

FROM THE LAND OF OUR FOREFATHERS TO OUR MOTHER, THE HOME-LAND: NEGOTIATIONS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ISRAELI CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Israeli-Hebrew culture was constructed in a conscious effort to create an authentic new culture in the land of Israel, which will articulate the national revival of the Jewish people in its ancient homeland, contain the different cultural heritages in-gathering to the new country from the diverse diasporas and create an indigenous authentic culture in its new geographical and cultural context. With time, these initial aspirations have adapted to the constraints and processes in Israeli and global history. Israeli Cinema, as an integral part of the construction of modern Jewish identity in its Hebrew-Zionist version, reflects the fluid and volatile nature of Jewish identity, as well as transformations in the unique negotiations of “Jewishness” within Israeli culture today.

1. Prologue: Here in the Beloved Land of Our Forefathers

In 1912, on a field trip of the Tel-Aviv Hebrew school “*Gymnasia Hertzliya*”, the music teacher Hanina Kracevsky taught the students a new song, whose lyrics were composed by another teacher at school, Israel Dushman. Dushman composed new lyrics to a Yiddish song, whose lyrics were originally composed by Maurice Rosenfeld and published in a Yiddish magazine under the title: “Exile March”. Rosenfeld’s Yiddish poem describes the endless journey of the wandering Jew, which is so vividly visualized in the painter Shmuel Hircshenberg’s paintings, and in particular the one titled “*Galut*” (meaning in Hebrew: Exile). In this painting, which in illustration 2 appears as reproduced on a “Rosh Hashana” new year greeting card, the procession of Jews appears in the middle of a generalized, indeterminate transitional space, on the move, as in Exodus, on their way, as refugees, looking fatigued and ages old. Rosenfeld’s poem describes the infinitely tired and aged wandering Jew from Hircshenberg’s painting, with a cane in his hand, in a loose translation- with no home and no land, no hope for redemption and no friend, no tomorrow and no today, never staying in one place; where you sleep today you won’t sleep tomorrow, always go, go, go”...The full text of the poem in Yiddish is quoted here, in illustration 1:

מאַרש גלות

מיט דעם וואנדערשטאַק אין האַנט ,
לאַנד , אַן אַ היים און אַן אַ
אַן אַ גואל , אַן אַ פּרײַנד ,
אַן אַ מאַרגען , אַן אַ היינט ,
ניט געדולדעט נאָר געײאַגט ,
וואו גענעכטיקט ניט געטאַגט .

אימער וויי , וויי , וויי ,
אימער גיי , גיי , גיי ,
אימער שפאן , שפאן , שפאן
כל זמן כוח איז פאראן...

זױר ליגט אין שטויב , אונדזער גב
אונדזער תורה איז רויב ,
אַ געפאַר , –אונדזער נאַמען
אונדזער ייחוס נאָר אַ צער ,
אונדזער גאונות נאָר אַ חטא ,

אונדזער פֿינקייט אַ געשפעט ...
אימער שלעכט , שלעכט , שלעכט ,
אימער קנעכט , קנעכט , קנעכט ,
אימער זוך , זוך , זוך ,
זעגן אין דעם שונאס פֿלוך ...

אַ יאָר נאָך יאָר-און אַזוי ,
אַ דור נאָך דור , -און אַזוי
אַן אַ האַפֿענונג , אַן אַ צוועק ,
איינגעהילט אין גרויל און שרעק

איין - אויס ווילד -וואַנדלען מיר ווילד
פֿון יסורים נאָר צו פיין ...

אימער טרעט , טרעט , טרעט ,
אימער בעט , בעט , בעט ,
אימער נויט , נויט , נויט
און קיין גליק זאָגאַר צום טויט .

