

“This Heritage must be Saved from Oblivion”: The Hebrew University, the National Library of Israel, and the Manuscripts of the Jews of Yemen

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Introduction

On December 20, 1946, historian Shlomo Dov Goitein (1900-1985), from the Institute of Oriental Studies at Hebrew University, sent a letter to the chancellor of the university, Judah Leib Magnes, discussing the “dear and poor” Jews of Yemen who, a few short months earlier, had begun to flee hunger and poverty-stricken north Yemen to the British protectorate of Aden in southern Yemen. Perhaps, he added, they will need assistance to preserve their cultural treasures (Lavie 2007, 200-201). Three years later, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi (1884-1963), founder of the Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East and later the second president of the State of Israel, visited the transit camp in southern Yemen. Among other things, he wanted to examine the spiritual assets that the Yemenite Jews brought with them to Aden and to explore the possibility of transferring them to the institute that he managed.¹

Between December 1948 and September 1950, about 50,000 of the Jews of Yemen emigrated to Israel. Upon their immigration, they lost most of the manuscripts and books that they owned (Levitan 1991; Nevo 1991). Under the wings of nationalism and under the auspices of dialectical and Orientalist imagery, the spiritual assets of the Jews of Yemen were appropriated to serve as relics of the Jewish past in its original ancient form. Simultaneously the Yemenites themselves were proclaimed savage and backward, ignorant and primitive, the Arabs among the Jews but also the bearers and preservers of ancient Hebrew culture (Stillman 2002, 64) and “the most Jewish of all the Jews” (Goitein 1983, 6). Paradoxically, the native “authenticity” of the Jews of Yemen, raised on a pedestal, was also targeted by the Zionist revolution as a project of “rehabilitating” and changing their Jewish identity, which was closely bound to a denial of the East and its culture (Chinski 1997, 194). This was an expression of Zionism’s ambivalent attitude to the past of Diaspora Jewry: on the one hand, the perception of the present as the realization of fundamentals that existed

¹ Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, “Four Days with Yemenite Immigrants”, ISA, N-5/2.

throughout Jewish history but could not be realized in exile, and on the other hand, a perception of the past as worthless and as an expression of a flawed and partial reality. The Zionist attitude toward Eastern Jews (*Mizrahim*) - the simultaneous implementation of strategies of inclusion and exclusion, absorbing exiles through cultural marginalization and reeducation (Shitrit 2007, 25) - made its mark on this affair: Orientalist admiration of the culture of the Jews of Yemen, and even of the Yemenite Jews themselves as the original representatives of Judaism, was consistent with an effort to detach them from their past and their culture (Alcalay 1993, 221). The bulk of their cultural assets fell into the hands of private dealers, collectors, research institutions and libraries around the world, and some 430 manuscripts reached the National Library in Jerusalem and the Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East (Toby 1982, 12). This affair, according to Yehuda Nini, researcher of Yemenite Jewry, was surrounded by a “conspiracy of silence,” mainly due to the involvement of private individuals, including prominent figures in the Israeli establishment (personal interview, January 21, 2010).

The Jews of Yemen and Zionism, 1881-1950

In 1881, the Jews of Yemen began to arrive in Palestine / the Land of Israel. The initial immigration from Yemen was driven by religious-Messianic feelings (Vital 1978). It was not associated with the Zionist movement, its emissaries or its institutions, and national concepts played a minor role (Zurieli 1997, 82; Eraqi Klorman, 2006, 511-513). In fact, until the end of World War II, the Zionist movement expressed little interest in the Jews of Yemen: the political Zionist idea was born in Europe, under conditions that existed in Europe and were foreign to Arab and Islamic countries. Only once the proportions of the annihilation in Europe gradually became evident, and realizing that it would be impossible to rely on the Jews of Europe as a basis for mass immigration, did the Zionist movement turn to Middle Eastern Jewry (Hacohen 1994A, 205-209).

However, since the late nineteenth century, Eastern and Arab Jews, especially the Jews of Yemen, were designated to serve as the labor force of the Zionist project, as “natural laborers” who might appropriate the labor in the towns from the Arabs (Hacohen 1994A, 130-158; Gilat 2002). Paternalism and ignorance were consistent with the search for romantic and autochthonic elements: the adherence of the Jews of Yemen to tradition, their appearance, their isolation from other Jewish communities,

and their Hebrew all made it possible to believe that this was the authentic Hebrew tribe, confirming the relationship between the Jewish People and its past and the ownership of the Land of Israel; a tribe which, with its vitality and strength, would inject new blood into the depleted Jewish population of Europe (Berlowitz 1996, 82; Kamoon 2001, 139).

On the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel about 50,000 Jews lived in Yemen, scattered in dozens of villages, towns and cities (Hacohen 1994B, 56). The initiative for bringing the Jews of Yemen to Israel came from institutions of the Zionist movement and the State of Israel, not from the Jewish communities in Yemen. Again it was necessary to encourage the Jews to leave, and functionaries and emissaries in Yemen “organized” the pursuit of redemption: Yitzhak Zadok, the Jewish Agency emissary, used Arab messengers to distribute letters of redemption among Jewish communities and instructed them on how to get to Aden, where the Hashed transit camp was set up; Yitzhak Raphael reported to the Jewish Agency Executive that two messengers had been sent to Yemen in order to influence the Jews not to come in large groups, since it was impossible to arrange for all of them to immigrate simultaneously. Later, when the stream of immigrants dwindled, he reported that Arab messengers had been hired to “hasten” the departure of the Jews (Segev 1984, 177). Upon arrival at the transit camp in Aden, the refugees were forced to undress. They were given other clothes in their stead, foreign to them, some of which had been brought from Israel, in a European style, the likes of which they had never worn (ibid, 179). The small medical team brought from Israel could not cope with the appalling mortality rate in the camp.² Yosef Meir, director general of the Ministry of Health who visited Aden, wrote in an internal memo of the Ministry of Health that no one knew how many patients there were. “Some of them manage to get to the clinic to get a bandage or a shot of quinine or penicillin. Others die where they are, mostly old men and women.” He added that the camp had no kitchen or dining room. He noted that the “more cultured” Yemenites, those from Sana’a, had primus stoves.³ The crowding was also unbearable: in mid-1949, the camp, which was set up as a way station for 500 people, contained about 12,000 refugees, and by September the camp’s inhabitants numbered over 13,000 (Jewish Agency 1950, 23). The Jews of Yemen were also asked to give the religious texts, Judaica and jewelry in their

² For information about the mortality rates and living conditions in Aden, see Jewish Agency 1950, 23.

