

Smadar Lavie, PhD  
Professor Emerita of Anthropology  
University of California at Davis  
[slavie@ucdavis.edu](mailto:slavie@ucdavis.edu)  
(651) 343-3621

**To:**

- (1) Prof. Linda Darling-Hammond, Chair, California Board of Education: [llindadh@stanford.edu](mailto:llindadh@stanford.edu)**
- (2) Mr. Tony Thurmond, California Superintendent for Public Instruction [superintendent@cde.ca.gov](mailto:superintendent@cde.ca.gov)**
- (3) California's Instructional Quality Commission [ethnicstudies@cde.ca.gov](mailto:ethnicstudies@cde.ca.gov)**

**Re:**

**Sample Lesson: Antisemitism and Jewish Middle Eastern-Americans**  
**Theme: Identity**  
**Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies**

Dear Mr. Thurmond, Prof. Darling-Hammond, and the California Instructional Quality Commission,

I am a professor emerita of Cultural Anthropology. My scholarly research and publications have focused on the intersection of gender, race and religion with nationalism and (post)colonialism in Egypt and Palestine/Israel. Several of my scholarly publications have won prestigious awards. I am also the co-founder of Israel's feminist of color movement, *Ahoti* ("Sistah", Hebrew) and have served on its board of directors for near a decade. I am also a board member of Israel's Women's Parliament. In 2013, an Israeli NGO-of-color coalition has awarded me one of Israel's highest alternative (i.e., non-establishment) awards, Heart at East, for my lifetime scholarship and activism researching and representing Mizrahi (Eastern, Hebrew) communities in Israel-Palestine. Here is a link to my UC Davis's homepage:  
<https://anthropology.ucdavis.edu/people/smadarlavie> .

I hold US and Israeli citizenships, and am forever grateful to the taxpayers of California for bringing me here from Tel Aviv in 1979 on a full scholarship, paying for my first-rate U. C. Berkeley graduate education, and for providing me with a post-doctoral scholarship, U. C. Davis tenured professorship, and more recently, with a U. C. Berkeley research visitorship.

It is quite unknown outside the state of Israel that Jews originating in the Arab and Muslim Worlds and the European margins of the Ottoman empire and their Israeli-born descendants constitute the majority of the state's citizens, the *Mizrahim* ("Easterners", Hebrew Plural). The other two segments of Israel's citizenry are the twenty percent Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, and the remaining thirty percent *Ashkenazim*, or European Jews of Yiddish-speaking origins. Ashkenazim control the division of power and privilege in the state.

As a member of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), I was asked to review the proposed Ethnic Studies lesson discussing what the lesson terms "Jewish Middle Eastern American community."

While American Jewry is not my field of expertise, my decades of ethnographic fieldwork and archival research on the topic of Israeli Mizrahim, including their patterns of immigration to the US and the manners in which they maintain their diasporic relationship with Israel, qualify me to write the following opinion. I divided my critique into topics that correspond with the points raised in the lesson plan in accordance with the order in which they appear in the lesson plan. Whenever I use quotation marks, I am quoting the document you sent.

### **(1) Anti-Semitism**

Anti-Semitism is a European phenomenon. In discussion of anti-Semitism, one must demarcate a clear line between its European origins and how it arrived in the Arab and Muslim Worlds. This arrival coincided with the Zionist settlement of Palestine.

Anti-Semitism is not to be mixed with the occasional pre-1948 persecutions of Jews and Christians in the Arab and Muslim Worlds. They were religious minorities living under traditional, authoritarian regimes, without a modernist “bill of rights.” Nevertheless, as monotheistic religions Jews and Christians had some civil protections that secured their religious freedom. Their family, kinship, marriage, and other aspects of daily life resembled those of the Muslim majority.

I encountered major bookstores in Egypt and Jordan that sold Arabic translations of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. To the best of my knowledge, these first appeared in Arabic in the 1950s.

