



PROJECT MUSE®

Foodways and The Ethnicization of Yemeni Identity in Israel

Ari Ariel

Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East and North African Migration Studies, Volume 6, Number 2, 2019, (Article)

Published by Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/778306/summary>

Ari Ariel

FOODWAYS AND THE ETHNICIZATION OF YEMENI IDENTITY IN ISRAEL

Abstract

The transformation of Yemeni food practices in Israel illustrates two contradictory processes. Yemeni Jewish immigrants used food in the process of becoming Israeli, but also to reimagine and preserve Yemeni-ness. To do both, they had to negotiate western stereotypes and pressure to assimilate into “modern” Israeli culture, while creating a single, homogenous Yemeni ethnic identity. Additionally, Yemeni food narratives evince a critique of Israeli absorption policies, and challenge aspects of Zionist ideology, while at the same time calling for inclusion in Israeli society and declaring their Zionism.



INTRODUCTION

This article argues that Yemeni Jewish immigrants used foodways as part of a strategy of integration into Israeli society.¹ In the process their food practices were radically altered, as they adopted new foods and adapted themselves to modern Israeli manners, as defined by the hegemonic Ashkenazi population. At times, engagement with European Jews required negotiating their assumptions about the biblical nature of the Yemenis. While this biblical-ness marked the Yemeni Jews as primordial, even primitive, it could also be used to claim full inclusion in Israeli-ness, via an “authentic” link to the period of ancient Israel, the national golden age of Israeli historiography. Yemeni Jews, therefore, used traditional religious practice to make such claims. Nevertheless, they came under immense pressure to assimilate modern culture, including food practices. This necessitated the homogenizing of Yemeni cuisine(s), and changes in ingredients and cooking methods.

After a brief overview of Yemeni Jewish immigration to Palestine and Israel from the late nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth centuries, this paper will focus on the 1950s, the period following the establishment of the State of Israel and the largest wave

of Yemeni Jewish migration. It will discuss then-current ideas about the Yemeni connection to the biblical, and particularly the idea that Yemeni Jews had preserved biblical foodways. The emphasis on Yemeni “preservation,” in both Ashkenazi and Yemeni accounts, obscures the fact that the 1950s were a period of radical transformation. Yemeni immigrants in Israel reimagined their ethnic identities and sought ways to integrate into Israeli society. This paper concludes with an analysis of food narratives in the memoirs of Yemeni women immigrants in Israel. These accounts are particularly illustrative of changes in foodways as a constituent element in the “modernization” of immigrants from Yemen, and the rest of the Middle East and North Africa. The memoirs indicate difficulty accepting new comestibles, but also a desire to become “modern” Israelis through the adoption of new foods and customs. This desire, however, should not be understood as a rejection of Yemeni identity. Yemeni Jews hoped to maintain their Yemeni-ness while becoming Israeli. They rejected complete assimilation, but were aware of the gaze of the dominant European Jewish population in Israel and sought an accommodation with it.

YEMENI JEWISH MIGRATION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Communal-scale migration from Yemen to Palestine began in the late nineteenth century. Most of the existing literature attributes this migration to either Yemeni Messianism (that is, the belief that the Messiah was to arrive imminently and therefore all Jews should be in the Land of Israel) or to Muslim oppression of Jews. Neither of these ideas can be substantiated by evidence. In truth, events external to Yemen transformed the Red Sea region in ways that altered Yemen’s economic position. The British conquered Aden in 1839 and made it one of the most important port cities en route to British India; the Suez Canal opened in 1869; and the Ottomans conquered parts of the Yemeni highlands, including the capital city Sanaa, in 1872. Together these events provoked migration for two reasons. First, Yemen’s incorporation into the world economic system depressed its economy. Imported items began entering the country in great numbers, which negatively impacted the Jewish community in particular because many of its members were small merchants or worked in traditional handicrafts. Second, increased movement in and out of the Red Sea region facilitated connections between Yemeni Jews and European and Ottoman Jews, which helped reduce the risk of migration and provided news about events in Palestine. This laid the groundwork so that when the rumors about wealthy Jews giving away land in Palestine reached

Yemen, and the Ottoman government in Sanaa announced that it was allowing Jews to migrate to the "Land of Israel," a portion of the community was ready to do so. The first group of migrants left Yemen in 1881 and a slow but steady migration stream continued until the 1950s when the vast majority of the community had relocated permanently.²

Although this migration flow began as an organic reaction to events in Yemen, over the first half of the twentieth century the Zionist movement became increasingly involved. In 1911, Shmuel Yavnieli was sent to Yemen to encourage migration, particularly to Zionist agricultural settlements in Palestine. Notably, this was the first time the Zionist movement organized any group migration to Palestine, from either the Middle East *or* Europe.³ From this point on, Yemeni Jewish migration would be linked to the World Zionist Organization. Another watershed moment came in 1929, when the Jewish Agency established an immigration office in Aden. This organizational assistance, coupled with poor economic conditions in Yemen and the increased strength of the Jewish economy in Palestine, meant that more Jews would immigrate and that soon the center of Yemeni Jewish life would shift from Yemen to the Yishuv. After the British withdrawal from Palestine, the new state of Israel could take in immigrants without regard for quotas or travel permits. Between December 1948 and September 1950, Israel organized the airlift of 48,818 Yemeni Jews, most of the remaining Jewish population. According to the *Colonial Office Report for the Years 1949 & 1950*: "The Yemeni Jews have thus ceased to be an important element of the population of Southern Arabia."⁴