³ ISA, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2397/15.

possession to the staff; They were assured that their property would be returned to them on their arrival in Israel.⁴

The first immigrants from Yemen arrived in Israel on December 17, 1948. At the time, Israeli institutions were dealing with questions of occupancy and absorption, and the fear of demographic and cultural changes brewing with the arrival of large numbers of Jews from Arab countries and the Orient to Israel. Government ministers and Knesset members, journalists, managers of government institutions, and academics took part in the discourse. Most of them shared the concern over the effect of immigration on the character of the young nation, and over the Levantization and Orientalization of the Jewish state. Many of them pointed out the danger of destroying Israeli society's cultural, social and economic achievements (Lisak 1986). Academics were also involved. Intellectuals, researchers and field workers dedicated themselves to supplying evidence of the inferiority of Jews from Middle Eastern countries, thereby establishing the systematic and institutional discrimination against Jews from places other than Eastern Europe and granting it scientific and objective validity (Bernstein 1978; Swirski 1995, 9-71). In anthropological research, exotica gave way to targeting the Eastern Jew as a "problem" and to seeking ways to solve it. The discourse on hygiene, disseminated by physicians and by health and welfare organizations, was an important instrument in shaping the Orientalist distinction between European Jews and so-called "Oriental" Jews, presented as having no habits of hygiene and as having chosen to live in filth and muck - evidence of primitivism, moral degeneration and a lack of culture (Rozin 2002; Shenhav and Yona 2008, 41). Sociologists and education researchers, all native to Central or Eastern Europe, including Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (1923-2010), Carl Frankenstein (1905-1990), Akiva Ernst Simon (1899-1988), Reuven Feuerstein (1921-2014), Nathan Rottenstreich (1914-1993) and others, developed academic explanations for the "backwardness" and "cultural inferiority of the Eastern Jews" (Swirski 1981, 50-55). The researchers were convinced about the steps to be taken: the immigrants were required to undergo processes of socialization and modernization. They were ordered to break away from their past, their language, their former social relationships and their traditions, and to embrace a new modern identity through imitation and assimilation and via a contradictory and complementary process of desocialization and resocialization.

⁴ Levitan 1991; Nevo 1991; Lavie 2007, 200.

“They stole children. Why wouldn’t they also steal holy books?”⁵

Libraries and synagogue archives in Yemen were full of holy books and ancient manuscripts. The Torah literature included the Old Testament, Mishnah and Talmud, commentaries on Jewish texts, the Zohar and books by religious arbiters - most notably Maimonides, who was accepted in Yemen as a paramount religious authority in the twelfth century. Since there were no printing presses in Yemen until the early twentieth century, most of the writings of the Jews of Yemen were handwritten, some were ancient manuscripts passed down from one generation to the next (Levitan 1991, 11). According to Yehuda Ratzaby, an expert on Yemen poetry, Yemenite Jewry was known primarily for collecting and preserving the spiritual values of the centers of Judaism - first the Babylonian sages, later the poets of the Spanish school and finally Maimonides (Ratzaby 1988, 35). Alongside commentary on the Bible (“Midrash”), poetry was the most prominent creative “industry” of the Jews of Yemen. The leader in this area was Shalom Shabazi, whose poetry centered on themes of exile and redemption, the Torah and the Land of Israel, Kabbalistic symbolism and the hereafter (Wagner 2007, 234).

In May 1949, Jewish Agency representatives in Aden reported that those who came to the camp brought thousands of books and 300 Torah scrolls with them. “A special envoy from the Immigration Department sorted the books and had them packed. At the earliest opportunity of these assets would be sent to the Land of Israel.”⁶ At that time, the first complaints were made about damage to the property of the Jews of Yemen, including theft and misappropriation of books, Judaica, manuscripts and jewelry, by camp employees and goods suppliers from among the Jews of Aden. Israeli staff members, mostly from Central and Western Europe, also adopted a colonial attitude toward the Jewish refugees and often treated them in a patronizing and racist manner (Parfitt 2001).

In November 1949, a delegation from the Central Association of Yemenites in Israel went to Aden. The members of the delegation concluded that some of the employees at Geula (redemption) Camp had taken advantage of the Yemenites’ panic and stolen Torah scrolls and manuscripts (Central Association of Yemenites in Israel

⁵ Yosef Dachoach-Halevy, interview, 17.5.2009.

⁶ ISA, Gal-426/340.

1950, 11). In a letter to the office of the Joint Distribution Committee in Tel Aviv from April 1950 (hereafter "Joint"), the heads of the Association wrote that the prevailing consensus so far on collecting the manuscripts and books and returning them to their owners in Israel was in danger: "Now we have begun to receive reports that someone wants to be or is proposing himself as a guardian for the above property or for it to be sent to Israel in his name and so on. We would like to inform you that there will be strong opposition to this on the part of our institution and the public at large. We inform you once again that caution must be exercised in this delicate matter [...]."⁷ The representatives of the Joint replied that the organization intended to establish a committee comprising representatives of all interested parties, which would handle the redistribution of the spiritual assets.⁸

Rabbi Yechiel Omisi, head of the rabbinical court and spiritual leader of Rada community in Yemen, came to Israel in early 1950. Before boarding the plane, he deposited the community's ten Torah scrolls with the director of the insurance agency in the Israeli government. When he came to pick them up at the Jewish Agency warehouses in Tel Aviv, he found that nothing was left of them. In September of that year, in a letter to the Jewish Agency, Omisi summoned the "earls and Judges of Israel": "On arrival [...] the packages were disassembled, and the crates were shattered and sacks were torn and the scrolls and valuables were stolen. Such a great disgrace is like the disgrace of the concubine at Gibeah, how [the Torah scrolls] were preserved in the land of the Arabs, and in the Land of Israel, the place of the Hebrews, they were stolen" (quoted in Zadok 1985, 248). A quarter of a century later, Omisi claimed to have discovered one of the Torah scrolls in the shop of a bookseller in Jerusalem (Ben-Yosef 1991, 53).

