Mashriq & Mahjar 10, no. 2 (2023), 68–94
ISSN 2169-4435

Yair Wallach[1]

TOURIST, PILGRIM, MIGRANT, SETTLER: RETHINKING THE MODERN HISTORY OF ASHKENAZIM IN THE LEVANT THROUGH SITES OF HOSPITALITY

Abstract
This article looks at Ashkenazi-operated hotels in Tiberias, Beirut, Jerusalem, Jaffa, Cairo, Alexandria, and elsewhere, in the late Ottoman period and under British rule, to consider the confusing ambiguities that these stories reveal. Ashkenazi presence in Palestine is typically understood in terms of either the pious, zealot pilgrims, or the nationalist settlers. And yet the story of the hotel owners and operators could also fit into a different category, that of migrants, who sought to integrate within existing social, economic, and political structures. The tourism and hospitality industry, which relied on flows of people across borders and on a diverse customer-base, was to some degree at odds with the segregation associated with Zionist Yishuv. Such stories, which have been forgotten and erased by the history of Palestine in the twentieth century, prompt us to rethink our understanding of Ashkenazi history in the region.

خلاصة
يتناول هذا المقال الفنادق التي أدارها اليهود الأشكناز (الأوروبيون الشرقيون) في طبريا وبيروت والقدس ويافا والقاهرة والإسكندرية وأماكن أخرى، في أواخر الفترة العثمانية وتحت الحكم البريطاني، وذلك للنظر في الغموض المربك الذي تكشفه هذه القصص. عادة يُفهم الوجود الأشكنازي في فلسطين إما من خلال الحجاج المتدينين المتعصبين، أو من خلال المستوطنين القوميين. ومع ذلك فإن قصة أصحاب ومشغلي الفنادق من الممكن أن تندرج أيضاً ضمن فئة مختلفة، وهي فئة المهاجرين، الذين سعوا إلى الاندماج في الهياكل الاجتماعية والاقتصادية والسياسية القائمة. وكانت صناعة السياحة والضيافة، التي اعتمدت على تدفقات الناس عبر الحدود وعلى قاعدة عملاء متنوعة، تتعارض إلى حد ما مع الفصل المرتبط بالمستعمرة الصهيونية. مثل هذه القصص التي نُسيت ومحاها تاريخ فلسطين في القرن العشرين، تدفعنا إلى إعادة التفكير في فهمنا لتاريخ اليهود الأشكناز في المنطقة.

[1] This research was generously supported by a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this article for their insightful comments, and to the guest editors for inviting me to participate in this project.

Yair Wallach is Reader in Israeli Studies at SOAS, the University of London. Email: yw11@soas.ac.uk

INTRODUCTION

At the foothills of the Jerusalem mountains stands an Ottoman caravanserai, known as "Bab al-Wad" in Arabic, or "Sha'ar ha-Gay" in Hebrew—"the valley's gate." This is the gateway to the narrow valley ascending to Jerusalem. In Israeli collective memory, Bab al-Wad is the chief *lieu de mémoire* of the 1948 war, symbolizing the Zionist fight to occupy the road to Jerusalem.[2] In early 1948, Palestinian guerrillas attacked Jewish military supply convoys passing through the valley. The carcasses of armored vehicles destroyed in those attacks are today arranged in a row outside the caravanserai and are visible from the Tel Aviv–Jerusalem highway. One of the Israeli soldiers who passed here, a Polish Holocaust survivor who had arrived in Palestine in 1945, described the place in his memoirs *From the Murder Pit to the Valley's Gate*:

> Near Bab al-Wad . . . we saw in the twilight an inn, deserted, and destroyed. . . . I once stopped here for lunch, which was served by a fat Arab wearing a red fez. Now it was empty and full of soot; one of our cars that traveled to Jerusalem a few days earlier had been attacked from this inn. In response, our people bombed it.[3]

In 2020, after many years of neglect, the caravanserai was renovated and made into a national memorial dedicated to the Palmach fighters who "broke the siege on Jerusalem". The website of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority describes the building as a "khan, which was built as a wayside inn during the Ottoman period."[4] The term khan

---

[2] On Bab al-Wad in Israeli collective memory, see Israel Rozenson, *Ba-Derekh el Ha'ir: Sha'ar ha-Gay ke-Maḥoz Zikaron* (Jerusalem: Karmel, 2017). Interestingly, Bab al-Wad is also a symbol of Palestinian heroism and the struggle against Zionism. A Palestinian website, dedicated to the history of Palestinian resistance and armed struggle, is named after the site (https://babelwad.com/).

[3] Beni Wircberg, *Mi-Gay Ha-Hariga le-Sha'ar Ha-Gay* (Jerusalem: Masada, 1967), 176.

[4] "Khan Sha'ar Hagai National Heritage Site," Israel Nature and Parks Authority, website, 2019, https://en.parks.org.il/reserve-park/gay/.

(caravanserai) identifies Bab al-Wad as part of an Islamic pre-modern network of hostels that operated as charitable foundations to welcome pilgrims and traders. Implicit here is the dichotomy between East and West. On one side is the Ottoman khan, which became a site of Palestinian resistance. Against it stood the Zionist fighters, who were mostly Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of Central and Eastern European descent) who occupied the road to Jerusalem and depopulated the Arab Palestinian villages in its vicinity. It is a narrative of conflict and conquest, in which Israeli liberation and independence as a modern, European-styled state was achieved through overcoming and destroying the Arab past, of which the khan is a relic.

But the Bab al-Wad inn was not, in fact, very ancient, and was never a khan. The complex was built in the 1870s as part of the upgrading of the Jaffa–Jerusalem Road and was referred to in Arabic as *Luqanda*—a word derived from the Italian *locanda* (inn), connoting in Arabic a modern hotel, as opposed to the pre-modern sites of pilgrims' hospitality.[5] The soldiers who conquered Bab al-Wad in 1948 were not the first Ashkenazim there. In fact, in its first fifty years of existence, between 1872 and 1921, the inn was primarily run by Ashkenazi Jews. Tenders for the operation of the hotel, issued by the Jerusalem municipality, were won by members of the families of Salant, Rokach, Rosenthal, and Wershevsky. These families had arrived in Palestine in the first half of the nineteenth century and became close to Ottoman authorities.[6] Their names are nowhere to be found in the heritage site, where the rich multimedia display is devoted entirely to the 1948 war.

Typical Zionist narratives portray the Arab rural landscape as hostile to Jews, especially to Jews who came from Europe. But the Jewish families at Bab al-Wad lived safely and peacefully in an almost entirely Arab and Muslim rural environment. This changed with the start of the British Mandate, as Arab-Jewish "disturbances" in Jaffa in

---

[5] See the minutes of the Jerusalem municipal council. "Hotel Bab Al Wad Needs Repairs, Contractor Found," 11 December 1901, Ottoman Registers, 5:36a, item 221, Jerusalem Municipal Archives (JMA), available at http://www.archives.openjerusalem.org/index.php/hotel-bab-al-wad-needs-repairs-contractor-found-11-december-1901-gregorian-calendar-28-tishrin-thani-1317-ottoman-fiscal-calendar-rumi?sf_culture=ar.

[6] On the history of Bab al-Wad, see Shmuel Avitsur, "Le-Toldot Kvish Yafo-Yerushalayim," in *Mivḥar Ma'amarim Le-Toldot Erets Yisra'el* (Ariel, 1988), 9–14. A fictionalized account of the inn is found in Ari Ibn-Zahav, *A Gharry Driver in Jerusalem.* (Tel-Aviv: Lion the Printer, 1947). See also Pedro Zuniga, *Mi Yitneni Ba-Midbar Melon Orḥim* (Tel Aviv: Kavim Ishiyim, 2010), 32–35.

1921 raised the concerns of the Wershevsky family, the last Jewish operators of the inn. They found shelter with their friends in the nearby village of Dir Ayub and afterwards left for Jerusalem.[7]

How did Yiddish-speaking Jews, who had recently immigrated from Europe, gain such an important foothold in Ottoman Palestine? And how can we reconcile the familiar narrative of Bab al-Wad of 1948—of inevitable conflict between European Jews and Palestinian Arabs; of insurmountable cultural differences between West and East; of entrenched hostility based on difference—with the Ottoman history of the site?

