

SESSION FIVE

The Arab in Israeli Culture

The characterization of the Arab in Israeli culture reflects the complex political realities of the Middle East. The Arab has appeared in the Israeli-Jewish imagination in many forms: the native, the neighbor, the enemy, the victim. Each implies in turn a different aspect of Israeli identity.

Toward East or West?

From the earliest years of the state, a central question has been whether Israel is a Middle Eastern society, Mediterranean, or a Western island in the midst of the Arab world and Islamic culture. David Ben-Gurion believed that Israel should remain a Western country, whereas Moshe Sharett, the country's second prime minister, favored gradual assimilation into the local culture. The issue became prominent during the years of the Oslo process, for one aspect of the Oslo Agreements, as envisioned by former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, was the concept of "a new Middle East," with Israel fully integrated into the Arab world by open borders, economic links, and common transnational concerns.

Mostly, the early Zionist leaders ignored the presence of the Arabs in Palestine and the potential political complications between Arabs and Jews. The Zionists had no doubts that the land of Israel belonged to the people of Israel, an absolute conviction based on divine promises in the Bible and the history of the Jewish people. The Arabs arrived later, following the rise of Islam in the seventh century and the conquest of Palestine by tribes from the Arabian peninsula (Saudi Arabia of today). The Arabs of Palestine had always been ruled by foreign occupiers, and, unlike the people of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, or Morocco, they did not cultivate a distinct national identity (until 1948, "Palestinians" was the name given to the Jews who settled in the land). Thus, it was easy for the founders of Zionism to relate to Palestine as empty territory, or, as one leader put it, "a land without a people, for a people without a land."

In contrast with this attitude, many early Jewish settlers were inspired by their

encounters with the local Arabs. Fascinated by the exotic appearance of the desert people, they cultivated a romantic notion of the Arab. Many of the pioneers sought to imitate the customs and dress of the Arabs as a way of integrating into the region and discovering ancient roots. Affinity with the Arabs was enhanced by the belief in a common Semitic racial background and a feeling that the native Arabs who adhered to old traditions might be authentic representatives or possibly direct descendants of biblical times. The nomadic Bedouin lifestyle especially was viewed as representative of the Hebrew Bible. These romantic fantasies about the Arabs were further supported by another belief—that many Arabs might be Jews who lost their Jewishness, following threats and oppression in the course of history, and that the Zionists might bring them back to Judaism.

A Historical View

World War I, when the British replaced the Ottoman Empire as a power in the Middle East, led to profound changes in the relationship between Arabs and Jews. The Balfour Declaration signified public, international recognition of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. At the same time, Arab nationalism spurred by the war began to be a factor in the region. As the Arabs of Palestine still generally lacked the political consciousness of being a separate nation, attacks against Jews were usually random acts of violence, including notorious massacres in Jaffa and Hebron. Nevertheless, it became clear that conflicts over the land were conflicts between two peoples, Arabs and Jews. It was a battle not over religion or economic questions or historical animosities, but simply over land. The U.N. plan to partition Palestine was accepted by the Jews “because half a loaf was better than no loaf” and rejected by the Arabs “because half a loaf wasn’t as good as a whole loaf,” as David Lamb writes in *The Arabs*.

When Israel declared independence in May 1948, the Zionists urged the Arabs of Israel “to preserve the ways of peace and play their part in the development of the State, on the basis of full and equal citizenship and due representation in its bodies and institutions.” But distrust ran deep—on both sides. By 1959, about half of the Arabs who had been living in Palestine in 1947 were in refugee camps in neighboring countries; of the other half, about one-fifth remained in Israel and the rest were living throughout the world as expatriates. After the Israeli victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel gained control over places like Judea and Samaria, known to Israelis through their Bible study, and also became the ruler of more than one million Palestinians.