Illustration 1: “Marsh Galut”, in Yiddish

This gloomily bleak song is completely reversed in tone and theme in its 1912 re-made lyrics by Dushman, first sung by a Tel Aviv Hebrew High School students during their field trip to the Galilee. In the new Hebrew words, in the first person plural WE, the undifferentiated or liminal space of transition and wandering, becomes – HERE: “Here in the beloved land of our forefathers, all hopes will come true; here we shall live and create, a life of splendor, a life of freedom; here the Divine Presence shall dwell and the language of the Torah will flourish; Therefore sing a song, song, song.” [my translation, MTB]



Illustration 2: "Galut" (exile) by Hirschenebner, reproduced as a greeting card for the new year– a *Rosh Hashana* card

The replacement of exile and infinite wandering with roots in the concrete homeland of the forefathers which is articulated in this story about one of many Hebrew songs from the early twentieth century Palestine–Land of Israel encapsulates the creation (and some would say invention¹) of the Hebrew Jewish culture in the Land of Israel. This first creative and entrepreneurial phase of producing an authentic Hebrew speaking and ultimately national Israeli culture, an enterprise still ongoing in Israel since its miraculous onset in the late nineteenth century, was characterized by local spontaneous and voluntary initiatives, mostly of teachers and cultural creators – composers, poets, songwriters, choreographers, painters, designers, photographers, cinematographers. This grass roots cultural production was in no way merely spontaneous and devoid of ideology. The creation and staging of this new version of Jewish culture in Hebrew very symptomatically, like the song I have chosen to begin my discussion with, materializes in educational and collective festive settings, in which the ideas and ideologies which motivate the creation of a Hebrew culture in the land of Israel are expressed and communicated to the local Jewish public–in the public sphere. The songs and dances performed at holiday festivities at school, in Tel Aviv or in a Kibbutz, originate in Biblical Hebrew texts and rituals, with particular emphasis in the emerging local culture on agricultural festivities which had been celebrated in the local ancient pagan and Israelite setting– such as the holiday of spring harvest (Passover–*Hag Ha'Omer*) or autumn harvest (Sukkot–Tabernacles, *Hag Ha'assif*). Creators of collective festivities adapted elements of their original contextual culture in the diasporas, introducing folk, rural Eastern Europe elements of ritual, dance and costume into these original Hebrew land of Israel creations– as

¹ Yaacov Shavit and Shoshana Siton, *Staging and Stagers in Modern Jewish Palestine: The Creation of Festive Lore in a New Culture 1882–1948*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004. Introduction, p. xi.

choreographer Leah Bergstein did for the harvest festivities of *Hag Haomer*, composed by *Matityahu Shelem* in the *Ramat Yochanan* Kibbutz²; The Hebrew text– the Torah and liturgy, was a vital source, mostly texts which reflect the local land of Israel culture as a concrete, sensual, rural culture which is “here” and not “there”. Rather than an abstract textual object of yearning, in the hopes and prayers of the exilic Jew³, the land materialized as a concrete sensual entity to be revitalized and revived by actually yielding fruit. The local Palestinian Arabs, Bedouines, Circassians and Druz communities, which were indigenously practicing local agriculture, were an inspiration for the creation of this local culture. These locally indigenous cultures were considered as practically carriers of the ancient Israelite culture, as textually captured in the bible and second temple scriptures. The local folk dances– *debka* and *Cherkesiya*, were added to the Polish *Polka* and *Mazurska*, the Roumanian *Horia*–which became *Hora*–allegedly THE authentic Israeli folk dance, as well as the Yemen step, to create an indigenous Israeli folk dancing, which incorporates and hybridized diverse elements borrowed from local and imported folk cultures from the Diaspora, further fusing them with traditions of Hassidic and European Jewish folk culture. The production of a local Hebrew culture mobilized local talents and artists for the creation of texts, festivities and rituals which will articulate the ancient (rather than recent) textual (rather than oral) Jewish heritage with the here and now of the land of Israel. Songs were composed for kindergartens and schools, collective public festivities and events. These were all local creative initiatives, based on Hebrew texts and borrowing folk Eastern European and Yiddish melodies, as well borrowing local folk Palestinian elements.

