conclude that anti-Americanism is not merely a counterproductive folly, but a deeply disturbing *symptom*: There is something profoundly rotten at the core of this system of belief, and as the past century has shown, nations in the grip of mythomaniacal belief systems tend not merely to be foolish, but volatile, self-destructive, and dangerous to international order.

Claire Berlinski is a writer who lives in Paris. She is the author of Loose Lips *(Random House, 2003) and is currently working on a study of the challenges facing the European political order.*

Were the Sephardim Religious?

Ella Shohat
Forbidden Reminiscences: A Collection of Essays
Bimat Kedem Lesifrut, 403 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Avi Picard

In a documentary that recently appeared on Israel television, director Nisim Mosek tries to track down Amram Cohen, a former leader of the Black Panthers movement in Israel, which in the early 1970s fought for the rights of Sephardi Jews. This man, whose black T-shirt and broad shoulders were a fixture of Israeli tabloids back in the 1970s, once claimed in a press conference that he regretted allowing Ashkenazim into the movement's leadership. Thirty years later, however, he has dropped out of sight. His fellow Panthers have not heard from him. He has not been seen in his hometown for ages.

The search finally ends in an unexpected place: The mystical city of Safed, where Cohen has been living a quiet life with his wife and eight children as the head of a local yeshiva. Gone is the rage for which he was famous. Gone even, remarks one of his old friends, is the booming voice that

brought crowds to their feet at rallies. "We used to make a lot of noise," Cohen now concedes, "but it didn't do very much for the Sephardim." He is asked how, exactly, the latter are to win their rights in Israel. "A solution will be found," he avers, "through the path of conciliation and openness."

Cohen's change of heart is part of a larger phenomenon that has seen the return of many Sephardi activists to religion. Disillusioned by the failure of the Panthers' efforts at social revolution, many of them realized that their movement had ignored the crucial role of tradition in their lives. And in their continued insistence on downplaying or denying the religious dimension of Sephardi life, a new generation of Sephardi radicals seems determined to make the same mistake.

A vivid example of this is found in the work of Ella Shohat, professor of cultural studies at New York University. An innovative scholar, Shohat is a leading advocate of the post-colonial approach to understanding the condition of Israeli Sephardi Jews. Like other radical critiques of Zionism, her approach maintains not only that the Sephardim were excluded from what was—and still is—a Eurocentric, Ashkenazi enterprise, but that the state owes its success to the very fact of their oppression. Shohat addressed this theme in her earlier work, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1986), and returns to it once again in her new book, *Forbidden Reminiscences: A Collection of Essays*. *Forbidden Reminiscences* takes on a wide range of subjects, from the Cairo Geniza and bias in Western cinema to the complex relationship between "Jewish Arabs"—the term Shohat uses for Jews from Islamic countries—and Zionism.

The radical line that Sephardim such as Amram Cohen abandoned lives on in Shohat's work. Instead of "conciliation and openness," *Forbidden Reminiscences* offers yet another malignant critique of the Zionist establishment. Wherever Shohat looks, she seems to find the same pattern of repression, the same patronizing attitude of the "white," or Ashkenazi, male toward the "natives," whether Palestinian or Sephardi. It is no surprise, perhaps, that Shohat's approach has taken root in the academy both in Israel and abroad, and she enjoys a good deal of popularity among scholars in her field. Her essays, many of which first appeared in English, have been translated into French, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Turkish, and German, and are, according to the book's editors, "an inspiration for a new generation of researchers, authors, and political activists."

It is therefore regrettable that this ambitious work by a respected

author is marred by such acute failings, particularly the selective use of facts and the tendency to ignore even the most glaring realities which do not fit her ideological paradigm. While Shohat spares no effort dwelling on every hint of Zionist and Ashkenazi prejudice, she overlooks the very real manifestations of solidarity that brought Jews of the West and the East together. Most strikingly, she turns a blind eye to the religious sentiments that lent the Zionist enterprise its remarkable drive and vitality.

There is no denying that the Eurocentric worldview dominant in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries influenced the attitude of European Jews towards their brothers from the Middle East and North Africa. Yet it is unfair to generalize about relations between the two groups based on this fact alone. After all, a mutual belief in the Jewish national idea, as well as a shared religious spirit, did much to create a feeling of solidarity on both sides of the cultural divide. This solidarity, for example, was the motivating force behind the French Jews' successful attempt in 1870 to persuade their government to grant citizenship to the Jews of Algeria, then under French rule.

Shohat, however, is interested in only one side of the coin. An unmistakable agenda drives essays such as "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," whose title is a clear nod to Edward Said's famous 1979 essay, "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims." There Shohat casts Zionism as the oppressor, and Sephardi Jews—as opposed to Said's Palestinians—as its victims. Employing a host of sources, she builds the case that the Ashkenazi attitude toward Jews from Islamic countries was a dyed-in-the-wool colonial one: She quotes, for example, the journalist Arye Gelbum, who claimed in an infamous column in 1949 that the educational level of North African immigrants was "one of virtually absolute ignorance… they are utterly captive to their savage and primitive instincts." What she neglects to mention, however, is that the column was lambasted in the Hebrew press when it first came out. Indeed, Gelbum's opinion never achieved anything like the legitimacy that Shohat gives it.

