From its very beginnings, political Zionism was primarily a European notion, inspired by Napoleonic Emancipation and the formation of the modern nation-state. To that end, the most influential Zionists, including Theodor Herzl and David Ben-Gurion, did not consider Jews from Arab countries to be part of the Zionist equation. In fact, it was not until the dissolution of the “Judeo-Islamic cultural symbiosis” (13), brought about by the emergence of Pan-Arabism in post-colonial North Africa (as well as by the realization of world Jewry’s meager, post-World War II demographic resources) that Israel began to take interest in the mass immigration of non-European Jewish communities. Put quite simply, “Oriental” Jews had not been part of the plan, and, upon their arrival to Israel, they were treated accordingly.

Fortunately, much energy has been spent in recent years in attempting to rectify the historical injustices and institutionalized racism wrought upon the ‘edot hamizrakh [Jews from Arab countries] by the Ashkenazi-dominated Israeli establishment. Many will recall Ehud Barak’s “official” apology to the Mizrahi Jews (given during his candidature for Prime Minister in 1997) for the government’s treatment of them as second-class citizens. Although Barak’s gesture was largely criticized as being mere lip service from an aspiring politician, it nevertheless set a precedent for addressing this issue in the public domain. In the past decade, Israeli society has displayed more openness to preserving the cultural riches of non-Ashkenazi Jewry, especially in the realms of ethnography, literature, and music.

Esther Schely-Newman’s *Our Lives Are But Stories: Narratives of Tunisian-Israeli Women* makes an important contribution to this initiative. The author, who is a folklore specialist and senior lecturer in Communications and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (and a cousin of the Tunisian-born, French-Israeli writer Chochana Boukhboza), undertook this project in order to document the marginalized voices of female Tunisian Jewish immigrants, whose stories might otherwise have gone unnoticed outside of their immediate communities. There are several reasons for which their narratives have remained untold for so long. The first is that because these women come from a social background in which they are not encouraged to publicly voice their opinions, they were reluctant to take advantage of the more liberal Israeli media available to them. Secondly, most of the women never developed a sufficient command of Hebrew to be able to fully articulate the difficulties of the transition from Tunisian to Israeli lifestyles. As with many other immigrant groups, part of the task of retelling their stories has thus been left to their children — so it should come as no surprise that Schely-Newman, the daughter of one of the interviewees (and a “native ethnographer,” as she puts it), decided to analyze the ways in which these women “create their own lives
through their stories against the backdrop of a patriarchal system, ethnic prejudice, and a modern, rapidly changing world” (7).

The setting for the book is moshav Gilat, a mainly agricultural community in the Northern Negev desert. The moshav contains a large number of Tunisian immigrants, who, around the time of Tunisia’s independence in 1956, became transfixed by the idea of having a Jewish state of their own, and subsequently decided to immigrate to Israel. (Many of the Tunisian Jews were so zealous in their yearning for Israel that their rabbis would even grant a divorce, on the grounds of a “sacred decision,” to a couple who disagreed on whether or not to go to Israel.) At moshav Gilat, Schely-Newman manages to persuade the elderly Tunisian-born women, who refer to themselves as ‘ajawez, or “old people,” to allow her to document their far-away lives in Tunisia, as well as the disappointments and hardships they encountered upon being transported to Gilat — then a tent community — without knowing exactly where they were being taken. Among those interviewed are Schely-Newman’s mother, Fortuna, who helped persuade the other women to trust her daughter with their stories; and Ghaliya, Biya, and Odette, all of whom were educated and married in Tunisia before their immigration to Israel.

The interviews (conducted in French, Hebrew, and Tunisian Judeo-Arabic), which span approximately thirteen years, are divided up into thematic sections, in which the author analyzes the subjects of childhood, marriage, motherhood, and immigration. Motherhood, however, is the focal point of all the conversations, as the ability to bear children was considered to be the universal path to social acceptance in Judeo-Islamic society. The proverb regarding children, “ktartu mshum, u-khasrtu ‘ara” [Too many is too much, none is a disgrace] (77) testifies to this fact, as do the frequent stories about women having miscarriages due to irresponsible or illicit behavior. Many more Judeo-Islamic principles make their way into these tales, such as the segregation of the sexes; public modesty; and the importance of maktub [fate]. Schely-Newman also points out that among the women interviewed, the three main components of feminine identity are the same as those still common in Islamic North Africa: asl [ancestry]; nsb [marital relations]; and bld [locality].

One of the most interesting aspects of this book is the author’s use of performance theory to illustrate how the women reconstruct their lives selectively, preferring the medium of xurayef — allegorical, or semi-fictional “women’s” tales — as opposed to khikayat, the more straightforward stories of life experiences told by men. In essence, this differentiation is the key to the entire study: according to Schely-Newman, the factuality of a story has nothing to do with its being told; the important point is the degree to which the story holds instructive significance for the teller and the audience. There is therefore a strong didactic component to the recurring statement, “e-denya kula xrayef” [The whole world is stories]: namely, that stories passed down to the younger generation in the form of oral narratives not only help to preserve the memory of the past; they also help to shape the desired values and mores for the future. In that vein, the narratives “are a mode of creating, working out, and affirming individual female identity” vis-à-vis “the constraints of particular settings” (9).

If there is a “moral” to Schely-Newman’s own narrative, then it is this: there is a fundamental difference between the way the state apparatus constructs memory and the
more personal, non-ideological way in which individuals construct it. Nothing could be more true in regards to the memories of the female immigrants of 'edot hamizrakh, whose voices have been marginalized for far too long. From that perspective, the author of this highly informative book is not only following the scholarly initiatives of Baruch Kimmerling, Harvey Goldberg, Raphael Patai, Sammy Smooha, and other researchers who have brought the legacies of non-Ashkenazi Jewry to the forefront of academic awareness in Israel; she is also creating a precedent for preserving the oral heritage of the long-ignored experiences of North African Jewish women, who, even more than European counterparts, belong to a culture that has all but ceased to exist.