Israel today has over a million Arab citizens, who comprise about one-sixth of the nation’s population. The Arabs who stayed in 1948, and their descendants, are citizens of the state. Israeli Arabs have the rights of Israeli citizens, including voting and serving in the Knesset. They are exempt from military service, but can volunteer. Most speak Hebrew as well as Arabic. But the socioeconomic gap between the two populations is wide. (It is necessary to distinguish between Israeli Arabs—who live within the Green Line, in small villages and in large cities, and are citizens of the

state—and those Arabs, or Palestinians, who live in the territories, on the West Bank and in Gaza; 95 percent of these Palestinians live in areas that are now administered by the Palestinian Authority.)

The Israeli desire to attain peace with the Arabs and end the occupation of the Palestinians in the territories taken in the Six-Day War led to a bold political arrangement, drafted in Oslo between mid-level representatives of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Nineteen ninety-three was the year of the handshake between Arafat and Rabin on the White House lawn, which was followed in 1994 and 1995 with the withdrawal of Israeli troops from Gaza and the major cities in the West Bank and transfer of ruling power to PLO forces. The Oslo process was seen as a ray of hope for peace by its supporters, and as a dangerous gamble by its opponents. The anxieties accompanying the accords with Arafat were intensified by a series of deadly terrorist bombings that began in 1994, shortly after the arrival of PLO fighters from abroad and the withdrawal of Israel security forces from Gaza and most of the West Bank. The arrival of more than fifty thousand Palestinian fighters into the territories, the new ability of the Palestinians to collect arms and organize terrorist groups, and their new freedom to control educational programs and their own media—a control used to spread hatred and incitement against Israel—altered the balance of power.

The most recent war began in 2000 after Palestinian leader Arafat rejected Israeli offers to end the conflict in a two-state solution, insisting on the return of millions of Palestinians to the Jewish state. Less than ten years after the beginning of the Oslo process, the majority of Israelis (including those from the Left who supported the Oslo process) favor a plan of physical separation between the Palestinians and Israel. The vision of peaceful coexistence was replaced by a strong desire to keep the two sides far away from each other, as Israelis witnessed the high cost of coexistence in terms of security and terrorist casualties. As of this writing, hopes for peace are difficult to sustain, amid deep apprehension about the stability and very viability of the Jewish state.

A Literary View

Conscious and unconscious attitudes toward the Arabs, ranging from an identification with the indigenous population to their demonization as an eternal enemy, have been expressed in various forms of Hebrew culture—literature, theater, poetry, popular songs, and films. In these works, much is revealed about the Israeli Jewish character as well as the Arab. The presence of the Arabs is a reminder of political conflicts, wars, and the high price paid in the victorious struggle for national survival. The issue of control—whether in the form of military rule, economic domination, or simply a sense of cultural superiority—over a different population, raises, for many Israelis, moral questions and anxiety about the future shape of the Jewish state. These issues are confronted in many texts that deal with Arab characters.

Early Zionist writers debated the implications of the notion of “a land without a people.” A.D. Gordon, a Hebrew writer and Zionist philosopher who moved to

Palestine in 1904, believed that the recreation of a state based in morality would be the Jewish people's contribution to mankind, and that the crucial test of that morality was the Jews' treatment of the Arabs. He wrote: "Our attitude toward them must be one of humanity, of moral courage which remains on the highest plain, even if the behavior of the other side is not all that is desired. Indeed their hostility is all the more a reason for our humanity." In later years, terrorist atrocities and full scale wars designed to obliterate the Jewish state would create special challenges to Gordon's call.

While a few writers (notably Ahad Ha'am) argued that Arab inhabitants held claims which would have to be acknowledged and dealt with, most believed that Jewish settlement and, especially, cultivation of the land established Jewish rights. Concern with Arab interests, moreover, was widely criticized as a continuation of the Diaspora habit of considering the interests of others above those of the Jews. In general, the fundamental belief in the redemption of the land as a means to the redemption of the Jewish people overcame expressed concerns about Arab rights and about the possibility or even inevitability of future conflicts.