This last wave of Yemeni Jewish migration took place in the context of an even larger flow of Jewish immigrants into Israel after 1948, which quickly doubled the Jewish population of what had been Mandate Palestine. This was not only important quantitatively, but also meant an important shift in the ethnic makeup of the state. In the pre-state period, the majority of the Jewish population was made up of immigrants from Europe or their descendants. By the mid-1950s, however, half of Israel's Jews were from the Middle East.

This meeting of diverse Jewish communities led to ethnic conflict between European (Ashkenazi) and Middle Eastern (Mizrahi) Jews. Ashkenazi Jews often held Orientalist views of non-Westerners. More importantly, the state authorities were particularly concerned with maintaining what they understood as Israel's modern Western identity and therefore advocated a melting-pot ideology intended to assimilate new immigrants. Like the US melting pot, this called for all

immigrants to shed their distinctive cultural traits and instead adopt a single Israel culture, summed up in the idea of the “the new Jew,” who was to be categorically different from the Jew in the Diaspora. Because the state was largely controlled by Ashkenazi Jews, the new Jew was based on European ideas of modernity, and there was particularly pressure on Middle Eastern Jews to give up supposedly primitive cultural traits.

In line with this, early Israeli studies of immigration, mostly coming from sociology, focused on transition from traditional to modern societies. In other words, they asked how Middle Eastern Jews could be successfully acculturated into “modern” Israel. In the following decades, however, Middle Eastern Jewish communities increasingly demanded that their histories and cultures be constituent parts of Israeli society, for example in school curricula. Critical literatures emerged in sociology and history that focused on Ashkenazi-Mizrahi relations and discredited the older modernization theory. By the 1990s this had developed into the Israeli postcolonial literature made famous by Ella Shohat and others, which condemned Zionist ideology for its antipathy toward Middle Eastern identity and Arabness.⁵ This is important, even foundational, work that calls our attention to discrimination against Middle Eastern Jews in Israel, and highlights inherent contradictions between Zionism and Middle Eastern Jewish identity. However, the focus of this body of work is an intellectual critique of the Israeli establishment, not the attitudes of the majority of Middle Eastern Jewish immigrants themselves.

Using foodways and women’s memoirs to analyze Yemeni immigrant integration into Israel, I believe, brings a non-academic, non-elite perspective into view. Ideologically, this perspective is as nuanced as its academic counterpart. Politically, it manifests a greater degree of ambivalence toward Zionism. Like the postcolonial literature, the memoirs under review here challenge some of the basic assumptions of the Zionist historical narrative, for example, the idea of negation of Diaspora.⁶ Likewise, they sometimes critique Israeli government policies. However, they do so while insisting on their Zionism and Israeli-ness. This position is in keeping with the history of Mizrahi protest in Israel, which called for Mizrahi equality but rarely challenged the fundamental aspects of Zionism ideologically. For the most part, Mizrahi movements demanded inclusion in the Zionist project, not its dismantling.⁷ Similarly, Yemeni women’s memoirs describe the hardship of immigration and integration, and sometimes attribute blame to the Israeli government, but they do so while

embracing Israeli-ness and accepting elements of Israeli “modernization” theory. In these narratives, Yemeni-ness and Israeli-ness are not in opposition to one another.

THE BIBLICAL NATURE OF YEMENI JEWS

Among the immigrants from Islamic countries, Jews from Yemen were favored, both by the Israeli political establishment and by the Ashkenazi public.⁸ They had immigrated earlier than most other Middle Eastern Jews, and thus had greater Zionist credentials and were better organized politically. Likewise, they were stereotyped as having preserved authentic Jewish biblical culture. Contact with Yemenis linked European Jews “directly to the time of King Solomon”⁹ or took them “back to the Bible.”¹⁰ This, of course, had a negative side – if they were religious, they were excessively so. If they were biblical, that marked them as primordial. According to this narrative, with migration to Israel, “they spanned more than a thousand miles and two thousand years, entering the modern world,” and would have to abandon their primitive practices and accept modern culture.¹¹

Yemeni Jews sometimes internalized these stereotypes, but also reinterpreted them as part of a strategy of integration into Israel society. Religiosity and biblical-ness could be used to argue for full inclusion on the basis of Jewishness. They therefore made, or sanctioned, claims that linked Yemeni practice to that of the ancient Israelites, for example the idea that Yemeni Hebrew most closely preserves the pronunciation of the biblical and/or Talmudic Jews. Likewise, the fact the Yemeni Jews considered locust kosher in accordance with Leviticus 11:22 was used to assert that they maintained biblical food practices.¹²

