The Missing Yemeni Children Affair – How Could It Happen?

Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, The Open University, Israel

Abstract

This article aims to position the phenomenon of the Missing Children within the broad context of the relations between Yemeni Jews and the hegemonic Eastern European Yishuv society, and as a continuation of institutional and social stance towards them. It is further argued that the Yishuv leadership's attitude toward the Yemenis signaled its conduct toward Mizrahi Jews in general.

The disappearance of children from their families in early Israel (1949 - 1954), became one of the underpinning experiences, which created mistrust between the State and many of its citizens. Infants whose parents handed them to the care of medical clinics just did not come back. Some probably died, although neither death certificates nor bodies were presented to the families. Some children were seemingly given up for adoption without their parents' consent.¹ More than fifty percent of the disappeared infants belonged to Yemeni Jewish families. The rest were Mizrahi children born to parents from Middle Eastern countries and the Balkans, and some were of Ashkenazi descent.

My article aims to position the phenomenon of the Missing Children within the broad context of the relations between Yemeni Jews and the hegemonic Eastern European Yishuv society, and as a continuation of institutional and social stance towards them. I further argue that the Yishuv leadership's attitude toward the Yemenis signaled its conduct toward Mizrahi Jews in general. During the Yishuv period, Yemeni Jews were the predominant group of Mizrahi immigrants to settle in the newly established Zionist colonies (*moshavot*) both in Ottoman Palestine (up to 1917) and thereafter in British ruled Palestine. By 1914, approximately 8 percent of the total number of Jews in Yemen (about 5,000 people) had made their way to Palestine—a figure unmatched in any other Jewish community. In 1918, they counted for 7.9 percent of all Jews in Palestine (which numbered 88,000 in a total populace of 770,000). During the British Mandate, about 15,000 Yemeni Jews immigrated to Palestine.² After the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and following the Imam Ahmad of Yemen (r. 1948 – 1962) permission in May 1949 to leave -- between 1948 and 1951 the great majority of the Jews (close to 50,000) left Yemen and immigrated to Israel.³

The Labor Movement, the Histadrut and the Yemeni Jews

One of the claims expressed by public figures and historians connected to the Labor Movement -- which turned into the principal body governing the Yishuv Zionist institutions -- is that Yemeni Jews arrived in the *moshavot* resulting from Shmuel Yavne'eli's mission to Yemen (1911-1912).⁴ This alleged attribution of "bringing" the Yemenis and ascribing them a passive role in the process of their own immigration became one element in rationalizing a paternalistic approach toward them. However, the idea to send Yavne'eli to Yemen in order to encourage immigration came up only following the spontaneous immigration of Yemeni Jews in 1908 and in 1909 and their settling in the Moshavot. These immigrants attracted the attention of the Zionist leadership and the labor parties, who at that time began to promote the idea of "the conquest of labor" (*kibush ha-`avoda*). According to this conception, the founding of the Yishuv ought to be realized not only by purchasing of land, but also by displacing the Arab laborers as the dominant work force in the colonies. The Ashkenazi European workers, members of the labor parties ("the idealistic workers"), were not successful at making significant inroads into the agricultural labor force in the Moshavot. Therefore, a notion came up that the conquest of labor could only be accomplished by means of "natural workers:" people accustomed to hard labor, who were satisfied with little, could live in uncomfortable conditions, yet were capable of competing in terms of productivity and wages with the Arab workers. Although the occupational background of Ashkenazi and Yemeni immigrants was similar, and both groups lacked agricultural training,⁵ the Zionist leadership in Palestine viewed the immigrants from Yemen as "natural workers" that should spearhead the conquest of labor. This conception underpinned the mission of Yavne'eli to Yemen, whose purpose was to encourage the immigration of laborers.