From the end of World War I until 1948 (the period of the British Mandate) the requirements of the movement to establish a Jewish state in Palestine resulted in more pragmatic attitudes toward the Arabs. Increasingly during these years, Hebrew culture tended to treat the Arab as an obstacle to the Zionist enterprise. There were many literary stories about pioneers ploughing the fields, killed by an Arab bullet shot from an ambush (see the reference to *This is the Land* in the Appendix). For many writers who settled in the land, the local Arab echoed the threats of the persecuting gentiles in Europe. In the Hebrew press, terrorist acts against Jews were occasionally covered with expressions of intense animosity toward the Arabs, reflecting their new status as enemies and offsetting the earlier romantic fascination. However, the chief enemies before 1948 were still considered to be the Nazis and the British who controlled Palestine and appeared to favor the Arabs' side (as was seen in *Hill 24*).

The War of Independence brought another reality, and some remarkable responses. The Israeli victories and the flight of the Arabs from their homes generated, amid the dominant tone of triumphalism and jubilation, literary pieces filled with condemnation of Israeli troops and compassion for the plight of the Arabs (best known are the works of S. Yizhar, "The Prisoner" and "Hirbat Hizah"). Some denounced these works as undermining the moral basis of the new state, while ignoring the fact that it was Arab armies massed at the border that had invaded. Others considered the texts admirable expressions of Jewish morality and universal humanism, reluctant to ignore the moral price involved in the conduct of the victorious military. What is extraordinary is that at the very beginning of the existence of the Jewish state, Israeli writers assumed the position of modern prophets, taking it upon themselves to express the claims of a national conscience. Still, as some critics have pointed out, their attitudes toward Arab characters were somewhat patronizing. In this literature, the Arab exists only through the eyes and the perspective of Israeli Jews, and his presence functions to highlight the moral dilemmas of the Jews.

Israeli literature of the 1960s (most notably Amos Oz and A.B. Yehoshua) introduced a new phase in the formation of the image of the Arab, within a literary trend that addressed existentialist dilemmas and explored philosophical alternatives to a strictly national identity. In Yehoshua's novella "Facing the Forests," a history student working as a fire-watcher completing his thesis on the Crusades develops a special relationship with an old mute Arab and his daughter, whose village had been located in the place where the forest is now planted. When the Arab burns down the forest, it is with the tacit approval of the Israeli protagonist, who has seen the evidence of the Arab's intention but did nothing to prevent it. On the political level, the story seems to question the right of the Israelis to the land (a favorite claim of Israel's detractors is that Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel can be compared to the temporary presence of the Christian Crusaders). On another level, the author depicts the complexity of human personality and the self-destructive tendencies of an existentialist malaise. The Arab retains the attributes of native, enemy, and victim, but he still believes in something, even if it belongs to the vanished past.

In several other key works, the Arab becomes a symbol of repressed energies and sexual passion. Oz's first novel, *My Michael*, focuses on a young woman consumed by the dull character of her husband (a student completing his doctorate) and seeking to escape the depressing boredom of her existence. Her desires culminate in orgasmic fantasies about the Arab twins who were her neighbors and friends during her childhood at the time of the British Mandate. The sexual motif is also central in Oz's short story "Nomad and Viper," in which a young kibbutz woman encounters a dark Bedouin and fantasizes a rape.

After 1967, the Arab residents of the territories taken by Israel in the Six-Day War entered Israeli reality with a new intensity. Vastly increased contacts between Jews and Arabs became a daily occurrence in the Old City of Jerusalem, at Israeli farms and construction sites where Arab workers were hired, and in the territories where Israeli soldiers patrolled, and frequently became targets of, the local population. These contacts, while bringing the groups closer together, have also heightened awareness of disparities in political, social, and economic life, and have intensified tensions, resentments, suspicion, and fear on both sides.

