The Transformation of the Popular Israeli: The Increasing Dominance of Israelis Originally from North Africa and the Middle East

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Abstract

In this paper, we offer an important preliminary discussion of the recent changes in the Israeli popular culture. We analyze the transformation in representations of the typical and desirable Israeli in Israeli television over time. Focusing on reality and drama shows, our findings demonstrate how the positive presence of Mizrahi characteristics (Israelis who originated from Arab countries in Northern Africa and the Mediterranean) in Israeli television have shown a significant increase, and dominate the various reality shows broadcasts. Based on our analysis, we argue how the image of the Mizrahi Israelis, previously depicted in popular culture as weak, unsavory, and an object of ridicule, has morphed over time into a popular, appealing character that evokes audience identification. The cultural traits of the popular Israeli character have become increasingly aligned with what is identified as Mizrahi Israeliness.

After years of marginal and stereotypical representation, a new perspective on the culture of thousands of Israelis who originated from Arab countries in Northern Africa and the Mediterranean (also known as Sephardi or Mizrahi Jews) has gained prominent expression in popular Israeli culture, specifically in music, in the local celebrity culture, and in the country's most popular television programs. In the past decade, Mizrahi Mediterranean music, which was previously the target of exclusion and was consequently absent from leading media organizations' playlists, has become the quintessential mainstream of Israeli pop music. Gradually, Mizrahi stars such as Eyal Golan, Peer Tassi and Dudu Aharon, have increasingly broken through broadcasting barriers and conquered radio station playlists. Data from websites such as YouTube, suggest that Mediterranean music stars easily attract millions of views and repeatedly break records (for example, hits such as Peer Tassi's 'Derech Hashalom' attracted a record of 27 million views on YouTube in 2015, while Dudu Aharon's hit 'Terminal 3' attracted 13 million views), while other Israeli performers trail behind them by millions of views. Moreover, Channel 24, which was established as an all-Israeli music television channel, now broadcasts Mediterranean and Mizrahi music exclusively.

In this paper, we analyze the transformation in representations of the typical, desirable Israeli in Israeli television shows over time. In reality and drama shows, the cultural traits of the popular Israeli character, which evokes widespread audience identification, have become increasingly aligned with traits identified as Mizrahi Israeliness. We emphasize that the term Mizrahi Israeli implies a collection of traits and features that have become assimilated in Israeli public consciousness as culturally identifiable with Jews from Arab countries. In this paper it is not our intention to obliterate the history of this group's discrimination or to obscure the areas in which prejudices persist. Multiple indicators show that inequality between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel still exists in various areas (e.g. significant salary differentials [1]). We do, however, argue that the positive presence of Mizrahi characteristics in popular Israeli television shows a significant increase. Our study focuses on the representations of Mizrahi-ness in popular media, the contexts in which it appears and operates, and social attitudes toward it. Specifically, we examine in what ways the image of the Mizrahi Israeli, previously depicted in popular culture as weak, unsavory, and an object of ridicule, has, over time, morphed into a popular, appealing character that evokes audience identification.

The Mizrahi Israeli

Traditionally, the Jewish Israeli public has been divided into two main ethnic identities or sub-cultures: Mizrahi and Ashkenazi. This division is based on the country of origin of the immigrants who came to pre-state Israel around independence, and on political predilections [2]. The definitions themselves are controversial and frequently contested for their inaccuracy, and the negative or hegemonic connotations they carry. The term Ashkenazi generally refers to Jews who emigrated from western countries, including North America, Europe and Russia, which symbolized, and in some sense continues to symbolize, Israel's social, cultural, political, and financial elites. Mizrahi Jews emigrated from Arab countries in Africa and the Middle East, largely after Israel's independence. As a group they were also known by other names such as Sephardi Jews and Arab Jews [3,4]. The Ashkenazi establishment considered Mizrahi culture to be inferior and primitive, and Mizrahi Jews were marginalized to the social and economic fringes of Israeli society. Many were forced to conceal or shed various features of their identity in order to assimilate into the emerging Israeli collective [3,5,6].

At the time of Israel's independence in 1948, Ashkenazi Jews constituted a majority of the population: Some were Holocaust survivors from Europe, and others were part of the earlier Jewish settlement. Ashkenazi Jews established their dominance in all walks of society, from manual laborers to the elite, and specifically set up and manned the state's new social and political institutions, and became pillars of Israeli society [7]. They acquired much of the properties and land, and filled most of the key positions in the Zionist Movement, the Histadrut (Workers' Union), and the nascent political and military organizations [7].

