The Construction of Non-Ashkenazi Homosexual Masculinity in Israel

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Abstract   This chapter explores the construction of non-Ashkenazi homosexual masculinity in Israel, focusing on first- and second-generation immigrants from MENA countries. Divided into two cohorts based on their exposure to the politicized gay and Mizrahi discourses of the 1970s, the analysis draws on oral testimonies, literary texts, and artistic works. It traces how these cohorts navigated their masculinity within intersecting gay and Mizrahi discourses, highlighting both continuities and differences between them.

Keywords   Mizrahi masculinity. Gay identity. Homosexuality in Israel. Queer Mizrahim. Jewish masculinities.

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1   Introduction

Scholarship on Jewish masculinity has focused primarily on European and Ashkenazi contexts, from Mosse's foundational work (1985) to more recent studies by Boyarin (1998), Baader, Gillerman, and Lerner (2012), Nordheimer Nur (2014), Boord (2017), and Grinberg (2024). Homosexuality and homoeroticism figure prominently in these accounts as key sites for analysing Jewish gender and identity (e.g., Mosse, Boyarin, and Nordheimer Nur, as well as Kraß, Sluhovsky, Yonay 2022). By contrast, the histories of Jewish men from Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) backgrounds have received little scholarly attention, and their same-sex sexualities remain almost entirely absent from the literature. This chapter seeks to address this gap by examining how first- and second-generation immigrants from MENA countries in Israel constructed non-Ashkenazi homosexual masculinities, and how their self-understandings were shaped in relation to both gay and Mizrahi discourses.

This chapter examines Israeli Jewish men of MENA origin who engaged in sexual or romantic attraction to, and relationships with, other men (for short, we will use the acronym MENA MSM). These are biographical facts. We differentiate between these lived experiences and two transformative discourses that emerged in Israel in the 1970s and gradually gained more momentum in following decades: a politicized and empowered Mizrahi masculinity and an affirming, politicized discourse on homosexuality. The distinction between same-sex acts and gayness as a historically specific category of identity, culture, and politics is well established in queer historiography. While same-sex behaviours have existed across times and places, 'homosexuality' as a social category and an identity emerges only when such acts are named, socially classified, and situated within broader cultural and material conditions (Foucault 1978; D'Emilio 1983; Halperin 2002; Weeks 2010). 'Gay' gained traction in the American context as a political identification in the 1960s (Cervini 2020).

The differentiation between MENA ethnic origins and Mizrahi identity and politics follows a categorically similar logic. Following Chetrit (2004), we treat *Mizrahiyut* not primarily as an ethnic label but as a social–political identity that crystallized in Israel out of power relations between European and non-European Jews. In this view, Ashkenazi-Zionist socialization erased 'Arab-Jewish' identity, and recoded Jews from Arab and Muslim countries as *edot ha-mizrah*. This discursive shift was coupled with discrimination in housing, education, culture, media, and the economy, producing structural marginalization. Mizrahiyut thus emerged as a counter-hegemonic discourse that reclaimed identity against assimilationist erasures, articulated demands for recognition and redistribution, and enabled an autonomous Mizrahi political voice. Both of these discursive

categories – gay and Mizrahi – extend beyond political or cultural self-identification. They also function as social labels applied by society at large, at times reinforcing their political aims and at other times used in derogatory ways.

Building on Rosenfeld's (2003) framework, we identify the rise of the Mizrahi and gay discourses in Israel as a watershed moment. Drawing on interviews she conducted, Rosenfeld distinguished cohorts of gays and lesbians according to the stage of life at which they first encountered affirming discourses around their sexuality, which shaped how they perceived and expressed their sexuality and how they engaged politically. Similarly, we argue that the politicized gay and Mizrahi discourses shaped two distinct cohorts of men, depending on the stage in life at which they encountered them. We emphasize how their styles of masculinity, sexual desire, self-understanding, and self-expression varied according to these encounters and to the tensions between the two discourses. In doing so, we offer a critical perspective on Jewish masculinity at the intersection of immigration, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

We begin this chapter by examining the cohort of men who shaped their identities before the emergence of the politicizing discourses of the 1970s. Key sources for this analysis include Jehoeda Sofer's (1992) brief reports, based on a series of non-academic interviews he conducted in the 1970s, as well as the study of gay experiences by Yuval Yonay, one of the authors of this chapter. Yonay interviewed several dozen gay men born between 1924 and the late 1940s, focusing on the development of their sexual identities and life experiences. These interviews began in 2001 and are ongoing. Most of the interviewees were Ashkenazi, reflecting both the demographics of those consciously identifying as gay during this period and research biases related to the centrality of Ashkenazi gay activists in connecting subjects for the research. For the purposes of this chapter, we draw on five interviews with men of MENA backgrounds conducted between 2001 and 2003, two additional interviews with MENA men from 2018, and several interviews with Ashkenazi men who recounted experiences involving MENA men.

Next, we turn our attention to the cohort of men who shaped their identities in the wake of the emergence of politicized Mizrahi and gay masculinities. Drawing on literary texts and artistic works created by MENA MSM, as well as interviews with such individuals featured in the media, we identify and describe several strategies used to construct a gay Mizrahi masculinity – or, for some, a non-heterosexual, non-Ashkenazi masculinity.

Note that this chapter is not intended as a systematic study of masculinities among MENA MSM. Rather, it draws on a diverse range of sources – activists' reports, academic interviews, literary and artistic works, and mass media representations – to outline a possible line of inquiry and to offer preliminary reflections on a

subject that has received little scholarly attention to date. The types of sources used, and the relatively small number of informants and artists included, inevitably bias the study toward men willing to be interviewed about their sexual experiences and identities, as well as toward writers and artists. As a result, the self-understandings and expressions presented here cannot be taken to represent the experiences of MENA MSM as a whole, and may not even reflect the majority. Nevertheless, we contend that even within these limits, the findings are valuable for illustrating cultural and political formulations at the intersection of marginal ethnic, gender, and sexual experiences, and for demonstrating the impact of politicized and affirming discourses on these formulations.

1.1 The New Mizrahi Masculinity

Edward Said (1978) famously argued that the West depicted the Orient as feminine and penetrable – a perspective that also found expression in Zionism, which portrayed non-Ashkenazi Jews in feminized roles. Raz Yosef (2004) claims that under the Ashkenazi Zionist hegemony, immigrant fathers from MENA countries, stripped of their cultural identity and economic stability upon immigration, were symbolically 'castrated,' unable to fulfil traditional patriarchal roles. These marginalized masculinities, using Raewyn Connell's (1995) term, were used to uphold Ashkenazi hegemonic masculinity.