In the second half of 1950, the Joint built warehouses for books and manuscripts in Jaffa and Kurdani, near Haifa. However, when the Jews of Yemen asked for their property, the officials turned them away on various pretexts; Sometimes, books that were in the warehouse disappeared the next day (Levitan 1991, 11). In the words of Rabbi Yahya Alsheich, a prominent Yemenite rabbi:

We went to the port of Jaffa to ask for the books and Torah scrolls. They said: Bring evidence that these are books and Torah scrolls from your synagogue. We had a big synagogue in Sana'a. Before we immigrated to Israel, we put the

⁷Joint Distribution Committee Archive (hereinafter JA), MALBEN, 126.

⁸ Ibid.

holy books into crates [...] on every book we wrote: “property of the Alsheich Synagogue.” So I said: What evidence do you want?! Our names are on the books. They said: Bring notes from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Prove to us that you have a place to store them. Then I came again, and they said: There was a fire, the books were burned, don’t go in. I didn’t believe it. They threatened me. They said that if I continued to nag they would make me pay the cost of immigrating to Israel (Nevo 1991, 15).

Meir Korach, grandson of Rabbi Amram Korach, told a reporter from the newspaper *Yated Ne’eman*:

You can only imagine what a library we had. There were ancient books on parchment, 700-800 years old. My brother went dozens of times to find out what happened with the books and one day showed us some burnt books. But all the pages were printed, and there was not even one handwritten manuscript, not to mention Torah scrolls or ancient parchments. I never believed that the books were burned. We had the feeling that we had been swindled (Brock 1990, 12).

Indeed, many tended to doubt the reports that a fire broke out in the Jaffa warehouse in 1950. They claim that a fire broke out only two years later, but it was staged and designed to convince the Jews of Yemen to accept the loss of their property. Moshe Nahum, President of the World Federation of the Jews of Yemen, said that in the summer of 1952, all the heads of the Yemenite community were invited to the port of Jaffa:

They stood on the hill and suddenly, right before their eyes, the warehouse where the books were ostensibly stored burst into flames. I was a boy of 15 at the time. I saw the grief of my father and grandfather and so I ran and jumped over the barbed wire fence [...] I kept running into the burning warehouse with a bucket of water. I found full burlap sacks inside [...] I grabbed two sacks and emerged from the flames. And then I opened the sacks, and inside them, instead of manuscripts and holy books I found a novel [...] and rags and newspapers (Cohen, 2007).

Meir Korach said that a few years later he discovered some of the “burnt” books in the shop of Moshe Schwartz, a bookseller in Mea Shearim. “I went to Schwartz,” he said, “and I saw Grandpa’s manuscripts. I was in a state of shock [...] Schwartz took

me to his warehouse, showed me a few crates and said: ‘Here, have a look. I poked around, and what do I see? One ‘burnt’ book and another ‘burnt’ book. I set aside around 60 ‘burnt’ books, with the name of Amram Korach” (Nevo 1991, 15). Korach demanded a meeting with Pinchas Sapir, chairman of the Jewish Agency at the time: The moment I walked in he said in his booming voice: “Well, so what do you want?” I replied quietly: “a comprehensive official inquiry of all the people who were there.” “Don’t you have other things to deal with?” he said. “After 25 years you want a commission of inquiry? What’s your job? Do you like your job?” (ibid).

Korach replied to Sapir that time would not cover the crimes. Linking the loss of books to the disappearance of hundreds of babies, most of them of Yemenite origin, after being admitted to medical institutions and infants homes in 1949-1954 Korach added that he would be willing to give up the books if his sister who was kidnapped is returned (ibid.). “They stole children, why wouldn’t they also steal holy books?” said Yosef Dachoach-Halevy, editor of the periodical *Afikim* for the study of Yemenite Jewry (personal interview, May 17, 2009).

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Yosef Tobi, director of the Center for the Study of Yemenite Jewry at the Ben-Zvi Institute, notes that in 1967-1980, he purchased hundreds of manuscripts of Yemenite Jewish origin for the Institute (personal interview, March 7, 2010). When asked if he thought there was anything to the allegations that some of the manuscripts had been taken from their owners illegally, he replied that, “the general impression that I have formed in my dealings with Yemenite Jewry is that jewelry, books and children were stolen from the Jews of Yemen. The relationship between the heads of these institutions at the time and the heads of the Aliyah Department and other departments at the Jewish Agency, who were sometimes the same people, should be examined.” When asked whether he believes that the spiritual assets should be restored to their owners, he replied that “such a question should be referred to lawyers. In any case, from a moral standpoint the manuscripts should certainly be returned to their owners, if the manuscripts and their owners can be found” (ibid.).

“The most Jewish Jews of all”:⁹ SD Goitein and the Jews of Yemen

⁹Goitein 1983, 6.

In mid-September 1923, a ship sailed from Trieste bound for Alexandria, and from there to Palestine / the Land of Israel. On board were two young German Jews - Gershom Scholem and Shlomo Dov Goitein. Scholem disembarked in the port of Jaffa and set up residence in Jerusalem, while Goitein sailed to Haifa and spent the next five years teaching at the Hebrew Reali High School. In 1928, they were to meet again; At the time Scholem was the Director of the Institute of Jewish Studies at Hebrew University and Goitein was appointed lecturer at the university's Institute of Oriental Studies, later the Institute of Asian and African Studies. Their friendship, which lasted for over seven decades, overcame political differences: unlike Scholem and many of his colleagues, members of the first generation at Hebrew University, Goitein did not join Brit Shalom (the Jewish–Palestinian Peace Alliance), which was founded in 1925 and espoused the creation of a binational regime in Palestine, based on equal rights and autonomy for Jews and Arabs alike.

Shlomo Dov Goitein was born in Burgkunststadt, Bavaria, in April 1900, descended from a dynasty of scholars and the son of Eduard Goitein, rabbi, teacher and leader of the Jewish community. In his youth, he was a member of the Jewish youth movement, Blau Weiss. In 1923, he completed his doctoral thesis, *On Prayer in Islam*, at the University of Frankfurt, under the guidance of Orientalist Yosef Horowitz (1847-1931). Goitein made a name for himself, first and foremost, thanks to his pioneering and monumental research on the Cairo *Geniza*. The five volumes of *A Mediterranean Society* are a comprehensive description of the customs, daily life, culture and economy of communities along the Mediterranean, as reflected in the thousands of documents deposited and accumulated at the Ben-Ezra Synagogue in Fustat, Cairo, for a thousand years, from the ninth to the late nineteenth century (Goitein 2005). The volumes of *A Mediterranean Society*, a project of extraordinary scope on pre-modern and Near Eastern contemporary Jewish society, could not have been written without Goitein's prodigious knowledge of history - he was particularly influenced by the works of Fernand Braudel and Jacob Burckhardt - linguistics, Judaism and Islam (Lesnar 2005); At the same time, they also could not have been written had not European travelers and researchers, most of them Jews, emptied the Cairo Geniza and transferred it to libraries and museums in Europe and America.