Proximity to the biblical could also be used to oppose Ashkenazi encroachment into Yemeni religious practices. For example, a Yemeni butcher, in what appears to be a rejection of Ashkenazi rabbis’ authority to supervise his work, refused to pay a licensing fee and instead hung up a sign which read: “Slaughterer – Working under the supervision of the Almighty.”¹³ Likewise, merchant Yehiel Hibshush claimed an absolute right to import *samna* (clarified butter) made by Muslims from Yemen, despite the Ashkenazi rabbinate’s doubt that it was kosher. He insisted that if his ancestors considered this food kosher, his community would in perpetuity. Tellingly, the rabbinate eventually conceded, but only that this *samna* was kosher for Yemeni Jews. Here we clearly see Yemeni foodways representing both

the preservation of Yemeni culture and the distinction between Jewish groups in Israel in ethnic and religious terms.¹⁴

Biblical, in this context, functions as native; it highlights Jewish indigeneity. Early European Jewish immigrants to Palestine believed that Arabs, and particularly Bedouin, were carriers of biblical practices. In a sense, then, they had preserved ancient Jewish culture. European Jews could, therefore, adopt local customs, including foodways, to connect themselves to ancient Israel and mark themselves as native.¹⁵ However, as political tension in Palestine increased in the early twentieth century, it became expedient, from the perspective of Zionist ideology, to disassociate aspects of Palestinian culture from its Arab roots, and instead to link it to Middle Eastern Jews.

For example, Ashkenazi settlers began to attribute falafel to the Yemeni Jews. Yemenis had been selling falafel in Palestine as early as the 1920s, though when, and more interestingly from whom, they learned to cook the dish is not entirely clear. They might have learned it from Palestinian Arabs, earlier Jewish settlers, or in Egypt (until the late 1940s an important stopping point for Yemeni immigrants on the way to Palestine).¹⁶ Regardless, this attribution is quite curious, since falafel is not a food typically eaten in Yemen by Jews or Muslims. Memoirist Naomi Hubareh's description of seeing falafel in Jerusalem for the first time makes this quite clear:

We stopped on King George Street next to a falafel shop and watched how the seller fried the balls of chickpeas in oil. The dough of chickpeas looked to me like *harish* (a kind of grain porridge we cooked in Yemen with a mixture of *samna* and honey). I said to my husband Yahya: "Let's buy ourselves some *harish* with *samna*."¹⁷

Nevertheless, this kind of attribution allowed European Jews to eat Middle Eastern foods as part of the process of indigenizing themselves, while marking these foods as Hebrew, and thus legitimizing their claim to Palestine. In the words of one observer: "In this sense, eating 'Yemenite' could be regarded as an act of bodily identification with the Zionist claim to the land of Israel."¹⁸ It is worth noting also that the assumption that Yemeni Jews have preserved ancient biblical food practices continues to be present in both academic and popular literatures. For example, John Cooper's *Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food* uses Yemeni (and Ethiopian) Jewish

foodways as an example of biblical eating and claims: "We may confidently apply our conclusions concerning the ancient world and our observations on the diet of the Yemenite and Ethiopian Jewish communities to the data in the Bible concerning the food of the Israelites."¹⁹ Similarly, Joan Nathan's cookbook *The Foods of Israel Today* states, "The closest a modern Jew can come to genuine biblical eating is to attend a holiday meal at the Yemenite home of Rabbi Yosef Zadok, the 111-year-old head of Jerusalem's Yemenite community."²⁰

YEMENIS IN THE ISRAELI PRESSURE COOKER

Despite the role Yemeni Jews could play connecting European Jews to the biblical, they, like others from the Middle East, were subjected to what I have elsewhere called "the Israeli pressure cooker."²¹ Israeli authorities pressured them to adopt modern Western culture, including but not limited to foodways. For many European Jews, this adoption necessarily required the rejection of biblical and "primitive" behaviors. For example, Israeli journalist Shlomo Barer, who was sent to Aden by Israel's radio service, Kol Israel, to report on the Yemeni migration and later published a book about his visit titled *The Magic Carpet*, linked the necessary modernization of Yemeni Jews to the elimination of facial hair and sidelocks. He describes the Knesset debates about the education of Yemeni children as follows:

Should [Yemeni children's education] be based mainly on the Bible on which these children and their fathers had been nursed, or should the old traditions, beautiful as they were but overgrown with many superstitions, be discarded? And to what extent, how quickly or how gradually should they be replaced by the same modern education as was given to the rest of Israel's youth? The question, to put it more simply, was whether Saadya's children should grow up with or without beards and earlocks.²²

Barer also used food to describe the Yemenis' transformation. For example, he noted that his respondent, Saadya, "ate bread now every day, huge chunks of it, like any physical laborer, but he still preferred the flat round *pitot* his wife baked, and he was probably happiest when, unobserved, he could dip his fingers directly into some spicy dish."²³ Here Saadya's transformation seems stunted by his preference for flatbread and eating with his hands.