The most significant change in the literary treatment of the Arab as a result of these increased contacts is that the previously romanticized, metaphorical views have been replaced with a more realistic depiction of those who have become an integral element of Israeli life. Yehoshua's *The Lover*, a novel revolving around the events of the Yom Kippur War, features a love affair between the protagonist's daughter and an Arab youth, who is a multifaceted character and one of the narrators of the story. Hebrew literature has also been enriched by the rise of a new generation of authors who came from Arab countries (Amnon Shamush, Sammy Michael, Shimon Balas), whose representation of Arabs is based on personal experiences and authentic childhood memories. In addition, Arab authors writing in Hebrew (for example, Anton Shammas) have created texts of Israeli Arab life that have become part of Israeli

Hebrew culture. Contemporary authors create Arab characters whose presence and significance are not necessarily subordinated to the perspective and psychology of Israeli characters.

Israeli writers in the last three decades have expressed growing identification with Arabs along with profound anxieties regarding the future of Israel. The literary and artistic scene in Israel has been dominated by artists whose political convictions tend to be critical of Israeli policies and sympathetic to the Arab predicament. In a positive sense, this perspective seeks to find bridges for peace based on self-criticism, mutual recognition of national rights, and the cultivation of compassion for the other side in the conflict. In more extreme form, it focuses on the presumed guilt of Israel and innocence of the Arabs, asserting Israel's failure to assimilate into the culture of the Arab Middle East, and doubting the validity of Zionism itself.

A View Toward the Future

At a time of rapidly changing relationships between Israel and its Arab foes, realistically assessing the prospects for true peace with the Arabs is of crucial importance. The agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is, in the view of its supporters, a long-delayed recognition of the legitimacy of Palestinian claims and an acknowledgment that the role of an occupation force requires a moral toll that Israeli society is unwilling to pay. In the eyes of opponents, the agreement represents instead a rapprochement with a terrorist organization, involving unacceptable risks and even a rejection of the basic tenet of Zionism—the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty over the Land of Israel. The current development of new dealings with the Arabs has been built in part on the work of Israeli writers and artists who have emphasized the moral aspects of Jewish experience. This is perhaps a fitting example of the Jewish tradition that assigns to poets and prophets a central role in shaping the future of the people. Whether these attitudes provide a wise path to a safe and tranquil future, or turn out to be idealistic but shortsighted, remains to be seen.

The Oslo process was followed by considerable doubt, apprehension, and loss of national solidarity among Israelis of different convictions, intensifying debates about security, territory, and the nature of the Jewish state. The wish for real peace is universal, but the risks are also great and the possibility of failure is ever-present. The film *Fictitious Marriage* explores Israeli attitudes toward the Arabs, reexamining stereotyped images and posing some very contemporary questions about trust, mistrust, and the difficult decisions that lie along the way toward peace and reconciliation.



ictitious Marriage

Feature film, 1988

Director: Haim Bouzaglo
 Producer: Micha Sharfstein
 Screenplay: Haim Bouzaglo and
 Yossi Savaya

Eldad: Shlomo Bar-Aba
 Judy: Irit Sheleg

Running time: 90 minutes

As the title suggests, nothing in this film is as it seems.

The story of one man's midlife crisis, *Fictitious Marriage* is also a tale of the dilemmas besetting the prosperous urban society of contemporary Israel. Through both humor and drama, the film turns familiar characters and situations around 180 degrees, allowing us to see and consider the reverse side of what we may think we know.

The film's protagonist, Eldad Natan, is a Jerusalem high school teacher, husband, and father, who instead of leaving on a planned vacation in America becomes an anonymous person in Tel Aviv. His experiences in his new identity yield fresh insights about himself, his society, and the Arabs.

In the beginning Eldad is an everyman. A typical Israeli, he fills his suitcase with the Bible, a military uniform, and a record of The Pale Tracker—Israel's most popular comedy group, whose repertoire has become part of the Israeli vocabulary and sense of humor. Clearly, he has a pleasant family, a spacious house, and a good job. The nature of Eldad's crisis is not specified, although his wife suggests that it may have begun when he returned in a confused state from reserve duty (generally understood to refer to service in the territories).

