

# Whitewashing History: Israeli Media & the Yemenite Babies Affair

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“We used to leave in the hospital healthy babies; the next day I would ask them ‘where are the babies?’ and they said they are gone. They died. What do you mean died? They were healthy. Nothing was wrong with them. Today when they say that they died, it’s not true. They were sent for adoption, mostly to the U.S.”<sup>1</sup> (Nurse Ruja Kuchinski, 1996)

**The day my aunt Hammama emigrated from** Yemen to Israel in 1949, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy. When she returned from the hospital to the immigrant camp in Rosh Ha’ayin, the nurse who accompanied her in the ambulance held the baby in her arms and told my aunt to step down. When my aunt turned her back, the ambulance and drove off. She never saw her baby again.

My father, himself a Jewish immigrant from Yemen, said he and the rest of the family rushed to the scene minutes after they heard my aunt’s cry. He told me the story when I was a little girl, but only years later did I understand the magnitude and ramifications of this traumatic event. When I became a reporter, I heard similar stories from many families of Yemenite and other non-European ethnic groups. I learned that hundreds of Jewish families in the state of Israel were carrying this tragic narrative in their memory.

Through extensive research, and interviews with dozens of families, activists and journalists, I discovered that while the Israeli government and the public have tried to forget and silence this Affair, Yemenite families continue to suffer from their terrible loss. In this essay, I argue that public efforts to silence and deny this affair contribute to the ongoing intra-Jewish rift and racism in Israeli society today. Moreover, the question of if and how this story will be remembered in the public sphere will strongly influence the identity formation of Yemenite and Mizrahi children of future generations.

## **What is the Yemenite Babies Affair?**

During the mass immigration to Israel from 1948 to the early 1950s, hundreds if not thousands<sup>2</sup> of babies disappeared from immigrant absorption and transit camps throughout Israel and from the transit camp Hashed in Yemen. According to testimonies given to the Kedmi Commission (1995–2001), the absorption policy governing Yemenite Jews required separating children from their parents because the stone structures housing the babies, called baby houses,<sup>4</sup> were in better condition than the tents and tin structures that sheltered the parents. Babies were usually taken from the baby houses

without parental knowledge or consent. Parents who were present and refused consent reported that camp authorities forcefully took their children from them, even acting violently.<sup>4</sup>

Later testimonies revealed that a typical scenario was as follows: a baby was declared ill and taken to the hospital despite parental assertion that the child was healthy. The ostensibly ill baby was then taken to one of several institutions around the country, such as Wizo, an international women’s organization with recovery centers in Safad, Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. The parents were then told their babies had died, even as state institutional workers later testified that these “parents were not interested in their children.”

As more complaints were filed during the mid 1960s, the Affair gained more momentum each time, causing a public outcry that was quickly suppressed and forgotten. Despite numerous, suspiciously consistent allegations that babies were kidnapped and adopted by European Jews, or sold to Jewish families abroad, the state of Israel has refused to properly investigate the matter. The establishment’s efforts to silence the story was unwavering—an effort that would not have been possible without the media’s active cooperation.

The government appointed two inquiry commissions, in 1967 and 1988. Both operated behind closed doors, had limited authority and budget, no power of subpoena, and were not challenged by the press. In 1995, a public investigative commission, called in Hebrew *Va’adat Hakira Mamlachtit*, was finally appointed after a public protest turned violent, by Rabbi Meshulam and his organization.

This commission, however, was not what the Yemenite community had hoped for. In his legal analysis of the Kedmi Commission’s conclusion (2002, 48), Law Professor Boaz Sanjero wrote: “My main conclusion, based on acceptable legal text analysis, is that the Commission’s work is lacking the most fundamental basis for investigative work: epistemology of suspicion.” According to Sanjero, suspicion of criminal acts was not considered at any stage of the Commission’s work. Rather, he said, the Commission was engaged in “a dis-

cussion” about this Affair, which can be read as a verification of the establishment’s discourse.

### Zionist Narrative and Media Discourse

The historical review of the Babies Affair raises questions about Western domination, national identity, “otherness,” memory, and how dissenting voices were silenced. With the exception of a few critical narratives in *Haolam Haze* in 1967 and *Ha’ir*, *Haaretz* and Channel Two in the mid-1990s, denial ruled the media coverage. Articles were mostly aligned with the government’s versions of events instead of challenging it. As a result, the media produced a narrative that obfuscate, rather than investigated the Affair. *Haolam Haze* was not only the first media outlet to bring the story to the attention of the public as a phenomenon, but also the only one to frame the story as a narrative of kidnapping. The magazine reported that the kidnapped babies were sent abroad for adoption at a cost of \$5,000 US per child. This alternative coverage, however, paled in relation to the overwhelming narrative that supported the government’s denial.