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The relations between the two sub-cultures, and the dichotomous social categories of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi solidified in the early 1950s, following a mass wave of 700,000 immigrants between 1948 and 1954, one half of whom came from Arab countries in Asia or Africa [5]. Early discontent over the 'quality' of the Mizrahi immigrants reached considerable proportions in the 1950s, and was voiced by the local veteran population as well as by the organizations set up to absorb the immigrants [5]. The Ashkenazi establishment, led by the Labor Movement and David Ben Gurion, instituted a 'melting pot' policy that forced Mizrahi immigrants to shed their original ethnic identity, adopt the values and customs of their new 'civilized western' society, and effectively become similar to Ashkenazi Jews, which allow Mizrahi immigrants to integrate into the emerging homogeneous, supposedly neutral, Zionist collective [8,4,6]. This policy was rooted in a Europo-centric view of modernization, in which the Mizrahi population represented the binary opposite of western civilization. On this view, they would be unable to participate in the construction of a modern nation without a radical transformation, due to their primitive and backward culture [9].

As a result of the melting pot policy, Mizrahi immigrants were subject to a process of proletarization and social and cultural marginalization [6]. The Labor Movement advanced the view that Mizrahi immigrants were 'the lost generation of the desert' that threatened Israeli democracy and culture, and used humiliating stereotypes to bolster its patronizing ideology. Represented as having few needs, Mizrahi immigrants were expected to be grateful for anything they received from the state. Mizrahi immigrants became a major source of cheap labor and were settled in development towns. The nascent state system created a social mechanism designed to inject the new immigrants into the labor market, with a host of mainly Ashkenazi clerks, teachers, counselors, and probation officers to ease their adjustment [5,9]. These conditions, combined with an ideological belief in the cultural inferiority of Mizrahi Jews, had a significant impact on creating hierarchies based on the distinctions between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi sub-cultures.

As cheap labor, Mizrahi Jews participated in all areas of economic development after independence, from agricultural expansion to industrial development — but factory owners and skilled workers were consistently Ashkenazi, while Mizrahi Jews accounted for the majority of the unskilled workers. According to Svirsky [6], the main significance of this category-based division of labor was not its division of benefits and achievements, but rather the consolidation of distinct socio-economic categories that it caused. In the early decades after independence, socio-economic differences were aligned with these category-based distinctions, creating considerable differences in education, employment, income, standard of living, and access to resources and centers of power. One's origin became identified with one's social status, residential location, values, and traits.

Until the mid-1960s, Mizrahi Jews were considered a cultural threat and came under heavy pressure to assimilate, but the attitude of the Ashkenazi establishment eventually softened somewhat, in line with other cultural and economic changes [7]. The Ministry of Education and Culture established enrichment programs for schools that incorporated materials from the heritage of Mizrahi Jewry, and public radio and television stations became open to popular Mizrahi culture, which was previously considered inferior and never officially recognized. According to several researchers, this change was only superficial: The Ashkenazi position simply became subtler and veiled. Mizrahi Jews still were considered to have 'primitive" thinking and were often defined as members of an impoverished population of limited capabilities and potential [7]. The stereotype of the Mizrahi Jew as a religiously traditional, primitive, uncritical, anti-democratic individual motivated by instinct was firmly rooted in Israel's collective consciousness [2,10]. Ashkenazi-ness, in contrast, was taken for granted as the normative, neutral Israeli ideal. Ashkenazi-ness defined the norm, and consequently served as a gauge of otherness.

Mizrahi Representations in the Media

Representations of Mizrahi Jews in popular Israeli culture and Mizrahi labeling of specific traits has been extensively discussed in the literature. As early as the 1950s, ethnic categories appearing in Israeli films sought to endorse the ideological-statist worldview of successive Mapai governments and their key notion of 'ingathering of the exiles'. The narratives of these films centered on the distinct social differences and cultural-racist tension and between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews, and presented mutual transformation as the key to resolve the sectarian conflict and adjustment issues. Each pole on the ethnic continuum was identified by polar opposite features that were represented as complementary elements that, fused together, would construct the identity of the 'new Jew'. Ashkenazi Jews were portrayed as cool-headed merchants, rational, educated, alienated, and suspicious, while Mizrahi Jews were depicted as warm, naïve, religiously observant, and uneducated [11].