After leaving his suitcase on a table in the airport—abandoned luggage being a telltale sign of terrorism—Eldad watches as a robot approaches to defuse the possible bomb. Inside are the clothing and tapes.

Changing Places

Instead of taking an airliner to America, Eldad takes a taxi

to the Hotel California in Tel Aviv. Pursuing his charade, he signs the register with an address in New York. The desk clerk, a cheerful, eager Arab, offers the typical excuses for a mediocre hotel in perpetual renovation. He ingratiatingly points out to the newly arrived tourist a photograph of the Western Wall. In a rapid-fire exchange of Middle Eastern courtesies, he speaks heavily Arabic-accented Hebrew—peppered with *Baruch haShem*—while Eldad shows off Hebrew-accented Arabic.

Judy, the hotel manager, is overjoyed with the new guest. Assuming that he will bring her one step closer to her dream of America, she tries to do everything to make this American happy, practicing her English and delivering fast food to his room on roller skates. He will not disillusion her with the truth.

A comic example of someone ready to go to any length to pursue the American dream, Judy also represents certain truths about Israeli society. She first articulates the American dream in materialistic terms: microwave, dishwasher, percolator, vibrator. But in a second conversation on the subject, she expresses a touching sentiment about the freedom that America represents for her. Eldad only pretends to share Judy's enthusiasm for America. He escapes instead within his own country, learning about its "other side."

Eldad allows himself to simply let things happen—resulting in all kinds of unexpected experiences. Repeatedly, he is taken for someone other than he is, a circumstance he allows to lead wherever it will. A fantasy life without the fantasy, we never sense that Eldad dreamed of this escape; rather, it seems almost to play out of its own accord. In a chance encounter with an elderly man on a park bench, Eldad seeks wisdom from the older character. The man declares, "It's a bloody country, makes no sense, and has no solution." Eldad asks, "So how do you cope, what do you do?" The answer from the sage: "You do the simple and usual things."

Recruited for an Arab work crew, Eldad climbs on the back of a truck as it pulls away. His wife, who is searching for him with a bumbling investigator (a mockery of Israeli intelligence agents) passes him in a car. She does not see him; he is out of context, invisible.

Wife: *How was your flight?*

Eldad: *I didn't feel a thing. As if I didn't fly.*

Judy: *Look, in America you can be just anybody. You can dream up an idea, and it's like a crane that picks you way up, high above, and you feel like a king. Here, you dream up an idea, the crane picks you up, you knock your head and fall down.*

With the Arabs, Eldad pretends he cannot speak, so as not to betray his Israeli accent. Clumsily, he joins in the manual labor at a construction site, witnessing the arrogant, insulting Israeli owners who come to criticize the work. He tries to squat like the Arabs but cannot. With the others, he spies on an Israeli woman, a painter, dressing before the window of a nearby apartment.

Eldad leads a double-double life—as American and Arab. He doubly fulfills a fantasy, with two women not his wife—a fantasy it isn't clear he had. He enjoys Judy's free, flaky spirit; she likes the idea that he's American. She thinks he'll marry her and get her a green card; his desires are more immediate. He is seduced by the painter, who is clearly proud of defying social norms by having an affair with an Arab, acting out (or so she thinks) the vulgar jokes about Arabs she tells her friends.

Israelis and Arabs

Like many films of the political cinema, *Fictitious Marriage* presents an Israeli uncertain of his identity and Arabs who seem more connected both to one another and to the land. Suggestions of malaise in Israeli society—Judy's dreams of escape, the painter's coarseness, the investigators' clownish behavior, Eldad's vague discontent—are contrasted with the simple aspirations of the Arabs.