The immigrants from Yemen were perceived, therefore, in quantitative terms, as an auxiliary work force for the Zionist project, while the immigrants from Eastern Europe were defined as pioneers, as the quality work force with the requisite traits needed for fulfilling the Zionist vision.⁶ These perceptions and their wide acceptance became a central guideline in distributing national resources: less for the Yemenis and more for the Ashkenazis. Indeed, after their failure in the struggle for *`avoda `ivrit* (Hebrew Labor), the Ashkenazi workers received from the national institutions land to establish agricultural settlements. At the same time, the Yemenis, who in contrast to their image wished to improve their condition and continuously begged the Zionist institutions to help them purchase agricultural land to cultivate and to create settlements, were

generally refused or received smaller and cheaper houses and small lots of land. In this way, the Yishuv institutions prevented the Yemenis from participating in the settlement project and to enter the Zionist ethos as founders, and consequently impeded their quest to be equal to the Ashkenazis. There were multiple occasions for blunt discrimination of the Yemenis in matters of allocation of land. One example is the agricultural settlement of Nahalat Yehudah. This *moshav ovdim* (workers' settlement) was planned in 1911 for 30 Yemeni workers and 25 Ashkenazi workers in this way: 2 dunams of land for each Yemeni settler and between 5 to 10 dunams to Ashkenazi settlers. The Ashkenazis received their lots and built their homes, but expressed intense opposition to settling a large number of Yemenis among them. The conflict was resolved only in 1920 when Menahem Ussishkin, Head of the Zionist Commission in Palestine, decided that only six Yemeni families would settle in Nahalat Yehudah.⁷ Another famous case is Kinneret, a settlement near the Sea of Galilee, where a group of 10 Yemeni families settled in 1912. After 18 years of living there they were banished (1930) because the near-by Ashkenazi settlers of Kinneret did not like them as neighbors and desired the land that was promised to the Yemenis.⁸ In these cases, and others, the rhetoric used by Labor leadership and the Zionist institutions was that the Yemenis deserved equal terms. In practice, they ignored the Yemeni pleas for support and sided with the Ashkenazi settlers' demands.

Wages of Yemeni and Ashkenazi Workers

The labor movement's egalitarian rhetoric proved to be void also in matters of wage equality. The labor leadership agreed that the salary of Ashkenazi workers, doing the same job and having the same seniority as Yemeni workers, would be higher. This applied to men, women and youth. One example for this approach surfaced during the strike that broke out in Rishon Le-Zion's winery in November 1920. All workers of the winery were members of *Ahdut Ha'avoda* labor party and the Histadrut labor organization. However, in the negotiations with the winery's management, the Histadrut representatives agreed that pay increase would be determined according to ethnic identity: higher increase to Ashkenazi workers, lower increase to the Yemeni and Sephardic workers.⁹ Zechariah Gluska, who in 1923 headed the newly established *Hi'ahdut Hatemanim* (the Yemeni Union) party, rebuked *Ahdut Ha'avoda* leadership: "where are the social values that they always claim to adhere? Is it only empty rhetoric?"¹⁰

Shaul Duke's 2018 book¹¹ demonstrates how the Histadrut excluded its Yemeni members from union resources. His analysis emphasizes that adopting the stigma about Yemeni workers as

"content with little" translated itself by the Histadrut not only into a wage gap but also into occupational segregation. As the Histadrut controlled a large part of the allocation of available jobs, in its allocation system the Yemeni workers were ranked low. Although allowed to join the Histadrut as members, they were given third-class services, and only negligible influence over policymaking. This consistent policy had devastating effects on the Yemeni community life chances.

Thus, it is evident that despite similar proletarian identity, Ashkenazi labor leaders discriminated against Yemeni and Sephardic Jews on the ground of ethnicity, and because of their perception as unequal to the Ashkenazis in their needs.

The Moshavot and the Yemenis

Similarly, the Moshavot leadership did not see the Yemenis equal to Ashkenazi settlers. Once in the colonies as workers, the Yemeni-Ashkenazi encounter was generally characterized by social detachment and relationships of condescension. The Ashkenazi settlers, who controlled all political, social and economic positions of power, preferred to contain the Yemenis in their own neighborhood, away from the colony's common space; and to preserve them in their marginal lower situation. Furthermore, at least during the early years, the Moshavot leadership evinced toward the Yemenis a colonial attitude shot through with contempt, which also reflects on the Ashkenazi settlers' views of the Arab population (comparing the Yemeni Jews to Arabs in their character and qualities).¹²

The interaction between the two groups was mainly based on power relations between Ashkenazi employers and Yemeni employees: men and boys, day laborers in the farmers' orchards; women and girls working as cleaners in Ashkenazi homes. There are multiple documented examples for patronizing, even cruel, conduct of farmers toward the Yemenis. This was criticized in contemporary papers, for example in *Ha'ahdut*: "*ha-Temanim* [the Yemenis] are not happy that the *Ashkenazim* treat them like slaves, like Goyim; and the *Ashkenazim* are not happy that the *Temanim* hold their head high and use *hutzpah*, as if they are equal to them in status."¹³

Despite this tense encounter between the Yemeni and Ashkenazi immigrants, in various Moshavot there were manifestations of compassion, philanthropic activity and even attempts to draw the Yemenis closer to the Ashkenazi society. However, most efforts remained in the domain of charity, and were not intended to change the distribution of national resources in an equal manner, or to equalize the Yemenis' economic and social status to that of the hegemonic Ashkenazi group.

