"Ana Yehudi": Shy Abady Goes Back to the Levant

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"I am a product of Arab culture, including its literature and its history. This is my identity, and even when I wrote in Hebrew I saw myself as an Arab. Just as there are Arab Christians in Israel, there are also Arab Jews like myself."[1]

"... That's how it was, we were Arab Jews, it was natural."[2]

Shimon Ballas

In November 2008, Shy Abady landed at Ben Gurion Airport on a direct flight from Berlin, where he had lived for a year and a half with his partner, working and painting, completely engrossed in Prussian-German history and culture. As they were walking toward the gates of the country, Abady was suddenly detained at passport control. With a suspicious look, examining his dark complexion and his face adorned with a mustache and unshaven beard stubble, the officer said to him: "The transliterated name 'Abady' is alarming..." It's not that Abady was unaware of his Mizrahi — let alone Arab — facial features; but he was surprised by the moment he himself — a deep-rooted and engaged Jewish Israeli — was caught up in the Israeli fear and anxiety about the threatening specter of "the enemy." This incident was preserved in his memory not just as a border crossing that was a bit delayed, but as an inner shift, which left a mark.

Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani would call this a "moment of discovery," a sudden realization of one's inner denial of background and culture, just as he himself experienced in his youth.[3] But it is doubtful whether Abady — the youngest of four brothers who were born and raised in a secular family in the liberal Jerusalem of the

[1] Dalia Karpel, "I am an Arab. An Arab Jew," Interview with Shimon Ballas, Haaretz, 1.7.2003 (Hebrew).

[2] Almog Behar, "The Revenge of Arabic: Interview with Shimon Ballas," published on Almog Behar's website, almogbehar.wordpress.com ,26.12.2011 (Hebrew).

[3] "The moment it became clear to me that the denial that I believed was a personal experience was in fact a collective phenomenon would be a moment of discovery for me: the discovery that the experience of denial was a formative one for many in my generation." Yehouda Shenhav, The Arab-Jews: Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity, Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003, p. 11 (Hebrew).

1970s, and a generation younger than Shenhav-Shahrabani — could be counted among the deniers. Like Baruch Shimoni, he could honestly say that "from a cultural standpoint, I was created [...] in the image of my parents and in the image of Israeli society, and these two histories echoed within me."[4] And indeed, Arabic culture was present in his life not as a shameful and oppressive presence, but as an obvious fact: the son of Shaul and Yaffa Abady, both born in Jerusalem; the grandson of Abraham Abady, born in Damascus (1860), and Mathilda Abady, born in Iraq (circa 1900); and of Rahamim ben Aharon, born in Jerusalem (1911) of Aleppan descent, and Sarah, born in Greece (circa 1916) and also of Syrian-Aleppan descent; and great-grandson of Aharon and Reineh Hara (Shama), both born in Aleppo, Syria. In the current exhibition, Abady looks at the Jewish-Arab-Mizrahi family tree into which he was born and examines the cultural and mental environment in which his parents and grandparents lived and worked, with the aim of pointing to a different relationship between the two languages and peoples, which history alternatively brought together and drove apart.

Return to the Levant, Abady's exhibition currently on display at the Walid Abu Shakra Umm el-Fahem Museum, returns the "Arab Jews" to the stage of history: Jews who were born in Arab nations, spoke fluent Arabic, grew up immersed in Arab culture and who were influenced by it — according to the definition of historian Hillel Cohen.[5] According to Cohen, the authentic life of this dual identity was short: It began at the end of the Ottoman period and ended with the 1929 Palestine riots, when Zionist-Jewish identity and Arab identity became enemies of one another and could not live under one rule, not even in consciousness alone. Those same Jews who lived in Arab nations, but grew up on European culture, as with the Levantine model proposed by Jacqueline Kahanoff, do not meet this definition, according to Cohen, and so too the

[4] Baruch Shimoni, "Fractured Identity: Reflections of a Mizrahi-Sabra," in Theory and Criticism 28, Spring 2006 (ed: Yehouda Shenhav), p. 213 (Hebrew).

[5] Hillel Cohen, "The Life and Death of the Arab Jew in the Land of Israel and Outside it," in Ofer Shiff (editor), Homelands in Exile, Perceptions of Belonging and Foreignness in the Jewish Diaspora, Ben-Gurion Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, 2015, p. 172 (Hebrew).

descendants of the Arab Jews who were born in Israel, and for whom it was no longer common to speak Arabic.[6]