Shohat goes on to assure us, however, that "lest one imagine this discourse to be the product of the delirium of an isolated retrograde journalist," we need only look to Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, who described Sephardi immigrants as "lacking even the most elementary knowledge" and "without a trace of Jewish or

humanistic education." Yet these words are taken out of context. A look at the original article in which they appeared reveals that Ben-Gurion was speaking not only of immigrants from Arab countries, but also of the refugees from Central and Eastern Europe. He speaks of the hardships of the world wars which brought about this state of affairs, how it caused a "material and spiritual decline" which was to blame for the beleaguered state of emigrants from countries that were "benighted, forgotten, oppressed, and robbed." And his use of the term "dust of the earth" elsewhere is clearly referring to Jews from both East and West alike. Ben-Gurion's conclusion, moreover, is that Israelis should make every effort to integrate these immigrants into society. "It will require a massive effort… an effort that comes out of a profound and pure love to unify these dispersed [Jews]…. Not out of charity, but out of shared destiny." Indeed, it was just this sense of Jewish solidarity that drove the Zionist leadership more than anything else.

Shohat attempts to buttress her claims of colonialism through additional misleading quotations. She cites, for example, Tom Segev's 1986 book, *1949: The First Israelis*, in which Ben-Gurion is quoted comparing Sephardi Jews with the blacks who were brought to America as slaves. A quick glance at the source of this citation, however, makes it clear that both Segev and Shohat have distorted the picture: Neither Ben-Gurion's reference to Jews nor to blacks is any way pejorative:

> The history of other nations is proof of how difficult and how prolonged is the process of national integration. North America, whose settlement consisted of waves of immigration from all the European countries and from some Asian ones, in addition to the blacks who were brought as slaves from African countries, is similar to Israel in respect of the melting pot. And one hundred eighty years after its War of Independence, the process of integration in America has still not come to an end. Even some European nations, that have all the appearances of being part of a single historical unit, like France and England, Germany, Spain, and Italy, required hundreds of years before the various tribes in their countries merged into one united nation. The State of Israel has not been given a period of hundreds of years.

Only a very creative reading could support Segev's and Shohat's claim that Ben-Gurion was comparing Sephardi Jews to black slaves. But scholars like Segev and Shohat do not lack for creativity.

Nor are these the only places where Shohat distorts sources to serve her arguments. For example, she writes that "the European-Jewish scorn for Eastern-Jewish lives and

sensibilities" was at times "projected onto the Sephardim by Ashkenazi orientalist experts who claimed that premature death for Sephardim was a 'natural and common thing.'" Her proof for this statement comes from a report made by a senior Israeli doctor by the name of Yosef Meir after a stay in a transit camp for Yemenite immigrants in Aden. Had Shohat widened the context of the quote by just a few words, however, we would discover a completely different statement: "Between 5 and 8 out of 10 babies in Yemen died at birth or very shortly thereafter. Is it any wonder that they see death as a natural and common thing?" Here the pertinent question is not so much about the Ashkenazi doctor's distorting prejudices, but Shohat's own.

The author's faculty for creative interpretation in the post-colonial paradigm extends to the book's photographs as well. In Shohat's view, the captions provided by Israel's Government Press Office are tainted by the arrogance of the Zionist establishment. She thus attaches her own captions to the photographs, providing the originals in parentheses underneath. The disparity between the two captions is as striking as she intends it, but perhaps for a different reason. For example, the picture of a man in a *galabiya* being X-rayed has the original caption, "Abraham Selah, 70, formerly a broker in Baghdad, is given a medical examination," while Shohat's title is "The Sephardic body under the scrutiny of the medical establishment." Again, one wonders whether it is not she, rather than the Government Press Office, who is imposing her ideology on the past.

Shohat does not deny the unifying sense of national loyalty that prevailed at the time, yet even this she recasts as Zionist arrogance, in which the Sephardim "are likened to naive children who warrant a paternal pat from the State of Israel that protects them." In this, she adopts the approach of her mentor Said, who depicted the relationship between Western orientalist scholars and the peoples of the East as paternalistic and patronizing. Yet even if one accepts Said's theory about Western orientalism, Shohat's parallel effort vis-a-vis Zionism is foiled by a single, salient fact: As opposed to the relationship between Westerners and the East, European Jews and Jews from Islamic lands shared something that drew them together from the outset and served as a powerful basis for common identity: Their commitment to their Jewish past.

The Zionist attitude toward religion, analyzed in countless scholarly works, is marked by a permanent tension between two

opposing viewpoints. On the one hand, the Zionist mainstream was committed to dissociating itself from the strictures of religion that were a feature of life in the diaspora, in favor of a thoroughgoing secularism. On the other hand, Zionism was suffused with classic Jewish symbols and themes, and drew inspiration from the Jewish ideas of redemption and ingathering. This contradiction was evident in relations between the establishment and Sephardi Jews. The latter's traditionalism may not have squared with the secular cultural orientation of their new society—indeed a major source of tension between the communities—but it nevertheless enabled the Sephardi immigrants to identify with the national renaissance on both the personal and collective levels.