2. Hebrew Eretz–Israeli Zionist Cinema and the New National Culture as a Masculine Project

The creation of local Israeli–Hebrew culture in Palestine–Land of Israel since the late nineteenth century was recorded and reinforced by cinematic endeavors, which helped concretize the locale for suspicious and reluctant witnesses in the diasporas, mobilized new partisans in the Zionist enterprise, and helped visually shape and represent the emerging culture. These early films, mostly documentary, offered images from the land of milk and honey, and constructed an allegorical cinematic narrative of the desolate holy land, a primitive frontier of desert and dunes, camels and ancient ruins, dense Arab villages with ancient agricultural technologies, prickly pear hedges and Mediterranean rocky hill slopes turning into European rectangular and square shaped cultivated fields in the valleys, small white houses with European tile roofs, modern machinery and urban European life styles. These 1930s films, a most outstanding example of which is Baruch Agadati’s “This is the Land” (1934) construct the pioneers and the national enterprise as a story of fit and competent masculinity reviving the land and physically possessing it, by manly manual labor, moistening the soil by the masculine sweating body and the fallen warrior’s blood, penetrating it with the phallic extensions of the plough and the drill and the hoe which the new MAN controls and operates. The Zionist Hebrew masculine pioneer visually penetrates the land, fertilizes it, re–vitalizes it and erotically merges with it. A soviet

² Judith Brin Ingber. *Shorashim: The Roots of Israeli Folk Dance*, *Dance Perspectives* 59 Autumn 1974, New York: Dance Perspectives Foundation

³ Zali Gurevitch (with Gideon Aran), discusses Israeli discourses of place, and suggests to distinguish between the “big place”, a textual abstraction in the Jewish liturgy and scriptures, as opposed to the “small place” – the real, concrete locale where people live. *On Israeli and Jewish Place*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishing, 2007, 22–73 [Hebrew]

cinema inspired dynamic montage editing, accompanied by vigorous and energetic musical score, and a futuristic glorification of man and machine in the outdoors and contested frontiers, articulate an ideology of a blood and sweat national masculine endeavor to “build the homeland”, “climb the mountain”, sanctify labor and physical effort outdoors, in the field, in nature. Much like Classic Hollywood Westerns and War Films these early films, as well as later Israeli films considered “national heroic”⁴ construct masculinity as a spectacular physical endeavor and communal project geared at taming the wilderness, achieving law and order in contested territories, working for the accomplishment of impossible missions. The constitution and evolution of Israeli society coupled with constant conflict and recurring wars, have turned masculinity into its inevitable stamp and shield. The plough, the hoe, and the rifle, the phallic extensions of the Israeli masculine collective body, were recruited to tame the wilderness and build the nation. Females, as well as feminine agendas, were marginalized and suppressed in that process.⁵ The collective, public sphere, ridden with the traumas of immigration, war and cultural suppression of the Diaspora heritage, diminished the private sphere and the individuals within it. The emerging collectivist society, constituted upon Marxist and Socialist ideologies, has since the 1920s marginalized the family, regarded motherhood and family life as trivial bourgeois constraints. Although traditional feminine roles such as motherhood were challenged, and children born in the Kibbutz were not raised in the traditional family environment, females rarely shared “masculine” duties such as road paving and agricultural labor, and were relegated to traditional feminine tasks such as cooking and washing. Indeed, mythological female fighters, warriors such as Manya Shochat and Hanna Senesh, did cross the visible cultural borders between dominant masculinity and subordinate femininity, yet they were the exception to the masculinist norm. As years went by, as Israeli existence became inseparable from constant war and militarism, the collective agenda was subject to growing masculinization. The culture has predominantly prioritized the collective sphere and agenda over the individual and private, the national over the personal, the outside world and “big” politics over a more traditionally feminine agenda: relationships and intimacy, the family and well-being of the individual, politics of identity and everyday life. This collectivist masculinist agenda, coupled with the glorification of youthfulness and the “*Sabra*” peer group, was very much a backlash to the image of the Diaspora Jew, as depicted in the “Galut Marsh” and painting. Rather than a culturally assimilated, intellectually active, cosmopolitan and globally mobile Jew— a current image of exile under globalization, the diasporic Jew was viewed as a feminized, passive and powerless victim of the manly gentiles, devoid of their agency and physical power. This prioritization of the male principle in Israeli culture has victimized males as well as females not only by demanding of them the sacrifice of their very bodies and lives to the nation and its wars, but also by establishing rigid, hetero-normative masculinist gender norms that do not allow neither males nor females feminine attributes such as sensitivity, verbosity, tenderness, weakness, passivity, prioritization of relationships, or “feminine” activities and skills which were completely acceptable as masculine in European cultures—cooking and baking, cleaning and sewing, educating the children in the household, and working at indoor jobs of merchants and sales persons. Such work and special environments (indoors, at home, in business) were considered both unmanly and “exilic”: males who were not doing outdoor chores such as driving and farming, serving in the military, building and