But before making a study of Mediterranean society, Goitein was interested in information about "The dear Jewish tribe, the Yemenites" (Goitein 1983, 3). He felt that getting to know them was "one of the best gifts that he ever received" (ibid.).

Goitein related that his first encounter with Yemenites took place in his hometown in Germany around 1910; he described it as a transformative moment that shaped his future work:

When I was a child of around ten, a traveling salesman visited our town, offering the products of the newly established Bezalel art school Jerusalem, and especially silver jewelry made by Yemenite artists. One of the items was a beautiful filigree pin that my parents, of blessed memory, very much wanted, but after a lengthy discussion they decided that the price was too high and the salesman left. When I saw this, I took all the savings that I had accumulated during my childhood [...] I ran after the salesman, bought the pin, and when my mother's birthday came, I gave her the pin. She wore it all her life (p. 6).

Goitein imagined the Yemenites as a primordial element which, by reason of isolation, was preserved as an object of “pure” research under sterile laboratory conditions, like “primitive” tribes that had not come in contact with the white man (Frankel 2002, 35). Due to geographical separation and socioeconomic isolation, he claimed, Yemenite Jewry remained in its original form from the period of the Talmud, “before being separated from the body of the nation” (Goitein 1983, 241). The Jews of Yemen, he added, are the authentic representatives of Judaism and preservers of Jewish religion and society in their original and early form and, therefore, the return of the Yemenites to the land of their forefathers not only redeemed their bodies; it marked the return of the entire Jewish people to its and authentic and primordial origins and spirit. Explaining his interest in the Jews of Yemen, Goitein wrote:

I wanted to explore pure Semitic speech, as can be found in the spoken language of Jews from Yemen, who came to Israel from a country in the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, without having had any real contact with the outside world [...] I assumed that the Hebrew elements of the spoken language of an autochthonous community, which was virtually unexposed to inter-Jewish migration, would constitute a rather interesting factor (Goitein 1983, 7-8).

Goitein's research on the Jews of Yemen is closely linked with the development of anthropology at the Hebrew University which, in the 1930s and the 1940s, combined the study of the biological aspects of the Jews and the Jewish race with science and the study of the social and cultural aspects of man (Abuhav 2005). Like Erich Brauer

and Raphael Patai, precursors of mainstream anthropology in Israel, Goitein's interest in Eastern Jews was a blend of nationalist feelings, scientific curiosity and romantic and Orientalist opinions. His studies were also influenced by changes at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem: until late 1940s, the Institute maintained a high degree of institutional and research autonomy. However, after the establishment of the State of Israel, it adapted itself to the new reality, designing a new model of State-sanctioned professionalism that sought to combine teaching and research on the one hand, and the training of officials, teachers and security personnel in the fields of Arabic and Islamic Studies on the other, focusing on Arab countries, Israeli Arabs, and Eastern Jews (Eyal 2002). Goitein saw himself as a "sociographer," describing ancient cultures according to their writings ("an interpreter of historical and social culture who relies on texts created by the people themselves" [Goitein 1966, 247]). For him the emigration of the Jews of Yemen provided ample scientific options. On October 22, 1949, he sent a proposal for a "comprehensive scientific enterprise" to the board of Hebrew University:

As you know, Yemenite Jewry has arisen as one man, leaving behind its property and home, and is making its way to Israel. A kind of messianic movement has taken hold of everyone. From the most remote villages men, women and children are running to Aden, even though everybody knows how terrible the situation is in a place that was not adapted to absorb these thousands. The main point: Yemenite Jewry is under threat of destruction [...] and if the unexpected does not happen, God forbid, one can assume that by the end of 1950 that murky valley will be emptied of its Jews [...] Yemenite Jewry was the oldest and the most deeply rooted diaspora. No group, especially so small in number, has such a characteristic and unique culture as they do. This heritage must be saved from oblivion and preserved in scientific research.¹⁰

The study, he added, will include six sections: history, religious literature, folk literature, arts and crafts, ways of life (education, family life, customs, etc) and anthropology - "photographs, measurements, blood tests, etc" (ibid.).

The very next day Goitein flew to Aden. Upon his return, he wrote to Harry (Zvi) Viteles at the office of the Joint in Paris that "it gave me a boost and an impetus for all scientific work in the field of study of Yemenite Jewry" (quoted in Rubinstein 1995, 39). He described his impressions of the trip in an article published in 1956:

¹⁰ ISA, P-3140/17.

“Despite my tendency to agree with the Talmudic adage that it would be better for a person not to be born at all, there are moments when it seems that one should be born nevertheless [...] in my life, the night that I first saw the Jews of Yemen at Hashed camp was such a moment” (Goitein 1956, 176). Goitein was thrilled with serenity of the Yemenites, but mainly was deeply impressed by the books that they brought with them:

When everyone had disembarked, it became evident that very little of their earthly possessions had survived the trials of the mass exodus. There was but one exception: books - Hebrew books, of course. On every truck there was a load: books printed in Venice, Amsterdam, Vienna, Vilna, Jerusalem, and many other places. Of all the amazing events of that night, this was perhaps the most significant. It revealed that these strange and wild-looking men from a remote district in lower Yemen were truly Jews who had taken their full share of the spiritual heritage of our forefathers (ibid, 177).

Goitein was not just a fascinated observer, but a historian and Orientalist who came to Aden to promote his ambitious undertaking. In February 1950, in an interview in the periodical *Scopus*, he said the trip made him quicken his pace in light of the unique opportunity that history had offered him. During his visit to Aden, he said he made the decision to complete the study quickly, because once they reached the Hashed camp and received new clothes instead of their traditional ones, the process of exposure to Western culture inevitably began, dimming their unique characteristics (Rubinstein 1995, 45). Many years later he noted that the splitting up of the original communities by State institutions made it “impossible to conduct systematic ethnolinguistic research” (Goitein 1983, 11).