In her book, 'Israeli Film: West/East and the Politics of Representation', Shohat [11] discusses the ethnic division that was portrayed as a natural and inevitable distinction. In Hasamba, a film based on a popular series of children's adventure books by Yigal Mosinzon, a group of young Ashkenazi native Israeli Sabras are battling against a gangster, an evil Mizrahi Jew from the local underworld (played by Ze'ev Revah) who uses primitive weapons against the children. Nathan Axelrod's film 'Don Quixote and Sancho Panza' celebrates the hierarchy between Dan the intellectual who represents the Ashkenazi elite, and Sa'adya, the simple laborer and ruffian, representing Mizrahi-ness. Shohat [11] argues that this division reproduced the sectarian divisions of the labor market: Ashkenazi youngsters were systematically directed to white-collar occupations while Mizrahi youngsters were channeled to blue-collar jobs.

Numerous films perpetuated the violent, barbaric image of Mizrahi Jews. For example, in 'Paratroopers', Mizrahi Jews conform to the aggressive macho male stereotype, in contrast to the Ashkenazi protagonists who cope with the challenges of military service [11]. The film Kazablan reflected public apprehensions at the rising new Mizrahi masculinity in the Black Panthers era, and contributed to an enduring image of violent, aggressive Mizrahi men. Israeli films resonated with social beliefs about the images of Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews and sectarian tensions. As a major popular medium, Israeli film incorporated the image of the Mizrahi Jew in diverse contexts - from 'Bourekas' films (a peculiarly Israeli genre of comic melodramas or tearjerkers based on ethnic stereotypes) to personal or political films - yet the narrative and cinematic language continued to be based on conventional dichotomous categories.

Statistics published by the Israeli Second Broadcasting Authority offer a more recent description of sectarian representations on major television channels. A series of studies by the research institute Midgam in 2011 focused on cultural diversity and the representation of social groups in prime time television, analyzing the contents and images that appear in different types of television shows. Findings suggest that all genres featured a dominant group of secular, Ashkenazi Jewish males, longstanding residents rather than new immigrants.

Mizrahi Jews were not excluded entirely from these shows, but the frequencies of their appearances were low and they were represented poorly. Moreover, The Midgam suggests that Mizrahi Jews account for 30% of the individuals appearing in newscasts, 38% of the people shown in current events and investigative shows, 34% of the people in lifestyle shows, and 18% of the people in dramas. In reality shows, and in entertainment and talk shows, however, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews receive equal representation.

We argue that the hegemonic process described above, interpreted by scholars of culture and sociology, and specifically scholars of film, has undergone a transformation in recent years, in which the idealized image of the Ashkenazi Sabra [3] has been replaced by the popular image of the down-to-earth Mizrahi Jew. We based our argument on the change in recent years in television representations of reality TV show winners, and the images of Israeli protagonists in local dramas created for television. Moreover, we are suggesting that the steady ascendancy of characters of a Mizrahi appearance in these shows over time has created a social and cultural change in collective Israeli consciousness; the image of the Mizrahi Jew, formerly a marginal, underprivileged, ridiculed and unappealing character, has become a popular, attractive, and even ideal type. This character wins the most watched reality shows in Israel and attracts the greatest number of audience text messages, and the most expressions of love and admiration. The features of fandom that previously belonged to leading Ashkenazi actors are now increasingly directed at Mizrahi characters, individuals with a distinctly Mizrahi appearance and personality traits that are typically associated with the Mizrahi public.

Television and Reality Shows Reflect and Shape Social Reality

It is well established that popular texts, which create and represent cultural and ideological meaning concerning race, gender, status, and sexuality, teach us about ourselves and others [12,13]. However, these texts do not merely reflect meaning, they also impose meaning; an analysis of the sectarian rift in Israeli television [14] and in Israeli film [10] highlights how such content creates and reinforces social stereotypes. With the increasing popularity of reality shows, communications research has come to focus on the representations and stereotyping reflected in this genre [15,16], which is considered to have a significant and unique relationship with the reality of real lives. Therefore, although former research on Mizrahi representations in popular culture has mainly focused on films, we believe that the most fascinating change has actually occurred in television, specifically in popular reality and drama shows.

The genre of reality television, essentially the filming of real people engaged in unscripted interactions, continues to thrive more than a decade after direct appearing in the early 1990s [17]. In view of the enormous success of US series such as 'The Kardashians,' 'The Bachelor,' 'Survival,' and similar shows, reality television burst on the Israeli scene, and local rating charts in recent years have been topped by locally produced reality shows such as 'The Next Star,' 'The Race for a Million,' 'Big Brother,' 'A Star is Born,' 'Super Nanny,' 'The Models,' 'The Big Loser,' and others.