Of Saadya's wife Rumiya, he says:

Like her husband, she did things and had thoughts which only months ago would have been unimaginable. She bought provisions at a co-operative store and used a highly complicated ration book, balancing her "points" and supplies and accounts in a way which could not have been excelled by a trained modern housewife. She used all kinds of new kitchen utensils and cooked all kinds of new meals, and knew about egg powder and powdered milk and dried potatoes and chicken noodle soup which could be bought in a little cellophane bag, and cereals that came in boxes.²⁴

Note the link between what Barer believes to be proper consumption and the goal of transforming Rumiya into a modern housewife. Changes in foodways, then, were part of a myriad of changes that the Yemenis had to undergo in order to make the "jump from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century."²⁵ Barer claimed the Yemenis had proven themselves "'primitive' only in the sense of being unfamiliar with a multitude of processes that these Westerners had come to take for granted."²⁶ Western Jews had patiently taught the Yemenis "that one slept *on* a bed, and not under it . . . how to make up a bed, how to sit on a chair, how to use knives and forks, and the why and wherefore of washing dishes after each meal."²⁷ Despite this, the modernization of the Yemenis was still not complete.²⁸

Oddly, one reviewer of Barer's book found his portrayal of Yemeni Jews too positive. According to Hal Lehrman, a prominent American journalist, the flaw with *The Magic Carpet* was its tendency to be "over-optimistic about the speed of Yemenite cultural absorption into the Israeli pattern." Lehrman worried that it would take the Yemenis much longer to understand the "new magic around them."²⁹

A NEW YEMENI CUISINE

How then did Yemeni immigrants understand the "new magic around them?" In particular, how did this manifest itself in their foodways? Yemeni immigrants attempted to preserve their pre-migration food practices, but their new situation required using different ingredients, utensils, and cooking techniques. In part this was for practical reasons:

the combined impact of the Arab League boycott, which made importing food from Yemen impossible, and the *tzena* rationing regime, in effect during the first decade of Israel's existence, made certain Yemeni ingredients hard to get, while making modern foods available.³⁰ As a result, even when making traditional dishes, replacements had to be made—margarine for *samna*, white flour for other types of grains. Yemenis consumed increasing amounts of dairy, noodles, and Western bread. On the other hand, traditional spices continued to be commonly used, presumably because they were readily available in Palestinian markets.³¹

Beyond the level of ingredients, the most dramatic change was the standardization of Yemeni Jewish cuisine. This process closely paralleled the invention of Yemeni Jewish identity itself. In Yemen, local identities had been more important than a general sense of Yemeni-ness. Travelers, Yemeni and non-Yemeni, highlighted differences between urban and rural areas, and between regions. Yemeni Jewish emigrants described the villages and regions they passed through, contrasting “our territory” to foreign areas. In transit camps, the emigrants made a point of settling in areas defined by local community. Yitzhak Katab describes the Geula camps outside of Aden this way: “We lived according to ethnic group (*‘edot*), for example, the Sananis had their specific area, the Haydanis had their own area, the Sharabis had their own area, the Ja’udis had their area.”³² According to Katab, then, Yemeni Jews were of different ethnicities before migration. In Israel, however, as they encountered others, Yemeni Jews began to highlight their commonalities and to think of themselves as a single community.

Likewise, in Yemen, cooking styles were defined by town and region, not by national identity. Zviah Issachar, in her migration memoir, makes a point of highlighting the differences in the foods of each area she passed through, particularly kinds of flours and cooking techniques used for breads.³³ Moreover, she tells us that in the transit camp she learned how to make at least one new kind of bread from Jews from central Yemen. The homogenization of Yemeni cuisine, then, began even before arriving in Israel. This process was amplified in Palestine/Israel as differences between Yemenis were further elided. Mazal Ahraq states this explicitly, “Today the traditional cuisine of Yemeni Jews in Israel is varied with all kinds of baked goods brought from different regions, but in Yemen each region had its own foods.”³⁴ Note that her use of “traditional” suggests a preservation, while she herself is stressing the newness of unified Yemeni cuisine.

Of course, the standardization of national or ethnic cuisine is not unique to the Yemeni experience. Hasia Diner notes the same kind of national reimagining of Italian food, as immigrants from different parts of Italy mingled in the United States.³⁵ In our case, regional specialties, like the now ubiquitous *jahnun* (a rolled pastry from parts of southern Yemen) were redefined as Yemeni in a national sense. *Jahnun* could then be used to represent Yemeni-ness in songs and literature. For example, Boaz Sharabi's song "Shabbat Celebration" describes coming home from synagogue on Saturday morning to a mother serving *jahnun* and eggs. Likewise, the protagonist of Jackie Mekayten's song "Maryuma" calls his potential lover *jahnun*-flavored. More recently, Ayelet Tsabari's story "Brit Milah" uses *jahnun* and Yemeni soup to mend a rift between a mother and daughter.³⁶ On the other hand, memoirists like Issachar and Ahraq make a point of noting when they encountered *jahnun* for the first time. Ahraq tells us that in her area of the eastern Taiz region, they made neither *jahnun* nor *kubaneh* (a common northern Yemeni Shabbat specialty); instead they made a spongy bread called *khafush* for the Sabbath. Likewise, they did not prepare another universal Yemeni-Israeli bread, *mulawwah*.³⁷ It seems that Yemeni women immigrants writing in Israel are aware of the homogenization of Yemeni cuisine, and hope to historicize the community's culinary memory.