In this article, I look at Ashkenazi-operated hotels in Tiberias, Beirut, Jerusalem, Jaffa, Cairo, and elsewhere, to consider the confusing ambiguities that these stories reveal. Ashkenazi presence in Palestine is typically understood in terms of either the pious, zealot pilgrims or the nationalist settlers. The involvement of Ashkenazi Jewish migrants in the hospitality sector in Palestine and neighboring countries, in the late Ottoman and Mandatory period, suggests a wider spectrum of possibilities that relied on integration in the region and the establishment of local connections and networks.

The development of modern tourism in the Eastern Mediterranean is widely understood as synonymous with growing European influence, the promotion of European imperial interests, and the prevalence of racialized Orientalist hierarchies. Jewish tourism, specifically, has been studied as part of the Zionist project. Jewish tourism entrepreneurs and visitors are seen as part of a Jewish national revival in Palestine, which, during the British Mandate, took an increasingly exclusivist and colonial character. However, as I argue in this article, the dialectics of tourism also allowed room for very different trajectories. Ashkenazi migrants to Palestine and Egypt became closely involved with the sector of tourism, which was tied to flows of Ashkenazim to the region from Eastern Europe, as well as Ashkenazi mobility within the region itself—movements which were by no means simply or only "Zionist" in nature. Furthermore, Ashkenazi entrepreneurship in hospitality involved diverse and intensive interaction with local actors, integration into local political culture, and acculturation within Ottoman, Arab, and Palestinian social structures.

I start with a short historiographic review on the conceptualization of Ashkenazi migration to Palestine and the

---

[7] Rozenson, *Ba-Derekh el Ha'ir*.

development of tourism (general and Jewish) in the region. I then examine the reasons for Ashkenazi involvement in hospitality and the commercial and political ties between Ashkenazim and the local elite that facilitated the development of the sector. I end with a discussion of Ashkenazi tourism to Egypt and Lebanon, and the persistence of Arab-Ashkenazi cooperation in the tourism sector into the 1940s, despite the growing trend of segregation.

ASHKENAZI MIGRATION TO LATE OTTOMAN PALESTINE

The migration of Yiddish-speaking Jews to the Eastern Mediterranean from Central and Eastern Europe has been recorded since the Middle Ages.[8] This flow of migrants and visitors grew gradually from the late eighteenth century through the nineteenth century. By the First World War, tens of thousands of Ashkenazi Jews had migrated to the region, as individuals, families, and in groups, creating communities in Safed, Jerusalem, Hebron, Tiberias, Cairo, Beirut, and other cities. It was the encounter with local Arabic and Ladino-speaking Jewish communities that coalesced Ashkenazim into a single overarching category of identification, despite significant differences between different Ashkenazi groups in religious practice, Yiddish dialect, and place of origin.[9] This dichotomous categorization, of Ashkenazim as "European Jews" (that is, Jews of Central and Eastern European heritage), as opposed to Jews of the Middle East, persists to this day and is used as an explanatory framework in both socio-political and cultural terms.

Relative to its size, modern Ashkenazi migration to Palestine is probably one of the best-documented and studied episodes of human mobility. There are radically different approaches to this issue among scholars. Palestinian scholarship (and generally scholars who are critical of Zionism) focused on Ashkenazi migration to the region starting in the late nineteenth century, as a form of settler colonialism,

---

[8] Michael Ehrlich, "The Jewish Communities of Safed and Jerusalem during the Fourteenth Century," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 4 (October 2021): 711–20.

[9] On the crystallization of the difference between Sephardim as "local Ottomans" ("citizens of the land") and Ashkenazim as migrants, see Matthias B. Lehmann, "Rethinking Sephardi Identity: Jews and Other Jews in Ottoman Palestine," *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 81–109. On the different meanings of "Ashkenaz" as place of origin, religious practice, and congregational affiliation, see Joseph Davis, "The Reception of the Shulhan 'Arukh and the Formation of Ashkenazic Jewish Identity," *AJS Review* 26, no. 2 (October 2002): 251–76.

which aimed to uproot the native Palestinian population.[10] The "Jerusalem school," which was dominant in Zionist-Israeli historiography throughout much of the twentieth century, celebrated Ashkenazi migration as a form of Jewish national revival and studied Ashkenazi migrants of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as pilgrim-settlers of sorts, driven to Palestine not only due to its holiness but also as part of the "Jewish return to Zion."[11] Thus, Zionist ideology was projected onto earlier migrations. Since the 1980s, Israeli historians have aimed to move away from the anachronistic and ideological readings of the Jerusalem school. Israel Bartal has studied the "diasporic" character of Ashkenazi communities which continued to rely on support networks vis-à-vis Eastern Europe. Bartal emphasizes the break between those earlier migrants and the ideological migrants who came after the establishment of the early Jewish colonies in 1882.[12] Gur Alroey has questioned the immediate identification of early twentieth-century Ashkenazi migration to Palestine with Zionism, demonstrating convincingly that most migrants were not motivated by Zionist ideology, and that the profile of migrants—in terms of age, profession, family structure, and motivation—was not substantially different from that of Ashkenazi migrants to North America.[13]

Notwithstanding the deep differences between these historiographic approaches, what unites them all is the assumption that Ashkenazim remained alien to the social, cultural, and political environment of late Ottoman Palestine. Alroey, for example, concluded that even though Jewish immigrants who arrived between 1904 and 1914 were generally not ideologically motivated, nonetheless they "had no interest in becoming part of the majority Arab society and made no

---

[10] See, for example, Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 93; Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016), 203, 213–16.

[11] David N. Myers, "Is There Still a 'Jerusalem School?': Reflections on the State of Jewish Historical Scholarship in Israel," *Jewish History* 23, no. 4 (2009): 389–406. For recent historical work in this vein, see Arie Morgenstern, *Hastening Redemption: Messianism and the Resettlement of the Land of Israel*, trans. Joel A. Linsider (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[12] Israel Bartal, *Galut ba-Arets:Yishuv Erets Yisra'el be-Ṭerem ha-Tsiyonut* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organisation, 1995).

[13] Gur Alroey, *An Unpromising Land: Jewish Migration to Palestine in the Early Twentieth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014); Alroey, *Erets miḳlat: ha-hagirah le-Erets Yisra'el, 1919–1927* (Sedeh Boker: Makhon Ben Guryon le-heker Yisrael, 2021).

attempt to adopt the Middle Eastern lifestyle. They isolated themselves from Arab society economically and culturally and formed separate ethnic enclaves that were cut off from the majority society."[14] Another scholar recently wrote that Ashkenazim in late Ottoman Palestine "generally chose to remain European in culture, refusing to assimilate or to take Ottoman citizenship. Relations with the local Arab community, unlike those of Sephardi Jews, remained strictly functional. . . . Ottoman authorities regarded European Jews as an alien element."[15] These categorical statements are presented as axioms that require no proof. The question of integration and acculturation, which is central to any discussion of migration, is rarely raised, certainly in such terms, when it comes to Ashkenazim in Palestine or in neighboring countries. Their migration and presence in the region are understood as a Jewish project—whether defined in national, colonial, or religious terms.

The lack of interest in Ashkenazi integration stands in sharp contrast to growing attention to the relations of Arab and Sephardic Jews with their social context. Those communities' integration within the Arab environment is the key question in the current historiographic debate on Middle Eastern and North African Jews.[16] Whether Zionist or not, Ashkenazim in Palestine are understood as extensions of European civilization and power, who are unable to become part of the local context. However, scholars have begun challenging this widely held assumption in the last decade, with studies of everyday Ashkenazi acculturation, in terms of clothing, language, leisure culture, and quotidian interaction.[17]

---

[14] Alroey, *An Unpromising Land*, 238.

[15] Alan Dowty, *Arabs and Jews in Ottoman Palestine: Two Worlds Collide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 31.