In response, second-generation men sought to construct a new, empowered masculinity. Following the establishment of the Mizrahi protest movement The Black Panthers in Jerusalem in 1971, a new Mizrahi masculinity emerged, portraying Mizrahi men as potent, active, and masculine. Drawing inspiration from the American Black Panthers, the Israeli movement of the same name adopted a hyper-masculine and highly sexualized aesthetic characterized by clenched fists, long sideburns, and Afro hairstyles. The Panthers used their hyper-masculine image not only to challenge Ashkenazi dominance but also to critique the dependency and submissiveness they associated with their fathers' generation. They articulated their anger in both racial and sexual terms, associating passivity with subjugation and activity with resistance. For example, they described their marginalized status as being 'fucked-up and black' (*defuqim u-shehorim*), tying their class and racial oppression to sexual domination by the Ashkenazi establishment. This narrative framed Ashkenazi-Zionist oppression as a form of symbolic homosexual rape, positioning the Mizrahi man as a victim of humiliation and emasculation. By reclaiming an active, dominant heterosexual masculinity, the Panthers aimed to heal these wounds and reassert their place within the Israeli social hierarchy (Yosef 2004, 92-112).
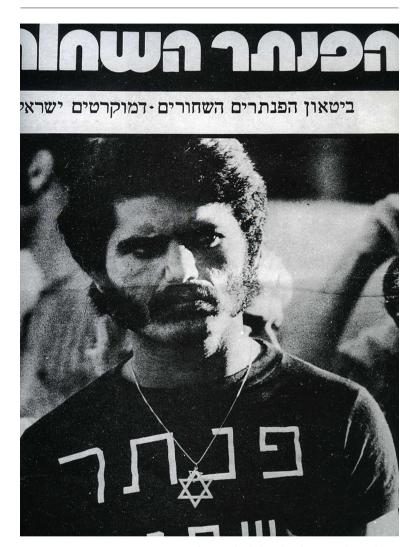
Figure 1 The Black Panthers' hyper-masculine aesthetics, as shown on the cover of the movement's journal, ca. 1973. *The Black Panthers – Exhibition Catalogue*. Musrara – The Naggar Multidisciplinary School of Art and Society. 1999. Copyright of the Musrara collection at Musrara

While the Panthers garnered press coverage, Menachem Golan's 1973 hit film *Casablan* likely played a pivotal role in popularizing the image of the new Mizrahi man. The titular protagonist ("Casa" in short) is a Moroccan-born gang leader from Jaffa whose hyper-masculine appearance and demeanour mirror the Panthers' aesthetic, characterized by muscular physiques, Afro hairstyles, and a tough,

sexualized image. However, Yosef (2004, 98-103) argues that the film policed this new masculinity rather than celebrated it, framing Casa's masculinity as a problem that required reform through mimicry of Ashkenazi heteronormative ideals.

1.2   The New Gay Discourse

Alongside the transformations in Mizrahi masculinity, the 1970s marked a major shift in the history of homosexuality in Israel. In 1975, The Society for the Protection of Personal Rights (today known as The Association for LGBT Equality in Israel, or *Ha-Aguda*) was established by a group of men almost all of whom were Ashkenazi. Ha-Aguda created a gay collectivity, organized social events, and published a newsletter that connected gays and lesbians with each other and provided them with vital information. It lobbied for repealing Israel's anti-sodomy law and shifting public opinion on homosexuality, addressed police harassment, negotiated with military authorities to preclude discrimination in the IDF, and worked with the Ministry of Health to establish quasi-anonymous medical tests of STDs (Yonay, Shapira 2025). Many lesbians were active in the Aguda during its early years but due to dissatisfaction with male dominance created in 1978 their own organization, ALeF (acronym for "a Feminist Lesbian Association") and were active also in advancing the social and legal standing of lesbians and gays (Safran et al. 2016).

This activism paved the way for what Aeyal Gross (2001) termed the 'Gay Decade'. Beginning with the repeal of Israel's anti-sodomy law in 1988 and culminating in the mass pride parade in Tel Aviv of 1998, this period saw significant legal and political victories for the LGBT community, laying the groundwork for broader acceptance in the decades that followed (Yonay, Spivak 2016).

While the prominent activists in Ha-Aguda were Ashkenazi, MENA gays nonetheless played influential roles in creating spaces where the new affirming gay discourse could flourish and where individuals could develop a sense of self rooted in pride in their sexuality. By the early 1990s, figures such as Shim'on Shirazi, Ofer Nissim, and Dana International – two gay men from MENA backgrounds and a Yemenite transgender woman – were pivotal in establishing Israel's first gay clubs and party lines.

As demonstrated, the new discourses that emerged in the 1970s politicized and empowered marginalized masculinities. However, they also created a tension between Mizrahi masculinity – particularly its virile variety exemplified by the Black Panthers – and homosexual masculinity. Mizrahi masculinity was often associated with overt heterosexuality, while the activist circles of the gay community remained predominantly Ashkenazi.

2   The First Cohort

As outlined in the introduction, the 1970s marked a turning point in the politicization of Mizrahi and gay masculinities. Before these transformative discourses emerged, however, earlier generations of Jewish men from MENA countries navigated their identities in a vastly different social and cultural landscape. Some scholarship has explored these earlier contexts. Ben-Naeh (2005) examined male same-sex relations and related discourses among Ottoman Jews in the early modern period, showing that despite biblical prohibitions, same-sex relations were common in Ottoman Jewish society. Ilany (2017) conducted an exhaustive study of references to male-to-male sexuality during the Mandatory period, arguing that this practice was regarded by Ashkenazim as pervasive among Oriental men, Muslims and Jews alike. This claim aligns with Sofer's (1992) observations, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The following section, drawing primarily on oral testimonies, examines the experiences of a cohort of Jewish MENA MSM who came of age prior to immigration or in Israel before the emergence of politicized Mizrahi and gay discourses, highlighting how they understood and navigated their sexuality and masculinity.

2.1   Sexual Roles in Male-to-Male Sex

Jehoeda Sofer (1944-1992), an Iraqi-born Jew who lived in Israel for several years and then migrated to Amsterdam, conducted a series of non-academic interviews in the 1970s, documenting the sexual lives of Palestinian and MENA Jewish men who had sex with men. His summary of these interviews (Sofer 1992) provides us with a rare glimpse into the practices and views of that period, but unfortunately, the posthumously published article contains only snapshots of the full interviews. Sofer met these men in public parks in Tel Aviv, Ramat Gan, and Jerusalem that were used as cruising sites. Most of them did not identify as gay; many were married to women and most insisted on taking the penetrative role in sexual encounters. According to some interviewees, being penetrated was regarded as both a personal and national humiliation, particularly for Arab men penetrated by Jewish partners. This view indicates the mainstream meaning of masculinity among MENA (including Palestinian) men, which associated penetration with domination. In what follows we concentrate on the stories of those for whom male-to-male sex was an essential part of their sexuality.