⁴ As defined by Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema* Austin: Texas University Press, 1989 and Nurith Gertz. *Motion Fiction* Ramat Aviv: Open University, 1993 [Hebrew]

⁵ The Dominant masculine and collectivist construction of Israeli identity and its representations in Israeli cinema are extensively discussed in: Miri Talmon. *Israeli Graffiti: Nostalgia, Groups and Collective Identity in Israeli Cinema*. Haifa: Haifa University Press and Ramat Aviv: Open University Press [Hebrew]

working in agriculture, those who lived in urban rather than rural environments, were associated with the pre-national exilic existence of the feminized Diaspora Jew.

3. The Centrality of Culture in the Creation and Negotiation of an Israeli-Jewish Collective Identity

The rebirth of the modern Hebrew/ Israeli national collectivity in its primordial biblical homeland involved a re-definition of collective identity. Culture at large was the domain where the creation of the re-born nation's identity took place. The creation of modern Hebrew-Israeli culture was characterized by an ambivalent approach to the Jewish cultural and historical past. On the one hand- selecting and embracing those aspects of the past which suited the image of the locally rooted national renaissance, on the other- a rejection of elements of the exilic Jewish cultures as incompatible with the new collective identity. The evolving national identity involved a return to the biblical text, which has preserved the linkage to the land of Zion over centuries of exilic existence, suspended in yearning for the lost homeland of the forefathers. The phase in which the people of Israel was rooted in its own territory, dominating and cultivating it, was the core of the emerging national identity. The Israeli-born "sabrá", was to be indigenous to the territory, and rather than spiritual and a man of letters, he aspired to be, like his biblical ancestors, a farmer and a shepherd, intimately tied to the land and cultivating it. The enterprise was about an indigenous Hebrew culture emerging from desert and sea, where the immigrants to the old-new country visually emerged in most films of the 1930s-1960s, re-connecting to the ancient Hebrew textual resources and rituals while "skipping", so to speak, the more immediate "exilic" folk Jewish traditions. Cultural origins and resources which the in-flux of immigrant cultural producers brought with from Europe and Africa, the Middle East and the European East, is now acknowledged as an infinitely rich resource for the constantly evolving culture. Yet, from its very inception Hebrew culture in the Land of Israel is characterized as an on-going struggle, or even battle, over its "genuine" and "authentic" nature. Is it to be western or eastern, secular or religious, "purely" homogenously Israeli, or rather articulating its wealth of resources from the diversity of diasporas, which were and still are, steadily in-gathering into the promised and shelter land?