[16] References are too many to mention here. See the works of Lital Levy, Orit Bashkin, Daniel Schroeter, Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Yuval Evri, Salim Tamari, Najat Abdulhaq, Menashe Enzi, and many others.

[17] See Yair Wallach, "Jerusalem between Segregation and Integration: Reading Urban Space through the Eyes of Justice Gad Frumkin," in *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere: Jews and Christians in the Middle East*, eds. S. R. Goldstein-Sabbah and H. L. Murre-van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 205–33; Ido Harari, "'The Arab Clothes of Our Forefathers': Articulating Ashkenazi Palestinian Jewish Identity through Dress and Language," *Contemporanea* 20, no. 4 (2017): 569–86; Yonatan Mendel, "On Palestinian Yiddish and Ashkenazi Arabic in 18–19 Century Palestine: A Language-Oriented New Look on Jewish-Arab Relations," *British Journal of*

The literature on Jewish involvement in the tourism sector in late Ottoman Palestine is aligned with the dominant historiographical approach of reading Ashkenazim in Palestine against and in relation to Zionism. Particular attention has been given to organized Jewish groups, such as the Anglo-Jewish "Maccabean Pilgrimage" of 1897, whose interest in Palestine took a national and proto-Zionist form.[18] Travel accounts to Palestine by Zionist individuals from Europe such as Ahad Ha-Am, Theodor Herzl, and others, are widely studied.[19] The literature's main preoccupation is with the visitors' attitudes to Jewish colonization, the Jewish national movement, and hopes for Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. As scholars emphasized, those attitudes varied greatly and were far from uniform. However, the discussion remains anchored within and against the Zionist framework.

This scholarship gives a limited and misleading picture of Jewish Ashkenazi involvement in tourism in Palestine. Most Jewish visitors to Palestine did not come as part of a Zionist expedition. What has also gone unnoticed is the significant involvement of Ashkenazim in tourism as operators of hotels, inns, and tourism-related services. Let us therefore return to the nineteenth century and examine why hotel and tourism operation was attractive to Ashkenazi migrants.

FROM HOT BATHS TO A HOTEL: MENACHEM MENDEL'S STORY

Why did Ashkenazi migrants decide to enter the hospitality sector in the Levant? In some ways, it may have been due to trade patterns

---

Middle Eastern Studies 49, no. 2 (2022): 204–22; Boaz Lev Tov, "Shkhenim Nokheḥim: Ḳsharim Tarbutiyim Beyn Yehudim Le-ʻAravim Be-Erets Yisraʾel Be-Shilhey Ha-Tḳufah Ha-Othmanit," *Zmanim: A Historical Quarterly* 110 (2010): 42–54. For more examples of Ashkenazi-Arab interaction see Menachem Klein, *Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Hebron* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[18] Stuart A. Cohen, "The First Anglo-Jewish Pilgrimage to Palestine: 1897," *Studies in Zionism* 2, no. 1 (1981): 71–85; Maja Gildin Zuckerman, "En Route to Palestine: Jewish Mobility and Zionist Emergence," in *New Perspectives on Jewish Cultural History: Boundaries, Experiences, and Sensemaking*, eds. Jakob Feldt and Maja Gildin Zuckerman (London: Routledge, 2021), 27–53; Kobi Cohen-Hattab, "Zionist Pilgrimages: The Beginning of Organized Zionist Jewish Tourism to Palestine at the End of the Ottoman Period," *Jewish Culture and History* 23, no. 3 (July 2022): 201–220.

[19] One of the most famous such texts is Ahad Ha-Am's 1891 essay. See Alan Dowty, "Much Ado about Little: Ahad Ha'am's 'Truth from Eretz Yisrael,' Zionism, and the Arabs," *Israel Studies* 5, no. 2 (2000): 154–81.

originating in Eastern Europe. In Poland, as of the sixteenth century, Jews were dominant in tavernkeeping, in cities and in rural areas alike. The sale of alcohol (primarily to non-Jews) was a primary source of income.[20] In Ottoman Palestine, however, the room for such practices was far more limited, given the Islamic ban on alcohol consumption. In nineteenth-century Safed, Ashkenazim produced and sold alcohol to not only Jews but also to Muslims who visited the Jewish quarter where they could drink discretely.[21] However, Safed appears unusual in this way, and such opportunities did not extend to the Palestinian countryside. The main form of Ashkenazi involvement in hospitality was the operation of hotels, typically small and family-run, that catered primarily to the growing flow of Ashkenazi visitors. With growing numbers of Jewish travelers coming to Palestine for business, pilgrimage, tourism, or family visits, there was a market for Ashkenazi hotel owners, who knew what these people wanted and could communicate with them in their language.

The first such guesthouse was opened in 1842 by Menachem Mendel Kaminitz (1800–1873) and his wife Tsipa in Jerusalem. Menachem Mendel's memoirs provide some clues as to the qualities that were necessary for hotel operators, beyond initial capital. Menachem Mendel left his home in Kaminitz (near Brest, in today's Belarus) in 1833, and set out for Odessa, then to Istanbul, and finally to Palestine. When he arrived in Safed, he rented a place in the courtyard of Reb Zalman Cohen. That street, populated by Ashkenazim, had a synagogue, a religious seminary, and a public bath. It was the bath which Menachem Mendel appeared most excited about:

> Everything is done according to our public baths' customs. The oven is made of stones like we do it, and they have laurel leaf whisks to lash our bodies in the heat to induce sweating, as we do. But in other cities [in Palestine], there are no public baths like this, all they have is hot water, according to Ishmaelites' [Arab/Muslim] customs.[22]

---

[20] Jacob Goldberg, "Tavernkeeping," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, trans. Christina Manetti, accessed 20 June 2023, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/tavernkeeping.

[21] Rivka Ambon, "Rabbi Shmuel Heller (1803–1884) and His Role in the Jewish Community in Safed" (PhD diss., Tel Aviv University, 2016), 181–86.

[22] Menachem Mendel Boym Kaminitz, *Ḳorot Ha-'Itim Le-Yeshurun Be-Erets Yisra'el* (Vilnius ,1839) https://benyehuda.org/read/2695. The family name

One can almost hear the sigh of relief of Menachem Mendel, who, after long weeks traveling from Eastern Europe, finally found a proper hot sauna, exactly like they do "back home," where steam is produced by pouring water over hot stones and bathers are slapped with laurel leaves. Local baths (later known as "Turkish," or in Menachem Mendel's terms "Ishmaelite") included a steam room and cold and hot pools; bathers would scrub their bodies with sponges. Yet these facilities simply could not match the habits accustomed to by the travelers from Eastern Europe.[23]

As a migrant, Menachem Mendel knew exactly what he was missing and what other Ashkenazi visitors would appreciate. He had a keen sense of travelers' need for a "home from home," where they can find familiar comforts. The hostel he later opened in Jerusalem offered Ashkenazi guests just that. Kaminitz served much-praised freshly baked bread and excellent cuisine. His children later expanded the hotel and opened branches in Hebron, Jaffa, Petah Tikva, and Jericho. By then, these were no simple guesthouses. Their hotels in Jaffa and Jerusalem especially were grand and luxurious, deliberately presenting themselves as "European" hotels for upmarket tourists, including non-Jews. The Kaminitz hotel chain locations straddled the divides within the different Jewish communities of Palestine: the modern and outward-looking Jaffa, the sacred cities of Jerusalem and Hebron, the predominantly Muslim city of Jericho (where few Jews lived), and the colony of Petah Tikva. That the Kaminitz family was able to operate branches of their hotel empire in these very different social settings illustrates their entrepreneurship and ability to negotiate across different cultural barriers.

It is this need for familiarity and understanding that attracted visitors to such hotels. That familiarity could take many shapes. Sometimes it was simply related to language. When Avraham Shmuel Hirschberg was on his way to visit Palestine, he stopped for a few days in Istanbul, where he lodged in a Sephardic hotel. But he soon found his "Ashkenazi brothers": "I also had my meals in an Ashkenazi hostel and I only went back to the Sephardic hotel to sleep, because it was

---

was originally Boym, but in Palestine they became known as Kaminitz after their hometown.

