



Shlomit Lir on Mizrahi Jews in Israel

Interviewed by Andrea Blanch, PhD

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Center for Religious Tolerance

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Background: Shlomit Lir is a PhD candidate at Tel Aviv University. She is a third-generation Israeli whose grandparents emigrated from Iran to Israel in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She is also a peace activist who has met with Palestinians on many occasions to discuss ways of ending the conflict.

Shlomit was a participant in the Women's Interfaith Leadership workshop co-sponsored by CRT in Amman, Jordan, in September 2007. Since then she has worked with CRT to build the women's interfaith leadership program and to explore how individual identity and religious identity affect religious tolerance. The following is based on an interview conducted with Shlomit in June, 2008.

Interviewer: Tell us something about your book.

Shlomit: This anthology focuses on the experience of "Mizrahi" women within Israeli society – that is, women native to Islamic countries. Here in Israel, the relationship between identity, ethnicity and class issues is generally not talked about – it's almost a taboo - because it undermines the façade of equality. People want to believe that Israel is a place that welcomes all Jews from everywhere equally, without regard to ethnicity, color or class. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Mizrahi women are to a large extent pushed to the economic, social and political margins of the state of Israel. No one intends it to be, but in fact, discrimination was built into Zionism from the start. The Mizrahi were seen as different and therefore inferior because we are Middle Eastern, not European. Many of us were unconsciously ashamed of our heritage because we are not taught about our culture. Often Arab music and culture and darker skin are devalued. It's very similar to racism anywhere – if you look at television, you'll see that most of the women in commercials are white, the Mizrahi are shown mainly cleaning and doing food preparation. There are some TV series without a single Mizrahi character.

Interviewer: How did you come to be interested in this subject?

I was asked to help with the website of Ahoti – a movement of Mizrahi feminists. I was fascinated by the strong, creative women, but it took me some time to understand the essence of the movement. I had experiences that I've since found out are typical. Most Mizrahi Jews deny the oppression because it contradicts the Israeli dream of togetherness and sharing – coming home after years in the Diaspora. Then one day you wake up and see it. For one woman, Aliza Frenkel, whose research appears in the

anthology, it was when her six year old daughter asked “Why are all the kids in TV commercials white and I’m dark?” It’s hard for people to see this at first. There is a huge gap between what they thought would be in Israel and what they actually find here. Israel is supposed to be a “melting pot” where the “New Jew” creates a new future, doesn’t look back or focus on the past. So it takes a while for it to dawn on you that the negation of the past does not work the same for everyone. I was taught all through elementary and high school about Jewish life and culture in the Ashkenazi Diaspora, but never did I learn about Jewish life and culture in Islamic countries. It took years for me to accept this truth even for myself – it’s very hard to acknowledge the failings of our society

Interviewer: Your work emphasizes that a lot of this is unconscious. Can you say some more about this?

Shlomit: The problem is not so much discriminatory laws, but patterns of thought. There is an article I wrote about the internalized anti-semitism of the Zionist leaders. It is unbelievable but Herzl, for example, wrote in his diary that anti-semitism, which is a strong power in the mass unconscious, will do the Jews good, it will build character. The country he envisioned was a European country with strong anti-Mizrahi and anti-religious elements. He, like many other Zionist leaders, adopted a colonizing perspective and the assumption of superiority over “exotic” countries. The whole concept of the “New Jew” at the center of Zionism wrongly assumes that there was something wrong with the “old Jew.” The anti-Semitic oppressor view was later directed towards Mizrahi who were considered “the other” and were treated as second class citizens. The power relation of assumed superiority is also applied towards Arabs, of course. However while many Israelis admit there is a need to change the relationship with Arabs, only a few are willing to look at the growing gaps within Jewish Israeli society itself. The Mizrahi discourse is still very much ignored. Understanding it is an essential step on the road to peace.

Interviewer: Are things changing for the better?

Shlomit: Discrimination against women and against Mizrahi is beginning to



change, but it's very slow. Today only 17 out of 120 Knesset members are women. Of course, the important thing is not only the numbers, it is the feminist, class and ethnic consciousness. Do women and Mizrahi who get into power positions remember their starting point? Perez, for example, a Moroccan Jew from Sderot - as soon as he was elected he forgot the people he was supposed to represent. It's true that things are a little better than they were in my grandparent's time. If you look at history, you'll find shocking records of racism. At the beginning of Israel, the government radiated healthy Mizrahi children as part of an experiment on *Tinea capitis* (a skin disease). There are hundreds of Yemenite and Mizrahi babies who disappeared and the claims are that they were kidnapped from parents and turned over for adoption. There is a movie that documents cases of women whose babies were taken from them the moment they stepped off the plane. This kind of discrimination obviously doesn't happen any more. But when you read some of the research about the Ethiopian immigrants you realize that not that much has changed.

Interviewer: How does your work relate to religious tolerance?

The dynamics are the same whenever there is discrimination against "the other." It's interesting, discrimination against the Mizrahi is often strongest within black hat (Haredi, or Ultra-Orthodox) communities. My friends and I at Ahoti are currently protesting against one case where a school for Haredi girls was built with a wall separating Mizrahi and Ashkenazi kids. It's not always so blatant, but it's there.

Interviewer: What can be done?

I think raising awareness is essential. The government refuses to deal with structural problems, or to admit that discriminatory practices were policy or widespread. But the movement of Mizrahi feminism is spreading, even internationally. It's important to bring Judaism together with social justice. *Tikkun olam* – the Jewish religious tradition of world redemption - must be about repairing this kind of psychological damage. We don't want to be portrayed as victims, we want to be life enhancing, to focus on the positive, on our strengths. The work we are doing – it's really about self-liberation and social justice- it is making a difference, but it's slow. I would love to see a political party formed by Mizrahi women.