The media was also instrumental in framing the Affair as a “Yemenite problem.” The title: “The Yemenite Babies Affair” ultimately turned this affair into a Yemenite problem, thus never transforming the discourse to questions of State and society’s responsibility. As Cornel West argued in *Race Matters* (1993), part of the barrier in the public discourse about race is the view of black people as “problem people.” This framework, West says, is paralyzing. It prevents society from dealing with the more crucial question of “what this way of viewing black people reveals about us as a nation.”

The media discourse about this Affair demonstrates the power of Zionist meta-narrative (Shohat 1988) to drive what Stuart Hall terms “strategies of representation.” The narrative of the Babies Affair is rejected because it contradicts the notion of Jews as victims. It forces us to acknowledge that Jews have victimized other Jews, on a racial basis and within a decade of the Holocaust. The mostly Ashkenazi controlled media was not going to allow this voice to be heard. As activist Rafi Shubeli explains, some vital questions were absent from the media discourse:

How is it possible that in a democratic state, so many people are living with an unresolved pain for so long? Why is Yemenite pain not legitimate?

One of the main strategies used by media organizations was denying access to Yemenites families and activists seeking further investigation and demanding answers from authorities all the while magnifying testimonies of state representatives, thus weakening the Yemenite community.

Ilana Dayan, prominent journalist and host of the show *Uvda* on Channel Two, was one of few journalists to break this silence. She said:

There is a gap between the depth of the pain, the magnitude of the Affair, and the media treatment...The ability to prevent the Yemenites from effective form of expression for so long is unbelievable. Especially because we think of ourselves as an open society, but the truth is that different groups in society have no access to power focal points and effective forms of expression.

### Yemenites as “Others”

To uncover the powerful ideology behind the narrative of this Affair, one must examine the Orientalist assumptions that marked Yemenites as “Others” and served as the basis for constructing this discourse. Some media narratives even blamed parents for not wanting their children, or worse, justified the kidnapping as an act of charity, to better the future of these babies.

In the 1960’s, articles on the Affair portrayed Yemenite Jews as at once exotic and inferior; primitive people in need of rescue and enlightenment. In a *Davar* article in 1966, for instance, Yemenite parents were described as seeing “for the first time in their lives how to bathe a baby and how to change a baby’s diaper.” (*Davar*, February 24, 1966)

Absorption camp staff told the press and the Kedmi Commission that Yemenite Jews were not terribly upset when told their children died, interpreting the Yemenites’ religious belief and their tendency to internalize pain as a lack of care. “If a child died in the tent, they would say, ‘God gives and God takes’” (*Davar*, February 26, 1966).

Moreover, the ideological assumption that Zionism “rescued” Mizrahim, justified abduction and adoption. Ahuva Goldfarb, head nurse of the Absorption Camp Baby Houses, went so far as to say, “Maybe we did them a favor” (Madmoni, 1996). The Yemenites were dehumanized beyond the categories of us/them, and became inhuman “things”. Head nurse Sonia Milshtein shocked the Commission when she referred to Yemenite babies as “packages” and “carcasses.” (*Ha’ir*, October 27, 1995). When asked if, as a mother, she could understand the families’ pain, she replied: “Oh, I’ve heard this too much lately. After forty years I would have been happy that my child got a good education and a good family. Yes, that is how I would feel” (*Yoman*, July 21, 1995).

When Sara Perl, chair of Wizo-Israel, testified to the Kedmi commission, she also claimed her supervisor said parent didn’t claim their children because “they just don’t want their children, they have too much going on” (*Ha’ir*, November 3, 1995).

In its final report, the investigative commission concluded that thousands of Yemenite parents deserted their own children. Sanjero’s criticism of the commission’s report notes that only Yemenite parents were blamed. No other parties were held accountable for separating thousands of babies from their families, or the burial of babies without the knowledge or presence of their parents (if they had indeed died).