[23] On public baths in Ottoman Jerusalem, their layout and functions, see Martin Dow, "The Hammams of Ottoman Jerusalem," in *Ottoman Jerusalem: The Living City, 1517–1917*, eds. Sylvia Auld and Robert Hillenbrand (London: Altajir World of Islam Trust, 2000), 519–24.

difficult for me to stay there, because it is the most difficult thing in the world, to be a mute person among people who talk."[24] He tried to speak Hebrew with the Sephardim, but no one understood him—either because their knowledge of Hebrew was poor, as Hirschberg believed, or because they didn't understand his Ashkenazi pronunciation. For Ashkenazi migrants and travelers, a hotel where the staff could speak Yiddish, or understand their Hebrew, was an oasis and provided considerable relief on a difficult journey. It made it easier to get information on transport, bureaucracy, and other critical issues. The hotel would typically arrange onward travel—booking boat tickets, donkeys, carriages, or trains—and getting the details right was much easier when communicating in one's mother tongue. Meanwhile, these travel arrangements and services provided the hotel with added income.

Religious observance was clearly a feature that attracted Jews to Jewish-owned hotels. Kosher food was the absolute priority, and this featured centrally in the advertisements for Jewish hotels in the Middle East (in Hebrew and in Yiddish). Most Jewish travelers in the late nineteenth century ate kosher food, which was often hard if not impossible to find. Travelers had to live on a simple diet of vegetables, fruits, or hard-boiled eggs (foods that were safe in kosher terms) or bring conserved food with them on the journey. Hotels with kosher restaurants had an obvious advantage in this regard. But this didn't stop there: some Jewish hotels also offered a small prayer hall and an atmosphere of religious observance in keeping with the guests' expectations, especially on the Sabbath. Hirschberg didn't find such an atmosphere in his Sephardic hotel in Istanbul. He was appalled to see Sephardic Jews playing cards in the hotel on the holy day.[25]

Ashkenazim who could speak European languages had access to a wider clientele beyond Jewish visitors. They thus could play the role of mediators—not unlike Sephardic Jews or local Christians who had access to European schooling, travel, and commercial networks across the Mediterranean. Such was the story of Yosef Weissman of Tiberias. Born in Brody, Eastern Galicia, he studied medicine in Bucharest and then migrated to Tunisia to serve as a doctor in the royal court there. He married a local Tunisian Jewish woman. Following the migration routes of North African Jews to Palestine, they moved to Tiberias together in 1828. In the 1837 earthquake, Weissman's wife and

---

[24] Avraham Shmuel Hirschberg, *Be-Erets Ha-Mizraḥ* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 1977), 14.

[25] Hirschberg, *Be-Erets*, 14.

two children tragically died, and his properties were destroyed. He then opened a hotel in 1838. It was probably his language proficiency in German, French, and English that made his hotel successful. It was visited by famous European travelers who also took pleasure in berating the hotel in their travel accounts, describing it as hot and ridden with bedbugs. The wine was reportedly awful, and dinners were served late.[26] Nevertheless, visitors returned to the hotel, perhaps because of Weissman's language skills and the lack of alternatives. However, Weissman's proficiency in European languages was a product of his unique biography and travels. It was atypical for Ashkenazim in Palestine, most of whom did not have schooling in English, French, or other European languages.

Jaffa, Palestine's main port, was the point of arrival for most tourists and an early summer destination for Jews from other parts of Palestine. A recent study of hotels in modern Palestine lists almost thirty Ashkenazi operators of hotels and guest houses in Jaffa in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. These names include Blattner, Goldberg, Kaminitz, Resnik, Lieberman, Haikin, Aharonov, Peppel, Hacohen Hirsh, the widow Miriam Horowitz, Feingold, Amdorsky, Miretzky, Frank, Sarah Hoz, Komorov, Spector, Borouch, Salant, Mintzburg, Lavsky, Israel and Rivka Cohen, Liphshitz, Pollak, Katsurin, Diskin, and Dorowitz.[27] The study also lists seven Ashkenazi hotel owners in Jerusalem, six in Hebron, nine in Tiberias, and four in Safed. These institutions ranged from modest pensions to luxurious hotels. Some hotels operated for decades, others were short-lived enterprises that closed or changed ownership after a year or two. The numbers indicate the popularity of the hospitality sector among Ashkenazi Jews in Palestine.

BETWEEN WESTERN IMPERIALISM AND OTTOMAN INTEGRATION

The emergence of modern tourism in the Ottoman Empire is largely seen in the historiography as a European and North American phenomenon that was closely tied to the growing influence of

---

[26] Eliyahu Hacohen, "Malchut Ha-Par'oshim: 'Al Ha-Malon Ha-Yehudi Ha-Rishon Be-Ṭverya," Oneg Shabbat, 12 November 2021, https://onegshabbat.blogspot.com/2021/11/blog-post_12.html.

[27] Zuniga, *Mi Yitneni Ba-Midbar Melon Orḥim*.

European powers.[28] Tourism operators which catered to European tourists no doubt operated within the colonial discourse and imperial economies.

In Istanbul, as in Jerusalem, most large hotels were European-owned and catered to Germans, British, French, Italian, Austrian, and other Western tourists. Locals participated in this economy as dragomen, waiters, cooks, and in other services. One example of a dragoman who became an entrepreneur and hotel owner was Iskander Awad, a Lebanese Maronite who was born in Malta, worked for Thomas Cook, and then opened hotels in Jaffa and Jerusalem. Awad anglicized his name and was known as Alexander Howard. This indicates that success in the tourism sector demanded a form of deracination and cultural transformation from Oriental to European. Strikingly, the two men who ran Jerusalem's "first modern hotel," The Mediterranean, were Ashkenazim who converted to Protestantism, in what can be seen as a parallel route of transformation.[29]

But tourism cannot be reduced entirely to European colonial hegemony. The emergence of modern hospitality was tied to flows of travelers, traders, and pilgrims that consisted not only of West European tourists but also, as we have seen, of East European Jews, as well as Russian pilgrims, members of local middle class and elites, and even humble villagers. The Ashkenazi-owned guesthouse in Qalunya (Motza), operated by the Yellin family, regularly hosted Muslim villagers from the Gaza region who lodged there on the way to Jerusalem to sell eggs. They typically paid for their hospitality in eggs.[30] Furthermore, even though tourism was dominated by European presence, its development relied on Ottoman regulation and infrastructure. Tourism offered opportunities for local elites and middle classes, and the smooth running of the European-oriented hotels required liaison with local authorities, contractors, suppliers, and staff.

---

[28] Noha Nasser, "A Historiography of Tourism in Cairo: A Spatial Perspective," in *Tourism in the Middle East: Continuity, Change and Transformation*, ed. Rami Farouk Daher (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2007), 70–94.

[29] On Simeon Rosenthal and Moses Horenstein, see Rupert L. Chapman, Shimon Gibson, and Yoni Shapira, *Tourists, Travelers and Hotels in 19th-Century Jerusalem: On Mark Twain and Charles Warren at the Mediterranean Hotel* (Leeds: Maney, 2013), 41–45, 141–45.

[30] Ita Yellin, *Le-Tse'etsa'ay* (Jerusalem, 1941), 2:69.