Capturing a growing share of audience attention, reality television has increasingly attracted the interest of researchers who focuses on the representations and stereotypes that these shows create and represent [18,19]. Beck et al. [17] suggest that reality shows are a major research platform for discursive analysis and interpretation of identities and images. Reality show winners are typically people who convey a high degree of authenticity. Reality show viewing is gratifying, either because it makes people feel that they are able to affect the events, such as the outcomes in music reality shows, or because it satisfies social needs such as observing social interactions and satisfying human curiosity about other people's lives [17]. One of the reasons reality shows are popular is because they are interactive and offer viewers an opportunity to determine the fates of the winners and losers. Programs of this kind effectively operate on the tension between appearance and authenticity, as viewers seek the moments of truth in the highly structured and controlled television environment. Participants are 'characters' who are collapsed into a single person-persona-personality. The rules of the game stress the need to 'be yourself' in public as you are in private. Accordingly, the first participants to be eliminated are accused of being insufficiently honest or genuine [17]. Accordingly, we believe that the winners on Israel's most watched reality shows largely reflect the empathy of the Israeli public and its preferences for specific personality traits and behaviors.

Study 1 – Reality Television

Methodology

To identify the quintessential popular Israeli character, we extensively studied the identities of the winners and leading characters in the most popular reality, drama and sit-com shows broadcast in Israel between 2010 and 2015 on commercial channels (channel 2 and 10), and in locally produced shows for cable and satellite television. The study is based on 25 most popular drama/sit-com shows and 17 reality shows, according to rating indices. We examined the ethnic origin and visible cultural traits of reality and drama show protagonists. Individuals were identified as 'Mizrahi' if they met the following criteria: (a) presented themselves or were introduced by someone else as a person from a Mizrahi ethnic background; (b) their name is distinctly identified with Mizrahi Jewry (c) Mizrahi appearance and style, and distinctly Mizrahi cultural preferences. It is important to note that no information on individuals' actual country of origin was collected and therefore the study includes no certain determinations of the origins of the contestants and characters. The methodology of this study was based on the important and not at all obvious fact that even in 2015, it is possible to classify television show participants and characters in Israeli dramas using the dichotomous sectarian categories Mizrahi and Ashkenazi. Our study is qualitative rather than quantitative, and explores the characters' prominence and success in their respective shows, and their representations.

Reality television is extremely popular in Israel, even in comparison to the international landscape. According to a special report by the French media firm Media Metri, 13% of the leading television shows in the world in 2012 were reality shows, while in Israel, 50% of the leading television shows were reality shows, including 'Big Brother,' 'Race for a Million,' 'the Voice,' and 'Master Chef'[1]. 'Big Brother' specifically constitutes a major arena for analyzing sectarian representations, due to its enormous popularity in Israel, among other reasons. 'Big Brother,' considered Channel Two's flagship reality show, launched its seventh season with an impressive viewership of 39.6%, or 1.1 million viewers in Israel, and a rating of 43.8% was measured at peaks. The sixth season of 'Big Brother,' which was broadcast in 2014, competed with the Protective Edge military campaign in Gaza. The new season started with a high rating of 43.6% and maintained high viewership throughout the season, despite the simultaneously military operation[2].

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[1]http://www.themarker.com/advertising/1.2027656[in Hebrew]

[2]http://b.walla.co.il/item/2853231[in Hebrew]

Findings and discussion

Based on the content analysis performed in this study, we found that Mizrahi representations account for a significant volume of air time, and dominate the various reality shows broadcast at different times of day. In the most recent season of 'Big Brother' VIP, 50% of the participants were identified as having these features of 'new Israeli-ness,' compared to 25% identified as having Ashkenazi features. According to Table 1, a considerable proportion of the winners or most popular runners-up had Mizrahi features, at a rate that significantly exceeded the proportion of Mizrahi participants on the show. In this study, the winners and most popular contestants were identified as being authentic, warm, and having a joie de vivre.

'Big Brother' is considered the most popular and influential reality show in Israel, with a typical rating of 30%. Over the eight seasons of this show, it has not only attracted a significant viewership, but has also captured a prominent place in Israeli discourse. In all but two seasons, all the winners and runners-up of this show were Mizrahi. A similar situation is evident in the popular cooking show 'Master Chef' where the majority of the winners or runners-up have been Mizrahi. Mizrahi contestants also dominated other popular shows in recent years, such as 'the Beauty and the Geek,' and the music shows 'X Factor' and 'The Voice'. In all of these shows, the majority of the finalists, runners-up, and other strong contestants had an unmistakable Mizrahi appearance.