Family, Hygiene and Education

Since the Moshavot farmers continued to employ the cheap and skilled Arab laborers, the Yemeni men remained in a constant state of searching for work. Many became day laborers mostly in agriculture, others gradually turned to other occupations, such as in the crafts and retail trade. The harsh economic situation drove women to work as cleaners and laundry women in Ashkenazi homes, often earning much more than men. In parallel, there developed a phenomenon of child labor: minor girls aged 6 to 8 worked in Ashkenazi homes, usually in exchange for food (sometime also awarded a little pay), and so were boys. Thus, similar power relations developed in both the manly space, and in the relationships between women in the private sphere of the family.

Subsequently, working Yemeni women became a sort of cultural agents for understanding the Moshava's ways of life. Likewise, Ashkenazi women organizations recognized the Yemeni Women, for example The Association of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights (*Hit'ahadut nashim ivriyot leshivyon zekhuyot*), which was founded in 1919 by Yishuv women.¹⁴ These well to do women wished to ameliorate the Yemeni women by introducing modern ideas and encouraging the abandonment of traditional values, which they perceived inferior and un-civilized. These "noble" intentions, deriving from cultural-paternalistic position, ensued the intervention of women activists in the life of the Yemeni families. They entered the Yemeni neighborhoods wishing to teach the women how to cook, how to manage their household, and how to dress. They especially promulgated taking off women's headgear. They also promulgated against marriages of minors and acted against the Yemeni Jewish custom of polygamy.¹⁵

Some Yemeni women likely welcomed the visits made in their homes by Ashkenazi activist women. However, these women entrance to the space of the Yemeni neighborhood also aroused an internal discontent and criticism. A literary reflection to this disapproval appears in Mordechai Tabib's novel, *Ke'esev Hasadeh*, written in the 1940s, which interweaves biographical elements from the authors' youth in the Yemeni neighborhood in the Moshava Rishon Le-Zion. Tabib describes the Ashkenazi women as preaching to better Yemeni women's rights in their community, while not protecting Yemeni women's rights when repeatedly violated by the Ashkenazi inhabitants of the Moshava.¹⁶

Recent research indicates that during the Yishuv period, interference in the affairs of weak sectors of Jewish society was not restricted to civil organizations. Public officials, such as social workers, public health workers, educational functionaries, also intervened in the life of families in poverty.

The intrusion of these bodies into the domain of the family reflects accepted perceptions by the Yishuv functionaries as to how to define a functioning family. Tammi Razi's work exhibits the public officials' efforts to trace presumably "weak" families whose parental functioning was viewed inadequate, in order to "mend" them. The care of these children was expropriated from their families and they were placed in various educational institutions. Although there were some Ashkenazi families that were identified to be dis-functioning and their children were removed from them, most efforts were directed at Mizrahi families, many of whom Yemenis. Razi emphasizes that the Yishuv establishment classified Mizrachis in general as belonging to an inferior ethnic origin, and whose cultural heritage was unworthy – these were viewed as the principal cause for parental dis-functioning. Many Mizrahi children, more than Ashkenazi children of similar background, were diagnosed as having learning disabilities, as suffering from intellectual disability, and were sent to the special education institutions.¹⁷

Similarly, Daphna Hirsch's research demonstrates that even activity for advancing public health and hygiene in the Yishuv was immersed with notions of the Mizrahi's cultural and mental inferiority and of their incapability of being equal participants in the Zionist enterprise. The Mizrahis, Yemenis among them, were portrayed as representing all that is not hygiene, while "hygiene" depicted culture and the West, with which Eastern European immigrants were associated. This distinction was based on ethnic differentiation and not on a difference connected with keeping hygiene that resulted from socio-economic conditions. During the Yishuv period poor housing conditions, poverty and insufficient hygiene were the lot of many Eastern European Ashkenazis, but they were not labelled as un-hygiene.¹⁸ This cultivated negative image of Mizrahis which was related to their 'incapability' to function as parents and to their 'improper' hygiene habits, propelled among the hegemonic Ashkenazi establishment senses of revulsion and even contempt toward Mizrahis in general. Orit Rozin shows that these attitude and emotions continued to reign well into young State of Israel during the 1950, with the arrival of large numbers of immigrants from Middle Eastern countries.¹⁹

