

A worthy tribe



By YIZHAR HESS

06/07/2016 American society is pulsating with Jewish life, culture and scholarship. Leading Israelis, quite properly, have been paying increased attention to recognizing the importance of Mizrahi (Sephardi) music, poetry, culture and overall contributions to Jewish life. Both the Education Ministry and Culture and Sports Ministry have created new committees and prizes to stress the significances of Mizrahi contributions to all aspects of Israeli life, and to Jewish life throughout the world.

All of this is wonderful – and surely deserved. But think for a moment about another community, ironically generally Ashkenazi, that has also for years been subject to neglect and even scorn. I refer to American Jews, half the Jewish population of the world.

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Yet Israeli government ministers, with impunity, refer to large numbers of American Jews as clowns or dogs. And what happens then (if anything)? Perhaps an exceedingly gentle slap on the wrist. Can you imagine what would happen if the same government officials made the same comments about Mizrahi Jews? Are American Jews, largely Conservative and Reform and historically so supportive of the State of Israel, the only ones upon whom it is permitted for Israeli officials to heap abuse and disdain? What a wonderful Jewish history there is in America. Jews first arrived in America after the expulsion from Spain, but the largest movement occurred between 1880 to 1935. Two million Jews (yes, two million) emigrated from Europe to the US. That is the largest wave of immigration in Jewish history. For the sake of comparison, in exactly the same years, the first to fifth aliyot (waves of immigration based on the Zionist ideal) arrived in Palestine; altogether, they numbered 300,000 (and a considerable number of them went back to their land of origin). Our Israeli education system, quite rightly, taught us about the individual characteristics of each and every one of these five waves of immigration. That is how these mass movements became legendary.

But that same education system patronizingly largely ignored the “mass aliya” and grouped all the Mizrahi Jews together under one wave of immigration. Today, therefore, the promotion of Mizrahi Jewish culture to a distinguished place in the educational syllabus is truly the correction of an historical wrong.

But has the cultural heritage of only one diaspora been ignored? While most American Jews remained in

America, Masorti and Reform Jews are no longer an insignificant minority in Israel. More than seven percent of Israeli Jews today describe themselves as Masorti and Reform (about the same number as call themselves Haredi). Polls clearly show that a majority of Israelis want to see government recognition of Masorti and Reform and acceptance of their rabbis, conversions and marriages.

If Israel is, indeed, the national homeland of the Jewish people, can half the Jews in the world be ignored? Why is it more legitimate to be excited about a Tunisian hymn that has been lost, and then found, than to remember fondly the grace after meals from Camp Ramah or the tunes of the wonderful singer Debbie Friedman, a cantor on whose tunes half the Jewish people grew up? Why are the moderate, learned judgements of Mizrahi rabbis worthy of investment, and not the egalitarian religious revolution which enabled women to become rabbis, and has changed the Jewish people for generations? This is no accident. This is an intentional cultural rejection of half of the Jewish people, simply because in North America there grew a form of non-Orthodox Judaism that is both religiously committed and liberal; a form of Judaism that, heaven forbid, has proven that there is more than one way to be a Jew.

And what have we missed? Goodness, so very much. Rich, Jewish culture, with music, instructive literature, amazing rabbinical judgements, revolutionary attitudes toward religion, which have written a significant chapter in the dialogue between man and God (and at the same time saved the Jewish people from assimilation); but, most of all, we have missed the substance of the State of the Jews. The national home of a people is a place that knows, that must know how to respect and to appreciate the culture, the customs and the heritage of all Jews.

Otherwise it is not a national home.

Yes, the “American Jewish Community” is also a worthy ethnic group.

It might sound funny, but it most assuredly is not.

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