In January 1950, Goitein’s efforts to join a scientific expedition which left for Aden failed (Rubinstein 1995, 69), but he continued to work on his research at the Institute of Oriental Studies. His writings on the Jews of Yemen were full of empathy, self-doubt and honesty alongside paternalistic reification, in the spirit of the classic approach of a Western scientist who examines, tests, classifies, and files the objects of his study. Only people from Yemen, he said, could examine themselves comprehensively and reliably in a way that “no stranger, even if he has extensive training,” could compete with (Goitein 1983, 8). Basically, Goitein considered himself a historian and Orientalist whose emotional sympathy does not detract from

his commitment to truth and science: as a historian, he believed that he was not entitled to take a stand on the issue of cutting off the sidelocks of Yemenite children at the immigrant camps (Goitein 1951), while as an Orientalist he believed in “Humanistic Orientalism,” whose key elements he presented in 1980 at the American Oriental Society conference. The humanistic Orientalist, he said, must operate from within and identify with the object of his research, but at the same time he must be equipped with an “Archimedean vantage point from the outside, from which he can observe critically and impartially” (quoted in Akiva Friedman 1991, 19).

This view about the synthesis of contradictory elements and the possibility of fusing them into a scientific ideal – a synthesis that Edward Said claimed is one of the cornerstones of Orientalist discourse (Said 1995, 211-224) - accompanied Goitein’s personal and professional life: on the one hand, he wished to fulfill the dream of the Zionist return through the integration of the Arab Orient, emphasizing the connection between the peoples who share the Mediterranean Sea region, and who sometimes, as happened in Yemen, even maintained ties that were “a kind of extremely tight symbiosis” (Goitein 1983, 229). Goitein also supported teaching Arabic in Jewish schools in Israel, as integral to Zionism and the return to the Middle East (Goitein 1946; 1958), and founded the Council for Cultural Discourse, which sought to bring Arabic and Hebrew closer together. On the other hand, Eurocentric and Orientalist views are apparent in his writings. So, for example, he stressed that emancipation, nationalism and socialism have turned the Jews into a modern Western people, and “Even the number of immigrants from the Orient who were accustomed to primeval ways of life does not change this fact” (Goitein 1956-1957, 388). He presented quasi-biblical characters like the pastoral Arab farmer and the noble Bedouin, as the embodiment of the Israeli farmer of the Bible – the Arab villagers, he wrote, can “illustrate the life of our forefathers” (Goitein 1958, 14). Such claims idealized reality and reflect the Zionist tendency to deny the presence of Israel’s Palestinian residents.

In 1952, Goitein carried out extensive fieldwork among Yemenite Jews from the village of al-Gades in lower Yemen. He said in al-Gades, whose residents made their homes in Moshav Givat Yearim, there were two prevailing cultural elements: the men’s culture of Jewish books, and oral folklore which was associated with the women and with “local traditions” (Goitein 1983, 237). He added that the women, who were illiterate, identified themselves completely with the men’s religious and

educational ideals and were proud of them (ibid, 240). Gender distinction was not innocent, but woven into the fabric of power relations in the social space, which included ethnic and class distinctions as well. In Goitein's lifetime, the field of folklore was usually presented as the site of a "popular," "natural" and "authentic" culture whose formal representations are the collective product of the spirit of the people, and therefore they are devoid of any private or individual nature. "The field of folklore is an artifact of identity, the remains of ancient mythology within which were embodied the spirit, character and feelings of the nation" (Oring 1986, 13). According to this definition, products of folklore and folk traditions testify to the presence of a "people" that produces a specific popular product. But folklore – which is based on the concept of "folk" from the nineteenth century, a group of unschooled people from the lowest stratum – developed in relation to an elite. The "folk" is found only where an elite defines the boundaries of culture, positioning itself outside folklore and defining its boundaries (Chinski 1997, 193). The object of study in folklore is always "otherness" in relation to an unspoken norm, i.e. the identity of folklore researchers. Thus it exists in the context of power relations between the ethnologist and the culture under study: "the ethnologist and archaeologist arrive at the moment when the culture loses the means of self-defense, and identifying the authenticity of the subordinate culture is rooted in camouflaging the political interests of the researcher himself, the interest of eliminating the threat of the popular," claims John Frow (Frow 1995, 66). The interest of the elite in folklore is based on the premise that culture is a linear process and on a belief in the inevitable march of Western progress toward "civilization."

In the Israeli case, the isolation of the Jews of the Middle East from their culture was vindicated through an ostensibly rational and scientific Eurocentric discourse, which was replete with belief in its moral mission – to rescue Jews from Arab countries and the Orient, who were identified with childhood and primitivism, from the pre-modern era and move them to modernity. The attitude to folklore was fed not only by the threat and the belief in the superiority of European values and norms, but also by the "passion for primitivism" and the thirst for Jewish exotica. This was a dialectic of aversion and attraction. The gender distinction clearly distinguished among cultural practices: the women of Yemen, who were identified with folk art, became the object of cultivation projects that presented their handicrafts and traditions as a site of childish and exotic naivety, while the men, identified with

the culture of books and high art, were perceived as the preservers of an ancient Hebrew culture that they themselves were not always able to appreciate. Both practices involved the establishment of romantic-modernist boundaries between high and low cultural forms (Lavie 2007, 202).

Goitein himself remained faithful to the ethos of modernization and Westernization: he saw the decline of the Eastern Jews as a structural consequence of the ignorance, backwardness and decadence that spread throughout the Islamic world since the thirteenth century; their resurrection, he claimed, involved a return to rationality, clarity, democracy and liberalism. In 1952, upon his return from a visit in the United States, he addressed the doubts and questions of his hosts:

On the one hand, there is great anxiety and many asked whether the State of Israel will not lose its Western cultural face due to the mass influx of immigrants from the Orient. Needless to say, fundamental explanations were necessary in this regard: one must not make generalizations; immigrants from Oriental countries are very diverse; on the other hand, the vast majority have no desire but to absorb as much as possible from Western culture; the State of Israel is a laboratory for the whole world, because the mass absorption of the Orient into its Western civilization is the task that humanity is now facing. Our concern is not so much how to “Westernize” our Oriental “brethren,” but how to maintain their traditional virtues in this process of fusion into the patterns of a new society (Goitein 1952, 118).