The struggle over diverse ethnic heritages and their articulation in the indigenously forming "authentic" and "organic" Israeli Hebrew culture has found its way to the particularly ethnically oriented Israeli humor. Whereas officially the culture adopted a "Hebrewist" approach⁶, suppressed exilic Jewish heritage and folklore, and strove to invent itself as tabula rasa, this aspiration imposed tremendous pressures in the Israeli socio-cultural context of an immigrant, multicultural society. The sealing of social boundaries to the cultural heritage from the "old countries" was coupled by social mechanisms of exclusion of new comers, accompanied by rejecting their cultural traditions, practices and signifiers. Hence, ethnic group which joined the boiling Israeli melting pot, and the individuals within them, were subject to ritual exclusionary cultural mechanisms, often materialized in jokes and additional popular texts, which ridiculed

⁶ Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi, *Popular Music and National Culture in Israel*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

and objectified “foreign” ethnic signifiers and accents. Officially, the Israeli melting pot was producing a cohesive and homogenized Hebrew–Israeli culture⁷. But the collective popular sub–conscious, expressed the suppressed cultural heritages and identifications in popular texts, which turned the inter–ethnic exchanges and negotiations into their core narrative and content. These cultural negotiations of Jewish and exilic ethnic heritage found their way into popular Israeli entertainment, that like American Vaudeville, created genres, typologies and cultural archetypes, which in a carnivalesque manner exaggerated ethnic signifiers, inter–ethnic clashes, reversals of ethnic–class social hierarchies; these popular texts constructed an escapist yet subversive utopian universe of cultural exchange and narrative integrative resolutions. Israeli cinema articulated these folkloric ethnic and Jewish heritage negotiations in particularly popular films, nicknamed “*bourekas*” after a Middle Eastern pastry. The central place of food, the family and the domestic sphere in these romantic comedies and maternal melodramas was a direct challenge to the official national Hebrewist, masculinist, ascetic and collectivist discourse, and clearly borrowed from the suppressed folklore of Yiddish and Middle Eastern cinema and culture⁸. No wonder these very popular films in Israel, which to this day are local cult, were so fiercely rejected by highbrow cultural critics and the cinematic institutions⁹; no wonder these films were so popular with the Israeli audience. The popular “*bourekas*” films captured what the official self–reflexively emerging Israeli culture suppressed and rejected: the vital folklore traditions of the Jewish communities out of which the Israelis originated. They laid–bare the inter–cultural heated encounters and struggles in Israeli culture, and resolved them in a carnivalesque and integrative manner. Films such as *Charly and a Half*, [Davidzon, 1974] *Two Kuni Lemels* [Becker, 1966], *Salomoniko* [Steinhardt, 1972], *Lemon Popsicle* [Davidzon, 1978], *Alex in Love* [Davidzon, 1985] and *Hill Halfon Doesn't Answer* [Dayan, 1976] import ethnic Yiddish or Ladino, Ashkenazi and Sephardic, Eastern European and Balkan familial and communal folklore into the fictional world. They are shot on location rather than in elaborate studio settings, and focus on every day familial matters rather than big national issues. These commercial popular films, dismissed as non–art and peripheral in a culture struggling in the public sphere for its national survival, sustain the cultural production where it actually takes place: in the dialogue between producers and consumers of culture, in the margins which allow the unofficial Jewish–Israeli folklore to be created and re–created in its unique Israeli version.

In spite of these popular negotiations of the fundamental heterogeneity and struggles over meaning in Israeli culture, its most fundamental feature is its constant state of becoming. The liquid state of cultural identity, which according to Stuart Hall characterizes cultural identities in the Diaspora, actually characterizes Israeli identity in its indigenous and vernacular contexts. Israeli culture refuses or cannot reach a static state of agreement about its contents, boundaries, narratives, histories and aspirations. The contested state of Israeli culture and national identity returns Israeli Jews to their “natural” and inherent Spiritual Jewish heritage, of always adapting to new cultural environments, while somehow retaining their diverse yet “of oneness” spiritual and intellectual heritage. This adaptive and flexible quality on the one hand, and stubborn adherence to some unifying core in spite of diversity and disparity on the other– enables the culture to

⁷ Tamar Katriel discusses the “crystallization” metaphor epitomizing the yearning for cohesiveness and the strict social boundaries in Israeli culture in: Katriel, Tamar. *Communal Webs: Communication and Culture in Contemporary Israel*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.