We also discovered similar findings in docu-reality shows, a sub-category of reality television that has increasingly captured screen time in recent years, generating significant public resonance. Docu-reality shows track the everyday behaviors of the characters, focusing mainly on behaviors that people developed early in their lives, and thus these shows function as a uniquely fitting platform for examining socio-cultural identities and profiles, as well as the responses of the Israeli audience to these identities. In the current study we examined all the major docu-reality shows in the past five years, including 'Living in La-La Land,' 'Goal-star,' and 'Three'. As seen in Table 2, we found evidence of a strong correlation between a show's popularity (based on multiple measures) and the significantly high participation rate of individuals represented as Mizrahi, supporting our main hypothesis.

Values and traits that were traditionally associated with Mizrahi Jews and became incorporated into negative stereotypes of this group include: folksy, simple, neighborly, warm, and family-oriented. Over time, these gradually became desirable traits representing authenticity and genuineness, and no longer symbolizing primitiveness or inferiority. The traits that were traditionally identified with Mizrahi-

Program	Finalists with a Mizrachi appearance
Big Brother	60%
Master Chef	44%
The X-Factor	62%
The Voice	58%
A Star is Born	55%
The Next Star	75%
Eyal Golan is Looking for you	100%
Race to the Million	60%
The Village	70%
The Chef Games	50%
The Beauty and the Geek	60%
Survival	55%

*Note: The group of winners and finalists also included, besides Ashkenazim, various minority groups such as Russians, Arabs, Ethiopians and others.

Table 1: Percentages of finalists with a Mizrachi appearance for each reality show.

Program	Popularity on social networks (Likes and Shares)	Participants with a Mizrachi appearance
Living in La-La land	77,000	95%
Goal-Star	62,000	70%
Three	20,000	75%
Connected	14,000	70%
The unit	12,000	75%
Bollywood	9,700	100%
The Rich ones	8,500	75%
What Happens in Eilat	7,500	65%
TLV Does Tel Aviv	500	60%
Six Mothers	48	25%

Table 2: The show's popularity and the participation rate of individuals represented as Mizrahi of main docu-reality shows.

ness were uniquely suited to the rules of the genre. 'Be real' and 'Be true to yourself' are phrases repeatedly voiced by young people, indicating the deep new mindset that urges one to realize one's true self, express oneself, and surrender one's individual desires and needs to those of the group. The social traits reflected in Ashkenazi stereotypes, which were once considered both important and worthy, including caution, self-awareness, rationality, critical thinking, and restraint, have become less relevant and even objectionable.

The character of the cool-headed rational Ashkenazi has been replaced by the hot-tempered person who does not stop to weigh each word, and although he occasionally expresses himself awkwardly using ungrammatical or plain language, he expresses what they are really thinking. The winners of 'Big Brother' clearly represent this new type of Israeli-ness that evokes admiration; they all conform to the image of the unsophisticated, down-to-earth male character. Their ability to be warm, simple, and authentic emphasized to viewers that they were 'genuine' people who were not acting for the cameras: They were expressing their true selves, and therefore should be trusted, loved, and especially supported by sending a text vote.

Winners of 'Big Brother' were warmly embraced by Israeli society and frequently installed in other television shows. One reality winner, Eliraz Sade, hosted a program on Channel 24, participated in another reality show, is currently a host of two shows on Channels 10 and 20, and is having a documented affair with ex-beauty queen Ilana Levi, former wife of Eyal Golan, the Mizrahi music star and symbol of popular Mizrahi Israeli culture. Moshik Afia, last year's winner, is a popular Mizrahi singer who returned to center stage after appearing in 'Big Brother' and is a celebrity who is known for his singing talent and stars in the gossip columns.

The binary nature of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi traits may have been fertile ground for the emergence of sectarian tensions in film, as discussed above, but Mizrahi characters are clearly the winners in this round, in reality television. An outstanding example is the first season of 'Big Brother' in 2008, which placed the show firmly on the agenda of Israeli society where it reached unprecedented heights of cultural popularity. The show became a boxing ring where participants argued over the nature of new Israeli-ness. The public mobilized on both sides of the argument in impressive numbers. Although the official winner was Shifra Kornfeld, a young religious Ashkenazi woman who soon disappeared from the public eye, the true winners were the Boblil father and daughter duo, who won second and third places. The two remained squarely in the public eye, became celebrities and television show hosts, and seven years later returned to participate in the sixth season of 'Big Brother'.

