls where they present their organisation and activism and have discussions. The festival newspaper has a schedule of all talks and other activities, such as social and cultural activities in the evenings. Many activists camp at the festival. This was the first time HaKeshet participated and it boasted the most colourful and largest stall of the entire festival.
Written sources from HaKeshet consist of the Principles of the movement and its presentation of itself from the website; documents directly related to the Land Struggle; one-page newsletters with information about current projects;\textsuperscript{73} and correspondance from the movement in emails. Also, many HaKeshet members gave interviews or published articles in various newspapers and activist publications. Even though individual members do not necessarily speak on behalf of the movement on all topics and in all forums, when introduced as HaKeshet members and expressing concerns or positions on issues relevant to this dissertation, this type of source is considered as a HaKeshet source. For example, an article by HaKeshet member Yossi Yonah in Ha’aretz about why he joined the Geneva Initiative, where he discusses views of his ethnic identity and his own reconciliation of interests in social change and the Ashkenazi peace-camp.\textsuperscript{74} In addition to interviewees from HaKeshet and HILA, both case studies also include interviews and written material by the relevant Palestinian organisations, Mossawa and Adalah.

This dissertation makes use of academic writing by HaKeshet members on MENA Jews in a two-fold manner. Firstly, the choice of topics and approaches in articles and research on MENA Jews are considered part of these individuals’ perspectives and are used in the presentations of interviewees and in discussions of HaKeshet. Secondly, HaKeshet members’ academic writing about MENA Jews is also used at the same level and in the same manner as other academic writings on these topics.

**Interviews with and Observations of HILA**

My participatory observation and interviews of HILA can be divided into three main parts. First, I volunteered for the organisation in the office in Tel Aviv, where I assisted in fundraising and writing reports to funding bodies in English. Second, I participated in courses given to parents in local communities. Third, I participated in the weekend

\textsuperscript{73} In 2004/2005 the movement coordinated the art project “Mizrachi veAraviut” - “Arab Jews and Jews – Identity, Space, Wound, Roots, Meetings, Forgetting, and Remembering.” Consisting of a travelling art exhibition of visual art by Israeli Jews and Arabs co-organised with Mossawa. Another project is Tikun Gvolot (“Reforming the Borders”), a project to change municipal and budget boundaries in Israel. After this fieldwork was concluded HaKeshet began producing a newspaper, the first issues came out in 2006. It is not part of the material on which this study is based.

\textsuperscript{74} “Rainbow Coalition,” Ha’aretz, Yom Kippur supplement, 24.09.2004
seminar (also) in the Oasis of Peace. Because I volunteered with and thus spent approximately one day a week in HILA’s office in Tel Aviv, I had access to HILA documents and its Director and other employees. This provided me with the opportunity to gain an in-depth insight into the running of the organisation and its history, as well as to continuously discuss my observations with the staff.

In terms of ethical considerations and bias regarding this research and the following presentations, the difference between my fieldwork experience of HILA and that of HaKeshet should be addressed. Because I volunteered in HILA, my knowledge of the organisation is of a more intimate nature than that of HaKeshet. However, as is mentioned above, I was invited to and participated in many HaKeshet meetings and arrangements that were for members only, and I have, as far as possible, tried to balance the presentations of the two case studies and the analysis of each. Moreover, when taking into consideration additional background fieldwork, to be further discussed below, in sum my experiences of HILA and HaKeshet balance each other.

My participation at HILA courses in local communities involved weekly attendance at a course in the Jewish Development Town Sderot from seven o’clock to ten o’clock, or later in the evening, from January through May 2005. In addition, I participated in the beginning of a course in the Palestinian village of Kufr Kara; I attended meetings in the Palestinian village of Jaljuliya and in the town of Arara; and I participated in a seminar in the Jewish Development Town, Ashqelon. Additionally, I made day-trips to all these places and in the Palestinian village Jaljuliya and town Arara I was invited and given a tour of the town and its schools and other facilities by parent activists. All experiences will be related in further detail in Part III.

In HILA I interviewed both the Director and the fieldworker several times. I also interviewed members of the HILA Board and General Assembly, other activists and people who volunteer for the organisation, and parent activists. With regards to Jewish interviewees, my Hebrew had the same practical and confidence-building effects as it did in HaKeshet. However, to Palestinian interviewees I had to express my sincere regret that

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75 It is a coincidence that both HILA and HaKeshet held their weekend seminars at the Oasis of Peace in 2005, but in both cases the choice is an indication of perspectives on Jewish-Arab relations. Issues related to this location will be further discussed when examining each case in Parts II and III.
I do not speak Arabic. All Palestinian interviewees in HILA spoke Hebrew, albeit to varying degrees, as will be discussed in Part III.

With regards to ethical responsibilities towards my interviewees, as mentioned above, activists in HaKeshet are to differing degrees used to talking about their activism and perspectives. However, parent activists in HILA are active on a particular issue, related to their children’s education and, in most cases, to their local communities. In order for the organisation to let me take part in their activities, I had to have several conversations with HILA’s Director and fieldworker to establish my credibility and sincerity.

The fact that I volunteered in HILA and was introduced by trusted HILA employees resulted in an interaction whereby I was, in many cases, addressed as part of the HILA staff. In the places where I participated in courses over a period of time, I became an integral part of the courses I attended. This was especially evident in the course in Sderot that I attended weekly, where the Secretary of the Parent Council began to include me when she counted people present, and my participation is recoded in all the reports. It is important to keep in mind that allowing me inside these small groups discussing parenting and problems concerning their children and their local communities could be contentious. Moreover, to both Palestinian and Jewish citizens, being parent activists can involve or results in serious political ramifications, as will become apparent in Part III.

The written sources from HILA are documents from the organisation: mainly publications for use in its activism, or records and other documentation written for the purpose of applying for funding or reporting to funding bodies.

“Participatory Observation”

Observation is part of the classical method of fieldwork in cultural anthropology and includes the study of the interviewees’ behaviour, language, dress code, communication and external reactions to all these issues (Lönnqvist, 1996:134). During observation the researcher can use all of his/her senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and feelings (Kaijser and Öhlander, 1999:77). The idea is to study a cultural expression or group of people, and contemplate what these observations signify and represent. Much of the information
gathered in both case studies has been related to me or observed outside of the interview situation.

It is important to emphasise that “participatory” observation in most cases means “attending” observation. In HaKeshet meetings and HILA courses I was present and took notes and sometimes recorded meetings, after having cleared this with the participants beforehand. However, I did not partake in the discussions or voice my opinion, unless directly prompted by my interviewees. For example, in a seminar in Sderot, a parent turned to me and asked me what the situation was like in Norway regarding the issue discussed. Or, in a HaKeshet meeting I was asked if there are “Mizrahim” in Norway. I am aware that my presence was noticed and might even have made a difference in the sociology of specific meetings or other gatherings. The below-related story serves as an example of a situation where my presence was highlighted. This specific episode furthermore revealed my identity as an outsider in terms of political belonging – I am not a Jewish or Palestinian Israeli – and simultaneously reveals the connections involved in unintended circumstances. My fiancé worked in Adalah when I conducted this fieldwork. Thus, I knew the Adalah staff though my fiancé. The following story conveys how coincidences can happen during fieldwork: I was invited by HaKeshet members to sit in on a meeting with Adalah in HaKeshet’s Tel Aviv office. As I lived in Haifa at the time I was given a ride with the participating Adalah staff, and when we entered Tel Aviv they realised they did not know where HaKeshet’s office was. I did and therefore directed them from the back-seat. The Adalah staff made a point out of the fact that I, the Norwegian student, had to show them, the national minority Palestinian citizens, how to reach the Mizrahim – the Arab Jews. When we arrived, one of HaKeshet’s members exclaimed (wittily): “What – are you with the Palestinians now? I thought it was us you are interested in.”

**Contextualising Observations**

My case studies are supplemented by observations outside of interviews, or observations of situations. For instance, attending Shenhav’s MA course at Tel Aviv University provided me the opportunity to observe the interest among Israeli graduate students in issues related to MENA Jews, as well as how this topic was taught and received.
Moreover, as the cultural field is important for constructing and expressing identity and related political views, this was used actively by many of my interviewees, either directly by producing their own cultural products, or by referring to those produced by others. In other words, in both *HaKeshet* and *HILA*, members and activists have used other forms than academic writing to communicate their political messages and feelings of belonging. Because my interviewees would refer to all fields of their activism in interviews and in other settings, for example by reading their poetry or discussing the general status of artistic productions by MENA Jews, these products constitute an important part of the material from which I developed my understanding of the context and place in society in which my interviewees exist, as well as what they react to.

For example, I consider this fieldwork to include my attendance at an art exhibition in a bomb shelter in Tel Aviv where *HaKeshet* member Shula Keshet exhibited her visual art, and watching former *HaKeshet* member Rami Kimchi’s documentary trilogy about his Egyptian family. This is especially relevant in the case of *HaKeshet* whose members include artists, media workers, and cultural and social organisers. Poetry is another channel for feelings of belonging, as exemplified by *HILA* Director Tikva Levi who wrote poems about being a MENA Jew in Israel when she was younger. Sami Shalom Chetrit still writes poems, as does the younger *HaKeshet* member Mati Shemuelof.76

Additionally, other cultural artifacts not produced by my interviewees, but to which they reacted to in various ways, are also considered part of the fieldwork. For example, many interviewees expressed strong emotional or academic dissatisfaction with the film *Sof HaOlam Smolah* (“At the End of the World Turn Left”), which was released in 2004. After seeing the film, I was able to discuss why they were provoked and I also took the opportunity to discuss this film with other MENA Jews or other Israelis in order to further contextualise my interviewees in a larger framework. Similarly, I attended conferences on related topics not directly connected with *HILA* or *HaKeshet*, where some *HaKeshet* members and *HILA* volunteers also participated. Such as, the conference “On the Future of Other Politics; Meeting Between Academia and Social Organisations” at Sapir College in Sderot (1-2 December 2004) and the AIC-organised conference entitled “Building a

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76 One of his poems is reproduced and translated in Part II.
Future Together: Alternatives to the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse” in Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank (December 2005).

Understanding a Fluctuating Field

The fact that several interviewees are or have been active in both HaKeshet and HILA is an indication of the simultaneous connections and tensions inherent in what can be described as the “field of Mizrahiut”. In addition, there is also a small amount of interaction between HILA and HaKeshet on an organisational level, usually in relation to funding. For example, the directors of HILA and HaKeshet exchanged information regarding a possible source for funding, and HILA would approach academics in HaKeshet to serve as references for applications for funding.

In terms of historical development, it seems natural that some Mizrahi activists involved in HILA subsequently became members in HaKeshet, because HILA was established in 1987 and HaKeshet in 1996. Providing an example of those engaged in both organisations simultaneously, a HaKeshet member was on the General Assembly of HILA in 2004-2005. Neither he, nor the organisations, seemed to consider this as problematic. The choice of where to be involved can depend on the kind of activities one wishes to undertake. Firstly, there is an ideological choice between grass-roots activism and activities that mainly involve participation in discourse. Secondly, as both HILA and HaKeshet rely heavily on volunteers, it is a matter of prioritising where and when to be involved in different types of activism. In other words, it is a question of how much time to spend at what level: the grass-roots education-oriented activism of HILA, or in the more academic-style discourse-oriented HaKeshet.77

It is important to keep in mind that the number of individuals who are or have been involved in both organisations simultaneously are in a minority, and this indicates that most Mizrahi activists make a choice regarding their type of activism. However, from the connections between HILA and HaKeshet activists, it becomes clear that there are no “HILA-persons” or “HaKeshet-persons”. Rather, it is here understood that activism in one

77 Although, to compartmentalise the two in this manner is to ignore the complexity of each, and as will become clear when presenting the cases below, components of HILA’s activism can be described as discursive, and elements of what HaKeshet does can be described as grass-roots.
of them, or in both, is determined by a mixture of familial background, interests and choice related to education, occupation and personal situation. As will become evident when introducing HILA and HaKeshet in Part II and Part III, many HaKeshet members are “recruited” in university circles by members who are university employees or students. HILA also draws activists from university campuses (and it is important to keep mind that the movement was established by university employees) but in later years, in line with the ideology of the organisation, the greater number of its activists are former and current parent activists.

**Ethical considerations and Fieldwork in a Conflict Area**

When conducting interview-based fieldwork in general, and in particular in a conflict area, a researcher must consider the following issues: how to handle “gossip”, how ensure one does not become a mouthpiece for interviewees and case studies, and how to deal with political and moral standpoints that contradict those held by the researcher. This research was conducted in the context of Intifadat al-Aqsa, which erupted in autumn 2000; the violent demonstrations in Israel in October 2000 which left thirteen Palestinian citizens dead; the construction of the Israeli separation wall rendered contrary to international law by The Hague, continuous expansion of settlements and settlement infrastructure in the occupied West Bank; the pull-out of Israeli settlers from Gaza; and the war in Lebanon and Israeli attacks on Gaza in summer 2006.

When conducting fieldwork in organisations it is to be expected that one would be exposed to internal tensions and power relations. An indication of internal frictions in my case studies was information presented to me about certain persons’ attitudes, lack of participation or dominating style or roles. Considering these disclosures part of the fieldwork, I have chosen to take them into account in my larger perspectives of my case studies, because this information is part of interviewees’ perspectives and understandings. However, in the following presentation and analysis, I have chosen not to reveal or discuss this type of information directly, unless it is related to important developments that can shed light on the questions examined.
I have tried to the best of my abilities to avoid becoming a mouthpiece for my interviewees and case studies. This can be a difficult balance. Since the onset of this research, my interviewees have spoken about the correct and the wrong presentations of the history of MENA Jews and Mizrahiut. Several interviewees have told me what to be careful to do and what not to do, or how to best and most correctly or truthfully present this topic. This “meta-communication” about me and my research, and how I would present their stories, participation and contributions is an important foundation when looking for the issues which cause tensions in the field of Mizrahiut. In the following chapters I have tried to be fair in accordance with academic principles when presenting and discussing my interviewees’ positions and contributions. I have, to the best of my efforts and as far as I know, not misused the information I have gathered from interviewees in a relationship based on trust. I have respect for all my interviewees and have tried to convey this by not using their words or information given to me in improper ways, or out of context.

Furthermore, the ethical guide for researchers established that a researcher (NESH, paragraph B.17) has to show respect for the values and attitudes of people, even though these may deviate from those of the researcher or from what is generally accepted. This means that I have had to be prepared to handle with care statements that are controversial and that contradict my own political and moral stands. Albeit at times challenging, I have heeded this advice when conducting fieldwork among the different groups of marginalised citizens in Israel.

The Interviewees and I

A final issue that should be addressed is my interviewees’ relationship to me as a researcher being a Norwegian woman who is not Jewish or Muslim. When I conducted fieldwork interviewing Shas officials in 2000/2001 I always dressed modestly and kept their rules for behaviour regarding men and women. Comparatively, during this fieldwork gender did not restrict me in my relations with my interviewees in any ways.

With regard to my family life I was open about and brought my British-Palestinian fiancé to several events in HILA and HaKeshet. My fiancé’s identity is relevant to
mention because it might have given my interviewees an indication concerning my perspectives on the political situation in Israel-Palestine. Because I do not speak Arabic, bringing my Arabic-speaking fiancé to HILA activities had a positive effect in relation to my Palestinian interviewees. With regards to my Jewish interviewees in HILA, the fact that my fiancée is British and did not grow up in Israel or in the occupied territory, seem to have made him more a foreigner than a Palestinian to them.

Moreover, after I had concluded my fieldwork we moved to Ramallah. I kept in touch with my interviewees in HILA and HaKeshet who, similar to my family at home in Oslo, expressed concern regarding our safety, and would often call when they heard about violent episodes. Typical of the situation in Israel-Palestine, very few of my interviewees had been in the occupied West Bank beyond East Jerusalem, and they expressed curiosity regarding the people and everyday life in Ramallah, and some asked me to send photographs.

In terms of political standpoints, the fact that we lived in Ramallah certainly had an added effect on how I have experienced the conflict in Israel and the occupied territory. I believe conducting empirical study in a conflict area is never detached: neither from the political situation nor from the people the researcher meets and becomes acquainted with and care about. I hope this dissertation reflects my respectful care for all my interviewees, those being discriminated against as Palestinian citizens in a Jewish state, and those being attacked by Qassam rockets in Sderot, as well as all activists working to improve their lives and the lives of others.
PART II:
Identities in Crisis and the Philosophy of Peace

Chapter 3

Painting the Rainbow: HaKeshet HaDemokratit HaMizrahit

HaKeshet was founded in March 1996 by forty men and women. By December its membership had increased to one hundred, and it was officially established with an institutional council, a resolution outlining the Principles of the movement, and a Secretariat of thirteen people, democratically elected. HaKeshet describes itself as a “Mizrahi” organisation based on universal beliefs and goals, and open to all those who identify with its values, as stated in its Principles:

The movement strives to bring about a meaningful change among the Israeli society and implement values of democracy, human rights, social justice, equality and multiculturalism. HaKeshet HaDemokratit HaMizrahit is an apolitical, non-parliamentary social movement whose goal is to affect the current public agenda in the aim of bringing a change into the Israeli society as a whole and to its institutions. The organization is Mizrahi (Jews from Arab and Muslims Lands and the East) in its goals, universal in its beliefs and open to all those who identify with its values.

In the Principles HaKeshet further declares that its main goal is to change the direction of Israeli society, by working to uncover official and unofficial bureaucratic processes responsible for the bad economic situation of the Mizrahim and other populations, and to defeat the economic gap and the cultural oppression of the Mizrahim in Israel. HaKeshet also aims to work to overcome and to uproot, from the source, old stereotypes that guide state educational and cultural organisations. It wants to implement its Siah Hadash (New Discourse) by increasing awareness, consciousness and readiness in citizens, to establish a society built on the values outlined above.

The movement’s offices are located in the centre of Tel Aviv where it shares office space with the feminist organisation Achoti (My Sister). During the time this research was being conducted, HaKeshet had a small paid staff. This included its Director Nurit

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78 Principles, HaKeshet website, accessed 29.09.2003. This text has now changed slightly in the wording but the message remain the same: http://www.ha-keshet.org.il/
Hadad, who has been employed in this position since August 2003, and is the movement’s first paid director (interview). She described her task as “being the architect of all HaKeshet activism and actions” (ibid). She defined the focus and main goals of HaKeshet as embodied in the nature of the organisation. Its role is to uncover and reveal gaps, both social gaps and gaps in state policy, and to discuss names and terms used in society based on the knowledge of its members. Hadad emphasised that Israeli society needs to be more equal and more just, and that HaKeshet cares about the quality of life of all citizens; it cares for their basic rights, whether in economic, cultural, social, or environmental terms. When prompted on the discursive nature of HaKeshet, Hadad (interview) replied:

I see HaKeshet as a movement of aspiration and inspiration for Mizrahim; we ask “What is this place?” We want to say something about the of whole society.

Next to the Director, the movement has a few part-time staff members who undertake secretarial and other organisational responsibilities, or are in charge of specific projects. Besides these paid positions, HaKeshet is a volunteer movement. It has between three and five hundred affiliated members, about one hundred of whom are active. Its funding comes from Israeli and international NGOs, such as the New Israel Fund (NIF), an American Jewish organisation promoting social change in Israel.79

As a volunteer organisation composed of intellectuals and academics, HaKeshet is a movement with many articulate and strong-minded personalities. A group of male academics in their late forties to early sixties stand out as, and are often characterised as, the leading voices of the movement. Yehouda Shenhav, Yossi Yonah, Yossi Dahan and Itzhak Saporta were often described to me as the de facto leaders of HaKeshet by other members, by people outside the movement, and in the media. These members were often interviewed or quoted in the media as being at the “forefront” of HaKeshet, whether they were talking about the movement or about other issues. All of these men have reputable

79 “Founded in 1979, the New Israel Fund advances civil rights and social justice for all Israelis, and believes the only secure Israel is a just Israel. An international partnership of Israelis, Americans, Canadians and Europeans, NIF pioneered the funding of Israel’s social change organisations and advocacy groups, and is widely credited with transforming the social justice and human rights communities in Israel. Since 1979, NIF has granted more than $200 million to 800 national and community-based Israeli organisations” (http://www.nif.org/).
positions in established academic institutions. Several of them have published articles, books or reports on issues directly related to MENA Jews and their situations in Israel. Based on this, it seems natural to assume that they are the leading personalities of the movement, even if they or other members would not agree with this description. They were active in the movement in 2004-5: at meetings they were notable for voicing their opinions with ease, and great articulacy.

Main projects of the movement in 2004/5 were the art project “Mizrahiut veAraviut” (“Arab Jews and Jews – Identity, Space, Wound, Roots, Meetings, Forgetting, and Remembering”), consisting of a travelling art exhibition of visual art by Israeli Jews and Arabs co-organised with Mossawa; Tikun Gvolot (“Reforming the Borders”), a project to change municipal and budget boundaries in Israel; and the pilot project aimed at unemployed women in Jaffa located in the women’s centre Hatzer HaNashim (“The Women’s Courtyard”). I attended several HaKeshet Forum talks where HaKeshet members or others presented issues for discussion: Rafi Shubeli talked about the Yemenite children who disappeared after their parents immigrated to Israel; Sara Fahima, Tali Fahima’s mother, spoke about her daughter’s activism and imprisonment; and Sami Shalom Chetrit spoke about the Mizrahi struggle.

HaKeshet also organised or partook in a variety of activities in addition to its regular members’ meetings. I attended the launch of Aharon Yitzhaki’s book about racism in Israeli society, HaMaseikha (“The Mask”), organised by HaKeshet; a non-public meeting between members of the movement and representatives from Palestinian legal human rights organisation Adalah discussing possible future cooperation; the HaKeshet stall at the Alternative festival for NGOs in Israel organised in the mixed Jewish-Palestinian city Ramle in 2005; and a weekend retreat with the movement to discuss HaKeshet, identity and future actions.

HaKeshet Members

The original HaKeshet members, those who took part in the initial meetings of what became HaKeshet, are described as faculty members, graduate students, actors, artists, educators, and successful business people and media workers in their twenties to fifties
(Dahan-Kalev, 1998:31). In other words, *HaKeshet* members consist of MENA Jewish Israelis who have had higher education, from the second or third generation following immigration to Israel, individuals who either came to Israel as children or were born in Israel to parents whose mother tongue was Arabic or another Middle Eastern language. When this research was conducted in 2004-2005 *HaKeshet* was celebrating its ninth anniversary. By then, the movement was well-established. It had gone through phases of attracting new members, losing some original members, and also seeing the return of members. The interviewees in this study represent all three groupings. There were original members, including individuals who have left the movement, the reasons for which will be discussed below, as well as younger members in their twenties and thirties, who can be described as belonging to the third generation of *Mizrahi* Israelis.

*HaKeshet* is characterised as a movement composed of “intellectuals”, that is of academics, artists and skilled individuals who in their academic or other writing and production deconstruct the *Mizrahi* category. From this point of view they interpret their and other MENA Jews’ experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in Israeli society. Many of *HaKeshet* members’ writings and projects were the results of meetings and discussion in the movement. Below follows a brief outline of the background and production of a few chosen academics from the original members and from the third generation MENA Jews, to serve as examples of the movement’s membership. They are chosen in accordance with these criteria: they are individuals who have written substantially on topics concerning *Mizrahim*, and I have interviewed and had discussions with them (with the first three more than once).

Henriette Dahan-Kalev was born in Morocco and came to Israel as a small child in 1949 with her family. She tackled the *Mizrahi* issue early in her career, in her PhD in Political Science, in which she wrote about the Wadi Salib uprising as an example of social protests from the margin. Her aim was to show how the state of Israel was not democratic, not only with regards to Palestinian citizens, but also as regards to *Mizrahi* citizens (interview). When she tried to publish her dissertation, she was rejected by all the publishing houses, who told her either that the gap between *Mizrahim* and *Ashkenazim* was closed, and thus her dissertation was outdated, or that they did not want to touch this
“hot potato” (interview).\textsuperscript{80} Her dissertation has never been published. Later in her academic study of \textit{Mizrahim}, Dahan-Kalev wrote about representation of women in the deconstructive analyses of this category. In a critical dialogue with Shlomo Swirski, as exemplified by her article “The Gender Blindness of Good Theorists: an Israeli Case Study”, she explains how \textit{Mizrahi} women’s suffering is twofold: from belonging to the \textit{Mizrahi} category, and from being women in a “macho” society. She explains how \textit{Mizrahi} women who complain about marginalisation are either accused of threatening the unity of the larger \textit{Mizrahi} groups or, if the complaint is raised in a feminist context, accused of threatening feminist unity.\textsuperscript{81}

In her article entitled “You’re So Pretty – You Don’t Look Moroccan” (2001), Dahan-Kalev tells her own story of growing up as an immigrant in a transit camp after arrival from Morocco, and about her adolescence in Jerusalem. As a young girl she was often told that she was lucky to be pretty and blond. She recounts how she understood at an early age the way the world was divided into “good” and “bad” determined by origin: \textit{Ashkenazi} was “good” and Middle Eastern “bad”. By virtue of her looks, she could pass as belonging to the “good” category, an ability she now considers to be the cause of her deep sense of alienation. When the family moved from the camp to Jerusalem, Dahan-Kalev introduced herself as French, changed her Arabic-accentuated Hebrew pronunciation, and constructed what seemed to her to be a desirable identity. As will be further explored below, Dahan-Kalev, in the same way as many other \textit{HaKeshet} members, “made herself \textit{Ashkenazi}” in order to belong to the “good”, modern, progressive and clean identity. This was not an easy or quick process, but required long hours of study of European culture, literature, music and history, as well as observations and imitations of food traditions, clothes and behaviour. Dahan-Kalev relates that because she spent all her time on this “study” of \textit{Ashkenazi} identity, she failed her studies at school. This failure was attributed to her Moroccan background by the academics and specialists who studied the “under-developed, primitive and dumb” Oriental Jews

\textsuperscript{80} This is similar to what happened to Shlomo Swirski and his book \textit{The Oriental Majority}, as will be described in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{81} Dahan-Kalev’s analysis of \textit{Mizrahi} women will be further discussed when examining women as one of the issues causing tension in the movement.
(interview). According to these experts, she was retarded and lacked curiosity, a verdict that seems ironic, knowing about her appetite for and ability to absorb Ashkenazi culture.

In this article, Dahan-Kalev deconstructs and criticises the academics and politicians of the 1950s and 60s who in their orientalist analysis decided that all North African and Middle Eastern Jews had a primitive mentality and were in need of change and modernisation. The consequence of the policies of this era was, according to Dahan-Kalev, that her family’s ties with their own culture and traditions were cut off, as was their sense of belonging. The result was a loss of self-respect. Dahan-Kalev maintains that even though these experiences happened fifty to sixty years ago, this is not a closed chapter in Israeli history, recounting something that happened to the first MENA immigrants in the first decades of the state. Rather, she holds that studying these policies and attitudes on the one hand, and the immigrant experiences on the other, is important in order to understand contemporary Israeli society. Due to her experiences, the family’s loss of their sense of belonging, and their marginal socioeconomic position in contemporary Israel, Dahan-Kalev asks rhetorically, “What are the Ashkenazi-fied Mizrahim supposed to do? Return to the past? Romanticise the culture in nostalgia? What culture?” Moreover, she argues, the education system is still built on the same narrative she was taught over thirty years ago. Thus to claim that the situation for Mizrahim has changed is hypocritical. Today, Dahan-Kalev lives and teaches in Beersheba and is a dormant member of HaKeshet, happy to contribute by giving talks and support, but does not want to be more actively involved (interview).

Sami Shalom Chetrit was also born in Morocco, in 1960, and emigrated to Israel as a child. He describes himself as an educator and a poet, and he was an activist in HILA, a Principal in the three Mizrahi-oriented Kedma (“Progress”) schools, and one of the initiators of HaKeshet. Chetrit has written many academic articles and political essays about the oppression and situation of MENA Jews, and about the connections between

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82 The Kedma schools project came out of HILA and was initially intended to be an alternative school network to state schools, with a community focus and with room for alternative narratives. For example, the Kedma School in Tel Aviv, where Chetrit was Principle, commemorated the Nakba of the Palestinians alongside the commemoration of the Holocaust. This was very controversial and many parents and others complained (Chetrit, interview). Shlomo Swirski, Chetrit, Shiko Behar and others from HILA were among the group of people active in the Kedma project. Due to problems with funding and local government, the school in Kiryat Melakhi and Tel Aviv closed down. Today only the school in Jerusalem is still running.
Chetrit observes two simultaneous, conflicting directions taken by MENA Jews in their struggle: one an effort towards adaptation and integration, and the other towards protest, rebellion and alternatives to the existing order. Chetrit (2004) divides the political history of this into four periods: encounters between MENA Jews and the European Zionist movement prior to the state of Israel; protests to the “class-cultural oppression” in the immigrant camps; the “uprising” by the Israeli Black Panthers movement that according to Chetrit lead to the 1977 Likud victory and to a change in the perception of MENA Jews’ protests, as described above, as well as a change in MENA Jews’ own awareness regarding their identity and status in society; this in turn opened up for the emergence of the religious Sephardi Shas and the secular “new Mizrahim”, which constitutes the fourth, contemporary, period.

Emphasising the significance of the Black Panther movement to the development of Israeli politics and for “the Mizrahi struggle”, Chetrit argues that even though it never became a mass movement, the Black Panthers were instrumental in placing the issue of Mizrahi social struggle at the top of the political agenda. Also, they were the first to draw the connection to the Africa-American struggle as evidenced in the choice of name. The Israeli Black Panthers wanted to signal that the ethnically divided Israeli society was “at war with itself” and that in this war they (MENA Jews) were “black” as regards to their position and status in society (Massad, 2006:69).²³ In Chetrit and Hamo’s documentary film The Black Panthers Speak (2003) former Panther Kochavi Shemesh explained:

Saadia [Martziano, one of the leaders] came up with the name “Black Panthers.” The idea was to frighten Golda [Meir]. She said that this name wouldn’t let her sleep.

²³ As Massad (2006:69) notes, the racist slogan “Shwartze Chayis” (“Black Animals”) used by Ashkenazim reveals the relevance of this imagery, as does “Musika Shrora” (“Black music”) used to describe music made by MENA Jews (Nocke, 2006:152).
That’s what we wanted. We succeeded. With this name we changed the entire discourse between the social movements and the establishment.

In the synopsis of the film Chetrit wrote: 84

The Panthers contributed to unmasking the economic and social relations in Israel and revealed it to be a sheer battlefield. Israel before the Black Panthers, refused to admit its policy of inequality among its Jewish population and denied its oppressive treatment of Mizrahim. Yet thirty years later, Israel can no longer deny this economic and cultural oppression which today is becoming increasingly acute.

Once the Panthers had paved the way for an alternative discourse, activist MENA Jews became “Mizrahi activists”. The “new Mizrahim” are described as a “growing wave of young people, academics, teachers, students, organisations and community activists, civil rights activists, worker unions activists, artists, writers, and media workers” (Chetrit, 2002:110). These new Mizrahim are, according to Chetrit, positioned on a parallel track with Shas, with a shared point of departure in their common disappointment with liberal modernism and European Zionism (ibid:108-11). But, whereas Shas draws on and looks to the synagogues and old traditions in order to create its own version of Zionism, the new Mizrahim are attempting to construct an alternative MENA-based Israeli identity that reflects their democratic, social, pluralistic and universal values (Chetrit, 2002:107).

In his writings Chetrit has addressed the marginalisation of Mizrahi pupils in state schools and the further societal marginalisation resulting from this, issues that will be thoroughly discussed in Part III about HILA, and he has criticised the content of Israeli textbooks. According to Chetrit (2004:29), the narrative represented in formal Israeli textbooks neglects the history, culture and traditions of non-European Jews. The Mizrahim are depicted as “…helpless hostages in the hands of Arab forces of darkness…” rescued by the Ashkenazi Zionist movement (Chetrit, 2004:28).

Consequently, the histories of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries are silenced, and rendered unimportant. This severs MENA Jews’ connection with their past and their culture, which gives these Jews a negative self-image, and it creates a superiority complex in Ashkenazim, giving them a culturally condescending attitude (ibid:28). Chetrit therefore argues that it would be more just if the topic called the “History of

84 See the film’s website: shttp://www.israels-black-panthers-speak.com/
Israel" was re-labelled as the “History of Ashkenazi Jewry”. That would reflect what is actually addressed in the narratives of Israeli textbooks, he suggests.

Using the term “Ashkenazi Zionism”, Chetrit (2004:21) explains that this is not an ethnic origin-based definition, because non-Ashkenazi Jews can also adhere to it. Rather it is the only existing Zionism. This is because, as Chetrit sees it, being Ashkenazi, or European, is the essence of Zionism. Therefore, according to Chetrit (ibid), the “Oriental Struggle” is not an ethnic one: it is a struggle for social justice, cultural freedom and the integration of Israel into the Oriental space. For Chetrit this struggle is linked with, or constitutes an integral part of, the Palestinian struggle for freedom from occupation, and for Palestinian citizens of Israel for equal citizenship. Chetrit currently lives in the United States and he left HaKeshet during the Land Struggle, in protest against how that struggle was conducted, and was thus no longer a member when this fieldwork was conducted.

While Chetrit and Dahan-Kalev focus on the representation of Mizrahim in Israel, and Mizrahi reactions to the negative stereotyping and its concomitant socioeconomic marginalisation, Yehouda Shenhav’s writing centres on how Arab Jews were made into Israelis. His book The Arab-Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, Ethnicity (2006) contains a personal story, about how it was disclosed to him that his father had been an intelligence agent recruited because of his Arab (Iraqi) background. Shenhav emphasises the irony whereby Arab Jews such as his father were able to enter and be part of Israeliness precisely through an Arab identity that the construction of the new Israeliness aimed to quash.

Based on his micro-analysis of two case-studies, Shenhav investigates attitudes and the rationale behind the Zionist approach towards Jews in Arab and Muslim countries. As described in the Introduction, Shenhav (2003) examined the practice of sending Zionist agents who used the traditional practice of emissaries from the Holy Land in order to legitimise their presence and hide their real intentions. These were to scrutinise the local Jewish population with the purpose of deciding whether or not to bring them to Palestine and later Israel (Shenhav, 2003:514-16).

Shenhav analyses the in-between position, and arbitrary use of, and perspectives on, Jews from Arab countries, and he concludes that the Zionist leadership needed to make
Jews from Arab and Muslim countries “authentic” (potential) Israelis by emphasising their Jewish religious identity while nullifying their Arabness. In other words, in order for these Jews from Arab countries to be accepted as Israelis, they were considered as “traditional”, a label Shenhav (2004:21) explains resultantly became their “ethnic marker” in Israel. This marker, moreover, served to describe or explain their perceived “backwardness” and “pre-modern” characteristics.

The Ashkenazi portrayal of Mizrahim as “traditional” tells us more about the definers than about the defined, according to Shenhav (2003), who explains that the Jewish national movement is based on an assimilation of religion and ethnicity, as opposed to the secular image its leadership insisted upon. Shenhav concludes that from analysing the way by which Ashkenazi Zionists included Arab Jews into the Israeli nation, one can see that the Jewish democratic state constrains Israeli liberalism in creating Israeli secularism. From Shenhav’s (2004:20) analysis it becomes clear that Arab Jews, who became “Mizrahim” in Israel, were considered simultaneously as Arab “others” and as Jews and proto-Zionists, meaning “one of us”: like inside-outsiders, as will be discussed further.

Shenhav (2004) explains his use of the controversial term “Arab Jews” by referring to older and other uses of this term. It was used by the first generation of Jewish intellectuals from Arab countries. It has also been used by the second generation of Jewish intellectuals from Arab countries, such as Ella Shohat. The term was a discursive category used by the Jewish emissaries in the 1940s and 1950s. Shenhav (2004:18) explains that the term “Arab Jews” is controversial because it is “unthinkable within the Zionist syntax and cannot exist in a contemporary Zionist lexicon.” He further explains that he purposefully uses this term interchangeably with the term Mizrahim, but that he also considers “Arab Jews” to particularly describe Jews in Arab countries prior to their arrival in Israel (2004:24, footnote 4). The idea of Arab Jews in Israel will be further discussed below. Shenhav is still active in HaKeshet and is often portrayed as one of its leaders. He participated in meetings and initiatives at the time when this fieldwork was conducted.
The anthropologist Pnina Motzafi-Haller (1997) conveyed the complexity of being *Mizrahi* and writing about *Mizrahim*. Being someone who belongs to this marginalised non-hegemonic group prompted her interest in studying power-relations and the functions of hegemony. During what she calls her “self-imposed academic exile”, when she studied for her PhD in the USA, she came to the conclusion that who she is in Israel also matters outside of Israel. In other words, her experiences elsewhere were shaped by her background that in turn shaped how she understood and perceived the world and herself in it. For example, Motzafi-Haller recalls how during her fieldwork in Botswana she was considered white in South Africa, while she considered herself to be “black” in Israel. This experience illuminates how categories of identification have different markers, yet similar consequences in terms of inclusion and exclusion.

In her academic work, Motzafi-Haller (1997) surmised that she can consciously choose how to use her own background, and that to her it is logical and fruitful to use her own story as a tool, in what is here understood as a “talking-back” style “resistance-writing” aimed to facilitate for alternative understandings. Since her return to Israel, Motzafi-Haller has produced several articles on *Mizrahim*, gender, feminism and multi-layered identities, published in book collaborations with other *HaKeshet* members such as Yehouda Shenhav and Yossi Yonah. Several of these articles were published as part of projects at the prestigious Van Leer Research Institute in Jerusalem. Motzafi-Haller, who works and lives in Sde Boker south of Beersheba is, like Dahan-Kalev, not active, but has not formally left *HaKeshet*.

**Third Generation Members**

Many of *HaKeshet*’s younger members have been taught by or read the writings of the original members. Several of my interviewees attributed their inspiration to join *HaKeshet* to these writings and to exposure to individuals belonging to what can be described as the second generation of MENA Jews in Israel. Pnina Motsafi-Haller (interview) emphasised the difference between her, as a second generation *Mizrahi* female academic, and the advantages today’s younger generation has, with her generation’s role models to support them: people they can copy or react to.
Yet, belonging to the third generation also creates new complications. A third generation participant at a HaKeshet meeting (20.03.2005) said that while it is now politically correct to talk about Mizrahim, because of HaKeshet and Achoti and all the research, she is still suffering from discrimination as a Mizrahi, and does not experience that it is any easier to be Mizrahi today. Another young Mizrahi activist in the Mizrahi feminist organisation Achoti, Yifhat Hillel (interview), further problematised being third generation. Instead of answering my question about what the identification categorisation “Mizrahim” meant to her, she asked me if I wanted the “academic discourse post-colonial answer” or her personal view based on her life experiences.

These two ways to answer what “Mizrahim” means indicate different points of departure in approaching the topic of the Mizrahi category of identification, and it points to how this field of knowledge and experience is a mixture of academic and intellectual discourse intertwined with, and indeed based on, individual experiences. Thus, the younger generation that is aware of alternative historical narratives and critique of the imposed category of identification, as exposed to them by the second generation of academics and Mizrahi activists, have to come to terms with this deconstructed narrative and simultaneously deal with still being categorised as Mizrahi by society at large. Moreover, members from the younger generation are also constructing their narratives based on their experiences as “Mizrahi” that are different from those of the second generation. For example, a book about third generation Mizrahim with the working title Mapping Third Generation Mizrahi Identity will be published soon. It is edited by HaKeshet members Mati Shemoelof, Nir Baraam and Naftali Shem Tov, and consists of sixteen stories and articles using different literary genres to describe how members of this generation deal with being Mizrahi.85

In the following paragraphs three members of HaKeshet from the younger generation are introduced. As with the four members introduced above, they are chosen because I have met and spoken with them several times. Due to their younger age and emerging careers they have not yet produced academic writings comparable with the older generation. However, whether in their academic studies, in their professional lives, in

85 Forthcoming, to be published by Am Oved.
their activism, or in their creative work, they all focus on issues related to identity and their own experiences growing up as MENA Jews in Israel. Furthermore, as evident below, they all developed a critical view, if not a rejection, of Zionism, both in terms of its historical consequences and its inability to create the type of society they want.

Mati Shemoelof’s latest poetry publication introduces him as a Jew from Arab and Muslim countries in its title: *Poetry Between Hazaz and Shemoelof*. Hazaz is his Iraqi mother’s maiden name and Shemoelof is his Persian father’s surname. Shemoelof’s poems reflect his experiences and thoughts about belonging to the third generation of MENA Jews in Israel. In his poetry, and in frequent writings for daily newspapers and on internet sites, as well as on his own website, Shemoelof is preoccupied with racism, discrimination and the consequences of constructions of Others. He also addresses these issues in his MA thesis, which was finished in spring 2006, where Shemoelof wrote about Spike Lee and black American nationalism. His perspective on the Mizrahi struggle is influenced by this thinking. As such, he considers the Mizrahi struggle intimately linked with that of Palestinians, advocates both an end to occupation and equal citizenship in Israel. Shemoelof advocates a non-Zionist secular democratic state within the Green Line or a one-state solution. He was very active in *HaKeshet* and held a part-time position working on the (then forthcoming) newspaper and the movement’s internet site when this fieldwork was conducted. Below is one of his poems that call for the suppressed and anti-racists to stand up, and to do so with or in an alternative “third way” by which he explained that he means a way in-between the Mizrahi and the Ashkenazi, and also a Third Space as in Homi Bahbah’s postcolonial binary perspective (interview). In sum, to avoid hegemonic notions and discrimination and to find a place where there is room for the Ashkenazi, the Mizrahi, and the Arab, as well as hybrid forms of all of them to coexist:
And It Is Not A Quotation, It Is a Burning Sign On My Neck

The time has come to say the oppression is not finished
The land is not Middle Eastern
The fury compels to write an illiterate poem
Black in the midst of white tunnels
Words torn apart in some prison
Stand united and revolt the language
We stood up
In the ruins of the racist words that surrounded us
In camps that weren’t vowelized or dotted
We are the slaves of Homer and the maids of Bialik
(We) Call Mizrahit against and over, a type of a
Third option of poetry

86 Also available on his website: http://www.notes.co.il/mati/17012.asp
87 Translated jointly by Shemoelof and myself.
Natalie Baruch was a new member of *HaKeshet* when I conducted my fieldwork. She managed *HaKeshet*’s pilot project located in the women’s centre *Hatzer HaNashim* (“The Women’s Courtyard”) in the poor neighbourhood of Jaffa. The centre is shared and run by three organisations working to empower poor women from the neighbourhood in different ways. *HaKeshet* ran a project from October 2004, assisting Jewish and Palestinian Arab women to find and apply for jobs. Baruch organised workshops where they gave lessons on how to write applications and CVs, prepared participants for interviews and gave individual counselling. This project is the only one in which *HaKeshet* works at the grass-roots level. It was a pilot project, and when this fieldwork was conducted *HaKeshet* did not have funding for its continuation.

Baruch (interview) explained that to her it is important to take responsibility as an educated *Mizrahi*, and to address in her *Mizrahi* activism the suppression inflicted by *Mizrahi* men on *Mizrahi* women, and by *Mizrahi* women on Arab women. “There is a lot of racism,” she said. Baruch is a feminist, and tried to embed some feminist attitudes in the women using the centre. Next to the employment focus of the project, she considers it equally important to increase awareness among these women about their situation and about the responsibilities of the state and all its governments for this. As part of the strategy to introduce this critical awareness, she invites people to give talks at the centre, as with the example of Ofir Abu, below.

Ofir Abu comes from a family of activists, but his own involvement began when he became a student at Tel Aviv University, as will be further related below when discussing how he became a member of *HaKeshet*. I heard Abu talk to women about *Mizrahi* and *Ashkenazi* categorisation at *HaKeshet*’s project in the women’s centre in Jaffa. He emphasised the importance of discussing the meanings and developments of these categories and stressed that: “We are framed as *Mizrahim* – which is different from ‘we are *Mizrahi*’.” He explained how the division between *Ashkenazi* and *Mizrahi* was created by the state, and how the construction of the boundary between *Mizrahi* and *Ashkenazi* frames the policy of the state and its expressions, as well as its geographical appearance with *Mizrahim* living in the south and north and *Ashkenazim* in the centre.
Explaining why this boundary was constructed, Abu recapped Zionist history and the demographic need for the Jews from Arab and Muslim countries in these words:

Zionism was a European movement escaping Europe that wanted to rebuild Europe here. This [want to belong to Europe] is evident in the Israeli participation in the Eurovision song contest, in the football leagues etc. They [the Zionists] live in the Middle East, but are not connected to this area.

Bringing his argument back to the women attending the talk, Abu clarified that when they as individuals identify themselves as “Israeli” or “Jewish”, and not as “Moroccan” or “Arab”, it is because they feel the need to not be strangers. His conclusion was: being Mizrahi is merely “to be almost Israeli.”

Abu opens his article “The Ethnic Demon Is Me!” (2002a) with these words: “This week on Tuesday in the evening it became clear to me that I had begun growing horns.” Using Oriental imagery from the story of Aladdin who freed the genie from the magic lamp, “the ethnic demon” in Israel connotes the “ethnic gap” (also referred to as the “ethnic problem”), i.e. the social, economic and political inequality between MENA Jews and Ashkenazim. In his article, Abu (2002a) criticised the dichotomous logic of the “bad East” versus the “good West” behind this symbolism that indicates that the reasons for the gaps are to be found with the MENA Jews. Moreover, he asserts that this logic is as prevalent today as it was in the 1950s. Secondly, Abu criticised the response by the Labour party to Mizrahi critics. When Mizrahi spokespersons protest to the inequality between these groups, Labour politicians typically depict Mizrahi critics as “emotional” and “whining”, contrasted with “rational” Ashkenazim. Thus, by using these orientalist stereotypes, the Ashkenazi leadership is re-invigorating their significance, and “letting the demon out of the bottle”, in other words bring the “ethnic” reasoning back in, in order to shift the attention away from the real socioeconomic issues targeted in the Mizrahi criticisms (ibid).

In another article, Abu (2002b) explains how “Ashkenazi” connotes “Israeli”, the “universal” and “neutral”, while Mizrahi culture is labelled “ethnic”. Building on Chetrit’s analysis of the Zionist erasure of Mizrahi culture in order to enforce assimilation, Abu argues that the dismissal of Mizrahi and Mediterranean culture is a sign
of totalitarian attitudes among the decision-makers. Citing Edward Said and Ella Shohat, Abu (2002b) stated that “Real multiculturalism is not to try to absorb the Other.”

The Political Context of HaKeshet

The contemporary political context to the establishment of HaKeshet was that of the “Oslo days”, when Israel and the PLO had acknowledged each other, thus engendering general optimism. As will be further elaborated when discussing tensions in HaKeshet below, the Oslo Accords provided what many HaKeshet members have described as an opportunity to focus on other issues than the conflict and its resolution. According to Shenhav (interview), the Oslo Accords caused a euphoric sentiment, and paved the way for internal “inter-Jewish” social movements. In addition to creating a general sense of optimism, the Oslo Accords also brought economic support to NGO activities in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. Thus, increased flows of money from foreign governments and organisations and individuals enabled the establishment and running of local organisations and movements, such as HaKeshet.

HaKeshet member and academic Yossi Yonah (interview) recalled how, in the early 1990s, the International Centre for Peace in the Middle East needed to recruit activists of Mizrahi origin in order to represent all ethnic Jewish Israeli groups. Responding to this invitation, he and others put forward the condition that the organisation would also address issues of social justice. However, this turned out to be a big problem because the Centre for Peace was a self-declared single issue organisation. In response to this, when HaKeshet was established, there was an emphasis on connecting the issues of identity and peace, a connection the main peace organisations do not want to see or make, Yonah explained (interview). Thus, according to Yonah (interview), HaKeshet was conceptualised in order to deal explicitly with culture and identity.

The positive atmosphere the Oslo Accords created had sobered by the time this fieldwork was conducted in 2004-5. This was especially observable with the level of violence from the IDF in the occupied territory, particularly in Gaza, next to the continued construction of the separation wall and Jewish settlement expansions on occupied Palestinian land. The “Palestinian question” is one of the contentious issues
among *HaKeshet* members, to be further discussed when examined below, and members’ reactions to the latest developments cover the whole political spectrum, from volunteering to do reserve duty in the military to refusing to serve in the occupied territory. As will be further discussed in Part IV, when the conflict with the Palestinians is peaking and particularly when it is violent, *Mizrahi* activism and attention given to *Mizrahi* issues in mainstream Israeli media and society quickly declines.

The success of the political-religious party movimiento *Shas* was the other major issue at the time *HaKeshet* was established. In the 1990s *Shas* dominated the representation of contemporary MENA Jews with its rapidly increasing members of Knesset from four seats in 1984 elections, to six in 1988 and 1992, ten in the 1996 elections and later seventeen in 1999. In these years, *Shas* put the issues of discrimination against so-called *Mizrahim* on the political agenda with its *Sephardi* religious and community-related perspectives. Although mostly supportive at first, appreciating the sought-after attention and success of a group representing MENA Jews, *HaKeshet* members said they became increasingly dissatisfied with the opinions and solutions presented by *Shas*.

Sami Shalom Chetrit (2002) has written about the relationship between *Shas* and secular *Mizrahi* activism, concluding that *Shas* can offer one thing that no other party can offer to *Mizrahim* in the lower working class, namely an atmosphere of struggle for *Sephardi* honour, which presents individuals with satisfaction in their own culture and traditions. But, the problem with *Shas*, according to Chetrit (1998), is that the party-movement did not succeed in changing the social infrastructure, and in fact perpetuated social stratification by not providing satisfactory and competitive education in its institutions. Thus, while both *Shas* and *HaKeshet* are critical of and present alternatives to European Zionism, as described above, Chetrit (2002:107) contrasts the religious *Sephardi Shas* with the radical and democratic new *Mizrahim* of *HaKeshet*, which attempts “to reconstruct a new *Mizrahi* self-defined identity, democratic, social, pluralistic in its Jewishness and universal in its *Mizrahi*ness, which strives to offer an alternative to the disappointing Eurocentric Zionist identity.”

It would be an exaggeration to claim that *HaKeshet* is (primarily) a reaction to *Shas*. However, *HaKeshet* certainly wanted to represent an alternative secular perspective on
Mizrahi oppression and Israeli society. The need to create a distance from Shas is evident in for example HaKeshet’s weekend meetings that take place in central Tel Aviv on Fridays, morning through afternoon. The time and place of these meetings indicates something about its members and their religious affiliation. Since they do not mind spending the afternoon before Shabbat in HaKeshet meetings, they are most probably secular or non-observant. Moreover, it indicates that HaKeshet members do not expect, or make it possible for, observant Jews to join their meetings. Thus, these meetings signal that HaKeshet is different from Shas, whose activism is organised in and around local synagogues and an observant religious lifestyle. By setting its meetings on a time and day that people associated with Shas would find inappropriate, HaKeshet signals the realm in which it does not belong.

From this, we can assume that its members differ in social character not only from the observant and religious supporters of Shas, but also from the parent activists in HILA who live in Development Towns, in poorer neighbourhoods and Arab villages. Below HaKeshet members discuss why and how they became members in the movement.

**Identifying with HaKeshet**

In this section, the reasons for individual members’ membership in HaKeshet are analysed. There are two main types of reason. The first is given by members who emphasise their personal awareness and realisation of being “Mizrahi” and what this meant to them and others. The second comes from members who came to HaKeshet from previous activism. This breakdown into two types has been deduced from my interviewees’ answers to the first question posed to all interviewees: “What is your affiliation with, your role in, and your history with HaKeshet?” This broad question was asked in order to learn about (1) the connection between individual members’ personal and activist history, and (2) the connection between their stories and their membership in the movement. Responses to this manifold question provide background information concerning HaKeshet’s members, about who they are and show the variety in histories and perspectives among individual members. Their answers illustrate the intertwining

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88 Most observant Jews spend this time preparing for Shabbat.
nature of personal, political, and academic interests of and perspectives held by *HaKeshet* members.

The first type of reason, here labelled Coming Out of the Category, is connected to one’s individual discovery of one’s *Mizrahi* identity. The second type of reason is related to previous social and/or political activism. Coming Out of the Category will be discussed first, followed by the examination of the previous activism-related engagement. It is important to note that these two types of reason are not meant to be exclusive, and many members described their affiliation with *HaKeshet* as a combination of the two. This is natural, and expected, because of the intertwined nature of personal identification, social and political activism, and academic interests, all united in members’ membership.