The "Levant" to which Abady returns, in the footsteps of his grandparents and great-grandparents, is therefore not the multicultural and multilingual Levantine sphere that returned to thrive in the contemporary Israeli discourse as an expansive and optimistic option, [7] but rather the pre-state Ottoman Levant, which was steeped in traditional Arab-ness, before being divided and split by the treaties of the colonial powers following and during World War I. This is the same vast and open "Levant" or "Orient", the Land of the Rising Sun (*lever* means "rise"), which Gustave Flaubert wrote about in a letter to his friend Ernest Chevalier in May 1849, in his description of the route of his great journey: "We begin by travelling up the length of the Nile until Karnak, and from there to Palestine; and then Syria, Baghdad, Batzra, Persia and until the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, Georgia, along the coast of Asia Minor, Constantinople and Greece."[8] Flaubert defined the borders of the imagined sphere of the Levant, a product of the 15th century, which was being discovered by the eyes of the European who sailed from the port of Venice to the streets of the exotic East, rich in goods, eros and resources. In the narrower modern delineation, the Levant included only the lands of the East and the Mediterranean Sea — Syria, Lebanon, Israel-Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus, and parts of Turkey. The political terminology "the lands of the Levant," on the other hand, was used in French and referred only to Syria and Lebanon, which were brought under the mandate of the French government following the Sykes–Picot Agreement (1916).

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[6] According to Avi-ram Tzoreff, in Kahanoff's definition of Levantinism, and in the cosmopolitan spirit that inspired it, "one component was missing — the Arabs." Tzoreff emphasizes the fact that Kahanoff's first language was French, and therefore, "Kahanoff's lack of knowledge of Arabic teaches about the Levantine character she sought to formulate — a Levantinism that reserved only a marginal place for the Arabs and Arabic." And later: "Kahanoff's Levantinism is not an expression of belonging to a sphere but rather belonging to a class — the upper class — and this in turn exacerbates the alienation toward the [Arab] sphere and the majority of its residents." See Avi-ram Tzoreff, "Levantinism as Alienation," in: Hazman Hazeh, a magazine of political thought, culture, and science, the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, Jerusalem (editor: Ofri Ilany), July 2020, (Hebrew).

[7] See David Ohana's book, Jacqueline Kahanoff: The Levantine, Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing House, 2022 (Hebrew); Idan Zivoni, In Favor of Levantism: An Essay and Thirteen Conversations, Tel Aviv: Resling, 2024 (Hebrew); Ketzia Alon and Liat Arlette Sides (editors), Bring The Sun In: Levantine Perspectives, Gama Press, 2024 (Hebrew). And of course, Jacqueline Kahanoff's book From East the Sun: Tel Aviv: Hadar, 1978 (Hebrew)

[8] Gustave Flaubert, Letters, Tel Aviv: Yedioth Ahronoth, 2006, p. 121 (Hebrew).

This is the same Arab-colonial Levant in which Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche, a native of Jaffa and one of the founders of Neve Tzedek and Tel Aviv, could be sent in his youth to a Jewish high school in Beirut, where he studied in Hebrew as well as Arabic and French; and in his adulthood do business in Cairo, purchase merchandise in Damascus and sell it in Jerusalem, freely using the network of trains and regional banking systems and taking advantage of his command of all three languages. In his autobiographical book My Life, Chelouche describes his life and thriving business in the large territory between Egypt to the south, the Land of Israel/Palestine in the middle and Syria and Lebanon to the north.[9] Like Chelouche, Shy Abady's grandfather, Abraham Abady, was also an active citizen of the geopolitical territory of the Ottoman and British Mandate Levant, as he experienced an open territorial, linguistic and cultural space around which he could move freely. Abraham Abady grew up in the Syria of the second half of the 19th century, immigrated as an adult to Cairo and finally, in the 1920s, immigrated again to the Land of Israel-Palestine and settled in Jerusalem. His portrait — a distinguished Syrian Jewish figure, adorned with a curling Mizrahi mustache and dressed in a suit, a Western-style tie and an Ottoman fez — is one of the starting points for his grandson's artistic process.

Eight years after his return from Berlin, after two widescale German series (My Other Germany [2008-2009] and Augusta Victoria [2009-2011]) Abady gradually began developing his familial "Levantine" series. During the research, which was based on an old family photo album, certificates and documents, Abady did not hesitate to explore the visual similarity between the portraits of his father Shaul and his uncle Ezra and the portrait of Gamal Abdel Nasser, and expose the manifest visual proximity between the three mustached, elegant men with neatly combed dark hair. His mother, adorned with a white veil and crowned with dark curls, is the "Syrian Bride," painted in a festive round format. Alongside her is a portrait of his great-grandfather, Aharon Hara (Shamaa), dressed in a festive jalabiya with the caption: Ana Yahudi ("I am a Jew") written in Arabic and Hebrew. His grandfather on his mother's side, Rahamim ben Aharon, appears in the uniform of the Palestinian police, under the auspices of the British monarchy, and embodies the blend of identities of the pre-1948 Levant. The

[9] Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche, My Life, 1870-1930 (1931), Babel, 2005 (Hebrew).

tangle of identities and the cross-fertilization between Jewish and Arabic is also expressed in the exchange of languages and the Hebrew-Arabic calligraphy, as a parallel phase to the dual identity of the portraits: "That's how it was, we were Arab Jews, it was natural," Abady echoes the statement of Shimon Ballas in the figures of his grandparents. Following his own characterization as Arab, he also blurs his own figure and exaggerates it with a fierce and shadowy self-portrait, which makes it difficult to distinguish between the two identities. The word *yahudi* ("Jew") which appears in Arabic underneath a different self-portrait, painted on an intense red background, symbolizes the suspicious dualism.