Yitshaq was one of the immigrants from MENA countries Sofer encountered who seemed to have internalized the mainstream view associating penetration with masculinity. He was born in Iraq and

immigrated to Israel in 1950 at the age of 16, living within a mostly Iraqi community. Yitshaq had been sexually sought after by men since childhood, and he performed the receiving role, which became part of his subjectivity. Accepting the mainstream view, he had a binary view of sexuality, seeing men as exclusively penetrative ('men') or exclusively receptive ('women'). When he travelled to Europe and visited gay spaces, he found the men there too feminine and struggled to distinguish between the 'men' and 'women'. Yitshaq recounted a sexual encounter with a European man, expressing astonishment at the affection shown towards him. In contrast, he found that sexual encounters in Israel's cruising grounds were more utilitarian. Although he liked the affection, he saw it as unmanly (1992, 106-7).

Another man whose sexual identity was related to his pleasure as the penetrated partner in male same-sex sex was Dani, a Yemenite from a Yemenite neighbourhood in the Tel Aviv region. Since he was 14, Dani had performed the receiving role with many men, presumably not gay, in his neighbourhood. "At 25 he finally met an Ashkenazi teacher [...] with whom he lived for three years as housewife both in bed and in the kitchen" (1992, 116). Unlike Yitshaq, however, Dani changed his practices and perceptions after moving to Berlin. There he observed that, "no clear separation existed between men who fuck and men who get fucked" (115-17).

The first stories involved 'passive' men from MENA backgrounds who associated masculinity with penetration. What about MENA men who performed the 'active' role? According to Yitshaq and Dani, there were many men in their environment (in Baghdad and in Dani's Yemenite neighbourhood) who would 'exploit' them sexually without considering themselves gay. Sofer was less likely to be able to find and interview such men. However, a few of the men who preferred the penetrating role, including married ones, were more attracted to men than to women and would regularly seek sex in cruising areas and achieving sexual satisfaction with their wives.

Shaul, an Iraqi Jew, viewed himself as a 'real man'. He was "big, masculine, well hung, and very popular among males who wanted to get fucked" (1992, 111). He was often seen in or near the cruising park with his wife and two kids. He declared that he was not 'like that' but obviously socialized with "fair, effeminate men, whom he addressed in the feminine" (111). Shaul emphasized his dominance by not allowing his sexual partners to reach orgasm, especially not before him, and refused to touch their genitalia. Apparently, he felt that sexually satisfying his partners would hurt his masculinity.

Eli, an Ashkenazi gay man, told Sofer about an 'active' Moroccan man he met in a cruising park. According to Eli, that man came to the place to look for a female prostitute when his wife was hospitalized. However, realizing that it would cost him too much to bring her home, he decided to try a sexual relationship with a man, a practice he

had heard about from two friends. Unlike the way Shaul treated his effeminate partners, Eli's partner "treated him lovingly and caringly" (1992, 112), and they met several times until the partner's wife returned home. A year later, he met the Moroccan man again in the cruising park. Apparently, he was not willing to give up the pleasure of male-to-male sex.

Moshe, another MENA Jew, shared with Sofer his experience with Ibrahim, a Christian Palestinian man from Shefa'amr (Hebrew: Shfar'am) who, as an owner of a building supply shop, belonged to a more affluent class. Moshe identified as a 'bottom' but defied the stereotype with his masculine appearance. He told Sofer that typically, sex with Palestinians or Mizrahim was short and utilitarian. However, his experience with Ibrahim differed: Ibrahim was affectionate and prolonged their encounters. The two maintained a relationship for five years, with Moshe visiting Ibrahim in Shefa'amr and meeting his wife, son, and friends (1992, 108-9). While Yitshaq's story suggests a dichotomy between the Middle East, where same-sex acts were pragmatic and binary, and Europe, where roles were more fluid and affection between men was acceptable, Moshe's story indicates that class might also play a role, with more affluent and highly educated Middle Eastern men being more willing to engage in affectionate and long-term relationships.

Moshe was not the only MENA Jew to describe sexual encounters with Arab men. Yosef, an Iraqi Jew who immigrated to Israel in the early 1950s, also had frequent relationships with Arabs. A singer of classical Arabic music, Yosef was popular among both Iraqi Jews and Palestinians. After his performances, men from these communities would often approach him, and he, being in a position of choice, would select the most masculine and well-endowed partners. When performing in Palestinian villages, Yosef often spent the night there and engaged in multiple sexual encounters with Arab men. He described this experience as empowering, as he could choose his partners and was treated with respect. Interestingly, the Palestinian men made no effort to hide what had occurred and continued to treat Yosef respectfully in public the following morning (1992, 107-8).

Yosef's story provides a curious connection to the interviews that Yonay conducted decades later. One of his interviewees, Shlomo, shared a strikingly similar account about his friend Yossi.[1] Yossi (a common nickname for Yosef), also a musician born in Baghdad, performed in Arab communities in private homes. While Shlomo was more discreet in describing sexual encounters, it is clear that Yossi also engaged in sexual relations with men following his performances

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of this interview, see Yonay 2022.

(interview by Yuval Yonay, 24 March 2001). It seems very likely that Sofer's Yosef and Yossi are the same person.

Shlomo, born in Baghdad and immigrating to Israel at the age of 13, was never attracted to women and never considered pursuing a heterosexual relationship. With men, however, he assumed the 'active' role exclusively. His friendship with Yossi began with a sexual encounter, as Yossi played the receptive role exclusively. After one or two such encounters, their relationship became platonic, but they remained close friends for years. Together, they frequented cruising spots across Israel, East Jerusalem, and even Egypt, choosing partners based on their preferences. The following excerpt from the interview with Shlomo demonstrates the way Shlomo thinks about sex:

> Q: Concerning Arab partners, did you meet some who were willing to perform the passive role?
>
> Shlomo: But of course! Many Arabs want it, of course, oral [sex] and passive [role]. I had a friend [Yossi] who died recently of AIDS, and we would go to the *hammam* in Jerusalem, on Yehezkel Street [a hammam which serves the general public] and we had a lot of encounters. There were two totally passive men there. [Q: Jerusalemite Arabs?] […] Yes, we met them and he [Yossi] had an apartment there. […] It was a time of innocence; no violence, nothing. He had an apartment, and we would use it a lot, really a lot. […] [Q: Was Yossi also in the active role?] He was passive, wholly passive. […] We would go to Jerusalem together, enter [the hammam], and each one of us would pick up his [partner]. Sometimes we picked up two friends who came together and we liked them both. We would take them to [Yossi's] apartment and slept there. Once one of them and he asked me "don't tell my friend what I did to you"; It was oral sex or something similar. [Q: Active Arab guys were willing to suck?] No; active ones would not; they would even don't touch you. But they were not for me. I sent them to Yossi. I'd sort them out, If [the guy] would be willing to be in the passive role, please do! I was very fussy about these issues. Often I passed [a guy] to Yossi. If he was active and did not want [to be in the passive role]. "Please go to him". (interview by Yuval Yonay, 24 March 2001)

Yossi occasionally requested Shlomo not to allow a receptive partner to reach orgasm, so that that partner would remain sexually aroused and assume the 'active' role with Yossi. It is evident in Shlomo's story the centrality of sexual roles for his and Yossi's self-images but the distinction between them did not hurt their close friendship. We can learn from Shlomo that sexual roles were also important for many of their sex partners, Jews and Arabs alike, but it seems that some

partners were willing to be in the passive role as long as it remained a secret.

These details in Shlomo's long interview demonstrate that his exclusive preference for the penetrative role was not connected, in his perception, with dominance and superiority over those men who played the receptive role. Yossi had been his closest friend, and at the time of the interview, he still grieved Yossi's death from AIDS. It was also evident from his story that he respected his sexual partners. Indeed, although he was not interested in long-term relationships, his pleasure was more than sexual. This is quite obvious from the few long-standing relationships on which we will elaborate in the next section.

This section examined male same-sex relationships among Jewish MENA men whose masculinity took shape before the 1970s. For many in this cohort, attraction to men was not the defining aspect of their masculine identity. Instead, assuming the penetrative role in sex (regardless of the gender of the penetrated party) and adhering to traditional gender roles were seen as central components of masculine behaviour. This pattern is well attested across Arab and Islamic histories and societies, and it is likely that many men in this cohort were acquainted with it before immigrating to Israel.

Khaled El-Rouayheb (2005) showed that, unlike modern Western societies where sexual identity is determined mainly by the gender of the object of desire, in Arabic-speaking regions of the Ottoman Empire until the nineteenth century the focus was on the sexual role. In these societies, men could have sex with different kinds of partners without it determining their identity, as long as they maintained the penetrative role. Moreover, homoerotic admiration, often tied to social hierarchies (such as relationships between men and beardless boys, known in Arabic as *murd*), was common and different from the modern Western expectation of egalitarian homosexual relationships.

Modern Western concepts of homosexuality, formulated in late-nineteenth-century Europe and the U.S., gradually reshaped Arab-Islamic understandings of same-sex desire. Dror Ze'evi (2006) showed how Ottoman discourses in medicine, law, mysticism, and other fields became less open and more heteronormative under Western influence. Joseph Massad (2007) similarly argued that Arab writers, adopting Western notions of sexuality, distanced themselves from classical Arabic texts that had openly depicted male-to-male desire, recasting such depictions as signs of cultural decline. Still, the interviewees cited in this section, along with the testimonies discussed by Sofer, suggest that although literary, legal, and religious discourses began to shift in the nineteenth century, it is unclear how deeply these changes penetrated everyday life in MENA countries, which may have continued to adhere to older models of male sexuality, centred on penetrative roles and social hierarchy.

2.2 Erotic Relationships Between Non-Gay Married MENA Jews and Older Men

When Shlomo was about 35 years old, he met a younger Yemenite man who was only 17 and a half at the time. Thirty-one years later, the Yemenite was married with four children, but he still visited Shlomo two or three times a week. Shlomo was a good friend of the whole family and helped the younger man's wife when she needed something, such as a ride. According to Shlomo, the Yemenite partner avowed that he would have divorced his wife had she demanded sexual contact; his sexual energies were channelled exclusively toward Shlomo. However, when the interviewer expressed interest in speaking with the Yemenite man, Shlomo explained that it was impossible because the man denied being gay. Given Shlomo's exclusive adoption of the 'active' role, it is evident that his partner assumed the 'passive' role. Nevertheless, he maintained his masculine position within the family and resisted the gay identity that Shlomo himself had long accepted. Surprisingly, though, Shlomo admitted that for this Yemenite partner, he occasionally assumed the 'passive' role as well, explaining that his love had overcome him and he was willing to do things that his partner asked (interview by Yuval Yonay, 24 March 2001).

While his relationship with the Yemenite man continued, Shlomo fell in love – although he did not use the expression, there is no other way to describe the emotion he conveyed – with a manual worker from Gaza whom he met in 1982. At the time of the interview, more than two years into the Second Intifada, their meetings were more limited, but they remained attached. When the Gazan married, as his family expected him to do, Shlomo was deeply depressed, even though he was reassured that the marriage did not mean the man had stopped loving him. This statement turned out to be true. The relationship 'survived' the marriage, and Shlomo played a significant role in helping his lover's wife obtain reproductive treatment in Israel. Their son was named after Shlomo (2001).

Several interviewees mentioned this pattern of deep and long-lasting relationships between an older man (Ashkenazi or Mizrahi) and a much younger MENA man who was married and had a family. Arye and Mordechai, long-time Ashkenazi partners from Jerusalem, recounted a few such cases among their friends (interview by Yuval Yonay, 10 July 2001). For example, when they spoke about Stefan, whose small apartment served as a 'community centre' for local gays, they also shared the following:

> [Arye:] He was a very nice person. He was lucky; [name] fell in love with him […] and took care of him until his last day. [Mordechai:] They had sex occasionally, but--- [Arye:] I don't believe it; at the end, certainly not. […] That Yemenite was married with five

kids and yet he took care of him--- I wish many parents to be so kindly taken care of as he was. (2001)

When asked to put the interviewer in touch with the Yemenite, Arye answered: "He is not gay. He will beat you if you say that he is gay". Similar to Shlomo's Yemenite lover, Stefan's lover also did not identify as gay, and therefore would not participate in a study about gays.