From responses by my interviewees and their thoughts and ideas about this social movement, a picture emerges of the diverse and different views of what *HaKeshet* is thought to do or to represent. From this, it is possible to understand more about why *HaKeshet* was established, why it was established in the form it was, and how it has developed into the form it has today. This will provide a clear idea of the image and self-representation of the movement, and of internal contradictions among the members’ perspectives and interests. Furthermore, when discussing *HaKeshet* members’ answers to questions regarding the nature of the movement, it is possible to detect reasons for the tensions between the self-presentation of this movement – what its members want it to be – and its actual practices. In terms of perspectives and understanding presented by older and younger members, the older members naturally have a longer historic perspective and thus an opportunity for reconsiderations in hindsight. Older members’ answers tended to seem more reflective, whereas younger members tended to be more concerned with contemporary criticism.

**Coming Out of the Category**

Different members of *HaKeshet* discovered their *Mizrahi* categorisation of identity, or more precisely its meaning for their personal lives, as well as the role of the *Mizrahi* category in Israeli society, in diverse ways. In my interviews with members of the

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89 I owe this phrase to Henriette Dahan-Kalev who in 1998 wrote about the “coming out process” of *HaKeshet* members to be described below.
movement, many interviewees spoke about their experience of “coming out” to face and engage with their own personal experience of being Mizrahi. This process of coming to terms with how they belong to this specific category of identification influenced their lives was then further developed by reactions.

These reactions were two-fold, related to how each member began to understand the ramifications of belonging to an underprivileged and oppressed group, as opposed to accepting that their predicament was due to their individual (in)abilities as explained by the modernist sociologists’ interpretations of their “primitive mentalities”. Consequently, after the awakening of this awareness, they had to come to terms with the past in light of their new consciousness. Many expressed feeling guilty and sad that prior to their awareness they had struggled to hide their Otherness as MENA Jewish Israeli, and as a part of this they had rejected the traditions, culture and language of their parents.

When beginning to understand that they belonged to a marginalised group, these generally successful emerging (coming out) MENA Jews began to perceive their successes in a new way. The interviewees used to perceive and describe their success as a result of hard work in different fields of Israeli society, and especially in the Ashkenazi-dominated academia. By contrast, after they “came out” they described having a realisation that they succeeded despite being Mizrahi. Consequently, they realised how few Mizrahi success stories there were and began asking why.

HaKeshet initiator Henriette Dahan-Kalev (1998) characterises the “coming out process” as a realisation of individual “Ashkenazification” – a process she describes wherein MENA Jews “become Ashkenazi” in order to advance in Israeli society. Dahan-Kalev further characterises this process of taking on an Ashkenazi identity as the “adati trap” (the “ethnic trap”), a trap she herself fell into as a child, as described above. According to her, this process is the response of underdogs in a society where ethnic background is used as an explanatory cause for political, economic and social position for

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90 In interviews, the following sources used the term “coming out”: Yehouda Shenhav, Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Ella Shohat and Meir Gal, all conducted Winter/Spring 2004.
91 Many of HaKeshet members were successful because they were sent to special schools for clever pupils, a practice that will be further discussed in Part III. Others, such as Dahan-Kalev, told of having worked very hard in school, and thus managing to obtain matriculation exams that enabled them to continue their education.
individuals and for groups (ibid). After having discovered why and how MENA Jews had been framed as *Mizrahim* and treated as Others, resulting in their marginalisation compared with *Ashkenazi* Jewish Israelis, *HaKeshet* members “came out” to protest against this intellectual, academic, political and economic marginalisation.

In my first interview with Yehouda Shenhav, he described his “coming out” in these words:

People were shocked when I came out in 1996 with my article “The Bond of Silence.” I received 40 letters in response! My article was not so brilliant, it articulated things *Mizrahi* intellectuals already knew, but it was me, Head of Department of Sociology at Tel Aviv University, who stood up and said this is a racist society, a discriminating society. My *Ashkenazi* friends responded in disbelief: We never discriminated against you!

In his article published in *Ha’aretz Weekend Supplement* (27.12.96), Shenhav asks why the New Historians in Israel “love dealing with the oppression of the Palestinians, while neglecting the case of the disappearance of the Yemenite children?” Shenhav was attacking the Israeli left, encompassing academic scholars, politicians and intellectuals, for denying the *Mizrahiness* of *Mizrahi* Jews, for not relating to the injustices done to *Mizrahim*, or recognising the common denominators between *Mizrahim* and Arabs. Shenhav refers to this “blind spot” in the focus and writings of the New Historians that he, furthermore, understands as the *Ashkenazi* hegemony silencing the “*Mizrahi* problem” in what he describes as “the intergenerational bond of silence between commissars of formative years of Zionism and the contemporary intellectuals of the Israeli left.”

The number of responses this article generated indicates two things. Firstly, that people were surprised that the issues of marginalisation and ethnic identity mattered to someone in Shenhav’s position. Secondly, that the process of coming out and emphasising one’s *Mizrahi* identification, and its predicaments, is a public affair, especially for individuals in positions of status. Responses to Shenhav’s article appeared in articles by other academics, in readers’ letters and in the photographgraphic art piece (below) entitled *Nine Pages of 400*, referring to pages about MENA Jews in Israeli textbooks, by the MENA Jewish artist Meir Gal. In my interview with Shenhav, he dryly pointed out that this article, and not his academic work, is his claim to fame.
The next two sections introduce *HaKeshet* members’ explanations of how their experiences of discrimination and exposure to critical theory served as generators that initiated their individual processes towards awareness.

**Discrimination and Critical Theory Trigger Awareness**

The processes of individual experiences of Coming Out of the Category differ of course from person to person, but this study detected some patterns in the recollections of these processes of awareness and self-realisation. Most interviewees talked about experiences of discrimination, either personally or more generally as a member of a subordinated group. The general experience was often explained to me in terms of the invisibility of MENA Jews in academic institutions or in Israeli history books. Many interviews referred to or showed me Meir Gal’s photograph of *9 out of 400* to explain how Mizrahim were not part of an official Israeli narrative.
In the photograph, Gal holds between his fingers the nine pages that deal with MENA Jews’ history out of the entire four hundred pages of the official history textbook used in Israeli elementary schools. In Gal’s own words (interview):

I just went over the book. One way to oppress the majority is to erase the history. Was that deliberate? One of the reasons why I used that book was that it was published by the Ministry of Education. Should the Ministry of Education be responsible for its action? Or was it some kind of innocent mistake – that Mizrahim got only nine out of 400 pages. And it is the same in all the books. The point of this work was to settle the issue once and for all: In Zionist documents from 1890s upwards, you see that the notion of the Jewish people does not include the Arab

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92 Reprinted with the approval of the artist.
Jews, only European Jews. Arab Jews were considered only as a tiny minority to be used as a work-force.

Chetrit wrote an article entitled “The Ashkenazi Zionist Eraser, Curricula in Israel on the History, Culture and Identity of Mizrahi Jews” (1997), addressing the place and image of Mizrahi Jewish history and culture in the Israeli school curriculum. From his studies of Israeli high school curricula Chetrit found that 59 out of 472 literary writers presented were not of European origin (Jews and non-Jews) and of the 472 there were 250 Ashkenazi modern writers whereas only seven modern were MENA Jews. Furthermore, in the curriculum decided by committees in the Ministry of Education composed largely of Ashkenazi Jews, MENA Jews were depicted as a homogenous mass of primitive people in need of help. Chetrit describes how he himself internalised this image as a pupil, and that this led him and his peers to hate everything that had to do with “Arab” and “East”. Furthermore, as part of the Ashkenazification described above, he tried to “acquire the identity of the superior white race” in order to distance himself from these Eastern Arabs.

Thus, personal experiences of discrimination include not only what people have said or done to individual HaKeshet members, but also internalisation of the general negative stereotype transmitted through their education and in general society. Furthermore, many HaKeshet members described how they, as children, passed on this negative image of MENA Jews to their parents. In her article “You are Moroccan, Why Are You So Pretty?” discussed above, Dahan-Kalev recounted her childhood memories of her attempts to hide the fact that she was Moroccan. She explained in a more academic way in her argument that the Zionist legacy is colonialist, orientalist and racist towards the Arabs it looks down on and marginalises (interview). In her words (interview):

So a kid like me would go to school, coming from Arab origins and studying how bad Arab origin and roots are, and would find him- or herself in a conflict. I think that as an Israeli Arab Jewish person and a woman I am in a dissonance situation, and I have to do one of two things in order to get out of this situation: either to choose the superior part of my legacy, which is what I was taught by Zionism because after all Zionism talks about Jewish rescue and nation state and so on. If I choose this side of the dissonance then I have to reject my Arabness, which to me means that I would reject my family, my parents – my family-life that I was brought up in. If I decide to stay faithful to my Arabness and my family’s Oriental roots that would be to reject Zionism and its legacy, and in Israeli society it has the implication
of making me a subordinated person. Because, if I did not choose the Eurocentric legacy, my chances to become an equal citizen and have equal opportunities for jobs, for promotion, for being represented, for developing my own career – all would be tainted as a result of this choice. Consequently, Mizrahim are in dissonance.

Former HaKeshet member Avi Cohen, a Professor in Chemistry at Bar Ilan University, talked about his experiences of personal discrimination when I asked him why he had joined HaKeshet. He lived abroad between 1990 and 1995 and upon his return he experienced a trauma caused by being faced all over again with the discrimination he had experienced when he was a child. This led him to become an activist fighting for land rights for Mizrahim, and through activism he got to know and be involved with HaKeshet. In an emotional manner Cohen (interview) related that he does not feel Israeli, even though he was born and raised in Israel. He described life in the immigration transit camp as difficult, but not bad. Rather, it was the general treatment of him and the members of his family in Israeli society after they left the camp that Cohen describes as “apartheid”, because of the discrimination he experienced on all levels. Cohen believes that as MENA Jews he and his peers in school had no chance to advance in their studies, nor were they given the opportunity to go to university, and it hurt him to see his parents doing hard and under-paid physical work. In the documentary film Taout bezehoi (“Mistakes in Our Identifications”, Hebrew), by Nurit Kidar, Cohen recalled how he and his brother would help his mother clean the schoolhouse every day after they had finished class. “The alien immigrants and Palestinians (working in Israel) are better off then we were!” Cohen said with sorrow.

These experiences of discrimination and alienation are not a passing phenomenon that happened only to the second generation of Mizrahim in Israel. A young female HaKeshet member belonging to the third generation told me about the low expectations her parents and teachers had for her (Nirit Zarom, interview):

I began to understand that my identity is problematic in a gradual manner and not in one instant. At the moment you start talking and sounding like a Mizrahi, you are considered to have certain problems; being Mizrahi is not considered a societal issue, but as Mizrahi you are perceived as having individual problems. […] The expectations for us (Mizrahi children) were not high; no-one thought I would go to university. My mother comes from the poor HaTikva-neighbourhood and started working when she was 15. I went to secretary school, but I didn’t like it.
Ofir Abu (interview), who also belongs to the third generation, recalled how he encountered “Ashkenazi repression of Mizrahim” for the first time when he began studying at Tel Aviv University. Almost in a paradoxical way, Abu experienced being Mizrahi and belonging to the group of underdogs only when he moved to the big city, “the most cosmopolitan place in Israel” (interview). There, in “the stronghold of the elites” it became clear to him that his place in Israeli society was inferior and that because of this he needed patrons in order to advance:

What I experienced here [at Tel Aviv University] is the same Ashkenazi repression I knew existed, but that I never experienced growing up in Tiberias. I grew up in a Development Town, in a poor neighbourhood – all were Mizrahim, all Moroccans – you didn’t see any Ashkenazim and I never had to deal with being Mizrahi or not. Then here in Tel Aviv it became very important. I have always had a Mizrahi consciousness: I knew there was oppression and that there still is because my family, especially my brothers, were very involved in the Mizrahi struggle. But I never felt it as strong as it was here at the university.

Apart from experiences of discrimination as a cause for “coming out”, another explanation given by HaKeshet members for Coming Out of the Category was exposure to critical thought, such as post-colonial theory, and especially theory critical of orientalism. As illustrated above with the remark by the young activist who asked whether I wanted the academic or the personal answer, the two explanations are two sides of one coin. In general, in addition to the writings by HaKeshet members such as Dahan-Kalev, Chetrit, Shenhav, Motzafi-Haller, introduced above, and others such as Yossi Yonah and Smadar Lavie, post-colonial and critical theory formed part of the discussions, and framed the discourse, in most HaKeshet meetings I attended. This was particularly evident in the discussions and talks given during the weekend at the conference centre in the Arab-Jewish village Oasis of Peace. HaKeshet members are in varying degrees familiar with post-colonial theory and use its tools to analyse and describe their positions in Israeli society, and to understand their category of identification and its ramifications. As such, the discussions during the weekend at the Oasis of Peace focused on questions of representation, i.e. who do we represent and who can and do we want to represent?; on political arenas, which are we a part of and which

93 See bibliography.
94 See Part I about fieldwork for details on Oasis of Peace.
do we have the ability and need to be part of?; on agenda, what is it and who is our audience?; and on identity, what determines our identities and how should we use them?.

To use Ofir Abu (interview) as an example, this is how he explained how critical theory changed his personal perceptions:

I have to say that one of the things that changed all of my perspectives and my world-view was reading Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. It was at university, about four and a half years ago and it changed me completely.

This is how Abu described the intellectual awakening that enabled him to untangle the Arab side of his identity that, according to him, was hidden until he read Edward Said. Not hidden in an absolute or real sense, but concealed by himself. About half of *HaKeshet* members interviewed had a story similar to Abu’s recollection of his childhood and adolescent reactions to his parents’ Arab identity prior to his awakening. When his parents spoke Arabic, Abu would hush them and tell them not to speak Arabic when others were listening: people might hear them and think they are Arabs. And, being and Arab was not good for a Jew in Israel: Arabs were the “primitive enemy” (ibid).

Today, in retrospect, Abu feels ashamed and deeply regrets having yelled at his parents in this manner, showing them that he was ashamed of who they were. Again, this is the nature of the Ashkenazi repression, hinted at by Dahan-Kalev above, wherein Mizrahim, in addition to the experience of being discriminated against, repressed their own parents and thus in a reflective manner also repressed themselves. Again, in the words of Abu (interview):

It is so complicated and bitter, not only the Ashkenazi oppression, but mine [of them] as their child. And then one day you have to deal with the fact that you oppressed your parents and yourself. You are not Moroccan or Mizrahi – you are Israeli!

Before I read Said, I was not comfortable with the fact that my parents are from the Arab and Eastern world. Today I am, while they are not…

Mati Shemoelof also recalls the process of realisation of his Mizrahi identity developing from denial to awareness through critical reading. Shemoelof (interview) first learned about his category of identification through the writings of Mizrahi activist, *HaKeshet* initiator and former member, Sami Shalom Chetrit, and from writing on the
Mizrahi Israeli website Kedma, edited by Chetrit.\(^9\) When he was a young student, Shemoelof was writing a play as part of his undergraduate studies in literature and theatre, and his friends commented on how stereotypical his Israeli characters were. Reacting to these comments, Shemoelof began to deliberate about his own Israeli identity. At first he came to the conclusion that “Me – I am nothing special, my mother is Iraqi and my father is from Iran – so what?” Then he began reading Chetrit’s and other people’s writings and he became, in his own words, “enraged!” when he found out about the institutionalised discrimination against MENA Jews in Israel.

At the time Shemoelof was considering continuing studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy, and he was contemplating how he could incorporate his newly discovered Mizrahi perspective into his studies. To him, this perspective was not something he would ever be able to put aside or put in a box entitled “private” or “activism”. Rather, after his awakening, Shemoelof expressed seeing the world through new lenses that changed everything, including his academic interests and perspectives. In this stage of his new awareness Shemoelof went to the renowned Israeli sociologist Sami Smooha and asked him for advice on a thesis topic where he could include a Mizrahi perspective. His reply to Shemoelof’s query was: “Mizrahi is not a category anymore; sociologically it has disappeared.” Being disappointed by this reply, Shemoelof subsequently turned to HaKeshet, where he found his “Mizrahi home”. The notion of HaKeshet as a home will be discussed further below in connection with Mizrahiut.

Something that recurs in HaKeshet members’ stories of how they came to realise what the Mizrahi categorisation meant for them, is time spent away from their home town or city, or Israel altogether. Most of the members who have been abroad, or in other ways left their immediate environment for a while, mostly in order to study, returned with new and critical perspectives. For example, Ofir Abu and Shlomo Varzana, who will be further introduced below, both left their poor neighbourhoods to study at Tel Aviv University. They related how they acquired tools for understanding what they had observed and experienced when growing up. Another example is Pnina Motzafi-Haller...
(1997), who says that she purposefully went to study in the USA in order to acquire intellectual tools and analytical perspectives, before she embarked on studying her own society.

They all confirmed the importance of distance in order to be able to see one’s own environment from new and critical angles. Itzhik Saporta (interview) stated that he was more influenced by studying for his PhD at Berkeley in the USA than by growing up in Israel. After returning he felt he had to do something about social injustice in Israel. Sami Shalom Chetrit (interview) said this about his experience of studying at Colombia University:

> Being away for three to four years gave me perspective and the ability to observe [Israel] from afar. Moreover, in New York I was able to have relations with Palestinians in a free manner. After I returned from New York I refused to serve in the [military] reserve duties in the occupied territories.

Smadar Lavie (interview) had her experience of coming to awareness of her position in Israeli society as a MENA Jew when she was eighteen and was rejected a position in the military radio station for her national service. The largest disappointment was that the officer was not interested in her long CV of journalistic experience, but made an indecent pass at her flattering her “dark skin”. When Lavie studied for her PhD in Berkeley she expressed being able to “spread my wings and fly high.” Like Chetrit, Lavie met Palestinians in the US, and she was part of organising what she claims was the first jointly taught course about *Mizrahim* and Palestinians and their possible similarities, at Berkeley in 1982. According to Lavie (interview), no-one in Israel at that time would have dreamt about organising or teaching any such topic, and no-one dealt with the *Mizrahi*-Palestinian shared experience from an activist or scholarly perspective, aside from the Black Panthers.

Micha Rachman is one of the few Ashkenazi members of *HaKeshet*. He emphasised the importance of having been abroad for his social development (interview). Even though he was already an experienced activist having worked with disadvantaged youth in Jerusalem, he spoke of his seven years in the USA and in Southern America, where he lived and worked with homeless people and in poor agricultural villages, as especially formative for his world-view and perspectives. In the United States he encountered issues
of political correctness and race, and felt what it means to be white in that context. This further emphasised for him how different the world he grew up in, as an Ashkenazi in a veteran kibbutz, fed on the myths of Jewish Israeli pioneering, was from that of most MENA Jews.

In addition to his experiences overseas, Rachman (interview) attributed what he described as a change in his personality and in his political and social perspectives, to his meetings with troubled teenagers in Jerusalem, the majority of whom were MENA Jews. The next section will look further into social and peace activism as background before joining HaKeshet.

Nabih Bashir (interview), an ex-member of HaKeshet and its only Palestinian member who left in protest of the Land Struggle, described his involvement in the movement as being based on his discomfort with the divide between Palestinians and MENA Jews. He explains that he saw both sides as dominated by the western Ashkenazi culture and he was looking for a space where he could confront and express these ideas. He tried the communist organisation, but it was “not his place” because they did not deal with culture. Then, at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem he met “the Mizrahim”, both students and teachers. He was curious about who these MENA Jews were and wanted to understand them as human being, to learn about their family backgrounds and culture. He expressed finding out that what he found were victims (Bashir, interview):

> Victims of Arab states and of the Ashkenazi Zionist project. I am also a victim, but at least I am conscious of my culture, of my identity, and I fight. It is difficult, but I now who I am. The Mizrahim do not have awareness of their culture and identity. Mizrahim live a complicated and problematic situation – a conflicted identity.

**From Other Activism to HaKeshet**

In addition to the Coming Out of the Category explanation for joining HaKeshet, other interviewees mentioned former social and political activism as the main impetus leading them to HaKeshet. Philosopher and lawyer Yossi Dahan (interview) characterised HaKeshet as an umbrella organisation of former activists. The types of activism these interviewees were involved in prior to their participation in HaKeshet can be divided into

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96 See Introduction.
Mizrahi, social and peace related activism. Those with Mizrahi activist backgrounds will be examined first.

Long-time activist and former (Israeli) Black Panther Reuven Aberjil (interview) described his membership in HaKeshet as a link in the chain of his continuous Mizrahi activism:

There is no difference in the activism of the Black Panthers and HaKeshet, the difference is only in birth and in design: the Black Panthers were more aggressive and militant, but the expression and the slogans are the same. The Black Panthers fought to take part in the Zionist narrative – be part of the hegemony, to be complete partners and to hold the knife that cuts the cake, not just to get a piece.

Aberjil went on to explain that to him the difference between the Black Panthers and HaKeshet is that the latter is a professional expression of MENA Jewishness, using the language of the hegemony, something the Black Panthers were not able to do due to lack of education and resources. He uses himself as an example. He only studied until second grade in elementary school, whereas HaKeshet is to a large extent made up of academic researchers. He emphasised that researcher HaKeshet members have access to archives and documents enabling them to study state institutions and policies, and to base their social arguments on facts, something the Black Panthers were unable to do:

In the Black Panthers we accumulated knowledge through experience, that of our own and of our parents, whereas the members of HaKeshet are intellectuals.

Film producer Shlomo Varzana is another HaKeshet member who has a long history as a Mizrahi activist. He grew up in the poor Mizrahi neighbourhood Katamonim in Jerusalem, where crime was part of everyday life in the 1970s. As a teenager he joined the alternative radical theatre group Ohel Yosef (Yosef’s Tent), organised by leftist social activists. Through theatre, disadvantaged children from this neighbourhood were able to express their life situations, and through touring Israel they educated others, in most cases more affluent Israelis, about the circumstances in which they grew up. Similar to Aberjil, Varzana (interview) in retrospect attributes his early activism in the 1980s to intuition and not to knowledge. It was only when he went to study film at Tel Aviv University that he was able to understand how he had been made a Mizrahi, and to articulate his discovery of what this meant. He described his predicament in these words:
I am a victim of a colonial state policy in which I was at the periphery politically, economically and socially. When I was young I wanted to be, or believe I was, in the centre of things.

Varzana (interview) explained how after his studies he knew what he had previously only felt: that the formal image of the homogenous Israeli society was not genuine. This knowledge further compelled him to do something about the peripheral positioning of himself and MENA Jews in general (Varzana, interview):

When individuals are represented as ugly, they see themselves as ugly. People ask: ‘How can they live in such ugly houses and dirty surroundings?’ But neither I nor anybody else in the public housing in the Katamonim neighbourhood, or in any other area built for Mizrahim, chose the sad-looking and grey housing we lived in where the government did not pick up our garbage or plant trees by our roads. The state built our housing this way – we did not choose it!

When Varzana returned home to Katamonim after his studies in Tel Aviv, he saw that nothing had changed. The combination of his socialisation through continued participation in organised social protests, such as the theatre group, and the new perspectives gained from his studies, then led him to initiate what became the Public Housing Struggle. The goal of this struggle was to ensure that MENA Jews would be granted the right to buy the public housing apartments they had rented for generations, and do so at an affordable price. The idea was to give working class urban Mizrahim the opportunity to own real estate. This struggle was the forerunner to the Land Struggle, as will be presented in the Chapter about the Land Struggle below.

HaKeshet member and dentist Rafi Shubeli linked his activism to his Yemenite origin. For him, the history of the Yemenite Jews and Zionism, and in particular the controversial and sad story about the disappearance of hundreds of Yemenite children from immigration camps in the 1950s and 1960s, is of central importance. The parents of these disappeared children alleged that their children had been taken from them by

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97 This section is based on a lecture by Shubeli and a documentary film, both from a HaKeshet meeting (19.05.05), and on Ha’aretz articles: “Panel on Yemenite children rejects conspiracy theory” (05/11/01), “The families don’t want to believe the report” (05/11/01), “Yogev group slams inquiry’s findings” (05/11/01), “Only one family linked to Yemenite remains; other bones turned to dust” (13/07/99), “Who is it? Leah Sharabi? Perhaps” (13/07/99), “Meshulam returns home ‘broken man’” (08/07/99), “Dead, but far from buried” (16/12/97), “How can there be two answers?” (13/10/97), “Stones left unturned” (05/09/97), “A mystery that defies solution” (05/11/01), “Fifty years of disbelief” (05/11/01).
Israeli and Jewish organisations that never told them what happened to their children, nor provided them with death certificates. Some parents further claimed they were told that their children had died, but were never shown their bodies and were therefore not able to bury their children. Most parents believe that the children were adopted by Ashkenazi couples in Israel and that some children were sent to the United States. Three Judicial Commissions of Inquiry were established to investigate the accusations of kidnapping. The first in 1967-68 concluded that no children were kidnapped. A second in 1988-1994 ruled that no evidence of “criminal action” was found, but it was not able to establish what had happened to 65 missing children. Finally a third commission established in 1995 concluded in 2001 that there had been no kidnappings and that most of the children who had disappeared had died. The parents and families and the Yemenite community are not satisfied with this answer.

Shubeli (interview) explained that he became an activist due to the disappointment he experienced when no-one was traced, or held responsible for these disappearances. In his view, the media, the police and the immigration authorities cooperated in order to keep this crime from public attention. In his early activism, Shubeli conducted investigations concerning the disappeared children and what he calls other crimes against Yemeni Jews. Among other things, he was instrumental in pressuring for the opening of some graves said to belong to these children. According to him, in ten graves they did not find any skulls or DNA that could be used to trace the identities of the bones (Nelsen, 2006:92). Later Shubeli (interview) developed his investigative activism into what he describes as an informative-type activism, aimed spreading his accumulated knowledge about discrimination and crimes committed by the state of Israel.

Shubeli (interview) described his development as an activist via “the cultural route”. He began searching for a Yemenite identity that he could not find or recognise in his Israeli education, in the media, or in any other aspects of Israeli society (interview). He explained how he extended his perspective, from his initial interest in his own cultural heritage, to reading critical writings about Israeli society. For Shubeli (interview) the modern history of the Jewish people is not that of “one people”. Rather it is controlled by European Jews who colonised and committed crimes towards, among others, the Jews
from Yemen. Furthermore, Shubeli emphasised that he was not talking about crimes committed in the past, but of the continued concealing of documents and changing of history by Israeli state institutions up to today.

Philosopher Yossi Dahan (interview) explained his activism in *HaKeshet* as following on from activism related to social justice and leftist multiculturalism. Dahan was often used as an example of a respected and well-know activist by other interviewees. Together with Shlomo Swirski and Uri Ram, Dahan was one of the founders of the non-partisan, action-oriented Adva policy analysis centre. Adva was founded in 1991 by activists from three social movements: the movement for equality for *Mizrahi* Jews, the feminist movement, and the movement for equal rights for Arab citizens.\(^98\) Dahan also runs the internet discussion forum *HaOketz* (the Sting) together with *HaKeshet* member and sociologist Itzhik Saporta. Based on his world-view and previous experiences, Dahan agreed to become a member of the movement when *HaKeshet* approached him. In an interview in the Jerusalem Post in 2000, Dahan emphasised that his social and political views are not results of any personal experience of being Moroccan.\(^99\) Rather, he emphasised the importance of living and studying abroad. Dahan (ibid) insists his views were formed while studying at Columbia University in New York, where he was exposed to what he calls “[…] critical, radical ways of thinking about culture and society.” This new thinking included a critical view of the notion that Western culture was better than culture from Eastern countries.

In addition to the *Mizrahi* and social related activism exemplified by Aberjil, Varzana, Shubeli and Dahan, the other major type of activism my interviewees have been involved in prior to their engagement in *HaKeshet* is related to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. For example, Dodi Mahleb, who died recently, taught philosophy at Alma Liberal Arts College, and could point to a long history of activism from the radical Jewish-Arab student group *Kampus* at Hebrew University, together with activists such as current Palestinian Knesset Member Azmi Bishara, to *Ha-mizrah el shalom* (“East for

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\(^98\) From the Adva website: [http://www.adva.org/](http://www.adva.org/)

\(^99\) “A New Left”, *Jerusalem Post*, September 6, 2000, by Larry Derfner.
Peace”),\textsuperscript{100} the *Kedma* school project,\textsuperscript{101} and finally *HaKeshet*. Mahleb described himself as “the leftist radical of *HaKeshet*” and stressed that for him *HaKeshet* had meaning beyond the Mizrahi story (interview):

I did not come to *HaKeshet* only for Mizrahi equality, and for me the solution of the conflict is no less important. My point of view of the conflict does not only concern borders, but it is also cultural. It is criticism of the Eurocentric Zionist ideology.

Neta Amar, a former member of *HaKeshet* and a human rights lawyer and a feminist, has a long history of activism, combining the issues of conflict resolution in Israel-Palestine and the marginalisation of MENA Jews. She recalled how her activism commenced in 1994 with *Bat Shalom* (Woman of Peace), a women’s organisation in which Palestinian and Mizrahi women worked together for peace (interview). Bat Shalom describes itself as “an Israeli national feminist grassroots organisation of Jewish and Palestinian Israeli women working together for a genuine peace grounded in a just resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict, respect for human rights, and an equal voice for Jewish and Arab women within Israeli society.”\textsuperscript{102}

As was mentioned before, Henriette Dahan-Kalev has been involved in a number of organisations and movements related to both Mizrahi activism and the resolution of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. The list of organisations with which she has worked includes AIC and Bat Shalom, and she is currently the Chair of the Board of *B’Tselem*, The Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. On the Mizrahi issue, she was active in *HILIA* and the *Kedma* school project prior to her engagement in *HaKeshet*, and later active in its feminist counterpart organisation Achoti. Dahan-Kalev (interview) explained that she enters and leaves activist groups based on the energy she perceives in the individual groups: “I need to move on when the revolutionary spirit is lost and this usually happens when power and money get in the way.”

When asked about the meeting points between her conflict-related activism and her Mizrahi-related activism, Dahan-Kalev (interview) identified two concurrent problems in

\textsuperscript{100} This group was established in 1983 by MENA intellectuals and it campaigned for socioeconomic equality in Israel, for acknowledgement of Israel’s Middle Eastern context, and for compromise with Israel’s Arab neighbours in order to achieve peace.

\textsuperscript{101} For details about *Kedma* schools see footnote above.

\textsuperscript{102} From the Bat Shalom website: http://www.batshalom.org/
connecting the two issues. The first is related to attitudes in the pro-Palestinian NGOs. She is chiefly referring to organisations such as Peace Now, Gush Shalom and others that HaKeshet has criticised for not including a class perspective or recognition of the suppression of MENA Jews. This criticism was also true of the AIC before it made efforts to integrate issues pertaining to MENA Jews as well as having MENA Jews in the organisation.\(^\text{103}\) Michael Warschawski (interview), initiator and a long-time activist in AIC, and Sergio Yahni (interview), former director of AIC and present Editor of News from Within, described how in the early to mid-1990s the AIC debated how to deal with ethnicity and the “minority within”. It subsequently decided to focus more on MENA Jews in its journals, as evidenced in the journals’ thematic table of contents where “Mizrahim” is a recurring topic, and also actively sought to recruit MENA Jewish activists and employees to reflect this perspective in the organisational make-up of the AIC.\(^\text{104}\) The AIC’s journals subsequently became important arenas for issues related to MENA Jews and is part of bursting what Kimmerling labelled the “Jewish bubble” by publishing about these issues in English and Arabic and also by publishing them next to issues related to the occupation and the situation of Palestinians in Israel.

According to Dahan-Kalev (interview), peace-oriented organisations naturally focus on the urgency of the situation of the Palestinians, and this tends to silence issues related to MENA Jews. This was one of the issues that propelled the establishment of HaKeshet, as Yonah described above, and as discussed by for example Shenhav, in his article “Bond of Silence” mentioned previously, and by Yossi Dahan (interview), who emphasised that the radical left in Israel either relates to Palestinian problems or to class issues in Israeli society, but does not connect between them.

\(^{103}\) In addition to Dahan-Kalev, other academics and activists have been involved in the organisation: Ella Shohat is on the AIC Board, Shiko Behar was the Director of AIC in 2005, and Avital Moses worked for HILA and now works for the AIC.

\(^{104}\) As the Bibliography of this dissertation testifies many HaKeshet present and previous members and others have published in these journals. In 1997 half of an issue of News from Within was devoted to Mizrahim and Zionism, with articles by Ella Shohat and former HaKeshet members Sami Shalom Chetrit, Zvi Ben-Dor and Shiko Behar. These articles were later translated into Arabic and printed in a separate publication. In 2004 a whole issue of MiTzad Sheni was dedicate to the HaMa’avak HaMizrahi (“The Mizrahi Struggle”), co-edited by the Director of HILA Tikva Levi and writer and activist Iris Mizrahi, featuring articles by among others HaKeshet member Ofir Abu and Ami Steinitz who is also active in HILA.
Sigal Haroush, the spokesperson for *HaKeshet* when this fieldwork was conducted, is a third generation Israeli and describes herself as an Arab Jew. She also links the predicament of the Palestinians and of the MENA Jews with the politics of “the Israeli establishment”. Like Aberjil, Haroush includes what is known as the Israeli mainstream left, such as Peace Now, in this “establishment” (Dissident, 15.09.2004). She described the left as made up of “liberals who only pressure the structure as it is now” (ibid). She further describes this structure as a “culture of power [...] built into the mainstream body politic of Israeli DNA”, and a remnant of the colonial attitude that divided between “high culture” and “low culture”, “enlightened culture” and “dark culture” (ibid).

Advocating a left that uses democratic means to change the existing structure of hegemony and power relationships, she argues that the left needs to be “more rooted in their communities” and emphasises that as such the left has a responsibility to communicate with marginalised groups in “more popular forms” (ibid).

Dahan-Kalev (interview) further explained how a joint Arab-Jewish (*Mizrahi*) perspective would disclose the hypocrisy of Zionism and of the founding fathers, and thus de-legitimise their use of terms such as “equality” and “universalism”. Therefore, if an academic acknowledged the connection between the unequal treatment of *Mizrahim* and the colonial treatment of Palestinians, he or she would be marginalised and have problems publishing works, or finding a position in academic institutions, according to Dahan-Kalev. Marginalisation of academics who publicly take radical stands was described by many different interviewees.

Several members provided examples from within the group of *Mizrahi* academics who, despite PhD degrees from domestic or international universities, were not able to get positions in Israel, or who had to take positions that were below their level or in different fields than their specialisation. Pnina Motzafi-Haller (interview) told me that being engaged in *HaKeshet* has a price: “It damages your opportunities to have an academic career.” Smadar Lavie (interview) pointed out that one of the reasons why most of what she called the “*Mizrahi* rebels” to her knowledge are in their mid-forties and older, is because “they are only able to textualise for themselves the intra-Jewish racism when they are middle-aged. This happens when opportunities for the professional middle
class promotion to the upper echelons of their vocation become blocked due to lack of historical embeddedness in the Ashkenazi-Zionist professional networks. This is when the brave might start exploring the Zionist NGOs of Mizrahi protest like HaKeshet.” Lavie, an outspoken critic of Zionism, considers HaKeshet a Zionist movement. This anticipates discussion of HaKeshet’s relationship with the “Palestinian question”. As will be seen in the following section, this is one of the major causes for tensions in the movement.

**Tensions in the Rainbow Movement**

As mentioned above, HaKeshet celebrated its ninth anniversary in 2005 and since it was established it has gone through phases of attracting new members, losing some original members, and also seeing the return of previous members. From one of the earliest meetings Henriette Dahan-Kalev (1998:32) identified “women, Jewishness and the ‘Palestinian question’” as the three controversial issues HaKeshet members were not able to agree a position on, and these were thus deferred before they could be included in the platform of the movement. It seems that these issues had still not been decided upon when this fieldwork was conducted in 2004-2005. In addition to these three issues, whether or not HaKeshet should become a political party has been described by interviewees as an issue causing many discussions. Another contentious issue is what has been described as tensions between Moroccan and Iraqi Mizrahim. This is sometimes connected to stories of tensions between members with an activist background and those with more academic backgrounds. In other words, I have often heard critical comments from people with activist backgrounds regarding the perspectives and the leading positions of those with academic backgrounds.

It is important to highlight that these contentious issues are interconnected in direct or indirect ways, as will be clear in the following discussions with HaKeshet members who relate the “Palestinian Question” to their Jewishness, which influences their views on

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105 Yehouda ShenHAV described members leaving HaKeshet in what he called a “series of ports of exits” (interview). He said he will write about this one day, interpreting these exits in a meaningful way using them as mirrors to illuminate the issues discussed or not discussed in the movement, as well as to what satisfaction the issues were dealt with.
Zionism, and they relate their position on Zionism to their views on what they see as the nature of HaKeshet. These issues can make individuals or groups of members feel excluded from the movement or its focus. Contentious issues are thus indications of difficulties in including sub-groups and elements of HaKeshet’s members’ internal Otherness. Beginning with the gender issue, the next sections look into why and how these issues created tensions.

Female activists in HaKeshet criticise the movement for not including a feminist agenda or having a gender perspective more generally, and in reaction many female members are also active in the women’s organisation Achoti. Shula Keshet (interview), Director of Achoti, stated that one cannot study Mizrahi movements and not look at Achoti: only in this way will one get a feminist perspective. Achoti’s goals concern the fight for and information about fair salaries and appropriate work conditions for women; encouraging Ethiopian, Arab and Mizrahi women to start their own businesses; creating an educational feminist environment with focus on “Mizrahi Feminism”; promoting creativity in art and culture; and generally working to change policies for the betterment of women in need.106 Some interviewees described their membership in Achoti as necessary in order to counterweight experiences of sexism in HaKeshet. Many of these women frequently described HaKeshet as an organisation led by men with “macho attitudes”. For example, Neta Amar (interview) pointed to the “male dominance in the movement” as one of her reasons for leaving HaKeshet.

As pointed out before, HaKeshet has a group of male leading figures. During my fieldwork, Yehouda Shenhav, Yossi Yonah, Yossi Dahan, and Izthak Saporta were presented as the main personalities of the movement. In terms of media and other exposure, male members were the most profiled. Many female interviewees asserted that HaKeshet and its male members are aware of this problem, but complained that in terms of action to change this situation, it amounts to “ideological lip service” (Dahan-Kalev, interview). Female members specifically pointed to the lack of equal representation, and criticised HaKeshet for failing to to rectify this. A new young member, Natalie Baruch

106 See Achoti website: http://www.achoti.org.il
directed her criticism of the movement at the older generation, who in her experience is not letting young people step forward:

We do not hear any young voices, only the one’s who were in the movement from its beginning: Yehouda Shenhav, Yossi Yonah etc. Moreover, it is a very patriarchal organisation – very militaristic and masculine. Then Achoti was established and HaKeshet said: ‘There is Achoti so we are not responsible for feminism.’

On gender relations in general, Baruch (interview) expressed frustration with what she understood as a general shortcoming in the development of perspectives on gender relations and ethnicity:

There is not enough talk about Mizrahi men’s suppression of Mizrahi women, who in turn suppress Arab woman. In Israel the Ashkenazi man is on top of the hierarchy. Then comes the Mizrahi man because he is also a man, then the Ashkenazi woman, then the Mizrahi woman, followed by the Arab Christian woman and at the bottom is the Muslim woman.

As previously mentioned, Henriette Dahan-Kalev has written about what she understood as the negligence of a gender perspective in studies of Mizrahim in Israel, and both Dahan-Kalev and Pnina Motzafi-Haller have written about the orientalisation of Mizrahi women in Ashkenazi-dominated feminist organisations in Israel. Using the First Mizrahi Feminist Annual Conference as a case study, Dahan-Kalev (2001) wrote about the exclusion and marginalisation of Mizrahi women by slogans for solidarity and sisterhood that in her view ignored that Israel is “a country torn ethnically.” Her conclusion was that “Like all Israeli institutions, the institutional setup of the Israeli feminist movement is infected by racism, elitism, and Eurocentrism. Consequently, its agenda gives priority to issues which are of concern to the dominant group of Ashkenazi feminists” (Dahan-Kalev, 2001:682).

In her polemical article “Academic Apartheid in Israel and the LilyWhite Feminism of the Upper Middle Class”, Smadar Lavie (2002) argues that the “Mizrahi woman is excluded from the academic publish-or-perish because she is a single mom or simply single or married to a lower middle-class Mizrahi like herself.” According to Lavie, Mizrahi women are assumed not to be good enough and not to fit into the “closed club” of what she describes as the “Ashkenazi upper middle-class male academics” where there
is no room for, and no intentions to make room for, lower-class Mizrahi women with maternal and domestic responsibilities.

Pnina Motzafi-Haller (2001) takes this discussion further. Also using the First Mizrahi Feminist Annual Conference as a case study, she examined how the former lack of focus on Mizrahi women created a need for ground research, consequently leaving no room for inclusion of Palestinian women. To give an example of this attitude of negligence of the other Other on behalf of Mizrahi feminists, Motzafi-Haller recaps the closing session of the conference, in which Mizrahi and Palestinian women participated. The conference took place in Jerusalem, and the Israeli Mizrahi singer Margalit Tzanaani came on stage and greeted her audience with a description of Jerusalem as “the eternal capital city of the Jews.” In Motzafi-Haller’s interpretation this remark illustrated the “delicate position” of the Palestinian women present, and also the diverging political opinions on the “Palestinian question” and Zionism among Mizrahi women.

This example from the feminist Mizrahi conference indicates that the difficulties HaKeshet experienced in its approach to the Land Struggle were not unique in the realm of Mizrahi activism. Both HaKeshet and the feminists base their activism on universal values. However, both ended up excluding the other victims (the Palestinians) of Zionism.

In HaKeshet, more members have left due to disappointment over the inability to take a satisfying stance on the “Palestinian Question” than as a result of gender issues. This may be because, as pointed out by Baruch, after Achoti was established it somehow took the responsibility of including a gender and feminist perspective out of the hands of HaKeshet.

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has been the issue that has led to the most fractures within HaKeshet. Several of the leading figures of HaKeshet are outspoken in their opposition to the occupation and some have a long history of activism for Palestinians’ rights next to their academic or other professional and creative productions. To begin with, the original members introduced above, Dahan-Kalev, Chetrit and Shenhav, have all publicly articulated their support for the Palestinian struggle for self-determination and freedom from occupation and for equality as citizens.
of Israel. Moreover, all three have published articles in the Hebrew and English journals of the joint Palestinian-Israeli organisation the AIC, and this is significant because the AIC is situated at the margins of Israeli society and considered a channel for the left of the mainstream left-wing in Israel. Thus, publishing in AIC’s journals is in itself a political statement.

Notably in the late 1990s MiTzad Sheni and News from Within were channels where Mizrahi issues were discussed in a critical manner before they entered mainstream media. For example, Chetrit published articles in these journals from 1997 about Mizrahi activism, on Shas, and about discrimination and misrepresentation of Mizrahim in education.¹⁰⁷ Shenhav re-published his seminal article “The Bond of Silence” in News From Within (1997), and also other articles on Mizrahi issues. Recently he published a critical article in both the English and Hebrew journal, arguing for an all-encompassing struggle against the occupation, based on anti-colonial ideas, connecting the external and internal colonialism of Zionism (Shenhav, 2006a). In other words, he argued for the linking of the struggle against the Israeli occupation and for equality among groups of Israeli citizens.

As mentioned above, Dahan-Kalev was previously active in the AIC, and is today Chair of the Board of the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, B’Tselem.¹⁰⁸ The organisation “endeavours to document and educate the Israeli public and policymakers about human rights violations in the Occupied Territories, combat the phenomenon of denial prevalent among the Israeli public, and help create a human rights culture in Israel.”¹⁰⁹ To illustrate the interconnection between her studies of Mizrahi issues, her Mizrahi activism and her pro-Palestinian activism, Dahan-Kalev gave a talk entitled “The Fear of Arabness – Zionism and Post Zionism” at the AIC conference “Building a Future Together: Alternative to the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse”, in Bethlehem in 2005. Because Bethlehem is in the occupied West Bank, and

¹⁰⁷ See bibliography.
¹⁰⁸ According to the B’Tselem website, its name literally means “in the image of” in Hebrew, and is used as a synonym for human dignity: “the word is taken from Genesis 1:27 ‘And God created humans in his image. In the image of God did He create him.’ It is in this spirit that the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "All human beings are born equal in dignity and rights.” See http://www.btselem.org/English/
¹⁰⁹ See B’Tselem website: http://www.btselem.org/english/About_BTselem/Index.asp
Israeli nationals are not allowed to enter the occupied territory without special permits according to a military order, Dahan-Kalev and the rest of the Israeli participants attended the conference despite facing the possibility of imprisonment for two years.\textsuperscript{110}

As for the younger members introduced above, all three advocate a state for all its citizens. That is, a non-Jewish state either next to a Palestinian state or incorporating the Palestinians in the occupied territory into one state in historical Palestine. Shemoelof writes comments and publishes other people’s articles on the damage and suffering caused by the occupation on his website. He has been active in the organisation Zochrot (“Remembering” in Hebrew), a group of Israeli citizens working to raise awareness about \textit{al-Nakba} - the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948.\textsuperscript{111} Zochrot organises tours of former Palestinian neighbourhoods, towns and villages, arranges commemoration ceremonies for places and people, and facilitates education-related activities and protests throughout Israel. Baruch participated in an Israeli delegation meeting with Palestinians from the West Bank in Germany for two weeks. She described it as an amazing experience and emphasised how much she appreciated the Palestinians who came to speak with Israelis, when in every family someone has died from the occupation.

Many other members of \textit{HaKeshet} have been active in Israeli peace organisations or joint Israeli-Palestinian organisations, at university campuses and later in joint Arab-Jewish organisations such as Taayush (Arabic for “life in common”), “a grassroots movement of Arabs and Jews working to break down the walls of racism and segregation by constructing a true Arab-Jewish partnership.”\textsuperscript{112} Most recently, \textit{HaKeshet} members, anthropologist Smadar Lavie and the former (Israeli) Black Panther Reuven Aberjil, stirred negative reactions when they co-authored an article entitled “Another Act in the Mizrahi-Palestinian Tragedy” (2006), criticising and connecting the Israeli war in Lebanon, the Israeli occupation of Palestine and suppression of Mizrahim. Aberjil had

\textsuperscript{110} Since 1970, the Israeli military has issued a number of orders aimed to stop Israeli nationals from entering the occupied territory, and in addition to the military orders there are frequently imposed “Seger” (“Closure”) (the Israeli Human rights organisation HaMoked; Center for the Defence of the Individual (“The Focus” in Hebrew), personal communication). These restrictions do not concern Israeli settlers’ movements in the occupied territory.

\textsuperscript{111} See Zochrot website: http://www.zochrot.org/index.php

\textsuperscript{112} See Taayush website: http://www.taayush.org/
earlier in the summer written an article in support of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel.\(^\text{113}\)

One of the main reasons why the “Palestinian Question” is so complicated for HaKeshet is that there is a diversity of political stances among members on the issue. As a result, HaKeshet was only able to pass a detailed written statement on the issues of the occupation and resolution of the conflict in November 2004. To Neta Amar, the last straw of her dissatisfaction with the movement, on top of its lack of a feminist perspective, was its policy (or lack thereof) on the occupation. She left HaKeshet in response. When asked about the attitudes of HaKeshet on the conflict, Yossi Dahan (interview) underscored that there were talks about the conflict before November 2004. Moreover, according to him the movement had agreed on two states for two people and equal rights for Arabs in Israel. But, he acknowledged, the talks and agreement was on a very general level, because to focus on this issue would lead to: (1) loss of members who are “not-so-left-wing” and (2) it would cause alienation of the Mizrahim (ibid).

The first of these issues, the “not-so-left-wing” members of HaKeshet, is related to the meaning or significance of HaKeshet: “The Rainbow” (movement). According to Dodi Mahleb (interview), the rainbow reflects the inclusion of members with political stances from right and left. As an example, Mahleb mentions HaKeshet member Avi Cohen who is an outspoken right-winger and votes for Likud. Others, like Moshe Karif and the late Vicky Shiran, are described as Zionists. Reuven Aberjil (interview), on the other hand, described Zionism as colonial racism, and Israel as a state ruled by a ten percent minority who control the remaining ninety percent consisting of twenty percent Palestinian citizens, forty-five percent Mizrahim and twenty-five percent Palestinians in the occupied territory. In Aberjil’s understanding, HaKeshet is reacting to the absolutism he sees in “the oppressive politics of Israel.” According to Aberjil, Israel is not the “Land of Jews”, rather it is the land of the ten percent that rules the subordinated Palestinians and Mizrahim and “gets fat” on this suppression. The subordinated groups are, furthermore, separated by the rulers who encourage inter-group hatred between them (ibid).

\(^{113}\) It was published on the PACBI website (see Bibliography) and commented in Ha’aretz, 11.06.06, in “News in Brief”.

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Chetrit and Karif are described as those arguing for the establishment of a political party. Interestingly, they are from opposite poles as regards views on Palestinian citizens and the occupation. Whereas Karif is an outspoken Zionist who volunteered to do reserve military service during Intifadat al-Aqsa, Chetrit (interview) said that he votes for the Palestinian party Balad because:

This place is going down very fast! I am looking for spots of light in this tyranny and give my little support to them to give me some hope. For a long time now I believe that the only hope for democracy in Israeli is what they call the “Arab minority,” which is really a majority because they do not count the refugees in the world. Real democracy is not about majority rule. Democracy is about the ability of the majority to allow the minority, not only minority in number.

The internal relationship of left- and right-wing voters in HaKeshet must be considered by looking at the political context in which HaKeshet was established. The second problematic issue as described by Dahan, of possible alienation of the Mizrahi public, is a concern based on the understanding that the majority of MENA Jews are right-wing and would disagree politically with a pro-Palestinian stand. According to Dahan (interview), in general Mizrahim would not agree on the Palestinian issue, on the issues of equal civil rights, and on equality between the genders. This seems to correspond with the general understanding of Mizrahi political behaviour as being inspired by Arab-hating and patriarchal ideas.¹¹⁴

Yossi Yonah explained the complex relationship between HaKeshet and “the Mizrahim” by stating that there is no “the Mizrahim”, no such monolithic group to try to represent. Therefore, HaKeshet cannot and does not represent “Mizrahim”. Yet, according to Yonah, it is possible to represent certain concerns of an individual person, if not all of his concerns. Therefore, according to Yonah (interview), there are Mizrahim who say, “Well done on the land issue and on inclusion of the Mizrahi Jewish history in Israeli narrative, but what is this thing about the Arabs?” He summed up (interview):

HaKeshet relates to certain levels of concerns, but not to all. You define your role, it is not an ideal role, but you define it and you can bring about some important changes without seeing it like masses being represented by political parties. Raising consciousness, making people aware of these issues, is an important thing without being a political party. We cannot be a political party without losing many of our

¹¹⁴ The inconsistency among HaKeshet’s members on these very central and significant issues are further discussed in Chapter Six.
values. If you talk about representations in an analogical way like a party we could get 50,000 people – not even win a seat in the parliament.

Yehouda Shenhav was in agreement with Yonah when he explained that *HaKeshet* does not (necessarily) want followers:

> We represent ourselves and the particular values we believe in, not followers. We believe in social justice, we know what it is; we do not need followers for that. In politics you need to have followers, go to bar mitzvah parties etc – the murky muddy business of politics, then you lose sight of your goals and you start to compromise. We can afford not to get into politics and not to compromise, we have other things to do. Maybe we could be more modest, people say we are arrogant. But, if the *Mizrahim* are backwards and want to go the right, let them do it! We still have our stands! They do not change! We can work through advocacy, lobbying, influential people, and set examples – having an equal number of men and women when the movement is interviewed for example.

Ofir Abu (interview) further explained that the *Mizrahi* public cannot relate to *HaKeshet* in a manner that can provide it with political power, because *HaKeshet* has certain points of view about how society should be that in effect criticises society as it is today, and thus also disagrees with Zionist ideology. The problem, according to Abu, is that the *Mizrahi* public wants to be part of the Israeli general public, and this means to be Jewish. Based on their experiences and socialisation in Israel they know that to be Jewish is to be nationalist or religious or both, and therefore they (MENA Jews) vote for the right-wing. Abu held that it is not legitimate for *Mizrahim* to be secular or to be connected to their Arab past and culture. And therefore, Abu (ibid) argues, *HaKeshet* cannot connect with the *Mizrahi* public:

> We are challenging the categories: in my opinion there is no difference between Jews and Arabs; we are Jews with Arab culture, but this is not legitimate in the Israeli discourse or among its public. Shenhav, Shohat and Chetrit are not on the side of the public discourse.