### **(2) “The Middle East”**

The term “Middle East” is a British colonial construction— middle of what and east of where? It was the London Victoria Train Station that demarcated the various distances from various “east.” Currently, the accurate name is Southwest Asia and North Africa or SWANA. Scholars of that area use the term “Arab and Muslim Worlds” to include Iranians and Turks who are not Arab. However, I’m not certain that this point is worth stressing over.

Nevertheless, the expression “Jewish Middle Eastern Americans” is way too broad. Does this mean traditional Sephardic communities? Mizrahi immigrants from Israel to the US?

Sephardim are descendants of non-Yiddish speaking Jews, expelled from Spain and Southern Europe in 1492. Sephardim constitute only one group of Mizrahim. There are ancient Sephardic communities in Europe, and some even survived the Holocaust and ended up in Israel where they enjoy White, Ashkenazi privilege. Yemenis (with their vibrant community in New York, for example) are not Sephardim because their Halakha roots hark back to Maimonides (1160), while the rest of non-Yiddish speaking Jews, like the Ashkenazim, use Shulhan `Arukh by Rabbi Karo (1488) as a main Hakhakhic source. Let me repeat, that I am not a historian or scholar Jewish theology, so these issues ought to be checked with experts in such fields.

Mizrahim (Easterners, Hebrew) is an Israeli coalitional term for Jews originating in non-Yiddish speaking countries on the margins of Ottoman Europe (such as Bulgaria, Greece or Italy) and in

the Muslim World. It is parallel to “of color” in POC. While some diasporic Mizrahi intellectuals argue that Mizrahim is a colonialist invention, Mizrahi communities refer to themselves as such, and their choice of terminology ought to be respected. Likewise, most Mizrahim oppose the appellation “Arab Jews” which seems to be a favorite among progressive Palestine circles outside Israel/Palestine.

### (3) “Discrimination and Prejudice”

Absent from the lesson plan is the intra-Jewish discrimination and prejudice of Mizrahim among the Ashkenazi majority of US Jewry. This issue merits discussion. It stems out of the paradoxical demographics of Israel and the Jewish diaspora. While 85% of world Jewry are Ashkenazim, they mainly reside outside Israel. The remaining 15% Mizrahim form Israel’s majority of citizens. The lesson does not refer to the racial demographic of world Jewry in its segment on “essential questions.” Rather, it discusses “ethnicity” instead. One of the Yiddish bigoted terms for Mizrahim both in Israel and the US is *schwartzes* (“blacks”, plural), given their Arab-Mediterranean phenotype. It is the same Yiddish term bigots relegate for African-Americans.

### (4) Phenotypic and Cultural Profiling US Mizrahim

In the US, due to phenotypic appearance, Mizrahim are at times profiled as Latinx or Muslims by law enforcement authorities. This is also part of the “discrimination, prejudice and hate crimes” noted in the lesson that ought to be discussed.

Here is another example, having to do with discrimination along cultural patterns. In the 1990s, I conducted a small research project in the California family courts among “non classified” racialized minority mothers, who do not fall into the census categories of Black, Asian or Latinx. They were immigrants or 2nd generation Arabs, Iranian, Pakistani, Southern Europeans and Mizrahi. Judges, attorneys, and the social workers of the Family Court Services measured Mizrahi mothers against US Ashkenazi Jewish mothers. As a result, these mothers were deemed dysfunctional. They lost custody and child support for not adhering to the Ashkenazi model of family dynamics familiar to the court authorities. Their embeddedness in their non-European communities of origin was ignored.

### (5) “Diaspora” and “Indigeneity”

Aside from the few Jews who have never left Palestine/Israel, all Jews are diasporic in their relationship to Palestine/Israel. The lesson’s employment of the concept of indigeneity is incorrect. Judaism praises itself on being a non-autochthonous religion.

The term “diaspora” is relegated in the lesson to Jews dispersed outside modern-day Israel. Some prominent Israeli Mizrahi rabbis, such as Yemeni Rabbi Korah, used to say, “We are in exile in the state of Israel,” meaning, Mizrahim are exiles in the Ashkenazi controlled state. Other Mizrahi Rabbis refer to their religious life in modern-day Israel as “diaspora of the diaspora.” Much of Israeli life would fall under the definition of secularity, even though the state calendar is Jewish. The default mode of Israeli state Judaism is Ashkenazi.