YEMENI WOMEN'S MEMOIRS AND FOODWAYS

In the years after migration to Israel, the foodways of Yemeni immigrants seem to have undergone multiple, perhaps contradictory, changes. Yemeni Jews were introduced to new foods, and were pressured to adopt them to become modern. At the same time, they attempted to preserve their food practices, while a single Yemeni Jewish cuisine was being standardized. How then did Yemeni women, the primary carriers of culinary tradition, reconcile the differing demands of each of these transformations?

The final section of this article addresses this question through a reading of three Yemeni women's migration memoirs published in Israel during the first decade of the 2000s: Naomi Hubareh's *Mi-paatey Teyman: mi-Suq al-Ithnayn 'ad moshav Naham* (From the Outskirts of Yemen: From Suq al-Ithnayn to Moshav Naham), Mazal Ahraq's *Sheva tahanot: me-ha-kefar be-Teyman le-moshav Tenuvot* (Seven Stations: From the Village in Yemen to Moshav Tenuvot), and Zviah Issachar's *Mi-Barat*

le-Kiryat 'Ekron: nedudeha shel na'arah ba-derekh le-Yisrael (From Barat to Qiryat Eqron: The Wanderings of a Girl on the Way to Israel).³⁸

These memoirs are particularly illustrative of the link between migration, changes in foodways, and integration into Israeli society. Their accounts of the everyday experiences of Yemeni women immigrants call into question some of the traditional assumptions of the Zionist historical narrative, but also describe the process of becoming Israeli as an almost redemptive modernization. For example, Hubareh's memoir ultimately describes immigration to Israel as liberating. The *Haaretz* review of her book claims that her storyline is largely made up of binaries: "disaster and resurrection, dependence and independence, conformity and individuality."³⁹ Though her portrayal of Yemen is quite positive, and her descriptions of her initial encounter with Israel are bleak, by then end of the book the positive side of each binary has been achieved through integration into Israeli society, something the *Haaretz* reviewer oddly fails to notice.

All three memoirs describe transformations: learning a new language, new behaviors, and adapting new styles of clothing. Likewise, all register difficulty adjusting to new foods. For example, Yemeni Jews simply didn't know or like olives when they arrived in Israel. Here is Hubareh's description of the foods provided at the Ein Shemer immigrant camp:

We didn't recognize all the food items we received. For example, when they gave us olives, we immediately threw them in the garbage. The [Yemeni] immigrants called the olives "b'ar," in other words, goat dung, because they looked like black circles and they weren't used to seeing these strange things in the food.⁴⁰

Sometimes the displeasure was even more visceral. Ahraq provides a description from another camp:

On top of the suffering of being in a refugee camp it was hard to adjust to the different food they served us and to the necessity of giving up the Yemeni foods that we were used to. . . . For example, they would serve us tuna from cans. . . . In Yemen, and especially in Aden . . . we enjoyed fresh fish, but here the kitchen workers mixed tuna with black bread to create

a kind of porridge and they distributed it to us to spread on bread. . . . One day I saw a woman take a slice of bread, spread *hilbeh* on it, and then spread the tuna on that . . . I was disgusted just seeing it and I threw up. I thought I was going to die. So I stopped going to breakfast and day by day I got skinnier until I was skin and bone.⁴¹

In both cases described above, revulsion with new foods is in stark contrast to the picturesque descriptions the memoirists give on their villages, and foods, in Yemen. For example, Hubareh begins her memoir by describing her village, Suq al-Ithnayn, as a beautiful area, very green and lush. She reminisces about picking doum fruit and soft stalks of sorghum with her grandmother, and provides an extensive list of the kinds of fruits and vegetables that her father and neighbors grew. Likewise, Issachar recalls the big round pita bread of her village, Barat, that was so delicious it could be eaten plain, and the abundance of meat that her family ate. After migration, by contrast, she describes the food she would take to work as dry slices of bread with jelly.⁴² It is noteworthy that she uses “pita,” a decidedly un-Yemeni word, to describe the flatbread of her village, indicating that her culinary terminology has been impacted by migration.

Women’s memoirs also describe changing foodways in terms of modernization. Issachar, who was separated from her mother and taken to a school for Yemenite immigrant children, depicts her cafeteria as a site of surveillance and discipline. She describes mealtime this way: “After a while [the director of the institute] saw and understood that we weren’t used to Western food and he began to teach us how to eat and what to eat. Slowly we started to eat but we didn’t like it and we didn’t dare eat everything.” She was later moved to another school, but there the same process was at work. At lunch the teachers monitored the cafeteria: “to see who didn’t know how to eat or who didn’t eat well.”⁴³ “Knowing how to eat” meant assimilating Western dining manners such as using a knife and fork. This, of course, was in keeping with the larger transformation described earlier, which required that Yemenis acquire modern Western behaviors.