Abu points out that it is not that *Mizrahim* are unaware of their oppression, but they are not ready to be part of a political agenda that speaks the *Mizrahi* story. Therefore, *Mizrahim* cannot vote for Labour, so they vote for the right-wing because there is no other alternative. Additionally, Abu stresses that one must not disregard the importance of the economic politics that speak to *Mizrahim*: they vote for those who provide them with what they need, and this tends to be the right-wing.
As mentioned above, many of my interviewees talked of the Oslo Accords and Intifadat al-Aqsa as important in the establishment and the development of *HaKeshet*. Shenhav (interview) put it this way: “*HaKeshet* came into being at the end of the beginning of the euphoria. It was 1995 and in the midst of the euphoria of the Oslo period.” Yossi Yonah (interview) consented:

Chronologically *HaKeshet* came into existence in the time of euphoria of the Left, the time of Oslo that signified the gradual end of the conflict. Also people of the right thought like this and this brought people from left and right together in social activism.

Both saw also the reverse side of the coin to this euphoric atmosphere. Shenhav (interview) recalled how he himself was always against the Oslo Accords, because he thought they were bad for Palestinians, and bought more time for the Israeli settlements in the occupied territory. Whereas, he pointed out, others in *HaKeshet* were against the Accords for opposite reasons: they thought the Accords gave too much to the Palestinians. This made *HaKeshet* into a movement containing people on opposing sides in terms of views on the conflict. As commented by Shenhav (interview): “… it not accidental that in October 2000 all this [togetherness] crumbled.” Yonah (interview) put it this way:

October 2000 split *HaKeshet*. The killings of Israeli citizens by Israeli police brought a split between rightists and leftists and it forced the question of minimalist or maximalist approach: The peace issue has not been resolved in *HaKeshet*, because the movement is grounded in universal values advancing only causes compatible with these values. So, in a maximalist perspective *HaKeshet* cannot take on cases only related to *Mizrahim*. In the minimalist approach we could view the conflict from a distance and not deal with it, not support the right and not get involved. [But also] as minimalists we have to be against the occupation. However, some members would even go with less than minimalist and for a right-wing agenda. For example, there is the controversial issue over Moshe Karif serving volunteer reserve duty in the occupied territories during the second Intifada. I almost left *HaKeshet* because of this [issue]. But people said that ‘leaving is the wrong thing to do, if you want *HaKeshet* to exist, be quiet about these issues or say what you have to say elsewhere, in other organisations’. So I did. I am a member of *Taayush*,¹¹⁵ and I participated in activities in the West Bank (but it did not mean much, not even to cleanse my consciousness). Therefore, instead of leaving, Shenhav and I sat on the fence.

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¹¹⁵ See description of *Taayush* under Tensions in the Rainbow Movement above.
Moshe Karif (interview) talked about his volunteer reserve duty during Intifadat al-Aqsa when asked about the nature of and his visions for HaKeshet. He explained that he is more religious and Jewish nationalist than other members, and that he is against one state for all citizens. He recalled that tensions caused by these differences were there from the start of the movement, and there had been many discussions about this:

For example, in the middle of the Intifada I went to do volunteer reserve duty as a spokesman, and the people in HaKeshet were very angry with me and wanted me to resign as HaKeshet’s spokesperson. We voted on it and I continued and Yehouda Shenhav and Yossi Yonah said they would leave the movement (interview).

Karif (interview) explained his position further:

I am more traditional than people in HaKeshet, Jewish culture is very important to me. [...] When we established HaKeshet we said that our agenda is social, if we were to take on the national positions we would break - we would not agree and the public that we work for would distance themselves from us. Despite our disagreements on national issues we had a very strong coalition on social issues. So we have Likud people and ‘one state for all’ people who cooperated in social struggles on housing and land.

Meir Bosaglov left HaKeshet because it lacked Judaism. He (interview) described how for example, the meetings on Shabbat made it difficult for him to attend because he observes Shabbat. According to him, it would have been preferable if the movement was as secular as the Israeli Black Panther movement, and omitted the Mizrahi label and intentions, or went all the way in the opposite direction and became as religious as Shas. The way it was, HaKeshet was neither one thing nor the other to him, and therefore he left. In his words (interview): “I am more traditional, more Jewish. There is no Mizrahiut without Judaism.”

Yonah (interview), on the other hand, admits that the discrepancies in the movement, and between the movement and potential followers are problematic, but he is nevertheless optimistic regarding HaKeshet’s potential effects on both Israeli society and between Israel and the Palestinians:

If addressing the issue of Mizrahi identity can achieve some positive results, it might have some impact on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, because of the symbolic fear of Mizrahim. You cannot rectify misunderstanding of the Mizrahim without to a certain extend rectifying [misunderstanding of] the Arabs. So in that aspect there is a
connection if *Mizrahi* Jews are negated for their culture that is Arab culture, a rectification will include the Arabs as well.

A final issue that was mentioned as a cause of tensions in the movement was the relationship between Moroccans and Iraqis. Conveyed mostly in passing comments or un-recorded conversations, internal power-relations between different groups of MENA Jews was hinted at as a continuously contentious issue. Since these statements were a recurring theme, they are important to mention. In a larger context, they refer to the situation whereby Iraqi Jews after immigration had been better off than Moroccan and other groups of MENA Jews. In terms of the history of *Mizrahi* activism and protest, the trajectory is often described as one in which Moroccan Jews start the impulsive protests, and Iraqi Jews form the leadership in organisations and movements, such as for example the Iraqi Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, who heads the Moroccan-dominated *Shas* electorship. In *HaKeshet*, it seems to be less the origin of people and more issues being in focus or not in focus that creates this tension. So, comments about this tension related to what issues are or are not raised or discussed in the movement.
Chapter 4
HaKeshet’s Siah Hadash (“New Discourse”)

In order to investigate the multiple meanings of the term *Mizrahi* and attempt to understand why the Democratic Rainbow has chosen to be *Mizrahi*, the following discussion focuses on HaKeshet members’ responses to the two questions: “Who (or what) are *Mizrahim*?” and “What is *Mizrahiut*?

Interpretations of the replies to each of these questions have three variations, divided so in order to present multiple meanings, and show the confusions and at times contradictions in the diverse understandings of these terms. This subdivision has been created by me to enable analysis of the complexity of the terms. As such, this typology stems from my interviewees, but is organised in this particular manner for the sake of this interpretation, in order to try to untangle and understand various meanings. It is precisely the mixture of multiple understandings of the meaning(s) and uses of these terms that makes it a difficult task to understand what the “*Mizrahi* HaKeshet is all about; what its agenda and goals are, and how this corresponds with its practical undertakings. As will be discussed further in Chapter Six, this confusion was also expressed by HaKeshet members. It seems plausible that the undecided character of the very definition of the movement is an indication of why there is a disconnect between HaKeshet’s discourse and its practical undertakings.

The different understandings and perspectives among the individual HaKeshet members is further complicated by the mixture of personally and academically-informed answers. For instance, when asked what the terms “*Mizrahim*” and “*Mizrahiut*” meant to her, a third generation activist asked if I wanted the “academic discourse post-colonial answer” or her perspectives based on her personal experiences. This dual perspective is obvious to most HaKeshet interviewees, who in their replies addressed the deconstruction of these terms, and of their historical meanings and uses, as well as their

116 See section entitled Third Generation Members above.
personal experiences related to feelings of belonging to the people(s) categorised as \textit{Mizrahi}.

\textit{HaKeshet} interviewees use expressions such as “having a \textit{Mizrahi awareness}” or a “\textit{Mizrahi consciousness}” to describe those who display understanding of the construction of this category, and its consequences for the categorised. In other words, an individual with a “\textit{Mizrahi awareness}” or “consciousness” is someone who is able to appreciate his/her sense of belonging to a constructed category of identification.

\textbf{Being “\textit{Mizrahi}’}

The three variations of answers are:

1. It describes the collective categorisation of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries and as such indicates an awareness of the negative and imposed nature inherent in this term.
2. It is related to who they are and where they originate: they are Jews from the Middle East and North Africa. This term embodies their cultural and their linguistic background. In other words, it is about identification based on ancestry and common culture.
3. It is a new political category constructed by taking the negative imposed category and reclaiming it as a source of resistance and pride.

Before going through the three variants respectively, below are two examples to illustrate the multiplicity of meanings of this term in \textit{HaKeshet} members’ explanations.

Shula Keshet (interview) explained the term \textit{Mizrahim} this way:

What is “\textit{Mizrahim}” – there is not one answer. No ready-made answer. To be \textit{Mizrahi}\textsuperscript{117} is someone who is born of \textit{Mizrahi} origin or who emigrated from an Eastern Muslim country. And then there are those who are not \textit{Mizrahi}, but have a \textit{Mizrahi} perspective. There are \textit{Mizrahim} from all sort of ethnicities, but the category \textit{Mizrahi} was imposed in order to blur the groups into one that was looked at as primitive. Today \textit{HaKeshet} use the term as a category by choice. Most of the people in the group of \textit{Mizrahim} are poorer, of lower class with lower level of education and live in the periphery.

\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Mizrahit} is the female version of \textit{Mizrahi}. 

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When asked what the term *Mizrahim* means to him, Reuven Aberjil (interview) replied that first of all he is from Morocco. He then presented this clarification:

A: it is a sign. Everyone knows I am *Mizrahi* when I walk down the street because of how I look and due to my culture - the music and the food.

B: it has a political meaning. I know I am *Mizrahi* because I feel *Mizrahi* – this is nothing decided by others, I am integral to this place, part of this landscape.

C: it is being just, patient, and emotional human beings. It is to be open-minded to the world and not see things in black and white, but in colours and with smells. In other words, it is not to be afraid of others.

1. Collective Categorisation

The first variation of replies to the question “Who (or what) are *Mizrahim*?” reflects awareness of the negative effects of the imposed *Mizrahi* collective category of identification. Some interviewees provided a more class-related perspective, for example HaKeshet member and social scientist Itzhik Saporta, to whom “*Mizrahi*” simply means “uneducated”. His logic follows that if someone categorised as *Mizrahi* ceases to be uneducated, he/she is no longer *Mizrahi* (interview). For Saporta, *Mizrahi* is thus a reference to the socioeconomic position of a group or groups of Israelis. This position is further reproduced by the Israeli school system described by Shlomo Swirski (1999) as built on the policy of inclusion, exclusion and differentiation. The Israeli education system will be thoroughly discussed in Part III, but in short, Swirski criticises the inherent differentiation among groups of Israelis in the budget allocations and in the quality and in quantity of education provided, which in general disadvantages MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens.

Natalie Baruch (interview) elaborated on her understanding of the imposed characteristics embodied in the term and category *Mizrahim* and her rejection of this:

It is first of all the differentiation of the state between those who are and those who are not Europeans, between *Ashkenazim* [Europeans] and *Mizrahi*. The non-Jews are called Arabs. I call myself a *Mizrahit* who was born in Israel, rather than Arab Jew or *Mizrahi* Arab, because I am not connected with Judaism – I am not religious. What I am is beyond religion – my religion is laughter. I am a *Mizrahit* born in Israel, I am not Israeli, because I do not like what this state does, I am ashamed of the occupation in the West Bank. It is like the word queer – it was a negative word and then the homosexuals took this word and made it proud – [before] it was a shame to be *Mizrahi*, but now the *Mizrahim* came out of the closet and say “We are *Mizrahim!*”
Media worker Moshe Karif (interview) also talked of the enforced nature and damaging consequences of Zionism for Jews from Arab and Muslim countries, and explained how the feeling of being victimised led him to vote for Shas in protest against this treatment:

Zionism resulted in two refugee camps: the Palestinian and Mizrahi. This must be reckoned for. The state needs to pay. [...] I voted for Shas before – it is my tribe.

MA student and HaKeshet member Zarom (interview) placed the construction of the Mizrahi category in relation to other constructed categories:

“Mizrahim” is a discursive definition. There is not such a thing as “a Mizrahi.” There is a Mizrahi experience and understanding; the Mizrahi Israeli. It is very different from the Orientals in Middle Eastern countries. It is a painful relationship. It is silenced. It has no colour and no religions. It is the border between the Other and the other. A very weak border between two worlds that never heals.

Philosopher Yossi Dahan (interview) attached the element of choice to the imposed collective category of identification:

Objectively speaking Mizrahim are people from Islamic countries and subjectively speaking Mizrahim are people who identify themselves as part of a Mizrahi collective in Israeli society - because this collective was created in Israeli society.

2. Jews from Arab and Muslim countries

The second variation of replies to the questions about the meaning of the term Mizrahim refers to origin and heritage. These replies are more controversial than variations one and three, because many HaKeshet members discuss their Arab origins in positive terms, and as part of their feelings of belonging that they were forced to lose after immigration to Israel. In various ways HaKeshet members speak about, write about, and in artistic expressions call attention to, their lost Arab identity as individuals and as a group. For example, the explanation of the term Mizrahi in the definition of the goals of HaKeshet in its Principles reads:

The organisation is Mizrahi (Jews from Arab and Muslims Lands and the East) in its goals.
Moreover, as discussed above, in academic studies of Mizrahim conducted by HaKeshet members, they use the term Arab Jews, such as in Yehouda Shenhav’s book entitled *The Arab-Jews: Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity*. Furthermore, in articulations by HaKeshet members concerning the realization that they have rejected their Arabness in order to integrate into Israeli society, the stress is on a past and lost sense of belonging to the Arab world geographically, culturally and linguistically. For example, Ofir Abu (interview) said this about his and his parents’ Arab identity:

My identity in relation to Arabs was always something camouflaged and something not real. What is Morocco? It was not new to me. Both my parents come from Morocco. Because of the Arabs it is a bad thing. I used to tell my parents not to speak Arabic on the bus because it embarrassed me. Today I am ashamed of that.

Arab Jewish feelings of belonging are controversial in the Jewish state, where the most significant divide is between Arabs and Jews. “For the state it is problematic if there is anything common between Palestinians and Mizrahim,” HaKeshet member and PhD student Meirav Alush (interview) explained. When Mizrahi activists emphasise their Arab origins, they blur the national categories that separate Arab from Jew: those excluded from and included in the Jewish nation. Being Arab in Israel is first of all to be associated with the enemy. Secondly, as a result of the orientalist attitudes of the Ashkenazi Zionist establishment who propagate this nationalism, Arabs are perceived as backwards, uneducated, primitive and in need of modernisation.

Most theorists agree that one of the cornerstones of nationalism is to provide a people, usually defined by common cultural and linguistic traits, with protection. This is provided by the state and its political system, with ideological constructions that connect the people to the state. Herein lies the background for the controversial and confusing nature of the categorisation Mizrahim. Interviewees in HaKeshet noted that they belong to the state as Jews, but feel, rightly or wrongly, that they are considered a potential security threat as cultural or political Arabs. As in-betweens, Mizrahim make up a category that can be described as being in a grey area between the nation and the ethnic category (Eriksen, 2002:119).
Dodi Mahleb (interview) highlighted the political controversy when he chose to answer the question of who the Mizrahim are by connecting Mizrahi marginalisation with the territorial conflict with the Palestinians:

The Mizrahi consensus is conflicted and not united because the Mizrahim are like a sandwich: they are with the Arabs and with the Jews – torn between. Until this conflict is solved there will be no solution to the inequality. I am not a Zionist – I am an Israeli patriot. There are two people in Israel: Palestinians and Jews. I am not anti-Zionist, because I do need to be here, but I need to be here in the fashion of civil citizenship, not ethno-nationalism. The solution is Israel within the 67 borders. One day there might be one state, but not today.

This paradox experienced by Mizrahi Jewish Israelis as “inside outsiders” was first articulated by Israeli sociologist Shlomo Swirski (1989:47):

The Orientals in Israel found themselves in a situation unlike that of most minorities and ethnic groups. Such groups tend to organise, among other things, because they are denied access to part or parts of the social universe. In Israel, in contrast, nobody denied that both Ashkenazim and Orientals belonged to one and the same national-societal universe, and Orientals were not openly denied access to any part of it.

And Swirski (ibid) continues:

In a country founded as the homeland of the Jews, where the Holocaust is a living memory, and where Jews are in constant conflict with the Arabs, the implication presents a very strong impediment. And the impediment has not remained implicit: it has been explicitly used by the Israeli elite in order to forestall and prevent anything that in Israeli parlance is called “ethnic [Arab Jewish] organisation” because these organisations were dangerous to the establishment who believed they could be a threat and “split up the nation.”

In 1991, the Israeli Jewish author from Iraq Shimon Ballas said “I never denied my Arab origins or the Arabic language… the Arabic identity has always been a part of me and I have to say: I am an Arab who has taken up an Israeli identity. [...] There are Arab Jews and there are French Jews.” According to Ammiel Alcalay (1993: 244), Ballas thus broke “...one of the great taboos of modern Jewish discourse about Jews from the Arab world.” Another person who broke this taboo early is Ella Shohat, who described herself as an “Arab Jew” in 1992. Many HaKeshet members have mentioned and

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118 Cited from the newspaper Kol ha’Ir, interview by Orly Toren, March 1991, by Ammiel Alcalay 1993:244.
referred to Shohat when talking about Arab Jewish identity. Shohat (interview) draws attention to the importance of using the term Arab-Jew with a hyphen:

It is an attempt to also try to see the history of the Mizrahim as traumatic identity crisis. Not simply speak of ourselves as Sephardim or Mizrahim, but as Arab-Jews who have gone through a crisis with the major importance placed on the hyphen between the Arab and Jew.

She continued to explain how she tried in her work to contribute to shifting the intellectual Mizrahi debate so that is focused not simply on economic social oppression but also discussed questions of identity and was contextualised it in relation to colonialism. While it was common at the time among Sephardim/Mizrahim to speak of oppression, she attempted in her 1980s work to argue for the importance of understanding the Mizrahi issue as also an identity and cultural crisis, which could only be fully analyzed and historicized outside the Eurocentric paradigm.

However, despite the enthusiasm in using terms that highlight the Arab past and contest the Zionist narrative of the history of Jews from Arab countries, the usage and meaning of this term is not agreed upon or shared by all HaKeshet members. For example, Dodi Mahleb (interview) said:

I do not describe or identify myself as Arab Jewish like Sami [Shalom Chetrit] and Ella [Shohat]. This is not an ontological category today. As a political category it is ok, but I am Israeli, I was born here, I am not a Jewish Arab. My parents who came from Iraq were Jewish Arabs. But I am not. Also culturally I am Israeli; I do not read or write my mother-tongue [Arabic]. What do I know about Arab civilisation? Arab Jews – it is a fraud! And I say this with a lot of love for Arab culture.

Therefore, in addition to being perceived as posing a potential threat to the Jewish nation in the state of Israel, the term “Arab Jew” is also contested among Mizrahi activists and intellectuals. The Israeli author from Iraq, Sami Michael, who grew up in Baghdad and described himself as an Arabic-speaking and thinking Jew until he came to Israel in his early twenties, in an interview in Ha’aretz (2005) said:

To say today that I’m an Arab Jew rather than an Israeli is a political statement more than a statement of identity. That’s also my attitude toward the statements of Yehouda Shahrbani (Shenhav), who doesn’t know how to speak Arabic and doesn’t write Arabic.

120 With thanks to Ghassan Kanafani, Ha’aretz, 15.04.2005, by Dalia Karpel
Michael was responding to Shenhav’s book *The Arab Jews*. By referring to Shenhav’s original Iraqi family name, Shahrabani, Michael seems to be trying to say “your family has changed its name in order to fit into Israeli Hebrew society and as a non-Arabic speaking ‘Shenhav’ you cannot call yourself an Arab Jew.” This leads us to the question of what defines an Arab Jew? And, moreover, who decides the criterion? The discussion between Michael representing the first generation of Israelis from Arab countries and the second generation, represented by Shenhav, raises questions related to the definition and thus the content of contemporary Arab Jewish identification. Is Jewish Arabness or Arab Jewishness defined by language, history, culture, or political ideology? According to The Israeli historian Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (2004:175), in the former Middle Eastern and North African homelands, most Jews identified themselves as Jews with what has been described as an “organic belonging” to Arab culture: 121

It should be clarified that the issue at hand is not whether the Jews from Arab countries saw themselves as Arab Jews or identified with Arab nationalism. Most of them identified themselves as Jews, but certainly not in opposition to Arab culture, to which they belonged quite organically. ‘Arab-ness’ was not an identity - it was a cultural-linguistic reality, expressed first and foremost through language, but also through a deep sense of belonging that persisted long after their immigration to Israel”

There are two important points to learn from the different reactions concerning the use and legitimacy of the term Arab Jews today: the first is that clearly there is no one answer to the definition of what constitutes an Arab Jew, and secondly, the important issue here is not to prove or disprove an authentication in the usage of this term. Rather, it is interesting to explore why some Jews in Israel today feel the need and want to be defined as Arab, or to feel that their Arabness or Arab past is acknowledged and respected, and how they envision this practically. A third point to be learned from these differences in opinion related to the term Arab Jews is that it is important to remember HaKeshet members do not act or react in a vacuum, rather, as the criticism by Michael and his reference to Shenhav indicate, HaKeshet members are active participants in the Israeli reality. Below are two examples of the relevance of this discussion about Arab Jews and

of the contributions made by *HaKeshet* members to the Israeli public discourse as *Mizrahi* intellectuals.

During autumn 2004 I watched, as did many Israelis, the Tel Aviv-based TV series *Ahava ze koev*[^122] ("Love Hurts") on Israeli TV. The central couple in this romantic comedy is composed of an *Ashkenazi* TV cook (the woman) and a *Mizrahi* mechanic (the man), and the series followed their bumpy road to a life together, with all their “ethnic” and cultural differences. In one unforgettable scene, the couple is visiting his parents, and when his family members criticise and discredit Arabs as uncivilised and primitive, the girlfriend says: “But you are Arabs, you come from Iraq and Syria, and you are Arabs as much as I am Polish – right?” His mother gets very angry and screams, “We are not Arabs!” The father adds: “We are Jews, not Arabs!” To which the girlfriend replies: “Yes you are; you are Arab Jews. If not, then what are you? Your [Mizrahi] intellectuals in *Ha’aretz* describe you and them as Arabs. What is wrong with that?!”[^123] After this, the mother kicks the girlfriend out of the apartment saying she can forget to ever come back.

Another example is a short story by Almog Behar entitled “*Ana min al yahoud* – I’m one of the Jews”[^124], selected for the yearly short story competition in *Ha’aretz* newspaper in 2005. In this story the second-generation *Mizrahi* protagonist is limited in his ability to communicate with Jewish Israelis and with Arab Palestinians. Furthermore, he lacks a focal point in his feelings of belonging. The physical reason for his inability to communicate is his heavy Iraqi-Arabic accented Hebrew that makes Israeli soldiers suspect him of being a Palestinian terrorist. Then when he encounters Palestinians, he is unable to communicate with them because he does not speak Arabic. He has lost their common language and, in addition, they think he is making fun of them with his guttural accent.

The short story describes the silencing of the second-generation Arabic-speaking Jews, through self-imposed change in their cultural identity, motivated by *Ashkenazi* pressures to assimilate and de-Arabise. This corresponds with what *HaKeshet* members said

[^122]: Written by Dana Modan who also played the lead role.
[^123]: *Ha’aretz* is perceived in Israel as a left-leaning newspaper read by the intellectual elite and thus the remark has a double meaning also referring to class, and this moreover, positions the “*Mizrahi* intellectuals” among the elite.
regarding their “coming out” experiences. The story ends with a similar description of the feeling of being caught in-between, as expressed by HaKeshet members:

..the borders that separate myself from myself. I am not here and not there, not East not West, not my voice now not the voices of my past… mother, father,… you are two in the same exile, the same silence, the same alienation between heart and body and thought and speech.

During fieldwork, “Mizrahim” were by most interviewees described as being in-between Arab Middle Eastern and Israeli Western culture. It is in that capacity they are perceived as, by for example Shiko Behar (1998), potential bridges between the Ashkenazi establishment and the Israeli Western public and their Middle Eastern Arab neighbours. But, as related by Shenhav (2006:5-6), Israel used Arab Jews, like his father, as spies. Through this intelligence work, these Jews from Arab and Muslim countries were incorporated into the Israeli collective, but Shenhav stresses that this incorporation did not involve a positive use of Arab Jew’s cultural skills and was never used to create constructive relationships and connections with Arab countries (ibid). Shenhav concludes that when the state used Arab Jews as spies this was not simply a way to deal with a practical need in terms of language skills and ability to work undercover, but rather this practice was used to separate Arab Jews from their Arab backgrounds.

As “Arab Jews”, MENA Jews are half this and half that, almost Israeli or simultaneously two things. This is a confusing and thus frustrating experience that spans generations, to which the very existence of HaKeshet is a testimony. Beyond personal identification and individual feelings of belonging, to express identification with Arab Jewishness has political implications that create expectations. Therefore, choosing to voice this identification is a complex and public act, an intricate situation that is complicated further by the ongoing conflicts between Israel and its neighbouring Arab and Muslim states, or groups in those states, in addition to the occupation and discrimination against the indigenous Arabs of Palestine.

As concluded by Swirski in 1989, the notion of MENA Jews posing a threat to the nation stalled the development and establishment of Oriental solidarity groups, and led to the protests that were initiated to focus on social and economic issues. It is clear from the interviews and observations this study is based on that Mizrahi activism and expressions
of solidarity with Palestinians is complicated by the notion that Mizrahim are perceived as being closer to the enemy than Ashkenazi (Jewish) activists are. For example, many interviewees would emphasise how much easier it is for Ashkenazi leftists to interact with Palestinians, both those with citizenship and those under occupation, and to advocate the Palestinian cause.

The cases of Tali Fahima and Mordechai Vanunu have been used by many interviewees as examples to illustrate that it is more complicated and risky for MENA Jews than for Ashkenazi Jews to be associated with Palestinians working against the occupation. In both cases, it is implied that they are punished harder than Ashkenazim are for similar cases, and that the reasons for this is the fear that they can bring the “Mizrahi masses with them” as Reuven Aberjil (interview) explained. Vanunu converted to Christianity after his exposure in order to, in his words, show that Israel is a religious state that has problems with all who are not Jewish: “Israel is a democracy for Jews only and an apartheid state,” according to Vanunu (interview).

At a meeting in HaKeshet’s office, Fahima’s mother, Sarah Fahima, gave a talk presenting her daughter’s arrest and then imprisonment (Fahima was released on 03.01.2007). She explained how Fahima was arrested after having been in contact with Palestinian militants and civilians in the occupied territory. Her mother stated that her daughter was not an enemy of the state of Israel, but was against the occupation, and especially its destruction of Palestinian civilian lives on all levels. Fahima’s mother also rejected the media allegations that her daughter had an affair with the Palestinian leader of the Al Aqsa Martyr Brigades, Zakariyya Zbeidi.

Oznat Trabelis (interview), the producer of the film Arna’s Children, and a HaKeshet member, said that the military and General Security Service are aware that many Israeli citizens, Jewish and Palestinian, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, like herself, cross the Separation Wall and travel into area A in the occupied territory, in order to meet or help Palestinians every day. However, when Tali Fahima was caught, they did not let her go with the usual warning, but imprisoned her, tortured her, kept her in isolation and held her without due procedure under military court orders (ibid). They made an example of her, Trabelsi concluded. HaKeshet member Sami Shalom Chetrit (interview) explained that he
believes that Vanunu and Fahima were perceived as dangerous because they changed the rules of the game and this was not allowed:

Because Mizrahi guys should not interfere in these issue because he/she could influence the masses. You can move far from the centre, beyond Shas and Likud, to the far right – and they do not care, like Igal Amir – they did not treat him like they did Vanunu. They used Vanunu to set an example of where to set the border – the red line. This is different from the Ashkenazim, spies like Udi Adiv, officers in the army, they went to jail, but that was it. With Vanunu it was very harsh. He is the red line, if you want to cross it you need to think hard about what you do. And Fahima is the new line, the big one, not between Ashkenazim and Palestinians, she comes from Likud, from the right, she voted for Sharon, and then she walked through that wall all over to the other side all on her own – without any slow leftist development.

3. New Political Category

The third variation in response to the question “Who or what is Mizrahim?” is that the term is a new political category constructed by purposefully taking the negative imposed category and re-making it into a category representing resistance and pride. As such, HaKeshet is in a sense the embodiment of this variation. In 2002, Sami Shalom Chetrit (2002:110) described what he calls “the new Mizrahim” as activists who do:

[…] not define themselves as ‘Edot Hamizrah’, ‘Mizrahi ethnic groups’, or ‘Sephardim’, but rather as ‘Mizrahim’ which is mainly a political identity definition.

Yossi Yonah (interview) is given the honour of naming HaKeshet, and this is how he explained why it was important that the Democratic Rainbow is “Mizrahi”:

We know that Mizrahi identity is held in contempt. […] Let us empower it, claim the difference, give it new meaning – make it become something prestigious and something to be proud of. […] The issue of identity will always be there, it goes to the nature and basics of Zionism, if we want Israeli society to deal with the issue of identity, let’s address it head-on, to try to bring it into the public with new connotations.

In a similar vein, Dodi Mahleb (interview) said:

The identity of Mizrahim is oppressed and therefore it is called HaKeshet Mizrahit and not Israeli. I cannot be apologetic for its Mizrahi identity; I want Mizrahiut to have a full licence in Israeli society.

As we know, HaKeshet it not the only Mizrahi Israeli expression, in fact the political party and religious movement Shas is a vastly and more successful contemporary
expression of Israeli Jews from North Africa and the Middle East. As a political-religious party-movement Shas’ self-defined New Jewish Israeli identity is Sephardi and by referring to Sephardi culture and traditions prior to the state of Israel, its Sephardi identification represents a self-reform based on religion and culture. In other words, in the name of indigenous Sephardi Jewish tradition and culture, Shas fosters self-discipline and functionality in modern Israeli society. Shas’ interpretation and use of Sephardi here provides a revivalist identity based on Jewish tradition and pride by combining old traditions in new circumstances, in order to create a satisfying cultural answer to a deprived situation.125

The need to assert pride in identification is also evident among HaKeshet members, such as Shlomo Varzana, a filmmaker and one of the founders of HaKeshet. He summed up how he felt to Ha’aretz (28.05.2004) after the High Court of Justice had handed down its ruling in favour of HaKeshet’s petition in the Land Struggle:

Now I can almost feel the smile my parents are sending me, from an entirely spiritual place. I did it for them. It’s a kind of pleasure.126

Varzana’s satisfaction seems to be linked to reversal of material injustice, coupled with acknowledgment of previous unfairness, as well as taking pride in the accomplishments of his own group. He is not proud because he thought they were unable to win the case in the High Court, but because he believed a) they would not be allowed to win, meaning that he believed in their case, but does not trust the legal system or the people working in it, seeing as an “Ashkenazi bastion”, and b) the others (the Ashkenazim) did not believe they could.

According to Chetrit (2002:111), in addition to the realisation of victimisation at the hands of Zionism and Zionists, “the new Mizrahi acknowledge their tragic double-position as oppressors and oppressed, as a major mental barrier to a full self-consciousness and identity.” This study questions this statement when it examines why HaKeshet was not able to include its other Others into the Land Struggle, discussed below in the third part of this chapter.

125 Based on Tilde Rosmer, 2004, “The Sephardi Torahnim: Shas’ New Jewish Israeli”
126 “An ‘assertive’ group flexes its Mizrachi muscles”, Ha’aretz, 28.05.2004, by Mazal Mualem.
Living Mizrahiut

As with the interpretations of the term Mizrahim presented above, in the following section HaKeshet members’ understanding of the term Mizrahiut is examined by dividing their responses into three variations. Again, as with the discussion of the term Mizrahim, these types have been constructed by me in order to be able to analyse and interpret the complexity of Mizrahiut. Combined with the responses related to the term Mizrahim, these responses constitute the complex and at times puzzling content produced when Mizrahim perform Mizrahiut.

The three variations of answers to the question “What is Mizrahiut?” are:

1. An alternative to the Zionist Israeli historical narrative by which the Mizrahi category of identification is deconstructed. It attempts to include a previously silenced Mizrahi/Jewish Middle Eastern narrative. It is thus both the study of Mizrahim and their history, and also the study of the development of the academic and political discourse on Mizrahim. Together, these two perspectives challenge the Zionist version of history and raise controversial questions regarding inter-Jewish interactions and racist perceptions.

2. A Middle Eastern integrative perspective on Israel as being part of its geographical region, rather than belonging to the European and North-American cultural sphere. The emphasis is on the need to embrace this political context in order to secure a future in the region.

3. A framework for an intellectual home, where HaKeshet members are able to interact with other MENA Jews who understand their arguments and who speak the same post-colonial and critical language. This is portrayed as an inclusive home where Mizrahim across the political spectrum are incorporated into the Rainbow Movement.
I. An Alternative Narrative

*HaKeshet* engages in public debate as an organisation, and through its individual members by producing alternative narratives to the one provided by the state and its agencies, primarily concerning the position and actions of *Mizrahi* Jews. Many of my interviewees consider the discursive contribution of *HaKeshet* as its most successful and significant impact. Noting the importance of challenging the boundaries of public discourse and the official historical narrative, *HaKeshet* members considered their contribution as a challenge to the *Ashkenazi* Zionist narrative; as a tool in creating awareness among Israelis categorised as *Mizrahi*; and as a base for social and political struggles for equality.

As an example of the need to and satisfaction in asserting a *Mizrahi* voice in Israeli history, Shlomo Varzana said this to *Ha’aretz* (28.05.2004) after the victory in the Land Struggle:

> For the first time, a *Mizrahi* is standing up and speaking fluently, and positioning himself as an equal in a dialogue with an *Ashkenazi* Zionist entity. For the first time the *Mizrahi* is speaking as a hero rather than a victim. He is putting up a fight. He sees himself as the *ba’al habayit* [land owner]; he is entering the centre of the discourse and challenging the established ethos, and winning.127

According to Dodi Mahleb (interview), *HaKeshet*’s success was evidence of its continued existence and of its impact on the public discourse. He further described this impact as evidenced by the fact that today one can talk about *Mizrahim* without being apologetic. Similarly, Itzhak Saporta (interview) described how he considered *HaKeshet*’s influence in terms of social change and justice entrenched in public discourse. Yehouda Shenhav (interview) noted how in the past, successful *Mizrahim* did not speak out and did not have a way in which to articulate their success despite being *Mizrahim*, or they did not see the need to highlight these facts; they had succeeded and that was their end-goal. Whereas, those who did not succeed did speak, and, thus, their *Mizrahi* voice sounded like a symptom of lack of success and capabilities. Shenhav describes *HaKeshet*’s achievement in changing these discourses and reversing this pattern by providing successful people with a way to speak out as successful *Mizrahim*.

127 “An ‘assertive’ group flexes its Mizrachi muscles”, *Ha’aretz*, 28.05.2004, by Mazal Mualem
HaKeshet, through its members, changed the distorted image of Mizrahim and provided a way for Mizrahim to articulate their Mizrahi identification, for good and bad, in the public sphere. Moshe Karif (interview) proudly said that thanks to HaKeshet, “Mizrahi” was no longer only the worker from the Development Towns, but it was Professor Itzhak Saporta being interviewed on TV.

HaKeshet and its members produce an alternative to the Zionist narrative in two ways: by its actions as a movement, and through its members’ academic writings, artistic productions and other forms of expression. Moshe Karif (interview) was active in the Land Struggle, and said that he understood this struggle as narrative in nature. His approach to the fight for historical rights to land and justice in distribution was to produce an alternative that would change the relationship between groups of Jewish Israelis and, most significantly, challenge the base that created the existing tensions between those who established the state and those who immigrated after its establishment. Karif described further that the goals, methods and ideology of HaKeshet in this struggle were based on the tactic “from exposure to just distribution.”

HaKeshet member Pnina Motzafi-Haller (1998)\textsuperscript{128} described HaKeshet’s discursive impact as the emergence of a “clear, assertive, and unapologetic” Mizrahi voice, challenging a national historical narrative written from a narrow, very particular perspective, excluding all groups other than its authors. In her view, this emerging Mizrahi voice fragments the existing narrative in a positive way, and thus “signals the hope for a more democratic future for Israel in a post-Zionist era” (ibid). In order to undo the distortion and disfigurements Zionist history has inflicted on regional Jews, Motzafi-Haller suggests including in the Israeli narrative Jewish history from the MENA region. She proposes to include for example writings of the Sephardi intellectual and activist in Palestine Eliyahu Elyashar, who lived and wrote in Palestine when the first Zionists arrived. Elyashar attempted to establish co-existence with his Arab Palestinian neighbours and opposed what he understood as demonisation of Arabs by East European Zionists (ibid). Ammiel Alcalay uses Elyashar as an example of a non-Western Jew whose works, and life story, are neglected. According to Alcalay, the contribution of

\textsuperscript{128} Quoted from Pnina Motzafi-Haller, “A Mizrahi Call for a More Democratic Israel—Israel at 50,” Tikkun, Mar.-Apr. 1988
most Jewish writers, thinkers and historical figures from the Arab world and the Levant are unavailable in English, and this is, according to him because they are “deemed marginal in relation to the central narrative of modern Jewish history” (Alcalay, 1993:10).

Both Motzafi-Haller, who in her article defines HaKeshet’s agenda as fighting for social equality beyond the Mizrahi category, and specifically mentions women and Palestinians, and Yossi Dahan (2000) in an interview in the Jerusalem Post, claim that HaKeshet is the only or “real” left in contemporary Israel. For Motzafi-Haller the goal is a post-Zionist society. For Dahan the key word is multiculturalism, which to him means that Western civilisation is not better than Eastern civilisation. He explains that HaKeshet is different from the Israeli left, which he describes as elitist and Ashkenazi, “with a very limited degree of pluralism” (ibid). Dahan compares HaKeshet with Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition and emphasises the importance of HaKeshet’s criticism of the Israeli left and its socioeconomic policy, which in his view is not progressive but rather creates imbalances and ensures comfortable lives for this predominantly Ashkenazi Israeli left.

Karif and Dahan were both active in the Land Struggle, and Karif further explained (interview) how the method of activism “from exposure to just distribution” was built on academic research of the historical development, subsequently translated into a media campaign. This latter part was his task. He literally took the discourse about land from the economic pages in the newspapers, and put it on the front cover. Because, when this was “hidden” in the economic pages, no-one noticed or understood it. Whereas, when he moved it and changed the type of journalistic language, people understood that this discourse was important for them. “It is all about discourse – who understands and who transmits it and how,” Karif (interview) concluded. As will be shown in part three, the Land Struggle followed this pattern: (1) research and exposure, (2) reactions and petition and (3) resolution and just redistribution.

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129 Alcalay challenges this neglect in his book After Jews and Arabs; Remaking Levantine Culture (1993) and actively tries to change this trend with his anthology Keys to the Garden (1996). In addition to Alcalay, G. N. Giladi (1990) and Michelle U. Campos (2005) discuss Elyashar and his role as a Sephardi leader and intellectual.
Meirav Alush (interview) researched the media coverage of the Land Struggle and found that in both HaKeshet members’ writings and journalistic reports about the case, social justice and not identity politics (or “Mizrahi issues”) was the focus. She concluded that in terms of influencing public discourse by introducing a Mizrahi narrative, HaKeshet failed in this case, whereas is did have influence in terms of introducing the notion of social justice:

We followed the flow; we saw what would catch on in the public opinion and what the journalists were ready to accept and we followed their tendencies. If we had focused on the Mizrahi issue all the time we would not have succeeded as we did. So if you read the appeal to the Supreme Court you will see politics of identity. But not in the decision by the court, the court was influenced by the media and the public discourse and the emphasis was on the principle of social justice. The court never said “We accept, like HaKeshet claim in the petition, that Development Towns unlike the kibbutz were discriminated against (interview).

Ofir Abu (interview) also acknowledged that to change the discourse one needs patience. It is a slow process and HaKeshet can have projects that influence either on an individual level or together. He gave the example of the Cultural Project, organised by HaKeshet member and artist Shula Keshet in 2005 with the aim of promoting cultural exchange between Arabs and Jews of Middle Eastern descent. In cooperation with the Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens in Israel, Mossawa, among other partners, the project consisted of travelling exhibitions, catalogues and documentations about the project, as well as conferences and seminars (Project Rationale). Abu (interview) noted that this project facilitated meetings between Mizrahim and Arabs, and that this is important because of the image of Mizrahim as very nationalistic and as people who hate Arabs, due to the majority voting for Likud.

As was illustrated with the examples of Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Sami Shalom Chetrit and Yehouda Shenhav in the beginning of this Part, HaKeshet members have written academically about the construction of the Mizrahi category and its consequences for those who have been categorised. Lately, HaKeshet members have begun discussing racism in Israel next to discrimination and inequality. “Racism” has until recently been a word avoided in Israeli politics and public discourse. However, it was heavily present in public discourse in the latest elections, as shown by remarks made by politicians and the electorate regarding Labour Chair Amir Peretz’ ethnic identity. One example was Shimon
Peres’ brother, who described Amir Peretz as a “foreign body” in Labour and accused him and “his people from North Africa” of having taken over the party the way Franco did in Spain in the 1930s. Reuven Aberjil (interview), one of the oldest members in HaKeshet in terms of age, and with the longest history as a Mizrahi activist from his days in the Israeli Black Panthers in the 1970s, talked about racism in Zionist ideology:

Zionism is racism: it is based on racist and territorial power. Jews do not believe or do not want to believe Jews can be racist towards fellow Jews.

HaKeshet members Yonah and his Palestinian colleague Dr Ismael Abu-Saad co-authored the article Race and Racism in Contemporary Israel - European Zionist Heritage and its Impact (forthcoming). It discusses the image of Israel as a safe haven for persecuted Jews, and the disparity between this image and racist ideologies and practices in Israel. Focusing on institutional and state-supported manifestations of racism in Israeli society, and the historical and social forces that influenced this development, Abu-Saad and Yonah suggest that these manifestations are an “amalgamation of two kinds of modern European racist discourses: anti-Semite discourses and Orientalist/Colonialist discourses” (fortcoming:4). Worthwhile noting, but not further investigated here, is the import of modern European discourse both in the development of modern anti-Semitism in Arab countries, imported via European colonialism in the 19th century, and in the development of racism in the Zionist establishment in Palestine and later in the state of Israel, as described by Abu-Saad and Yonha.

Yonah is one of the most outspoken and critical members of HaKeshet, and has expressed his views on Israel’s immigration policy and fear of Palestinian demographic growth. In his article in the New Statesman (31.10.05), he connects the fear of “the demographic threat” to the Jewish state with the hegemonic desire to preserve Israel’s “European character”. He concludes that “Israel's demographic policies are nothing but a continuation of war by other means.” In an interview in Ha’aretz (13.10.2005), Yonah presented his understanding of multiculturalism that has taken the place of his former

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130 “Peres’ brother compares Amir Peretz to Franco”, Ha’aretz, 28.11.2005.
131 Yossi Yonah provided me with this unpublished article.
132 See Chapter One.
emphasis on “national, ethnic and gender distributive justice and equality.” To Yonah, multiculturalism means finding a solution that is applicable to all minority groups, beyond people categorised as Mizrahi. He explains how he has extended the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi discussion to include relations between Jews and Arabs, men and women, veterans and immigrants, citizens and migrant workers, and that this has enabled him to transcend victimisation as Mizrahi (ibid).

When prompted to describe his ideal, utopian state, Yonah describes a state that is Jewish based on a Jewish majority, but that by no other arrangements is exclusively Jewish (ibid). When asked if he is still a Zionist, and if it frightened him to say he is not a Zionist, he answered that it did frighten him (ibid):

I admit that I do not connect with that word, Zionism. It does not express who I am. In my youth I was a Zionist. But not today. I am afraid of the internal reverberation of that response within me. I am afraid of the reverberation of a statement like that in my extended family and in my close milieu generally. I am connected umbilically to this place. I am very angry at this place. But strongly connected.

Ofir Abu (interview) said that he is not a Zionist, based on the exclusion of Mizrahim in this ideology, and due to the occupation:

I started to think differently about the occupation and Intifada and I became a leftist who is anti-Zionist completely. Not just because of the Palestinian issues, also because of the Mizrahi issue: someone who works for Mizrahiut and thinks there is a place for this in Zionism does not know what he talks about. Zionism has a task that does not need the Mizrahim. It is not even interested in what the Mizrahim need. The Mizrahi story is not part of the Zionist agenda.

Henriette Dahan-Kalev (interview) expressed her own double-position vis-à-vis Zionism this way: “I am a Jewish Arab woman with a complex of Zionism.” She explained that from the age of five she was told that Zionism is her redemptive ideology, and she acknowledged that despite having come to a different ideological and intellectual conclusion through studies and experiences, she is not able to rid herself of what she was told as a child. Zionist teachings have become part of her, even though she critically identifies them as indoctrinations: “it is running in my blood,” she said (ibid).
2. A Middle Eastern Perspective

Art curator Avi Steinitz is one of the few Ashkenazi long-time members of HaKeshet. He understands Mizrahi as “the Jewish communities who immigrated from the Arab and Islamic world to Israel” and Mizrahiut as a “political agenda that in a way opposes the Western-oriented Israeli culture by presenting an alternative that is connected to the Middle East and to Arab countries” (interview). Steinitz explained further that this political agenda does not perceive the region in a hostile manner, but prefers to be part of the region through cooperation. He declares that not everybody has to be Mizrahi in order to have this understanding and view of the concept of Mizrahiut. Similarly, Sami Shalom Chetrit (2004) defined the Mizrahi struggle not with an ethnic definition, but as being for all those who believe in the struggle for social justice, cultural freedom and the integration of Israel into the Oriental space.

In the Introduction, Israeli sociologist Gil Eyal (2006) explained how the creation of the state of Israel started the process of separation of “Arabs outside” and “Arabs inside”. Before the state of Israel, Middle Eastern studies at the Hebrew University included all that was understood to encompass “the Orient”: Arabs, Islam, Arab Jews, Bedouins, certain aspects of Judaism, and Palestinians. However, after the state was established, the state-borders and national boundaries became reflected in the new domains of expertise. In other words, the Arab Jews ceased to be Arabs and became Jewish “communities from the East”. Also Raz-Krakotzkin (2004: 172) has described how “the scholarly interest in Jews from the Arab world continued only until they were included in Zionist planning.” The regional aspect of HaKeshet members’ Mizrahiut can thus be understood as an attempt to undo this academic and discursive disenchantment.

HaKeshet members Karif and Mahleb, who are on different poles regarding how to achieve a negotiated peace with the Palestinians, both talk of the regional belonging of Mizrahim in general and themselves in particular. Karif (interview) stated:

Israel must be part of its geographical-cultural context – we are in the Middle East. It is forbidden for us to be Western in the Middle East, forbidden to be in the middle or on one side in the Christian-Muslim divide. Why does not the European discourse understand Israel? They do not see how bad the “leftist” Labour is for example. The peace between my Likud-voting father and his Arab co-worker when they listen together to and share Arab music; their cultural relations and understanding is much more dramatic than that between [Israeli Meretz politician Yossi] Beilin and Abu
Mazen [Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas]. It is not only class, it is also cultural. This is the model I want: to be Jewish and Muslim and to be together. And you think Beilin can bring this?

Similarly, Mahleb (interview) stated:

I am from this region; my neighbours are not Europeans but Egyptians and Syrians. I do not agree that European culture is above ours; this is a geo-political issue.

Shiko Behar (1997:68) goes one step further in his regional perspective and engages his critical perspective in his analysis of Ashkenazi Zionists and Arab nationalism with the aim to “further develop the Mizrahi argument within the context of the political history of the entire Middle East in the 20th century.” According to Behar, Mizrahim/Arab Jews were excluded and included in both these national movements, and constitute the most unexplained factor in studies of both these nationalisms. Thus, he holds that because of their passive roles as recipients of “brutal subjections to political, economic and legal practices of both Zionism and Arab nationalism,” the Mizrahim/Arab Jews are central in understanding the development and results of these two nationalisms (Behar, 1997:70). This is because of the nature of being both Jewish and Arab:

We, Arab-Jews, were Arabs, and we, Arab-Jews, were Jews” (ibid).

Behar calls for challenges to both sides of the Arab versus Jew dichotomy, by re-interpreting the political history of the Middle East in the 20th century, and thus creating the basis for new understanding of what happened in 1948. To Behar it is 1948 and not 1967 that is the point of departure. Why HaKeshet does not follow up this idea and desire to interrogate it is discussed in Chapter Six. The importance of feeling at home, or the lack of this feeling in Israeli society, is further explored in the next section.

3. An Intellectual Home

Several of my interviewees have spoken about the importance of HaKeshet as a home for its members. Reuven Aberjil said (interview) that he had joined HaKeshet because it was his home. To him, HaKeshet is the Black Panthers in a new way. When asked why there are no Palestinian members in the movement, the Director of HaKeshet Nurit Hadad (interview) explained that even though there are Ashkenazi members in HaKeshet, they
do not feel at home. That taken into consideration, she did not think an Arab would feel at home in *HaKeshet* (but she added that they would not reject Arab members).

Another example of the image of *HaKeshet* as a “home” indicated who is assumed to belong in this home. At a *HaKeshet* meeting I asked a young female *HaKeshet* member who someone was. Instead of explaining who this person was she, unprompted, responded that she was not really sure what he was doing there: because he was Ashkenazi. She elaborated that she was not sure what he was searching for, and if he could find it, “[…] a *Mizrahi* movement, where he clearly is not at home.”

Symbolically, “home” represents a space that provides security and something familiar, somewhere to relax and be with people with whom one has a relationship. Moreover, one feels understood “at home” and does not have to explain feelings or experiences that people from the outside might not have experienced or thought of. In the case of *Mizrahi* activism, a “home” becomes a space where activists can socialise, discuss and take action with people from similar backgrounds and/or with similar experiences. All of these factors make feelings experienced by individual members, such as having been discriminated against or feeling different, less of an isolated experience. Through commonness in experiences, members are able to view their individual experiences as pieces of the puzzle constituting the history of Israeli society. This again makes the individual stronger and gives his and her experience greater legitimacy.

The degree to which *HaKeshet* is perceived as an intellectual home is related to the members’ individual ways of joining the movement, whether they come from former activism and “homes” like Aberjil, or belong to the Coming Out of the Category as described above. Whereas interviewees in *HaKeshet* from both backgrounds have spoken of the general importance of the function of the movement as an intellectual home for *Mizrahi* activists, most interviewees who come from previous activism backgrounds said that this was not so important to them personally. However, to someone like Yehouda Shenhav (interview) for example, who came out as a *Mizrahi* as a result of meeting people of similar background and with similar experiences, *HaKeshet* provided a safe framework wherein he could deal with the complexities of his social categorisation and

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134 *HaKeshet* meeting, February 2005.
marginalisation. *HaKeshet* can thus be characterised as a space wherein *Mizrahim* are “coming out” or to which they turn after having come out. That is, a place where *Mizrahim* are provided with an environment where they can find others with whom to confirm their self-identification. This space further provides a context in which *Mizrahim* can express themselves, and reflect on their recognition of their own, and their groups’ past and present experiences of discrimination, stemming from their imposed *Mizrahi* identity categorisation.

Dahan-Kalev (interview) described that her discovery of the similarities in the personal stories of the initiators of *HaKeshet* made her write her article about the establishment of *HaKeshet*:

I started looking into my friends’ backgrounds and I found something fascinating, all of us had experienced being thrown out of school in one way or the other. None of us was the “good pupil,” none of us was found to be intelligent. Another thing I found was that all were defined by their teachers in elementary or in high school as retarded! In my case, I was recommended to become a clerk. In Yossi Yonah’s case they suggested he become a carpenter. Yehouda Shenhav worked in an oil factory. Everyone were failures of the educational system. And today we all have PhDs. So you end up with a small group of people who first failed in the regular system, and then refused to be failures, because we were not really retarded and we had all experienced injustice, and finally we made it all the way through university.