In other cases, the older and younger men lived together, as in this story:

> [Arye:] We know a couple in Tel Aviv. He was an educated European man, a nice person, and he 'adopted' [as a spouse] a boy, a nice Moroccan fellow [...] 50 years apart, and they were together until the [older man] died, and there was mutual understanding. (2001)

Interviewing the younger MENA partners of older gay men, who were married and were fathers was not possible, but two gay interviewees, who were interviewed by Yonay, were also attracted to older men and spoke freely about their desires. One of them, Doron, was born in Morocco in 1946 and immigrated to Israel as a teenager (interview by Yuval Yonay, 3 May 2018). His first sexual experience occurred at the age of 17 when a man about 50 years old made a pass at him. They began dating for about a year until Doron was conscripted into the army. Although they engaged in oral sex, Doron recalls that their relationship was mostly social, consisting of activities like going to the movies together. He was not in love but appreciated the company of the man, who was three times his age.

Doron considered the next affair his first serious relationship. He was 23 years old when he met Nikola, a Holocaust survivor from Yugoslavia, who was 64 at the time. Doron did not spend much time reflecting on his attraction to older men. He had a robust relationship with Nikola that lasted 24 years until Tibor's death at the age of 88. "We travelled abroad, we enjoyed life, we ate. He was brilliant; he knew 10, 12 languages", Doron said, sharing few additional details about his partner. Only a few years before Nikola's death did he meet Doron's mother. This occurred because Doron underwent serious surgery and needed help from both his mother and Nikola. After Nikola passed away, Doron's mother remarked that he was now free to marry a woman. Doron rebuked her, asking, "Do you want to make me ill?".

A year later, when Doron was 48, he met his second partner, Shmuel, an 80-year-old widower whom he remembered from a casual encounter at a cruising area on Rothschild Avenue 30 years earlier. This time, the relationship was quite open to both families, and they lived happily until Shmuel died in 2006, coincidentally on the same

date as Nikola. Again, Doron did not analyze his attraction to older men. He jokingly recounted several instances in which he rejected younger suitors, telling them to try again when they reached old age.

In this section, we examined enduring relationships between older gay men and younger men from MENA backgrounds, many of whom were married with families. As shown, younger partners often avoided identifying as gay, maintaining traditional roles within their households while engaging in intimate and sometimes long-term relationships with older men. This is an empirical finding. We looked at our interviews for stories related to MENA men and came up with these cases. We cannot tell how common such relationships were, but we should add that with many more interviews with Ashkenazi men we did not hear anything similar to the pattern described in this section. All we can do, therefore, is to open the question whether some features in the construction of gender and sexuality in MENA societies facilitated this pattern. It is admittedly a very speculative conclusion that we hope future researchers would be able to examine more thoroughly. In the next section, we will turn to the cohort of men whose masculinity developed during and after the transformative period of the 1970s.

3   The Second Cohort

The second part of this chapter examines gay and bisexual men born in the 1970s and 1980s, primarily second-generation descendants of Jewish immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East. This cohort's masculine identity formed during a period when politicized and affirming Mizrahi and gay (and, for some, queer) discourses were already available among the general public. We argue that these discourses influenced the development and expression of their masculinity, as reflected in testimonies, media representations, and artistic works created by this cohort. However, not all men responded uniformly to the Mizrahi discourse, the gay discourse, or their intersection. The following sections explore three strategies that this cohort used in navigating and engaging with these discourses to shape their masculinity: fostering male-to-male intimacy without adopting identity labels; reclaiming stereotypical depictions of Mizrahi women to construct a queer, feminine Mizrahi masculinity; and forging a Mizrahi or Levantine queer identity that challenged hegemonic Zionist ideals.

3.1 The First Strategy: Non-Gay Same-Sex Sex and Intimacy

The first strategy reflects a continuation of the patterns observed in the previously discussed cohort. Men employing this approach refrained from identifying as gay or bisexual, despite engaging in sexual, erotic, or even romantic relationships with other men. This pattern aligns with the experiences of the first cohort. Many did not identify as gay and sometimes were described as actively rejecting the label. Additionally, elements characteristic of the first cohort's masculinity – such as the dichotomous perception of sexual roles – are also evident in the men adopting this strategy, as we will demonstrate shortly.

Alongside these continuities, there appears to be the adoption of the hyper-masculinity associated with the Black Panthers, and with works like *Casablan*, together with a reliance on stereotypes often attributed to Mizrahi men – such as the hyper-sexualized man who assumes the penetrative sexual role. Another stereotype, described by Yosef (2004, 142-71) as emerging in the 1980s and 1990s yet rooted in older Orientalist imagery and fantasies, is that of the effeminate Mizrahi boy, who usually occupies the receptive role. As we will see, this stereotype also informs the repertoire of images employed in this strategy to construct a non-gay homoerotic masculinity.

An example of the masculine variant of this strategy can be found in Dani Kaplan's (1999) research on masculinity and sexuality among gay Israeli combat soldiers in the 1980s. Kaplan illustrates how different military units fostered distinct cultures aligned with specific ethnic groups in Israel. The Golani infantry brigade, for instance, was associated with the working class and the strong presence of Mizrahi young men (1999, 69). A gay Mizrahi interviewee described his platoon as filled with homoerotic tension, sometimes explicitly expressed – such as direct propositions for sex (69-74). In contrast, many gay interviewees from other units reported much more clandestine same-sex encounters. The men in Golani, according to Kaplan, did not identify as gay. Rather, the interactions between them were seen as part of the *Sahbakiya*, the intimate camaraderie of warriors isolated from home and their girlfriends – a camaraderie that included physical intimacy that might not have been approved in other contexts and that in some cases led to male-to-male sex or propositions thereof (214-18).

Jane Ward (2015) described a sexual culture of American white men who engaged in various sexual acts with other men while avoiding or rejecting gay or bisexual identity. She argued that sexual contact between straight white men, often in fraternities at colleges and universities, was not antithetical to their heterosexuality. Instead, when performed "the 'right' way – when they make a show of enduring it, imposing it, and repudiating it – doing so function[ed]

to bolster not only their heterosexuality, but also their masculinity" (2015, 5).

Akin to fraternities, the army is a homosocial space of social and cultural centrality. The public nature of many acts that Kaplan's interviewees described – from the friendly touch of one another's bodies, through public nudity to very explicit, yet perhaps playful, propositions of sex – reinforces the participants' heterosexuality and masculinity. As Kaplan (1999) notes: "If the entire military service is a chain of masculinity tests, homosexual relations can become a part of it as well, if one knows how to present it 'the right way'" (216). This is true in all combat units. However, in Golani, a unit associated with working-class Mizrahim, references to sex, including male-to-male sex, were more explicit, and there was less pressure to hide the feelings of attachment between the men. In other units, 'too much' emotional or physical attachment between two men might be classified as 'truly gay'. Therefore, soldiers might be more guarded in playing with what are considered homosexual signals and patterns.