In light of the concerns of his hosts regarding the Levantization of Israel, Goitein clarified his views as to the methods for including the Jews of Yemen into the national collective: assimilation of the “masses of the East” in Western culture is a primary challenge to the new state and test all of humanity. Fortunately, the vast majority of immigrants undertake this project willingly. The idealized image that Goitein bestowed on the Yemenites – hardworking, modest, clean, pleasant and preservers of authentic culture (Goitein 1938, 106) - was nothing but the assimilation, and incidental reversal, of the European-Christian criticism of the lack of productivity and lack of aesthetics among the Jews. It is not surprising that after turning the Yemenites into the refined symbol of the original Judaism, he demanded that the Yemenite immigrants themselves change their habits and adapt to modern life in Israel.

“Salvaging the many spiritual assets of Middle Eastern Jewry”: Yitzhak Ben-Zvi and the Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East

In June 1953, at a meeting with Jews from Yemen in Jerusalem, Ben-Zvi shared his memories of his visit to the Hashad transit camp in December 1949:

On my arrival they held a large outdoor gathering in the camp. The immigrants sat on the sand, men and women separately, and listened to my speech [...] When I finished, they all sang Yemenite melodies. They sang psalms and songs of Rabbi Yehuda Halevi and Rabbi Israel Najara, and especially songs of Rabbi Shalom Shabazi. After the singing there were special Yemenite dances [...] some of them carrying “*diwans*” (collections of poetry) in wooden boxes. Then I truly realized what a tremendous impact the poetry of the Jews of Yemen in general, and of Rabbi Shabazi in particular, had on the Jews of Yemen’s state of mind, and how it encouraged and inured them not to despair in all their suffering, but rather to believe in the imminent coming of the Redeemer.¹¹

Like Goitein, Ben-Zvi, born in Poltava, Ukraine, and the eldest son of Zvi Shimshi (Shimshelevich), a Zionist activist and writer, was fascinated by the Jews of Yemen, “Maybe the most amazing of the waves of immigration to Israel” (ibid.); And, like Goitein, he also wished to take it under his wing, using a mixture of Orientalist admiration and paternalism with racist overtones: “In an environment of savages, in deserts, [the Jews of Yemen] safeguarded considerable wealth, spiritual wealth, and even possessed manuscripts previously to researchers in Europe.”¹² In 1952, he noted that the Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East had selected “the most difficult link, the most backward tribes of Israel [...] whose spiritual assets are not in the hands of a responsible caretaker.”¹³

Ben-Zvi, founder of the "Workers of Zion" party and supporter of some of the most authoritarian activists of socialist Zionism, was not a scholar but an amateur ethnographer and an avid traveler, imbued with a “passionate love of the land of the forefathers” (Yanait Ben-Zvi 1967, 7). He saw himself in charge of the work of gathering the scattered tribes of Israel in order to merge the heritage of the past with the national revival enterprise, through the establishment of a utopian society founded on principles of sharing, equality, manual labor and a broad education (Benaiah 1964,

¹¹ ISA, N-5/2.

¹² ISA, P-3145/48.

¹³ ISA, N-23/5.

19). His devotion to the Zionist enterprise shrunk the world, as he saw it, to the Jews who populate it and the national potential inherent in them: in his memoirs from his first trip to the Land of Israel, in 1903, he wrote that while his ship was moored in Istanbul he remained indifferent to city's towers, bridges and palaces because, in his opinion, Constantinople was nothing but "the capital on which the fate of Israel depended for about four hundred years" (Ben-Zvi 1960, 10). Wherever the ship docked, he added, "I was looking for Jews, and indeed I found them everywhere: in Gallipoli and Izmir, Rhodes and Chios and the coasts of Anatolia and Syria" (Ben-Zvi, 1967, 36).

The writings and actions of Ben-Zvi, later a partner in the "Israel Exploration Society," expressed the effort to create a link between past and present and between scientific and popular. But unlike Jewish anthropologists and sociologists of his time, including Arthur Ruppin and AZ Eshkol, who claimed the superiority of the Ashkenazi Jews over Eastern Jews on the basis of racial characteristics and mental qualities, Ben-Zvi stressed the similarities between the various Jewish communities. The differences between the communities, he wrote in his book *Our Population in the Country*, do not lie in the difference of racial and tribal origin, but the influence of various conditions of nature and the general environment (Ben-Zvi 1929-1932, 23). Paradoxically, Ben-Zvi's avoidance of biological discourse involved nullifying the heterogeneity of diverse Jewish communities and the unification of Jewish history, through ideological instrumentalization: in describing his first impressions of Jerusalem, shortly after immigrating to Palestine/the Land of Israel in 1907, he wrote that through the mixture of colors, outfits, characters and languages of the Jews, there is a recurring theme of "profound recognition of national brotherhood [...] not extinguished by the snowstorms of the far north or the storms of Yemen" (ibid, 20). His first book, *The Land of Israel Past and Present* (1918), co-written with David Ben Gurion during their exile in New York, reveals teleological views: the preface to one of the book's essays (?) describes Israel as the center of the world, a centrality that is the outcome of "the wonderful physical nature of Israel itself and the virtues of the Jewish nation" (Ben Gurion and Ben-Zvi, 1979 [1918], 44). Just as the Jewish People longed to return to its land, claimed the authors, the land waited for its children, refusing to accede to various invaders and conquerors, none of whom managed to link their fate to it. For nearly two thousand years, since its loyal and hard-working children left it, the Land of Israel was a "land without a people" (ibid, p. 228), and

was left in ruins and deserted, abandoned to destruction and poverty, "waiting for a people, its people, to come and renew and rehabilitate its old home, cure its wounds [...] come with the passion of pioneers, the spirit of sacrifice, enthusiasm, courage and genius, and create and build and establish the new Land of Israel" (ibid.).

About the Jews of Yemen, Ben-Zvi wrote that they never gave up their independence and hopes of redemption, and when the time came they were among the first to abandon the land of their exile and immigrate to the Land of Israel (Ben-Zvi, 1967, 96). Sitting with Yemenite Jews in the slums, he sensed the reality of the legend of the Ten Tribes and imagined that they were the descendants of those lost tribes of Israel (Yanait Ben-Zvi, 1967, 6), and when he first met Yemenite Jews in Jerusalem, shortly after he immigrated to Israel, he was unpleasantly surprised by their external appearance - the yoke of exile, he claimed, was more evident on them than any other community - but he was impressed by their mental traits and their Hebrew (Ben-Zvi, 1960 23-24). Ben-Zvi's devotion had a clear purpose – shaping the Zionist subject as part of a national-cultural enterprise. And so, three decades after he accused the farmers of treating the Yemenite laborers "inhumanely" and abandoning them to poverty and disease (Ben-Zvi, 1936), Ben-Zvi claimed that under the surface of ignorance and backwardness - the result of distress and appalling living conditions - the Jews of Yemen concealed latent powers of creation and regeneration.