Pnina Motsafi-Haller (interview) referred to the same sentiment of togetherness, and excitement about having found a social network of people from the same social class, who thought in the same way as she did when she joined *HaKeshet*. Similarly, Shenhav (interview) explained how for him being part of establishing the network of *HaKeshet* was like “finding a home”, inhabited by people with the same experiences, people who also had concealed their identity, and who shared his feelings of shame. In this new context he could disclose his identity and his relationship with his Arab background. “It was a euphoric feeling!” Shenhav (interview) exclaimed, still resounding with past enthusiasm: “I became enchanted, I made friends and networks – we thought we would bring revolution.”

Neta Amar, former *HaKeshet* member and human rights lawyer and activist, added another and more factual perspective on the issue of home. She wrote about the

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135 The article is Dahan-Kalev H. 1998, “*Keshet* the *Mizrahi* Democratic Rainbow” (see Bibliography)
experience of losing homes shared by Palestinians and Mizrahim (Amar, 2003). Her argument is that both of these groups have lost their homes, Palestinians to the Israeli/Zionist army in 1948 and afterwards up to this day, and Mizrahim in their homelands prior to Israel. Further, she argues, this loss has political, social, economic and psychological ramifications, and that, despite the difference in factual circumstances (and the tragic irony that Mizrahim are soldiers partaking in the continuous destruction of Palestinian homes), the despair felt due to the loss has the same source. This, moreover, results in the same search for a home, or, as she puts it, “[…] a home that does not exist” (ibid).

The emphasis on the feelings of being “at home” in HaKeshet for Mizrahi activists has also been highlighted by people outside of HaKeshet. Ella Shohat (interview) recollected how when she was a young Mizrahi activist, her intellectual home was in the Mizrahi left with her activist friends. As a PhD student, she moved back to Israel to write her dissertation, where she used to lecture at Mizrahi leftist organisations on these issues. This was in the 1970s and 80s, many years before the establishment of HaKeshet. From my observations, HaKeshet seems to be the main such home-space for secular Mizrahim today. Another and less positive effect of the homely atmosphere in HaKeshet was identified by Shiko Behar, who was formerly active in HaKeshet. He described HaKeshet as “a cultural club” that offers “therapy for a group of secular, educated, middle-class Mizrahim, where they can feel at home and feel good about themselves” (interview). He stressed that this space for intellectual Mizrahi interaction is important in itself, however, in his opinion, this should not be the purpose of the movement. The objective of HaKeshet should be to try to democratise and change Israeli society, instead of being a social club. “Because of this development I distanced myself from HaKeshet,” Behar (interview) concluded.

Moreover, not all HaKeshet members feel at home in the movement. Dentist and HaKeshet member Rafi Shubeli described himself as a Yemeni (Jewish) activist more than a member of HaKeshet (interview). He said that to him being a member of HaKeshet is a strategy, and that he does not feel at home in HaKeshet, but in other Yemeni Jewish organisations. In HaKeshet Shubeli finds partners for coalitions and power with which to
fight for Yemeni Jewish issues, but he does not feel at home in the movement because it is too secular for him.

Another related question that arises with this emphasis on HaKeshet as a home for Mizrahi activists is: what about Ashkenazi members? As indicated by the Director of HaKeshet, as well as by the young female member, Ashkenazim are not thought to feel at home in HaKeshet. I asked three Ashkenazi members about this. Former HaKeshet member and lawyer Dr Sandy Kedar (interview), who represented HaKeshet in the Land Struggle (to be examined below), gave the view that one of the major tensions in HaKeshet is “under-the-table tensions between Mizrahim and non-Mizrahim.” He felt that for most members of HaKeshet it was not easy that an Ashkenazi, and moreover one from what he described as an “elite founding family” was at the forefront of the major struggle of the movement (ibid). And it was not only he that is Ashkenazim, but also the other lawyer representing HaKeshet in the case, Avidgor Feldman and his assistant. Kedar told me that Moshe Karif, as the spokesperson for HaKeshet, had the job of deciding which members were interviewed by what media, and that Karif was under a lot of pressure from HaKeshet to have other people than Kedar and Feldman speaking on behalf of the movement. According to Kedar, Karif told him that racism is not only present in Ashkenazim.

Another Ashkenazi HaKeshet member, Micha Rahman (interview), responded to the question about not being Mizrahi, by saying that HaKeshet is not a racist movement. Rather, he experienced it to be warm and receptive, and said he never had any problems because of his non-Mizrahi background. “What is Ashkenazi anyway?” he rhetorically answered, and pointed out that he had always worked in “non-Ashkenazi territory” in his social activism. Ami Steinitz (interview) also said his Ashkenazi identity had never been a problem. However, he admitted that there is a difference between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Israelis, and also between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi members of HaKeshet:

I experienced different things, but not the socioeconomic gaps that Mizrahim experienced. My gap is with Europe and not so much inside with Israeli society. As a family of Holocaust survivors we were not accepted as heroes in the beginning, but as people who did not fight for their lives. We are “Diaspora people,” not like the Israeli people who established the state and established an alternative Jewish identity. In that sense there were gaps between the older Israeli society, the pre-48 [Zionist population], and the Holocaust survivors. Therefore coming from a family
of Holocaust survivors I have some immigrant issues from the 1950s and 1960s that are similar to the Mizrahim. But, after 15-20 years here my parents became part of the Western-oriented society, so the rift is between me and Europe, as their son.

When asked why there are no Palestinian Arab members in HaKeshet Steinitz replied:

It is an Israeli organisation, Palestinians even within Israel have their own organisations, and there are still no clear reasons for them [to join HaKeshet], unless it is an organisational collaboration. But, to join – as members? There is no home for them there. Most of the discussions will not deal with them. Not like in HILA where [Palestinians from] Jaljuliya and [Mizrahim from] Sderot are equal.
Chapter 5

The Land Struggle - Discourse and Dispute

This chapter will discuss HaKeshet’s reasoning behind the case known as the Land Struggle. As briefly outlined in the Introduction, the movement petitioned the High Court, opposing implementations of decisions made by the Israel Land Administration (ILA) regarding use and distribution of state land. The main reason behind the petition was that the implementation of the decisions in question would disfavour those citizens who do not lease national land and benefit those who do. This chapter will focus on what the movement reacted to; why it reacted as it did; how its members organised and publicly argued their case; and finally, the outcome of this struggle.

The Land Struggle will illustrate the observed discrepancy between HaKeshet’s discourse and its practical actions, and will in this way provide further material for discussion of the main empirical question asked in this dissertation: why the social movement HaKeshet, made up of intellectual Mizrahim, whose discourse and presentation profess universalistic values, has difficulties with breaking out of its narrow circle in practice, especially in creating ties with Palestinian citizens of Israel.

As was explained in Chapter Two, of all HaKeshet’s activism, this study focuses on the Land Struggle because it is described by HaKeshet members and others as the largest and most successful struggle undertaken by the movement, imparting in this case a special significance for HaKeshet, as a movement and for its members. Moreover, as will become clear in this chapter, it is significant that HaKeshet chose the issue of land to fight for universal equality, considering that land is the most problematic issue in Israel-Palestine.

Below, a short overview and account of land control in Israel is provided in order to contextualise the Land Struggle, after which the reasoning behind the petition will be introduced. After this follows an interpretation of HaKeshet’s invitation to Palestinian organisations to join the petition; of it discourse and slogan; and, finally, the last section examines the outcomes of and reactions to this struggle.
Land Control in Israel

Land is at the very heart of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and relevant to all parties involved, those living in Israel and in the occupied territory, as well as to Palestinians in exile. According to Raz-Krakotzkin (2004:167), the Zionist myth of the Jewish “return” to the land believed to be their home constitutes the flipside of the notion of the “negation of the exile”. He explains that this notion expresses the orientalist nature of Zionist discourse and is thus to be considered the “core of Zionist consciousness” (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2004:166-7). The negation was of “[…] all that was considered ‘Oriental’ by western Jews” and that simultaneously “demonstrates a desire to integrate the Jews and their history into the narrative of the west”. Raz-Krakotzkin draws on the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said who describes Israeli relations to this land as “a mythical perception of ‘The Land’ as the national motherland” based on a “national-theological perception.”

This perception further ignores the history of Palestine since the Second Temple, as well as Arab existence on the land that was regarded as “inconsequential, and subsequently rejected to the point of obliteration.” “The Land” was, according to Said, had no history outside of its place in the Jewish-Christian theological myth”, and was furthermore considered to “be in exile, until its return to its original ‘husbands’ ”.

Above, HaKeshet member Shlomo Varzana emphasised the importance of the Land Struggle for Mizrahim to feel like ba’al habayit: land owners. The different uses and perspectives in the understandings of these terms and their significance is a hint to the problematic issues when arguing for land-ownership and belonging in Israel-Palestine. As introduced in Part I, Oren Yiftachel (2000) has developed a critical perspective on the relationship between land and nationalism in Israel, with his description of Israel as an “ethnocracy”, defined as a specific type of nationalism that aims to “ethnicise” the contested territory and society in question.

Concurring with, and also later a co-writer of Yiftachel, HaKeshet’s lawyer in the Land Struggle, Sandy Kedar, wrote about this land-controlling system in his doctoral dissertation entitled “Israeli Land Regime: An empirical-legal investigation” (1986)

137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
where he examined the relationship between Israeli law and confiscation of Palestinian land. According to Kedar, the aim at the core of the historical development in the relationships between land, agriculture, law, and society in Israel, is Judaisation of land, a continuous process that is enforced and controlled through the “Israeli Land Regime” (Kedar, interview). In his PhD dissertation he developed the understanding of the Israeli Land Regime as “a collectivist-nationalist land regime” (ibid). According to Kedar and Yiftachel (2006), the Israeli Land Regime was originally shaped by (a) Nationalization of Arab and other lands, (b) preservation of firm national control over these lands and (c) a selective allocation of possession and land-use among different sectors within Jewish society.

This is how land ownership in Israel is described on the ILA website:

93% of the land in Israel is public domain; that is, either property of the state, the Jewish National Fund (J.N.F) or the Development Authority. The ILA is the government agency responsible for managing this land which comprises 5,750,000 acres. “Ownership” of real-estate in Israel usually means leasing rights from the ILA for 49 or 98 years.139

To provide a perspective on the Jewish National Fund and the Development Authority, Peled and Navot (2005:8) use the term “political order” instead of “state” to describe the nature of the relationship between the Israeli state and these Jewish agencies utilized to perform state policy. The land rights outlined by the ILA in practice bars Palestinian citizens of Israel from leasing land, because the land is controlled by Jewish agencies, whose sole purpose is to keep Israeli land under Jewish control, open for use by Jews. Adalah objected to the way ILA and the Jewish National Fund discriminated against Palestinian citizens in its oral intervention submitted together with Habitat International Coalition to the UN Commission on Human Rights in March 2005. In the intervention the administration of land in Israel was described from a Palestinian point of view:140

Since 1948, large tracts of Palestinian-Arab-owned land have been confiscated, or otherwise appropriated, under Israeli law and taken into the possession of the state or Zionist institutions, such as the Jewish Agency, the World Zionist Organization and the JNF, for the exclusive use of those holding ‘Jewish nationality,’ whether they are citizens of Israel or not. Under Israeli law, this land cannot be sold to individuals.

140 See: http://www.Adalah.org/eng/intladvocacy/JNFUNCHR.pdf
and the ILA allocates leasing rights to ‘Jewish nationality’ holders for 49–98 years. The 19.5 million dunams of land (about 78 million acres) managed by the ILA are comprised of lands controlled by the state, the Development Authority and the JNF. Israel's Basic Law: Israel Lands (1960) categorize these lands as ‘Israel Lands’.

This particular intervention was a protest against the manner in which the ILA administers land owned by the Jewish National Fund that amounts to 13 percent of land in Israel:

[...] The Palestinian minority in Israel constitutes nearly 20% of the population, and yet the allocation of public lands by the state overwhelmingly benefits Jewish citizens. [...] In particular, Habitat International Coalition and Adalah wish to draw the Commission’s attention to the policy of the Israel Lands Administration (ILA), a state agency, prohibiting Palestinian citizens of Israel from leasing Jewish National Fund (JNF) lands, all of which fall under the management and administration of the ILA. As a result of this policy, non-Jewish (in particular, Palestinian citizens) of Israel have no access to 13% of ‘Israel Lands.’ Allowing the perpetuation of this discriminatory policy will result in the institutionalization of apartheid-like human settlements in which citizens of Israel are segregated along racial and ethnic criteria. [...] To place this figure in historical context, the UN Palestine Commission reported that, as of January 1948, the JNF held only 600,000 dunams, approximately. It should be emphasized that the JNF claims that it bought 1.25 million dunams of land from the state immediately after the establishment of Israel, using donations from Jews from around the world. These acquisitions totalled close to 2,000,000 dunams, or approximately 78% of the total land currently held by the JNF. These were actually acquired by the JNF from the state in 1949 and 1953.

Kedar and Yiftachel (2000;2006) confirm that land is managed in a hierarchical and non-egalitarian manner, benefitting the Ashkenazi Zionist “founders” through the Israeli Land Regime and its transfers of land to bodies such as the ILA. They explain that this management further allocates land following secretive and centralised decision-making processes also controlled by the “founders”. This system has further, according to Kedar, undergone significant partial privatisation since the early 1990s. Kedar argues that this privatisation mainly benefits members of the Israeli “founding elites”, in other words the Ashkenazi Zionist establishment. Other groups, of which Kedar emphasises Palestinian citizens of Israel and Mizrahim residing in Development Towns and poor city neighbourhoods, have not gained from this process. Kedar (interview) sees this privatisation as part of efforts to preserve Jewish national control over land, resulting in what he describes as a reconciliation of privatisation and nationalism.
HaKeshet member Moshe Karif (interview) also spoke about the non-egalitarian management of land by what he labelled the “Land Lobby”, which he further described as a handful of people from all political parties who have common interests. He mentioned Abu Vilan from Meretz, Shalom Shimron from Labour, who lives on a moshav in the north, Ariel Sharon from Likud, and Tzvi Evedel from the National Religious Party, to illustrate how this Lobby crosses party affiliations and to indicate that he is talking about people in powerful positions, such as the current Prime Minister. According to Karif, these few individual Israelis are more powerful than all the political parties put together. Taking into consideration the presentation of Development Towns, kibbutzim and moshavim in the Introduction and from all the different arguments presented here, it becomes clear that land is not only at the centre of the conflict with the Palestinians, but is also a focal point in inter-Jewish Israeli inequality and relations.

HaKeshet Petitions the High Court

In the petition against the ILA decisions, HaKeshet presented itself as a social movement that is non-party and non-parliamentary affiliated, with the aim to influence the public agenda and the intention to make general change in Israeli society and institutions. The movement introduced its members as second and third generation Israelis of Mizrahi origin from all over Israel, representing different strata of the population and society. The goals of the movement were presented as equal rights and respectful existence for all individuals in political, cultural and socioeconomic spheres. This would be sought through producing even-handed statements about resources and their allocations among all of the groups making up the Israeli population. As the legal philosopher and HaKeshet member Yossi Dahan (interview) explained: “It is a discourse on rights – not from a group that wants more, but based on universal values that also includes Arab citizens.” However, as will be observed, despite this universal emphasis, HaKeshet was unable to integrate Palestinian citizens when the movement went to court in order to make sure land in Israel is distributed fairly among its citizens.

141 Ariel Sharon was the Prime Minister when this interview was conducted in May 2005.
142 I obtained the petition from HaKeshet’s lawyer Sandy Kedar.
In the petition submitted to the High Court of Justice in Jerusalem, *HaKeshet* demanded a cancellation of decisions 737, 727, 533 and 611 made by the ILA and the Council of Israeli Land. These decisions changed the aim and use of agricultural land in a manner that benefited the land leasers who were mostly people living in *kibbutzim* and also *moshavim*. *HaKeshet* opposed the implementations of these decisions, which would result in re-zoning of leased land, as well as the decisions to change how land leasers would be compensated, arguing that if implemented, this would disfavour citizens who did not lease land.

Since the establishment of the state, Israeli governments have appropriated agricultural land when they needed to build housing for immigrants, to construct roads, or for other purposes. The agriculturalists have been compensated with a per dunam price. In the 1990s more than one million Russian immigrants in need of housing created demand for land and this demand concurred with economic difficulties faced by *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*. According to the new ILA decisions (737, 727, 533 and 611), made when Ariel Sharon was chairing the ILA (Dakwar):

Holders of agricultural lands in the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* were given the option to change the purpose of their land and to receive a significant cut of the land with new purposes. In addition, the implications of these decisions are benefits in amounts exceeding thousands of percents more than the compensation the Jewish farmers would have been entitled to according to the situation preceding these decisions.

However, the “Land Lobby” surprisingly opposed this, according to Dakwar, because they feared that the land might get into the wrong hands. A new bill was initiated that anchored the farmers rights in the land, with the intention to (Dakwar):

[…] transfer the effective possession of the land from the State to the hands of the Jewish farmers in the *kibbutzim* and *moshavim*. Clause 2 of the bill provides that holders of agricultural land shall have a perpetual lease right for 196 years divided into periods of 49 year each. In addition, the bill sets generous compensation mechanism for farmers whose lands shall undergo a process of change of purpose and release for construction.

According to Dakwar, *HaKeshet’s* petition against these decisions requested to maintain the status quo prior to the decisions, and argued that this would benefit all deprived groups in Israeli society, meaning MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens. Kedar represented *HaKeshet* in the Land Struggle, and was responsible for much of the legal
preparations and analysis behind the petition. Kedar (interview) related how in 1993-4 he began to follow the new regulations of agricultural land and the change of land use that was coupled with other measures, resulting in more land for kibbutzim and moshavim:

What I saw is a land revolution [in the meaning of “transformation”], but a very ‘regressive’ one, going on without any public debate. So I was trying to give this some attention, trying to convince some NGOs [to get involved], but no-one was into it.

In 1997 Kedar taught a course called Israeli Land Regime about agricultural land, Palestinians and the kibbutzim in the Department of Law at the semi-private Academic College. In an article in Ha’aretz he read about a new movement called HaKeshet which discussed public housing and justice of distribution, and this aroused his curiosity. Shortly afterwards, he was approached by one of his students who was a member of HaKeshet. It was decided to introduce Kedar to the movement, and this is how he got involved in what became the Land Struggle.

With Kedar on board, HaKeshet petitioned the High Court in protest against the unequal distribution of land, which the movement argued is a national asset belonging to all members of Israeli society. The movement was against rezoning of land and changes in use of land that benefited the predominantly Ashkenazi group making up the establishment in Israeli society. HaKeshet argued that this group had profited from this land since the establishment of the state. This perspective is evident in then-spokesperson Moshe Karif’s reaction after the ruling in favour of HaKeshet’s petition: “This land belongs to everyone and so everyone should benefit from it,” and HaKeshet member Meirav Alush added: “The land is a national resource. It does not belong to a single group, as close as that group might be to the corridors of power” (Ha’aretz, 29/08/2002).

The argument in the petition itself makes mention of the fact that Mizrahim, similar to Ashkenazim, have worked both for and on the land itself, and/or contributed to the state by paying taxes; by participating in the military; by providing Israel with a working class for its industry; and by giving birth to new Israelis. Basically this argument is: “We also contributed to this state – this (the land) is ours (We meaning Mizrahim) as much as it is yours (You meaning Ashkenazim).” This line of argument clearly excludes Palestinian citizens of Israel, as will be further discussed below when interpreting the choice of
narrative and HaKeshet’s invitation to organisations representing Palestinian citizens. As articulated by former HaKeshet member, Palestinian citizen Nabih Bashir: 143

Equality should not be claimed on the grounds that ‘I am also a Zionist’ but on the grounds that I am also a human being, or at least on the grounds that I am also a citizen or resident of the state.

All present or former members of HaKeshet talk (and write) about the fact that state property is unjustly and unevenly distributed between groups of Israeli citizens, and all express agreement about the internal-Jewish discrimination in distribution and the resulting continuous gaps between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, accompanied with claims for equal rights for Mizrahim to state property as citizens. However, there are divergences in perspectives and in argument among members in relation to the inclusion or exclusion of Palestinian citizens. For example, Behar, Yonah and Saporta include Palestinians on all levels in their analysis and criticism, whereas Karif only addresses the inequality between the two major Jewish Israeli groups, Mizrahim and Ashkenazim.

“Is it conceivable that the State of Israel will write off $1 billion worth of home-mortgages-debt for the Palestinian and Mizrahi citizens who constitute its working class?” Behar (2000), asked in his article “Die la-Kibbush or Die la-Kibbutz?” (“Stop the Occupation or Stop the Kibbutzim?”).

Behar was criticizing the decision by the state to forgive kibutz-debts, an admittance that coincided with the rezoning of land. Altogether the kibutz-debt written off by the state, banks and other creditors amounted to $2.8 billion. According to Behar, this happened during the same time (in 1990-2000) as the state allocated the much smaller sum of $230 million to Proyekt Shikum HaShechunot: a restoration project for Mizrahi working class neighborhoods, or slums as Behar calls them. He concludes that the differences in the sums of money provided to the two groups, the Ashkenazi kibbutzim and poor Mizrahi neighborhoods, stem from racism. What else would cause the state to treat different social segments of Jewish Israelis so dissimilarly?, he asks (ibid).

HaKeshet members Yossi Yonah and Itzhak Saporta (2002) argued that understanding the allocation of rights to land and housing is crucial in order to comprehend Israel’s

143 Quoted in Yonah and Saporta, 2002:13.
national identity, and it shows how the structural laws underly the construction of this national identity and the state’s definition of citizenship. They argue that by looking at the differential nature of allocation, partial allocation and deprivation of land, as well as on rights to housing in different sectors of Israeli society, one can see the emergence of a socioeconomic stratification along national and ethnic lines. In terms of Palestinian citizens, Yonah and Saporta (ibid:10) argue that they are excluded from land rights due to racist nationalist polices that favour Jewish citizens, whereas Mizrahim are not considered ba’alei beit (land-owners) because they did not sacrifice for the “redemption of the land” and thus, unlike the Ashkenazi Zionists, are not considered to deserve it.

Inviting the Other Other

During preparations, HaKeshet invited the Palestinian legal human rights organisation Adalah to join the petition. Kedar (interview) conveyed how he tried to convince Adalah to file the petition together with HaKeshet: “I told them ‘Listen you have to be in the game, they are talking about land; go and tell your story’.” However, Adalah Director Hassan Jabareen (interview) responded that as long as the goal of HaKeshet in the struggle is limited to changing the decisions by the management of land in Israel, and not to change the principles by which land is distributed and controlled, Adalah as a Palestinian organisation could not join them.

The fact that HaKeshet invited the Palestinian Israeli organisation Adalah to join them on the issue of land, the most contested matter in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, both inside and outside the state of Israel, and considering the premises of HaKeshet’s approach, this indicates that the movement did not appreciate their impact for Palestinians. As explained by Jabareen (2002), land for the Palestinians is a national issue, and not a social issue as it is for HaKeshet and Mizrahi Jewish citizens of Israel. The question is whether HaKeshet’s strategy was a result of ignorance and forgetfulness of the Palestinian predicament, or whether it was a result of a conscious and pragmatic choice preferred in order to increase the chances of winning the court case.

I participated at the Land Day commemoration near Shafa’amr (north of Haifa) 30th of March 2005. In 1976 the quieted Palestinian citizens called for a general strike in order to
protest against land expropriations in the Galilee and six Palestinian protesters were killed by the police in the protests that erupted, and since then this day commemorates the collective struggle against land confiscations and disposessions of the Palestinians in Israel. I was surprised that HaKeshet as a movement, or none of its members, participated in this commemoration in solidarity with the Palestinian citizens and for their historical land rights. When I voiced this surprise with HaKeshet members they seemed as surprised by this suggestion as I was by their absence.

In retrospect, several HaKeshet members acknowledged that they forgot to consider how their approach and discourse would affect Palestinian citizens. For example, Yehouda Shenhav, Sami Shalom Chetrit and Itzhak Saporta admitted that they were ignorant as to how their discourse, epitomised in the slogan “This land is also mine/ours”, would distance Palestinians from HaKeshet and from this particular struggle, as well as potentially further discriminate against Palestinian rights to land in Israel. These retrospective views will be further discussed below, after discussing the discourse on land and rights.

Those who were more directly involved in the court case itself, such as Kedar (interview), admitted that it was a pragmatic choice to argue within the framework of Zionist discourse, even though this was against his and others’ political and moral stands on the distribution of land. Kedar explained that the reasoning behind this pragmatic choice was that if they tried to argue for equal rights to land for all citizens, including Palestinians, they would most probably lose in court. Also, Adalah staff acknowledged this fact, and when they declined to join the petition for the reasons given above, they also conceded that without them, that is, without any Palestinian partners, HaKeshet’s chances of winning the petition would increase.

The main differences in relationship to land between MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens is that whereas for Jewish Mizrahi Israelis land is an issue of just social distribution, for Palestinian citizens of Israel land is associated with words like “expropriation”, “colonisation”, and “house demolitions” (Jabareen, 2002). And this is not just in historical perspective. Since 1996, beginning with the Benjamin Netanyahu

\[144\] For details about Land Day see Adalah, “History of the Palestinians in Israel”, Historical Background.
government, Palestinian citizens of Israel have increasingly been targeted by the state in different ways, by land expropriation, house demolitions and inequality in budget allocations (Peled and Navot, 2005). According to Peled and Navot (2005), this development continues up to today, and reached its peak in October 2000 when the police shot and killed thirteen Palestinians citizens of Israel. At the core of the problems of Palestinian citizens of Israel lies the Zionist perspective of Israel as a Jewish homeland, with territorial claims.

*HaKeshet*'s petition on distribution of land in Israel brought forth the core problem concerning land in Israel-Palestine, according to *Adalah* lawyer Suhad Bishara (interview). It clearly showed how discrimination in Israel is not only by class, but also by ethnicity and national category. Jafar Farah, Director of *Mossawa*, further problematised the subject by adding that, almost paradoxically, the ILA decisions *HaKeshet* petitioned can be used to demand that the government recognises the rights of the Bedouin community to their land in Israel. Farah (interview) admits that it is very complicated:

> We support their [*HaKeshet*'s] demand on the issue of allocation of land to the kibbutzim, we are against it […] because of national reasons etc we have enough reasons to be against giving the land to the kibbutzim. We were asked to support *HaKeshet*'s Land Struggle, but at the same time the government decisions to distribute or to privatise the land and to recognise the rights of the kibbutzim to their land could help us in arguing for the rights of the Bedouin to this land – so it is a complicated issue!

As argued by Shany Payes (2005), the dilemma for Palestinian NGOs is how to best present and argue their cases: by demanding regime change that could turn Israel into a civic state for all its citizens, or by focusing on specific interests? In the 1970s, Palestinian NGOs connected with the Communist Party, and in demanding regime change they were not accepted by the state as representatives of the Palestinian minority. Learning from exclusion, the Palestinian NGOs that emerged in the 1980s focused on change from within the system. *Mossawa* and *Adalah* are such organisations. *Adalah*’s Director Hassan Jabareen argued “that turning to legal procedures emphasises the importance of citizenship and civil rights issues for defining state-minority relations” (Payes, 2005:125). The organisation consciously chooses cases that represent first-time
legal challenges of issues of significance for the Palestinian minority. Moreover, Adalah considers influencing Israeli public and legal discourse as an aim on its own obtained by participating and raising issues through the media. However, the critical question is whether working for equality and change from within the system in fact prolongs and legitimises the discriminatory system. For example, one Adalah Board Member argued that the “Court is not a neutral institution, but an amour of the state, committed to laws that prefer the common good of Jews to that of Arabs” (Payes, 2005:126).

HaKeshet member and student Ofir Abu (interview) described how the Land Struggle in the beginning was focused and conceptualised as a struggle regarding the discrimination between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim in relation to land. It was a reaction to the fact that suddenly the state wanted to give land to 30 percent of the (Jewish) population, when the remaining (Jewish) population were not able to buy the apartments they have rented for generations. But, he said that HaKeshet was not saying “Let us divide the land between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim,” and that in fact HaKeshet was saying (interview):

‘Let us give the land back to the state and it has to divide it according to the needs in the society.’ It was about social justice - not only for Mizrahim, but also for Ashkenazim. Also the Arabs will be partners in our new division of land.

The unawareness displayed by HaKeshet regarding the predicament of Palestinian citizens of Israel became repeatedly clear during my fieldwork. HaKeshet members did exhibit knowledge about Palestinian organisations and groups, but to degrees that varied considerably, whereas Palestinian interviewees and NGOs demonstrated that they knew Israeli Jewish society well. For example, the Director of Mossawa explained how they had conducted research of other groups in Israeli society, to strategically plan their agenda and make this available and interesting for the Jewish public(s), in order to increase the understanding of the Palestinian community among Jews (interview). Through their research Mossawa was able to identify Jewish groups and organisations it could cooperate with on various issues, such as allying with Russian groups on language rights and with Mizrahim on issues of social and economic discrimination. Overall the main objective of Mossawa’s research was to increase knowledge of Jewish groups in
order to understand how to reach out to different groups and on what issues. According to Farah (interview), from Mossawa’s their analysis its members realised that several groups share parts of Mossawa’s agendas, despite not sharing its identity. Also Adalah demonstrated knowledge and awareness of Mizrahi identity and its situation of being discriminated against. For example, many of Adalah’s lawyers regularly read the academic critical Hebrew journal Teoria VeBikoret (Theory and Criticism), edited by Shenhav and published in Hebrew, where Mizrahi issues have been regularly debated. Overall, my Palestinian interviewees showed in-depth knowledge about MENA Jews and other groups of Jewish citizens.

Whereas HaKeshet conveyed a lack of knowledge regarding their other Other, the Palestinian organisations, and individual Palestinians interviewed about the Mizrahi struggle in general and about HaKeshet specifically, showed an impressive comprehension of Mizrahi predicaments, and of their historical background. HaKeshet, when approaching both Adalah and Mossawa to engage them in cooperation as representatives of marginalised groups, exposed what Meir Amor (interview), former HILA activist who now teaches sociology in Canada, called “blissful ignorance” about the internal political situation and about the sociology of Palestinian Israeli society. It seems reasonable to interpret that this dissimilarity is part of the power position of the involved parties. As a marginalised national minority, Palestinian activists consider it important to have knowledge about groups who are included in the hegemonic category of citizenship by their birth-right inclusion in the Jewish nation.

Considering ever-present and inescapable power relations between those included and those excluded from the nation, HaKeshet is Jewish from a Palestinian point of view, even though it represents marginalised Israelis. It can thus be seen as part of the Jewish dominant Israeli society. When discussing why HaKeshet has so little knowledge about the other Other, Amor (interview) hypothesised that HaKeshet members’ own interests were obstructing inclusion of Palestinians, and that this obstacle stems from their position of power. “Which is easier to relate to, post-modern and post-colonial debate around self-discovery, or real politics of social activism to engender change?” Amor asked rhetorically (interview). Against this backdrop, Adalah’s members’ reason for declining
to join the petition by HaKeshet seems similar to the Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s comments after Camp David. HaKeshet members’ response (interview): “But we invited them [Adalah] – they did not want to join us” resonates with Barak’s “We offered them all and they refused to accept.” HaKeshet thus seems to have fallen into internal-Jewish and Zionist arguments that contradict its universal values. For example, when confronted with their choice of slogan, many HaKeshet members responded that HaKeshet is a movement aimed at Mizrahim. This is further discussed below.

“This Land Is Also Mine”
To whom does the possessive “mine” in the slogan “This land is also mine” refer? To Mizrahi Israelis? To all citizens and residents of Israel? According to the former Palestinian member of HaKeshet, Nabih Bashir, the Land Struggle in fact resulted in a “distribution between thieves.” He explained that since HaKeshet was not able to escape the Zionist paradigm, they are not really acting in accordance with the ideas of multiculturalism. This is where the discrepancy between theory and practice is located.

This discrepancy is evident in the former spokesperson Karif’s (interview) comments about the Land Struggle not being a real estate struggle, but a narrative struggle about land and rights of land:

This has been looked upon in relation with Palestinians, but not inside: through land you can see the historic shame and injustice.

No land for Jews in a Jewish state! The difference among us: those who live in a moshav and a kibbutz get to own land and the people without land or in public housing like those in Katamonim... The land was the largest trigger to violate the historic justice. As a narrative story we asked: whose land is this?

Palestinian criticism accuses HaKeshet of ignoring the historical background for Jewish control over land in Israel, when they claim to demand land for all citizens based on universal rights. As described above, land for a Palestinian citizen and for a Jewish citizen is historically and legally two very different issues. One has lost the land under debate and is prohibited from regaining it by Israeli law, and the other has potential right to the land based on her/his Jewish nationality. The issues were the focal point of the
criticism voiced by Bashir when he told *HaKeshet* he was not able to become a Zionist at the expense of Palestinians’ rights to land.

“Isn’t it our land they are fighting about?” he recalled Palestinians asking him during the preparations for the Land Struggle (Bashir, 1997). In his article about his departure from *HaKeshet*, Bashir (1997) argues that to the victim, the identity of his/her oppressor is incidental. Nor does it matter from what source the perpetrators draw or inherit their stimulation, whether it comes from *Ashkenazi* Holocaust victims or from *Mizrahi* victims of Zionist manipulation. Bashir explains further that he cannot accept the slogan “This Land is also Mine” because it implies that Development Town settlers and MENA Jewish inhabitants in poor city neighbourhoods contributed equally in comparison with the *Ashkenazi kibbutz* to the development of Israel: thus it reinforces the Zionist paradigm. Bashir (1997) uses this quote from a leaflet published by *HaKeshet* to illustrate his point: “Those who settled the under-privileged neighbourhoods and the development towns were brought there by the government for national security reasons…” Bashir rejects this type of discourse also if it were used as a semantic-tactical method of “provisional language” in order to win the case.

In the ethnocratic Israeli context, when aiming to make social change with regards to land, it is important to be aware of the level at which one is aiming to, or is able to, instigate change. As described by (Yiftachel, 2000) change can be aimed at, or occur, on two levels: On the superficial level, changing negative outcomes of the structure of the ethnic hierarchy that determines social and legal rights and access to resources. Or, on a deeper level changing the hegemonic structure of the ethnic hierarchy itself. Bashir’s criticism can thus be understood as a critique of *HaKeshet* for operating at the superficial level. As such, this approach assists and cements the deep structure of ethnocracy, by making it seem less discriminative and open to social change, while enabling preservation of the ethnocratic state and structure.

Former *HaKeshet* member Dani Ben Simhon (2002) echoed this argument in his critical work. He called the Land Struggle “An Intra-Jewish Squabble over Arab Lands.” He further wrote that *HaKeshet* “…did not ask the High Court for historic justice on the
questions of lands, but rather for *distributive* justice – distributive, we may ask, for whom?”

In his article in response to Nabih Bashir’s criticism of the Land Struggle for adopting Zionist parameters that excluded Palestinian citizens, *HaKeshet* member Shlomo Varzana (1997) used the earlier Public Housing Case to demonstrate that *HaKeshet* adheres to universal justice and equality. In this case, *HaKeshet* confronted the laws and regulations for buying rented public housing apartments. The majority of the tenants in the housing projects in Development Towns and poor neighbourhoods in the outskirts of the larger cities have been and are *Mizrahim*. In my interview, Varzana explained:

> When my parents died they left me an unattractive apartment in badly kept public housing that they had paid rent for, for over forty years, and then the state wanted it back. I said that after having paid rent for so many years I had the right to this apartment. I started a war.

The Public Housing Case is linked with the Land Struggle through the same basic argument: the majority of the MENA Jews were not given the opportunity to buy or in other ways hold land or to buy the public housing apartments they had paid rent for over generations. In the Principal Demands in the Public Housing Case (Varzana, 1997:31), *HaKeshet* stipulated these rights of tenants: rights to acquire housing for tenants in public housing (a tenant was defined as someone who lives in public housing and does not own any other housing unit); rights for inheritors of tenants; rights for tenants to take part in the decision-making process regarding administration of the houses and their environment, and in discussion of privatisation of the state companies that administered them; rights to halt all evictions; rights to public housing for all homeless and economically incapable residents of Israel; rights to allocated land for public housing when zoning state land; and rights to oppose privatisation of state and public lands. As in the Land Struggle, in the Public Housing Case, MENA Jews are contrasted with *kibbutzim* predominantly inhabited by *Ashkenazi* founders, “the heroes of the nation” as Varzana (interview) sarcastically labelled them:

> It is a continuation of the *Ashkenazi* narrative that determined who got what and who did not get anything. We paid for their land with our tax money, and we were not even offered the opportunity to buy our apartments’.
Varzana further explained that the people in *kibbutzim* and *moshavim* did not understand this and replied to us:

‘It is not your money or your territory!’

As mentioned above, it was important for *HaKeshet* that *Mizrahim* were acknowledged and treated as “landlords” or owners. According to Varzana (interview), in the hegemonic narrative regarding land, Palestinians are the villains, Israelis are heroes and *Mizrahim* are not present. With the Land Struggle, the Israeli public discourse changed, he claimed. First of all, it exposed the inequality of the system in the media and, secondly, it offered a new discourse that was intellectual, multicultural, and represented a *Mizrahi* opposition, in addition to raising questions about territory and its ownership. Varzana (interview) concluded:

Instead of fighting for equality on issues such as the number of mixed marriages and how many [Ashkenazim] listen to our music, [we] focus on the important issue – on earth and land and relate it to the narrative, thus implying that: ‘I am equally important.’

When discussing *Mizrahiut* (above) as an alternative narrative to the Zionist Israeli history, attempting to include the previously silenced narrative of MENA Jews, Varzana was quoted from a newspaper saying that in the Land Struggle “*Mizrahim*” were for the first time considering themselves as landlords. He elaborated and explained that *Mizrahim* have no other land than Israel, and the Palestinians too only have this land (interview). Yossi Dahan said this to the Jerusalem Post:

The *Mizrahi* immigrants who settled the periphery were just as pioneering as the legendary farmers, and they also contributed in the same degree to Israel’s security

The point here is, as noted above, that *Mizrahim* have also fought for and worked on Israeli land, and thus deserve equal rights to it.

Saying that “*Kibbutzim* gave to land and state, but *Mizrahim* did too” was a social approach arguing for equality in and from the state, using Zionist arguments, Itzhik Saporta (interview) explained. He admits that this was a double-edged sword, explaining that in a court case “you play with what you have when answering the state’s argument.”
It seems, however, that the choice of a Zionist language was not a result of strategic pragmatism for all HaKeshet members, as exemplified in this quote of Karif in Ha‘aretz (14.06.1998) in Ben Simhon’s (2000:13) article (the comments in brackets clearly indicate Simhon’s view of Karif’s perspective):

Today various sectors of the Israeli public are engaged in the most significant discussion ever held on the questions of lands. The discussion is with the Palestinians about their land [the reference to the Occupied Territories, and the emphasis is mine – DBS] and with the kibbutzim and moshavim concerning land they lease. As we approach Israel’s fiftieth year, an entire sector of the population [Karif means the Mizrahim, not the Arabs – DBS] is again left out, and not through mere absent-mindedness, although the discussion concerns the most important of the national resources: land.

Whereas Kedar held that HaKeshet was constantly trying to include the Arabs, and that this is evident in the conflicting narratives in the petition itself, varying from a very civic equality: why give land to the kibbutzim and not to public tenant and Arabs and so on. But, he admits, there is an undertone that is more nationalist:

We were struggling not to sell our principles; all the people who worked on the petition; me and the other lawyer Smadar Ben Nathan who now represents Tali Fahima. At a certain point during the framing of the petition, the legal work was done by people who were not actually members of HaKeshet. HaKeshet just gave a general assent. [...] We were talking about civic equality and social justice, not about nationalist issues, so for example, we were not talking about Palestinian refugees, only about citizens of Israel and a full equal citizenship.

Adu-Saad made this comment on the Land Struggle of HaKeshet:

The land case – look at the land distribution - it goes to the Ashkenazim because they are part of the system. The sad part is, if they combined the power of the two groups; the Mizrahim and the Arabs, they would have much more power. But this is not their intention. The goal of HaKeshet is a political goal: “We want our rights in the state; we do not care about the rights of the others.” Their goal is to be part of the system rather than to see justice. There is something wrong here from the point of view of social activism, social activism is based on people suffering from the same issues, but they are saying “We are dealing with our issues and we do not want to deal with you.” [The implication is] You are still the enemy.
Anti-Zionist Accusations and Retrospective Perspectives

In response to the Land Struggle, the Kibbutz Movement put up large banners with the text: “HaKeshet is for the Right of Return.” Referring to the Palestinian claim to the right of return to historical Palestine, these banners were clearly meant to de-legitimise HaKeshet and its Land Struggle. By accusing the movement of favouring a return of Palestinian refugees, something the majority of Israelis consider to be the demise of Israel as a Jewish state, implies that HaKeshet is anti-Zionist. In accordance with the demographic concern for Israel’s Jewish character, if the Jewish population is outnumbered by non-Jews, it will cease to be a Jewish state. Thus, by invoking this fear, the Kibbutz Movement tried to push HaKeshet and its Land Struggle outside of the boundaries of Israeli public discourse, and signalled that the alternative Mizrahi narrative is a challenge to the Israeli concept of national identity. In response, HaKeshet members went out and tore down the banners.

Similar accusations have been used to de-legitimise earlier Mizrahi protests, for example, the Wadi Salib protesters were described as “enemies of Jewish people” (Massad, 1996:60), and in response to the Black Panthers’ demonstrations, their protest was described as “abnormal” (Massad, 1996:62). Throughout Israel’s history there have been few Jewish Israeli anti-Zionists. The socialist organisation Matzpen was self-declared anti-Zionist in the 1960s and 1970s, and outspoken Israelis such as historian Ilan Pappe can be described as anti-Zionists. The common goal of anti-Zionists can be defined as an end to the functioning Zionism that in their view discriminates against Palestinian citizens and renders impossible a just solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. According to Edward C. Corrigan (1991), the bottom line in the response to Jewish criticism of Zionism is that it threatens the unity of the nation. Moreover, such criticism is undesired because it contradicts the image of Jewish youth defending Israel.

145 About 90 percent of all kibbutzim are members of the national Kibbutzim Movement (Jon Fidler, 2002).
under all circumstances. Corrigan concludes that ultimately anti-Zionists are defined as outside of the community (ibid).

It was not the last time the movement has been accused of threatening the Jewish state. One example is a recent article by Meyrav Wurmser (2005), Director for the Centre for Middle East Policy at the Hudson Institute, who described HaKeshet members as the “new school of intellectual radicalism” who constitute “a new and worrisome twist on the post-Zionist phenomenon” as a challenge to the legitimacy of the Israeli state from within.146 Another recent example is the Israeli Labour representative who criticised members of HaKeshet in these words:

This group represents almost no-one, holds anti-Zionist views and consistently supports [Arab MK] Azmi Bishara and his friends.147

This was a response to HaKeshet members’ criticism of the new Labour chairman, Amir Peretz, for not including a Mizrahi perspective in his political agenda.

After the Land Struggle, HaKeshet member Shlomo Varzana (interview) asked rhetorically: “We won – now what?” In retrospect, many HaKeshet interviewees have expressed dissatisfaction with the way in which this struggle was conducted. The disappointment is related to several issues: with the fact that the court decision in their favour has not practically resulted in any significant change; with the choice of litigation as method to pursue social change; and with regards to the inability to include Palestinians citizens. When these interviews were conducted in 2004-2005, many HaKeshet members seemed to have an ambivalent relationship with the Land Struggle. Meirav Alush (interview) rhetorically asked:

Where is HaKeshet now? Why has it not appeared in public since 2004, since we won the court case? It is strange, we could only go up, but we went down. What does this say about the idea that HaKeshet represents and this discourse of politics of identity – I do not know about any other movement besides HaKeshet that has the same idea as us. What does this say about the future of identity in Israel? Are we post identity questions? Is this why HaKeshet is not there anymore? For me it is a puzzle.

146 This article is important because it brings the issue of Mizrahim and Mizrahiut in Israel to a larger and probably ignorant audience outside of Israel.

147 Ha’aretz, 09.02.2006.
Lawyer Sandy Kedar is no longer a member of *HaKeshet*. He expressed confusion and frustration regarding the unfulfilled promise to Israeli society that *HaKeshet* became:

“Why did *HaKeshet* disappoint us?” he asked at the end of the interview.

Sami Shalom Chetrit (interview) explained that now he could see that they had been blinded by themselves, and had made the struggle into a Jewish issue. Today he was able to admit this was wrong:

We did not see the criticism at that time as we were too occupied with our own goals. We thought we were creating some provocation and that the Israeli Arabs will join in, but we did not have any single discussion or talks with anybody. The slogan should have been in Arabic and in a plural; OUR land – all of us. We thought; let us gather the people first, talk about issues they are concerned with and gradually, when they are inside and comfortable, then launch a campaign that everybody would join - Arabs and Jews. Then we did the opposite; we launched the campaign first and in retrospect it was wrong. Once we initiated the case without the consciousness, we had to stay away from Arabs as a strategy, not an ideological act. It was launched too early and it became a missed opportunity.

Chetrit further connected the inability to include Palestinians citizens, with the idea of the Rainbow as incorporating all *Mizrahim* from left to right on the political map:

We were too much preoccupied with the concern not to scare anybody away. […] So we were always tip-toeing around issues dealing with the conflict and the Palestinians.

Why or how *HaKeshet* neglected the Palestinians and their perspective is discussed in the following chapter.
Chapter 6

Perpetuating the Problem? The Risks of Reinforcing Ethnic Boundaries

What is clear from what has been presented so far is that the issues that have been causing tensions ever since HaKeshet was first established – gender, the “Palestinian Question” and internal friction between groups of MENA Jews – are still unresolved. It is here suggested that the reasons for this are the same as the reason for the inability to include the other Others in the Land Struggle. Based on the empirical data in Chapters Three, Four and Five, the following discussion will show how the discrepancy between discourse and practice in HaKeshet is caused by the vacuum between its members’ understanding of “Mizrahim” and the lack of a definition of “Mizrahiut.”

HaKeshet’s Mizrahi identification will be discussed first, followed by an examination of its members’ understanding of Mizrahiut. On the one hand, HaKeshet members are in general agreement in their understanding of who or what “Mizrahim” are: they are Jews from the MENA region who were categorised by the Zionist leadership in the 1940s and 1950s as belonging to one group, and they were subsequently discriminated against as Sephardi/Mizrahim, and are consequently marginalised in Israeli society when compared with Ashkenazi Jews. As presented in the previous chapters, several HaKeshet members drew parallels between their new political identity Mizrahi and African-American activists in the USA who are “black and proud”. However, when it comes to “Mizrahiut”, HaKeshet members have not decided what they are acting for, or what their vision for Israeli society is, as became clear with the differing and at times contradictory explanations of this term and views on HaKeshet as a movement.

HaKeshet’s inability to support its universal discourse is examined here with the help of theories about the need for recognition, the logic in identification, and the inherent dangers in the use of post-colonial and post-modern deconstructive tools. Also, the ambivalent relationship with the communal past in Arab and Muslim countries, and the dearth of employment of history will be discussed. This will be further contextualised by
drawing parallels to the five paths presented in Chapter Two, illustrating directions taken or not taken by HaKeshet.

Before discussing HaKeshet’s Mizrahim and Mizrahiut respectively, it is necessary to make some remarks on the sincerity of the choice of a universal language by HaKeshet. Is it used because the members believe in it, is it an instrumental choice, or is it used in ignorance? Eran Shor (2006) analysed the use of human rights discourse by right-wing settlers resisting removal by force from Gaza in 2005. There is an obvious tension between the use of this universal language and the particularistic right-wing discourse these settlers use to argue their case. Shor (2006:3) argues that in today’s global reality wherein the human right discourse dominates international discourse, these settlers used a human rights discourse because it provided them with an appearance of moral dignity intended to give their cause legitimacy. Shor did not question whether the right-wing settlers really believed in this universal human rights language or not, but concludes that human rights rhetoric today is free to be used as a political instrument by all groups. The present study assumes that HaKeshet and its members believe in the universal values to which they attest, but at the same time there is also an assumption that the movement is not able to act in accordance with these values, due to reasons given below.

**Restricting the Rainbow**

*HaKeshet* advocates a “Mizrahi” challenge to what its members understand as a hegemonic Ashkenazi Zionism, based on their belonging to a group that has been devalued, and stands unrecognised, in the dominant Israeli narrative and society. As its members expressed, in addition to socioeconomic and political marginalisation, this lack of recognition has lead to a distortion in their individual relationships with part of their past, heritage and feelings of belonging. In order to undo the stigmatisation resulting from repeated encounters with a culturally and politically dominant Other, the intellectual members of *HaKeshet* engage in the politics of recognition. According to Charles Taylor, (1992:75) identity is shaped not only by positive recognition, but by “misrecognition”, in other words by the absence of recognition, and this is especially relevant for oppressed and marginalised groups. *HaKeshet’s* new Mizrahi identification can be described as a
reaction to being overlooked, and the marginalisation embodied in the negative collective
categorisation of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries. *HaKeshet* members further
explained that this new identification is related to who MENA Jews (really) are, based on
where they originated, and it emphasises their cultural and linguistic Middle Eastern and
North African backgrounds.

By using the tools of post-colonial theory, such as critical theories of orientalism,
*HaKeshet* members seem to attempt to do what Foucaultian (1971) discourse analysis
suggested: to deconstruct the construction, to unmake what is in their view made by
imposition, as part of a system of control and dominance with negative consequences. In
Chapters Three and Four it became clear that *HaKeshet* members participate in academic
and other types of deconstruction of the imposed category of identification, concentrating
on the Zionist narrative of MENA Jewish histories prior to immigration to Israel, and on
the orientalist perceptions of their supposed collective “primitive” nature and resulting
status and position in Israeli society. Inspired by Foucault (1971) in their studies and
deconstructive analyses, *HaKeshet* members have examined Israeli conditions of
knowledge at specific historical points and social contexts, and then constructed
alternative views of the narrative, of how the category *Mizrahim* came to be what it is,
and who is responsible for establishing it and utilising it.

However, in this deconstructive understanding of Israeli society presented from the
point of view of the subordinate as an alternative based on universal values, *HaKeshet*
was unable to include the other victims of what its members label *Ashkenazi* Zionism.
Patchen Markell (2003:3) agrees with Taylor that “misrecognition” results in the pursuit
of recognition. However, he holds that if injustice is lack of recognition of identity, this
implies that equal recognition is the ideal, and the resulting quest for recognition might
obscure and ignore the actual roots of social and political injustice. Markell argues that to
focus on recognition is a mistake, because the notion of recognition itself was created by
the state. That is, the state, which is usually not perceived as involved in the politics of
recognition, is in fact the actor that made this type of politics the rules of the game. Thus,
other actors who oppose the state policy and use the politics of recognition when arguing
their case, in fact sustain the root structure of the relationship between this state and society.

Accordingly, HaKeshet, when arguing its case for social justice and change as Mizrahi is (unwillingly or willingly or unconsciously or consciously) strengthening the ethnocratic character and structure of the state, or of the “political order” as defined by Peled and Navot (2005). If HaKeshet was only arguing for recognition of the way in which the category Mizrahi was constructed, used by state institutions and as informing general negative stereotypes, it would have never need to include Palestinian citizens in its undertakings. The need for deconstruction of the imposed category of identification and for recognition of alternative narratives are understandable as goals in and of themselves. But, because HaKeshet bases its goals and actions on universal values aimed at changing Israeli society and its direction towards “democracy, justice, equality and recognition of the different cultures it incorporates” and “to contribute to the establishment of brotherhood relations between its members and to peace with its neighbours” (Principles) it must address two issues. One, it must ensure that its ideology and conduct in practice includes all citizens. Two, as its context is determined by the conflict in Israel-Palestine, it must make especially sure that the ideology of universal values and its enactment facilitate the inclusion of Palestinians citizens as the other (and principal) victims of Zionism.

In Migdal’s (2001) state-in-society perspective, it is the nature and outcome of the struggles between different groups in society that decide the structural and characteristic distinctions of a given society. Thus, for social movements the choices that must be made concern how to conduct their struggles and to what end. In other words, a social movement must consider whether it is fruitful to argue within the politics of identity when reacting to imposed categorisation(s), if it has the aim to change society. Recalling the two types of response to imposition of categories of identity presented in Chapter Two, the choice of HaKeshet when challenging the Zionist narrative and treatment was between

(a) facilitating an alternative category of identification, which instead of repressing empowers groups and imbues their feeling of belonging with pride, or
(b) opting out of categorisations altogether and arguing for rights as citizens.