'Gayness,' of course, is not merely a matter of sexual preference but also encompasses a mode of self-expression, cultural affiliation, and aesthetic identification. Kaplan's testimonies suggest that in the post-1970s Mizrahi discourse 'gayness' was coded as Ashkenazi. Consequently, male-to-male intimacy, when stripped of a gay agenda, aesthetics, and feminine gender expression, and performed by non-Ashkenazim, could be interpreted as 'not gay'. This variant of masculinity and sexuality is also represented in literature. Sami Berdugo, a gay Israeli author born in 1970 to parents of Moroccan descent, explores these themes in his short story *Like Us, Lovers*, which depicts a sexual and romantic relationship between two men (Berdugo 2011a). The narrator is an unemployed man in an unhappy marriage, while the other man, Rafi Buskila, is a divorced single father. Though also financially strained, Buskila embodies symbols of Mizrahi masculinity: dark skin, shaved black hair, coffee brewed on the stove, soccer coaching, and military reserve service.

This is not a coming-out story, nor one of self-discovery; the men do not see themselves as gay. Instead, their relationship becomes a space to express their masculinity. In this space, they transcend their struggles with financial hardship and complex relationships with women, instead finding a realm of generosity, passion, and potency. In this sense, the men in *Like Us, Lovers* operate within a logic not dissimilar from the *Sahbakiya* – where sexual and emotional connections between men (in their case – actual sex and romance, which were not part of the *Sahbakiya*) serve as a means to reaffirm their masculinity in the face of the emasculating (in their experience) socio-economic and familial contexts in which they are set.

Another of Berdugo's short stories, titled *Sissy* (2011b), portrays an effeminate Mizrahi teenager from a small town who walks the

streets of a nearby city on his way to visit his ailing father. He has an Ashkenazi appearance, with curly blond hair, green eyes, and a hairless body, but in his veins runs "the blood of a hot Mizrahi" (2011b, 214). Along the way, he meets and is attracted to masculine, hairy, and tough Mizrahi youths and men, who are "brown and strong because of their temperamental character and dark genes" (212). They are described in a manner that intertwines their Mizrahi appearance, their allure in the narrator's eyes, and their masculinity:

> The voices coming out of the mouths of men and youths impress me. […] Someone already caught me red-handed about a year ago, when I asked some country stranger to talk, and later I also wanted him to lift his arm and let me peek at the bursting hair of his armpit, because a sissy like me […] is powerless in the face of temptation. (2011b, 209-10)

In one scene, he observes "three such Mizrahi men. They act as if to threaten, wearing black jeans and button shirts. Their hands attract me like delight [*ta'anug* in Hebrew], and my gaze moves over their pointy faces that perfectly suit men like these" (2011b, 210).

The narrator's unconventional gender expression draws attention from people around him, much of it is seemingly sexual: "The young men mark [him] and wait to see [him] naked" because "the blond does something that would arouse anyone" (2011b, 210). However, being a sissy is also portrayed as an abnormal excess, which in several scenes leads to violent reactions:

> I see two tall men walking. […] The swarthy, thin one looks at me and blows smoke out of his mouth, and it seems to me he gestures toward me with a sign of serious beatings. […] And here I am, unable to stop my heart from beating next to these Mizrahi men, and one of them puts another cigarette in his mouth and says something to the other guy. Both of them start walking in my direction – it can't be otherwise – and soon they will yell, "Where did this sissy come from?". (2011b, 219-20)

Berdugo clearly leans into both stereotypes described earlier – namely the hyper-masculine Mizrahi man and the delicate Mizrahi boy – and uses them to portray homoerotic tension that mirrors heterosexual attraction, where the effeminate youth substitutes for a woman – all without applying the label "gay".

Tom Salama adopts a similar approach in his memoir, *The Boy Who Thought He's A Fat Woman* (2022). Born in 1982 and raised by a single mother in Kiryat Ata, Salama left home at 16 and moved to Tel Aviv. The narrator of the memoir is an effeminate, overweight gay boy who develops a complicated relationship with a classmate,

the domineering and macho Maor – both of whom are of MENA descent. Eventually, their relationship turns sexual, characterized by clear power dynamics but also tinged with mutual affection. For the narrator, this experience fulfils his gay fantasies. Maor, however, does not identify as gay or bisexual. He boasts about his sexual relationships with girls and is portrayed as stereotypically hyper-masculine. Maor and the narrator never openly discuss their sexual relationship. The closest Maor comes to expressing his attraction to the narrator is through his fantasies of having sex with fat girls, indirectly emphasizing the narrator's weight and femininity through an unspoken association. The power dynamics between the two extend to their sexual relationship, where Maor takes pleasure in his dominant role (2022, 123-8).

The narrators in *Sissy* and Salama's memoir present a different subjectivity compared to the youths and men to whom they are attracted. Their objects of desire are embodiments of hyper-masculinity – who are on the 'down low' if attracted to other men at all – and the sexual tension is framed along the lines of a traditional heterosexual couple. In other words, it unfolds between a masculine man or teen and a feminine teen, constructed as a girl or a sissy (compare to Yitshaq's characterization of men who occupied the penetrated role as 'women'). However, the narrators themselves might employ a strategy closer to the one outlined in the next segment in formulating their effeminate masculine identity and expression.

To conclude, this strategy exemplifies the adoption of a Mizrahi identity while rejecting a gay discourse. By refraining from aligning with gay identity, it frames male-to-male intimacies as compatible with, or reinforcing, traditional masculine ideals.

3.2 The Second Strategy: *Forach*

The second strategy in forging a non-Ashkenazi gay masculinity is centred on creating a feminine, carefree Mizrahi gay identity that subverts both the macho norms of Mizrahi masculinity and the Ashkenormative dominance within Israel's gay culture.[2] We term this strategy *Forach*, which is a key term in *Ochtshit*, a Hebrew gay slang. It embodies a light-hearted and cheeky ethos characterized by overtly feminine, campy, and flamboyant mannerisms. Previous research on *Ochtshit* (Levon 2010; Elias 2021; Brom 2022) highlights

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2 Ashkenormativity is a colloquial term defined by the *Jewish English Lexicon* as "assuming Ashkenazi Jews and Jewishness as the default; excluding Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and other Jewish practices and histories from Jewish communal life" [*Jewish English Lexicon*, s.d.]. On the dominance of Ashkenazi culture in the Israeli society in general, see Sasson-Levy and Shoshana 2013.

its links to Mizrahi identities, both lexically (with words deriving from Jewish Arabic dialects) as well as socio-linguistically. The term *Forach* itself stems from *Freha*, a derogatory stereotype of a common, stupid, boorish Mizrahi woman.