This first season of this show chose to heighten the binary tensions between the Mizrahi Boblils and other Ashkenazi contestants, a group that became known as 'the Friedmans', and establish a virtual boxing ring on camera by perpetuating the stereotypes attributed to Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews. Yossi and Einav Boblil, of Moroccan descent, represented traditional Mizrahi stereotypical traits including warmth, lack of sophistication, loud speech, cursing, and aggressive physicality. In contrast, 'the Friedmans' (who were represented by Ashkenazi contestants including Shifra Kornfeld, a soft-spoken, intelligent and educated young woman from a religious background, who used a high language register. The phrase 'The Friedmans are dead,' first articulated by Einav Boblil, was repeated incessantly as the season progressed, and the conflict between the two groups dominated public discourse and the media in general, permeating other discursive contexts as well. In a piece on the Cast Lead military campaign in Gaza, Commentator Ben Kaspit wroted, '…in the words of a senior IDF officer yesterday: The Hamas thought that they were dealing with the Friedmans. Well we are really the Boblils' (96 Hours, Maa'riv, January 2, 2009). As this comment illustrates, what was once a symbol of backwardness and primitiveness has now become a desired expression of strength, representing a new, powerful Israeli-ness.

Study 2 – Drama

The transformation discussed above is not limited to the reality genre. Mizrahi-ness has also filtered down to the world of comedy and drama, to which hundreds of thousands of viewers are exposed every week. Sixty-nine percent of Israelis' viewing time is devoted to cable television shows. The five most viewed programs in 2014 include dramas and simple sit-coms, with ratings that skyrocketed above newscasts and came close to reaching reality show ratings[33]. The second study focus on these shows.

Methodology

In this study, we examined 25 of the leading series broadcast between 2010 and 2015. These series not only reflect or mediate 'the new Israeliness' that is evident in television reality shows, but specifically include and address Mizrahi cultural representations. We found a large number of dominant and popular Mizrahi characters in the most popular shows of 2014 ('Being With Her,' 'Ramzor,' 'Zaguri Empire,' 'Popularity,' and Fauda'), and these characters highlight and consolidate 'the new Israeliness' and its Mizrahi features, and incorporate them into the country's cultural fabric.

In his book 'Television Drama,' Dan Oryon [20] states that Israeli drama is an appropriate environment for investigating the links between television and society. As all cultural texts, drama is largely the product of its social environment, and the actors — in their television characters — reflect contemporary popular identities. The people who 'pull the strings' in television are sensitive to the social and psychological needs and wants of various audience groups [20].

Findings and discussion

Findings clearly show that series focused on Mizrahi characters are extremely popular. Topping 'the hottest Israeli Google searches in 2014' was 'Zaguri Empire'[44] a drama series that symbolically portrays the life of a traditional Mizrahi family embroiled in a neighborhood feud. Three weeks after the satellite television company HOT launched the series, it was downloaded three million times to subscribers' set-top

boxes. The series became a magnet for many Israeli viewers and its stars won the admiration of millions of Israelis. The series even exceeded the results of the Google search for the term 'Protective Edge,' the military campaign that was conducted when the series was broadcast. In third and fourth places on this list we find the FIFA World Cup games and another dramatic series, 'Being with Her'. 'Big Brother' was also high on the search results, and was followed by the final season of the comedy 'Ramzor'. All the shows mentioned have a pronounced representation of Mizrahi Israeli-ness.

Findings also point to the clear multi-annual trend in television representations. While Israeli dramas in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s prominently featured upper- or middle-class Ashkenazi characters, the more recent series that were examined in the present study concern Mizrahi Jews and 'more Mizrahi' content. In recent years, according to statistics, Israeli dramas have been moving toward a preponderance of Mizrahi characters in leading roles and increasingly focus on what is clearly non-Ashkenazi culture. In the 2013 series 'Being with Her,' the lead character is a simple baker from Bat Yam who wins the heart of a supermodel. The series was written by Assi Ezer, a Mizrahi Jew who was himself catapulted into fame as the popular television host of the 'Big Brother' and 'The Next Star'.