⁸ Ella Shohat, “From Orientalism to Bourekas”, in *Israeli Cinema–East/West and the Politics of Representation*, Austin University of Texas Press 1989, 124–137.

⁹ Nurith Gertz *Motion Fiction* Ramat Aviv: Open University of Israel, 1993, 27–37 [Hebrew].

infinitely absorb new immigrants, with their diverse Jewish and folk cultures of origins, while still maintaining a shared culture which is both Jewish and Israeli.

While it is true that cultural tensions are ongoing in Israel beyond the conflicts the media regularly report, this would be¹⁰ the most productive state in popular culture, and culture at large: being a site of struggle over meanings. The most striking Jewish quality, that of always asking questions, questioning itself, always reflexively addressing identity—is the most fundamental trait of Israeli culture and identity, from its very alleged re-invention as a “new”, alternative Jewish culture. Rather than providing all the answers to the fate of the Jewish people, the question was, and still remains, and I am quoting yesterday’s text by Karen Goodman: Who will I be? Who will you be? Who will we be? “Will” articulating not only a future of creative indefinite becoming, but a becoming¹¹ at will. The freedom to choose “who” you become.

4. From the Land of our Forefathers to our Mother’s Kitchen: Feminizing a National Agenda

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed dramatic changes in Israeli consciousness and culture. In the mid 1990s it seemed as if peace could actually materialize and transform Israelis’ daily existence and collective agenda. The disposition towards peace brought about a turning point long due in the culture: it legitimized what I suggest to characterize as feminization of the culture: prioritization of the private sphere, the personal pursuit of happiness, the family and relationships with regard to the national agenda and collective concerns. The home now replaces communal spaces and collective forms of entertainment. The media, which dominate the domestic space, turn the home and the family into Israelis’ most significant site for socialization and socializing. Television, the video cassette recorder and player, the personal computer and the internet, the DVD player and the home theater fill the private home with forms of entertainment and contents they used to consume in more collective forms and in the public sphere. Even the national holidays are in the last two decades more passively and intimately experienced indoors, in front of the television screen, with family and close friends. These replace festivities in public spaces, which used to contain and celebrate national, collective events, at time when Israelis were practically dancing in the streets and in mass festivals. The traditional military marches of Independence Day (the last of which was symbolically transmitted on the first experimental broadcast of Israeli public television channel 1 in 1968) were an example of the way Israeli Independence Day festivities were experienced as collective events that articulated Israelis’ pride in their army and their confidence in its power to defend their very existence. Since the late 1980s collective festivities of Independence Day have become secondary to family and close friends’ picnics and backyard barbecues. The Home Depot has become one of Israelis’ favorite shopping spaces, and their home has become their favorite castle. Homemaking as well as parenting is at the top of many Israelis’ agenda. The family became the central site of identification and resource of identity rather than the nation and other social institutions such as school or informal education frameworks like the youth movement.

¹⁰ According to theories of popular culture, see: John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*. London Unwin Hyman, London and NY: Routledge, 1989.

¹¹ I am using “becoming” in a Deleuzian sense of infinite creativity— which in Deleuze’s analysis is the revolutionary, playful, and infinitely open resistance to control and language. Gilles Deleuze, translated by Martin Joughin “Control and Becoming”, in *Negotiations*, New York: Columbia University Press pp169–177.

In a society as collective-oriented as Israeli society, this trend is no less than a revolution. The supremacy of peers and the cohesive Israeli collective on the national as well as personal agenda was relinquished in favor of family trips abroad, romantic relationships and individual success and happiness as the ultimate Utopia. Accordingly, ever since the 1990s Israel, like the 1950s American culture, experiences a creative momentum in its television culture. This momentum goes in tandem with the proliferation of suburbs, malls, consumerism and domesticity that Israeli commercial and cable television addresses and caters to.