Much has been written about this stereotype, its use in the repression of Mizrahi women in Israel, and its simulacral nature (see, for example, Naaman 2006; Evri 2008; Haruvi, Shabat Nadir 2015). While criticism of the Freha stereotype is significant, its reclamation in certain Mizrahi circles and among speakers of Ochtshit is equally compelling. The latter draw on linguistic indices associated with the Freha (among others) to construct a light-hearted, campy, and feminine gay persona. This persona leverages the cultural vocabulary of a Freha-inspired Mizrahi femininity to embody the ethos of Forach, thereby subverting hegemonic Israeli masculinity and its adoption by parts of the gay community (Brom 2022).

Contemporary Ochtshit lexicon has been influenced by characters played by actor Ilan Peled, born in 1969 to Jewish immigrants from Tripoli, Libya. Peled gained fame with his portrayal of Miri Pascal, a vulgar, larger-than-life Mizrahi female parking-enforcement officer. Later, he developed a similar character named Danit or Deniz, a Mizrahi wedding singer whose identity is underscored by her speech (Gafter 2019, 237-8) and occupation – a 'wedding singer' being a stereotype once used disparagingly against Mizrahi musicians. While a full analysis of Peled's linguistic style is beyond this chapter's scope (see Gafter 2019 and Brom 2022), his characters serve as more than mere parodies of Mizrahi women.[3] Their immense popularity in Israeli gay spaces and their centrality within contemporary Ochtshit style demonstrate the allure of the vulgar, larger-than-life, stereotypical Mizrahi woman for Israeli gay audiences. Peled's characters serve as cultural resources for those gays, who use Peled's linguistic mannerisms and expressions to craft their own empowering non-macho, overtly queer Mizrahi personas (Brom 2022).

Another highly popular cultural phenomenon in Israel's gay scene was *Arisa*, a line of gay Mizrahi parties founded in 2010 by Yotam Papo and Omer Tubi. Shortly after its creation, Uriel Yekutiel, a drag performer, joined the team and quickly became the face of Arisa. This party line achieved two significant milestones: it created an unapologetically Mizrahi gay space that attracted diverse crowds, including LGBT Mizrahim from small towns, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and Palestinians. This inclusivity was

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3 Previous analyses of Peled's characters have highlighted their dual role in both reinforcing stereotypes of Mizrahi women as vulgar, grotesque, unintelligent, and uncultured, and simultaneously ridiculing Ashkenazi elites while reimagining the Mizrahi woman as an empowered cultural icon. See Ben Yehuda 2015 and Elias 2018.

partly due to Arisa's policy of eliminating door selection at the club entrance, allowing broader access. Additionally, Arisa collaborated with prominent Mizrahi music performers, overcoming barriers in a genre that was often seen as homophobic (Atwan 2015).

Arisa produced music videos featuring well-known Mizrahi hits, working with artists to create Mizrahi gay anthems. These videos, many of which went viral within the local LGBT community, starred Yekutiel in his drag persona. Born in 1988 to a Jewish family of Afghan descent, Yekutiel's gender-bending persona blends femininity with Mizrahi cultural symbols. He appears on stage with elaborate makeup and often in traditional female attire from various MENA communities or modern feminine clothing coded as Mizrahi. His look is further accentuated by an impressive moustache – a symbol of Mizrahi and Arab masculinity – that he pairs with both feminine and masculine roles. Many of the characters Yekutiel portrays are recognizable Israeli Mizrahi archetypes or stereotypes, like the Moroccan mother or the Breslever Hasid. Arisa, then, can be understood as a space for unapologetic Mizrahi gay expression, with Yekutiel embodying a carefree, playful, and feminine Mizrahi masculinity – much like Ilan Peled's characters.[4]

As a final example, we highlight the work of visual artist and animator Dotan Moreno, born in 1985 to a family of Egyptian descent. Moreno's art explores themes of Mizrahi masculinity – "a fragile, passive masculinity that appears tough on the outside but is soft on the inside" (Moreno 2018). Moreno's men feature emblematic elements of historic and contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi masculinities. He depicts Ottoman male figures in turbans, hairy-chested young men with moustaches, a black-haired man clad in a black Adidas tracksuit and white sneakers, and men in traditional homosocial spaces, such as synagogues. Yet, Moreno's men are never aggressive. They exude melancholy, introspection, and occasionally a touch of cheekiness. In one animation on his Instagram page, a man in Ottoman attire reveals a hairy buttock. In an installation at Ha'amakim Gallery, Moreno reimagines Goya's *The Straw Manikin* (1791), replacing the manikin with a Mizrahi man suspended mid-air, tossed by four Mizrahi women – a striking representation of passive masculinity.

Moreno also draws on the concept of Forach, using it as the title for a series of portraits of men painted in watercolour and ink, where colours flow freely across the surface. Many of the figures in Forach meet the viewer's gaze directly with tears in their eyes, hinting at

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4   Like Peled, Arisa has also been analysed as simultaneously subverting hegemonic Israeli masculinity and creating a space for Mizrahi queer expression, while perpetuating misogynistic stereotypes of Mizrahi women (see Horesh 2013).

an emotional intensity beneath their tough exteriors. While not as overtly feminine or flamboyant as the personas seen in Arisa's video clips or among speakers of Ochtshit, Moreno subtly constructs a Mizrahi masculinity that challenges traditional straight Mizrahi machismo by embracing vulnerability and fluidity within masculine identities.

The Forach strategy emerges from these examples as one that embraces both Mizrahi and gay/queer affirming discourses. Unlike the first strategy, which draws on images of Mizrahi hyper-masculinity, Forach reclaims and reimagines cultural symbols traditionally tied to Mizrahi femininity to craft identities that are campy, flamboyant, and unapologetically queer. It challenges both the Ashkenazi dominance in Israeli gay culture and the hyper-masculine ideals of Mizrahi identity, instead celebrating vulnerability, playfulness, and gender fluidity.

Figure 2   Dotan Moreno, *Black Tears*. 2017. Water colours and ink on paper.
Courtesy of the artist

3.3 The Third Strategy: A New Middle East

The third and final strategy, like the second, embraces both Mizrahi and gay/queer discourses, but in a distinctly different manner, as it uses them to critique Zionism or Ashkenormativity. Author Moshe Sakal offers a queer alternative to prevailing Zionist narratives, an alternative that is rooted in his family biography. Born in 1976 to a family of Damascene and Cairene descent, Sakal has spent much of his life outside Israel, mainly in Paris, and currently resides in Berlin with his husband. His literary work, encompassing six novels and a collection of short stories, is often imbued with semi-autobiographical details, with many of the works centred around gay men, writers, and Egyptian and Syrian immigrants to Israel.

