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**If We Immigrate to Israel, We Are Bound to Incite
the Panthers' Bitterness**

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Summary:

For many centuries Jews not only from Europe but also from across all of what we now call the Middle East trickled to Eretz Israel/Palestine, most importantly to Jerusalem. Moreover, in the mid-nineteenth century, the leading proto-Zionist thinker Rabbi Judah Alkalai (1798 [Sarajevo]-1878 [Jerusalem]) was a Sephardi, i.e. a Jew whose family was originally from Sepharad, Spain, and ended up in the Ottoman Empire after being expelled in the fifteenth century. And when in the later nineteenth century Zionism arose, it found some followers in the Middle East, too.

Despite all the above, Zionism's political-ideological epicenter was the Russian, German, and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Whether left- or right-wing or liberal, Zionist parties were led by European-born Jews (who were quite diverse, though). And while Jews from Middle Eastern countries continued to arrive in Palestine in the very late Ottoman period (1516/17-1917/18) and the British Mandate (1917/22-1948), most Jewish immigrants were from Europe. This changed only after and due to the Holocaust, in which about two out of three European Jews were killed. In the early postwar Americas and Western Europe, relatively few Jews wished to emigrate, and the Soviet Union, which after World War II replaced Poland as the European country with the largest Jewish population, forbade emigration.

Hence, the government of Prime Minister David Ben Gurion (1886-1968; r. 1948-1954/1955-1963) expanded initiatives—in some cases “helped” by Arab nationalist pressures on domestic Jews—to bring to Israel the ‘edot ha-mizrah, the (Middle) Eastern communities, a plural that would morph into the collective mizrahim. After all, Israel in 1948 counted “only” about 700,000 Jews. While many middle- and upper-class Jews e.g. from Morocco and Egypt left for Europe, a large majority—but far from all—of those Israel-bound emigrants were poor. As if this did not make starting a new life hard enough, the relatively poor newly-found State of Israel was overwhelmed by the ensuing population explosion. Worst, however, was systemic institutional and individual discrimination, analyzed e.g. in Ella Shohat's classic article “Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the standpoint of its Jewish victims” (1988). Yes: the Palestinians who had

remained in Israel after the nakba had it worse, for the Jewish State did not treat them as full citizens, even subjecting them to military rule until 1966. But in the eyes of most Middle Eastern Jewish immigrants, this was cold comfort.

Protests occurred from the 1950s. They took a new turn in February 1971, when poor Jerusalemites, many with a petty criminal record and most from Morocco, founded the Black Panthers (BP), organizing demonstrations and asserting that their communities had “enough of deprivation [and] enough of discrimination.” Although the Panthers would have a limited long-term effect politically—only one, Charlie Bitton (born 1947), would go on to have a lasting political career, as a communist member of parliament—socially, they did. The government reacted not only with repression but also by increasing social services; besides, the Panthers helped bring different Middle Eastern Jewish communities closer. For our purposes most crucial, though, is the Panthers’ choice of name. While they did not too often refer to their US namesakes and never to leaders like Huey Newton (1942-1989), their name reflected the influence on Israel of US developments, as Oz Frankel’s “The Black Panthers of Israel and the Politics of Radical Analogy” (2012) argues. And although the Israeli Panthers shared neither the Americans’ separatist nationalism—they wanted fully in, not out—nor their use of arms nor their support for Palestine, calling themselves Panthers shocked Israel’s Ashkenazi (European) establishment. It presumably harmed Israel’s reputation, also by the hand of Arabs. Moreover, by the late 1960s Israelis and some US Jews believed that most African Americans had become anti-Semitic.

The text featured here, an English translation of a Hebrew article published in the leading daily Yediot Aharonot, reflects some of these intricate international dimensions of the rise of Israel’s Panthers.