'Zaguri Empire' is an important case in point. The series is about a superstitious Mizrahi family from Be'er Sheva that conforms to traditional Mizrahi traits and negative stereotypes. The family is, however, portrayed as a strong family that represents the 'new Israeli-ness,' and is not apologetic for its culture or character. The frame narrative is the story of Avi'el, a successful artillery officer in the IDF, who returns to his 'Moroccan' home after eight years including several years spent in a boarding school, where he became 'more Ashkenazi'. He inherits an abandoned falafel stand from his grandfather and decides to restore the stand to its former glory, butting heads with his father in the process. He returns home with his blond Ashkenazi girlfriend, also an IDF officer, whom his family calls 'Mayonnaise' - referring both to her coloring and to the family's assumption that she is a 'frigid' and a bad cook. These traits are, obviously, the opposite of the warm-hearted Mizrahi woman who skillfully cooks spicy dishes.

Casting Oz Zahavi, an Ashkenazi star with light hair and skin, in a Mizrahi role, underscores that popularity calls for Ashkenazi Israeli-ness to adopt outward aspects of Mizrahi-ness. Zahavi's character, like many other characters in this series, supports an intertextual reading that gives the Mizrahi characters, as well as their success and prominence in Israeli culture and society, broader and more general meaning. Choosing a popular Ashkenazi actor in this role further reinforces the new status of the Mizrahi type. His childhood sweetheart Lizzy is played by Ninette Tayeb, an Israeli cultural icon who burst on the scene and immediately became a mega-celebrity after winning the first season of the reality show 'A Star is Born'. Tayeb, a local Cinderella, has a pronounced Mizrahi appearance, comes from the small city of Kiryat Gat, and has, for over a decade, benefited from enormous publicity, starring in gossip columns where fans passionately follow her developing career as a television, film, and theater actor, model, and rock star. Tayeb is also known for her former extensively covered relationship with Yehuda Levy, who was 'compelled' to adopt Mizrahi gestures to play the lead in the Israeli series 'A Very Important Person,' which was broadcast in 2015.

Ninette Tayeb's appearance in 'Zaguri' evokes a dual reading, in which Lizzy's character is fused with the famous celebrity's own adored status. In one of the conversations between Aviel and Lizzy, she tries to laugh at his acquired Ashkenazi gestures and says, 'Why are you

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being so 'Polish'?' to which Aviel responds, 'I'm Israeli… a proud secular Sabra'. His statement is a double entendre: On the one hand, Aviel's light coloring and his years living apart from his family made it possible for him to adopt Ashkenazi behaviors — he is more polite than his siblings and rarely curses, and has tried to develop a distinct identity of his own, outside his family — but at the same time, leaving his family also emphasizes just how strongly Aviel remains an integral part of his family, and like his family, he represents the new, normative brand of Israeliness. Ultimately, Aviel returns to Be'er Sheva and to his family, runs his grandfather's falafel stand, and continues his family heritage: He is attracted to and prefers the values of warmth and family traditions, and he becomes their exemplar.

The mother's character in this series is also noteworthy. Sarah von Shwartze, a German-born actress, plays Vivian, the traditional Moroccan-born matriarch of the clan whom everyone calls 'Mamu'. Vivian represents a combination of conflicting traits: although she exudes warmth, love and concern for her family, she completely misunderstands them or their real needs. She is egotistical, superstitious, and manipulative. Von Shwartze is known as an outstanding theater actor who also acts in films and on television. Here, the Ashkenazi actress adopted a Mizrahi appearance and character and became a popular television star. The father of the family is played by Moshe Ivgi, a highly respected television and film star who has won numerous awards and roles in important films and programs. The use of such prominent actors such as Oz Zehavi, Ninette Tayeb and Moshe Ivgi reinforces the role of the Zaguri family as a focal and perhaps hegemonic family in Israeli society. Viewers cannot disregard the actors who introduce into the series notions of success, centrality, stardom, and prominence. The Zaguris are not just any ordinary family from Be'er Sheva, they are the stars of Israeli society.

The series reflects the entire gamut of traditional Mizrahi stereotypes with no exception: the traditional roles of the matriarch and the patriarch, large families, poverty, the significance of food, the interspersion of Arabic language, superstitions, verbal and physical violence, scorn and contempt for the establishment. Yet, the background message is that this Israeli family conforms to accepted social norms, and in contrast to its marginalized representation in the past, a family like this is now center stage. The only Ashkenazi in the series, 'Mayonnaise,' is a negative character. The positive family features, such as warmth, authenticity, the importance of family cohesion, clearly represent the new Israeli norm. The members of this family are the heroes of the story, and all the other members of Israeli society are viewed through their eyes. Israeli institutions are also portrayed through Aviel, an IDF officer, and his brother, a police officer. The police and the military play a central role in the narrative, as they do in the lives of many Israeli families. Even the actors, who play minor characters in this series, have become extremely popular. A fact that also reflects the popularity and new status of Mizrahi individuals in Israeli society.