In August 1944, Ben-Zvi resigned from his position as chairman of the Jewish National Council. At age 60, free of any political activity, he could devote himself to traveling and research. When in December of that same year, the Jewish National Council gave Yosef Shprintsak (1885-1959), one of the founders of Mapai and the Histadrut, the responsibility for relations with the Diaspora, Ben-Zvi demanded that Shprintsak's sphere of responsibility be limited to Jewry outside the countries of the East. "The affairs of Eastern Jews are my concern," he said.¹⁴ This was the beginning of a new era; its highlight would be the establishment of the Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East.

In November 1947, Ben-Zvi wrote to the board of Hebrew University: Jewish communities in the Orient (the Exile of Ishmael) were not yet the subject of in-depth research encompassing their history, legal status, economic and social roles, cultural assets and status in the Muslim world. This field of research was neglected, even though everyone acknowledges its importance for learning about the ways of life

¹⁴ Central Zionist Archives (hereinafter: CZA), J1/8031.

of our people [...] This role will be fulfilled by the Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, which will systematically collect the documentary material scattered throughout West Asia and North Africa.¹⁵

In April 1949, the Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East published a memo about its purpose and objectives: The purpose of the Institute, it stated, is to collect information and official documents of governments, communities and individuals, relating to the living conditions of the Jews in the Middle East, past and present. The documents will be used for a comprehensive study of economic, cultural and political conditions, as well as the internal and organizational arrangements of Eastern Jews (Goldsmith, 1998, 389). However, in December 1949, at the first meeting of the supervisory committee of the Institute, Ben-Zvi made a significant addition to the letter he had written to the university administration in November. The purpose of the institute, he said, is not just to study the history of the Jews of the East, but also “to save their cultural assets.”¹⁶ Images of rescue and redemption were to occur with increasing frequency in Ben-Zvi’s public writings and the Institute’s publications: the Institute’s report from April 1950 stated that his job was to convene and coordinate all the historical material about the ways of life of the Jews in the East, “and what matters most these days of the ingathering of the exiles, rescuing the spiritual assets of our brothers who are now converging in the State of Israel.”¹⁷ In 1951, Ben-Zvi noted that “the first objective [of the Institute] is to rescue from extinction the many spiritual assets of Middle Eastern Jewry in order to present it in the right light” (Ben-Zvi, 1951).¹⁸ His language, beyond indicating changes in the objectives of the Institute, reveals how the difference between academic discourse and the popular-political sphere was consistently obfuscated. An explicit version of this convergence appears in a memo written by Ben-Zvi in July 1950: The purpose of the Institute, he wrote, is to turn the spiritual values of the Eastern Jews into “the property of the entire people, accessible to all. I see this as one way to consolidate the tribes into a nation, enhance self-awareness, recognize their values and the fact that they are not uncultured gypsies, but tribes who were captured

¹⁵ Hebrew University of Jerusalem Archive (hereinafter: HUJA), 1950/2261.

¹⁶ ISA, N-23/6.

¹⁷ HUJA, 1950/2261

¹⁸ He added that “it is customary to think about this Jewry as poor in cultural values, and now certificates were discovered that show, to our joy, that there are many values and this Jewry has a high culture” (Ben-Zvi, 1951).

between dark hills and deserts, among savages, and who, on their return to their place, to their historical homeland, have something to contribute to the nation's treasures."¹⁹

In order to take possession of the spiritual assets of the Jews of Yemen, Ben-Zvi took a few steps: the most important was a week-long visit to the transit camp in Aden. In October 1949, he wrote to Dr. A. Nadad, head of the Jewish Agency's Department of Jews in the Middle East, to apply for a travel permit to Yemen. In late December, he arrived at the Hashad camp: he was impressed by the attitude to the immigrants and the care they received, and praised the quality of the food, but finding deficiencies in the areas of education and "cultural work," especially among children, he offered to send teachers from Israel to Aden.²⁰ At the end of the report, Ben-Zvi mentioned the cultural assets:

Most of these recently arrived immigrants bring books and Torah scrolls with them. In Aden, these objects are stored in the central warehouses, where they are packed them in crates and safeguarded [...] I opened two or three crates and found mainly printed matter, as well as ordinary manuscripts, copies of prayer books and "diwans." These books undoubtedly include valuable manuscripts and various certificates and documents [...] all these objects will be brought to the Jewish Agency's Immigration Department and must be concentrated in one place, before being returned to their owners, in order to carefully check whether they include valuable material that could be purchased for the Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the Middle East [...] this requires advance preparation and the establishment of a special Jewish Agency committee, with the participation of representatives from the Institute. As for the rest of the books, that do not have private owners, a special committee should be established, with the participation of representatives of the Yemenites, in order to distribute them among libraries to be built in Yemenite communities.²¹

Avraham Yaari and the Eilat Collection

Ben-Zvi's good intentions were not fulfilled. In September 1993, the Department of Manuscripts and Archives at the National Library received a letter from Shalom Ozeri, relating a fascinating story:

¹⁹ ISA, P-3140/8.

²⁰ Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, "Four Days with Yemenite Immigrants," ISA, N-5/2.

²¹ Ibid.

The Ozeri family immigrated to Israel in 1949. They left behind Torah scrolls and holy books in Aden. Some months later, the books were sent by ship, and some holy books were sent by air, to a camp in Rosh Haayin. The package (addressed to Shalom Ozeri) that arrived by air contained, among other things: two big shofars, an ancient handwritten "*tiklal*" (Yemenite Jewish prayer book), 500 years old, containing all the prayers of the year and various commentaries and liturgies, and the two aforementioned sections of the Mishnah. The day the package arrived at the camp in Rosh Haayin, I asked the camp director to release my package. His answer was that I wouldn't be able to release my package until the next day. The next day we went to the warehouse. Glancing through the bars of the window, I was surprised to see that the package was open and was nearly half empty. Upon receipt of the package it turned out that in addition to expensive fabrics and clocks, the shofars, the Tiklal and one section of the Mishnah had also been stolen [...] I approached the camp director. He instructed us to file a complaint with the police in Petah Tikva. I made it clear to the director that the warehouse was not broken into and that whoever stole the objects in the package had a key.

