“ARABS OF THE MOSAIC FAITH”: CHRONICLE OF A CULTURAL EXTINCTION FORETOLD

BY

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On 14 December, 1984, I was sitting in the news department of the Voice of Israel, Arabic section. Our correspondent had just informed us that the poet Anwar Shā‘ul (1904-1984) had passed away, in Kiron, near Tel-Aviv. We broadcast this news along with a short biography. Over the internal telephone network, I called the news editor in the Hebrew section; it was important, I thought, to let Israeli citizens know that one of the last Arab-Jewish poets had passed away. “Anwar who?!” I heard her screaming. I explained briefly. Ze lo me‘anyen et ha-ma‘zinim shelanu (it doesn’t interest our listeners), she said. I didn’t try to convince her.

Two years later Murād Michael (1906-1986) died. And over the years other Arab-Jewish poets and writers passed away in total anonymity: Shalom Darwish (1913-1997), David Semah (1933-1997), Ya‘qūb Balbul (1920-2003), Ishāq Bār-Moshe (1927-2003), and 5 months ago one of the greatest of Arab-Jewish writers of our generation, Samūr Naqqāṣ (1938-2004). He passed away without having the most elementary means for honorable survival. “I don’t exist in this country,” he said some years ago, “not as a writer, neither as a citizen nor human being. I don’t feel that I belong anywhere, not since my roots were torn from the ground [in Baghdad].”

I want to present another anecdote: the Israeli press recently mentioned some activities by a “Jewish-Arab Musical Orchestra” supported by the UNESCO. Its aim is the promotion of peace

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through music. Such projects are not rare in Israel, especially if others finance them. The orchestra consists of Jewish and Arab members.

About 70 years ago (in 1932), the first Congress of Arabic Music was held in Cairo. Iraq was represented by a *maqam* orchestra which included 7 members, but unlike the UNESCO-sponsored orchestra, all of its members were Arabs, Iraqi Arabs. The recitalist was Muhammad al-Qabānji and the other members were: Yehūda Shammāš, Khadhouri Shammā, Yusuf Za’rūr, Ezra Hārūn, Sāliḥ Shumayyīl, and Yusuf Hūgī Patao. Seven members, all of them Arabs.

I’m sure that some of you feel uneasiness. How can you say that all the members were Arabs?—We hear Jewish names: Yehūda and Ezra. Yes, you are right, six of the seven musicians were Jews, but they were also Arabs—they were Arab Jews and one, Muhammad al-Qabānji, was an Arab Muslim.

I now want to highlight a different matter: I want to quote a text by a Jewish poet who cannot express himself in Arabic though he is of Arabic origin. Sami Shalom Chetrit was born in 1960 and the following text is called *Who is a Jew and What Kind of a Jew*. In a conversation between the persona and an American female friend, she asks him whether he is a Jew or an Arab. “I’m an Arab Jew,” he responds. “I’ve never heard of that,” she says. He tries to convince her that just as there is an American Jew or German Jew, one can imagine the existence of an Arab Jew:

- You can’t compare, a European Jew is something else.
- How come?
- Because “Jew” just doesn’t go with “Arab,” it just doesn’t go. It doesn’t even sound right.
- Depends on your ear.
- Look, I’ve got nothing against Arabs. I even have friends who are Arabs, but how can you say “Arab Jew” when all the Arabs want is to destroy the Jews?
- And how can you say “European Jew” when the Europeans have already destroyed the Jews?

I want to address the same topic from another angle: more than thirty years ago, in January 1974, Albert Memmi published an article titled “What is an Arab Jew?”. It was written following