At times Issachar’s tone is defensive. For example, she notes that, “Northern Yemen is described as a backward place from the perspective of the cultural concepts of the twentieth century, but it is very rich in its own traditions and culture.”⁴⁴ Likewise, the women’s memoirs describe the adoption of Western foods defensively, but also

as part of integration into modern culture. Early in her memoir Hubareh recounts learning how to bake two typical regional breads before the age of nine. In the period immediately following immigration to Israel, she continued to bake according to traditional methods, even going as far as to buy unground flour to use to make Yemeni bread for her family:

My uncle liked the pita because it was better than the bread they distributed in the camp that we weren't used to. The food that they served us was strange to us, and also the bread that we baked in Yemen was different from what we received in Israel. Nevertheless, we didn't continue with the pitas for a long time, because we quickly got used to the modern food in Israel.⁴⁵

Note her use of the word "modern" as a descriptor for Israeli breads. Hubareh and her family, it seems, felt compelled to adjust to new foods even if they preferred those they were used to eating in Yemen. In fact, in a 1958 survey of Yemeni women indicated just that—the cooking was easier in Israel, but they preferred the taste of food in Yemen.⁴⁶

Moreover, her description of her culinary education is quite revealing:

The Yemeni woman remembered the entire process of cooking and baking by conveying this knowledge and experience from mother to daughter, and thus the tradition continued from generation to generation. I also learned from my mother and only in Israel did I go out at some point to study home economics, cooking, and baking. Of course, I also learned to cook the customary dishes in the Israeli kitchen.⁴⁷

She doesn't elaborate further, but the contrast of transfer of knowledge from mother to daughter with classes in home economics indicates again, a defensiveness and an acceptance of the superiority of what we might think of as the science of cooking.

Despite her nostalgia for the foods of Suq al-Ithnayn, by the time Hubareh has her own children she has completely adopted these modern food habits. She tells us that her morning routine is to make sandwiches for her kids to take to school, using whatever leftovers were in the fridge. After that she makes them soft-boiled eggs and

serves them in special egg cups she bought for the children. She serves the eggs with toast, spread with margarine, butter, or cheese.⁴⁸

Yemeni food, by this point, has shifted from the food of every day to an ethnically marked food served on holidays or the Sabbath as part of a strategy of remembering. The everyday foods—sandwiches and toast with margarine—are foods of convenience but also mark the author as having accepted modern Israeli culture. Writing about the Greek Island Kalymnos, David Sutton has suggested the structure and repetition of food habits—both quotidian foodways and holiday and ritual foods—create food memories as a form of historical consciousness.⁴⁹ But in the Yemeni Jewish case daily and ritual foodways seem to be moving in different directions. As everyday foods veer toward the Western, Yemeni food itself is ritualized. If Western food is modern, by contrast Yemeni must be primitive; Yemeni is ethnic, Western/Israeli is national.

Hubareh continues to describe Yemeni foods but in specifically ethnic settlings. Likewise, a post-migration understanding of Yemeni food is evident in her description. For example, toward the end of her memoir, she describes a ceremony given in honor of the Yemeni women of her moshav as follows:

We saw slides and a film about the work of our hands, about the mothers who stand in the kitchen from morning to evening without complaint, and serve their husbands and children food: the [Yemeni] soup and *hilbeh* and warm pita . . . we must appreciate initiatives like these [meaning the ceremony in honor of Yemeni women]. I hope their daughters will follow them in maintaining the Yemeni tradition for the coming generations.⁵⁰

Gone are the idealistic descriptions of food in Yemen. While Hubareh and the other memoirists had described food in Yemen as regionally distinct, here she talks about Yemeni tradition as a single entity. And although in her description of Suq al-Ithnayn she had defined celebratory food by the presence of “roasted meat and wine”⁵¹ she now employs an Israeli understanding of a typical Yemeni food—a generalizable Yemeni soup.

Hubareh is calling on the Yemeni women of the younger generation to preserve Yemeni identity through food. On one hand,

then, she can be said to be resisting pressure to assimilate into a Western-dominated Israeli culture. On the other hand, the way she and the other memoirists describe Yemeni food in Israel makes it clear that Yemeni tradition has been altered by migration, and that only a single, flattened, Yemeni identity can be maintained in the space allowed for Israeli ethnic difference. Moreover, this identity is increasingly performed in ritual settings. In fact, throughout her memoir Hubareh is quite clear that Yemeni Jews must embrace “modern” Israeli culture. How the ethnic and modern will be reconciled is left unclear.

In a sense, then, through the progression of their memoirs these women become both Yemeni and Israeli. They adopt what they see as modern Israeli and also insist on the continuation of a reimagined Yemeni-ness. All treat Yemeni culture as a source of tradition but also reject aspects of it. And they declare their loyalty to Israel, even reproducing the narrative by which leaving Yemen and moving to Israel brings them into modernity. Hubareh, for example, calls Yemen a “cursed” land because of its high rate of child mortality, which she links to a lack of modernity.⁵² She likewise denounces the tendency not to educate girls. Nevertheless, she ends her book calling on the next generation of Yemeni women to follow their mothers “in maintaining the Yemeni tradition for the coming generations.”