The Zionist view, as we know, did not see this dual identity as natural: "The Arab Jews," wrote Yehouda Shenhav-Shahrabani, "were perceived as ethnic others, who should be brought through processes of assimilation in order to blur their (Arab) otherness and recreate them as similar."[10] The hot wind of the Zionist melting pot was blown onto the backs of the Arab Jews, who came from the Islamic nations, and sought to purify them from the Arab-ness of their background in favor of the new and whitewashed Israeli-ness. Recently, the categories of Arab Jew and Levantine Jew have reemerged in the Israeli discourse, less as living identities and more as discursive terms that challenge the national Zionist identity and seek to effect change and adaptation within it.

Jewish-Arab Identity Versus Western Artistic Tradition

In contrast to the younger generation of Israeli artists of Mizrahi descent, who developed out of the ethnic-traditional foundations of their parents' households and were fed by the tailwind of identity politics that pushed back against the Ashkenazi hegemony, the body of work of Shy Abady (a graduate of the Faculty of Arts — Hamidrasha) grew out of the tradition of figurative Western art from the beginning, without recourse to his Mizrahi background. The young Abady raised his eyes to monumental Baroque painting, the great Italian and French painters, the anatomical tradition of the male nude of the Renaissance, and the dynasty of classical etchings.

[10] Yehouda Shenhav, The Arab Jews: Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity, p. 204 (Hebrew).

That is where he directed his large early series of paintings: from an intensive exploration of the character of Russian ballet dancer Vaslav Nijinsky (1995), to the figure of Radu Klapper, a Romanian poet who lived in Tel Aviv (2012), to a series of portraits of Paul Celan, the Jewish Transylvanian poet, which concerned his historic visit to Israel (2022). His other series that were exhibited and gained renown explored the figure of Hannah Arendt (2006), the family of the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, the life of the empress Augusta Victoria, and the Viennese family of Binyamin Ze'ev (Theodor) Herzl (2012), out of an attempt to explore the complex and convoluted Jewish connection in each of these biographies. Abady's painting tends to correspond with the genre known in the Western artistic tradition as "history painting," which relies on grand stories of kings and princes and raises biographic narratives of people and dynasties. In the series My Other Germany, he follows the Medieval Gothic sculptural tradition and raises echoes of the theological debate, not between Judaism and Islam, but between Judaism and Christianity: the victorious "Ecclesia" and the downcast "Synogoga" appear in his pictures as two Gothic personifications, Medieval in character.

At the same time, Abady layers the dominance of the classic Western tradition in his paintings by means of foreignness and remoteness, especially by using light painting materials and an industrial canvas: the German series were painted on industrial planks of oriented strand board (OSB), while the drawing was performed using an electrical needle that blackens the lines; the Back to the Levant series is painted on plywood in various shapes, rectangular or round, in mixed media including coal, dry pastel chalk, colored pencils and diluted acrylic paint. The industrial platform, which projects a purposeful matter-of-factness at the expense of majesty, transfers the Prussian splendor and Gothic tradition of the images to a contemporary mode, and allows them to be interpreted as allegory. Abady also uses the artistic format as a marker that mediates between past and present: Thus, the portraits in the series Back to the Levant, which are painted in large round formats (110-120 cm in diameter), correspond with the European bourgeois tradition of portraits in round or oval formats, which are embedded in decorative sets of elegant interior design. But unlike the luminous shine of multi-layered oil paint characteristic of the European Baroque,

Abady maintains “artistic scarcity” and works with thin and dry layers of color, which carve a distance between the nostalgic portrait and the conceptual statement. Thus, his artistic process, which is based on the Western painting tradition, is saved from the trap of nostalgic anachronism and becomes a thought-provoking argument.