As described by John Lie (2004:8), in today’s complex world, which offers multiple social sources of identifications, each individual is constantly faced with manifold circles to which he or she can belong. According to Joel Migdal (2004:15), when navigating between multiple set of boundaries, individuals and groups use their emotional feelings of belonging and/or their instrumental status-oriented belonging:

Belonging, then, has both a formal, instrumental sense attached to it – that is, one’s status – and an informal, affective component – that is, one’s sense of identity. Communities of belonging thus designate one’s external standing, one’s status, for others to see. But these communities of belonging gain succour from the affective elements associated with identity that bind people together in ways transcending their material and instrumental interests, inducing them to sacrifice for the group. For states, the status of individual is that of citizens, and the identity is the sense of being part of the naiton.

In the case of HaKeshet’s members, they express that their affective component is in disconcert with their instrumental one. With regards to the informal emotional feelings of belonging, HaKeshet members feel excluded due to their perceived otherness, and are as a result alienated from what they understand as Ashkenazi-dominated Israeliness or Israeli identity. However, concerning their formal material status, these activists claim their rights and take on their duties as Israeli Jewish citizens. This vacuum between the instrumental belonging and the emotional feelings of belonging elucidates the predicament of the MENA Jewish Israelis as caught “in-between”. This explains the location of the discrepancy between HaKeshet’s discourse and practice, but not why HaKeshet as a collective reaction to this predicament was unable to break out of the framework that constructed their in-between position in the first place.

This discrepancy thus leads HaKeshet members to acknowledge their dissatisfaction about their situation and status, but nevertheless not to consider or attempt to solve their problems by challenging the structure of the state. This behaviour corresponds with the previous explanations of Shafir and Peled (2002), Swirski (1989) and Yiftachel (2000), identifying the reason for Mizrahim’s inability to include Palestinians, as described in Chapter Two. At the core of this perspective is the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion
of MENA Jews as citizens of the Jewish state. As such, *HaKeshet* members are MENA Jews who are caught in-between the dichotomised political and emotional categorisations of belonging. The excluding European attitude to MENA Jews, the perception of MENA Jews as ‘primitive’ and ‘suspicious’ Others, and their institutional and symbolic inclusion as Jewish citizens in the Jewish state frames *HaKeshet* members’ in-betweenness.

MENA Jews in Israel simultaneously belonging and being alienated is analogous, in terms of feeling, to the “liminal” period of time described by Victor Turner (1964), also called “in-betwixt-and-between”. This phase of time is familiar to most from the paradox of being a teenager: neither a child nor an adult, neither here nor there. One could say that all MENA Jews as “*Mizrahim*” are in-betwixt-and-between: not fully Israeli and not fully Arabs. Rather they are “inner Others” who continuously struggle for their rights and privileges as insiders, and simultaneously feel the need to struggle in order to somehow belong in their Otherness. Turner focused on the sociocultural properties of the liminal period. The liminal phase is characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity of persons, no longer classified and not yet classified. As such, using Mary Douglas’ ideas from *Purity and Danger* (1966), Turner identifies persons in the liminal period as “unclean” due to their liminality. This period can be a situation of crisis because it entails a position of unstable social status for a person going through a change. It seems that *HaKeshet* members are in a process of experiencing this uncertain liminality and have not found a way to deal with this crisis in identification. They have not decided whether to go back to what they were (Arab Jews) or to go ahead to be fully Israeli, or to come up with a different state of being altogether.

In the USA, the original Rainbow movement grew out of the Democratic black-led electoral upsurge of the early 1980s. The Rainbow Coalition led by the Reverend Jesse Jackson linked racial justice with broader social and economic justice issues. In his 1984 speech as the Democratic National Convention Keynote Addressee, Jackson described the nation of United States as a rainbow of diversity. Drawing on the legacies of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and others, he went beyond the struggle for black equality and included Jews, Muslims, Arabs, Asians, Native Americans, disabled veterans, young people, and small farmers, all who have suffered from discrimination and biased politics.
The fundamental principle, according to Jackson, is tolerance and understanding in order to achieve justice for all. When HaKeshet chooses to utilise the symbol of the rainbow, it seems paradoxical that this rainbow is identified as Mizrahi.

According to the African-American philosopher Tommie Shelby (2005), a key question regarding the construction of nationalism is whether one must share a collective identity in order to engage through solidarity. He describes two types of black American identity: “thin identity”, referring to appearance and physical traits as descendents of a specific people, and “thick identity”, a social category beyond appearance and descent (Shelby, 2005:208). Thick identity is further subdivided into five categories: racial based on biological essence; ethnic based on ancestry and common culture; national based on a geographical origin culture and a shared the idea of a “homeland”; cultural based on shared beliefs, values, traditions, and practices; and kinship based on a family model through blood ties or a reproduction of a way of life. When applied to HaKeshet, and the three variations of responses to the meaning of the term “Mizrahim”, the confusing picture that emerges is a combination of the ethnic identity, nationality and cultural identity.

In the second variation of responses to the meaning of the term Mizrahim, HaKeshet members referred to origin and cultural heritage, and this can be identified as ethnic identification according to Shelby. However, the first variation of responses reflected awareness about past imposition of one category to describe and identify all Jews from the MENA, and the third variation reflected a new use of this category that resists this imposition. In sum, together HaKeshet members serve as an example of how contradicting understandings of identifications can be simultaneously present in one movement. This indicates that schematic and theoretically organised descriptions, such as the one provided by Shelby, are not necessarily able to cover the complex reality. However, by using Shelby’s account, the intricate nature of the puzzle inherent in HaKeshet and its Mizrahi identification becomes clear.
The Palestinian Question, Internal Frictions and Representing MENA Jews

Nancy Fraser (2000:108) describes how expression by unrecognized people leads to “the problem of reification” wherein new alternative identifications end up reifying group identities, and thus risk sanctioning violations of human rights, perpetuating the very antagonisms the alternative purports to mediate. This is precisely what happened in the Land Struggle case of HaKeshet: their discourse, epitomised by the slogan “This Land Is Also Ours”, implicitly deprived the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel, alienating them from the movement with its Mizrahi label. Thus, going beyond the passive constrictions imposed by the state and identified by Shafir and Peled (2002), Swirski (1999) and Yiftachel (2000), here it is argued that HaKeshet members have actively chosen an alternative that results in the exclusion of their other Other. While HaKeshet members use Foucaultian discourse analysis to uncover techniques of representation of the Others in the hegemony, they have not heeded the warning from Foucault (1971) of the danger inherent in this approach: that it might result in repeating the form of the official techniques. It might result in the imposing of a new identification category, or the perpetuation of identification categories that sustain, or worse, escalate the conflict.

The Palestinian researcher Nada Matta (2003) of Sikkuy, the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality in Israel, discusses the inability of Jewish resistance identity to include Palestinian citizens in the article “Postcolonial Theory, Multiculturalism and The Israeli Left: A Critique of Post-Zionism”. She draws attention to the missing anti-colonial link in post-Zionist academic discourse. Her article looks at articles by Shenhav in the Hebrew journal Teoria veBikoret (Theory and Criticism), of which he is the editor, analysing his view on the relevance of post-colonial studies for Israeli society. According to Matta, Shenhav argues that post-colonial theory led to several changes in Israel: a change from a binary to a hybrid perspective; from Orientalism to Occidentalism; from the politics of “blackness” to the politics of

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148 See Sikkuy’s website: www.sikkuy.org.il
“whiteness”; from the politics of consciousness to the politics of change; and from national to post-national questions.

Matta believes Shenhav’s approach to post-colonial theory is simplistic, and she argues that even though he has undergone a process of colonisation as Mizrahi, he displays ignorance of the fact that to Palestinians, Mizrahi intellectuals are part of the colonial Zionist project. Similarly, she argues that in another article, co-authored with HaKeshet member Yossi Yonah, Shenhav again “do[es] not respect the real differences between the Mizrahim and the Palestinians in Israel” (Matta, 2003:97). This criticism coincides with the lack of knowledge and perspectives displayed by HaKeshet in the Land Struggle regarding Palestinian citizens’ relationship with the land. HaKeshet appears unable or unwilling to appreciate the difference between Jewish and Palestinian citizens as victims of Zionism. Additionally, Matta (2003:99-101) takes issues with Shenhav’s argument that identity politics challenges nationalism and opens things up for new identities, such as the Jewish-Arab, and she argues that even though there are challenges to Zionism today, Jewish nationalism shows no signs of retreating. On the contrary, Matta holds that in the Israeli context, identity politics is too marginal to enact real change. Asserting that identity politics is inherently constructed on difference and not on similarity, Matta (2003:95) advances the view that it probably results in (new) particularistic and exclusionist categories.

Another way to approach the tensions within HaKeshet over the “Palestinian Question” is linked to the internal friction between members in the movement and to the re-orientalisation of MENA Jews by HaKeshet. In a perplexing way, HaKeshet members explained that the all-embracing Mizrahi rainbow aims to include Mizrahim from the entire political spectrum. That is, the rainbow is supposed to represent diversity in the movement, including diversity of views of the state and its ideology. This perspective on the embrace of the rainbow is puzzling first of all because some of the right-wing positions of some members vis-à-vis the Palestinians clearly contradict the universal values espoused by HaKeshet.

Moreover, based of this perspective on the embracing rainbow, aimed at including people from the entire political spectrum, why do its members assert that it cannot represent “Mizrahim” because they are too right-wing? This is related to the dismissive answer provided to the questions of why HaKeshet cannot become a political party; that it would not have enough supporters. Furthermore, the ideas about “the Mizrahim” held by several HaKeshet members who assume that “Mizrahim” in Development Towns and poor neighbourhoods are not able or willing to accept or understand (some of) HaKeshet members’ leftist positions regarding Palestinians in Israel and the solution of the conflict, HaKeshet members seem to accept and reaffirm the stereotypical image of MENA Jews as right-wing Arab-haters.

During fieldwork it became clear that many intellectuals and academics of HaKeshet seem removed from: the geographical and socio-political reality in which most MENA Jews live. In their theories and in their actions, HaKeshet members re-orientalise “Mizrahim” as traditionalist, religious and hostile to Arabs. This was evident in interviews in which several HaKeshet members explained that HaKeshet was not able to be pro-Palestinian or “too left-leaning”, because this would alienate the majority of the MENA Jewish public. Several HaKeshet members seemed to be of the impression that the movement does not have and never will attract a constituency.

This was one of the central issues discussed at the weekend seminar at the Oasis of Peace in spring 2005. When discussing the relationship between identity and identification, between imposed category, origin and awareness, the “Mizrahi public” was presumed by HaKeshet members to have not developed such awareness. These stereotypical views of MENA Jews were evident in the surprise displayed by many members of HaKeshet upon hearing my stories about the contact and joint action between Jewish parents from Sderot and Palestinians parents from Jaljuliya. Several HaKeshet members conduct studies of so-called Mizrahim, but do not seem to identify with or be familiar with the people categorised as such, nor with the diversity among these people (as the difference between HaKeshet members themselves and the HILA parent activists by itself demonstrates). Consequently, it is not only the state and its Ashkenazi Zionism
that is making “others” of MENA Jews in places like Sderot; it is also done by “their own” intellectuals in HaKeshet.

Uri Cohen (interview) at the School of Education at Tel Aviv University, himself a MENA Jew, expressed frustration in his critique of HaKeshet for its generalisations of MENA Jews. According to Cohen, HaKeshet members forget or ignore the Mizrahi middle class. This middle class has been emerging since their immigration and the descriptions and attitudes of HaKeshet indicates to Cohen (ibid) that the movement believes all Mizrahim, except HaKeshet members “who made it” are poor and deprived. Cohen agrees with HaKeshet members’ analyses of the Eurocentric and modernist orientalist attitude demonstrated by the state towards MENA Jews upon arrival in Israel and during the integration process, but he opposes what he considers patronising and inaccurate descriptions of MENA Jews today.

In addition to the confusing internal plurality of political positions vis-à-vis Palestinians and the dismissal of “Mizrahim” as too right-wing, the rainbow movement also has problems in embracing women. As described in Chapter Four, women activists in HaKeshet felt the need to establish another organisation in order to be heard and to be feminists. Moreover, some activists explained that they had left HaKeshet because of its male-dominated informal leadership, mostly referring to the group of leading figures.

In sum, the basis for the Mizrahi rainbow is a desire for acknowledgement of past discrimination of their identities and history, without an inclusion of others’ history of discrimination, and in particular disregarding that of the Palestinian victims of Zionism. As such, ironically, the Mizrahi rainbow is a struggle for recognition of its members’ non-Western cultures in the non-Western location of Israel.

**Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

Mizrahim are situated between the rock of economic-cultural oppression caused by the US-European capitalist Israeli rule, and the hard place of Palestine’s war of independence. (Aberjil and Lavie, 2006)
Chapter Three, Four and Five showed that HaKeshet lacks a definition of what its goals are. The Mizrahi movement has not decided what its “Mizrahiut” is. This is here interpreted as the root of the movement’s inability to decide on an agenda and to produce an alternative to the hegemonic Ashkenazi Zionism it challenges. Due to this ambivalence in goals and agenda, the movement has not been able to decide if, or how, to include its other Others. In other words, when HaKeshet members hold that HaKeshet is the new and real left in its critique of the mainstream Israeli left, which they attack for ignoring or forgetting to take into account non-European Jewish perspectives, and thus espousing Eurocentric and Orientalist standpoints, they do not provide any alternative vision of what their Mizrahi left is, or what it could offer.

This was observable in the film The Black Panthers Speak (2003). Former Panthers Charlie Biton, Kochavi Shemesh, Saadia Marziano, Reuven Aberjil (now a member of HaKeshet) and Haim Hanegbi gathered to reminisce about their activism in their old neighbourhood in Jerusalem. Recalling their old slogan “Either the cake will be shared by all or there will be no cake” and demonstration posters “Peace, Food and Work!” and “Down with the Occupation!”", the former Panthers complained that today many Israelis do not even know that they are Mizrahi. This is not because the gaps have disappeared, they all agreed, but because the younger generation think they are, or are taught to think they are, born in Europe. The former Panthers agree that what is needed is for these people to stand up as an alternative to the right-wing and left-wing and fill the political gap that is enabling the building of walls due to fear of the Arabs. They concluded that their old slogans are still relevant: Israelis still need peace and equality.

It is here argued that this want of an operation of Mizrahiut, the lack of a concrete idea of what HaKeshet does or aims to do, is brought about because the movement has not defined a point of departure from which to formulate its reactions. A point of departure is a beginning from which an enterprise is launched, the start of something that indicates the central issue to be debated or considered.151 By not selecting a point in history from

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151 As an example of the importance of a point of departure, in their book The Palestinian People; A History, Kimmerling and Migdal (2003) choose as point of departure for the roots of modern Palestinian identity the 1834 revolt against the Egyptian occupation. The controversy caused by this suggestion in Israel showed how significant the choice of a historical point of departure can be.
which *HaKeshet* is directing its criticism, the movement consequently has an ambivalent and even ignorant relationship with its territorial context and political other Others. This results in the movement’s problems in relating to the outcome of the war in 1948 and the occupation of Palestinian territory from 1967, the two major events that constitute its political context.

A concrete example of a MENA Jew’s point of departure is Sami Michael, who described his current identification as being constructed when he came to Israel from Iraq. This was a physical move that changed the parts of his identity that were the most important, parts that included him in and excluded him from his surroundings:

In a matter of four or five hours, my identity changed from that of an Arab Jew to being an Israeli Arab. In a matter of four hours I was regarded as an enemy of Israel due to being an Arab, and then, upon reaching Israel, I was regarded as an enemy of Iraq (interview).

As covered in the previous chapter, even though *HaKeshet* members express awareness of how the “*Mizrahim*” category was constructed, and what it entails for those who belong to it, in terms of taking action, as “inside outsiders”, they have not been able to resolve the confusion of their predicament. They have not been able to extend their boundaries to include the other Others, the Palestinian citizens who are excluded due to their non-Jewishness, nor to connect their critical analyses of Israeli society with its territorial politics. *HaKeshet* thus ends up being reactionary due to its members’ feelings of belonging, as evidenced in the Land Struggle, where it was not able to go beyond its Jewish categorisation and challenge the deeper structure that produces the injustice *HaKeshet* opposes. It does not succeed in using its historical and regional history to connect with its Palestinian Others or to broaden Israeli national belonging. As the title of this section suggests, *HaKeshet* is caught in between the hard place of Israel and the rock of being Zionism’s marginalised internal Others.

As Peter Vandergeest (1996) showed with his Thailand case, territorial understanding of categories of identification is especially important in places where who you are decides where you can be. In Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, a Jew can settle and live and drive almost everywhere, whereas an Arab Palestinian is limited in these actions. Israelis who took path four in Chapter Two are those who have made the
connection between the territorial and racialised politics of the Jewish ethnocracy, such as Vanunu and Fahima, who have suffered for this. As shown in the Land Struggle, HaKeshet disregarded the Palestinian perspective, and HaKeshet had not conducted enough research into Palestinian perspectives on land that could have provided it with awareness of the viewpoint of its other Other on this issue. It failed to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of Palestinians’ position in society, their predicament vis-a-vis the state, or their needs.

What becomes clear is that the reaction to the imposed categorisation embodied in HaKeshet is targeted at the Ashkenazi institutions and hegemonic narrative, and these are its partners in interactions that produce the ethnic boundaring in which the Mizrahi HaKeshet is the victim. However, HaKeshet members seem to have forgotten or ignore that as Jewish and Israeli citizens they also interact with Palestinian citizens and non-citizens in a continuous manner, and this interaction is based on uneven power-relations wherein HaKeshet members represent the Jewish and thus hegemonic and occupying power.

Because they lack an agenda, HaKeshet end up in practice having an ad-hoc focus that has changed from case to case, presenting itself as Jewish when this secures the most favourable result, and as post- or non-Zionist when this was useful. This ad-hoc methodology has created instability and dependency on people outside of the movement, as observed in the Land Struggle when the litigation was conducted by professional lawyers who were not all members of HaKeshet. In the actual arguing for rights, HaKeshet ended up using its instrumental status-oriented belonging as Jewish Israelis, with all the privileges and advantages stemming from their belonging to the nation. Thus, while its general discourse is universal, in the discourse concerning land HaKeshet became Zionist. The gap between the two discourses indicates a movement that is not able to choose between an assimilative approach and a confrontational strategy. This is because, as argued above, the movement has not decided on a point of departure for the reconstruction of its Mizrahi identification, and consequently has not decided whether its aim is to challenge the structure of the Israeli state and society, in other words challenge
the ethnocratic nature and the institutional and policy-related decision-making this represents, or if its aim is to change only the outcomes of this structure.

**The Politics of History**

In this sub-chapter, the liminal in-betweeness that is *HaKeshet* members’ simultaneous inclusion and exclusion is further examined, by looking into how the tension between Arab and Jewish identity, produced by Zionism, makes it complicated for Jews from Arab pasts to relate to their Arab history, when producing positive future identifications and alternative socio-political approaches. *HaKeshet* did not fully utilise the potential in its diversity, or in its formulation of an alternative to *Ashkenazi* Zionism based on cultural belonging and cultural assets. The two main issues discussed here are: why *HaKeshet* has not developed an Arab alternative, despite its members’ focus on their Arabness and criticism of the *Ashkenazi* neglect and dismissal of this element of their identity and past, and why the movement has not actively used the cultural diversity among its members actively in shaping its ideology and conduct in practice.

One of the clearest examples of *HaKeshet* members’ critique of the *Ashkenazi* left is Yehouda Shenhav’s article “The Bond of Silence” (1997). In this article Shenhav reasons that if this left was to acknowledge what he calls *Mizrahi* Israeli history, they would have to acknowledge the *Ashkenazi* role as oppressor, and consequently this left would “be obliged to erect an academy for classical Arab music, to teach the roots of Arab culture, to learn and teach Arab poetry and language. They will have to give up their exclusive identification with Europe and North America, which they have perceived as universal.”

With this emphasis on Arab culture as the means by which the hegemonic group in Israeli society can fully include *Mizrahim* and thus repair the damage done to them, it is notable that *HaKeshet* has not chosen to emphasise the Arab past of its members when defining its understanding of “*Mizrahim*” and “*Mizrahiut*.”

The most obvious and significant reason Arab identity is so complicated for MENA Jews is that for Israelis Arabs are the enemy. The awareness of this contested status of their past is illustrated by remarks such as:
Why do you think so many *Mizrahim* wear skull-caps and big stars of David on their chests? To avoid being taken for Arabs of course! (Avital Moses, interview).

Abu-Saad (interview) explained MENA Jews’ hatred of Arabs in these words:

The hatred towards the Arabs from the *Mizrahi* Jews is stronger than the *Ashkenazi* Jews; who are the extreme racists? Look at Ovadia [Yosef] – you [Abu-Saad to Ovadia] are an Arab and you call Arabs snakes? It is amazing! He [Yosef] wanted to show that “I am the system” and because the system is against Arabs he cannot be an Arab. It is a paradox. How much they want to be accepted - the main thing for them is to be integrated and fight for their rights. And this is easier than being an Arab.

Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin (2004:171) explains the intricate liminal position of the Jews from Arab countries:

Unlike the attitude toward the Palestinians, who were systematically excluded and dispossessed, the official Zionist attitude toward Arab Jews was far more complicated. Zionism was obliged to include the *Mizrahim*, given its perception as the representative of the entire Jewish nation. But in order to integrate, Arab Jews were required to abandon their traditions, deny their past, and erase their memories, in order to assimilate into the dominant culture, representative of what was seen as modern, universal values. The binary Zionist distinction between Jew and Arab produced an impossible rupture between what were, up to the mass migrations following the establishment of Israel, congruent aspects of *Mizrahi* identity - Jewish and Arab. Suddenly, in order to be considered Israelis, *Mizrahim* had to forsake the culture and language in which they defined their Judaism - the Arab culture - and in some cases even give up their “religion” as they understood and practiced it.

It is the ethnocratic context, and the conflict with the Palestinians and other Arab states, that demarcates the parameters of MENA Jews’ identification, whether political, cultural or social. As the *Sephardi* Jewish French PLO representative Ilan Halevi (1987:208) wrote: “a Jew who calls himself Arab would be belonging not to the territory but to a ‘nation,’ that is, to another tribe.” As Ammiel Alcalay (1993) explains, due to the silencing and displacement of other non-European cultures by Israeli nationalism, it has become difficult to appreciate positive elements from the cultures in this region. In the divide between “us” and “them” in contemporary Jewish discourse lies the assumption that only a modern nation state makes a people a historical reality. Thus, Alcalay describes that it is difficult for MENA Jews to appreciate positive elements from Arab cultures after Western cultural supremacy, embedded in the Zionist Western nationalist
ideology, has displaced them and made them the Others who were supposedly needed to be brought out of the dark Arab world into civilisation.

In contemporary Israel, it is increasingly important to be on the “inside”. As indicated in the Introduction, the Israeli political environment is more and more open to outspoken expressions of racism, as indicated by the election of Avigor Lieberman, whose platform is to transfer Palestinian citizens to the occupied territory; by racist comments in response to Amir Peretz’ election as Chairman of Labour; as well as in opinion polls showing that sixty-eight percent of Israeli Jews would refuse to live in the same apartment building as Israeli Arabs.152

Abu-Saad (interview) described the predicament of Arab Jews in these words:

It is not my concern what people calls themselves: Arab Jew or not, the thing is we have Muslim and Christian Arabs – but Jews cannot be Arabs? Culturally they are Arabs, religion is not a way to describe your ethnicity – so you are Jews by religion and Polish or Arab is your ethnicity; your culture. Why is this different with the Jews? What do Jews from Morocco, from Poland and India have in common? Only religion. But, because of the conflict in Israel they created the image that they are not Arabs, which is not true.

Up to 1977 they had very strong emphasis on changing the Mizrahim; people were even embarrassed to speak their Arabic mother-tongue. But (yet) the system did not treat them equally with the Ashkenazim so they [MENA Jews] lost from both sides; they are not Arabs because they did not want to be backwards, and they did not manage to integrate in the Ashkenazi system: they were under a lot of pressure!

In 1977 Likud took over because the Mizrahim just could not swallow it anymore: to be poor, live in the periphery etc. But it was symbolic – they [Likud] played with words. But there was a significant transformation “back to the roots” – they will not call it Arab, but Moroccan, Mizrahim, and Sephardi – without admitting or defining themselves as Arabs. This is threatening because Israel is in conflict with the Arabs – Arab is the enemy. They brainwashed the people, in the school books and the media. The Arab is the dirty, the terrorist: the enemy. So they wanted to identify themselves with the Ashkenazi, strategically they could not identify themselves with the enemy.

Despite the tokenisms of the Likud, we still did not find any Mizrahim within the establishment. The number of Mizrahi students in the university is 20 percent and in the colleges 85 percent – why? Look at the figures and the representation – don’t look at rights, but at the figures!

152 “Poll: 68% of Jews would refuse to live in same building as an Arab,” Ha’aretz, 22.03.2006, by Eli Ashkenazi and Jack Khoury.
During fieldwork I often heard that “he or she is a spy” about *HaKeshet* members, other academic left-leaning persons, leaders of Palestinian organisations, or the ones who refrain from activism. They were all accused of being spies. As Shenhav (2003) related in the Introduction to his book about Arab Jews, his father was employed as a spy because of his Arab origin. Also today there are the so-called *mistaravim* (“disguised as Arabs”), Israeli spies disguised as Arab Palestinians, usually MENA Jews. Beyond the everyday examples of MENA Jews being recruited as spies because of their background, and similarly Palestinians, the spy accusations reveal something about the nature of Israeli society and its relationship with the state. The implications are that Israel(is) cannot trust Arabs, and that all those who make these remarks know where the dividing line is. These spy remarks are congruent with comments about Tali Fahima and Mordechai Vanunu: if you cross the border you are a spy or you go to jail.

As was evident in Chapter Four, most interviewees believe that it is more dangerous for MENA Jews than for *Ashkenazi* Jews to cross the physical and ideological border to cooperate with Palestinians. Fahima was recently released, and activist and AIC initiator Michael Warschawski (2007) wrote a public letter to Fahima entitled “My Personal Hero: Tali Fahima”. In this letter he recalled his release from prison, where he had been held on similar charges, as he put it “for crossing the border between Israelis and Palestinians.” However, according to him, the difference between him and Fahima is that he comes from a French, educated middle class background, growing up in the aftermath of the Second World War, and was raised to become oriented to the left, whereas Fahima comes from a Development Town where she grew up in a poor family that traditionally supported right-wing parties. Because she crossed the physical and ideological border on her own, without the political education and support network Warschawski benefited from, he considers her his personal hero.

Considering these circumstances, the complex desire of second and third generation MENA Jews to relate to their Arab past and undo the wrongs of the past (feeling guilty for having oppressed their parents, and for rejecting their identity, culture or language) can be seen as even more difficult when fulfilment of this desire can become conflated with political meanings concerning the conflict with the Arab enemies of Israel.
Nevertheless, *HaKeshet* members have expressed the need for a cultural revival and acknowledgement of Jewish pasts in Arab and Muslim countries.

Language is one of the most important elements in identity and national construction, and is especially relevant here, for the bounding of the imagined community (Anderson, 1983). For MENA Jews Arabic is the language *both* of their parents and of their enemy. Moreover, as the enemy language, Arabic is learnt by Israelis in order to be able to spy on or interrogate the enemy. Given this situation, how can this language become a positive symbol or become a positive part of one’s own cultural past? How can one facilitate a cultural revival and familial attachment through the Arabic language, which is today more than anything associated with the Palestinians, and thus with a potential fifth column and the occupied enemy? Whatever the goals of learning it are, MENA Jews express extra concern with being identified with or perceived as close to the other Other.

Language has always been an important component and indeed a cause for the degree of interaction and participation of Jews in the Middle East and North African Muslim-dominated culture. Hebrew was the liturgical language, but in the Islamic empire Arabic was the spoken language and the written language of the intellectuals, and this included educated Jews. Through extensive translations, especially of Greek writings, Jews could study and appreciate the ancient philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. The degree of participation and acculturation exhibited by Jews in pre-modern times can be summed up by S. D. Goitein’s description of contemporary Jewish cultural development as “Judeo-Arabic culture” (Scheindlin, 2002:317).

There are signs that Israeli Jews of Middle Eastern and North African origin are trying to learn more about their lost heritage. For example, *Ha’aretz* reported that a thirty-four-year-old owner of a public relations agency initiated a course in Moroccan Arabic as part of his efforts to revive Moroccan culture (*Ha’aretz*, 05/05/2004). With the aim of becoming able to understand his aunts in their native language, the organiser said that “Language is key to returning to one’s roots,” and continued by stating how important this is to him and members of his generation (ibid). Another sign is increased interest in local Arabic literature and in its characterisation of Jews. For example, Israeli-Iraqi
Professor Emeritus of Arabic, Sasson Somekh: (Ha’aretz, 30.04.2004) wrote a very positive review of an Iraqi novel and was particularly impressed by the unbiased depiction of Jewish Iraqi protagonists. Another example is the Israeli-Iraqi author Sami Michael who, in his recently published novel “Doves in Trafalgar”, built on the Arabic novella “Return to Haifa” by the Palestinian author Ghassan Kanafani. Generational and linguistic gaps and possible bridges are also the themes in Rami Kimchi’s documentary trilogy In Exile in their Homeland about his Sephardi-Egyptian family over the last century. Kimchi explores the themes of alienation and exile in relation to his familial cultural past and ethnic identity, as well as the sense of belonging in Israeli society (interview).

However, few members of HaKeshet speak or have made efforts to learn Arabic. Several interviewees outside of HaKeshet have pointed out critically that the members of the movement have not made the effort. This indicates something about the commitment of HaKeshet members either to their Arab past or to their Arab co-citizens. It will not be attempted here to test the authenticity of HaKeshet members’ quest for a past, or to test their commitment to their pasts by measuring their efforts to learn Arabic. Rather, the question should be asked: is HaKeshet engaged in cultural reminiscence, or is it constructing a political vision for the future? Its members’ passive relationship with Arabic does not suggest that they are actively engaged in connecting to the Middle Eastern region or to their Arab countrymen and women.

To turn to the other main issue to be discussed here, the movement has not chosen to highlight its pluralism, despite the diversity in cultures and traditions among HaKeshet members deriving from different Arab and Muslim countries. During fieldwork I often heard comments regarding the strained relationships in the movement between MENA

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153 Kanafani’s story describes the dramatic flight from Haifa by Palestinians during the war in 1948 when a young couple are forced to abandon their infant son. After the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in 1967 the couple is finally able to return to Haifa. They find their son living in the same apartment they were had lived in nineteen years ago, where he has been raised by Israeli immigrants and now meet them as an Israeli soldier. This is the point where Kanafani’s story ends and Michael’s story starts (or continues). Michael focuses on the problems facing the biological mother and the son in their attempts to build a relationship across physical and emotional boundaries. In addition they have to overcome the language barrier – the mother who only speaks Arabic studies English in order to speak with her Hebrew-speaking son (Michael, interview).

Jews from different backgrounds, usually conflicts between those of Iraqi origin and those of Moroccan origin. Generally, these remarks described power relations among MENA Jews of different origins related to attitudes, positions and favouritism within the movement. Diversity in this sense became a negative feature with the potential to produce schism and tensions.

It is puzzling that HaKeshet has chosen to downplay its diversity, especially considering that HaKeshet embodies Mizrahi frustration with the experience of discrimination, resulting from the imposition of the patronising and misleading categorisation of all Jews from Muslim and Arabs countries under one label, giving the impression that they share essential characteristics. Instead of playing it down, the Mizrahi Rainbow Movement could have exploited its plurality. As the Bangladeshi Nobel Prize laureate, Amartya Sen (2006), describes from his south-Asian experience, HaKeshet could have used the variety of cultures and experiences among its members to show that diversity can exist in harmony. And, moreover, that the Western Zionist ideal it challenges is not the only option or model for Israeli society. Sen (2006) argues that political tolerance does not have to be a Western liberal ideal, but can be based on regional pluralistic commonalities. Commonalities can be language, food traditions, music etc., with respect for diversity and free from past religious or any other defined system of privileges or power-structures based on ascribed identification. By using the common Arabic language and the inclusive character of the Ottoman Empire, it is possible to challenge the West's expropriation of universal political ideas such as liberty and democracy. Thus, in the same way that Shas uses its Sephardi past to provide an alternative Israeli identity, HaKeshet could draw on the pasts of its members to provide the Ashkenazi Israeli model.

As such, HaKeshet could have used its variety of pasts to illustrate that other authentic Jewish experiences, which are integral to the region, can, if utilized in a suitable manner, help integrate Israel into the region. This would further integrate MENA Jews and other

155 As also identified by Yair Sheleg in his article “Soul-searching in the Mizrahi movement” (Ha’aretz, 13.12.2006), where he further connected this with tensions resulting from what in Chapter Two is discussed as tensions resulting from different views and feelings of belonging to Jewishness/Judaism: “An outside observer claims there was “tension between the ‘Iraqis’ (the secular activists), such as Yonah and Prof. Yehouda Shen hav, and the ‘Moroccans’ (the more traditional activists).”
non-Ashkenazi Jews and Palestinian citizens into Israeli society. However, HaKeshet as a movement does not emphasise the histories of its members’ original communities. There is a certain focus on why or how Jews from Arab and Muslim countries came to Israel, but there is no connection exhibited between this and the goals or focus of the movement. There is cultural diversity among HaKeshet’s members, coming from several civilisations where exchange and encounters between different cultural traditions was integral to the make-up of society. Such legacies from the past are not reflected in the Mizrahi goals of HaKeshet.

The commonality in the diverse pasts of HaKeshet members is the existence of and interchanges among multiple traditions, religions and groups. As presented in the Introduction, a major difference between these Jews’ Middle Eastern and North African experiences, and those Jews who were exposed to European nationalism, is that Jews in the Arab and Muslim world were perceived as belonging to this context without imposed political or social pressure to adopt a national, religious or other identity (or, if pressured towards a national stance, this pressure was the same as the pressure towards other religious groups). By emphasising where they came from, HaKeshet members’ pasts could have been used as a bridge to the region in which Israel is situated: to the peoples and cultures surrounding it.

By drawing on its members’ pasts, HaKeshet could have opposed “clash of civilisations” theories, the best example of which is Samuel Huntington’s work with this title. Sen does this by using his personal past and experiences from the heterogeneous Indian civilisation to demonstrate how this cultural syncretism invalidates the idea of such a clash. This is not a suggestion to recreate or idealise the past. Certainly, it was at times difficult and dangerous to belong to a religious or other minority in the Middle East and North Africa. But, as presented in the Introduction, until the introduction of European nationalism, via imperialism, and Zionism, Jews, as other groups, were considered by others, rulers and Jews themselves, to belong in this region as Jews. Beyond actual experiences, this is the major difference between Middle Eastern and North African Jewish experience and the European one. European Jews’ Jewishness was considered the root cause of their political and social inability to be Europeans, Germans French etc.
Due to this, *HaKeshet* has the potential to draw from its pool of cultural and historical plurality, in terms of experiences and backgrounds, as a base for its pluralistic goals as a social movement.

In its *Principles, HaKeshet* states that the movement “believes that a society that functions with respect for democracy, justice, equality and recognition of the different cultures it incorporates, is able to contribute to the establishment of brotherly relations between its members and to peace with its neighbours” (*Principles*).\(^{156}\) With the explicit goal to change the direction on the development of Israeli state and society. Again, the question is: why in formulating its *Principles, did HaKeshet* not use its members’ histories more directly, by expressing pride in being from this region and reflect this further in its goals and vision? If it had, its members could have experienced pride in their belonging to something beyond the Israeli *Mizrahi* experience, such as Shas’ *Sephardi* does. And thus, their source of pride would not have had to be to finally have excelled in Israel despite being “marginalised *Mizrahim*, as in the Land Struggle won in the *Ashkenazi*-dominated High Court, nor that they have learnt how to speak “the language of the elite”.

Based on their Arab and other Jewish experiences, HaKeshet members’ pride could have been openly anchored in a production of alternatives to what they perceive as the single national-religious-ethnic ticket to allocations of resources and full membership in the state. The movement could have shown that there are alternative ways of including and administering collectives that are not based on exclusive birthrights or imposed categories of belonging, and in this way opened for association with people who are not necessarily Jewish or Westernised.

**Alternative Paths – an Assessment**

When comparing the five courses or paths for MENA Jews from Chapter Two with *HaKeshet*’s Mizrahi Rainbow, the movement’s lack of an agenda, a vision and a point of departure on which to base its actions is clear. The observed discrepancy between *HaKeshet*’s discourse and actions mirrors its members’ experiences as caught in-between

\(^{156}\) Hebrew, my translation.
inclusion in the nation and exclusion from aspects of Israeliness. This resulted in the perpetuation of the bifurcation of “Jews” and “Arabs” and the ethnocratic structure of the state. This occurred despite HaKeshet members articulated need and desire to reengage with their Arab past. Thus, the movement ended up neither a) facilitating a positive alternative category of identification, nor b) choosing to not focus on ethnic categorisations and arguing for rights as citizens.

Shas, presented as the first of the five alternative paths for MENA Jews, unlike HaKeshet wanted to reaffirm the Zionist structure with its proud new Sephardi Jewish identity, and thus chose response (a). The religious-political party-movement engages in what can be described as a combination of Castells’ (1997:8) legitimising identity and project identity: It legitimises the dominant order with an alternative identity that emanates from a group of social actors who have built the new identity based on their cultural resources.

The discrepancy between HaKeshet’s discourse and actions is perhaps similar to the second path of “default Zionists/Israelis” such as MENA Jews who are unhappy and dissatisfied about their situation and status, but who nevertheless do not consider or attempt to solve their problems by challenging the structure of the state. This behaviour corresponds with the previous explanations of Shafir and Peled (2002), Swirski (1989) and Yiftachel (2000), identifying the reason for Mizrahim’s inability to include Palestinians, as described in Chapter Two. However, HaKeshet members insistently rejected this description, as also evidenced in their choice of universal language.

Certainly, like Sami Michael, HaKeshet’s members remained in Israel and, despite their short-comings, are engaged in trying to change the country from within. But, as already described, unlike those who left HaKeshet, the movement’s members have not decided on a point of departure. Thus, they have no agenda or vision of Israeli society to work towards. Moreover, as has become clear, HaKeshet’s members have not been able to leave behind their Mizrahi categorisation whose meaning and consequences they are still deliberating.

Undoubtedly, the Land Struggle case showed that, unlike path four, describing MENA Jews who fight for equality of all citizens of Israel and for Palestinian freedom from
occupation and right to self-determination, *HaKeshet* was not able to extend its egalitarian struggle to the Palestinian citizens.

Finally, in contrast to the positive ways in which *Sephardism*, Levantinism and possibly also Mediterraneanism used cultural and historical pasts in shaping and formulating alternative Jewish collective identities, in path five, *HaKeshet* has not been able to draw on the plurality of pasts within its movement or to articulate an Arab alternative, despite its pronounced calls for such an alternative.
**PART III:**

**Parent Power: Trans-national Solidarity in Practice**

**Chapter 7**

*Teachers Without Borders: The Development of HILA*

This part of the dissertation will present and discuss *HILA – HaVa’d HaTziburi LeMa’an HaHinukh BiShkhunot VeBeIriyt HaPitukh*, translated by the organisation as “Israel Committee for Equality in Education” and used as a parallel case study to *HaKeshet*, which was presented and discussed in Part II. The grass-roots organisation *HILA* was established by the Israeli sociologist Shlomo Swirski and others in 1987 to fight for equality in the Israeli education system. In contrast to *HaKeshet*, *HILA* manages to include Palestinian citizens on all levels of its organisation, and it will be shown here how this is done. *HILA* works with parents, teaching them about their rights as parents and their children’s rights as pupils in order to facilitate parental involvement at all levels of the Israeli state educational system. In addition to empowering parents through educating them about Israeli laws and institutions, *HILA* assists individual parents and groups in their disputes with various institutions in the system. Concrete problems faced by marginalised groups of parents vary depending on what national and ethnic group they belong to, and at what level (local, regional or national) they experience problems. This will be illustrated by specific cases in this chapter.

*HILA*’s main office is located in south Tel Aviv, in the least affluent part of the city. As all courses *HILA* provide are given in the local communities where parents reside, *HILA*’s office is mainly used for administrative purposes, such as phone communication with parents, and hosting meetings of the *HILA* bodies. Thus, compared to *HaKeshet*’s location of its office and most of its activities in Tel Aviv, *HILA* is more similar to *Shas* in that the grass-roots activism is located where its parent activists are. “Parent activists” are parents who use *HILA*’s resources and who are or have been active in *HILA*’s courses.

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157 Literally *HILA* means “The Public Council to the Source of Education in Neighbourhoods and Development Towns”. This name and its meaning will be discussed below.
The *HILA* office is run day-to-day by its Director, who over the past twenty years has been Tikva Levi. Also to be found in the office is Li Einstein, who has been a part-time assistant for three and a half years. *HILA* has volunteers who assist in administrative tasks, as I myself volunteered during fieldwork, and students who volunteer to conduct research related to *HILA* and education.

Structurally, *HILA*’s General Assembly (*Asefa klalit*) is made up of thirty-six registered organisational members, who form the core of its leadership. The General Assembly meets twice a year to approve the budget; decide on general policy and changes in regulations; to vote for the Board; to allocate an inspection committee (external organisational accountants); and to appoint new members of the General Assembly. *HILA* also has a Board (*Vaad*) that meets once every six weeks to make decisions regarding organisational policy and principle decisions regarding the general running of *HILA*. Further, the Board is active in *HILA*’s public relations and in determining its ideological direction.

*HILA*’s funding comes from non-governmental sources, mostly foreign NGOs such as the German Heinrich Boell Foundation and Rosa Luxemburg Foundation,\(^\text{158}\) and Novi, the Dutch branch of Oxfam. Furthermore, *HILA* has in the recent years leading up to 2005, received funding from the New Israel Fund (NIF), an American Jewish based organisation promoting social change in Israel.\(^\text{159}\) Most of these funding organisations provide general funding. *HILA* also gets some funding from smaller organisations that fund specific parts of *HILA*’s activism or specific projects.

In 2004-2005 *HILA* was in its most difficult economic situation since the establishment of the organisation. This situation was explained by *HILA*’s Director as being caused by a number of coinciding factors. Many funding organisations have limits on how many years they provide funding, such as the NIF, which funds projects over three years, after which the recipient is meant to be able to generate funding themselves, or apply for funding from other sources. There was increased competition for economic funds after the increase in Israeli NGOs after the Oslo Accords. Also, from the mid-


\(^{159}\) The New Israel Fund was described in Chapter Three.
1990s, donors began looking for joint activism between Palestinian and Israeli organisations, but since *HILA* works with both groups in the *same* organisation and because the Palestinians are also Israeli citizens, it does not suit this paradigm of partner organisations.\textsuperscript{160} Lastly, *HILA* is, according to its Director, considered too controversial for many organisations, precisely because it works with both Jewish and Palestinian citizens who challenge the educational system of Israel.

In the conversation quoted from above in the Introduction, between the Head of Sderot Parent Council and the representative of the Ministry of Education, *HILA* was described as the union of all parents in Israel. Despite being smaller today than it was in the late 1980s and beginning of the 90s, *HILA*’s established networks of previous and current Parent Councils, comprised of groups and individuals all over Israel, preserve the organisation’s character as a nationwide organisation. Finances limit current and possibly future activism, but the established network of empowered parents continues to exist and function by itself. Shlomo Swirski (interview) who established *HILA*, nostalgically described the most successful days in this way:

> We worked with people; it was not a top-centre organisation. It was an organisation of parents who were mostly working class. We changed the organisation over the years; it was started by maybe five people. Then we started to make parents become activists for *HILA*. Then we brought parents into the governing bodies of *HILA*. That was the idea. At the time we were, next to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the only other NGO [in Israel]. But we were sort of in the middle between an NGO and a movement: we had many weekend seminars with 300-400 people. Many young people came to join us. We had a monthly newspaper, and we were often in the media. We also went to the courts and many of the cases had reverberations and people felt that *HILA* was a force.

Below is a more specific outline of *HILA*’s goals, objectives and strategies as stated in its General Information:\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{160} An example of *HILA* not matching the criteria was the Norwegian People to People project. People to People funded cooperation between Israeli Jewish organisations and Palestinian organisations from the occupied Palestinian territory. They rejected *HILA*’s application for funding because it worked with both groups in Israel.

\textsuperscript{161} From the presentation of the organisation used in applications for funding.
GOALS:
1) To allow every Israeli child the chance to receive an academic high school diploma;
2) To end discrimination and negligence in the Israeli education system;
3) To open opportunities for university study to disadvantaged students from development towns, low-income neighbourhoods and Arab villages.

OBJECTIVES:
1) To inform and empower parents to become involved in improving their children’s education;
2) To help return all children who don’t belong in “special education” to regular education;
3) To encourage the opening of academically-oriented high schools in development towns, poor neighbourhoods and villages.

STRATEGIES:
1) Grass-roots organizing with our primary target group, the parents in low-income Ethiopian, Arab and Mizrahi (Sephardic) communities, other immigrants and anyone suffering from negligence in the education system;
2) Lobbying Israeli Parliament members and Education Ministry Officials;
3) Training future teachers in equal education practice;
4) Educating and mobilizing university students and young activists; and
5) Raising public awareness through newspapers, radio, television, newsletters, pamphlets, booklets, and audio cassettes and video journalism.

*HILA*’s fieldworkers teach courses in local communities across the country. When this fieldwork was conducted, *HILA* had only one fieldworker, who worked part-time due to the economic situation described above. Up until 2005 *HILA* ran courses in Arara in the centre of the country, in Ashqelon south of Tel Aviv and in Sderot on the northern border to the occupied Gaza Strip. In addition, *HILA* conducted follow-up meetings in Jaljuliya, a few initiating meetings in different places and the weekend seminar to be discussed below. In practice, Yehouda Amichai, Program Director and Parents Guide of *HILA*, worked in his private business during the day, and for *HILA* between one and four nights a week, depending on demand. Additionally, *HILA*’s Director participated in meetings and gave lectures in *HILA*’s courses. As most parents are in employment, *HILA*’s courses are provided in the evening. In most cases they are held at the local school or in local community houses. *HILA* provides the written material used in the courses. Overall, keeping in mind that each case is different, economic funding for the courses is provided by a combination of funding from *HILA*, from municipalities, and from Non-Governmental Organisations.
In addition to the HILA-trained fieldworker, HILA draws on resourceful people from all spheres of society, who volunteer to contribute to courses and to the organisation. For example, Mizrahi activist, HaKeshet member and media figure Moshe Karif came to give a talk to the parent group in Sderot on how to relate to the media. While this example illustrates how HILA uses a volunteer on a specific topic related to his/her capacity, volunteer activists in HILA contribute in all areas of the organisation. Another example is the author Sami Michael, who writes letters in support of HILA’s applications for funding. Other volunteer activists are engaged in the daily running of the organisation and in specific groups and/or cases. Also HILA’s General Assembly and Board are made up of volunteers.

Introducing itself, HILA quotes from the universal UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), stating that every child has the right to education aimed at “developing the child’s personality and talents, preparing the child for active life as an adult ... and developing respect for the child’s own cultural and national values and those of others.” On HILA’s website and in its various presentations, this universal bill is put into the Israeli context:

In Israel, class and cultural discrimination against Arab, Ethiopian and other disadvantaged populations is a severe and growing problem. Rather than decreasing, the socio-economic gaps between ethnic groups are widening as the cycle of poverty and powerlessness in these communities continues. Nowhere is this more evident than in the education system, where thousands of these children each year fail to even graduate from high school.

The Israeli sociologist Shlomo Swirski established HILA in 1987 to address what he understood as an educational system reproducing inequality and an ethnic-based power-system disfavouring those Jewish Israelis who did not originate in Europe or in the USA, and disfavouring also the Palestinians citizens of Israel. The inequalities in Israeli society are manifest to this day in statistics over income, educational level, and presence in administrative and leader positions (see for example Shafir and Peled, 2002: 78-87). Additionally, discriminatory practices and views are evident in representations and prioritising of cultural expressions, and in daily social encounters.

162 For the full text of this document see Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm
163 HILA website: http://www.HILA-equal-edu.org.il/, General Information
Based on his studies of the causes of this inequality, Swirski chose to direct his attention to the education system in his attempt to stop the reproduction of the established Israeli class system. The reasoning behind his focus on education was the idea that if individual Mizrahi and Palestinians citizens could continue or complete their education, they would be able to compete for jobs with higher salaries and opportunities for advancement. Swirski believed that by achieving equal opportunities in education, Mizrahim and Palestinian citizens would be able to change their socioeconomic situation. In Swirski’s analysis, the design of the education system supports the existing class system. He and other activists wanted to address the insincerity in the discourse of “modernisation through integration”, as regards both marginalised Mizrahim and excluded Palestinians. Through HILA, Swirski sought to counteract the existing damaging system by enabling parents to demand equal rights to equal education for all of Israel’s citizens.

According to Shafir and Peled (2002:84) the best indicator of educational achievement in Israel is:

[…] the ability to gain the state matriculation certificate (teudat bagrut), a high school diploma that is necessary (although no longer sufficient) for admission to institutions of higher education. […] The ratio of Mizrahi eighteen-year-olds holding the certificate in 1995 was 28 percent, up from 17 percent in 1989, while among Ashkenazi eighteen-year-old is was 38.7 percent in 1995, up from 31.6 percent in 1987.

Furthermore, when including Palestinians citizens in the comparison (Shafir and Peled, 2002:123-4):

In the 1993-4 school year, 93 percent of Jewish fourteen-to-seventeen-years-old but only 70 percent of Palestinians of the same age groups were attending school. Only 44 percent of the relevant age groups among Palestinians reached the twelfth grade that year, and of these only 33 percent gained a matriculation certificate (constituting 40 percent of those who actually took the matriculation examinations). Of the total age group, 14.4 percent of Palestinians and 39.5 percent of Jews gained the matriculation certificate in 1994. By the end of the century the figures rose to 20 percent among Palestinians and over 50 percent among Jews. […] Many of the matriculating Palestinian students earn matriculation certificates that are not good enough to gain entry into universities. Thus in 1998 90 percent of Jewish high-school gradates, but only 70 percent of Arab ones (not including Druze and Negev Bedouin graduates, whose rates were even lower) gained matriculation certificates that met the universities’ admission requirements. As a result, in the 1994-5 academic year Palestinian students constituted only 5.3 percent of the students in Israeli universities.
In 1991 Swirski co-founded Adva, a social research centre, which he currently directs. According to the centre’s report *Israel: A Social Report 2005* (12):

Inequality in Israel has an ethnic face. This is reflected in the earned income of urban wage earners from the major ethnic groups from 1990 forward. The earned income of Arab citizens of Israel is the lowest; up to the eve of the second Intifada, their earned income was on a downward trend. The earned income of Mizrahi Jews is somewhat higher; during the last decade, it has been on the rise. The earned income of Ashkenazi Jews is the highest, much higher than that of the other groups.  

Citing the Poverty Report, published by the Social Security Institute (23.11.2004), *HILA* (Grant application, 2005) stated that 1.42 million people out of the total population of 6.78 million lived beneath the poverty line in 2003, and 662,000 of these were children. Based on these figures, *HILA* stated that in 2003 every fifth person and every third child in Israel lived beneath the poverty line, which indicated an increase of 100,000 people from 2002 (ibid). According to the *Sikkuy Report 2003-4*, based on statistics from the Central Bureau of Statistics, forty-five percent of Palestinian families live below that poverty-line compared with fifteen percent of Jewish families. According to *HILA*, this economic development is more evident in the educational system than any other place, where thousands of Mizrahi and Palestinian children fail to graduate from high school each year. In its grant applications, *HILA* emphasises that the socioeconomic gaps between ethnic groups in Israel are widening.