Secular left-wing Mizrahi intellectuals also conceive of the Mizrahi existence in Israel as “diasporic” or “exilic.” Mizrahi communities, however, most of whom are ultranationalist, do not agree with the academic definition of Israeli Mizrahim as diasporic.

In the US, Mizrahi communities are divided into Mizrahim who immigrated straight from the Arab and Muslim Worlds to the US and Mizrahim who immigrated to the US via Israel.

#### **(6) Mizrahi Jews as Refugees from the Arab and Muslim Worlds**

The lesson’s claim that since the 1940s, one million Jews from the Arab and Muslim Worlds fled their countries due to antisemitism is incorrect. From the 1930s on, living a Jewish life in the Arab World became very difficult because the Euro centered Zionist movement drafted young Mizrahi Jews into its ranks. Atrocities against Jewish communities were ignited by the Nakba and the rise of the anti-colonialist movement in the Arab World. The Jewish identification there with the Zionist project of settling Palestine was criticized. As painful as these atrocities were, they were not anti-Semitic, but anti-colonial.

These events dovetailed with the valiant efforts of the Israeli state establishment to augment its Jewish population after 1948 -- its claim to be a homeland for all Jews needed further demographic evidence. After the end of World War 2, the state of Israel exhausted most resources of Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants, who were preferred due to their European origins. The state lured Mizrahi Jews, through Mossad or Jewish agency emissary activities, such as inducing panic in the Jewish community of Iraq by planting bombs in synagogues; deterring North African Jews from moving their financial assets and immigrating to France; running the hobby-spy ring of Jewish youth in Cairo who planted home-made bombs in US, British and French institutions in Egypt. This cannot be compared to the Jewish refugees in the post-Holocaust displaced persons’ camps, many of whom ended up in Israel. The lesson implies such a comparison to be valid. Another implied comparison is between the Mizrahi Jews who were lured to Israel and the Palestinians who were removed from their homeland to make room for the Israeli state and became refugees in the neighboring Arab states.

Upon arrival to Israel, many Mizrahi Jews’ religious and cultural objects were confiscated and sold by Ashkenazi Judaica merchants to museums and private collectors, all advised by Orientalist Ashkenazi professors based in Israeli universities. Their extended family structure, as well as their centuries-old traditions, were destroyed; their lighter-skinned babies sold to childless Ashkenazim in Israel and abroad for unconsented adoptions. Such acts were conducted by the same Ashkenazi-Zionist establishment who orchestrated the mass migration of Mizrahim to Israel and settled them in villages and towns from which Palestinians were removed.

#### **(7) US-Mizrahi “Intersectional” Identities**

From my limited experience, I can hesitantly say that the “intersectional” identities of the majority of US Mizrahi Jews -- whether arriving straight from the Arab and Muslim Worlds or via Israel -- tend toward Zionist ultranationalism, rather than the intersectional identity politics typical of US BIPOC communities. The reasons for Mizrahi ultranationalism ought to be discussed in the lesson structure. These reasons are somewhat similar to that of POC Trump

supporters. But here, the Mizrahi Zionist ultranationalism is also directed toward the relatively liberal, democratic-voter Ashkenazi US Jewish community whose younger generation is gradually becoming critical of present day Israel. The majority of the US Jewish community also supports the state of Israel. It is also worth mentioning that according to various polls conducted in Israel, 70-77% of Israeli Jews supported the presidency of Donald Trump. The ethnic/racial origin of the Trump supporters was not mentioned by the pollsters, however.

I hope that you find my comments of assistance as you revise the core curriculum of Ethnic Studies in the California public education system. Jews originating in the Arab and Muslim Worlds belong in the Asian American Studies segment of the curriculum, to be studied alongside lessons focusing on the rich history of Arab American communities and their important historical and present-day contribution to the fabric of life in California.

I am thankful for your time and thought in reading my expert opinion. I would be glad to answer any further questions.

Sincerely,  
Prof. Smadar Lavie