Even Ahraq, the most critical of the Israeli government, describes her migration in Zionist terms, as “a pioneering journey and call of mobilization for the public and the state [of Israel].”⁵³ Likewise, she thanks God that her parents succeeded in making *aliyah* to Israel and that she was able to see her children and grandchildren in “the homeland.”⁵⁴ She too ends her book with a plea for the coming generations: for Yemenis to learn about their roots and for the next generation of Israelis to continue to build Israel and to shape it in their own image and spirit. Taken together, this is a call for younger Yemeni Israelis to use Yemeni cultural material as one of the building blocks of modern Israel.

CONCLUSION

This article has used food narratives in Yemeni women’s memoirs to highlight the infrequently heard voice of non-elite Mizrahi actors. The perspective that emerges is quite different from that of Mizrahi intellectuals. For example, while the women’s memoirs under review here are critical of Israeli absorption policies and their romantic descriptions of Yemen are sometimes at odds with Zionist assumptions

about life in the Diaspora, they also reproduce Zionist notions of *aliyah*, and describe integration into Israeli society as redemptive modernization. My point here is not to argue for a particular position vis-à-vis Zionism, but rather to suggest that, although the literature on Middle Eastern Jews in Israel has grown and improved considerably in recent decades, more needs to be done to bring to light voices of all sorts if we hope to understand the Mizrahi experience.

This article has also used food as a lens through which to view Yemeni Jewish integration into Israeli society. The transformation of Yemeni foodways in Israel is representative of a larger pattern of changes in Yemeni Jewish identity. While Yemeni Jewish immigrants were called to maintain a link to the biblical, both to connect European Jews to ancient Israel and to claim Israeli-ness by virtue of their authentic Jewish identities, they were also pressured to shed their supposed primordiality in order to adopt the culture of modern Israel. Likewise, Yemeni Jews hoped to become Israeli, but also insisted on preserving their pre-migration identities and cultures. To do so they had to standardize, and perhaps homogenize, Yemeni culture and then to reimagine Yemeni-ness as ethnic. They could then become Israeli in a national sense. In the process Yemeni identity and culture would be relegated to specific “ethnic” times and places. Thus, the Yemeni Jewish experience in Israel illustrates the loss inherent in the process of ethnicization.

NOTES

¹ By “foodways” I mean any and all beliefs and practices related to the production, preparation, and consumption of foods and beverages.

² For an in-depth analysis of Yemeni Jewish migration see Ari Ariel, *Jewish-Muslim Relations and Migrations from Yemen to Palestine in the Late Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

³ Until this point the movement would assist immigrants but only once they had reached Palestine. See Margalit Shilo, “Tovat ha-‘am o-tovat ha-aretz? Yahasa shel ha-tnu‘a ha-tzionit le-‘aliya bi-tkufat ha-‘aliya ha-shniya,” *Cathedra* 46 (1987): 109–22.

⁴ *Colonial Office Report for the Years 1949 & 1950*, (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1951), 3.

⁵ On the rise of Mizrahi consciousness see Avi Picard, “Like a Phoenix: The Renaissance of Sephardic/Mizrahi Identity in Israel in the 1970s and 1980s,” *Israel Studies* 22, no. 2 (2017): 1–25. For a summary of the historiography on

Middle Eastern Jewish immigration to Israel see Esther Meir-Glitzenstein, "Turning Points in the Historiography of Jewish Immigration from Arab Countries to Israel," *Israel Studies* 23, no. 3 (2018): 114–22.

⁶ The Zionist historical narrative divides Jewish history into three periods: a national golden age in ancient Israel, a period of exile during which Jews lived in the Diaspora and were unproductive, and finally, the modern return to Israel as a period of national rebirth and revitalization. See Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 139.

⁷ Ehud Ein-Gil and Moshé Machover, "Zionism and Oriental Jews: A Dialectic of Exploitation and Co-optation," *Race & Class* 50, no. 3 (2009): 62–76.

⁸ Zvi Zameret, *The Melting Pot in Israel: The Commission of Inquiry Concerning Education in the Immigrant Camps during the Early Years of the State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 48–53.

⁹ William Zimmerman, director and producer, *Flight to Freedom*, 1949, Jewish Film Archive, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

¹⁰ Shlomo Barer, *The Magic Carpet* (New York: Harper, 1952), xi.

¹¹ Zimmerman, *Flight to Freedom*.

¹² This, of course, ignores that Muslim Yemenis eat locust as well.

¹³ Barer, *The Magic Carpet*, 242.

¹⁴ For a detailed description of Hibshush's story see Ari Ariel, "Mosaic or Melting Pot: The Transformation of Middle Eastern Jewish Foodways in Israel," in *The Global History of Jewish Foodways: A History*, eds. Hasia Diner and Simone Cinotto (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 94–95.

¹⁵ There are many problematic aspects of the emulation of Arab culture that are beyond our scope here. See Oz Almog, *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew*, trans. Haim Watzman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), chap. 5, "Uri of Arabia." Regarding food and the emulation of Palestinian Arab cultures see Ronald Ranta and Yonatan Mendel, "Consuming Palestine: Palestine and Palestinians in Israeli Food Culture," *Ethnicities* 14, no. 3 (2014): 412–35.