In addition to the media revolution in 1990s Israel, globalization and the postmodern sensibility that accompanied the end of the millennium brought about a reversal of gender roles to Western and global popular culture at large, and no less so to popular Israeli culture. This socio-cultural change in gender power relations is expressed in cultural texts and media which embody the aesthetics and themes of “women on top,” unruly and strong women “doing men’s work”, taking their place as breadwinners, dominant in relationships, threatening and subverting masculine authority, replacing the traditional militarist and “macho” male bonding with sisterhood and mother-daughter bonding, and the male Jewish dynasty with a feminine dynasty. These images of powerful, threatening females permeate advertisements, video clips, popular television series and films in Israel since the 1990s. Accordingly, current Israeli cinema is dominated by mothers and sisters whose solidarity and agency saves the day and provides support- moral and otherwise. Israeli films such as *The Siren's Song*, (Eitan Fox, 1994) *Nina's Tragedies* (Savi Gabison, 2003) *Something Sweet* (Dan Turgeman, 2004), *Campfire* (Joseph Cedar, 2004), *Turn Left at the End of the World* (Avi Nesher, 2004) *The Schwartz Dynasty* (Shmuel and Amir Hasfari, 2005), *Aviva My Love* (Shemi Zarhin, 2006), *Three Mothers* (Dina-Zvi-Riklis, 2006) *Jellyfish* (Shira Gueffen and Etgar Keret, 2006) *The Secrets* (Avi Nesher, 2007) and *Noodle* (Shemi Zarhin and Ayelet Menachemi, 2007) are seminal examples of this cultural trend. The assertive dominant female of the 1990s and 2000s does not necessarily reflect a real change in the positioning and status of females in the social Israeli reality. Representations of females as active and even aggressive, their location in open spaces rather than in the confinement of home-making and the private sphere, and the reversal of power relations between males and females in the narrative and visuals of various media texts, articulate more often threatened hegemonic masculinity rather than empowered femininity. Yet, the feminine solidarity and bonding, the shift to the domestic sphere, and the prioritization of the family, relationships and self realization all articulate through this new feminine and feminized paradigm a deep yearning in Israeli culture for peace and quiet, a genuine fatigue of war and conflict, and most of all a true and new understanding of the Zionist enterprise: not as a revolution whose trajectory was to turn the feminized Diaspora Jew into a virile ruthless pioneer and paratrooper, but as an enterprise aiming at “normalizing” Jewish life, and finding a home for the displaced wandering Jew in the most sensual sense we can imagine a Home. Rather than a national home, Israelis wish to simply live happily ever after in their mother’s kitchen, and are even happy about cooking themselves, as is Shlomi in “Bonjour Monsieur Shlomi” (Shemi Zarhin, 2003).

5. Performing Histories, Inscribing Jewishness: the Israeli Version

The feminization of agenda and of the cinematic discourse- as well as the predominance of feminine genres such as the family melodrama, the romantic comedy, the soap opera, telenovela, and the sitcom in Israeli Cinema and Television of the 1990s-2000s denote a crucial change of priorities in the national agenda, which has both facilitated the peace process and was facilitated by the 1990s peak in it. I propose to characterize this historic cultural change in