Bab al-Wad Hotel, with which I opened this article, is a good example of the entanglement of Western tourism with local dynamics and networks. The hotel was constructed on the initiative of the Ottoman *mutasarrif* in 1874, who sought to create a place "for travelers who want to rest from the hardship of the road, and particularly for European tourists." The hotel consisted of a stone building, in which Europeans could dine and rest, and wooden shacks, where Bedouins and peasants could rest, "so that they do not mix with the Europeans."[31] The spatial segregation of the hotel extended and solidified European racial typologies, which were accommodated by Ottoman officials. At the same time, this was also a site of Ottoman governance, which served for road tax collection and, when necessary, as an official quarantine station.[32] One form of tax collection practiced by the operators of Bab al-Wad was charging all passengers for a compulsory cup of insipid black coffee ("black water," in one description), ignoring the protests of those who had no wish to drink it.[33]

The Ashkenazi families who operated the site between 1872 and 1921 were all closely connected to the Ottoman authorities and the Arab elite. Yitzhak Rokach was a business partner of Salim al-Husayni, who later became the mayor of Jerusalem.[34] Binyamin (Beynish) Salant, the son of the leading Ashkenazi rabbi, served as his father's Arabic translator in dealings with the Ottoman *mutasarrif*.[35] The Rosenthal family were famous for their Arabic proficiency and ties with Arab and

---

[31] Binyamin Zeev Ha-Levi Sapir, "Asie," *Halevanon*, 5 February 1873, 4. In David Yellin's description of the hotel from around 1900, poor travelers (Arabs and some local Jews) sat in a café that was added near the stables on the ground level, while the restaurant on the upper story served the "selected few." David Yellin, "Mi-Dan ve-'Ad Be'er Sheva'," in *Ktavim Nivḥarim* (Rubin Mass, 1936), in https://benyehuda.org/read/21469.

[32] See, for example, "Nomination of officers in charge of taxes and fees," 10 March 1896, Ottoman Registers, l4:35b, item242, JMA , http://www.openjerusalem.org/ark:/58142/2JJhv. On Bab al-Wad as quarantine during a cholera outbreak, see "Yerushalayim be-Matsor," *Havatselet*, 31 October 1902, 1.

[33] Yitshak Shiryon, *Zikhronot* (Jerusalem, 1943) https://benyehuda.org/read/7338.

[34] Ilan Pappe, *The Rise and Fall of a Palestinian Dynasty: The Husaynis, 1700–1948* (Saqi Books, 2010), 155–56.

[35] Ya'acov Yehoshua, *Ha-Bayit ve-Ha-Reḥov Bi-Yerushalayim Ha-Yeshanah Pirḳey Havay Mi-Yamim 'Avaru* (Yerushalayim: R. Mas, 1966), 239–40.

Ottoman officials, and traveled regularly to Egypt, Beirut, and Istanbul.[36] Shlomo Rosenthal, who operated the hotel in the 1890s, was known by the Arabic version of his name, Sulayman.[37] The last Ashkenazi to operate the site—Todros Wershevsky—was the mukhtar (appointed head) of the Hassidic Ashkenazi congregations and represented the community in dealings with the government.[38] These tight-knit connections explain why the Ottoman authorities were willing to place them in such a strategic location, where they had to deal with local traffic and foreign visitors.

A sense of the diversity of the clientele in Ashkenazi hotels can be assessed in the visitors' books of two hotels in late nineteenth-century Palestine. The prestigious Hotel Jerusalem was run by Eliezer Lipman Kaminitz, the son of the aforementioned Menachem Mendel. Located in a generous and impressive building overlooking the Jaffa Road, outside the city walls, the hotel catered to an upmarket clientele, focusing on English-speaking tourists from Britain, the United States, and South Africa, as well as Jewish visitors from other locations. While mentions of the hotel often emphasize the famous Jewish personalities who stayed there (such as Ahad ha-Am and Edmond de Rothschild), the hotel's visiting book reveals the diversity of the clientele. Between 1883 and 1892, 564 guests signed their names and left comments in various languages and alphabets. Nearly 80 percent (447) of the guests signed in European languages (primarily English, but also French, German, Russian, and other languages). A further 89 names and messages were recorded in Hebrew, almost all in Ashkenazi cursive writing, and almost none in Sephardic cursive font. A further 15 visitors left comments in Arabic, 9 in Yiddish, and 4 in Ottoman Turkish.[39] These figures show that the hotel catered primarily to Western European tourists (Jewish and non-Jewish alike) and much

---

[36] Aryeh Morgenstern, *Beshliḥut Yerushalayim: toledot mishpaḥat P"ḥ Rozental, 1816–1839* (Jerusalem, Israel: Rivka Weingarten, 1987).

[37] "Hotel Bab Al Wad," 29 June 1897, Ottoman Registers, l6:62a, item426, JMA , http://www.openjerusalem.org/ark:/58142/1tdPt.

[38] David Tidhar, "Todros Wershevsky" in *Encyclopaedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat rishonim, 1949), http://www.tidhar.tourolib.org/tidhar/view/3/1525.

[39] The guest book was scanned and is available online. "Hotel Kaminitz Guest Book 1883–1920" (Jerusalem, 1920), The National Library of Israel, accessed 4 September 2023, https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH000044516/NLI#$FL78636025.

less so to Eastern European Jews. Given that the historiography portrays modern tourism as a European development, it is particularly intriguing to find Arab signatures in the book. Issa Antoun, for example, recommended the hotel warmly in 1884 and mentioned that this was his third stay. In 1891, Suleiman Abaza Pasha, formerly the Egyptian education secretary, stayed in the hotel and left an appreciative note. "In here both Europeans and Asians stay together in one hotel," wrote Hirschberg, who visited the hotel in 1899–1900.[40] The upmarket status of this hotel was evident also in its advertising:

> Luxurious and spacious rooms, good and tasty food, a bath and a garden for walks, and carriages to take the guests to wherever they wish. Translators and servants stand ready to please the guests at any time. Everything is done according to the manners of the big hotels in Europe, nothing is absent.[41]

This claim for the hotel's "European" quality repeats in many advertisements for Middle Eastern hotels in the early twentieth century. This was a promise for certain comforts and standards, delivered in a racialized language that conformed to a colonial imaginary. Hotels promised to be small enclaves of Western enlightenment, order, and hygiene. By extension, they constructed their surroundings as irredeemably dirty and chaotic, as the Orient was often described by European visitors. The Kaminitzs' advertisements aligned with this language.

And yet at the same time, the Kaminitzs also presented a model for regional integration. Menachem Mendel Kaminitz, the founder of the family's hotels chain in Palestine, wrote the first Hebrew-Arabic and Yiddish-Arabic phrasebook, which appeared in 1839 as part of his travelogue-guide book.[42] He clearly understood the importance of communication and connection to the local population. His son, Eliezer Lipman Kaminitz, proudly wore the Ottoman fez on his head; in Jerusalem, among Ashkenazi Jews, this was a clear statement of Ottoman patriotism and commitment to integration (a gesture that was

---

[40] Hirschberg, *Be-Erets Ha-Mizraḥ*, 309.

[41] Advertisement for the Kaminitz hotel [1893–1906], https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%91%D7%A5:Kamenitz44.jpg, accessed 3 September 2023.

[42] Kaminitz, *Ḳorot Ha-'Itim Le-Yeshurun Be-Erets Yisra'el*.

avoided by other Orthodox Jews).[43] One of Eliezer's brothers, Joseph Kaminitz, took assimilation further as he moved to Egypt, converted to Islam, and changed his name to Yusuf al-Qudsi. He ended up as a dragoman of the British consulate in Jeddah.[44]

Hirschberg, who stayed in the hotel in 1899 and 1900, was not impressed with the hotel owner, who he thought took Jewish guests for granted and disrespected them. But Hirschberg remembered most fondly the hotel worker named Qasim, "a rich villager from Lifta" (a Muslim village outside Jerusalem). Qasim's quick and attentive service surpassed European standards, and he could chat in all the guests' languages.[45] Some Arab Muslim carriage drivers could master small talk in Yiddish, which won them generous tips from Jewish tourists.[46] An example of joint business ventures can be found in the tours and ferry business of Mrs. Kenig (a widow from the Orthodox neighborhood of Meah She'arim) and the Muslim al-Alami family. Together, Kenig and al-Alami provided short tours to the Dead Sea and to Transjordan.[47] Kenig's son lived on the Dead Sea shore during the tourism season to manage the trips.

---

[43] Hirschberg, *Be-Erets Ha-Mizraḥ*, 309. On the symbolism of the fez, see Caroline R. Kahlenberg, "The Tarbush Transformation: Oriental Jewish Men and the Significance of Headgear in Ottoman and British Mandate Palestine," *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 4 (2019): 1212–49.