¹⁶ On falafel and Yemeni Jews see Shaul Stampfer, "Bagel and Falafel: Two Iconic Jewish Foods and One Modern Jewish Identity," in *Jews and Their Foodways*, ed. Anat Helman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 189; Yael Raviv, *Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 18. On disassociation from Palestinian culture, see Ranta and Mendel, "Consuming Palestine."

¹⁷ Naomi Hubareh, *Mi-paatey Teyman: mi-Suq al-Ithnayn 'ad moshav Naham* (Tel Aviv: E'ele be-Tamar, 2010), 186. Parenthetical in the original.

¹⁸ Stampfer, "Bagel and Falafel," 189.

¹⁹ John Cooper, *Eat and Be Satisfied: A Social History of Jewish Food*, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), 3.

²⁰ Joan Nathan, *The Foods of Israel Today*, (New York: Knopf, 2001), 137.

²¹ Ariel, "Mosaic or Melting Pot."

²² Barer, *The Magic Carpet*, 238.

²³ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 235–36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁹ Hal Lehrman, review of *The Magic Carpet* by Shlomo Barer, *Commentary*, January 1953. On the other hand, another review by Oscar Gass faulted Barer for not presenting the Yemeni perspective:

The most serious shortcoming of the book is that the voice of the Yemenite is hardly heard in it. We hear little of his actual daily problems and needs, or any revelation of his emotions and feeling beyond the accents of traditional piety and national sentiment. Mr. Barer could not speak to the Yemenites in their own language, and he shows awareness that interpreters failed to make it possible for him to "get through" to the people he was trying to reach. He was obviously concerned about this failure. Early in the narrative (53) he tells of securing only "bare scraps of information . . . but no emotional account . . . or anything at all which might show an inner attitude to the fact and circumstances of their coming here." This difficulty was never overcome.

Oscar Gass, review of *The Magic Carpet*, *Jewish Social Studies* 16 (1954): 98.

³⁰ Tzena (Austerity) was the name given to Israel's rationing program, in effect from 1949 to 1959. See Yael Raviv, *Falafel Nation: Cuisine and the Making of National Identity in Israel* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 64–74; Orit Rozin, *The Rise of the Individual in 1950s Israel: A Challenge to Collectivism*, trans. Haim Watzman (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 4–19. On the Arab League boycott of Israel, see Gil Feiler, *From Boycott to Economic Cooperation: The Political Economy of the Arab Boycott of Israel* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

³¹ See Ariel, "Mosaic or Melting Pot." Also, Israel Institute of Applied Social Research and the Department of Preventive Medicine of the Hebrew

University of Jerusalem–Hadassah Medical School, *Changes in Food Habits in the Yemenite and Iraqi Communities in Israel* (Jerusalem, 1958).

³² “Yitzhak Katab,” Sephardi Voices: Preserving Our Heritage, accessed 20 August 2018, <http://sephardivoices.com/yitzhak-katab/>.

³³ Zviah Issachar, *Mi-Barat le-Kiryat ‘Ekron: nedudeha shel na‘arah ba-derekh le-Yisrael* (Israel: E’ele be-Tamar, 2006), 25–26, 32, 37–38, 71, 82.

³⁴ Mazal Ahraq, *Sheva tahanot: zikhronot me-ha-fefar be-Teyman le-moshav Tenuvot* (Israel: E’ele be-Tamar, 2004), 31.

³⁵ Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), chap. 3.

³⁶ Ayelet Tsabari, *The Best Place on Earth* (New York: Random House, 2013), 64–65.

³⁷ Ahraq, *Sheva tahanot*, 31.

³⁸ Hubareh, *Mi-paatay Teyman*; Ahraq, *Sheva tahanot*; Issachar, *Mi-Barat le-Kiryat ‘Ekron*. I would like to thank Vered Madar for first bringing these memoirs to my attention.

³⁹ Sharon Geva, “Kisharon ha-hisardut shel Naomi Hubareh” *Haaretz*, 20 June 2013, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/study/.premium-1.2036629>.

⁴⁰ Hubareh, *Mi-paatay Teyman*, 159.

⁴¹ Ahraq, *Sheva tahanot*, 85–86.

⁴² Issachar, *Mi-Barat le-Kiryat ‘Ekron*, 11, 14, 105–6. She also notes several times that the Yemenis didn’t like olives.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 97–98.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ Hubareh, *Mi-paatay Teyman*, 164.

⁴⁶ Israel Institute of Applied Social Research, *Changes in Food Habits*, 58.

⁴⁷ Hubareh, *Mi-paatay Teyman*, 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁴⁹ David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), 15.

⁵⁰ Hubareh, *Mi-paatay Teyman*, 261.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵² Hubareh, *Mi-paatay Teyman*, 110. Also cited in Geva, “Kisharon ha-hisardut.”

⁵³ Ahraq, *Sheva tahanot*, 205.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*