**Challenging the Zionist Narrative**

Shlomo Swirski (1999:19) described the development and characteristics of the Israeli educational system that was constructed based on the school systems of the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate rule in Palestine, in addition to the Jewish *Yishuv*

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164 This report was described in *Ha’aretz* under the headline “Poverty report paints picture of worrying gaps in society” and made its way to the *Agence France Presse*, 13 December 2005 under the title: “Poverty gap widens in Israel.”
He describes the latter as part of the Jewish institutions that in his view constituted a (Jewish) proto-state. Swirski notes that when the state of Israel was established, three main groups of people met: (East) European Jews, Palestinian Arabs and Jews from Middle Eastern and North African countries, Palestine included. This differs from the Zionist narrative, which describes the education system as part and parcel of the Zionist settlement development in Palestine, in which segregation between Jews and Arabs and among groups of Jews is obscured. Refusing to accept and reproduce the Zionist narrative, Swirski writes of the power-structure in the new state through its education policies and practices with regards to the three groups up to today.

In contrast to generalised negative images of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries in the Zionist narrative, Swirski (1999:58) describes Jews from Muslim lands as far less unified than different groups of European Jews who made their way to Palestine and later to Israel. For example, Swirski calls attention to the fact that Jews from Muslim countries did not have a common cultural, political or religious movement, such as the Jewish Enlightenment provided for European Jewry (ibid). Moreover, unlike European Jewry, Jews in Arab and Muslim lands did not have the equivalent of the shared experience of European anti-Semitism. Even though Jews in Arab and Muslim countries experienced assaults at various times in various places from the majority population and/or from the political leadership, this was not experienced across North Africa and the Middle East at the same time or in a similar fashion. Any persecution was not comparable in character with the unified nature of European anti-Semitism.

Palestinian Arabs

Palestinian Arabs under the Ottoman Empire used the Ottoman state school system or the traditional Muslim schools. The Ottoman schools were similar to French public schools and the language of instruction was Turkish (Swirski, 1999: 37-8). In addition, there were Christian schools where the language used was Arabic. Under the British Mandate, next to denominational schools, Palestinian Arab schools were administered by the Mandate.

\(^{165}\) The Zionist and mandate eras are called the New Yishuv, whereas the pre-Zionist Jewish community is called the Old Yishuv.

\(^{166}\) See sub-chapter “Regional Jews and Indigenous Arabs – Becoming Citizens in the Jewish State” in the Introduction.
government (Swirski, 1999:53). Mandate schools used Arabic and have been described as a “strategic contributor to the formulation and expression of a Palestinian national project” (Swirski, 1999:54). Moreover, the Mandate school system became the de facto start of the Palestinian school system (ibid). However, the mandate authorities were criticised for favouring Jewish schools in budget allocations, and Palestinians accused the British of having an educational policy that promoted the Zionist goal to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine (Swirski, 1999: 53).

The Ashkenazi Zionist community

The Ashkenazi veteran community in Palestine was made up of a mixture of East European and West European Jews, with their different historical and sociological backgrounds. As such, this community was not uniform. The first complete Western-style Hebrew schools in the Jewish colonies in Palestine were established after 1882 as part of the first wave of Zionist immigration into Palestine. Swirski explains (1999:47-49) how there developed three school streams in the Zionist school network: the general Zionist stream; the religious school stream that to this day is affiliated with the political religious Zionist party the National Religious Party; and the Workers’ stream affiliated with the Histadrut, the Israeli Labour Union. Next to these Zionist streams are the ultra-orthodox schools affiliated with the non-Zionist Agudat Yisrael (“The Band/Association of Israel”) party.

Alliance Israelite Universelle and Jewish Education in Arab and Muslim Countries

The indigenous Jewish community in Palestine was composed largely of Ladino-speaking Sephardi Jewish families who lived in Safad, Hebron, Tiberias and Jerusalem, and Yiddish-speaking conservative Ashkenazi Jews who lived mostly in Jerusalem (Tamari, 2004). Tamari (2004: 12) describes how secular education for Sephardi Jews in Palestine was introduced by the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools. This was a school network based on the ideas of the enlightenment, and whose goal was to spread European-style education to Jews in Muslim lands. The Alliance Israelite Universelle network was established in 1860 and was mainly French, with representatives from other
Central European countries. Providing schools for both genders, this network aimed to promote communal revival among local Jews in non-European countries. Overall, French and Arabic were the languages of instruction. Swirski described the network as “the foremost representative of ‘Jewish colonialism’” (Swirski, 1999:65). The Alliance consisted of Europeans Jews, who in well-meaning Orientalist ways aimed to show Jews in Arab and Muslim countries the way out of “the darkness” through education. However, being present in countries as far away from each other and as different as Morocco and Iraq, in practice the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools operated differently to correspond with local circumstances. In Palestine Muslim pupils also attended the Alliance schools, and mixed groups of Muslim and Jewish pupils studied together at the Ottoman authorities’ public schools (Tamari, 2004).

Overall, the Alliance schools were instrumental in producing a westernised leadership of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities (Swirski, 1999:70). Politically, the Alliance Israelite Universelle taught and practiced a non-state and non-territorial Jewish nationalism. Their three core principles were equal political and civil rights for Jews, inter-Jewish solidarity, and sociocultural renewal (Swirski, 1999:66). Thus, many Jews educated by Alliance Israelite Universelle arrived in Israel after 1948 with this Western-style education and non-territorial perspective on national goals. This is significant, because it contradicts the Zionist narrative, in which Jews from Arab and Muslim countries are presented as uneducated, in need of westernisation, interested in emigration to Israel for religious reasons, and assumed not to have nationalist ideas.

Also present in Palestine, but not so often mentioned in the Zionist narrative, was the Jewish Yemenite traditional heder (“room”), the religious schools. The existence of traditional religious education next to the Alliance network was normal throughout Arab and Muslim countries.167 It is significant to remember, however, that, as with the veteran Zionist community in Palestine, the Jews from North Africa and Middle Eastern countries were far from a homogenous group, despite their characterisation as such in the Zionist narrative. Again, this is especially significant, considering the negative

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167 Sami Michael writes about his heder experience in Baghdad in the essay Tadeeb, published in Ha’aretz, 29.08.2003.
generalised and orientalist image these Jews have been described with in the Zionist narrative and school textbooks to date.

After 1948 – Marginalised in State Education

In 1948, the state of Israel was established. For the Palestinian Arabs it meant *al-Nakba* (*the Catastrophe* in Arabic), wherein more than 700,000 Palestinians became refugees and lost their land, home and belongings. The establishment of the Jewish state also signified the beginning of the end of significant Jewish existence in Muslim and Arab countries. Three main groups: European Jews, the remaining Palestinian Arabs, and Jews from Arab and Muslim countries, with all their plurality and diversities, constituted the micro-societies that made up the new state (Swirski, 1999:88). The new state formation created changes and ruptures for all three groups: the East European Zionists became the hegemonic group in the new state, a process that lead to what Swirski termed “civil-society-become-state” (ibid:90-95). The two other groups became Israeli without choice and without ideology. They became Israeli because of the result of the war, especially in the case of the Palestinian Arabs, and because of the new political scenario created by the establishment of the Jewish state in the case of the regional Jews (Swirski, 1999:92-93).

The new state decided to continue the school segregation between Arabs and Jews from the British Mandate (Swirski, 1999:117), and Palestinian pupils up to today study in local schools, with a curriculum dictated by the Israeli Ministry of Education, taught in Arabic by teachers who are Palestinian citizens of Israel (ibid). This was legislated in the first Cabinet, where it was decided to continue the Jewish educational system of Mandate Palestine and to add a new Inspectorate for Children of Minorities, meaning Arab Palestinians (Swirski, 1999:101). In 1949, the Knesset passed the Compulsory Education Act obliging all pupils from ages six to fourteen to attend school. In the case of Palestinian pupils, it was implemented very slowly, and only one third of children in this age group attended school in the state’s first decade. There are also non-state-funded private Muslim and Christian schools, where Palestinian parents with means send their children, but the focus here is on state-funded and state-run schools. As will be described below, up to this day state education for Palestinian citizens is decided and administered
by Jewish Israelis, regardless of Palestinian history and their situation as an indigenous minority under constant security control and surveillance. Ironically, since their inclusion in the state of Israel, Palestinian pupils have been exposed to systematic exclusion. As non-Jewish inhabitants, they were not included in the promise of the “ingathering” of the Jewish exiles, or in integration policies aimed at Jewish groups, as stressed by Swirski (1999).

Meanwhile, the Jewish Zionist schools wanted to increase numbers in their student body, and competed over the new Jewish immigrant children from Arab and Muslim countries. This is particularly interesting, as the different schools were affiliated with political parties and thus school enrolment was seen as a way to attract parents to the related political party. This party-affiliation ended with the 1953 Education Law, which will be dealt with below. Before this, an important development for Jewish schools was the “status quo letter” written in 1949 by Prime Minister Ben Gurion to the leaders of the ultra-orthodox non-Zionist Agudat Yisrael party. In the letter the Prime Minister promised that the state would keep observing the religious arrangements as they were in the Jewish community before the state was established. Thus, Saturday was preserved as the national day of rest; all governmental kitchens had to preserve the traditional kashrut food rules; religious courts maintained control over marriage, divorce and burials; and the religious non-Zionist school system was preserved next to the different Zionist schools.

In 1953 the State Education Law was passed, establishing the continuation of a Jewish religious and a secular state school which ended the party-affiliated school system (Shafir and Peled, 2002:141). In addition to the religious Zionist schools, the non-Zionist religious school system of Agudat Yisrael was given state funding while maintaining the independence achieved by the status quo agreement (ibid). Later, new private or semi-private school networks emerged. The largest and most contentious is Maayan Hahinuch Hatorahni (“the Wellspring of the Torahni Education”) network, which was established in the 1980s by Shas. Based on the religious Sephardi Jewish tradition advocated by Shas, this educational network covers every level from kindergarten to high school. Many Sephardi/MENA Jewish families send their children to these schools, especially parents in the lower income strata, because Shas schools provide long school days and meals to
pupils. However, the quality of the education provided is a subject of debate.\footnote{According to Marcello Waksler, the Educational Director of the National Educational Programme Ometz ("Courage"), even if it is good that Shas schools provide food, clothes and after school activities, the level of education provided is "terrible" (Rosmer, 2002:87). According to HaKeshet member and Adva Chairperson Yossi Dahan, "Shas discourages its members from pursuing higher education, which is one of the modern tracks of social mobility, and turn them into obedient followers of the rabbis. If Shas is the Mizrahi future, the present situation is infinitely better than what we can expect in the years to come" (quoted in Kashti, 1997:27).} Since the Shas schools network is not government-run, and thus not a focus for HILA, it will not be included in the following discussion.

According to Swirski (1999), the most important issues to be aware of as regards education in Israel is that MENA Jews, Arab Palestinian and Ashkenazi children have been segregated in the state-funded educational system. Due to this segregation, Mizrahi and Palestinian children have received unequal education both in terms of quality and quantity, when compared to Ashkenazi children. Moreover, this system of segregation and inequality was in the 1950s and 1960s anchored in the contemporary modernisation discourse that held that different groups of people were at different levels of modernisation. Thus, children were treated in accordance with what was assumed to be their needs and abilities. In short, the social scientists believed that Palestinian children and children of MENA Jews were failing their education because of their stagnant Arab culture. Prior to 1948 both these groups of children were “diagnosed” as “primitive” and thus in need of civilisation and modernisation (Ram, 1995:38-9; Swirski, 1999:162-4).

However, in accordance with Eyal’s analysis presented in Part I, after the establishment of the Jewish state, social scientists ceased to be interested in the local Arabs (Swirski, 1999:164). In practice, this meant that children of MENA Jews received “special education” and were channelled into so-called comprehensive tracks, which combined academic and vocational education (leaving these pupils unable to meet the criteria for further education, in order to accommodate for what was understood as their “primitive” and “un-modern” status). Whereas Arab Palestinian schools were excluded from these educational projects and thus from the accompanying state funding. As Swirski explains, even though MENA Jews were in this respect privileged compared with Arab Palestinians, this privilege carried a heavy price: “the collective labelling of Mizrahim as educational failures and as the intellectual inferiors of Ashkenazim”
(Swirski, 1999:164). “Special education” and its ramifications for individual pupils and MENA Jews as a group and the exclusion of Palestinian pupils and schools will be further discussed below.

**Knowledge is Power – The Ideology of HILA**

Many *HaKeshet* members introduced in Chapter Two described experiences of “coming out” to face increased awareness about Israeli society and their place in this society as *Mizrahi*. Similarly, *HILA* activists described their relations with *HILA* based on former activism, personal feelings of belonging, and position and experiences in Israeli society. Furthermore, many activists in *HILA* said their activism was a reaction based on their understanding of the correlation between ethnicity and class in Israel, and of the correlation between the Israeli economy and the continued occupation of Palestinian land and its people, as well as anger over money spent on wars and not on social welfare. This section introduces activists who explain how and why they became involved in *HILA*. The activists can be divided into two groups: people who have other and previous activist backgrounds, such as peace-related activism and/or other *Mizrahi* or social activism, and people who have come into contact with *HILA* as parents and subsequently become members of the *HILA* organisational bodies.

*HILA*’s Director Tikva Levi (interview) described how she began her activism as a student at the Hebrew University in the mid-1980s. Her focus was on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. She was active in the joint Jewish-Palestinian student groups *Campus*, which called for an end of the occupation, and demonstrated against the Lebanon War, something that was controversial because it broke the taboo of demonstrating during a war. Born in the Development Town Ashqelon to Iraqi parents who were active communists in Baghdad, Levi said that the connection between her former peace activism and present work with education in *HILA* was not unnatural for her:

I was in communist youth clubs, then in *Campus*, and following that there was a group of *Mizrahi* students from the communists and social activists who all saw the connection. We established *HaTahasit HaMizrahit* (the *Mizrahi* Jewel) in 1987 whose approach was: No just peace without social justice, and vice versa. This was
followed by *Mizrahi elHaShalom* [“The Oriental Front”] that perceived *Mizrahim* as a bridge to peace.

In Ammiel Alcalay’s anthology of Israeli Jewish authors and poets from the MENA region in English translation, *Keys to the Garden* (1996), Levi is interviewed about her fight with the “borders within”. She describes how she left university because she felt that the Arab Jewish culture she was a part of was not represented or respected, or even acknowledged, among the academics at the Hebrew University (Alcalay, 1996:336). She confirmed that she feels much more content and appreciated working for the community in *HILA* and that she is able to express herself better in the role of an activist instead of fighting with *Ashkenazi* academics. Levi (interview) recalled how she became involved in social activism related to education and marginalised groups at university, and how at a weekend seminar in Haifa she met Shlomo Swirski and Meir Amor, the founders of *HILA*. In 1989, she moved to Tel Aviv, where Swirski offered her a job in the organisation. She has been there ever since. Levi (interview) tried to explain the marginal position of *HILA* and the fight against the system by talking of how difficult it is to fight it from within:

For example, when we are trying to argue against sending students to “special education” we need to get a second opinion from a private and neutral psychologist.
But, how many psychologists are not in the system – very few!

Yehouda Amichai is *HILA*’s only fieldworker today. His family is from Baghdad, and he describes his background as poor. Amichai (interview) recalled how he became an activist in *HILA* while he was a student at Tel Aviv University. He met Tikva Levi whom he knew from their hometown Ashqelon, and she asked him if he had noticed that they had hardly met any other students from Ashqelon at the universities where they studied. Amichai had thought about this, but not in an organised manner. He subsequently met with Levi and Swirski who told him about *HILA*. In hindsight he said (interview):

I knew there was a problem, but not that there could be an organisation that could deal with the problems I thought of in a more as an experience. So I joined Shlomo [Swirski] on the road giving courses to different communities and parent groups for six months and then I decided I would join *HILA*.
Ahmad Masarwa is from the Palestinian town Arara in central of Israel. He has been an activist since he was young. Raised under the harsh reality of the Israeli military rule of Palestinians until 1966, Masarwa agreed to an offer to live on a kibbutz when he was sixteen. Wanting to get away from what he described as lack of school, food and work in his hometown, he arrived without any knowledge about Israeli Jewish society or kibbutz life. Despite being offered work, housing and education, he soon realised that the Arabs on the kibbutz worked more and studied less than their Jewish contemporaries. Moreover, he came to realise that the aim of the endeavour was to socialise and educate young Arabs to become “Israeli”. Masarwa vividly remembers having to sing the Israeli Hebrew national song HaTikva (The Hope), not knowing what he was singing or the meaning of the text. He came to the conclusion that Zionism and socialism did not and cannot match, and left the kibbutz to work in Tel Aviv. There, he became involved in workers’ organisations and taught workers about their rights. He searched for real Jewish-Arab cooperation and this is how he became active in the anti-Zionist socialist Israeli-Palestinian Matzpen group. Masarwa came into contact with HILA when he was Head of the Parent Committee in Arara and the Parent Committee was protesting against a private company taking over the local school. With assistance from HILA the parents won a case in the High Court: “HILA was interested in our situation and gave us invaluable guidance and advice.” Masarwa has since been active in HILA and is today on its Board.

Art curator Ami Steinitz, who is also member of HaKeshet, is a member of the General Assembly of HILA. He was one of the few people who were active in both organisations simultaneously when this fieldwork was conducted. He described how he came to this as a result of his visual art activities mixed with his critical analysis of the cultural and social situation in this field of art (interview). In the 1980s he joined a group of artists in the Development Town Yavne. Addressing the gaps within Israeli society with the lack of MENA Jews in the cultural arena, Steinitz established a cultural centre, with the aim “to turn upside-down the situation of the one-sided European originated majority” (interview). During the course of this art-related activism, Steinitz and several artists joined HaKeshet. Later he joined HILA, first as a Board member and then as a General Assembly member.
Matie Jaousi is from the Palestinian village Jaljuliya and is one of the very active parent activists there. He became involved because of the poor teaching conditions at the school, as related in detail below when discussing grass-roots activism in Jaljuliya (interview). As one of few parent activists in an economically poor village that has many levels of social tension, Jaousi has felt the pressure from his activism both in terms of time and finances. Despite suffering economically and being exposed to threats and accusations, the details of which will be further discussed below, Jaousi is an enthusiastic and continuous supporter of HILA.

Batya Katar is the Head of the local Parent Council in Sderot and was the person quoted above in the conversation with the representative from the Ministry of Education. She became an involved parent because of the poor conditions at the school where her sons studied. As a very active member of the Sderot Parent Council, Katar (interview) explained that she perceives her activism in a community-oriented context, transcending the realm of her own family. This is evident from the position she has acquired in Sderot, which seems to have occurred spontaneously. She told of how, after the first court case (to be discussed below), children and parents came up to her in the streets to tell her about their problems at school and ask for her help.

Poet, academic and educator Sami Shalom Chetrit worked in HILA for two years, editing its newspaper prior to his partaking in the establishment of HaKeshet. He became an activist during his student days at the Hebrew University, where he listened to people on the left, such as Azmi Bishara. Chetrit recalls that at university his ideas were not yet shaped. He was 25 years old, and he describes meeting people like Tikva Levi and Shlomo Warzana who became “his teachers” (interview). Chetrit explained how by looking at his early poetry he can see his development of consciousness. He describes that he was still not “aware” when he served in the military in Lebanon when he was 22, and that if he had been, he would have refused to serve and would rather have gone to jail. Instead, he sat in Beirut and wrote poems about it not being home. He admits that his poetry from these days as naïve. He later refused to go back to Lebanon.

169 The Iton HILA (the HILA newspaper) was no longer being published due to lack of funding when this fieldwork was conducted. Previous issues can accessed on the HILA website.
Academic and activist Shiko Behar, who like Chetrit has left *HaKeshet*, also described having a slow and late start in becoming an activist. He explained that he was alone and did not have anyone to talk with (interview):

[…] like in the shadow, in the cave of Plato, you feel things, but cannot conceptualise or comprehend them. Then at university I began meeting people who were democrats and *Mizrahi*. Then [I was introduced to] writings, activists, *HILA* – all the links between the various rings. I met for example Tikva [Levi] from *HILA* in the second year at university in 1988. I went to visit *HILA* and I understood that it is all connected, not that everyone is everywhere, but there is an inter-connected issue here. Later on I did some academic work on this. That was the beginning.

Behar’s PhD dissertation in Comparative Politics from Columbia University, USA, is entitled “Arabised Jews and the Unintended Consequence of Arab and Jewish Nationalism”. In it he tried to understand the position of Egyptian and Iraqi Jews vis-à-vis Arab and Jewish nationalism, focusing on the interplay between social involvement and academic and non-academic writing. Also here he observed that Zionism, the existence of Jews in the Middle East and North Africa, and the continuous colonisation and occupation of Palestinian land and people are all connected. Behar was the Director of the AIC in 2004-05. He has been a member of the General Assembly of *HILA* since 1991-2 but he adds that he was “connected” prior to this.

Author Ronit Chaham is *Ashkenazi* and describes her involvement in the *HILA* Board as a formality, by which she means that she is not very active in the organisation beyond attending Board meetings. Chaham (interview) said she feels solidarity with many aspects of *HILA*: she writes children’s books and values education; she is academically interested in representations of Eastern and Western culture; she actively opposes the political system of Israel where there are groups of “haves” and “have-nots”; and she sees the *Mizrahi* and the Palestinian struggles as related parts of the struggle to change Israeli state and society. Like several other interviewees, Chaham (ibid) said that as long as there is a need for *HILA* she feels a need to support it, and also to continue asking why there is a need for such an organisation in a “democracy” (her quotation marks).

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170 *HILA* has long and close relations with the AIC. In addition to Behar this has been personified through Avital Moses who is on the *HILA* General Assembly and works for the AIC. Moreover, Swirski has published on education in the AIC journals and, as described in Part II, Levi guest-edited its Hebrew journal in 2004.
Author Sami Michael became aware of HILA through his wife, who is a relative of Tikva Levi. Michael (interview) described helping HILA by giving lectures and by assisting in fundraising from the New Israel Fund:

There are so many social organisations and volunteers, not only for Mizrahim. I am not an activist: I need to write, I give moral support and give them the opportunity to use my name in order to get support from people and funding and to get to the public with their goals. HILA is one of these that works in education that is the most important issue in relation to poor and rich, Mizrahim and Ashkenazim. It helps pupils from poor neighbourhoods, not as Mizrahi, but these are Mizrahi or from Mizrahi background, this is one of the problems of the state of Israel, that poverty has colour!

The Iraqi educator David Motzafi was the Director of the Education in the city of Or Yehouda, inhabited mainly by MENA Jews. When he conducted research for his PhD in Education in 1999, he used HILA as a base to find and meet interviewees. He interviewed parents to gather information about why their children had been sent to “special education”. Motzafi worked in HILA for one year while he conducted interviews and had discussions with HILA staff. He described HILA as assistance for the people who want to fight for the rights of the weak groups (interview). As someone who comes from “the establishment”, albeit at a local level, Motzafi is conspicuous among the other activists. It is therefore striking that he described HILA in the following way:

[HILA is] A body that fights for very many and substantial goals. In Israel, many problems are not solved by democratic means. There is someone who says there are democratic ways, but this is an ideal. In the practice of everyday, the stronger finds ways to stay strong, and then we need something in order to help the weaker groups. To give them more power through knowledge, guidance, and assistance in law-suits etc. So HILA has significant importance. And it is not easy, they do something and the establishment does something else, it is the same with the Arabs: they are weak in all concerns.

Film producer Osnat Trabelsi (interview) described her perspective as anti-colonial, anti-institutional and Mizrahi. Trabelsi has produced among other films the internationally acclaimed documentary Arna’s Children.171 Sympathetically telling the story of Palestinian youths who later became suicide bombers, the film was considered controversial in Israel. Trabelsi sits in the General Assembly of HILA. Coming from a

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171 As mentioned in the Chapter Two, the film is about the human rights activist Arna Mer-Khamis and the activism among Palestinian children in the refugee camp Jenin on the occupied West Bank.
Mizrahi Development Town background, she always keeps in mind the people and conditions on the other side of the wall" (interview). In the introduction to her recent interview with HILA’s fieldworker Yehouda Amichai she wrote about herself (2006) in the following way:

The first statistic I heard on the subject of education which lit a red alert light in me and directed me to re-check the things that I took for granted for many years, was a statistic conveyed to me by Sami Shalom Chetrit: There is not a single academic school in any of Israel's Development Towns or low income areas, only vocational schools. What is wrong with that? I asked. Think about it, at the end of the day, for 50 percent of the students to be on an academic track and 50 percent on vocational track, with 40 hours of home economics or car mechanics, who end up with a diploma or only a partial matriculation at best. Someone has to be directing that. I have read many books and articles on education by Shlomo Swirski, by the Adva Centre, and on Yossi Dahan and Itzhik Saporta's website HaOkets ("The Sting" in Hebrew, a critical web-site run by HaKeshet members and academics Dahan and Saporta) since then. When [the journal] Highway 40 turned to me to write an article about a subject of my choice, I chose education. Because that is where I think it all begins. And I chose Yehouda Amichai whom I met as HILA's amazing fieldworker, who has worked with parents in the various underprivileged communities in Israel for years, and who has in-depth knowledge on the subject.

Li Einstein is the latest person to join the HILA’s activists. She works in the office, writing letters and documents in English related to applications for funding. She previously worked with Osnat Trabesli, from whom she learnt about HILA. For Einstein, HILA is a natural place for her to work in combination with her anti-Zionist activism with Anarchists Against the Wall. In her world-view, the marginalisation of MENA Jews and Palestinians in Israel is directly linked with the discrimination of Palestinians under Israeli occupation (interview).

“The End of the Era of Innocence” (Brochure, 2005) is the title of the letter HILA uses in order to convey a personal story of an individual’s position in the Israeli state and society, as well as the ability of parents on the margins of society to be empowered and to help themselves. The author is Avital Moses, a parent activist from a poor MENA Jewish background, who was assisted by HILA with problems in her son’s education, and who subsequently began working for the organisation. Today Moses continues to serve as a

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172 The separation wall built by Israel that the ICJ rendered contrary to international law, see subchapter Fieldwork and Methodological Consideration in Chapter Two.
173 Anarchist Against the Wall website. http://www.awalls.org
member of the Board of HILA. Moses (interview) described meeting Palestinian citizens through HILA, and being introduced to their situation and perspectives. She was also introduced to the Palestinian-Israeli organisation AIC, where she became employed and currently works. Moses (interview) perceives her current job with this activist anti-occupation organisation as a natural continuation of her development and self-realisation of her situation as a MENA Jewish woman in the Zionist state where she considers all societal development to be connected with and dependent on the conflict.

Moses (interview) was born in Israel to her Indian father and Lebanese mother. She grew up in a poor family with eight brothers and sisters who all lived in two rooms in a deprived neighborhood of Jerusalem, which had been a Palestinian village before 1948. Her father worked in a medical factory and her mother was a housewife:

   We lived in cramped quarters, filled with tensions and worries – worrying how to make ends meet – fear, pain and sadness. But I also remember humility, modesty and happiness (interview).

Because Moses was a good student, she was sent to a kibbutz to continue her education when she was eight. Both her teachers and her parents believed the kibbutz environment would be better for her and for her studies. However, Moses did not feel welcomed by other children in the kibbutz, who laughed at her Arabic-sounding accent and her belief in God. She suffered from being away from her family, but she was also disappointed when she returned home three years later. She became an angry and rebellious youth who did “wild things” to get her parents’ attention, and she finally stopped going to school. When she was sixteen and a half, she became pregnant and married the father of her son. She viewed the marriage as an escape (interview), but her husband oppressed her and she ran away to her parents with her infant son. Living with her parents was not successful, and Moses left again. She described how her life involved self-harm, including an eating disorder, self-pity, and lack of love and trust in other people. It was when her way of life began to affect her son that she first came into contact with the educational authorities, who diagnosed her son with “an emotional burden” and recommended “special

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174 Moses has agreed to be identified.
education”. Moses had never heard of “special education”, and her sister put her in touch with HILA to help her understand and deal with the educational authorities.

When a child is assigned to “special education”, welfare officers are automatically involved. Moses (interview) explained how she felt powerless facing the authorities and lacked the requisite without the tools and information to answer or discuss with them. HILA provided her with these tools and with the necessary information for her to be part of the decision-making process regarding her son’s future. She describes how in HILA she was accepted as a person, as a woman and as a mother and was seen as brave, intelligent and talented. First HILA assisted her in preventing the educational authorities from placing her perfectly normal son in “special education”. His problems were caused by his mother’s lifestyle and their socioeconomic situation, not by a disability or psychological problems. Simultaneously, Moses (interview) underwent a difficult enlightening process which enabled her to love and motivate herself. After having dealt with her immediate issues, Moses began working part-time in HILA and experienced growth in self-esteem and pleasure in helping other parents in similar situations. She still serves on the General Assembly.

The Methodology of Empowerment

As mentioned above, Swirski established HILA in order to fight against the reproduction of the ethno-class system through the field of education. There seems to be an observable connection between what, why and how HILA activism is conducted. In HILA’s goals, ideology and methodology there is a discernable connection. The overall approach of HILA is to challenge the education system and its institutions with the aim of changing its ideology, as well as its practices. The goal of HILA’s activism is to attain equal opportunity in state-funded education for all citizens. Specifically, HILA works with parents who are active in School Parent Councils and District Parent Councils comprised of representatives from the various School Councils. HILA also works with individuals or groups of parents who are not in a council or otherwise organised. An example of the latter is parents of a school class, from a school or a village, town or city. Below is a specific outline of the practical goals of HILA’s “Parents Involvement in Education
Course - Towards Quality Education in Low-Income Israeli Communities” *(HILA general information in grant applications):*

1) To impart information and tools to parents in every subject relating to their rights and obligations as parents in the school and in the education system.

2) To explain basic terms for understanding the education system, and to facilitate communication and cooperation between parents, the school and the children.

3) Creating a supportive home environment and following up on students’ homework, discussions with children about what’s happening in school, reading books,

4) To encourage parents to become involved in school and community life, including: visits to the school, participation in school trips and parties, organizing parent committees, initiating projects, working with educational institutions, local authorities, and more.

5) To train parents to participate in local and regional educational decision-making bodies for the purpose of radically improving the level of education in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

6) To foster substantive Jewish-Arab solidarity and;

7) To raise the issue of equal rights in education to the top of the public agenda.

An example of the last point, to raise public awareness, is an article in the national daily newspaper *Ha’aretz* (24.09.2004)\(^{175}\), from the weekend supplement, telling the stories of Jaljuliya and Sderot Parent Council and their respective struggles with local and national education administrations. In the article, which covers four pages, activists from both places are introduced in interviews and photograph. Amichai, the *HILA* fieldworker, is also interviewed. Presented to me by the Director of *HILA*, this article is considered important because it was a well-written piece in a serious national newspaper’s weekend supplement and was consequently widely read. It is not every day that mainstream media is typically uninterested in people on the periphery, from places such as Sderot and Jaljuliya. Certainly not if it is not about Qassam rocket attacks in the case of Sderot, or about terrorist or illegal workers from the occupied West Bank in the case of Jaljuliya. Another example of public awareness about *HILA*, education and peripheral Israeli citizens was when grass-roots activism was taken to a higher level by *HILA*’s participation in the Parliamentary Committee of Israeli Constitution and Law (06.01.2005). Three *HILA* representatives participated in this: Field-worker Yehouda Amichai and Muhamad Shawane and Yussef Jumaa from Jaljuliya. The issue discussed

\(^{175}\) “Parents without rest, involved parents in the periphery, for example Sderot and Jaljuliya”, Yoli Haromtznko, *Ha’aretz*, 24.09.2004 (Hebrew)
was the National Education Law that states that all students are learning the same mandatory program. In practice however, there are huge gaps in education between wealthy and poor areas. The three HILA representatives drew attention to the inequality in the education system, and demanded the reinforcement of education practiced in all schools.

Point six above expressed HILA’s promotion of Jewish-Arab solidarity. As stressed by HILA in its various presentations (on its webpage, in its written material and by HILA employees and activists), its work is based on the understanding that the problems faced by Jewish Mizrahi (and Ethiopian) citizens are connected to those faced by Palestinian citizens. This message was clearly conveyed in all courses I took part in during 2005. HILA’s fieldworker and other lecturers methodologically drew on parallel cases and struggles in other communities and by other parent groups when discussing an issue. For example, they would say: “As in Sderot…”, “It is the same in Jaljuliya,…”, “What they did in Arara...” and “You can do what the group in Ashdod did...” In addition to what naturally came up in certain settings, HILA employees made conscious efforts to inform workshop participants about cases and situations across religious and national boundaries, in line with the ideology of the organisation. As a result of this, a web of parent groups from all over Israel, representing all groups of citizens has been developed, used by individual parents and groups of parents who get in touch with each other to discuss methods, solutions and problems. Ensuing from this, parents get in touch with HILA after having heard about the organisation from other parents who have participated in HILA’s courses or received individual advice.

**Mum’s the Word**

The empowerment of women is central to HILA’s work. Due to economic and societal conditions, the majority of our target population is comprised of women. It is most often mothers who battle the authorities for the sake of their children’s education. With HILA’s help, many mothers have gained the confidence to challenge the public school system and its (mostly male) representatives. These mothers then have gone on to challenge and change other oppressive structures in their lives, breaking out of confining roles by getting jobs, becoming financially and personally independent, and becoming active in the public sphere. Members of the HILA staff were the initiators of the first Mizrahi Women’s Conference ever to take place in Israel, on May 16-17, 1996, and of the Mizrahi Women’s Art Exhibition that took
Both HILA’s fieldworker and director have described HILA as a feminist organisation. Sami Shalom Chetrit (interview), who was active in HILA at the height of the organisation’s activism in the late 1980s, commented HILA’s staff was comprised almost exclusively of women. Indeed, in the male-dominated Israel society, it is worth emphasising that HILA has had a female Director for many years now.

As will be further described below, in some Palestinian parents’ groups, women do not participate. Generally, Palestinian society is described as more patriarchal than Jewish Israeli (secular) society (Jamal, 2006). However, each case is different. Sometimes only women participate, as the group consisting exclusively of mothers in Kufr Kara testifies. Both Ghada Shawakee (Muhammad’s wife) and Taheiya Jaousi (Matie’s wife) from Jaljuliya participated in the weekend seminar at the Oasis of Peace with their husbands. Similarly, on my visit to the Shawakee family in Jaljuliya, both husband and wife took part actively in the conversation.

Yehouda Amichai (interview) saw a connection between what he labelled “small politics”: politics at grass-roots level in the realm of education, and female involvement. According to him, women are more involved “in local and close-to-home politics.” However, he gave the opinion that that this politics is not small to him:

I think it is even more important. It solves problems faster. There are organisations that only deal with media and policy and law – it looks bombastic. I do not like this. I like grass-root. What matters for the individual teacher, parents and pupil? What about the weak man at the end of the line.

Levi (interview) agreed with Amichai, and said that in her experience women are more interested in small goals that are more immediate. Also, they are less interested in creating conflict, but rather seek cooperation. Levi is the HILA staff member who gives individual advice to parents by phone. There can be as many as fifteen phone calls per day from parents who are uncertain and concerned due to decisions and suggestions

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176 See website Brochure under General information in the HILA website: http://www.HILA-equal-edu.org.il/
177 As evidenced in the chapter title “Mizrahim and women: Between quality and quantity” where Shafir and Peled (2002) hold that Jewish women possess the most fragmented citizenship in what they describe as the gendered Israeli citizenship discourse that both explicitly and implicitly privileges men.
concerning their children by the school management. Almost all these phone calls are from mothers.

When discussing “small politics” versus other politics, an issue discussed both by the employees and parent activists is the relationship between their activism and “politics” in general. When I have asked, I have been told in some cases it is not clear whether some parents, both Palestinians and Jewish, are really interested “in politics” and not in education. In other words, it is assumed that some people use education either to establish themselves in politics, as a way to enter politics, or as an arena in which to further other political agendas. For instance, when asked about their activism, many parents would say that they are not interested in politics, but in the educational situation in their local community. When I made further enquires, it became clear that it is not perceived to be a good thing to be interested in “politics”, because it is understood as the quest for (individual) powerful positions and possibly is related to corruption. On the other hand, depending on which group of Israeli citizens one is talking about, sometimes using different channels than obvious ones to further political struggles is necessary. For example, according to Amichai (interview), among the Bedouins in the Negev/Naqab, HILA has experienced that parent activists are interested in areas of politics other than education, and try to use education as a channel to further those other issues. The understanding of the political potential of education was evident in Jaljuliya, where the school management at one point tried to stop men (fathers) from participating in the Parent Council, and would only allow women. Evidently, the manager felt threatened by fathers in an organised context, even though it was for the sake of education.

As Mark B. Ginsburg wrote in the Introduction to Swirski’s (1999: ix) book Politics and Education in Israel: “[...] education is political. Not only is education constituted by and constitutive of struggles over the distribution of symbolic and material resources, but education implies and confers structural and ideological power used to control the means of producing, reproducing, consuming, and accumulating symbolic and material recourses.” Amichai contextualised this view in these words:

Politics is about power. For marginalised Mizrahim and national minority Palestinians in Israel this is self-evident and education is but one of many fields in which their fight for equal rights and belonging is taking place.
Chapter 8

The Common Cause of Parenthood – HILA’s Parent Activists

In Part I, the reasons for the “Mizrahi” identification of the social movement HaKeshet were presented, and it became obvious in the interpretation of the multiple meanings of this signifier for HaKeshet members that the movement’s Mizrahi self-identification addresses several issues simultaneously: affirmation of personal background and identity, emphasising pride in this feeling of belonging; a reaction to an imposed category of identification that marginalised and discriminated against non-European Jews; and a socio-political agenda with the aim to change inequality in all spheres. In the case of HILA, its Hebrew name reveals to the informed who its clients are because of where they live: HaVa’d HaTziburi LeMa’ayn HaHinukh BiShkhunot VeBeIriyt HaPitukh is literally “The Public Council to the Source of Education in Neighbourhoods and Development Towns.” The inhabitants of these neighbourhoods are by and large Mizrahi, Ethiopian and Russian Jewish Israelis, all dwellers in Development Towns, and Palestinian citizens who live in the poor neighbourhoods of large cities. In the early 1990s HILA decided to include BeKfarim VeBeMoshavim, “in villages and moshavim” (agricultural cooperative villages) to its name, in order to reflect the composition of all its client base. “Villages” denotes Arab Palestinian villages and moshavim in peripheral areas in the south and north of Israel are largely inhabited by Mizrahim. The addition was put on letterheads and used by HILA orally, but when they wanted to change the name formally the process was so intricate and time-consuming the organisation decided not to go through with it at this point.

As presented in the Introduction, Swirski (himself an Ashkenazi) coined the term “Mizrahim” to describe Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East who constitute a group in the sociological make-up of Israeli society. Thus, to Swirski this term indicates a shared experience in Israel, largely due to their low position in Israel’s social, economic and political hierarchy, when compared with Ashkenazi citizens. Therefore, in the beginning HILA worked in MENA Jewish neighbourhoods, but as
Swirski (interview) pointed out, they never defined the organisation as a “Mizrahi” organisation. When asked why or how HILA is Mizrahi he answered:

I can speak for myself – I felt there was a need to establish legitimacy for an organisation that dealt with Mizrahim – today this is sort of self-evident, in the 1980s this was far from evident. If you look at the Left, so to speak in this country, their main and only topic has always been the Palestinians – Mizrahim as a topic? What are you talking about? “We should leave them aside, not disturb them because they are becoming like us, and let us give them a generation or two and that’s it.” I think this is the main answer to your question. We thought we needed a period for establishing legitimacy for a Mizrahi organisation.

*Mizrahim as the Victims of “Special Needs”*

When he established HILA, Swirski (interview) noted that schools with MENA Jews and Arab children were in similar kinds of bad conditions with poor buildings, unskilled and few teachers, and very little if any material educational facilities (1997:36). Also comparable was the fact that the children of both groups were failing and dropping out of school according to Swirski (ibid). However, the difference in the treatments and views of MENA Jews and Palestinian pupils was evident when the educational system felt compelled to react to this situation. The reaction came only with regards to the Mizrahi pupils, ignoring the same problems among Palestinian pupils (ibid). Swirski (interview) explained that because Mizrahim are Jews in a Jewish state and, as such, part of the Zionist dream, the state felt compelled to address their educational failure. Therefore, the Ministry of Education established the “Mizrahi tracks” with partial and less demanding curriculum for schools in poor neighbourhoods and Development Towns.

From the 1970s these special tracks for MENA Jewish children were meant to improve their ability to finish school and give them an education from which the political and educational establishment believed they could benefit later in life. Again, based on the perceptions that the Jews from Arab and Muslim countries were primitive and, as such, at a lower level on the evolutionary path to modernisation, the tracks created for them were preparing them for vocational high schools and made them “unfit” for academic high schools (Swirski, 1997:37-8). As newcomers in Israel, Jews from Arab and Muslim lands were perceived as “disorganised” by the veteran Zionist establishment.
and treated as an “anomic mass” to be integrated through measures directed at individuals, as opposed to immigrants collectively (Swirski, 1999:94-5). Their background was given as the cause of their bad results in school, rather than the discriminatory policies of the Ministry of Education (Swirski, 1997, 37). But in the Ministry’s comparison of the new immigrant children with children of veteran European Zionists, the latter group’s advantages due to their command of the Israeli Hebrew language, and to their belonging in the proud new national “high culture” developing in Israel, was not taken into consideration (Swirski, 1999:94-5).

According to Swirski, this tracking system resulted not only in providing Israel with its proletarian class, but also made it impossible for these children to begin considering further education. Pupils with vocational exams from high school are not able to enrol in universities or colleges, and are thus barred from continuing their academic education. So, while ensuring that Mizrahi pupils were now in school until the age of seventeen, instead of the previous drop-out rates from age fourteen, they “get a vocational matriculation which is worth nothing, but they are from ‘retarded Arab countries’ so what can you expect?” as Swirski (interview) put it sarcastically. It is important to note that the disdain for vocational education is not due to its vocational nature, but to the fact that these children did not choose this kind of schooling; it was chosen for them, by the Ministry of Education, based on the assumption that they were not intelligent enough for the academic track.

At a HILA seminar in Sderot, HILA’s fieldworker Yehouda Amichai explained that up until recently the Ministry of Education classified children as teoni tipoah (“in need of special nurture”) by asking pupils the following questions (from the blackboard):

1: Where is your father from: Asia/Africa or Europe/America?
2: How many years did he study?
3: How many children in the family/divorce/problems?

Generally, pupils whose fathers were from Asia/Africa with a low level of education and/or many siblings, and/or divorce or other family problems, were categorised as “in need of special nurture”. Because of protests from parents and HILA, and because it
became perceived as racist to define people’s abilities by their origin, today instead of asking about a pupil’s father, who ask “where do you live?” As indicated in HILA’s name, Amichai emphasised that in Israel there is a connection between your origin and where you live. Amichai explained these recent changes in the method of classifications in an interview with Osnat Trabelsi (High Way, 2006):

Today the issue of ethnic origin has been taken out of the definition of teunei tipuach. Instead they use a socioeconomic definition and “in the south” [of Israel] it’s very congruent to the ethnic origin. Instead of calling you “Mizrahi,” they can write “a person who makes a living from manual labour.” The place of living completes the equation. The “minority populations” as they are called in Israel, for example, are native Israelis – they were born here so what is this issue of origin? Most of the communities in the south are teunei tipuach according to the Ministry of Education. [...] The parents don't understand that if a child is categorized as “in need of nurture,” this means as a sub-achiever, and if the percentage of sub-achievers in a class or in a school is high it receives a lot of extra support from the Ministry, but [for the children] this is not a good thing! It is just a sticking stigma.

Children defined as tenuei tipuach (“in need of special nurture”) will very likely be classified as needing “special education”. According to researcher David Motzafi (interview), children who are placed in “special education” are thought to be unable to think abstractly and be impatient. Therefore, “special education” was thought to assist these presumed weak children by using simple language and by teaching them slowly. Motzafi (ibid) explained: “By and large they were treated as small children or as retarded.” There follows an account of how HILA’s Director teaches parents about “special education” and more details from Motzafi’s analysis of this practice.

“Special Education” and Boarding Schools

In her lecture about “special education” to a group of parents in the Development Town Ashdod, south of Tel Aviv, HILA’s Director Tikva Levi explained that “special education” is designed for physically or mentally challenged children. It is offered either at the local school in separate classes, or in special institutions that are often far away from the children’s homes and families. The problem is that many children of MENA Jewish descent and today also of Ethiopian descent are sent to “special education”. According to HILA, the majority of these children are not physically or mentally challenged. Rather, they are children with social and learning problems caused by one
social factor, or a combination of several social factors, such as their home environment, socioeconomic situation, immigrant status and adjustment issues. The fact is that these children attend schools with poor teaching and material resources.

A child is examined by a psychologist before he/she is sent to “special education”. His/her parents must sign an agreement, and in this meeting Levi advised parents to demand that the school facilitate a second specialist opinion and not to sign any paper before discussing this further with the school management:

They will tell you it is for the best for your child to receive “special education” with smaller classes, more teachers per student and easier language. In reality, children coming out of these classes are several years behind their peers in terms of level of education and they will never be able to pass admission tests for higher education. Instead of signing and sending your child to “special education”, you should ask the teachers and the school manager what is being done in order to assist your child in the regular school. [...] Moreover, before this becomes an issue, you should talk with your child – ask him/her about school and create a habit of communication so that you know what is going on at school. In addition, you should be in contact with other parents so that you can confirm or contest what the school or your child tells you, so that if you need to take action you are not alone. Remember; knowledge is power.

The problem with getting a second specialist opinion is that this is expensive and few parents can afford it. Instead, some parents keep children at home to avoid sending them to “special education”, thus breaking the law which states that all children have to go to school. HILA assists parents in reading and understanding documents about “special education” decisions regarding their children, and, as far as possible, assists with a second specialist examination by a specialist who is not part of the education system.

David Motzafi, former Director of the Education System in the city of Or Yehouda, decided to research issues pertaining to “special education” based on his experience and background working in municipal educational management in the predominantly MENA Jewish inhabited city. Having observed and familiar with parents and their problems for many years, Motzafi came to HILA to do research for his PhD. According to Motzafi (interview), in the USA there is also a tendency to send children from weak and minority groups to “special education” in larger proportion than from the general population. He explained that in Israel many children were sent to “special education” because their parents did not understand how things were organised or how the system worked.
According to Motzafi (interview), these parents did not know why their children were sent to “special education” or how to speak with the school management, or how to demand the background for these decisions from them. “They were poor,” he emphasised (interview). During his career and research, Motzafi observed how HILA helped many of these families. He referred to HILA’s assistance in court cases against decisions to send children to “special education”. After one such court case, a change was made in the legislation of the law of “special education” in 1988. Motzafi said that this shows how HILA helps in a direct manner by empowering parents.

In addition to the tracking system and “special education”, boarding schools constitute another element of system of segregation in education. Some MENA Jewish pupils with good results and abilities were chosen for special boarding schools for “clever Mizrahi pupils.” Osnat Trabelsi (2006) said she is glad she “escaped” boarding school, because now she understands what it was meant to do, and has learned from those who were sent there what effects it had on their relationship with their families and backgrounds:

When I was a sixth grade pupil in Ashdod I was diagnosed as a gifted child. My parents were advised to send me to the Boyer school in Jerusalem, but my mother did not agree: “My children are growing up next to me” she said. The High School-Army-University track seemed obvious and natural for me. Years later I began to understand that this track is not so natural and not so obvious for a Mizrahi girl from Ashdod in those years, not because she is not capable, as is usually perceived, but mostly because she is not assumed to be “designated” for it. In film school I was the only one from Ashdod, not just in my year, but in the years above and below me. In time, I understood that my mother saved my life when she refused to send me to Boyer, an elitist boarding school populated by chosen children from Development Towns and low-income neighbourhoods. All these pupils were sent there to come out as “culture agents” to educate their parents and surroundings after returning home.

Established to provide a Western-style and better education for the chosen gifted children from the periphery, these boarding schools are today seen as another prejudice-based policy in the Israeli education system. By taking the good students out of the local schools, the peripheral regions lost many of their resourceful inhabitants, because these children rarely moved back to their communities after completing their education, as they no longer felt that they belonged. Thus, it had the opposite effect to the one expected. Part of the idea behind the boarding school was to send the educated back to the
periphery and hope that their new knowledge would “rub off” on their environments 
(Amichai, interview). On the individual level, this practice resulted in many estranged 
family relations between the children in boarding school and their families on the 
periphery.

The documentary film Mehonenot (“Gifted”) by Yochi Dadon Shfigal focuses on the 
reunion of the girls from the class of 1978 at the Boyer boarding school. The protagonists 
talk about how, during their time at the school, they grew to perceive their parents and 
family traditions as backward and uneducated. Tikva Levi, HILA’s Director, was one of 
these women. They all recalled how at the boarding school they “met the culture of the 
Other” and became “westernised” or “Ashkenazified”, and subsequently changed their 
taste in music and culture. This change resulted in embarrassment and discomfort with 
the culture and traditions they came from, that their parents represented. Some women 
recalled refusing to have their family come to visit them at the school. This is similar to 
the Ashkenazification discussed by HaKeshet members. One woman described how after 
finishing school she felt as if “the fuel went out of her”: she did not know who she was or 
where she belonged.

The film shows a meeting between this woman and her teacher from the Development 
Town elementary school where she had been a pupil. Up until recently, the teacher 
assigned and recommended pupils to be sent to these boarding schools, and he explained 
to her that according to the theory, taking these gifted children out of their local and 
“low” environment and introducing them to Western culture and ideas would help them 
develop into better individuals. It was for the pupils’ benefit, he assured, whilst trying to 
calm his crying former student. She told him that she felt rejected by her family when 
they allowed her to move to the dormitory school and that due to her education she had 
lost her feeling of belonging the place she grew up. “It was successful, we studied and 
now we have careers and today people ask me to bring couscous to parties,” she summed 
up sarcastically.
Palestinians as the Victims of Israeli Education

As described before, when HILA was establish in the late 1980s it focused on MENA Jews, due to what Swirski and others saw as the need to create legitimacy for a Mizrahi organisation. However, Swirski, HILA Director Tikva Levi and Fieldworker Yehouda Amichai, all said that HILA was never closed to Palestinians. According to Amichai (interview):

It was never a decision: “Now we start working with Palestinians.” There was always an opening. In HILA we have had mixed groups, Bedouin groups, groups in Jaljuliya and in Arara. In HILA there is no difference. All who come to HILA come because the Ministry of Education screwed them over; and we take them all!

As mentioned above, in the early 1990s HILA added BeKfarim VeBeMoschavim – in villages (denoting Arab Palestinian villages) and moschavim (Jewish agricultural cooperative villages) to its name so as to mirror its public. Cooperation across socioeconomic stratification of Jews and Palestinian citizens, across national and ethnic boundaries, is unusual in Israel. This is related to the “inside Israel” and “outside Israel” perspective that creates the “Jewish bubble” that Kimmerling (1995) criticises, the bubble that dominates Israeli discourse and narratives and in which “Arab citizens” have an in-between position. The author and HILA volunteer Sami Michael, describes the Israeli left as one of the big problems in Israeli society:

It is an aristocratic left. It is nice to have the flag of solidarity with the Arabs, but they do not relate to the real and big social problems that are related to Mizrahim and Arabs. Because of the isolation of the left and its focus only on ‘the Arab problem’, they look from the top down at the Mizrahim. The problem is that the left needs to also want to help the Mizrahim as the poor, but there is a gap between the Mizrahim right-wing voters who turn to Likud, but gets nothing but words from them, and the foreign policy-oriented left. Most volunteer organisations address the Palestinians. HILA and HaKeshet are the exceptions!

HILA parent activist turned member of the Board, Ahmad Masarwa (interview) from Arara, described HILA as crucial for Palestinian parents in Israel: “We do not want a

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178 See Introduction.
situation without HILA!” he told me. According to him, HILA provides a wide perspective, necessary in order to end discrimination in the field of education. Comparing HILA to the inability of HaKeshet to include Palestinian citizens, Adalah lawyer Ghadeer Nicola (interview) explained that HILA and Adalah take a similar approach, which is not to conduct activism in the name of any group, but for changes that will have ramifications for all citizens. Adalah’s lawyers further explained that they do represent Jewish Israelis and consider this part of their mandate, based on democratic principles applied to all citizens (interview Adalah, Nicola and Jabareen). For example, if Tali Fahima had asked Adalah to represent her, they would and could not have resisted representing her. The remedies Adalah ask for are not ethnic or national remedies, but are to be applied to all groups and all socioeconomic situations, they asserted. As a concrete example of the similar approach of Adalah and HILA, Adalah lawyer Ghadeer Nicola (interview) said that a petition HILA had filed about pre-schools could just as well have been filed by Adalah. However, Nicola added, Adalah differs from HILA in that Adalah does not believe discrimination is based only on class:

This is an ethnic state and thus discrimination cannot only be based on class. There is another factor: the national identity and ethnicity – and many times you can see these two factors going together. Sometimes the class and sometime the ethnic/national [identify] is the base of discrimination – it depends on the cases. That is why we have many things in common with HILA and organisations like HaKeshet. But still we have an addition which is nationality.