[44] Amir Freundlich, "Apendix: Kaminitz Hotel Conservation File" [in Hebrew], April 2014, for Plan 101-0135004, https://mavat.iplan.gov.il/rest/api/Attacments/?eid=1000286938661&fn=e68614f4-a734-4cda-9df3-94190b498011.pdf&edn=3D5E45CE362BE20D6F8AACBE58126D3AF46B3BC9A52BAA075DC331C0A04108FD, accessed 3 September 2023. Michael Christopher Low, "The Mechanics of Mecca: The Technopolitics of the Late Ottoman Hijaz and the Colonial Hajj" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015.

[45] Hirschberg, *Be-Erets Ha-Mizraḥ*, 310. By "rich," Hirschberg perhaps meant that he dressed as an urban rather than a peasant.

[46] Shlomo Eliyahu Freiman, *Poteaḥ She'arim: Zikhronot ṿe-Pirḳey Ḥayim. Mi-Pinḳasaṿ shel R Shlomo Eliyahu Freyman, Shomer Ḳever Raḥel ṿe-Shamash Beyt-Ha-Kneset Ha-Ḥurva*, ed. Yosef ben Efraim Ben Shachar (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2009), 26-27.

[47] *Havatselet*, 5 April 1909.

An even more mixed clientele can be found in the visitors' book of the Salant Hotel in Jaffa.[48] The Salant is remembered as the hotel in which many Ashkenazi immigrants first landed, and most signatures are indeed in Hebrew Ashkenazi script. But the visitors' book includes a huge diversity of languages, including quite a few Sephardic names and Arabic and Turkish signatures.[49] A 1920 list of guests and their professions includes Muslim merchants from Tripoli (Lebanon) and Jerusalem; a Christian merchant from Tanta, Egypt; a Jewish merchant from Aleppo; and three Indian Muslim visitors (a policeman and two tailors). This diversity reflected Jaffa's cosmopolitan nature as a port city.

BEYOND PALESTINE: ASHKENAZI HOTELS AND TOURISTS IN EGYPT AND LEBANON

The historiographic focus on Zionism has obscured the fact that Ashkenazim migrated and traveled not only to Palestine but also to other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean. Ashkenazi communities and synagogues could be found in Istanbul, Cairo, and Beirut. It is clear that by the early twentieth century, Palestine had the largest population of Ashkenazim in the region, but there were also thousands of Ashkenazim in Egypt—in Alexandria, Cairo, Port Said, and Ismailiyah. Some Ashkenazim settled directly in Egypt, as they were attracted by the country's booming economy, while others arrived from Palestine.[50] There was a significant flow of people between Palestine, Beirut, and Egypt. This mobility created opportunities for hotel operators.

One example is the Ashkenazi hotel in Beirut—Hotel Rabinowitch. Its owner, Shalom Rabinowitch, had migrated from Ukraine to Palestine to become a settler in one of the early colonies. He first worked as a laborer in Rishon Lezion and Rehovot, before joining the first group to settle in Hadera. After contracting yellow fever and losing his three-year-old son, Rabinowitch finally gave up and in 1896

---

[48] The Salant Hotel was owned by Moshe Salant, a grandson of Menachem-Mendel Kaminitz. It was a separate (and cheaper) hotel from main Kaminitz hotel in Jaffa, the prestigious "Hotel Palestina." Zuniga, *Mi Yitneni Ba-Midbar Melon Orḥim*.

[49] "Guest book of Hotel Salant, Jaffa: 1893–1920," accessed 24 August 2022, https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH002722444/NLI.

[50] Gudrun Krämer, *The Jews in Modern Egypt, 1914–1952* (London: I. B.Tauris, 1989).

moved to Beirut, where he opened a hotel with a splendid view overlooking the sea.[51] In this case, Rabinowitch came as a colonial settler to work and redeem the land, but was forced to become an urban migrant. He was deeply resentful of having to abandon his colonizing dreams and complained to guests about his fate: "He came to Syria to settle Eretz Israel," and instead he had to live in a "defiled" city like Beirut.[52] He stayed in the city until his wife died in 1929, and he then returned to Palestine to spend his final years in Hadera.

In addition to Hotel Rabinowtich, Beirut also had a Rosenfeld Hotel.[53] In Damascus, Eliyahu Levin opened the Jerusalem Hotel in the early 1920s opposite his pharmacy.[54] Other examples include the Central Hotel in Cairo, operated by Shmuel Bloom from the 1910s to the 1940s, which also had a branch in Hilwan.[55] In the Egyptian business directory of 1949, we find at least eleven Ashkenazi-owned hotels and pensions in Cairo, and eight in Alexandria.[56]

The operation of Ashkenazi hotels in Beirut, Alexandria, and Cairo is evidence not only of Jews visiting the region from Eastern Europe but also of growing travel by Ashkenazi Jews within the region itself. This was already evident in 1899, when Hirschberg visited Hotel Rabinowitch in Beirut and found several colonists from Rosh Pina,

---

[51] Ya'acov Ya'ari-Polskin, "Derekh Ha-Ḥathatim Shel Ḥaluts: Shalom Rabinovich" in *Ḥolmim u-Magshimim* (Tel Aviv: Mizraḥi, 1967), https://benyehuda.org/read/26220.

[52] Hirschberg, *Be-Erets Ha-Mizraḥ*, 28.

[53] Yosef Lang and Reut Green, "Me'ir Hamburger, Ha-Mohel ve-Tsfunot Pinḳaso," *Cathedra* 156 (July 2015): 71–100.

[54] David Tidhar, "Eliyahu Michal Ben-Tsion Levin," in *Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat rishonim, 1947), http://www.tidhar.tourolib.org/tidhar/view/3/1472. Gilad Karmeli, "Kshnasanu le-Ṭayel be-Surya u-vi-Levanon," *Ynet*, 25 December 2020, https://www.ynet.co.il/vacation/worldtrips/article/HJRudn7pP.

[55] See advertisements in *Ha'aretz*, 7 August 1922, 1; *Ha'aretz*, 22 February 1935, 12.

[56] These names include: Barzilai, Goldman, Metzger, Goldman, Westner, Lucovitch, Catz, Neuman, Salmon, Berger, Hochstein, Bauer, Marcovitch, Leibovitch, Cohen, and Singer. Most pensions were operated by women. Max Fischer, ed., *The Egyptian Directory: L'Annuaire égyptien du Commerce et de l'Industrie* (Cairo: Impr. de la Soceété orientale de publicité, 1949), 63: 472–74, 647–48.

Rishon Lezion, and other colonies in Palestine who came to rest after the harvest.[57]

This regional tourism intensified in the first half of the twentieth century, after hundreds of thousands of East European Jews settled in Palestine. Many of them traveled regularly to Europe for family visits, trade, university studies, and other reasons. But many others traveled within the region, as recently shown by Shahar Penn.[58] Neighboring countries, namely Lebanon and Egypt, offered much closer destinations. During the Second World War, travel to Europe was impossible. Local destinations were the only options for those seeking a holiday abroad.

For such travelers, Cairo, Alexandria, and Beirut offered exciting sights and experiences. These were huge cities, far exceeding in size of any city in Palestine. Cairo in particular was the Middle East's metropolis, where visitors could walk by the Nile, visit markets and interesting architecture, or go to the Cairo Zoo—the largest in the world at that point. A resident of Tel Aviv of Ashkenazi descent, who visited Cairo frequently, commented: "It was a beautiful zoo, really extraordinary. People walked around, sat in a café, watched the swans in the lake. For us, the Eretz-Israelis [Jews of Palestine] - where did we have a chance to see something like this?"[59] From these accounts it is clear that these visitors did not think of Cairo and Beirut as exotic Oriental destinations but rather as sites of dazzling urban modernity.

Honeymoon in Baalbek, summer in the mountains of Lebanon, or a short trip to visit the Pyramids—all this was part of the world of Palestinian Jews, including Ashkenazim. In the first nine months of 1936, 5,178 Palestinian Jews visited Lebanon. This number rose two years later when, in 1938, 7,890 Jews from Palestine visited Lebanon and 2,811 Egypt; that was about 40 percent of travelers, with about 50 percent traveling to Europe. Shahar Pen, who studied family photo albums, concluded that most Jewish holidaymakers from Palestine in Lebanon and Egypt were Ashkenazi rather than Sephardic.[60]

---

[57] Hirschberg, *Be-Erets Ha-Mizraḥ*, 28.