It is somewhat surprising, then, to find Ella Shohat adopting the same secular arrogance that she attributes to the Ashkenazi establishment. She sees something distressing, even embarrassing, about Sephardi traditionalism. Her own alienation from, and ignorance of, Jewish tradition is evident. (For example, she describes the custom of *geniza*, the burial of sacred documents, as widespread among Sephardi Jewry, when in fact it has been practiced by *all* Jewish communities, dating back to talmudic times.) In addition, every Zionist attempt to highlight the Jews' shared religious heritage is construed as inherently patronizing. She cavils, for example, that in a book describing the various Jewish communities of the world, the pictures taken of Yemenite Jewry feature only holy books, and no secular texts. And she takes umbrage at the biblically inspired names of the operations that brought Sephardi Jews to Israel ("Operation 'On Eagles' Wings'" for the Jews of Yemen, and "Operation Ezra and Nehemiah" for the Jews of Iraq), claiming they smack of orientalism. Even the use of the term "exodus" (*yetziat mitzrayim*) to describe the immigration of Sephardim to Israel was, she is convinced, intended to justify the forced displacement of the immigrants from their homeland by describing their life there in terms of slavery. This is, of course, flatly disingenuous: The exodus metaphor was widely used in describing the entire Zionist enterprise. Theodor Herzl employed it in calling upon his fellow Jews to leave Europe, and it was also the name of the famous ship that carried illegal immigrants from Europe to Israel.

Shohat's disregard for the meaning of religion in the lives of both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews is nowhere more noticeable, however, than in her efforts to validate the expression "Arab Jew." In her essay "Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew," she tries to convince

her readers that there is not necessarily a contradiction between being Jewish and being Arab. Her grandmother, for instance, has been living in Israel for half a century, yet to this day she still speaks only the Arabic dialect of Baghdadi Jews. She explains that "the distinctions that her generation made throughout the Arab world were based on religion, not nationality—that is, between Jews, Muslims, and Christians, and not between Jews and Arabs. The assumption was that the Arabness of the Jews was but one thread running through the tapestry of Arab culture in which many religions and ethnic groups were interwoven."

This is an anachronistic, Westernized picture of Jewish identity in Arab lands. Shohat would have us believe that religious identity has always played, and continues to play, a secondary role in the collective identity of minorities in countries like Iraq, after language or other markers of "Arabness." Yet even if Arab nationalism was once a genuinely secular movement, today it is linked firmly to Islamic identity, as anyone who has studied the fate of Christians in the Arab world will attest. And anyone with even a casual acquaintance with Jewish history will recognize that unlike places such as Germany and England, where a great many modern Jews placed national and cosmopolitan identities ahead of their religious affiliation, in the Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa religion played a far greater role in the formulation of the individual Jew's personal identity and collective allegiance than Shohat is willing to admit.

Shohat's baffling denial of the religious dimension of Sephardi identity stems from the fact that to admit it would severely undermine the post-colonial paradigm she has applied to the relationship between Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. The truth, however, is that religious identity not only facilitated the acceptance of Zionism—not only in Islamic countries, but also in Eastern Europe, over the objections of the rabbinic leadership—it also created a basis for a sense of mutual commitment between Jews on both sides of the "colonial" divide. Sephardi and Ashkenazi religiosity may have differed in many ways, but what they shared was far greater, and more profound, than what divided them. Indeed, it is precisely this shared religious identity that has made possible the absorption of Sephardi Jews into Israeli society—a society that has itself become increasingly religious over the last few decades.

Religious identity is pivotal to any discussion about Sephardi Jews in

Israel. Radical intellectuals and aging revolutionaries will continue to look for those things which might alienate Sephardi Jews from the Israeli collective, but they do so at the risk of ignoring the profound religious commitment of their constituency. Shohat seeks to defend the downtrodden by rereading Zionist history, but in the process she resorts to the same tactics of distortion, deception, and mythmaking of which she accuses the founders of the Jewish state.

Avi Picard is a doctoral student at Ben-Gurion University in Beersheva.

Lax Americana

Niall Ferguson
Colossus: The Price of America's Empire
Penguin, 240 pages.

Reviewed by Liel Leibovitz

With the rise of a unipolar world, the debate over the merits and meaning of American empire is everywhere. Proponents of the *Pax Americana* see it as a liberal force for democracy and against tyranny, terrorism, military adventurism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Critics worry about its financial costs, its corrosive effects on democracy, the delegitimation of American ideals abroad, and the threat it poses to the order of alliances and institutions which the United States helped establish in the aftermath of World War II.

The British historian Niall Ferguson has been one of the most important voices in this debate. In 2002 he published *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power*, a treatise on the benefits the British Empire bequeathed to the rest of the world; that