Palestinian Citizens in the Israeli Education System

As mentioned earlier, HILA bases its activities and philosophy on the International Children’s Bill of Rights, which states that every child has the right to education, aimed at “developing the child’s personality and talents, preparing the child for active life as an adult ... and developing respect for the child’s own cultural and national values and those of others.” In Israel, the curriculum of state schools is based on and designed to further Jewish values and history, and thus disregards Palestinian history and national development (Swirski, 1999, Maj Al-Jah, 2001). Swirski criticises the state for attempting to implant patriotic (Israeli) sentiments among Arab pupils (Swirski,

179 For details about Tali Fahima see Chapter Two.
This is confirmed by Abu-Saad (2003:20) who holds that the goals of Jewish studies in Palestinian Arab education are to implant in the pupils understanding and sympathy with the Zionist cause, while Palestinian history and culture is ignored in Israeli state education. Abu-Saad quotes Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, who pointed out that there is not a single geographical map of pre-1948 Palestinian settlements in the “celebrated revised textbooks” (Abu-Saad, 2003:19). Moreover, according to Abu-Saad (2003:19), in the existing textbooks, Palestinians and Arabs are portrayed as “murderers”, “rioters” and “suspicious” in schoolbooks, in addition to being seen as backward and unproductive as “the Oriental Other”.

The Israeli state has also controlled Palestinian teachers since its establishment. As described by Shira Robinson (2005: 214, footnote 16), “the Department of Arab Education devoted considerable energy in the early 1950s to routing out any politically ‘suspect’ teachers who had remained in the country.” Robinson uses this quote from May 1957 by a former department Director who described the process in a confidential report:

The operation and the results [of Arab education] are tied to a great extent on the teachers. In the first years, we carried out many sweeping scrutinies with the help of the security forces and the army. Most of the people who were found to stand out as having a nationalist past, or who were active or inactive communists, were fired. The result was that some of them repented. We took them back, but for the majority we are not sorry.180

Only in December 2001 did Ha’aretz confirm that the deputy Director of Arab Education in the Ministry of Education is a General in the Security Service (Sultany, 2002). As chairman of the appointments committee for the Arab educational system, this agent has veto power over what teachers to employ (ibid). But, because a rejection based on security reasons would not stand up in court, the ministry never informs applicants when this was the reason for which someone was rejected (ibid).

The main problems experienced by Palestinian pupils since the first decades of the state have remained more or less the same: few resources and poor quality teaching, resulting in a low level of education that gives Palestinian citizens few opportunities in life. According to the Sikkuy Report on Education 2003-4, titled “Monitoring Civic

Equality Between Arab and Jewish Citizens of Israel: The Or Commission recommendations: one year later

Gaps between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel in education, health, income, employment and poverty**: “The Arab school system in Israel has been under-funded for many years at all levels of the system.” Thus, what Swirski (1999) described about Palestinian schools and pupils not receiving an equal share of resources in the 1950s and 60s, is confirmed by contemporary reports. The Human Rights Watch report from 2001 concluded that in every aspect Palestinian children in government-run schools get an education of far less quality compared to that of Jewish children. The report described Palestinian children attending schools with larger classes and fewer teachers than Jewish schools, and compared with Jewish schools there is a lack of basic learning facilities and recreation spaces. Palestinian children have long journeys to school, they do not have special facilities for extra-curriculum activities, and they lack sufficient teaching staff and equipment for children with special needs. Moreover, according to the report, teachers in the Arab schools are often uneducated and inexperienced, as will be exemplified in the Jaljuliya case presented below. This is another long-lasting problem. Swirski (1999:171) describes that in 1949, as many as ninety percent of the Palestinian teachers were uncertified, and in 1969 the number was still forty-five percent.

Furthermore, not all inequality in the distribution of educational resources is obvious, or easily detectable, because the municipalities are responsible for some expenses. Thus, the picture becomes even bleaker when adding recent numbers from the annual report by Sikkuy as reported in Ha’aretz under the title **“Discrimination against Arab municipalities unchanged”**. The article states that in a comparison between ten Arab municipalities and ten Jewish municipalities of identical population size and geographical structure, the total welfare budget in 2004 in the ten Jewish municipalities was NIS 220.8 million while the Arab municipalities totalled only NIS 107.4 million.

The consequences of these differences along national and ethno-religious lines are that Palestinian children perform relatively poorly in school, which bars them from future higher education. According to Adalah, Palestinian pupils in state-run schools have double the number of drop-outs in addition to the low percentage of matriculation
certificates (described above) (Adalah, Education Rights, 2003). Thus, comparing the number of Jewish and Palestinian students in the school year 1999/2000/2001, there were less than ten percent Palestinians in first degree programmes in Israeli universities, less than five percent in second degree programs, and under four percent in third degree programmes (Adalah, Education Rights, 2003). Consequently, Palestinian citizens are not given realistic or proportionate opportunities to attain success or participate in Israeli society, Adalah concludes.

Furthermore, Ismael Al-Haj (2001) explains that, despite the fact that the years of schooling among Palestinian citizens has increased since the 1960s, this rise in the level of education for Palestinian citizens is not reflected in terms of income or employment. Educated Arabs have not found employment in senior government positions nor in the Jewish private sector according to Al-Haj (2004:6):

> Educated Arabs have not found employment in senior governmental positions or in the Jewish private sector (see Rekhess 1988; Ben-Rafael 1982). The relatively rapid growth of education among Arabs, coupled with the much slower expansion of the Arab economy, has resulted in fewer appropriate job opportunities for the educated and highly skilled (Lewin-Epstein 1990: 31). In addition, military service and security considerations form a screening mechanism that has been used to exclude Arab candidates from senior positions in the Jewish sector

In conclusion, when compared to their Jewish co-citizens, Palestinian citizens of Israel are not given realistic and proportionate opportunities to success and participation in Israeli society. As Ismael Abu-Saad (2005:238) writes, the nominal, as opposed to assimilative, nature of Palestinian civil rights have the negative results of making Palestinian children “outsiders, foreigners and illegitimate”. He concludes that Arab education in Israel is used as a tool to manipulate the Palestinian minority and to maintain the status quo in power relations between the majority and the minority (ibid).

**Practising Mizrahiut – Building Consciousness**

Besides analysis concerning the position and status of MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens in Israeli society and in particular in its education system, present and former HILA employees and activists spoke about how their activism was related to and
informed by consciousness and feelings of belonging. And, similar to *HaKeshet* members, they discussed their Arab past and belonging. Tikva Levi (interview) spoke about the contradiction experienced by belonging to Arab Jewish culture and being a Jewish Israeli with Arab enemies:

To be Arab is not something religious; Arabs in Israel are Christians and Muslims. Arabism is not religious, but ethnicity. [In Israel we] use the terms “Moroccan” and “Iraqi” because in *Ashkenazi* Zionism there is no place for Arabs, the enemy is “Arab,” not “Moroccan.” *Ashkenazi* Zionism sends eighteen year old children to kill Arabs. It is difficult to live here!

Avital Moses (interview), a former parent activist turned Board member said in a similar vein:

Growing up here Zionism is strong and it is important to be accepted...“Arab” is the enemy. *Mizrahi* and Arabs are similar, so we [*Mizrahi*] need to be with the consensus or [we will] be expelled. We need to hate Arabs more than non-*Mizrahi*, because of our Arabic, because of our Hebrew accent, our clothes, and small things like this. [We must] disconnect from Arabs, in order to be Israeli. “*Mizrahi*” is Jewish, but Arabs, they have the same mentality and culture, the same language, and this is very important. At home we spoke Hindi, Arabic and Hebrew.

According to Levi (interview), few people are well-read or knowledgeable on *Mizrahi* issues. She explained that there is a disconnection between the intellectuals and the activists on the one hand, and *HILA*’s parent activists on the other. Levi mentions that while some people read about MENA Jews in the latest revised history, most of what is written is too academic and is written in a difficult language, and is thus inaccessible to most of *HILA*’s parent activists and to other people. However, this does not discourage *HILA*:

I don’t believe in instant revolution, we must have patience; the boundaries are broadening – developing! It is *teoda*; work of consciousness.

With regards to building consciousness, Sami Shalom Chetrit (interview) described *HILA* as the most important transmitter of awareness:

*HILA* was the first, and is perhaps now the only, platform and tool for consciousness-work in the field – in the communities through education and through the empowerment of parents and women. In those days [when he was an activist in *HILA*] there were several teams going out every day. If we could take *HILA* and multiply it by 20 there would be a revolution. That was my idea of *HaKeshet*. 
In other words, Chetrit went from *HILA* to *HaKeshet* hoping for a revolution based on increased awareness among MENA Jews regarding their marginalised position in Israeli society. As described in Part II, Chetrit envisioned the revolution of the MENA Jews as fulfilling a similar role to the Civil Rights movement and the protests by black Americans.

To Amichai (interview) “*Mizrahi*” is not and cannot be positive:

It is a sad story, the history of the *Mizrahim*. Being *Mizrahi* is different to all individuals as indicated in different memories – it exists in people’s inner worlds. I do not accept this definition of me. As much as I love and respect the man who made up this definition. It is new and it is a geographic description. I like my mother’s definition: We are Jews who came from Eastern countries; in Arabic it was [*al* *Yahud al Arab* – Jews who speaks Arabic with Arabic culture and its associative world. My mother does not listen to Israeli music, but to [Egyptian singer] Um Koulthoum. *Mizrahim* is a political definition to use about all of us who came from these countries. Ethiopians – are they *Mizrahi*? It is impossible to describe all in one category, we are all different: from Morocco, from Beirut, from Iran. The Jews always tried to be a separated people, but they were never separated when they walked down the street – who could tell who was what? As my mother said, the problems started when this state was established: then it became difficult to be a Jew in Baghdad. They say we vote right-wing, as if we all vote like one person and vote similarly because we came “from there” – because we know the Arabs and are closer to them politically. The problems came before this term; they used to call us *Edot haMizrah*. Swirski was the first who wanted a word that was comparable to “*Ashkenazi*” politically. I think it was a little easy [this construction], there are differences among *Ashkenazim* also! We are not only different in our skin-colour or country of origin, but in way of life. “The Arab Jews” – this is my mother, the religion was different, but their world was the same, we are closer to Muslim families than to Polish ones. Here we are half Arab and semi-Jews. Arab is the enemy. This attitude continues but is concealed. Today Israelis say: “I was born here..” (Amichai, interview)

When asked about Zionism, Amichai (interview) rhetorically answered:

What is Zionism? A Jewish state in acknowledged borders and this is ok with all who live here - ok. *HILA* is open for all who lives here in Israel – we have no problems with Zionism. We do not work in the settlements in the territories. The problem with Zionism is that it did not relate well to my family or friends or anyone who came from “our” countries. I have problems with how it used “us” like “black workers” and with the Western dominance it contains, we lived in this place for many years now, and for example there was never a Prime Minister from the Middle East. The racism among the ruling elite – we will never have a *Mizrahi* Prime Minister! People do not see this racism: why do *Mizrahim* vote for Ehud Barak and Shimon Peres – they think politically; the most important thing now is to fight the Palestinians and all the Arabs. They do not know about education, social justice, or
income struggles. People think that when the conflict is over then we can take care of our problems. I say no! We are paying too large a price. My dream is to close HILA because there is no need for it. I want to drive to Beirut, via Gaza to Cairo, to Libya and then to Morocco. This will not happen. The Arabs hate us [MENA Jews] more than the Ashkenazim. The hate at home is stronger than that outside.

“Home” here is the previously Arab and Muslim homelands of MENA Jews. It seems that Amichai is implying that because they left and have become Israelis, their former Arab co-citizens hate them more than they hate those who came from Europe. Presumably, he is saying that because MENA Jews are considered to be traitors, they are despised more than the European (Zionist) colonisers. Why he believes he will never be able to drive from his home in south Israel, to Beirut or Cairo, could be interpreted as being due to the increasingly violent conflicts in the region, in Israel and the occupied territory particularly, or that he does not think this will happen in his time. Precisely because these comments come from Amichai, one of very few Israeli Jews to have visited a Palestinian town and village after the deadly October 2000 demonstrations, it might be an indication that despite his experiences and participation in activities that include Palestinian citizens, he does not believe that (at this point in time) the cooperation among parents in HILA can be transferred to a larger resolution.

In contrast to HaKeshet members, the Jewish parent activists in HILA interviewed for this research did not describe themselves as “Mizrahi” and did not refer to “Arab Jews”. If they use any identification label, it was their country of origin or that of their parents. For example, if they wanted to emphasise a point, positive or negative, they often used their origin to accentuate it. For example, when they talked about raising their children, they would say: “I am a Persian mother, and I would not take that attitude toward my child!”

HILA parent activists understand where they stand in Israeli society, from experience and not through deconstructive analysis. One of the parent activists in Sderot told me that when she worked as a secretary for a kibbutz factory as a young woman, she threw away what she thought was an ugly dark poster lying on her boss’s desk. She recalled, still horrified at her own ignorance that it turned out the poster was a Van Gogh:

I had no and knew no culture! In Sderot we did not have pianos or cinema theatres.
As the kibbutzim around Sderot are predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish in culture and in inhabitants, in the above quote, this interviewee revealed that her perception of lacking in culture refers to Western culture, meaning European art and music. It was only after acquiring this European-dominated Ashkenazi Jewish culture that she began asking herself what access to art, culture and power has to do with ethnic identification in Israel. She described how she began to question herself and others why there was no theatre or cinema in Sderot when she grew up. Describing the political establishment of the 1950s and 1960s, she said: “Inequality was their ideology, not the official one, but nor was it hidden.”

The process this woman has experienced, which led her to become an active participant in the Parent Council in Sderot, fighting for the rights of her own and other children, predominantly MENA Jews, can be described as similar to the “coming out” process of the intellectuals in HaKeshet. That is, a process of increasing awareness of the institutional and societal processes that formed each individual’s social and political category of identification. In this woman’s case the categorisation resulted in her perceiving herself as being “un-cultured”. But, even though she is conscious of her category of identification and its predicament, it is doubtful that as a way of breaking out of the negative stereotype or a result of such a process, she would agree to or find it helpful to be characterised as an “Arab Jew”. Rather, she might want to prove and consolidate her feeling of belonging to Western culture, despite her realisation that this very culture’s representatives are to blame for her marginalised position and feeling of inferiority. This may be because “Western” culture has become her own, and also that of her children, and, furthermore, she might not conclude that the Western cultural products she has learnt to appreciate are to blame or should thus be punished for their Jewish European carriers’ conduct.

When asked how Jewish parents receive and digest information about the treatments of “Mizrahim” and the ideas behind this categorisation, both Amichai and Levi admitted that it is difficult. Amichai (interview) elaborated:

"This is the most difficult part - they do not want to believe it: ‘We have lived in this state for more than 50 years...’ and ‘It was like this once, but it changed,’” and ‘Look we have mixed marriages now.’ But, after they have studied and read documents from the Ministry of Education they are in shock - it is like a 50 kilo hammer on the
head for them. They need to know, need to mature to the facts and acknowledge that part of the problem is being of Mizrahi origin.

Working with MENA Jews and Palestinians – Differences and Similarities

Above, Swirski identified how MENA Jews received “special education” and were tracked into vocational high schools, whereas Palestinian children were excluded from “special education” projects, and Palestinian children with special needs did not receive adequate schooling. Thus, their problems are the reverse of each other: MENA Jews are unwillingly or unwittingly placed in what Swirski describes as an undesirable “special education” system, whereas for Palestinian citizens it is difficult to access resources to establish classes for children with genuine special needs.

As mentioned earlier, before 1948 Israeli social scientists included Arab Palestinians in their analysis of groups and their correlation with levels of modernisation. Orientalist Eurocentrics drew the conclusion that MENA Jews and Arab Palestinians were primitive and in need of civilisation and modernisation (Swirski, 1999:164). However, after the establishment of the state the focus shifted to MENA Jews only, excluding Palestinian education and pupils from all research and efforts to “correct their primitiveness” and improve their position in the Israeli education system. As such, the apparatus established to “restore” the new Jewish immigrants through compensatory education was not extended to Palestinian children (Swirski, 1999:164). Only in 1994 were Arab children eligible for “remedial hours” granted to MENA Jewish children from the 1960s (Swirski, 1999:164). This neglect of Palestinian pupils and education continued and officials even failed to undertake surveys of Palestinian schools as they did with MENA-dominated Jewish schools (Swirski, 1999:175). To illustrate with an example from the Palestinian town, Arara, the “special education” facilities were located in a small, dark, almost barren room down a set of narrow and steep stairs. This room was intended to serve children with physical and other challenges.

This puzzling diametric problem faced by Palestinian citizens and Jewish citizens creates a lot of confusion among organisations and NGOs fighting for equal rights. I observed this when Adalah made contact with HILA to learn more about the remedial hours and “special education” provided for Jewish children, but not for Palestinians.
HILA’s Director tried to explain to Adalah that she understood and agreed with the principal objection regarding different allocation in resources to the two groups of pupils, but she emphasised that the solution was *not* to claim that Palestinian children also get “special education”. The reasons for this are that, as has been established, “special education” and vocational high schools have trapped MENA Jews in low-income occupations with little opportunities for advancement. Thus, HILA’s Director wanted to convey to Adalah that instead of fighting for the *same* treatment as Jewish citizens, they should argue for equal share in resources and use them as in ways that best assist Palestinian children. Explaining to Palestinian citizens that they should not necessarily seek what some Jews have can be complicated, if the Palestinians in questions are not aware of the institutionalised marginalisation of MENA Jews.\(^\text{181}\)

According to fieldworker Yehouda Amichai (interview), the differences in working with Jewish and Palestinian citizens are related to Palestinian citizens’ circumstances and feelings of belonging as a national indigenous minority. He identified four issues as important when working with Palestinian parent activists: anxiety and lack of trust due to continuous control by the security establishment; extreme lack of resources; extensive knowledge about Jewish citizens and society; and cultural differences.

Regarding the first issue, fear and distrust of the Israeli state, its institutions and Jewish citizens, Amichai (interview) described how initially most Palestinian parents are apprehensive towards HILA, and he illustrated this with his experiences with parents from Jaljuliya:

> The difference is not in our theoretical material – it is the same laws, and thus formally we are dealing with the same problems with Jews and Arabs, but the subtext is different. With Arab parents in the beginning of our cooperation there is a lot of suspicion of who we are and what we want. Arab parents ask themselves: ‘Who is he [Amichai]?’ ‘Why did he come?’ ‘What is his motivation?’ ‘If he is not from the Ministry of Education, what is this independent organisation?’ These parents are afraid and it takes them time to understand that we are on their side in the struggle. But then there is a good connection. In the beginning the Arab groups think their problems are specific to them; that it happens only in their school, or in their village. Then they learn that the situation is the same in the neighbouring schools and towns and so on – it is sad really that all are in trouble! And then they understand that they can learn from each other and that they can trust us. But, in the beginning they always test us.

\(^\text{181}\) Incidentally, Adalah’s staff were appreciative of HILA’s perspectives.
The suspicious attitude of these parents from Jaljuliya stems from the fact that Palestinian parents are afraid of the Shabak (the General Security Services, GSS), the internal secret service that deals mainly with Palestinians in Israel. Amichai (interview) explained how the GSS use inside informers among the Arab population, and also Jews of Middle Eastern origin. As a result, there has developed a reliance within parts of the poor Palestinian population for the salary the GSS pays for information and services. By the combination of spreading insecurity, splitting communities and providing much needed income, the GSS is able to pressure Palestinian communities to, for example, obstruct HILA-related activism. Therefore, despite the changes in the GSS policy with regards to appointments of teachers among the Palestinian citizens after Adalah won a case about this, the GSS is still very much involved in the lives of Palestinian citizens and also in the realm of education. I asked if the GSS causes other problems for HILA, and Amichai (interview) answered:

Shabak does not come to HILA. They can only hurt those who are afraid of them – if you are not afraid of them - what can they do?

Tikva Levi (interview) explained the connection between Palestinian citizens’ voting patterns, the GSS and positions in the educational system. The GSS controls the teachers who (therefore) vote for Likud, which in turn gives them power and economic improvement. As in all societies and groups, among Palestinian citizens, there are egoistic people who (mis)use the system and act for themselves, and not for the good of their local community or their national minority. Levi (interview) said that it was wrong to look at Palestinian citizens as one group or as one acting community:

Israel is a very class organised society, it is very hierarchical, and for the national minority it is in their interest to work with Israelis. Their interests are positions, in class and in economy. Everybody knows that school Principals are among the richer. Remember, in Arara, the people who called the police [against the parents] were Arabs! For the police it is much easier to come to take Arabs than to take Jews. And the school officials have the power to call the police, and they are not embarrassed to do this! There is a strong relationship between the police and the Principal; one phone call and they came…

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Connected to the problems with the GSS and communal leaders with close ties to the law-enforcing powers is the *hamula* (clan) system that parents described as a cause of problems and an obstacle for change. A *hamula* is the extended family social organisation and its related power-structures (Shafir and Peled, 2002:130). This traditional social structure in Palestinian society is not static, but has continuously changed and has also been utilised by the authorities. Parent activist Said Yunis explained that the original meaning and importance of familial connections and organisation changed after 1948, and that what is called the *hamula* system today was created after the establishment of the state of Israel. The existing *hamula* system was, according to Yunis, institutionalised, and used by the state to further its policy and practice of “divide and rule” of the Palestinian national minority. This is confirmed by Ian Lustick’s research describing (1980:130-5) how the Military Government co-opted the *hamula* leaders as part of the “divide and rule” tactic.

Yunis told of how the state changed people’s surnames after 1948 in order to split up large families and create easier conditions for the split and rule policy. An example is Ahmad Masarwa, also from Arara. His family was originally Abu-Shama, but after 1948 the Israeli state changed the name of the family to Masarwa. Today, brothers and other relatives may have different names, but according to Yunis they all know what the state has done and why. However, as with all created systems, the current *hamula* system has taken on a life of its own and when provided with the opportunity, many Palestinians have utilised it in order to enhance their own positions and economic situation. Yunis described how the state prefers a family or *hamula* when distributing funds or appointing positions (as another side of its divide and rule practice). This practice was observable in Jaljuliya where the level of nepotism is high and abuse of power seems to be part of the system, but the state institutions do not react or clamp down on these irregularities. As a result, in many cases, citizens do not have a choice, but have to utilise the existing corrupt power-structures, thus leading to a continuation of the system itself. The second major difference identified by Amichai is the communal and individual lack of resources. For *HILA* it is more demanding to work with poor Palestinian communities because of the dearth of material ressources. For example, Palestinian citizens do not always have a
place for meetings. One consequence of this is that Palestinian parents turn to HILA with problems regarding basic need arising from the lack of school buildings, water, toilets, toilet-paper, shade for the children in the schoolyard, and teachers. Palestinian parents also complain to HILA that the educational facilities their children do have, such as classroom furniture, are often old and inappropriate. “Their situation is so difficult it is almost impossible to understand, particularly among the Palestinian Bedouin in the south,” Amichai summed up.

In addition to the divide and rule practices of imposed hamula, the state has divided the indigenous Palestinians into groups along religious affiliation, geographical area and what is presumed to be lifestyle, such as Bedouins, as described in the Introduction. Even though HILA does not follow the categories or boundaries superimposed by the state, its current and previous activism with Bedouin Palestinians in the Negev/Naqab has been limited to those in urban settlements. A major reason for this is that the state told the Bedouins that if they do not live in a recognised settlement, the state is not responsible for their education (Levi, interview). Concurring with Human Rights Watch and Adalah, HILA considers the situation for the Palestinian Bedouin in the south of Israel as the worst of all Palestinian citizens.

Amichai (interview) said that in comparison with other Palestinian citizens, the problems of the Bedouin in the south and particularly in the unrecognised villages, are the most severe in Israel: where material facilities exist, they are poor; parents face problems with helping their children due to their own lack of education and also due to their limited knowledge of Hebrew; the teachers are there unwillingly and are thus uninspired; there are problems of political nature, particularly the usage of education in order to further other agendas; and problems related to gender representation (as discussed above) as almost exclusively men participate in parents groups.

To further illustrate the general lack of resources in Palestinian schools and education, below follows a description from the Palestinian town of Arara where I was given a tour in July 2005 by Said Yunis and other men from the Parent Council. The general situation in all seven schools in this town is characterised by overcrowded classrooms; poor buildings, and in one case the old, unsound building from the 1950s is still in use; old and
unsuitable furniture, such as chairs in only one size for all children in one elementary school; poor toilet facilities; no securing of schoolyards from cars or nearby roads; no provided school material, such as books; and outdated maps and old blackboards. None of the schools have a sports-hall or other opportunities for recreational activities. This description is confirmed by the descriptions and statistics in Human Rights Watch’s report (2001:VI)\textsuperscript{182} which compared educational data for Jews and Arabs (1994-2000). The report states that:

Arab schools need more classrooms, and those they have are often in poor condition, especially in the Negev. Compared with Jewish schools, Arab schools have fewer libraries, sports facilities, laboratories, and other auxiliary facilities

Moreover, the reports found that 83.2 percent of Jewish schools offer psychological counselling compared to 40 percent of Arab schools, and 80.7 percent of Jewish schools have libraries compared to 64.4 percent of the Arab schools.

In Arara the road leading up a narrow hill to the entrance of a school had collapsed in heavy rain last winter (in 2004) when school children were walking on it. Some of these children were taken to the hospital with serious injuries, according to the Parent Council. The road was still not repaired a year and a half later, and this is particularly dangerous because no ambulance or fire-engine is able to reach the school in case of emergencies. Inside the school building we were met by the Principal and other staff who were using the summer holiday to renovate the school. Neither the municipality nor the school have funds to cover the necessary renovations, and therefore parents paid for the materials and the school staff members undertake the maintenance job. These particular renovations included installing the only air-conditioner/heater in the entire school. To utilise it to the fullest, the school staff members made a hole in the wall between two classrooms and placed it in the middle. The air-conditioner was also paid for by the parents.

Furthermore, the school-building has no room for teachers, neither to work in, nor to have lunch in. Computing facilities consisted of a single old computer without an internet connection which teachers shared. The school also lacked a library, although some parents had donated books, or money to purchase books and bookshelves. Only last

\textsuperscript{182} Web version of report: http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/israel2/
summer was the school able to install drinking facilities for the children. Again, this was paid for by parents. It is a simple watering-system placed outside in the school grounds. “My children drink like cows, outside in the rain in winter – and this is a social democracy we live in?” Yunis commented.

Keeping in mind that Palestinians have lower income and that there are more poor Palestinian citizens than Jewish citizens, the majority of these parents can ill afford to spend money on school renovations and materials that the state should be providing according to the law. But, as the Parent Council members explained (interviews/tour), they cannot wait for the state to face up to its responsibilities, because despite all their complaints over many years, they have not seen any changes. Thus, in order to make sure that their children receive the best education possible, these parents use their private funds to make the educational situation a little better. The ability and willingness of individual parents to become involved in their children’s education is connected with their familial economic situation, the situation of the individual school, and of the community. Due to their individual difficult financial situations, many parents do not have time to participate in necessary or extra activities related to their children’s education, especially if they have many children and several jobs.

The third major difference between working with Palestinian and Jewish citizens is, according to Amichai, the level of knowledge about the other main group of citizens. First of all, in addition to the history they are taught in school, the majority of Palestinian citizens speak Hebrew and thus are able to communicate with Jewish citizens and follow the debates and issues of mainstream Jewish Israeli media. As many Jewish citizens articulate fear of Palestinian citizens, feelings based on “fear of the unknown”, many Palestinian citizens are also afraid to come to Jewish cities due to a more substantiated fear. According to Amichai “the guys from Jaljuliya knew exactly what Tel Aviv is and why they are afraid.” Coming to a peak in October 2000, when thirteen Palestinian citizens were killed and many more wounded by the Israeli police, Palestinian citizens’ fear was tragically confirmed.

183 As illustrated by Smooha’s Index (2005) in the Introduction.
Amichai himself, who is dark-skinned and has a big black beard, is used to being assumed by security forces and police officers to be a “dangerous Arab”. He told me that once when he fell asleep on a bus, he was woken up by the poke of a rifle on his shoulder, to face an armed policeman. The bus driver thought he “looked suspicious” and called the police, who pulled the bus over, evacuated it and were intending to arrest Amichai, believing him to be a terrorist. “Is the terrorist sleeping?” he heard someone ask, and realised to his surprise that they were talking about him. However, Amichai added, for him as a Jewish citizen this was a misunderstanding, whereas for Palestinian citizens this is inescapable:

It is too much – one cannot live like this. I cannot count the number of times security people have suggested I put on a yarmulke [to look more Jewish]! But it is no joke, you cannot know when they guy who stops you will shoot…I cannot say that I feel like the guys in Jaljuliya, I cannot tell them these stories; it is not even slightly similar to what they experience, for me it is an anecdote, for them this is life.

(Amichai, interview)

Muhammad Shawakee (interview), the carpenter and parent activist from Jaljuliya told me this story from his Palestinian perspective:

Arabs in Israel are choking here, the check points for example, the “Arab gate” that we have to pass through to go visit our relatives in the occupied territory. Whereas settlers pass straight through – we both are Israeli citizens, but I am held at gunpoint “for fun” in the occupied territory… One time I was forced to get out of my car in heavy rain in winter just outside the village – inside Israeli territory, in “my” state. My old parents were in the car and I refused to have them step out into the mud in the rain. The young mocking soldier “let us go” after a long search for no good reason…

The last major difference in working with Palestinian citizens stressed by Amichai is the cultural difference. For example, according to Amichai, the translation of “Parent Council” in Arabic is literary the “Council of Fathers.” Thus, while in Hebrew the term is gender neutral, in Arabic it is not. As a result, HILA has experienced managers of Arab schools telling mothers they cannot be in the Parent Council because they are women. Amichai explained how at HILA they study all the time, to try to alter their approach to different circumstances without compromising the ideology of the organisation. Gender in HILA was discussed above, but here it is relevant to mention that HILA will not accept
that the Palestinian Parent Council is for men only, regardless of how it is named in Arabic. As stated by Amichai (interview):

We need to study the material, we have our ideology, and our roles are to be managers and teachers, to teach and organise and keep in mind who we are talking with. It is difficult, but it is also what makes it interesting and what makes us grow [as individuals and as an organisation].

**Grass-roots Activism: Three Case Studies**

Whereas *HaKeshet* focuses on discourse, *HILA* works mostly through grass-roots activism. Both *HaKeshet* and *HILA* aim to assist their constituencies by teaching them about their position in society and thus increase their awareness. While *HaKeshet* uses and relies upon nationwide media, books and articles to dispatch its message, *HILA* works from the bottom up:

The first step to enacting change in schools is by involving the parents, and by extension, the community at large. For almost eighteen years now, *HILA* has been empowering parents to take action vis-a-vis the educational system in order to ensure that their children receive what they are entitled to by law. And where there have been no laws or regulations to ensure equality in education, *HILA* has initiated relevant legislation (*HILA*, introduction in application for funding).

Addressing the issue of grass-roots oriented activism, *HILA*’s Fieldworker Yehouda Amichai (interview) insisted:

We did not do something new! Parents always did this at the grass-root level. We took the law and saw who did what and who succeeded and investigated these processes politically. So we did not invent the model, but we learned and accumulated experience from parents and activists. It is more dynamic [than *HILA* teaching parents] and this reflects reality: Druze have a different context and experience from *Mizrahim*; and theirs is different from Palestinians in Arab towns; mothers are different from fathers; religious [communities] differ from secular [communities]; elementary from high school; and so on. We [*HILA*] have to correspond to the context.

The courses offered to local groups of parents can be said to be *HILA*’s backbone. There are three levels. First of all the parents learn how to gather information from official institutions, teachers and staff, and from their children. Then they learn about parents’ and children's legal rights. Finally they learn about Parent Committees and
groups who in former cases acted and were able to implement changes, or if they were not, why they were not. The aim is to learn from previous experiences and also to facilitate for possible cooperation between groups in the future. Below, the three cases observed for this study are presented to demonstrate how HILA works in practice.

**Kufr Kara – Muslim Mothers Become Involved Parents**

I joined a group of six mothers on the first day of the first course in the Palestinian village of Kufr Kara. Also present was Sami, a young man from the village who had taken the initiative to organise for the course to take place. The meeting occurred in the new municipal building in the centre of the village. The general topic was what it means (and how) to be a parent in today’s Israel. Amichai spoke about the meanings, values and traditions of family. He said that HILA does not offer magic solutions, and that he expected to learn as much from them as parents and individuals, as they would from him. He spoke about the home as a safe place where we feel and seek support; about parenting and parenthood that involves “simple” things such as covering basic needs, food, clothes, and a home; and about the changes in the expectations and responsibilities for parents in “our generation” compared to “our parents’ generation”. What he wanted these mothers to take away from this meeting and generally from HILA, was the importance of being involved parents.

Amichai used the example of a child who comes home with a report about violent behaviour: “What do you do? Or, what should you have done prior to this incidence? Is this your fault or your child’s fault? More importantly, how do you deal with this?”

Amichai advised the mothers present to talk with their children, to listen to their stories when they return from school every day, and not only when they come with a school report: to be involved in their children’s everyday life and to create a pattern wherein their children involve them. “There is no school for parents where you learn how to be a good parent,” Amichai said to the amusement of the audience. “However, we must be aware of our learned habits and perhaps reconsider them. There was no Parent Council and there were no meetings when we went to school,” Amichai continued.
“Today we can and need to be involved in our children’s education and the institutions that make the larger part of their everyday life.”

Amichai spoke about the need to be assertive, not only with one’s children, but with their teachers and the school administration. “You know your child better than anyone else does,” he emphasised, warning these mothers never to let any official talk them into taking decisions relating to their child without due consideration. “In addition to providing your child with love, support and basic needs, you need to make sure he/she has a suitable study environment at home, and make sure that you know what is going on in his/her life,” Amichai instructed.

The week after, the topic of the meeting was the structure and institutions of the Israeli education system, the position of Palestinian parents and students in this system, and the implications thereof. Amichai affirmed that is it difficult to achieve change in the “democratic” state of Israel (his quotation marks). Therefore, it is even more important that one knows what one’s rights are, and how to address irregularities and inequalities in order to push for changes. According to Amichai, about ninety percent of all problems in schools can be solved by approaching the teacher: “As parents, it is your responsibility to strengthen the teachers,” he told parents. He added that today the status and position of the teacher is not comparable to before, when being a teacher was an honourable position. Therefore, supporting one’s children in school includes supporting the professionals schooling them.

However, Amichai stated that not all problems are directly related to the teacher or his/her area of responsibility. It depends on the nature of the problem, whether it is economic, psychological, familial, or related to stereotyping and prejudice. Often, it will be a combination of the four. In these complex circumstances it can be difficult to determine in which realm the problem is located, Amichai cautioned. He warned against individual solutions and advised that communal solutions are preferable. For example, when addressing the problem of a child’s violent behaviour, it is not constructive to only blame the pupil, but the failures in and of a system must also be addressed. Several of the participating women concurred and one said, “We must take care of all the children in our community.” During the one-and-a-half hour class, the group of women asked
questions, offered their stories and made comments, either encouraged by Amichai or on their own initiative. The social environment was relaxed and at the same time there was a respectful distance between the mothers and the male teacher. Some of these women’s Hebrew was not fluent; a few have never formally studied the language. Sami translated from Hebrew to Arabic when necessary. This created a situation in which Amichai was also learning Arabic. For example, the group spent some time finding good translations of important concepts such as “involvement”.

In all meetings with Palestinian citizens that I have participated in, HILA’s staff has apologised for not speaking Arabic. Furthermore, they explain that their courses and meetings need to be conducted in Hebrew because Hebrew is the official language of the Ministry of Education. One reason for this is that information and documents regarding laws and regulations and related institutions exist mainly in Hebrew. However, HILA provides information, such as the dossiers handed out to each individual parent for each course, as well as other information leaflets, in Arabic (and Amharic for Ethiopian immigrants). Moreover, both HILA’s Director and fieldworker voiced the need to hire an Arabic-speaking Palestinian fieldworker. Due to the organisation’s contemporary financial situation, HILA is unable to hire a new fieldworker in the near future.

Most Israelis would be surprised if they saw the Middle Eastern Jewish bearded man discussing family values and how to raise children with six hijab-wearing Muslim Palestinian women. Even people from HaKeshet expressed astonishment when I described such meetings from my experiences with HILA. This is one of HILA’s strengths: it is not afraid to cross established boundaries, whether physical, ethnic, national, cultural, or imagined. To illustrate further, Amichai, as the fieldworker of HILA, was the only Jewish Israeli to enter Arara and Jaljuliya in autumn 2000, following the killing of the thirteen Palestinian citizens in the beginning of Intifadat al-Aqsa. Not even Jewish employees from the electric or water companies would enter Arab town or villages in those months (Masarwa, interview). Amichai recalled coming to Arara and finding it dark: a whole town in a darkness imposed by the police to thwart demonstrations. Some parents were waiting for him at the entrance to the town to guide him to the private house where the meeting needed to be held because the municipal
building was without electricity. This provides an indication of how segregated and distanced Palestinian and Jewish Israelis live, despite proximity in geography. And this story indicates why Palestinian citizens appreciate *HILA* and does not take it for granted.

**Sderot – Town under Fire**

The first time I met the members of the Parent Council of Sderot was in the home of Amichai, who lives with his family on a *moshav* outside Sderot. By then this group had already been through *HILA*’s first course and was now gathering to prepare for the next course. Sderot is a case in point of Amicha’s insistence that *HILA* learns from parents as much as they learn from *HILA*; even before getting in touch with *HILA*, the Sderot Parent Council had already won a case in the High Court of Justice. Then the problem was with specific schools, where children were not receiving the required number of hours of schooling as provided by law. When the Parent Council approached the relevant schools, the schools’ management acknowledged the problem, but wanted parents to pay for half of the costs of the disputed hours. Lawyers from Tel Aviv University volunteered to represent them when the Parent Council took the case to the High Court of Justice. According to Amichai (interview), the fact that the case was accepted and dealt with in the High Court was very important for these parents:

> Imagine getting to the High Court! The status this gave for someone from the Sderot Parent Council! And they won the case! They were very proud! Furthermore, they were on radio and on local TV and in the written media. These are very significant actions and showed that “the little people were right.”

“The little people” are the inhabitants of the Development Town Sderot situated close to the border with the Gaza Strip. Approaching Sderot from the north, the town suddenly appears on the horizon where it seems a little out of place in the desert-like environment. It is a quiet, small city with two- to three-storey attached or semi-detached houses, and typical public housing built by the state in the 1950s and 60s. It has a small shopping centre, some individual shops, an open market space and a cinema in the centre. Sderot is a poor city in Israel and during this fieldwork in 2004-2005 it was reported in the daily
newspapers more than once that poor people were picking leftovers from the market at the end of the day.

As was briefly described in the Introduction, in the last few years Sderot has been in the national and international media with headlines such as “As schools open, strikes in Sderot over Qassam protection” (Ha’aretz),184 “Sderot: Israel’s ghost town on Gaza frontline” (AFP ),185 because it is targeted from Gaza with Qassam rockets. No one knows how many Qassam rockets have been fired at the town since 2003, but to date they have hit a kindergarten, a synagogue, a school, the commercial quarter and a community centre, when not landing in open landscape or in one of the nearby kibbutzim or moshavim. According to Amichai, four children from Sderot have been killed and many injured by Qassam rockets. According to a recent study, almost half the parents and one third of the children in Sderot suffer from post-traumatic stress (Ha’aretz, 13.06.2006).186

I was able to observe international interest in Sderot when Miriam Sassi from the Parent Council invited me to the kindergarten that she manages. It was located in a new and relatively wealthy part of Sderot. The visitors that day were Christians from the Netherlands who were on a tour of Israel and who wanted to come to the rocket-ridden town to show their support for the inhabitants.187 Welcome by signs in English made especially for the occasion and accompanied by Sderot’s Vice-Mayor, the guests were honoured with dance and songs by the children. To indicate how present the reality of Qassam rockets are in the lives of these children, when asked by the Dutch representative if anyone could tell them about Sderot, a three-year-old boy stood up and asked if they wanted to hear about the Qassam rockets. It seemed that even at this young age, this boy knew why people come to Sderot and what makes an impression on them.

The impact of the threat and reality of Qassam rockets on individuals in Sderot should not be underestimated. One of the women in the Parent Council would often come to the

184 “As Schools open, Strikes in Sderot over Qassam protection”, Ha’aretz, by Yulie Khromchenko, 03.09.2006.
185 “Sderot: Israel’s ghost town on Gaza frontline”, AFP, by Michael Blum, 13.06.2006.
187 Another example of such solidarity is this heading: “Christian Zionists stand with Sderot” October 8th, 2004, Jerusalem Newswire.
weekly meetings in the winter and spring of 2005, accompanied by her twelve-year-old
daughter who was afraid to be home alone. Her mother explained that she hurried home
from school to be with her family and that she would panic if she could not be with one
of her parents. Other parents told me about children as old as fifteen who began wetting
their beds and refusing to sleep in their rooms alone, and children who had even begun
playing and eating under the dining-room table to seek protection in case of Qassam
rockets. According to the post-traumatic study cited above, conducted by at the
Mashabim Center of Tel Hai Academic College, 18 percent of children in Sderot suffer
“slight to moderate degrees of post-traumatic stress, which includes insomnia, headaches
and the inability to concentrate” (*Ha’aretz*, 13.06.2006).  

As a typical Development Town, Sderot is inhabited largely by MENA Jews and
lately also by Ethiopian and Russian Jews. The majority of its population is found in the
lower socioeconomic levels of the state. Furthermore, Sderot, in conjuncture with MENA
Jewish inhabited places in general, has an image of being a right-wing Likud-voting
community. For example, Linda Grant wrote about Sderot in *The Guardian* (2006a) as:

A poverty-stricken town composed of immigrants from Morocco, Russia and
Ethiopia. Sderot turned out to be a really depressing place, only the sunshine, date
palms and bougainvillea would stop you from cutting your throat. […] The kind of
town where unemployed men with bad dental work hang around hopelessly on
benches in the city centre, some of them drunk by mid morning.

In her follow-up article Grant (2006b) continues:

The place smells of the monotony of poverty and despair. The people of Sderot may
be richer than their Palestinian neighbours, but it is hard to feel wealthy when you
cannot get to the end of the week without running out of food. Like Gaza, Sderot is
propped up by welfare, but instead of the UN or NGOs, it comes from private
donations from the Jewish community of Italy. Small workshops and factories have
been built to provide jobs, but even these are subsidised by rich Israeli
philanthropists.

This philanthropic support described by Grant is in sharp contrast to feelings among
Sderot’s inhabitants of neglect, and of having been let down by the state and the
government. These feelings of being disregarded by the political leadership and the rest

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188 “Post-traumatic stress affects Sderot kids and their parents alike”, *Ha’aretz*, 13.06.2006, by Eli
Ashkenazi.
of the country are not new, but it has been exacerbated since Qassam rockets began to be launched at the city. As Miriam Sassi articulated sarcastically:

This state begins from Ashdod and north - who live in the periphery? It is accidental? Just look at the lack of culture and everything in Sderot compared with the Ashkenazi kibbutzim nearby. They [the Ashkenazi kibbutz-dwellers] never even come to Sderot.

The growing despair over the increasingly dangerous situation and the lack of protection from Qassam rockets was highlighted when, the mayor Elie Moyal organised for the lights in the town to be shot off in order to show that it was not longer on the political map of Israel (YNet, 19.06.2006). In sum, Sderot’s inhabitants live on the geographical periphery of Israel, they feel marginalised socially, culturally, politically and economically, and they do not feel they are getting the protection or support they should have from their government and military. During the heated demonstrations at the withdrawal of Israeli settlers from the occupied Gaza strip, many of Sderot’s inhabitants supported the settlers, but not necessarily for political reasons. Rather, they feared being the Jewish town closest to the Palestinians after the pull-out. In addition, many had family and friends among the Gaza settlers, and thus sympathised with these people on an emotional level. Their fears regarding being closer to enemy fire were justified, as Sderot was under constant attack almost every day in the months and years following the pull-out.

In Sderot, as is also the case in Arara and other Palestinian towns and villages, despite the security situation and dire atmosphere, parents are still active. After the court case described above, the Sderot Parent Council decided to invite different people and organisations to give them lectures on various issues and topics in 2004. Amichai gave a lecture about parents’ rights and how to achieve change. According to Amichai, the Council members were shocked when they realised how little they knew and they decided to ask HILA for a whole course. Council members call now Amichai day and night when they need advice.

Because of the previous experiences of this Parent Council, HILA designed a course especially for their needs. The main practical issues discussed were (HILA documents):
In addition to international support, Israeli Jewish organisations, municipalities and individuals have supported Sderot because of the Qassam attacks. Impressed by the organisation of a particular trip, the Parent Council suggested using the company that organised it for future trips, instead of the more expensive company that has been used by the school for the past 10 years. According to Miriam Sassi (interview), the school board “went crazy” and they later found out that one of the teachers is from the family who owns the company the school usually uses; “It is corruption!” Sassi exclaimed. In the end children and parents were told that all school trips were postponed, even though the parents paid: “We are the trouble-makers. To make changes is never pleasant,” Sassi summed up.

There is a problem regarding parental contributions to schools and kindergarten in order to improve the material situation. According to the law, it is legal to give economic or material support if all the children benefit and all parents agree. However, the problem is that this creates schools and kindergartens of “haves” and “have nots.” This problem highlights the splits between the poorer older neighbourhood and the richer new neighbourhood of Sderot.

The largest issue discussed continuously in this course was the issue of privatising public schools. The municipality wanted to open for private companies to run the public schools. But, HILA and the Parent Council are both against this. The Council argued that they want a good public school for which they already pay tax. They are concerned that if a municipality hands over the running of a school to a private company, parents loose their rights and opportunities to be involved that are now granted them by law. Thus, they might not be able to organise Parent Councils, or these would not have any influence or formal roles. According to HILA, private companies would result in a reverse to the situation in the 1980s when parents from marginalised groups were uninvolved in their children’s education and thus also in ending the reproduction of the system of marginalisation.

Jaljuliya – Living on the Seam

My first visit to Jaljuliya was with HILA’s Director, Tikva Levi, and HILA’s fieldworker, Yehouda Amichai, for a meeting with the Parent Council. Before we went, Levi gave me a briefing on the situation and on previous parent activities in Jaljuliya. HILA started working with Jaljuliya in 2000. According to Levi and Amichai, Jaljuliya serves as an exemplary case of the conditions they have observed in most other Arab villages and in Development Towns. So far the organisation has conducted four courses in this village with approximately fifty participants, eight to ten of which are steady activists, and three Levi describes as “hardcore” activists. Two of these three also take part in HILA’s Board meetings. Some women took part in previous courses, but generally few women participate in Jaljuliya.
After the meeting I was invited to visit the village again and to see it in daylight, as it was dark when the meeting took place. This way I would be able to talk more with some of the key parent activists. A few weeks later, I returned to spend a day as a guest of the Shawakee family, and to interview Muhammad and Ghada Shawakee. On a tour of the village, Muhammad recapped Jaljuliya’s recent history. According to him, before the war in 1948 Jaljuliya was a small village with 23 families. However, as a result of the war, many Palestinian families from other villages and towns sought refuge in Jaljuliya and today there are more than 100 families. Shawakee (interview) explained that Kibbutz Horashem was built on what was Heresh village where his parents lived in 1948:

The Israelis destroyed everything even the graveyard in the village to leave no traces. Many people were slaughtered or sent to what are now the occupied territories, and some escaped to Jaljuliya. People also came from Jaffa and other places to here. We were all ‘present absentees’.  

Describing their life in the village, the Shawakees first talked of enjoying a quiet and good life, but then they began to reveal financial difficulties, land problems, and spoke of general discrimination and unjust treatment they experienced as non-Jewish citizens. A major problem is land, as for most Palestinians in Israel, said Shawakee (interview):

There is no land here for me. They send people to Israel from outside, for example Russians, whereas Jaljuliya is fenced in between new roads, the kibbutz, the Israeli city Kfar Saba, Russian settlers, and the airport. The economic situation in the village is bad – people are poor. Their goals are to have a family and a house – but where? It is not legal to sell land in this country to Arabs! The state hides behind organisations that buy and appropriate land from us. The land in Jaljuliya was taken in 1962; 1 500 dunams! And they left us with only 5 percent.

Shawakee continued by pointing out that there is no clinic in Jaljuliya or in any of the nearby Arab towns:

We are always dependent on the Jews for everything, even milk products; there are no Palestinian producers or institutions. Furthermore, doing military service provides citizens with special rights, but we do not serve in the army thus we loose certain rights we are not able to choose to have, such as mortgage, access to dorms at

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189 Muhammad’s story of internal refugees ending up in Jaljuliya is backed up by descriptions of the 1948 war and its aftermath as described in detail by Benny Morris, 1987, and in Shira Robinson’s (2005) dissertation.
university, scholarships etc.\textsuperscript{190} Also Ethiopians are discriminated against – but they [the state/the Jews] brought them here, so why – why bring them in order to discriminate against them and when they do not care for or about them? We have great problems here. If there was no Arab enemy the Jews would kill each other – Iraqi versus Yemeni Jews, and so on.

This is our home, me and my family and children, our home, our state. I am an Israeli citizen, [and should] have the same rights as other citizens. I (we) accept and receive Jews here in the village, but they do not return the gesture. Nor do they study Arabic, which is the second language in this country, unless they are in security services… Discrimination and inequality in Israel is open – in the policy and in the political system. This must change! We must feel part of this country, of this state, and not have to wait three hours to be checked at the airport. We are used to this, sadly, used to being held at gunpoint, and we expect no less. We need a state for all its citizens - not for one ethnic or religious group. With the new generation there is no change, in fact it got worse.

The Jews are strong and do not want peace, every day they go into the territories and do what they want. Our Arab mentality is to live – maybe this is part of our failure? We are too weak and vulnerable: from our religion and culture we learn to give before taking. All houses in this village house large families; we are eight in this apartment, my brother’s family in the next apartment are six, my father and mother live down stairs – sixteen people live in this standard-sized house.

The main educational problem in Jaljuliya is that teachers are absent from class or are “substituted” by uneducated employees, such as cleaning staff. This is in addition to poor conditions of school buildings, with unhealthy water and no toilets. According to Shawakee (interview), the problems with the teachers are caused by three interconnected predicaments: teachers’ lack of education and experience; the GSS and the Ministry of Security causing fear among the village inhabitants; and finally, the Knesset which “squashes the inhabitants from all directions.” As an example of how they have been received when they have tried to get in touch with the Ministry of Education, Shawakee (interview) said he cannot count the many times he has heard the sentence: “We have not heard about this” or “We have not received your file.”

The Shawakees and other parents began questioning the teaching their children were receiving after their suspicion were aroused when their children came home week after week, month after month, all receiving the highest grades. At first most parents were

\textsuperscript{190} Since this interview took place in 2005, in August 2006 \textit{Adalah} won the case that Considering Military Service Criterion in Allocation of Housing at Haifa University Discriminates against Arab Students, in a Haifa District Court Issues Precedent-Setting Judgment (\textit{Adalah} newsletter, Volume 27, July).
simply pleased with their children’s high level of learning, but since their grades never changed and when they realised that this was the same for all the children in almost all classes, they decided to look into it. They asked their children what they had learned and how, and were shocked to hear that many days the teachers did not come at all, some days they came in for a little while and sent the children home early, and in many cases the cleaning staff were charged with supervising the children. Together with other parents, the Shawakees confronted the teachers and made the pupils sit tests with parents present. They discovered that only three girls and one boy in one class of ten-year-olds could read. The rest were illiterate.