gender terms. Whereas the Hebrew renaissance and Israeli nation building materialized culturally as a process of masculinization¹² and going back “to the field”, as national poet Haim Nachman Bialik described it in his poem “To the Field”– to nature and agriculture, the body and the soil, in the recent two decades Israeli culture is recoiling back into the warmth of the feminine kitchen, the Jewish family and ethnic heritages of Jewish folklores. The stiff armor of the virile Israeli is replaced by the vulnerable flesh and blood of the private family and individual histories. The national Israeli history, glorified by war and heroic achievements, is marginalized in Israeli discourse in relation to the personal prices individuals have had to pay. Rather than inventing an original, authentic Israeli culture, Israelis explore ethnic–folkloric–Jewish origins that had been suppressed, and treat original Israeli culture as an object of nostalgic explorations, as one optional subculture in a multicultural repertory that affords new hybrids, which challenge one singular national culture. The fascination with a pre–Israeli Jewish culture is most evident in films that depict the orthodox, religious world not as a stereotypical, formulaic clichéd folklore, as in the 1960s **Kuni Lemel** cinematic series, but as an enigmatic slice of Israeli reality, an authentic local site for self exploration and cultural expression of filmmakers who are authentically affiliated with this cultural environment, of Israelis pertaining to it or opting to become part of it. This return of the repressed Jewish orthodox culture, finds its expression in films such as **Ushpizin**, (Gidi Dar, 2004), **My Father My Lord** (David Volach, 2007) and **The Secrets**, (Avi Neshet, 2007). In the latter film, the return of the repressed Diasporic Orthodox Jewish culture articulates with the return of the repressed feminine principle; the seminar in which the film’s heroines congregate for the study of the Jewish religious texts, a practice reserved in Orthodox Judaism to males, becomes a site of female self realization, rebellion and bonding.

6. Epilogue: From the Land of Our Forefather’s to Israel– Our Home

The title of this article is inspired by an article titled: “The concept of ‘Homeland’ and the Jewish ethos: Chronicles of a Dissonance”.¹³ In it, Hagai Dagan re– reads the stories of our forefather Abraham and Exodus– the constituting myths of the Israelite–Hebrew–Jewish people and its contested affiliations to a stable homeland. The idea, so dominant in post–Zionist and neo–Jewish discourse, that Zionism in a deeply substantial way contradicts the soul of Judaism is being examined by Dagan in reference to Israelis’ sense of place. Dagan, much in the spirit of Aran and Gurevitch’s cultural–anthropological study of Israeli discourses of place, regards the yearning for the land of Israel –rather than the actual living in it– as a crucial constitutive foundation of the Jewish people. It is this abstract notion of the “promised land” of Israel as a spiritual, holy yearned for entity that actually underlies Zionist texts. This ethos of the return to the promised land as an act of redemption for the persecuted and displaced Jewish People, is epitomized in the 1947 film “My Father’s House” (Meyer Levin screenplay, directed by Robert Kline and Joseph Leijtes), in which the newly found house for the Holocaust orphan survivor David is “the house of my father Israel”, namely– the ancient and eternal house of the forefathers. Yet, Dagan argues, for most Israelis Israel is actually HOME. Not an abstract yearned for entity, but a real sensual concrete aggregate of everyday practices, fragrances, tastes and colors at home, rather than in the national house. It is this concrete domestic, sensual, not

¹² Miri Talmon *Israeli Graffiti: Nostalgia, Groups and Collective Identity in Israeli Cinema* Haifa: Haifa University Press and Ramat Aviv: Open University Press, 2001.

¹³ Hagai Dagan. “The concept of ‘Homeland’ and the Jewish ethos: Chronicles of a Dissonance”. In: *Alpayim, –A multidisciplinary publication for Contemporary Thought and Literature, Number 18*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 1999, pages 9–23 [Hebrew].

ideologically committed but personally and privately experienced domestic context that dominates current cultural Israeli film and television production and the new ideologies of place they articulate. This Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, local, vernacular of Israeliness, which is intimately rooted in the local territory as home-land, dominates the visual and artistic cultural discourses of place. Nevertheless, at the same time, and in no contradiction whatsoever with the “Gola” or “Galut” [exile, Diaspora] as an idea and material cultural resource- current Israeli culture is completely at ease with its non-Hebrew, Jewish and exilic traditions, heritages, and imports. They no longer threaten a culture completely and authentically in place, at home.

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