The presence of the old family photo album flickers through the painted portraits: The characters stand gayly in front of the camera, in an era when photography was not an everyday event to be taken for granted. Abady brings an additional element into the cast of characters in Back to the Levant — the negative of the Arab Jew, i.e. the mythological, hegemonic, eternally youthful and handsome Israeli *tzabar*. Here Abady bases himself on “He Walked Through the Fields” (1947), the Israeli novel written by Moshe Shamir, one of the main spokespeople of the generation of 1948 writers and one of those who shaped the new Hebrew literature. There's a reason Abady chose to paint the actors who portrayed the frontier heroes in Yosef Milo’s legendary film (1967): Uri, the main protagonist, the soldier who meets his death at the end of the story, was played by Assi Dayan, the ultimate *tzabar* son of a *tzabar* and a legend in his own right, whose tragic personal destruction went beyond the movie’s plot. Mika, Uri’s girlfriend, the new immigrant who comes to the kibbutz and is captivated by its native charms, was played by Iris Yotvat, the daughter of colonel Moshe Yotvat, a native-born Israeli, a soldier in the Haganah and commander of the Kiryati Brigade, one of those who captured Latrun during the Six-Day War. On the portraits of these two native-born Israelis, Abady wrote the word in Arabic and Hebrew: *tzabar-sabr*, a double entendre between the discourse of Israeli identity and the Palestinian-Arabic metaphor of patience and stubbornness.

In the conflicted sphere of the Levant, Abady also planted images of holy sites, graves and historic points of reference. Rachel's Tomb, in its simple and exposed appearance before it was fortified with concrete on all sides, the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock — appear as sort of “historical portraits” that connect to the characters themselves and map their spatial awareness. *Tishrin* (2024) — the Arabic name of the month of Tishrei (the equivalent of October) is a painting done after the massacre in the southern Israeli border region on October 7, 2023, and the Gaza war that came afterwards: a black and threatening silhouette of a broad-winged bird of prey that

casts the full weight of its gravity on the sphere of the Levant, which does not know how to come to terms with the different characters within it.

Back to the Levant and a Vision for the Future

The ensemble of Abady's work, which includes prominent Western elements alongside Mizrahi-Arab elements, shapes itself as a modern, Kahanoff-esque version of a Levantine model. Idan Zivoni, who recently brought the Levantine discourse to the forefront of his studies, follows many others in marking the Levantine as a "non-identity based discourse that allows the dual gaze given in a tangle of libidinal attraction-rejection relations, both from the West and the East, without either removing the other, and along the way it enables a softening of intransigent identities."[11] Abady, then, moves between the two states of the Levant: Both the old, fundamentally Arab one in which his grandfather lived, and in which his Arab-Jewish identity was shaped — like the historic German-Jewish identity — out of the contemporary faith that the intercultural encounter was endowed equitably and facilitated coexistence; and between the new Levantinism, which deviates from the boundaries of the concrete Arab sphere and takes place in full freedom in the eclectic and fluid land between the East and the West.

However, the Arab-Jewish identity that arises in the exhibition at Umm el-Fahem is more closely aligned with that of Yoseff Eliyahu Chelouche, Abraham Elmaliach, Nisim Mallul and Moshe Matalon. "We, natives who speak Arabic,"[12] Chelouche defined the group that worked in the 1920s and 30s, out of the belief that their first duty, as those who correctly understood the "question of getting closer to our neighbors and living in peace with them," was to conduct intensive negotiations with the Arab leadership in the Land of Palestine-Israel. "[...] and if we succeeded in our work and our success was great, it is [because] we appreciated and got along with our neighbors, in whose proximity we had to live and to build our buildings". Chelouche attacked the group of Russian socialists, who were completely foreign to the culture and languages of the East, who arrived in the Second and Third Aliyah, "who were fruitful and multiplied in

[11] Idan Zivoni, In Favor of Levantism: An Essay and Thirteen Conversations, p. 18 (Hebrew).
[12] Yosef Eliyahu Chelouche, My Life, 1870-1930, p.149 (Hebrew).

our small and poor land under the red flags — the land will surely not be built by them, and hopefully will not be destroyed by them..." He determined correctly, already in 1930, that "during this time of our work on building the country, we did not even try to learn enough to speak the language of the land, the language of our neighbors, though we eagerly learn other languages; and still today, in all in our cities and communities in the new Hebrew Yishuv, there is a very small number of people who know how to read and write in their language." "What do we know about the life of the Arab people in all its different branches and powers and tribes? Of its traditions and manners? Its economic and cultural situation and more?" asks Chelouche. "In all the Zionist literature, there is not one book that correctly gives a true description of the life of this people."[13]

The questions Chelouche raised in Tel Aviv-Yafo in the early 1930s have not lost their relevance, and still today they challenge the whole of Israeli society: a society that denies its place in the East and raises its eyes to the West, while relegating Arab-ness to realms of fear and hatred. Abady's exhibition Back to the Levant contemplates these questions again, using his family's history as a model and example of Arab-Jewish history with all its overlap. With an inner impulse, Abady added the Arabic word *halas* — "enough" — above the holy sites, as a profound cry for the end of the bloody historic conflict between the Arab and the Jew, for whom the sphere of the Levant is a shared cradle.

[13] Ibid, p.364