According to HILA staff, the problem with unskilled or absent teachers is complicated because the local school management and the teachers are also from the village. How teachers without required knowledge and skills are able to get their positions, and, connected to this, the fact that the teachers themselves are from the village is a complex issue. Shawakee (interview) explained that most of the teachers are educated at the same educational institutions and have similar family backgrounds and social networks. Shawakee clarified that if someone wants to be a teacher, he or she needs to have connections, often from certain families. As an example, he mentioned one teacher who is the daughter of the Director of the school. She teaches English, but has not studied the language, according to Shawakee (interview):

The logic is ‘you help me and in return I help you.’ It is a system with a base in family or social networks, such as study friends. Next to this there are cases of fraud and corruption – people who buy papers to prove degrees they never studied for. For example, the supervisor of the Ministry of Education is the cousin of the manager of the school.

In the case of Jaljuliya, it was HILA’s fieldworker who made contact with parents there after having heard about the low level of high school results in the village. This illustrates another side of HILA’s method of outreach. In 2000 Amichai came to give a lecture to the Parent Council. This was followed by HILA courses. According to HILA’s Narrative Report (2002-April 2003), HILA organised and implemented four courses in Jaljuliya. Three of them were initial courses and the fourth one was an advanced course.

\[^{191}\text{Reports are provided to funders to enable them to follow the development of the organisation’s work.}\]
Altogether three parent groups participated. As described by one of the parent (interview):

Amichai taught us courses here and we studied in a course in Tel Aviv. HILA gave us the study material and the skills needed for our war; they taught us how to enter the war. We were astonished!

Below is a table showing what HILA taught in one of these courses (from the Narrative Report):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Theme of Lecture</th>
<th>Name of Lecturer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>November 8(^{th}), 2002</td>
<td>Preparation meeting for the meeting with the educational committee in the Knesset concerning the physical, pedagogical and social deficiencies in Jaljulya.</td>
<td>Yehouda Amichai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 12(^{th}), 2002</td>
<td>Meeting with the chairman of the education committee of the Knesset, Mr. Zvulun Orlev and with Knesset Member Mr. Muhamad Knaan concerning the above issue.</td>
<td>Yehouda Amichai</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 25(^{th}), 2002</td>
<td>How to attain physical improvement of schools and the missing hours in the study programs.</td>
<td>Yehouda Amichai</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 24(^{th}), 2002</td>
<td>Workshop on preparing letters to the Ministry of Education</td>
<td>Tikva Levi</td>
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<td>Yehouda Amichai</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 20(^{th}), 2003</td>
<td>Parents’ status in the education system – towards a Bill.</td>
<td>Tikva Levi</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yehouda Amichai</td>
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<tr>
<td>January 22(^{nd}), 2003</td>
<td>Establishing a regional parents committee; Examination of the legal implications concerning the lack of intervention of the Ministry of Education’s senior officials.</td>
<td>Yehouda Amichai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 4(^{th}), 2003</td>
<td>Meeting with 4 lawyers from the Law Clinic in the Tel Aviv University concerning the physical, pedagogical and social deficiencies in Jaljulya. The Law Clinic agreed to represent the Jaljulya’s parents’ committee, pro-bono. They have been given all the material concerning the matter and they started to organize the lawsuit.</td>
<td>Tikva Levi</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yehouda Amichai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 19(^{th}), 2003</td>
<td>Analyzing the activities and the progress so far.</td>
<td>Yehouda Amichai</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One of the first tasks undertaken was to have an independent body conduct research on the educational system in Jaljuliya. Dr. Khaled Abu Asba from Massar, the Institute for Research, Planning and Educational Counselling, presented the results in a conference that took place in August 2003 in Jaljuliya. According to the Narrative Report, Massar’s results “showed the complete failure of the educational system in Jaljuliya.” This is substantiated by numbers for 2002, when 71 percent of the youth in Jaljuliya did not obtain matriculation certificates, compared with 66 percent of all Palestinians in Israel, and a national percentage of 53.5. While 15 percent of Israeli Jewish pupils continued their education in academic institutions, the equivalent percentage among the pupils in Jaljuliya was 0.8 percent.

As Shawakee mentioned above, the other problem lies with the authorities’ lack of interest in evaluating the educational situation in Jaljuliya. According to HILA, this is clearly different from the frequent and thorough inspections of Jewish schools. In order to further prove their case, the Jaljuliya parents documented both the material and the teaching situation. They took photographs of the lacking toilet facilities and showed these photographs to politicians and others in government positions; and they documented the presence and absence of teachers by having one parent present every day for six months in every class to document if a teacher came, when he/she came, and if he/she left early or sent the children home early. One can only imagine the organisation and motivation behind this thorough and long-term activism, especially for people in low-income occupations.

However, in spite of all this activism and some achievements, many problems remained. When the parents realised that the Knesset Education Committee, the Parliamentary Committees and the Ministry of Education were not going to help them, they decided to file a lawsuit. In February 2003 they met with HILA’s Director and four lawyers from the Law Clinic at Tel Aviv University to prepare. The judges appeared shocked when they heard and saw the documentation proving that teachers taught in subjects without qualifications. Jaljuliya’s parents won the court case, but not without incurring personal costs.
One risk of being an involved parent is that some teachers, or other local or regional administrative staff, will feel threatened by knowledgeable “nosy” parents. As part of the initial course taught by HILA, it is explained that being an involved parent does not mean being an interfering parent, rather being involved requires knowledge upon which one bases one’s criticism, as opposed to unqualified criticism. Amichai (interview) recounted experiences in which teachers or other staff had used children to “get back at” their parents when the parents were perceived as annoying and interfering. Keeping in mind that being involved is for the betterment for the children is important. So is the task of getting this message across to the professionals who may feel threatened.

However, in the case of Jaljuliya, the risks and costs of being an involved parent went beyond this, and the costs became violent, as Shawakee (interview) explained:

The negative results of involvement, for me and others involved, and we are few active, are the costs in money, in health and the threats. In power structure of the village we became a virus and that created fear – fear of us; this destroyed the relationship between us and the teachers and the school management.

Shawakee told me how his and the other activists’ children were afraid to tell him what occurred at school, because they were afraid that their parents would get involved and that this would be dangerous for themselves at school and to their families in general. Their teachers bullied them once the activism started, and other children stopped playing with them. They were all afraid of reactions from the community. Indeed, Shawakee’s carpentry shop lost almost all its customers. He used to have seven employees, whereas today, as a result of business losses, he is only able to employ one. His house was attacked, and family members were hospitalised. Matie Jaousi also paid a heavy price for his parent activism. His business was ruined when he was suddenly accused of transporting Palestinians from the occupied Palestinian territory. As a result he now drives a minivan-cab and works very hard to be able to provide for his six children.

Nevertheless, as evidenced in the recent meeting I took part in, as well as the weekend seminar discussed below, both these two parents and other parents from Jaljuliya continue to be involved, to arrange and to participate in parent activism in order to improve the education of their and others. Certainly, they have been encouraged by
seeing that their activism bore fruit, and that today teachers in Jaljuliya are present in their classes. However, there is still a lot to do.
Chapter 9

Weekend Seminar: Building Solidarity Through Joint Activism

The weekend seminar at the Oasis of Peace briefly described in the Introduction, is one in a long history of such seminars organised by HILA. This weekend, the methods used and knowledge exchanged will serve as a case to illustrate how HILA facilitates for cross-boundary activism and solidarity. First a short description by HILA of the motivations and goals behind these seminars:

RATIONALE:
A Weekend Seminar has up to 120 participants. At this seminar, group representatives present selected projects, and a work plan is created for the HILA National Parent Council for the coming year. Weekend workshops provide an essential forum for cross-community learning and solidarity by bringing together parent groups from the various Jewish and Arab communities which HILA represents.

The workshops are intended to provide for more than just an abstract exchange of ideas, as done by many other “dialogue” programs; rather they unite disparate groups around common social and educational goals to work for improvements in their children’s education. The result is lasting grassroots solidarity and action networks between Jews, Muslims, Druze and Christians, both religious and secular. In most organizations, Arab-Jewish cooperation amounts to meetings between professionals or elites to discuss issues of co-existence. HILA realizes that sustained, long-term mobilization can only occur around well-defined social, cultural and educational objectives that are of critical importance to both Arab and Jewish communities.

THREE MAIN PURPOSES:
1) To provide large numbers of parents with information about their and their children’s rights in the education system.
2) To facilitate interaction and exchange of ideas, information and support between parents from all over the country.
3) To place issues of parent involvement in education on the public agenda.

Some of the parents from Sderot came to this particular seminar in spring 2005 with orange ribbons on their cars, symbolising support for settlers in the Gaza Strip about to be evicted. This might have been thought to arouse protests from participating Palestinian parents; however, it was not an issue. The Palestinian citizens present were accustomed

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192 From an application for funding for Parents Involvement in Education Course (2003).
to living in a Jewish majority state, and they did not come to discuss this political issue. The consequences of this separation between political issues will be further discussed below.

As described in Chapter Two, the Oasis of Peace is the only Jewish-Arab established community in Israel, and in addition to being a place to live, its inhabitants are engaged in educational work for peace, equality and understanding between the two peoples. The community works to promote coexistence “based on mutual acceptance, respect and cooperation” (website). It has its own bilingual school and is situated halfway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv-Jaffa. As such, it seemed like the perfect place for this seminar. All participants stayed at the hotel in the conference centre and many brought their partners. Some, including HILA’s staff, also brought their children. All meals were eaten in the hotel restaurant which provided kosher and halal food. On the Friday evening some of the Jewish participants conducted the blessing for Shabbat.

In the preparations for the seminar, HILA informed all possible participants that they would subsidise the costs of the weekend. Furthermore, both Jewish and Palestinian participants needed directions to and reassurance regarding the nature of the Oasis of Peace, as few knew anything about it. Concurring with previous descriptions of fear among Palestinians and Jewish citizens, Amichai (interview) explained that the Jewish participants are not sure why or what exactly they are afraid of, but they are concerned to go to an “Arab village” or place. Some of the Palestinian parents are also concerned, but their worry stems from knowledge of the Jewish towns and society, as well as from previous experiences, either personal or communal. Ahmad Masarwa (interview) expressed sadness over these fears, rhetorically asking if anyone had ever heard about anything happening to Jews visiting Palestinian towns and villages. He went on to explain that due to good and close relations HILA had “passed the check-point policy of the state,” and as an example he recalled that HILA continued to work in Palestinian localities despite the violent reactions to demonstrations in Israel at the start of Intifadat al Aqsa. Encouraged by the vision and goals of HILA to help people, activists and parent activists were able to “pass the borders,” Masarwa stated. At the weekend seminar, new

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193 See the Oasis of Peace website: http://www.nswas.com
borders were crossed, or old borders were crossed by new people. Being in a small place for two days and one night gave the participating parents the opportunity to talk and continue discussions after classes. The atmosphere was relaxed and there was time and opportunity for people to meet and engage with one another. Participants who had previously met in Board meetings in the HILA office in Tel Aviv stressed that this was especially important for them.

Knowledge about the Other

The topics of this weekend seminar were the coming study year, private companies running state schools, and how to be heard and involved decision-making processes. The discussions and classes focused on summing up previous activism, and establishing what the current problems were, discussing how to solve them, and how to join forces between different Parent Councils on issues of importance to all. In the first session, all participants were introduced, and one from each group would introduce the activism and issues they are working with or need to solve. Then the floor was open to comments and questions.

This session created a rare and unique opportunity for Jews and Palestinians to engage directly with each other, and learn about the others’ everyday lives and struggles. As mentioned above, HILA’s employees consciously draw parallels between cases and places in their courses, but at weekend seminars this is taken one step further, and people learn about each other’s situations in their own words. Palestinian parents described problems with the GSS and local power-relations, and the Jewish parents from Sderot expressed growing concern for their children due to the threats of Qassam rockets. For the following sessions, the groups were split up according to level of activism. Specifically, the groups were divided according to how many of HILA’s courses they had been taught previously, and/or subject of interest. For example, the parent groups from Jaljuliya and Sderot were in the same sessions, as their activism is at the same level in terms of the courses they have attended, and additionally, their issues of interest and the problems they face are of a similar nature.
Learning to Appreciate Similarities and Differences

It was interesting to observe that the Palestinian citizens of Israel thought their problems only concerned them, and they were very surprised to discover that Jewish parents in, for example, Sderot have problems at all, let alone, similar problems. On the other side, the Jewish parents were shocked at the magnitude of the problems in the Arab schools. These thoughts were further communicated when Jewish and Arab parents studied together. Both groups shared the experience that the state does not provide them with the resources they are entitled to and require, and therefore they have turned to HILA. Thus, in this seminar the participating parents confirmed what HILA employees and activists had described: that Jews and Arabs who approach the organisation have similar problems, and that the extent of the problems is worse for Palestinian citizens.

Mizrahi activist and freelance columnist Iris Mizrahi participated in a weekend seminar with HILA in 2005 at the Basel Hotel in Tel Aviv. Below is her description of this experience and her thoughts about what she observed (HILA document):

80 parents from all over the country (mostly from the south), Arabs and Mizrahim, came together alongside HILA to raise the important question “Who is teaching our children?” The participants were parents of pupils who live and study in deprived areas. Parents that want to stand up for their basic rights for equal quality education for their children – beautiful, articulate people who have navigated their way through field of struggles and who were now going to alter the rules of the game that eternalizes their situation. During the discussion about the brave, new law proposal that will change the reality of suppression and discrimination in the educational system, I suddenly realized that they are marching with their heads held high, all the way to the High Court of Justice.

And there, when they’ve presented the court with cases of discrimination in the educational system, they’ve already won. They win with democratic tools because they are democratic people. And there are no better, greater or more understanding democrats than those that are discriminated against, and this is already the fourth generation. Sitting in the lecture hall, my delight didn’t cease from the calm atmosphere.

There were no enemies there. There was internal dialogue, but with the knowledge that everybody was supporting one another. That’s what gave the calming sensation and enabled in-depth conversation. They [the participants] are active in grassroots struggles and parent committees, and in most cases spend their own money to keep the struggle alight. The grassroots struggle is not dormant in the least. It does however suffer from severe financial strain. But everyone that was present at HILA’s weekend seminar agrees “that despite all that, we’re onwards bound”. Jaljuliya, Kiryat Gat, Kiryat Ekron, Sderot, Ofakim, Arara and Ashqelon all adamant and
united around the law proposal that refers to our right as parents to be involved in our children’s education and know who is teaching our children; our children’s right to good teachers that will march them forward.

“*We are Family*”

“Ethnic identities” and “Arabs” is politics – in *HILA* we work together in solidarity without hatred. (Ahmad Masarwa, interview)

While members of *HaKeshet* spoke about the movement as a home, people in and associated with *HILA* talked about the organisation as a family. Ahmad Masarwa (interview) from Arara told me that in *HILA* parent activists are a family across the Jewish-Arab divide, and that they are proud of this. According to him, *HILA* supports the weak and neglected in Israel, and in *HILA* parents care not only for their own children, because “my child is not safe until all children are cared for.” Amichai also described *HILA* as a family bound together by the responsibility of knowing each other and caring for the same issues.

Avital Moses (interview) explained how *HILA* creates an atmosphere of solidarity wherein these parents can meet, discuss, learn about each other and agree on how to approach common problems. This is done on the basis of common problems and roles as parents. With the assistance of *HILA*, Jewish and Palestinian parents approach the state with their problems as citizens of the state. Amichai (interview) said that there are groups that have a lot of interaction with other groups, and groups that have less. Usually, groups who were engaged in cross-national solidarity are older groups who have worked with *HILA* over some time, groups who have been involved in activism that changed their lives. These experienced groups understand the instruments of the game, Amichai explained, and they focus on the concept of citizens’ rights.

Muhammad Shawakee from Jaljuliya described relations with Sderot established through *HILA*:

I am not interested in what people are! In *HILA* groups help each other; it is the person and not the identity that is interesting. We have relations with Sderot, they learned a lot from us, because we did groundbreaking and fundamental work here. Jaljuliya was put on the maps after our struggle; it is a crime that people and the state did not know where it was before! People thought it was behind the Green Line! This is not politics, it is about people. About livelihood and honour - that is what we
want. But the state is a problem. We pay the same taxes and what do we receive? I have 7000 relatives in the territories – I cannot fight in the IDF! The fundamental issue is power, what can we do, Amichai and I? Arabs are working class here. Even Jewish academics are afraid to be too associated with us.

I asked HILA’s staff if they generally experience that Jewish and Palestinian parent groups are interested in each other’s situations, and whether they ask and understand the complexity of the other group’s predicaments. As was discussed above, Palestinian citizens of Israel know who MENA Jews are and who Ashkenazi Jews are, and the stereotypes they have of each other. According to both Levi and Amichai, Palestinian citizens are very aware of the hierarchy and structure of Israeli society: If you are an Arab you are at the lowest level after Ethiopians, MENA Jews, and within the categorises women are below men. However, as became evident with the surprise Palestinians expressed regarding the situation in Sderot and other places, they do need to learn about actual differences among Jewish groups in Israeli society.

When it comes to Mizrahi Jewish citizens, the picture is a little different. Except for Palestinians they have worked with, usually people they have employed or managed, or come across as service personnel, the Jewish interviewees in this study did not express having any contact with Palestinian citizens, or having much knowledge about their situation, before being introduced to Palestinian parents and their communities through HILA. Nor do they get any ideas about the situation of their Palestinians co-citizens from the media, as Abeer Baker (2006) from Adalah described in her report about Palestinian citizens in Israeli media:

The coverage of Arab citizens in the Israeli media is problematic in three levels: Firstly, although Arab citizens of the state constitute almost 20 percent of the population, as citizens they hardly ever appear on the screen. Secondly, even when they briefly appear, they are presented in a negative manner, while their unique problems and living conditions are almost totally ignored. Thirdly, as Palestinians and as part of the Arab world, they are also influenced by the negative manner in which Arabs are generally portrayed in the Israeli media.

The reaction of the representative of the Ministry of Education cited in the Introduction indicates that joint action, beyond being a surprise, also concerns him. Similarly, the following story told by HILA’s Fieldworker Amichai at a board meeting

194 Quoted from web version of article.
where parents from Jaljuliya, Arara, Sderot, Ashqelon and Ashdod were present, illustrates how unusual it is in Israeli society to have joint Jewish-Palestinian civil activities. Moreover, the story indicates that the reaction by the representative of the Ministry of Education was not unique, but in HILA’s experience typical. Amichai received a call from a representative in the Ministry of Education who had read about HILA’s activities in Jaljuliya in Ha’aretz195 and was interested to learn more about this. After having consulted the Parent Council in Jaljuliya, Amichai invited the representative to join their next meeting. The two agreed where to meet with their respective cars on the way to the village. At the agreed-upon time Amichai received a phone call from what he described as a nervous-sounding representative who asked:

I am a little concerned...this Jaljuliya – is it safe to go there? Is it on our side of the Green Line?

The story aroused laughter, shaking of heads and exclamations of disbelief from the participants at the Board meeting. First of all, the fact that the representative did not know that Jaljuliya is on the Israeli side of the Green Line, and as such under his department’s jurisdiction, was taken as a proof of HILA clients’ peripheral status. Secondly, that he was afraid to go there because he is Jewish and they are Arabs, citizens whose education he decides upon, signified a lot about who runs this country and for whom it is run.

In a summing-up plenary session at the weekend seminar at the Oasis of Peace, parents discussed the politicisation of education and of their own activism. The Jewish female Head of the Parent Council in Sderot said:

We are many parents here and more out there – we have power, it is time we use it and go to court.

A member of a Palestinian Parent Council concurred:

Politics is entering education and therefore we must do politics – we are becoming politicians.

195 In the article “Parents without rest, involved parents in the periphery, for example Sderot and Jaljuliya” cited above.
The depictions of Mizrahi people and their conducts by and through HILA is in stark contrast to the views presented by HaKeshet that Mizrahim are too right-wing to include Palestinians citizens in their social and political struggles. On the contrary, HILA offers an example of interaction and inclusion in a common struggle for rights as citizens.

The Risks of Controversy

HILA was considered controversial when it was established in the late 1980s and, as evidenced in the conversation between the Head of Parent Council in Sderot and the representative from the Ministry of Education referenced in the Introduction, its activism is also today seen as contentious. Its founder Shlomo Swirski has paid a heavy price for his activism for equal rights among Israeli citizens. As Ram (2002:114-115) put it in his personal comment in an article presented to mark twenty years since the publication of Swirski’s Lo Nechshakim Ela Menuschaalim (the Hebrew and original version of The Oriental Majority)

I have not met many academics with the integrity of Shlomo Swirski, and Swirski is not an academic indeed. Ever since he was discharged from Haifa University some two decades ago, in one of the more blatant acts of political cleansing in Israeli universities, he is involved in struggles for social justice in Israel, starting with the establishment of Kedma and HILA educational committees and up to the establishment, together with his wife Barbara, of the Adva Centre for the study of inequality in Israel.

Below Swirski (interview) tells his story, which further illustrates how marginalised and controversial the topic of Jewish inequality was when he established HILA:

When I wrote The Oriental Majority, I interviewed 120 or more people and groups of people. Most would not agree to talk to me if I did not guarantee anonymity. It was not taboo, but people were afraid to speak their mind because the entire ethos of this country was based on that this was a passing phenomenon and we should all become one people.

Then I wanted to publish the book. I had already been thrown out of Haifa University because of things I had written. I wrote the book on a grant from the Israeli Ford Foundation and when I went to all the major Israeli publishers, no-one wanted to publish it. This was no regular academic book, it was very political and emotional and there was no question in my mind that it had to be published. I wanted to distribute it and I started with the biggest distributor and he said “No way in my life we will distribute this book!” I was taken aback – I thought distributors were about money? Then I saw the biography of Abu Iyad, one of the founders of the
PLO; and I asked him “What about his book?” “This book is ok and we can beat them, but your book is going to split our society!”

This stressed the question of marginalisation. I went back to the Ford Foundation after this episode as I still wanted to do research after being thrown out of the University. I asked them if they would support me. The secretary said “Shlomo forget it, there is a decision that you will never be supported again.” So we published it with our own money. The book created a lot of waves. It was and still is a contentious issue, but now, much less. The entire climate in the country is changing with people being more open to the entire idea of multiculturalism. People are more open to variety and it is not as threatening as this distributor thought it was to him.

Swirski (interview) followed-up with this anecdote about the controversial nature of HILA:

I had a meeting with the Ministry of Education and people kept opening the door and peeking into the room and one lady even came up to me and said very frankly ‘I just wanted to meet you.’ I asked why and she said ‘Because you are public enemy number one of the Ministry of Education!’ So this is HILA – HILA was very powerful at that point.

HILA Fieldworker Amichai (interview) said that the state and the educational institutions know of and about HILA and that the organisation always challenges them:

“HILA is always ahead of them” he put it. To emphasise, he quoted Batya Katar’s answer to the ministerial representative:

We are all parents and all Israeli citizens and as such all are entitled to the same rights.  

Amichai also pointed to other contentious issues related to HILA’s activism. He explained that as much as HILA is a professional organisation, they also become close friends with groups and individuals (parents). Creating these ties also means getting involved in issues other than education, Amichai explained. Examples include the absence of buses going to certain neighbourhoods, or refuse not being picked up from Arab villages.

When asked if he believes there is a “master plan” behind the injustice in the Israeli state and society, Amichai said he does not believe there is any conspiracy. According to him, the oppressive system is too substantial for this to be the case; it has been so

196 See the Introduction.
successful for so many years and no programme of planned suppression could sustain itself for that long. However, he asserted, it is true that there is no willingness or motivation to change the system. Occasionally there are small movements, for example Yitzhak Rabin changed the budgets a little when he was Prime Minister for the second time, and Yossi Sarid opened doors when he was Minister of Education. However, in Amichai’s view the leftwing gives some, the rightwing talks and does not deliver, and overall there is no change. The answer is always that there is no money. What is lacking is pressure and willingness from above, according to Amichai (interview):

We need an Intifada of parents; mothers and fathers who go out to protest and say “I want to study what I want and where I want!”

Today however, as mentioned above, HILA is a small organisation fighting for its survival, largely due to monetary problems, but also because of lack of (younger) activists and less focus on the type of activism HILA conducts. Because, as pointed out above, HILA falls between two stools in competition for funding: it is not “Israeli” enough and not “Palestinian” enough. Swirski (interview) recalled that one funding organisation asked HILA to add “Mizrahi” to its name and that HILA refused because; “This is not how we defined ourselves. This is something that changed with HaKeshet.”
Chapter 10:
Addressing the Problem – Confronting Inequality Across Boundaries

The main research question, as established in the Introduction, concerns HaKeshet and thus this chapter on HILA is naturally shorter than Chapter Six, in which the reasons for HaKeshet’s inability to include the other Others was examined. In this chapter, the emphasis is on how HILA facilitates the inclusion of Palestinian citizens in its organisation, and moreover, how this facilitation engenders interactions across national boundaries. In addition to the inclusion of Palestinian citizens, the main difference between HILA and HaKeshet is that the discrepancy between discourse and practice observed in the latter is not present in HILA. As with Chapter Six, the following analysis uses theories about identity construction and post-modernism and draws on the five paths introduced in Chapter Two.

Whereas HaKeshet’s acquired awareness concerning the construction of the Mizrahi categorisation of identification and of its marginalising consequences did not result in a movement with an agenda and a vision, HILA does not identify its activities or goals as Mizrahim. Thus, when reacting to the imposed category, HaKeshet ended up in-between the two options for reaction at their disposal. They were neither (a) able to create an alternative category of identification that could be used to empower Mizrahim, and imbue them with self-pride or feelings of belonging; nor did they (b) opt out of categorisations fully, to argue for rights as citizens. HILA, on the other hand, chooses the latter in correspondence with its ideology.

The ideological base of HILA, as mainly articulated by Swirski, perceives Israeli society as divided into groups of “haves” and “have-nots”, a division that corresponds with the state’s imposed “ethnic” and “national” categories. Thus, the ideology behind HILA takes as its point of departure the whole of Israeli society, and its relations to the state and its institutions. “Mizrahim”, in what HILA considers the Israeli societal hierarchy, are defined as the collective Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East, who share the common experience of belonging to a certain group in the
sociological landscape of Israeli society. In the same way, Palestinians are indigenous Arabs and the national minority of Israel. According to HILA, both groups are located in the lower levels of the hierarchy, and are subjected to similar mistreatment and discrimination by state institutions. This positioning is then directly related to the imposed category of identification, in the case of MENA Jews as primitive “communities from the East” and Palestinians as “enemy Arabs.” As discussed in Chapter Eight, in HILA’s Hebrew name the geographical locations of its clients is the key to who they are. In other words, instead of identifying its activism with one or more categories or groups of Israelis, in its name HILA displays knowledge of which groups are marginalised in Israeli society. Moreover, HILA’s name acknowledges that in Israel who you are overlaps with where you live and how you are treated.

Thus, HILA avoids the pitfalls of the politics of recognition that in the case of HaKeshet resulted in no recognition for Palestinian rights and claims. By concentrating on citizenship and rights, HILA’s activism corresponds with Nancy Fraser’s (2000) suggestion of an alternative approach to identity politics, namely treating recognition as a question of social status. From this perspective, what requires recognition is not group-specific identity, but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction in the society. Furthermore, HILA uses its knowledge and awareness of the different groups it works with in a manner that supports it ideology.

Thus, significantly, the non-identification of HILA as a movement is not to be interpreted as indicating that HILA employees are unaware of, or ignore, the specific implications of the various categories of identification. Rather, it is the opposite: HILA employees know from experience and from interactions what it means to be Palestinian and MENA Jews in Israel, and this knowledge exceeds the field of education. It seems to be precisely due to this knowledge, manifest in their interactions with parents from different groups, that parent activists feel that they can trust HILA. Thus, HILA is practising what Patchen Markell (2003:7) calls “a politics of acknowledgement” based on appreciation of individual and groups’ basic situations and circumstances. Markell suggests that “politics of acknowledgement” can lead the way out of the dilemma of the perpetuation of categorisations and thus exclusion.
What HILA has succeeded in doing is not only to offer services to both Mizrahi and Palestinian citizens on the basis of understanding of their positions and situations in Israeli state and society, but also to facilitate interactions and joint actions by individuals and groups across the Jewish-Palestinian boundaries. HILA began by creating a physical space, a social meeting place, where these groups could meet despite the segregated reality of Israeli society. In these meetings Mizrahi and Palestinian parents learn about each other’s communities: knowledge they most probably would not obtain first hand anywhere else. They learn about similarities and differences in both problems and solutions and, more importantly, across group boundaries. In accordance with Zygmunt Bauman (1992:xxi), who holds that the only way to prevent the reproduction of categorisations and the ensuing hostility and competition, is to produce solidarity that recognises the relevance and validity of the difference of the Other, HILA facilitates acknowledgement and respect for the legitimacy of the Other’s interests and rights.

As shown in Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine, through HILA, parents from within different categories of Israeli citizens are able to cooperate to transform their circumstances. This could indeed be due to solidarity with each other, based on knowledge about each other. They not only empathise with each other, but make the choice to cooperate. Additionally, HILA’s parent activists reveal that they know where they are on the sociological map of Israel, despite not having conducted the type of critical analyses undertaken by HaKeshet members. Using Bauman’s (1992) terminology, the solidarity through knowledge created by HILA can be said to be what he describes as actions and affiliations based on what is here termed “circumstantial solidarity”.

Unlike most HaKeshet members, the disadvantaged parents involved in HILA activism deal daily with the physical threat of the conflict, especially those living in Qassam-targetted Sderot, and in economically deprived Palestinian towns and villages under the constant control of Israeli security forces, such as Jaljuliya. This is significant in more than one way. In spite of experiencing the grim reality that is the periphery of Israeli society, these parents are able to extend their feelings of solidarity directly to citizens of other categorisations, who reciprocate. According to my interviewees in Arara, HILA’s staff were the only Jewish citizens to enter the town after the October 2000
demonstrations. This proved to the parents in Arara that HILA stands by its words; its
employees are not afraid of its national minority and they know that crossing the
boundary is possible.

In addition to learning about each other’s situations and from the boundary-crossing of
HILA employees, the various groups of parents also learn from each other about how to
approach and solve various problems, and share experiences with similar problems. In
this way, HILA’s parent activists discover that their problems are not unique or personal,
but that the source of their marginalisation is the system, and their position in the system.
Finally, joint action is not only confined to the realms of HILA’s organised activities, but
has been made public, by, for example, letters to the Ministry of Education and in
newspaper articles. Consequently, the joint activism is formalised and can be interpreted
as political beyond the realm of local education.

Writing about African-Americans, Shelby (2005:235) argues that in order to achieve
black solidarity it is not necessary to discover some essential ground, but to release all
identities from racial stigma. Thus, blacks should identify with each other based on
common experiences of racial oppression and their commitment to collective resistance
(ibid:236). In other words, Shelby suggests that one can choose to identify with one’s
ethno-cultural heritage, but one does not need to share some distinct black identity in
order to unite against racism. Correspondingly, in this study it has become clear that
HILA chooses identification with marginalisation and discrimination, but not through
identity, and fights against the general reproduction of inequality in Israel.

In Chapter Six it was argued that the reason for HaKeshet’s lack of an agenda was that
it never decided upon an historical point of departure. HILA’s historical point of
departure is defined: the establishment of the state of Israel. At this point, the indigenous
population became an excluded national minority and Jews who emigrated from Arab
and Muslim countries became “Mizrahim”, and were included in the nation as internal
Others. Due to this historical point of departure and its civilian status perspective, HILA
is able to act upon its understanding of the term Mizrahi(m). The organisation does not
have a cultural or past-oriented definition of the term, but describes the circumstances of
MENA Jews in Israeli society as people categorised as such. This perspective enables the inclusion of Palestinians.

An arguable limitation to the inclusion of Palestinians in HILA is that on the organisational level HILA has been a predominantly Jewish organisation, in other words, most employees and volunteers have been Jewish. As described in Chapter Eight by HILA’s founder Shlomo Swirski, the organisation was established to address the vacuum regarding activism focused on MENA Jews, and it subsequently attracted many MENA activists. However, when HILA later also aimed its activism at Palestinian citizens, it quickly acquired Palestinian parents who became active in the organisation. Thus, in terms of parent activists, including those who have become members of the Board, it is on all levels a Palestinian-Jewish organisation. When this fieldwork was conducted, representation on the Board was approximately sixty percent Jewish and forty percent Palestinian. But with regards to HILA’s employees and volunteers, most have been and are Jews. This is explained by the historical evolution of the organisation, and the fact that HILA never had many employees (it currently only has one full-time employee and two part-time employees). Moreover, HILA’s Director (interview) pointed out that even though most of its clients are relatively poor, the Palestinian clients are the most poverty-stricken and cannot afford the time to volunteer.

**HILA’s Vision of Israeli Citizenship**

Because HILA is not characterised by any category of identification, it seems easier for parents of different backgrounds to choose to get involved in the organisation’s activities. That is, due to the general and “Israeli” presentation of the organisation, joining its activities can be less controversial than joining an organisation that is identified ethnically or nationally. For parents who fear alienation from their own community due to their activism, as well as reactions from other groups, and society at large, the fact that HILA in its name and presentation, emphasises places where citizens live, rather than group-identifications, makes it more attractive to join. HILA’s signalling of place and concentration on the facts of discriminatory treatment make parents less
vulnerable to accusations of particularistic or hidden agendas. This is particularly important for Palestinian citizens.

Since HILA deals solely with the field of education, it can be argued that this makes it easier for the organisation than for HaKeshet to act on its ideology. But there are two issues to be considered regarding HILA’s educational focus.

First of all, its ideology goes beyond the realm of education. Education is for HILA a tool for change. The change they are aiming for is equality for all citizens, regardless of category of identification, because, in Shlomo Swirski’s analysis, categories of identification reproduce the hierarchical system. As such, HILA focuses on education in order to stop the reproduction of the persistent socioeconomic hierarchy.

Secondly, through its activism in the realm of education, HILA teaches awareness of citizens’ categorisations, and the connection between this and their current status in society. As observed in the chapters about HILA, its fieldworker and its written materials explain why different groups are offered different education, and explain the connection between the different education and future prospects. Thus, HILA enables grass-roots awareness of the political and social system of Israel, through the realm of education, which ultimately connects to other realms of politics, for example municipal funding, which is especially important for the educational situation of the Palestinians.

However, if HILA was to expand it mandate beyond equality for citizens in education, and for example go into another field of politics, such as political representation, it is doubtful that it would be able to retain all its parent activists, especially the Jewish ones. This is the shortcoming of the approach of HILA. Arguably, the fact that HILA never mandated itself to go beyond education, shows an insight and foresight lacking in HaKeshet. In Chapter Eight, when dealing with HILA’s practising of Mizrahiut, Chetrit said that if HILA was to be multiplied and have an organisation in all corners of Israel, there might be a revolution. In other words, if HILA was to expand into other realms or if Amichai’s plea for an “Intifada of parents” was to materialise, it might challenge the structure of this state.

The ideology HILA’s agenda and goals are based on, the vision of Israeli society inherent in its egalitarian and democratic values, is that Israel should be a state for all its
citizens, regardless of categorisation based on religious, national or other boundaries. In such a state, whether or not it would incorporate today’s occupied Palestinian territory, Arab culture and language would automatically play a larger and more significant part in society than it does in Israel now. In such a scenario, the Arab roots and feelings of belonging of MENA Jews would be less stigmatised, and would become positive characteristics that could serve as bridges of communication, crossing the boundaries between Jews and Arabs. In such circumstances MENA Jews would most likely be more encouraged and free to learn Arabic, and develop a relationship with the culture of their parents and grandparents, in addition to the Western culture of today’s Israel. The Sderot woman who listened to the Egyptian singer Um Koulthoum when she grew up, but was not familiar with Van Gogh, would not be ashamed of this fact.

Returning to the facts, despite his activism and observations of results, HILA’s fieldworker did not express optimism regarding the future of the region. Taking into consideration the larger context – the civil war in Iraq, the threats between Israel and Iran, the continued occupation of Palestinian land and people and their resistance to it, and the killing of Palestinian citizens October 2000 – Amichai’s doubts that (at this point in time) the circumstantial solidarity among parents in HILA can be transformed into a wider “politics of acknowledgement” are not so surprising.

To summarise, HILA has been able to include Palestinian citizens because of its approach of focusing on citizens, with acknowledgement of their circumstances as Palestinians (or MENA Jews) in the Jewish state. Thus, the organisation has been able to imbue solidarity across Israel’s imposed national boundaries between MENA Jews and Palestinian citizens.
Alternative Paths – another Assessment

When the ideology and activism of HILA is compared to the first of the five courses or paths for MENA Jews laid out in Chapter Two, HILA can be seen as very different from Shas. First of all, HILA does not consider Israel’s ethnocratic character as legitimate or just. Unlike the Sephardi party-movement Shas, which has its attention only on the Jewish population of Israel, HILA includes all citizens in its activism and organisation. However, it employs a similar method to the one applied by Shas, in that both work at the grassroots level, assisting people on issues pertaining to and part of their everyday lives. Another similarity can be seen when comparing Shas’ relationship with its Jewish public, from whom Shas does not require any level of religious observance in order to use its resources, to HILA’s relationship with its parent activists, from whom HILA does not require adherence to any political or other position.

In terms of path two, as described in Chapter two, many of HILA’s parent activists are default Zionist/Israeli, by the fact that they act within this frame, albeit in order to change it. Thus, one could argue that HILA is itself a Zionist/Israeli, but then one could also argue that it is anti-Zionist and pro-Zionist, depending on which parent activists one has in mind.

Neither HILA, nor its parent activists are, through their activism, taking path three: leaving Israel’s ethnocracy. This would be the “easy” choice, but HILA and its activists, like the members of HaKeshet, remained in the state to work for equality. This struggle for equality is for all citizens, thus coinciding with the first part of path four. HILA does not directly relate its activism to the Palestinian struggle for freedom from occupation. However, if its ideology was to be followed in all areas of the state and society, it would (eventually) bring about such freedom. More concretely, HILA’s involvement and connection with the AIC testifies to its anti-occupation stance.

Finally, in terms of path five, the cultural path, HILA does not use culture in order to emphasise commonality among its clients or to indicate “We are all Arabs”. Rather, HILA shows knowledge and appreciation of the diversity of cultures among its clients.
and, as has been made evident, uses this in order to relate individuals and groups to their position and status in the state system.
PART IV

Chapter 11 Conclusion: In Lack of an Imagined Community

The presentation and discussion of HaKeshet and its Land Struggle case indicates a clear tension between the social movement’s aims and its achievements. Despite HaKeshet’s declarations of support for universal values and for the “radical democratisation of all aspects of life and independence for all citizens, residents, workers and women; all oppressed groups” identified in its Principles, two major shortcomings from HaKeshet’s actions are discernible. First, HaKeshet was unable to include its “other Others” – the Palestinian citizens of Israel, in its campaign for a “just” re-distribution of land. Second, HaKeshet’s action ultimately reinforced the ethnocratic structure of the state of Israel. Transparently, this is contrary to the universal values professed by the movement.

In sharp contrast to HaKeshet’s failure to include Palestinian citizens, HILA’s work, discussed in Part III, demonstrates that it is not only possible to include Palestinian citizens in social actions, but that it is possible to undertake joint activism across national and ethnic boundaries among working class citizens. Thus, HaKeshet’s inability to include Palestinian citizens in its work is only partially explained by the arguments of Swirski (1989), Yiftachel (1999), Shafir and Peled (2002) that state-imposed restrictions prevent manifestations of cross-boundary solidarity. According to the line of argument advanced by these scholars and presented in Chapter Two, the nature of the marginalisation of MENA Jews determines the nature of their reaction to it and the development of their collective identity. This argument can be countered by returning to the main research question posed in the Introduction to the present study: If HILA and its “non-intellectual” parent activists are able to cross the imposed national, ethnic and physical boundaries, then why should not HaKeshet’s intellectual members be able to do the same? The question is more salient still when it is considered that HaKeshet’s intellectual members generally hold privileged positions in society, are aware of why
they have been categorised as “Mizrahim”, and express sympathy with the situation of Palestinian citizens of Israel. Indeed, many of HaKeshet’s members voluntarily discuss their predicament as MENA Jews by relating it to the Palestinian predicament. As Chapter Six discusses, the roots of HaKeshet’s inadequacies can be found in the movement itself.

The present study acknowledges the societal difficulties and obstacles that HaKeshet members, as MENA Jews, encountered and surmounted on their paths to positions of privilege. It also recognises the challenges HaKeshet members faced on their individual journeys to awareness of their predicament as MENA Jews. Thus, the interpretation offered here values the price that HaKeshet members have paid along the way.

As described in Chapters Three, Four and Five, MENA Jews in Israel were not, in most cases, part of the original Zionist project and joined it only after the establishment of the state of Israel, whereupon they were subsequently marginalised as internal Others. Consequently, HaKeshet’s members not only had to struggle against the state’s educational system and societal prejudice to attain the privileged positions they hold today; they also experienced individual difficult processes of awakening (by “coming out” as Mizrahi). The process of “coming out” has itself prompted responses towards these members of HaKeshet from others in their professional circles and from the media.197

Chapters Three and Four illustrated that many of HaKeshet’s members have suffered the loss of their identity and past, and in the process of trying to assimilate into Israeli society, have distanced themselves from their families and their cultural heritage. Having come to realise this, HaKeshet’s intellectual members used critical theory and universal values to further articulate and react to their predicament. Nevertheless, in the Land Struggle case, they failed to consider, or acknowledge that they were neglecting the heritage, familial relations or identity of their “other Others”.

Based on this matrix of personal, professional and social struggles, Chapter Six argued that, in its effort to achieve equality and democracy, HaKeshet has ultimately perpetuated

197 These responses are best illustrated by Yehouda Shenhav’s colleagues at Tel Aviv University. According to him, following the publication of “The Bond of Silence” several of his colleagues approached him to insist that they had never discriminated against him. See sub-chapter The Political Context of HaKeshet in Chapter Three.
the ethnic categorisation of the state by defining its rainbow as “Mizrahi”. A different approach would have been to create and advance an alternative way of being Israeli and refuse to engage in the politics of recognition. As Markell (2003) has argued, by engaging in the politics of recognition HaKeshet reconfirmed the rules of Israeli politics as established by the state. Thus, HaKeshet’s members reacted to their marginalisation as MENA Jews by reasoning that justice is predicated on recognition. However, in the ethnocratic reality of Israel, this is not the case. Achieving justice for all in an ethnocratic state requires challenging the roots of social and political injustice, as Markell suggests. Thus, as Matta (2003) has concluded, the Jewish politics of identity cannot lead to the inclusion of Palestinian citizens and ends up creating new exclusionary and particularistic categories.

Naturally, the reinforcement of ethnocracy was not the intention of HaKeshet’s members, who do genuinely support universal values. Rather, as discussed, it was the outcome of the discrepancy between what Migdal (2004) describes as the affective and instrumental feelings of belonging. In this case, HaKeshet’s members felt excluded from Zionism, but notwithstanding the qualifications detailed above, the group was still included by the state in the nation. Caught in this dilemma, as a collective, HaKeshet’s members were unable to decide how to respond to the category of identity imposed on them. In Chapter Two, two types of response to imposed identity was suggested: (a) responding with an alternative identity, or (b) to opt out of categorisations altogether and argue for rights as citizens. As illustrated by the five alternative paths introduced in the same chapter, actual responses do not necessarily correspond with these ideal types.

Chapter Four outlined how inter-connections between the various meanings of Mizrahim and Mizrahiut cut across individual and group relations, state and minority relations, competing narratives and categories of identification. Somewhere in the web of all these issues the contemporary Mizrahi intellectuals of HaKeshet got lost. Significantly, HaKeshet’s members lost focus in their process of boundaring. Having deconstructed the imposed category of identification, HaKeshet’s members have yet to develop an alternative category, or, indeed, an alternative approach to categorisation.
As described in the Introduction, the interpretation offered in the present study is based on the Barthian approach to ethnic studies and focuses on how the process of “ethnogenesis” emerges and changes over time in a specific geographical context (Eriken, 2002). Caught in between the need and desire to address the issues of an emerging process of identification and the simultaneous attempt to construct a socio-political consciousness based on universal values, HaKeshet’s members ended up reproducing the form of categorisation, as Fraser and Foucault warned against. Thus, again, the movement ultimately reinforced the ethnocratic structure of the Jewish state.

By contrast, HILA challenges the ethnocratic structure of Israel by focussing on citizens and rights, specifically within the field of education. It does so while maintaining an acute awareness of different groups of citizens’ distinctive situations, needs and abilities to react. As was argued in Chapter Ten, the organisation is able to do this because it has a clear ideology that informs its agenda and goals and is based on its vision of Israeli society. Thus, there is no discrepancy between the discourse and practice in this organisation. Moreover, the methodology of the organisation and its refusal to make an explicit appeal on the basis of any type of categorical solidarity beyond citizenship allowed HILA to expand its work from its initial concentration on MENA Jews to include Palestinian citizens. In addition, because HILA undertakes grass-roots activism, it has accumulated vast knowledge of all the groups it works with and is able to genuinely appreciate the differences between distinctive groups of Israeli citizens. Consequently, HILA takes care not to use ambiguous ethnic or national discourses that might exclude Palestinian or other groups of citizens.

The principal differences between HILA and the five paths chosen by other MENA Jews presented in Chapter Two, on the one hand, and HaKeshet on the other, is that in all of the former it is clear that a choice was made based on a vision of Israeli society. This provided HILA and the other groups adhering to the five alternative paths with an agenda that, significantly, was based on an agreed-upon point of departure. For Shas, the agenda was to create a new way to be Sephardi and Zionist. For some HILA parent activists and some Palestinian citizens, the agenda was formed following a conscious decision to act within the Zionist framework and on the basis of shared Israeli citizenship. For those like
Ella Shohat, a conscious decision was made to leave Israel and its categorisations all together, to criticise Israel from abroad in academic writing, and to take part in organised activism. Others, such as Mordechai Vanunu and Tali Fahima, decided to remain and fight for equality for all in Israel and for an end to the state’s occupation of Palestinian land and people. Yet others decided to use their own non-European cultural past to create a base for the possible integration of Israel into the region, as illustrated by Levantinism. What all of these approaches have in common is that they are based on conscious choices made with a clear vision of a desired future.

This prompts a return to Ram’s (2002) question: Does the post-modern identity paradigm of “Mizrahiut” have a future or does it only lead to past-leaning nostalgia? In the Land Struggle case, HaKeshet ended up adapting its campaign to fit within the constraints of the Zionist framework. This conflicts with HaKeshet’s discourse in which the movement insists on calling for changes in Israeli society. Thus, the social movement failed to be universally inclusive or sufficiently open to pluralistic democratic politics in its struggle over what is perhaps the most important resource in Israel/Palestine. This failure is all the more dramatic when it is considered that territory is the very cornerstone of the ongoing conflict between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians (whether citizens of Israel or not).

Ultimately, HaKeshet failed to burst the Jewish “bubble” described by Kimmerling, but acted inside it. Consequently, it has proved unable to advance beyond its “internal” perspective on the Israeli state and society. This internal perspective manifested itself in two ways: in the inability to include a Palestinian perspective in the Land Struggle case, and in the exclusion of MENA Jews from Sderot (and other peripheral and “non-intellectual” places). By dismissing MENA Jews as right-wingers who are uninterested or unwilling to co-operate with Palestinians, HaKeshet not only accepted existing stereotypes, but also reinforced them. As is clear from the HILA case study, these stereotypes are misconceived.

Moreover, HaKeshet acted in the “bubble” because it disregarded the Arab-Israeli conflict. Ironically, in their explanations of how and why HaKeshet was established in the hopeful “Oslo-days”, HaKeshet’s members complained that the left-wing in Israel
had forgotten and ignored the narrative and concerns of MENA Jews. Yet, having organised their own counter-movement, HaKeshet’s members subsequently proved themselves unable to adopt a position on the “Palestinian question”; a term that is itself ambiguous.

As has became evident through their statements and actions, described in Chapters Three, Four and Five, HaKeshet’s members are critical to both the ideology and practices of Zionism which they often described as Eurocentric and racist. This was exemplified by Moshe Karif’s comment that “[...] it is forbidden for us to be Western in the Middle East”, and Ofir Abu’s statement that “[...] real multiculturalism is not to try to absorb the Other”. Moreover, HaKeshet’s members have openly criticised Israel’s contemporary Ashkenazi-dominated left-wing for holding Eurocentric and racist attitudes. This criticism was well articulated in Yehouda Shenhav’s article, “The Bond of Silence”. Shenhav argues that in addition to the focus on Palestinians, a real left-wing must actively link the conflict with the Palestinians to the predicament faced by MENA Jews. Furthermore, several HaKeshet members, such as Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Smadar Lavie, Reuven Aberjil, Mati Shemoelof and Yossi Yonah, are outspoken critics of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian land and people and are active in other organisations that advocate and campaign for Palestinian rights. These views and examples of engagement would seem to point towards a willingness to include a Palestinian perspective in a social movement that was established to direct Israeli society towards “democracy, multiculturalism and solidarity” (Principles).

It is not the intention here to disregard the sense of insecurity behind statements by some of HaKeshet’s members that, as MENA Jews, they cannot risk publicly adopting an anti-Zionist position or campaigning from such a stance. However, the fear of real and perceived threats that may result from the public adoption of anti-Zionist positions does not alone explain HaKeshet’s failure to embrace this approach. This is plain because some members of HaKeshet are outspoken critics of Zionism or self-described anti-Zionists, and also because the aims of HaKeshet are expressly critical of the state and its practices. Notwithstanding its reluctance to embrace anti-Zionism as a movement, HaKeshet has still been accused of being anti-Zionist and HILA is still considered to be
an enemy of Israeli state institutions. This was explicitly demonstrated in the accusations of anti-Zionism that the kibbutz movement directed at *HaKeshet* as well as in the accusations by Meyrav Wurmser (2005) from the Centre for Middle East Policy at the Hudson Institute, and from politicians and journalists responding to *HaKeshet* members’ criticism of the Labor Chair Amir Peretz. *HILA*’s “status” as “enemy number one” of the Ministry of Education, discussed in Chapter Nine, and the refusal of publishing houses to publish Swirski’s book, *The Oriental Majority*, in its Hebrew original, provide further evidence of *HILA*’s perception by the Israeli establishment. Perhaps more pertinently for the academics in *HaKeshet*, Swirski lost his job at Haifa University due to his political stance. Finally, the Fahima case demonstrates that the state’s punishment for crossing borders or challenging Israel’s ethnic boundaries includes imprisonment.

Inherent in the accusations of anti-Zionism and in the reactions of the representative of the Ministry of Education to the Head of the Parent Council in Sderot, is the view that *HaKeshet* and *HILA* breach the boundaries of acceptable behaviour of Israeli Jews. The nature of the reactions suggests that challenges to the Zionist historical narrative and Zionist institutions are considered as existential threats to Israel.

As has been observable throughout this dissertation, *HILA* continues to cross the imposed national, ethnic, physical and imagined boundaries on the grass-roots level: in particular, by visiting and working in Palestinian villages. It does so in the name of parental solidarity and the right of citizens to education. By contrast, *HaKeshet* did not cross the boundaries to reach its members’ Palestinian Others in the Land Struggle case, and thus cannot know what reactions such boundary-crossing could or would mean for its intellectual members.

Ultimately, it appears that *HILA*’s imagined community, meaning those for whom *HILA* acts and with whom it interacts, consists of all parents in Israel. By contrast, *HaKeshet*’s imagined community is comprised primarily of its members and then encompasses potential members from the same social circles or those who hold similar ideas and demonstrate the same need for an intellectual home. Crucially, *HaKeshet* has thus far demonstrated an inability to extend beyond its Zionist framework. As the present
study has hopefully demonstrated, the results of such limited imagination may defeat the very intentions of those who adhere to it.
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Sergio Yahni, AIC employee, interviewed in New York, 07.06.2005

Michel (Mikado) Warschawski, interviewed in the AIC office in Jerusalem, 20.06.2005
Appendix I: Theme Guide for Interviews of HaKeshet

1. Affiliation, role, background, history, biography in relations to HaKeshet
2. Describe HaKeshet
3. What/who are Mizrahim? What does it mean to be Mizrahi?
4. What is Mizrahiut?
5. The main challenges of HaKeshet, inside and outside the movement
6. Natural partner(s) for HaKeshet and why?
7. Will there come a time/point when Mizrahi focus is unnecessary?
8. The Land Struggle
9. What are your views on the conflict with the Palestinians?
10. How has HaKeshet been influenced by the second Intifada?