The Arabs appear generally more sympathetic than the Israelis, who desire material and sexual goods and are unsure of their place in their own country. Portrayed as hard workers, united in mutual support and camaraderie, they are shown doing simple things: working, eating, and emotionally supporting their families. Despite suffering from poverty and discrimination, they accept Eldad as one of their own.

Eldad experiences the predicament of the Arabs when he, with the others, is locked in at the worksite at night, and when he visits Gaza with one of the workers. There he sees poverty and misery, with Israeli soldiers patrolling the muddy lanes. He goes fishing with some of the Arabs, who haul in along with the fish a tire, which one of them comments is "for the Jewish kids."

The fishing scene in Gaza, showing the boat in the sea and birds in the sky, accompanied by exquisite romantic

Bashir: *If you walk the way,
you'll arrive.*

music, suggests a union with nature characteristic of the pioneering years, now lost to the Israelis. Bashir, the hotel worker, is the one Arab who seeks to adopt the Israeli way of life, becoming excessively friendly with Israelis, rooting for the national basketball team, and watching cultural programs on Hebrew literature. He is an Israeli wannabe, just as Judy wants to be American. Nevertheless, he turns down Judy's offer of a ticket to America, declaring that he cannot go because he cannot leave his homeland.

But the Arabs' simplicity can also be seen as childlike, the patronizing conception of an Israeli filmmaker. The Arab characters are two-dimensional, undifferentiated in their personalities, desires, or opinions. The workers serve as a kind of chorus, an echo for the main characters around whom the drama revolves.

Seeing the World Through the Eyes of the "Other"

The film explores on many levels the notion of crossing boundaries and transforming one's own identity.

When Eldad, imagining that the tire swing fashioned by the Arabs contains a bomb, breaks his silence, he reveals his identity—and his mistrust. A look of abject apology and guilt appears on his face, deep disappointment on the faces of the Arabs.

As he returns to his family, Eldad has learned, perhaps, who he is and who he is not. The soundtrack sings of the human quest for happiness and dreams for change. Seeing his son squatting, Arab-fashion, in play, Eldad smiles. Maybe the next generation can make the transition.

Judy: *Darling, what will I wear
to a fictitious marriage?*

While you watch, consider . . .

- ◆ What aspects of the film are humorous?
- ◆ What events in the film surprise you?
- ◆ What does America represent to the different characters?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Does Eldad succeed in escaping from his identity as an Israeli Jew, husband, father, high school teacher? Do you think that it's ever possible to escape from one's true identity? What does he learn from his experiences?
- ◆ How does this film address the relationships between the individual and society, Israelis and Arabs, Israel and the Diaspora? What is common to the treatment of all three?
- ◆ What is the significance of the title? What other "marriages" might it refer to?
- ◆ Do you think that some of the roles in this film might have been switched? For example, could an Arab manage to blend in with a group of Israelis as Eldad did? Would Jewish men have the same interest in an Arab woman as the Arabs did in the Jewish painter?
- ◆ What are the values of the Jewish characters in the film? How do they compare with the Arabs? How do they compare with the earlier generation of Israelis, as seen in *Hill 24 Doesn't Answer*?
- ◆ This film is framed by two imagined bombs. What does it suggest about trust and mistrust, the need for security, and the need to overcome longstanding assumptions about Arabs and Jews? Eldad turns out to be mistaken in his suspicion of the Arabs. But undeniably there have been, and continue to be, cases where Arab terrorists infiltrated Israel and brought on great destruction of innocent life, including the lives of children. Do you think the suggestions implied in the film are realistic?
- ◆ This film was praised by the Left and criticized by the Right in Israel. Do you think the film portrays Israeli society in a negative light, or is it a fair presentation of a difficult political situation?
- ◆ Consider the final image of Eldad's son squatting like

the Arabs. Is it an expression of new family harmony, a promise of a better future between Jews and Arabs—or something else? What do you think are the prospects for better economic, social, and political relations between Arabs and Jews?