[58] Shahar Pen, "Beyn Palestina, Levanon ṿe-Eropa: Nesiʿot ṿe-Ṭiyulim Bi-Tnaʾim Shel Mizraḥ Tikhon Ḳoloniali Ḥasar Gvulot," *Sotsyologya Yisraʾelit* 19, no. 1 (2017): 12–41.

[59] Pen, "Beyn Palestina."

[60] Pen, 32.

For the tourism industry, the free flow of people across the region was a vital ingredient. This ran against the increasingly dominant Labor Zionist ethos of economic, cultural, and political separatism.

AGAINST THE SEPARATIST TREND

The study of Jewish involvement in tourism in Palestine during the British Mandate has focused on Zionist efforts to take over and shape the tourism industry.[61] Kobi Cohen-Hattab has discussed how Zionist institutions viewed tourism as a political and ideological tool, to educate tourists and visitors.[62] Jasmin Daam has perceptively argued that Zionist and Arab actors in the tourism sector used a radically different vocabulary. While Arab Palestinians emphasized historical continuity and multireligious heritage, the Zionist narrative, as communicated by tour guides, guidebooks, and posters, emphasized the modernity of the Jewish "New Palestine" in contrast with the backward Arab landscape.[63]

Daam demonstrated that Zionist institutions consciously used tourism as a tool of colonization and nation-building. The Zionist Information Bureau for Tourists adopted a systemic approach, seeing tourism as a state-building resource through the development of an economy of Jewish tourist guides, hotels, and other services: "Zionist advocates of tourism development intended to establish a separate, exclusively Jewish, tourism sector that would allow them to accompany tourists from their arrival in Palestine until their

---

[61] Pedro Zuniga's rich album stands out in this regard. It is a 950-page, illustration-rich, two-volume survey of hotels in Palestine, from the Ottoman period to the early decades of Israel. It surveys Jewish as well as Muslim- and Christian-owned hotels, relying primarily on Hebrew sources. It quotes numerous sources but unfortunately does not use standard footnotes. Zuniga, *Mi Yitneni Ba-Midbar Melon Orḥim*.

[62] Kobi Cohen-Hattab and Yossi Katz, "The Attraction of Palestine: Tourism in the Years 1850–1948," *Journal of Historical Geography* 27, no. 2 (2001): 166–77; Kobi Cohen-Hattab, "Zionism, Tourism, and the Battle for Palestine: Tourism as a Political-Propaganda Tool," *Israel Studies* 9, no. 1 (2004): 61–85. On the architectural design of Jewish hotels to convey the modern nature of Zionism, see Daniella Ohad Smith, "Hotel Design in British Mandate Palestine: Modernism and the Zionist Vision," *Journal of Israeli History* 29, no. 1 (2010): 99–123.

[63] Jasmin Daam, "Palestinian Past, Zionist Future: Vocabularies of Tourism in Mandate Palestine," *Contemporary Levant* (8 June 2023): 1–15.

departure."[64] The itineraries and travel literature aimed to encourage Jewish tourists to migrate to Palestine. When the flow of international tourists slowed down and eventually stopped, after the late 1930s, attention turned to the domestic Jewish market. As Daam shows through the example of a Dead Sea hotel, this was accompanied by increasing segregation.

While Daam's analysis of the separatist agenda of Zionist institutions is compelling, there were many in the Yishuv who did not align with that agenda, and the trend was not unidirectional. For many "local Ashkenazim" whose families arrived in Palestine before the Mandate, some Ottoman modes of cohabitation and integration persisted into the 1930s and 1940, even as they came under new and increasing pressures. Just as Ashkenazi Jews in Palestine traveled to Egypt and Lebanon for holidays, they continued to frequent and work in Arab cafes and restaurants.[65] Ashkenazi businessmen approached Arab clientele as potential audiences and worked with and for Arab Palestinians. The story of two hot springs sites near the Sea of Galilee, Tiberias and al-Hamma, exemplify this.

The concession over the development of the hot springs of Tiberias was granted by the Ottomans to Arab businessmen. The British renewed it and involved Suleiman Nassif, a Protestant Lebanese, who had made his fortune in Egypt and who had strong ties with British intelligence.[66] Before World War I, he was involved with oil prospecting in Palestine. After the war, he moved to Palestine where he established himself as a pro-British voice on the short-lived Advisory Council of the early 1920s. Politically savvy, Nassif was able to maintain good ties with Arab Palestinian nationalists as well as with key Zionists.

In 1928, after the Arab concession holders failed to invest adequate sums into the site, they sold the concession to a Zionist

---

[64] Jasmin Daam, *Tourism and the Emergence of Nation-States in the Arab Eastern Mediterranean, 1920s–1930s* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2023), 125, https://directory.doabooks.org/handle/20.500.12854/97775.

[65] One famous example was "Hawaii Garden," a club in the village of Shaykh Muwannis north of Tel Aviv. An armed (criminal) attack on the cafe on 10 August 1947 and killed several (European) Jews. "4 Yehudim Nehergu ṿe-10 Niftseʻu", *Haboḳer*, 11 August 1947, 1.

[66] Rosemary Sayigh, *Yusif Sayigh: Arab Economist, Palestinian Patriot: A Fractured Life Story.* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2015), 164–65.

company, most likely under British pressure. The Zionist plan, which won them the concession and its subsequent renewal, was to put Tiberias on the global health tourism map and make it into an international destination.[67] As Jacob Norris has shown, the British approach to the colonial development of Palestine relied on private capital and investments, with British supervision and encouragement.[68] In effect, this meant prioritizing Zionist capital and companies: despite fierce opposition from Palestinian businessmen and the press, Jewish-led groups won the large concessions for electricity generation and distribution (the Rothenberg concession), the Novomeysky Dead Sea Works, and salt production in Atlit.

However, the failure to attract international visitors led the concessionaries to turn to the Palestinian market. In March 1941, journalists from Arab newspapers were invited to visit the hot baths, where they met with several Arab and Jewish officials. Among them was the director of the company, Yitzhak Rokach, who spoke in Arabic. Rokah's father, Shimon, had leased the Bab al-Wad hotel in the nineteenth century, and he himself was closely involved in dealings with Arab businessmen in the citrus sector. The Arab newspapers reported positively on the site.[69] In the summer of 1942, Arab visitors (primarily from Tiberias's hinterland) made up most of bathers, numbering hundreds per day.[70]

The other example was the al-Hamma Hotel. Located in a narrow enclave in the Yarmouk valley, al-Hamma had been known for its hot springs and their medicinal qualities since antiquity. In 1930, after the borders between Palestine and Transjordan in this area were finalized, the Palestine government marked al-Hamma as a site for tourism development.[71] The forty-five-year concession was given to the same Suleiman al-Nassif, and was probably the only concession

---

[67] Daam, *Tourism and the Emergence of Nation-States*, 158–62.

[68] Jacob Norris, *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905–1948* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[69] Eli Osheroff, "The Jewish Question, the Palestine Problem and Forgotten Political Solutions: The Arab Perspective, 1908–1948" [in Hebrew] (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 2021), 67–68.

[70] Kobi Cohen-Hattab, *La-Tur et ha-Arets: ha-Tayarut be-Erets Yisra'el bi-teḳufat ha-Mandaṭ* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2006), 82.

[71] The most comprehensive overview of al-Hamma in the twentieth century is found in Bezalel Lavi, "Al-Ḥama, Historya she-Nishtakḥa," *Ariel* 147–148 (June 2001): 53–65. However, Lavi makes no use of Arab sources.

awarded by the British to an Arab (although not Palestinian) businessman.[72] Al-Hamma's advantage as a tourist attraction lay in its location on the border triangle between Syria, Transjordan, and Palestine, and its proximity to the (Ottoman) Syria–Palestine railway. Muslims, Christian, Druze, and Jewish visitors camped and picnicked on the site during the tourist season of the winter months.