In other popular series, Mizrahi Jews are not the focus of the action, although the lead characters are Mizrahi. In 'One Zero Zero' , actor Amos Tamam plays the all-Israeli police offer Arik Arbel, clearly a Mizrahi type who is rough around the edges, hot-tempered and violent, and who plays the 'good cop'. In 'Polyshuk', a political satire, Sasson Gabbay plays the Mizrahi character of Polyshuk, a senior government minister heading a non-existent ministry (Social Progress), with Hannah Azulay Hasafri as strong chief administrator who pulls the strings. 'Shihor,' a path-breaking Mizrahi film written, directed and acted by Azulay Hasafri, is another powerful, unmediated portrayal of Mizrahi Israeliness.

The penetration of Mizrahi characters such as these into the screen, in dramas and in reality television, creates a cultural hegemony in which the new Israeli is Mizrahi. The image of desired Israeliness has shifted from the cold, calculated, Ashkenazi member of the elite, to a warm-hearted, unassuming Mizrahi. As evident from contemporary representations on television, the close-shaven, light-skinned, tailored character, with proper syntax and diction and a European background, has been displaced by an unshaven, inarticulate, hot-tempered Mizrahi. Through its contents, television set in motion powerful socialization processes, and characters that were previously considered ideal types are now irrelevant and even trigger antagonism.

Summary: The NEW Israeli-ness is Mizrahi and Collectivist

A study of popular Israeli culture reflected in the country's most popular dramas and reality shows highlights the powerful influence of Mizrahi culture in shifting to the forefront cultural heroes from identifiably Mizrahi backgrounds and origins. This shift not only involves individuals with Mizrahi characteristics, but Mizrahi culture and its values as a whole, including the importance of family, cohesion, food, tradition, preference for emotional expressions, spontaneity and authenticity over education, rational thinking, and restraint.

Looking back to its foundations, Israeli society grew out of a strong work ethic, belief in principles such as pioneering, national development, collectivism, community service, collaboration, and a regard for social life. The kibbutz, which is the purest representation of original Israeli-ness, is the site of collaboration, community, liberation, as well as noise. This is also true of other social groups such as military units, youth movement groups. Original Israeli-ness had a collectivist nature, despite the fact that the country was established by Ashkenazi Jews. In fact, the kibbutz reflected the young Ashkenazi Zionists' rebellion against the individualist bourgeoisie of the west. Zionism was the avant-garde: The return to the Levant, to the Land of Israel, to manual labor was a return to imagined Orientalism or Mizrahi-ness.

Unsurprisingly, these original Zionist values are in line with the backbone of Mizrahi culture, which is based on clans, large families, generosity, warmth, and an absence of individual boundaries or privacy. The new ideology of individualism that emerged in Israel in the 1960s and 1970s resulted from the adoption of Americanisms that were grounded in hedonism and egocentrism [7]. Although collectivism and individualism persisted without becoming mutually exclusive [21], the dominant Ashkenazi culture gradually abandoned the kibbutz values of collaboration and collectivism as young people moved to the cities and became members of the bourgeoisie, individualistic - materialistic, and isolated. Zionism became bourgeoisie. In the government, the socialist Labor Party was replaced by the liberals who touted free markets and non-intervention. Nonetheless, at the core of Israeli-ness remains a passion for 'the gang,' for togetherness, and for the power than it gives the individual.

Israeli society has come a full circle: Mizrahi-ness has replaced Ashkenazi-ness in popular culture in an attempt to regain society's former sense of togetherness, a sense of collaboration, a connection to the joy of family and a shared life with others. Instead of friends gathering on the lawn in the middle of the kibbutz, today's Israeli togetherness is located in the house of the Big Brother, in sports teams, combat military units, schools, and on the street, and it reflects the values of the new Mizrahi Israeli-ness. Today's society is changing,

both in the technology it uses and in its values, and the collaborative dimensions of the Internet, mobile phone use, and other technologies is growing increasingly dominant [22].

This increasingly collaborative culture aligns perfectly with the values of Mizrahi culture. The growing frequency with which Mizrahi characters appear on television, either as reality show hosts or leading characters in dramas, is a reflection of the transformation of Israeli society and its use of technology to turn back to its roots. The new Israeli-ness is more Mizrahi and more collective than ever. And while this paper does not purport to offer a complete comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi representations, it offers an important preliminary discussion of the recent changes in popular culture that have implications for the representations of these groups. We hope that this discussion will serve as a basis for future research on this topic.

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