In his analysis of Hebrew literature by authors of Jewish Egyptian descent, Dario Miccoli (2014) has written about Sakal's 2011 novel, *Yolanda*. The titular character is the narrator's grandmother, who was born in Cairo to a bourgeois family and immigrated to Israel shortly after the establishment of the state in 1948. The narrator, Momo, lives between Tel Aviv and Paris, where he pursues a degree in French. Momo's relationship with his grandmother, mirroring the author's with his, is thus spatially constructed between Paris, Cairo, and Israel. Temporally, Yolanda's memories are rooted in a Cairo that does not exist anymore. Her present in Israel is shadowed by her unaccomplished childhood dreams of going to the 'Promised Land' in Paris. At the same time, Momo lives in that Promised Land, but is caught up in a nostalgic fantasy of a multicultural Cairo through his grandmother's stories. Miccoli notes that both of them are living a diasporic existence and are rooted in a language – their familial idiolect of French – rather than a place.

This diasporic tendency permeates Sakal's entire oeuvre, potentially reflecting a gay sensibility to feelings of exclusion from the heteronormative majority or aligning with a queer politics that resists assimilation into that majority. However, while the creation of 'chosen families' outside the biological family is a recurring theme in queer history and fiction, Sakal situates queerness within the biological family itself. His novel *The Diamond Setter* (2018) is inspired by true events from the author's family. The plot centers on Tom, the male narrator, a writer who begins working at his great-uncle Menashe's jewellery shop in Tel Aviv. The narrative alternates between past and present, revealing a 1930s love triangle involving Menashe's parents and a Palestinian Muslim woman from Jaffa named Laila. In the present, Fareed, a young man from Damascus and Laila's grandson, crosses illegally into Israel, attempting to return a piece of a legendary diamond that his grandmother had given him to its rightful owner in Jaffa. Fareed becomes part of a second love triangle, all-male in this case, with the narrator and an Israeli soldier named Honi.

Through these intertwined stories, the novel explores queer love that spans generations and connects two families – one Jewish and one Muslim. As in *Yolanda*, the novel's treatment of space and time subverts the Zionist framing of Israel as a Promised Land. It reminds the reader that this region is also a site of Palestinian nostalgia and political aspirations of return, as well as Damascus being a part of Jewish history. This transgressive stance is epitomized by queer love – not only in the homoerotic sense experienced by Fareed, Tom, and Honi, but also in its challenge to monosexual ideals (through the love triangles) and, perhaps most importantly, in its defiance of national and religious boundaries.

Sakal's ethnic and gays identities translate into a political vision of a Middle East existing either before or beyond the nation-state framework, where diasporic communities sustain their cultures through language and family stories, and where national, ethnic, and religious borders are permeable to erotic ties with outsiders – a kind of Levantine Pax Erotica. The term 'Levantine' connects Sakal's work to that of Jacqueline Kahanoff, another Cairene Jewish writer and intellectual. Born in 1917, Kahanoff immigrated to Israel in 1954, where she encountered a society shaped by Zionism's rejection of the diasporic past. She reclaimed the pejorative term 'Levantinism', reframing it as a positive model for a pluralistic, hybrid society embracing diverse cultural identities. Her vision called for reviving the Levant as a cultural and geographic entity, bridging East and West and fostering coexistence. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Kahanoff broadened her Levantinism into a regional framework, proposing it as an alternative to imperialism and domination (Starr, Somekh 2011).

Sakal (2015) articulated his vision of Levantinism in an essay published in *Haaretz* at a moment when Mizrahi identity was being politically mobilized by the right wing, shortly after Miri Regev, the Mizrahi Minister of Culture from the Likud party, had proudly declared that she had never read Chekhov and preferred listening to Mizrahi music instead:

The New Levantine gazes indifferently at the ongoing identity wars in the country. Those who believed the Levantine was a derivative or extension of the Mizrahi identity were mistaken. [...] The ancestors of the New Levantine didn't travel in cattle cars across Europe, weren't smuggled to the land on immigrant ships, weren't expelled from Arab countries, nor sprayed with DDT and brought to transit camps. They arrived impoverished but proud. They didn't build the country, didn't fight, didn't kill, and didn't receive medals of valour. (Sakal 2015)

This formulation explicitly rejects the Zionist Ashkenormative narrative while simultaneously distancing itself from the mainstream political Mizrahi discourse that seeks recognition for Mizrahim as well for their contribution to the nation building project, offering instead an ethics of non-belonging.

As noted earlier, this perspective aligns closely with gay sensibilities and queer politics. Sakal (2015) draws the connection himself: "The New Levantine is a minority among the masses – whether *galuti*,[5] a woman, or gay – therefore he is weak, but therefore is also strong. All places are his. All times are his. [...] He is neither 'Mizrah' nor 'Ashkenaz'.[6] He is a multitude of negations. He is a multitude of affirmations". Sakal's masculinity is therefore a queer one, rejecting both national and heteronormative formulations of hegemonic masculinity – whether those of the Ashkenazi pioneer or the Mizrahi Black Panther – and instead celebrating weakness and marginality.

4 Conclusion

This chapter explored the construction of non-Ashkenazi homosexual masculinity across two cohorts of men from MENA countries. The first cohort, navigating their identities prior to the 1970s, adhered to traditional gender roles, upheld a binary view of sexual roles where penetration expressed masculinity, and had male-to-male sex without adopting a gay identity. In contrast, the second cohort, shaped during and after the emergence of politicized Mizrahi and gay discourses in the 1970s, demonstrated a more diverse engagement with masculinity and sexuality. While some continued to emphasize traditional sexual roles and avoided adopting a gay identity, others actively subverted hegemonic norms. These subversions included crafting feminine masculinities through the reclamation of Mizrahi stereotypes and developing queer identities that challenged both Zionist and Ashkenormative ideals.

We hope this study helps fill gaps in the scholarship on Jewish homosexuality and Mizrahi masculinity. Beyond adding to our knowledge about a group historically marginalized in both Israeli society and academic discourse, this research also improves our understanding of the lasting impact of the sociopolitical transformations of the 1970s on political discourses, identities, and modes of self-expression in Israel over the past 50 years – a topic that remains under-researched.

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5 *Galuti*, the Hebrew translation of diasporic, is considered pejorative in the Zionist ideology that glorifies the return of Jews to Eretz Israel and demeans Jewish life in the Diaspora, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi alike.

6 Sakal goes back to the geographical terms – Mizrah, the East, and Ashkenaz, the Medieval Hebrew name of Germany – from which the two social categories of Mizrahim and Ashkenazim were derived.

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