Nassif was happy to have Jewish visitors in al-Hamma. In 1932, Hebrew University archaeologists, led by Professor Elazar Sukenik, excavated the Roman baths site in al-Hamma, where they discovered an ancient synagogue. Nassif provided the team with considerable assistance, including free lodging in his guesthouse. Nassif even donated money towards the publication of their report on the ancient synagogue and received a warm acknowledgment from Sukenik.[73] He was also keen to attract Jewish staff and investors. In 1944, Nassif contracted an Ashkenazi family from Safed to operate the site for one year. The Meibergs operated several hotels in Safed and Tiberias and saw the potential in the site. The al-Hamma job was entrusted to the twenty-six-year-old Meir Meiberg, who stayed in al-Hamma throughout the season. Meiberg was also a secret member in the Haganah—the main Jewish militia—and he used his stay in al-Hamma to collect intelligence and take photographs of the railway bridge, which connected Palestine and Syria. In June 1946, the bridge was bombed as part of the "Night of the Bridges," in which the Palmach destroyed ten bridges connecting Palestine to neighboring countries, in response to a near-total British ban on Jewish immigration to Palestine.[74] The attack illustrated the Haganah's resolve to separate Palestine from its neighboring Arab countries. This also meant cutting the easy flow of people across borders that was key to al-Hamah's success.

After the Meibergs left, Nassif struck a new agreement with two Ashkenazi businessmen from Haifa, Ze'ev Sapir and Abraham Goldfein. The two invested 14,750 Palestine pounds in equipment and

---

[72] Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Jewish Problems in Palestine and Europe, "A Survey of Palestine" (Palestine: Government Printer, 1946), 2:976.

[73] Eleazar Lipa Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue of El-Ḥammeh (Ḥammath-by-Gadara): An Account of the Excavations Conducted on Behalf of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem,* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1935), 1.

[74] Lavi, "Al-Ḥama," 62. Meiberg was later the Haganah commander of Safed in the 1948 war.

in the construction of a second floor, and then leased the hotel for three years beginning in January 1947. The hotel was run by Zvi Rondel, who recruited twenty Jewish workers from Tiberias to work in al-Hamma.[75]

The early 1940s, following the Arab Revolt and during the war, were years of relative calm and rapprochement in which some members of the Jewish and Arab bourgeoisie worked together. At that point, the official political vision was that of a single binational state as was charted in the 1939 white paper.[76] The Nassif-Sapir agreement was a continuation of decades of joint business ventures between Palestinian Arabs and Ashkenazi Jews. But unlike in the examples from the late nineteenth century, this inter-religious cooperation was now concealed. Yusuf Sayigh, later a leading Palestinian intellectual, managed al-Hamma for Nasif in the 1940s, which he wrote about in his memoirs but with no mention of any Jewish involvement in the site.[77]

In 1944, a new forty-five-room hotel was inaugurated on the site, named in Hebrew Marpe (cure), or Hotel al-Hamma in Arabic. The Arab press celebrated the opening of a new symbol of a "successful Arab project," while advertisements in the Hebrew press invited visitors to the "new Jewish hotel," offering Kosher food.[78] It appears that one floor in the hotel was kept for Jewish customers. Tourists arrived to Samakh by train and by bus from Tiberias (three to four trips a day), Nazareth, and Dar'aa in Syria. The hotel was visited by Jews from Tiberias as well as Arabs from Palestine and Syria.

In 1947, as tensions grew and the Jewish guests stopped coming, the Jewish staff decided to vacate al-Hamma. The Nassifs escorted them to safety in Tiberias and expressed hope they would soon return to al-Hamma. Sapir told different versions of this story: in one he was driven to Tiberias wearing "the Bey's fez";[79] in another he

---

[75] Lavi, "Al-Ḥama."

[76] On binationalism in the citrus sector in the 1940s, see Mustafa Kabaha and Nahum Karlinsky, *The Lost Orchard: The Palestinian-Arab Citrus Industry, 1850–1950* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2021).

[77] Sayigh, *Yusif Sayigh*, 163–71.

[78] Nasri Sliman Jasir, "Yanābīʿ al-Hamma al-Miʿdaniyya," *Filastin*, 5 September 1946, 3; "Sguloteyha ha-Refuʾiyot shel al-Ḥama," *Hamashḳif*, 6 December, 4.

[79] Eli Landau, "Sapir Toveʿa Zchuto be-el-Ḥama," *Maʿariv*, 3 February 1967, 11.

was wearing a *kufiyya*.[80] In the 1948 war, al-Hamma was occupied by Syria, and the site became inaccessible to Israelis until the 1967 war when it was occupied by Israel.

As the examples of the hot springs in Tiberias and al-Hamma illustrate, Ashkenazi Jews continued to be involved in enterprises that pushed against the hegemonic ethos of economic separatism. While Labor Zionism dominated Yishuv institutions from the early 1930s, there were sections of the Yishuv that did not adhere to the ideology and practice of "Hebrew Labor." Urban capitalists and colonists in the privately-owned colonies formed a loose alliance known as "the civilian circles" against the Labor Settlement movement. This was the social base for what Gershon Shafir termed "capitalist binationalism."[81] However, these circles could not stand against the rising tide of separatism.

CONCLUSION

Through the story of Ashkenazi hotel operators in Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon, we can read an alternative narrative to the dominant one that identifies Ashkenazi migration to the region entirely with the project of Jewish exclusivist nationalism and settler colonialism. Whether they arrived in Palestine before Zionism or with the aim of becoming settlers, Ashkenazim found themselves in an Arab-dominated environment, and in a region where movement was not only free but also necessary for trade and many other reasons. In that environment, the hospitality sector allowed migrants to build on their advantages: common language and cultural proficiency with Jewish Ashkenazi visitors, and a network of connections to Eastern Europe and elsewhere, which helped them spread the word and find customers. Locally, their Arabic proficiency and regional ties allowed them to act as middlepersons for visitors who wanted to navigate local bureaucracy, buy souvenirs, or arrange day trips and onward travel.

Shalom Rabinowitch of Hadera, who became a reluctant hotelier in Beirut, provides an example of a settler in Palestine who became a migrant in Beirut. In other cases, hotel owners consciously sought to integrate and work within local power structures. The Bab al-Wad hotel, operated by a series of Ashkenazi families, provides one such remarkable example.

---

[80] Avraham Tal, "Pirḳey al-Ḥama" *Ha'aretz*, 26 May 1978, 43.

[81] Gershon Shafir, "Capitalist Bi-Nationalism in Mandatory Palestine," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 4 (2011): 611–33.

The growing separatism during the Mandatory period, which encompassed the Zionist tourism sector, was by no means universal. In al-Hamma, an Arab capitalist hired Jewish Ashkenazi hotel operators and teamed with Ashkenazi businessmen to increase investment. While the hotel was marketed separately in Hebrew and Arabic, in practice it crucially depended on a mixed milieu of clientele and a welcoming environment. It also required open borders that made visiting the site easy for Muslim visitors from Damascus and Jews from Tiberias.

Israeli historiography has, by and large, attempted to force these stories into a Zionist narrative: highlighting the visits of key Zionist thinkers and activists. In such accounts, the Jewish hotel operators, while not quite the ideal Zionist type of enterprising agricultural settlers, become supporting actors in the drama of Jewish nation-building in a hostile Middle East. Yet such narratives erase the remarkable success of entrepreneurs like the Kaminitz, Rokach, Rosenthal, and others: Yiddish-speaking Jews who within decades built strong ties with the Arab Muslim nobility and won the confidence of Ottoman officials.

Eventually, however, separatism prevailed. The hegemonic Zionist attitude steered, at least from the late 1930s, towards the establishment of an exclusive Jewish statehood, even at the price of war, mass expulsion, and cutting Palestine off from the rest of the region. We see this transformation in al-Hamma, where the Ashkenazi contractor who managed the site also collected information that led to the bombing of the railway bridge, disconnecting Palestine from Syria; or in Bab al-Wad, where the memory of half a century of Ashkenazi presence was erased and overshadowed by the 1948 war, and a vision of Israel as a fortified enclave in a hostile region.

NOTES