

Return to Our Forefathers' Glory? Fashion and Identity Politics Among Ultra-Orthodox Mizrahi Jews in Israel

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Abstract

In the 1980s a social and political movement named "Shas" was established. This movement sought to represent the Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab and Muslim countries (Mizrahim) and suffered oppression and discrimination by the Ashkenazi Zionist establishment (Jews of European descent.) One of the key tasks defined by Shas leadership was to "Return to our forefathers' glory." Shas wished to protest against the Zionist attempt to erase the oriental cultural heritage and lifestyle of the Mizrahi Jews. As an alternative, the movement sought to revert to the past and rebuild, through cultural, educational and communication institutions, the Mizrahi cultural tradition.

This turn toward the past was also reflected in its spiritual leaders' attire, who wore traditional gowns and hats. However, the movement's all male political leaders as well as thousands of activists adopted a dress-code that was designed in the early 19th century in Europe by Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox communities. This style which is identified with the oppressive Ashkenazi community, included black suits and broad black hats, detached from any real or imagined history of the Jewish communities living in Asia and North Africa.

This article will conduct a post-colonial analysis to examine the tension between the Shas' desire to promote traditional Mizrahi culture and the choice of a clearly European clothing style. This analysis will argue that this choice wishes to obscure or conceal any sign that may be reminiscent of the Arab characteristics of the Mizrahi Jews and thus reconfirms the European Zionist colonialist logic that places the "modern" and the "Jew" in a contradictory and exclusive identity category to the "traditional" and the "Arab."