Conclusion

My discussion underlines the Yishuv establishment's perception of the Yemenis and other Mizrahis as ethnically and culturally inferior, and unworthy of equal treatment. These views led to a consistent patronizing and discriminatory behavior towards them on the part of the Labor movement, the Moshavot, and civic and national organizations. Their demeaning conduct was

reveled in matters, such as allocation of land, housing, employment, wages, welfare, health and education and personal interaction. My paper points to the intervention of voluntary and public organizations in the life of Mizrahi families in poverty, which often violated their autonomy. I argue that this bearing toward Yemeni and other Mizrahi families, which continued in the early years of the State, enabled emerging the phenomenon of the Missing Children. The dominant society's indifference towards the needs and human values of the 'others' became a convenient backdrop for the disappearance of infants, Yemenis, and others.

Even if we take into consideration the great difficulties of young Israel in absorbing masses of immigrants, it is inconceivable that hundreds of infants just disappeared from clinics and hospitals in the absorption camps and in the cities. Even if we accept that many children passed away due to illness, state officials who were responsible for caring for them did not make the required reasonable efforts to locate the parents, and to inform them of their loss and/or to provide death certificates. Nonetheless, according to accumulated testimonies of family members (mothers, fathers and siblings) as well as recent research, it appears that a number of infants were kidnapped from their families and given up for adoption. It is probable that parties involved in such actions maintained that they were acting 'for the benefit of the children' to secure them better life and to save them from 'uncivilized' and 'dis-functioning' families. Nevertheless, recent awakening led by the second and third generation of immigrants demands that the State of Israel should recognize its wrong doings, and that new and unbiased investigation should open. This arousal -- which increased general public attention in Israel, and rekindled scholarly interest -- might further unveil the happenings of this unfortunate missing children affaire.

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Notes:

¹ Nathan Shifriss in his elaborated study, *Where Have All the Children Gone: The Kidnapped Yemenite Babies Affair and its Denial*, Rishon Le-Zion: Miskal-Yedioth Aharonoth, 2019 (in Hebrew), names more than 2,000 missing children and maintains that their majority was kidnapped and given for adaption. However, Dov Levitan upholds that most of the infants died, see "*Parashat yaldei Teman Hane'edarim: h'im akhen nehtefu ve'umtsu yaldei 'olei Teman?*" in Aharon Gimani and Shaul Regev (eds.), *The Jews of Yemen: Studies in the History and Heritage of Yemen's Jewry*, Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2010, pp. 251-291 (in Hebrew).

² Hanna Herzog, *Political Ethnicity – The Image and Reality: Socio historical Analysis of the "Ethnic" Lists to the Delegates Assembly and the Knesset (1920-1984)*, Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1986 (Hebrew), p. 34 (and see appendix 3 in this book); Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, *The Jews of Yemen: History, Society, Culture*, Vol. 3, Raanana: The Open University Press, 2008 (in Hebrew), pp. 373-375, 396.

³ For Yemeni Jewish immigration to Israel, see Tudor Parfitt, *The Road to Redemption: the Jews of Yemen 1900-1950*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996, 178-285; Eraqi Klorman, *Traditional Society in Transition: the Yemeni Jewish Experience*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014, 87-116.

⁴ In 1911 Shmuel Yavne'eli was sent by the Palestinian Bureau of the World Zionist organization (created in 1908) on a mission to encourage immigration from Yemen. Many The immigrants who arrived between 1911-1914 intended to arrive in Palestine following their brethren, with no relation to Yavne'eli. However, his mission hastened their decision to go. These people were defined as "Yavne'eli immigrants." For more about "Yavne'eli's immigration," see Eraqi Klorman, *The Jews of Yemen*, Vol. 3, pp. 226-232.