Of course, I made every effort to locate the stolen items, but unfortunately I was unable to unravel this mystery. As your honor knows, at that time they managed to hide small children who were stolen from their parents, to say nothing of books. About a year ago I met a neighbor who told me that he had bought a photocopy of a handwritten Mishnah. When I looked at the copy, I found to my surprise that it was a photocopy of the Mishnah that "disappeared" in 1949. At the time I did not notice who had distributed the copies. A few months ago I discovered that the copy was circulated through your institution. I visited your esteemed institution colleague and asked to see the photocopy. I ascertained beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the Mishnah that you have here is the first part of the Mishnah in my possession [...] I would be very happy to meet with you, in order to find a solution that will satisfy both parties.²²

The meeting, attended by Ozeri, one of his sons and Raphael Weiser, head of the Manuscripts Department at the National Library, took place on December 14, 1993. At the end of the meeting, Weiser wrote a brief note: We are convinced beyond any

²² Archive of the Jewish National and University Library, Manuscripts Department (hereinafter: JNUL MD), Ozeri, Shalom.

doubt that this is indeed an identical manuscript, and it was agreed with Rabbi Ozeri that within a few days I will speak with Prof. Bonfil (lecturer, Department of History of Israel at the Hebrew University and director of the National Library at the time) about the return of the manuscript. Rabbi Ozeri, he added, will let us photocopy it.²³ In early February 1994, Weiser wrote about his conversation with Bonfil: “We agreed, in fact, that we have no choice but to comply with his request, but Prof. Bonfil requested that we call him in for a talk.”²⁴ The meeting was set for February 17, and a week later the affair ended with a letter from Ozeri: “I hereby confirm that I received from the Jewish National and University Library a manuscript of the Mishnah with commentary by Rabbeinu Ovadia, which was formerly owned by me and found its way to the National Library years ago [...]”²⁵

The National Library inventory – an internal inventory and management list for the use of the institution’s employees – includes titles of 430 manuscripts that were owned by the Jews of Yemen. These manuscripts constitute the Eilat Collection. The name of the collection comes from the Port of Eilat, where the ships from Aden unloaded their cargo of books and holy objects; Avraham Yaari (1899-1966), bibliographer and librarian, who worked in the National Library for some three decades and was a pillar of *Kiryat Sefer*, the library’s bibliographical quarterly, was in charge of manuscripts. The Eilat Collection includes 29 “*tiklals*” (Yemenite Jewish prayer books), 35 “*tajs*” (parts of the Pentateuch) and 42 “*diwans*.” Many of the manuscripts in the collection deal with the laws of ritual slaughtering, *haftarot*, *Shulchan Aruch*, holiday and prayer books, cantillations and *selichot*, books of medicine and *segulot*, books of periods, constellations and the interpretation of dreams, and remnants of manuscripts of the Kabbalah. The collection also includes Torah and Mishnah commentaries, dictionaries, Jewish laws of marriage and divorce and tractates of entreaties.

On May 2, 1951, some four decades before the return of the manuscript to Shalom Ozeri, Avraham Yaari wrote to Hassan Yehuda Nissim of the Shikun Hamizrah neighborhood in the Tel Aviv suburb, Kfar Saba:

After you visited us during Passover and told us about the manuscripts that belong to you, we searched and found the requested manuscripts: three volumes of the book, *In the Words of the Sages*, marked by us as volumes number 54, 81 and 120. And today

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

we are sending you the three volumes in a special package by registered mail [...] and we ask you to send us confirmation of receipt of the three manuscripts immediately.²⁶

Raphael Weiser sees these documents, and rightly so, as evidence of the National Library's willingness to return the spiritual assets of the Jews of Yemen to their rightful owners (personal interview, November 27, 2009). However, the four books and manuscripts that were returned may also indicate that only a minute portion of the cultural assets were returned to their rightful owners, and for 40 years very little has been done to correct the injustice. A number of things should be noted in this context: first, the goddess of good fortune was beside Ozeri and Nissim. Had it not been for their insistence, the books and manuscripts would not have been returned to their owners. We can only imagine the number of Yemenite Jews who were less fortunate, or the number of those whose attempts to locate their spiritual assets failed. Meanwhile, it is vital to contemplate the nature of the encounter between the Jews of Yemen and the authority in possession of their assets, whose characteristics are similar to the working practices of the State Commission of Inquiry on the disappearance of Yemenite children (Sangero, 2002). The victims are the ones who must prove that the books did indeed belong to them, and the burden of proof is on those who claim the existence of a problem. If they are unsuccessful, the property will remain in the hands of those who possess it illegally. In a discourse relying on the paradigm of law - its demand for objectivity and the decisive weight that it attaches to evidence and the reliability thereof - there is no room for laments of pain and loss, private and personal memories, the intimate connection between human beings and the creations of their souls. Are these strict rules of evidence truly appropriate in the case at hand? And is it not appropriate to place the burden of proof on the establishment and his representatives as well, at the National Library and elsewhere? Finally, it is essential to note that to date, the National Library has not installed a catalog of the books and manuscripts that came into its hands when the Jews of Yemen immigrated to Israel. Even if the reason is rooted in bureaucratic difficulties (Raphael Weiser, personal interview, November 27, 2009) and even if the manuscripts at the National Library are second and third degree manuscripts, while valuable texts came into the hands of private dealers and institutions overseas as some claim (Yehuda Nini, personal interview, January 21, 2010) - the absence of a

²⁶JNUL MD, Eilat, list.

catalog, and the fact that the collection of manuscripts of the Jews of Yemen is not open for public view, greatly limit the ability of the Jews of Yemen to find their spiritual assets.

The separation of the Jews of Yemen from their assets was part of the effort to turn a multitude of Jewish communities into a single ethnic and national unit, formulated in close connection to the cultural structuring of the Western colonial project and subject to the Orientalist paradigm. In this process, cultures were marginalized, traditions were buried and other affiliations were severed; from the Zionist perspective all this was perceived as correction. As noted by Ella Shohat, “The Ostjuden [...] who were marginalized to the sidelines of European culture for hundreds of years, realized their desire to become ‘Europe,’ ironically, in the Arab East of all places, this time on the backs of their own Ostjuden, i.e., the Eastern Jews” (Shohat 2001, 183). It is not surprising, therefore, that in the dozens of bibliographies, articles and books that he wrote, proofread and edited, Yaari makes no mention of the manuscripts of the Jews of Yemen stored in the storerooms of the National Library.

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