The blame for not searching hard enough or

neglecting their children forced parents to defend themselves from false accusations as they relived their tragic losses. In Tzipi Talmor's documentary *Down—A One Way Road* (1997), the following heartbreaking testimony was given by Shlomo Bahagali, a Yemenite parent who searched for his son Hayim for 50 years:

I am talking to you, Hayim; this was not my fault. This is the fault of the people in charge. It isn't at all like they said that we were not interested in the babies. It is a cruel lie. That is why I am talking to you, Hayim; please in God's name, if you hear me, your ID number is 64703, please come back to me, let me rest in peace. I need to know that you are alive wherever you are.

### Lack of Closure Future Cost

The unresolved tragedy of the Yemenite Babies Affair will not fade with time, as some state leaders hope. The wounds of long-suffering mothers and fathers only deepen as the younger generations see the injustice wrought upon their families and community. The kidnapping of my aunt's baby remains a vivid memory. Many people of my generation have made an unbreakable connection with the past and vowed to fight for the recognition of their parents' narratives.

To avoid consequences stemming from civil discontent, more dialogue is needed. The state and the public must fully listen and truly regard parents' narratives; they have a right to be heard. As noted historian Howard Zinn wrote in *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*: "If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past..."

Moreover, in the absence of dialogue about the transgressions of the past, acts of oppression reoccur. As Esther Hertzog (2005) noted, there is a direct connection between the kidnapping of Yemenite babies in the 1950s and what she calls the systematic removal of children from their families in Israel today. "...Children are still a resource for the government to maintain its power... all the while using rhetoric and ideology that justifies any means including violence by the controlling institutions, all the while denying any responsibility for these actions" (12).

Hertzog's analysis demonstrated how state welfare and absorption organizations infantilized Ethiopian immigrants for their own benefit, for instance, despite good intentions. Major decisions, such as the children's education, were once again made without consulting parents. Hertzog claimed the integration of Ethiopian families into Israeli society was influenced by the same Eurocentric biases that dominated the absorption of Mizrahi and Yemenite Jews in the 1950s. Both were seen

as "traditional" societies in need of rescue and enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Hertzog noted that "behind this image of patronage and responsibility lies also the suspicion and anxiety about criticism" (38).

To date, more than 1,000 complaints have been filed with one or more of the three commissions investigating the Yemenite Babies Affair. Despite the many legal problems with the final commission's report, the numbers are still horrifying, making the often-cavalier attitude of decision makers and the media even more shocking.<sup>6</sup>

The state and the media have told Yemenite parents and other Mizrahim that their experiences, memories and pain are not relevant. No society can build a healthy future with such a stained past. Yael Tzadok, a journalist who investigated the affair for the Voice of Israel explained:

Organized crimes performed by people against other people of their own nation have occurred all over the world, including similar affairs where babies were used as an "asset" that is negated from "unworthy" families and granted to "more worthy" ones (in Canada, Argentina, Australia). We didn't invent it. Yet, while other countries have started a process of revealing the truth, listening to the victims, healing the wounds and heading towards forgiveness and reconciliation, here in Israel we won't even admit that it happened. We believe that we, Jews, are more moral than other nations... And yet here we are, with our own homemade racism... What does it say about the Jewish state? This is why you find massive silencing from the government and the press. We are a society that lives with a very big gap between what we pretend to be and what we really are.

### Notes:

1. The nurse was audio taped by Avner Farhi, whose sister was kidnapped from Ein-Shemer Camp in 1950.
2. Over 1,000 complaints were submitted to all three commissions combined. Rabbi Meshulam's organization claimed to have information about 1,700 babies kidnapped prior to 1952 (450 of them from other Mizrahi ethnic groups) and about 4,500 babies kidnapped prior to 1956. These figures were neither discredited nor validated by the last commission. Shoshi Zaid, *The Child is Gone* [Jerusalem: Geffen Books, 2001, 19–22).
3. During the immigrants' stay in transit and absorption camps, the babies were taken to stone structures called baby houses. Mothers were allowed entry only a few times each day to nurse their babies.
4. See, for instance, the testimony of Naomi Gavra in Tzipi Talmor's film *One Way Road* (1993) and the testimony of Shoshana Farhi on the show *Uvda* (1996).
5. For Shohat, the kidnapping formed part of the broader Eurocentrism of the Zionist Enlightenment discourse of progress and modernization, viewing itself as rescuing Middle Eastern Jews (Shohat 1988). See also her analysis in "The Narrative of the Nation and the Discourse of Modernization: the Case of the Mizrahim" *Critique* 10 (Spring 1997).
6. These findings were often presented to the public as low numbers, as if "only 69" missing babies could be accepted and forgotten