- ⁵ Most Yemeni Jews made their living from the craft and retail commerce. Some 40 percent of Eastern European Jews worked in commerce; the remainder were craftsmen and day laborers, and a small minority were industrial workers. See Yoav Peled, *Class and Ethnicity in the Pale: The Political Economy of Jewish Workers' Nationalism in the Late Imperial Russia*, Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997, pp. 30, 37 (in Hebrew); Gur Alroey, *Immigrants: Jewish Immigration to Palestine in the Early Twentieth Century*, Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Press, 2004, pp. 40-42 (in Hebrew).
- ⁶ Yoav Peled and Gershon Shafir, "The Roots of Peacemaking: The Dynamics of Citizenship in Israel, 1948-1993," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996): 391-413.
- ⁷ See Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, "Settlement of Yemeni and Ashkenazi Workers: From Rishon le-Zion to Nahalat Yehuda and Back," *Cathedra*, 84 (1997), pp. 85-106 (in Hebrew).
- ⁸ Yehuda Nini, *Kinneret's Yemenites: Their Settlement and Removal from the Land: 1912-1930*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1996.
- ⁹ [Unsigned report] "The Winery's Workers Strike in Rishon Le-Zion," *Do'ar Hayom*, November 9, 1920; for more about this strike see unsigned reports from 1920 and early 1921 in *Pirgei Hapo'el Hatsa'ir* 4, Tel Aviv: Twersky Publishers, 1935, pp.90-93 (in Hebrew).
- ¹⁰ Zechariah Gluska, "Ahdut Ha'avoda, ha-sotsialut ve-ha-Temanim!," *Do'ar Hayom*, December 21, 1920. In his essay, Gluska details other occurrences where the *Histadrut* discriminated the Yemenis in matters of allocation of work and salaries.
- ¹¹ Shaul A. Duke, *The stratifying Trade Union: The Case of Ethnic and Gender Inequality in Palestine 1920-1948*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 255-264.
- ¹² See Bat-Zion Eraqi Klorman, "The 'Other' in the Political Culture of the Moshava," in Yaffah Berlowitch (ed.), *Conversing Culture with The First Aliya*, Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 2010, pp. 157-175 (in Hebrew).
- ¹³ Zerubbabel, "Lematsav ha-'avoda," *Ha'ahdut* 20, 5 Adar 1912.
- ¹⁴ For The Association of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights, its history and activity on behalf of women's rights, see Sarah Azaryahu, *Hit'ahadut nashim 'ivriyot leshivuy zekhuyot 1900-1947*, Jerusalem: M. Newman, 1949 (reprinted with an introduction by Marsha Friedman, Haifa: *haqeren le'ezrat ha'isha*, 1977) (in Hebrew); for more on this association see Mimi Ajzenstadt, "The Jewish Women's Equal Rights Association of Palestine and its Struggle to Establish the Role of 'mother of the family' in pre-State Israel, 1919:1948," in Eyal Katvan, Margalit Shilo and Ruth Halperin-Kaddari (eds.), *One Law for Man and Woman: Women, Rights and Law in Mandatory Palestine*, Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010, pp. 57-85, (Hebrew).
- ¹⁵ For polygamy in the Yemeni Jewish society and the women's organization in Palestine combat against this custom, see chapter 6 in my book, *Traditional Society in Transition*, pp. 157-171.
- ¹⁶ Mordechai Tabib, *Ke'esev ha-sadeh*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1974, p. 228.
- ¹⁷ Tammy Razi, "'Rebuilding the Family': Perceptions of the Urban Jewish Family in the Mandate Period," in Eyal Katvan, Margalit Shilo and Ruth Halperin-Kaddari (eds.), *One Law for Man and Woman: Women, Rights and Law in Mandatory Palestine*, Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010, pp. 21-56 [in Hebrew]; idem, "Immigration and its Discontents: Treating Children in the Psycho-Hygiene Clinic in Mandate Tel Aviv," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 11, no. 3 (2012), pp. 339-356.
- ¹⁸ Daphna Hirsch, *"We are Here to Bring the West": Hygiene Education and Culture Building in the Jewish Society of Mandate Palestine*, Beer Sheva: The Ben-Gurion Research Institute, Ben-Gurion University, 2014.
- ¹⁹ Orit Rozin, "Conditions of Revulsion: Hygiene and parenthood of immigrants from Muslim countries in the eyes of veterans in the 1950s," *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel* 12 (2002), pp. 195-238 (in Hebrew).