Original Language:

Hebrew

Contents:

Translation - English

Im na'aleh le-Israel - anu 'alulim lelavot et merirut ha-'panterim'

"If we immigrate to Israel, we are bound to incite the Panthers' bitterness"]

In view of the many echoes that the demonstrations of violence in Jerusalem in the US press and the public opinion of American Jewry, a prospective immigrant told Jewish Agency representatives in New York:

"If we immigrate to Israel, we are bound to exacerbate the bitterness of 'the Panthers'"

"The US 'Black Panthers' fight Jews while their name-sakes in Israel fight new immigrants"

"If there will be peace in the Middle East, a civil war will break out in Israel."

—Telegram from Ram Oren, our correspondent in New York—

It was a hot noon late last week. About 300 young Jewish demonstrators had gathered in front of the Soviet embassy in Washington and were shouting *shalach et 'ami* (Let my people go).^[i] They were waving signs against the Leningrad trials,^[ii] shook their fists and read psalms with devotion.

Suddenly, a number of Soviet diplomats came out of the building. They stopped in full view of the demonstrators and stared at them in anger. One approached them and told them in fluent Hebrew, perplexing them: "Do you really think that Israel is at all able to absorb Jews from the Soviet Union? Just see what a welcome the Israeli 'Black Panthers' give the [recently immigrated] Russian Jews ..."

The diplomat, who revealed that he had learned Hebrew at the University of Moscow, did not wait for an answer. "A state in which 'Black Panthers' run amok does not have the right to be an immigration country," he said, turned on his heels—and disappeared.

A civil war

"The Black Panthers" did not get to the attention of the Soviet embassy in Washington by chance. These days, their name is mentioned far and wide in the United States. It's enough to listen to the radio, to peruse a newspaper, or to watch television to be fully informed about what is occurring. The demonstrations of violence that took place lately in Jerusalem were covered also in the United States, this week led by the "New York Times," which published on its lead page a big reportage on "the Panthers."

On the same page, next to important world news, a photo was published of a Jerusalem police officer who at the height of the riots is beating a curly-haired youngster with a baton. Explaining why people had rioted the reportage emphasized the rift between the Ashkenazi community and the [Middle] Eastern communities (*ha-kera' bein ha-'eda ha-ashkenazit le-edot ha-mizrach*).

The reporter also interviewed Eli Elyashar [1899-1981], a Jerusalemite businessman from a Sephardi family with good reputation. "I wholeheartedly support the "Black Panthers'" struggle," he said. "For too long, promises made to the Mizrahi communities have remained unfulfilled." If there will ever be peace in the Middle East—a civil war will break out in Israel" ...

(In response, ex-Knesset^[iii] member Eliahu Elyashar said yesterday that he had talked with the New York Times reporter before "the Black Panthers" were born. Still, he stressed, there is racism in Israel, and said this to the US reporter, too.)

The *New York Times* reporter also relayed an extended life story of Reuven Abergel [born 1943], the "Panther" leader.

A weapon for propagandists

The publication of the demonstrations in Jerusalem of course arose the interest of Arab propagandists across the United States. In assemblies that convened this weekend, they used the "Panthers" affair as a proof that for the deteriorating social situation in Israel and the country's dictatorial character.

This claim by the Arab propagandists here is not new, though this time, the demonstration in Jerusalem gave them the chance to equip themselves with new "facts." As most campuses are already inactive in preparation for final exams and the summer break, those propagandists missed the opportunity to bring the issue to student bodies, too, and were forced to make do with much more limited frameworks.

The publications triggered a considerable echo among Jewish thinkers. For many American Jews who heard or read about [those events], they came as a surprise. "It was hard for me to believe that this happened in Jerusalem," said Jacob Borshtein, who teaches in a Yeshiva in New York, "I had no idea that there is a gap between the communities in Israel. This only proves that we basically are turning into a normal nation—and that is very saddening."

Intensifying bitterness

People close to the immigration department of the Jewish Agency in the United States say that the question of the "Panthers" came up in almost every meeting with prospective immigrants this week. It turns out that most of those who asked questions had read the publications on the events in Jerusalem, and hence they are raising practical questions of a sort that have to date not been heard in meetings with prospective immigrants.

For instance, in a meeting that was held last week in New York, a prospective immigrant said: "The problem is that the "Black Panthers" are full of complaints and claims vis-à-vis immigrants from the West. By coming to Israel, we hence are intensifying the bitterness of the "Panthers" and are bound to cause even harsher riots."

When the average American Jew reads the news on the "Black Panthers," the association that immediately comes to his mind concerns the homonymous American organization. "The Black Panthers" of the United States is a radical organization of an anti-Semitic nature that is tightly related with the Arab terrorist organization and calls for an armed revolution in the United States in order to eliminate the current ruling order, which is "rotten to the core."

"We are trying to escape from the "Black Panther" and similar American phenomena and find peace and quiet in Israel," said a prospective immigrant to a Jewish Agency employee. And suddenly—the selfsame phenomenon in Israel. The only difference is that here, the "Panthers" fights the Jews—and there, in Israel, they fight the immigrants ..."

Without fear

Nevertheless, many prospective immigrants as well as Jewish Agency envoys agree that the phenomenon of the "Panthers" in Israel cannot deter them [the immigrants from the United States], who ended up immigrating. "This would deter only if there would be large riots," said a prospective immigrant.

Immigration specialists explain that many of those who are asking to immigrate first make reconnaissance visits, and *inter alia* emphasize the [real] dimension of the community problem. They know that the issue of the "Panthers" has been inflated beyond all proportions.

Mr. Michael Hasani, the Minister of Welfare, who visited the United States last week on the occasion of the Jerusalem Day celebrations, made the effort to tour the notorious poor neighborhoods in New York, in order to see with his own eyes on which ground the US "Black Panther" grow. Here was no comparison at all to what is going on in Jerusalem. The poverty, neglect, and crime here are many times worse than in the most wretched poor neighborhood in Jerusalem.

"Here," said one of the Americans accompanying the minister, "you do not dare to walk the streets by night, for fear of getting killed. I have visited Jerusalem and know from my own experience that even in the most remote poor neighborhood, nobody would fear to go on a nightly tour."

The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee Joint, which sends hundreds of millions of dollars to Israel every year, earmarks the money, or at least parts of it, for improving the living conditions of immigrants in Israel. Martin Blum, its spokesperson, revealed this weekend that this year, 36 million dollar were channeled to help the absorption needs of new immigrants in Israel, and a similar sum—for welfare for immigrants. Seventy-two million dollars were spent for health in areas in which immigrants are concentrated, and 193 million—for housing.

"It is not clear to us whether from these sums, which are transmitted [to Israel] by the Jewish Agency, some sums were set aside for older immigrants from Middle Eastern

communities, who are protesting their deprivation,” he said. “But we have absolutely no doubt that we will pay special attention [to this issue] soon.”

He admitted that as of late, in meetings with Joint lecturers, donors bring up the question of the gap between recent immigrants and older inhabitants in Israel and are asking to understand the reasons behind the “Panthers” riots.

In a special reunion—which recently programmed the focal points of next year’s donor drive—the Joint took the unanimous decision to highlight the need to give aid also to the older immigrants and inhabitants in Israel. “We have no doubt,” Blum said, “that we will present these issues to the donors without any blemish next year, and we are certain that they will donate generously, and hence will contribute, at least to a degree, to solve the problem.”

[\[i\]](#) This was, in the Old Testament, God’s command to Egypt’s Pharaoh before and during the ten plagues. Twentieth-century Jews around the world, including in Israel and the United States, adopted it as the lead slogan when calling on the Soviet Union to allow Jews to emigrate. The command was also used by African Americans in the US context.

[\[ii\]](#) A trial that took place in Leningrad in 1970. The defendants were Soviet Jews who had tried to flee their country by plane to get, via Sweden, to Israel. International and especially Israeli and American Jewish pressure led to the reduction of some sentences, from the death penalty to long-term prison sentences. The trial helped broaden protests for Soviet Jews among Jews living outside the communist orbit.

[\[iii\]](#) The Israeli parliament.