

**Mazzig, Hen. The Wrong Kind of Jew: A Mizrahi Manifesto.
Brentwood, TN: Wicked Son-Post Hill Press, 2022**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Reviewed by Elaine Margolin, Hewlett, NY

Beneath his optimistic demeanor, one senses Hen Mazzig, whose Twitter following exceeds 84,000, struggles at times to reconcile his many identities which don't easily mesh. His terrific new book, "The Wrong Kind of Jew: A Mizrahi Manifesto," is an attempt to tell his readers where he stands on issues dear to the Jewish people at large. Mazzig spent six years in the IDF working tirelessly as a communications officer. His work focused on opening channels with Palestinians, hoping to make relations between Jews and Palestinians better. In addition to being a proud Zionist, Mazzig is also a gay man engaged to a non-Jewish partner who lives in London. Mazzig concedes he rarely attends synagogue and doesn't keep kosher. He speaks on the phone on Shabbat. He is progressively-minded. But what haunts him most is the way his preciously held Mizrahi identity is perceived by other Jews in Israel and around the world; a perception he hopes to change.

The story of Mizrahi Jews is unknown by many. These are the Jews who were expelled from Middle Eastern countries such as Iran, Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen, and Morocco shortly after Israel was established by the Ashkenazi Jews who came from European lands. The Mizrahi, claims Mazzig, were mistreated from the get-go. Many were shuttled to peripheral regions of the country where they remained in transit camps before slowly making their way into Israeli society. In 1948, Mizrahi Jews represented only 20 percent of the Jews in Israel, but today make up over 53 percent of Israel's Jews. They are the majority population, yet are barely represented in the halls of power of the Israeli government, academia, the judiciary, or the military elite. There has never been a Mizrahi prime minister. They suffer from higher levels of anxiety and depression. Many work as police officers and other low-paying jobs that leave them with little access to the middle class. The Mizrahi mostly align themselves with the hawkish and conservative Likud party, perhaps in reaction to the horrific treatment they received in the Arab countries from which they were expelled and forced to leave penniless; losing all their wealth and possessions. They were never treated as equals in these Arab lands, yet in many ways, they had been there for centuries and it felt like home

to them. The food, music, customs, and language of these places had become their own. They practiced their own form of Judaism that was anchored by a certain traditionalism that was different from the way Ashkenazi Jews practiced. When they arrived in Israel, they felt like strangers, and spoke Arabic instead of Yiddish or Hebrew, and were often mistaken for Arabs, as is Mazzig due to his darker complexion.

When Mazzig tells strangers his parents are from Tunisia and Iraq, most respond by saying “So, you’re Arab?” to which he responds “No, I’m a Jew.” Yet, growing up in the Israeli school system he felt he was not represented and secretly wished he was Ashkenazi. He is flabbergasted by how many people are oblivious to the Mizrahi experience and has taken it as his mission to inform as many people as he can. There are beautiful passages throughout that explain his attraction and loyalty to his background: “My Saturday lunch can be okra, pink beets, pumpkin or hard-boiled eggs with hummus, and a pita bread. My grandmother doesn’t make matzo-ball soup when I’m sick, or even on the holidays. Instead, she’s making stew my Jewish friends can’t pronounce.” He explains his grandparents bear no resemblance to Larry David or Sarah Silverman or Bernie Sanders. They, like he, have a much darker complexion. His family wasn’t murdered in the Holocaust, but is filled with horror stories of Jewish terror in Arab lands.

The cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Middle East during the 1950s and 1960s is not familiar to most American Jews, 90 percent of which are Ashkenazi. His Ashkenazi friends find it odd that his relatives don’t eat gefilte fish or knishes, and have few direct memories of the Shoah. His Tunisian grandparents worked in a forced labor camp and would have been sent off for extermination if the war hadn’t ended just days before the transport was to leave. Mazzig reminds us how Egypt was once home to 75,000 Jews, and Iraq had over 150,000. None of the quarter of a million Jews who live in Syria or Libya remain.

Other writers have written about the Mizrahi experience. Ayelet Tzabari has written about the unique challenges of being a Mizrahi woman from a large Yemeni family and how she felt denigrated in Israel as somehow dirty. The Egyptian born late writer Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff felt shunned by the Israeli elite in Israeli while admitting in Egypt she felt she never belonged. She dreamed of a communal space that could be created between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews and Arabs. Hadar Cohen believes she was actively encouraged not to see the part of her identity that was Mizrahi. Her family had lived in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, as well as Kurdistan before living in

Israel and her family prayed in Hebrew and Arabic. She felt uncomfortable in Israel. Ronit Matalon, born to Egyptian parents, writes about the pressure she felt living in Israel as a Mizrahi and resented friends who would purposely marry Ashkenazi men in order to fit in more smoothly. The late Israeli-Iraqi novelist Samir Naqqash felt torn by tender memories of the Tigris River and the lights of the street lamps reflected upon it. He came to Israel at 13 and continued throughout his life writing in Arabic since he felt it was an intrinsic part of him. All these writers were overwhelmed by the Israeli idolization of David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, and Shimon Peres, who were the Ashkenazi leaders canonized by the Israeli masses.

Mazzig also seems to be struggling at times despite his bravado. He writes “Because of how I look or whom I love, some do not perceive me as Jewish at all. To them, I am not ‘really Jewish.’ Which is their way of saying ‘the wrong kind of Jewish.’” He adds “I have the audacity to know that I am a bad Jew and feel good about it. To love every minute of being Jewish on this Earth, and the legacy of every Jew before me-including but not Mizrahim.” Still, those threatened by Mazzig’s growing popularity have made up nasty rumors about him; most pertaining to his time in the IDF. Mazzig is disturbed by these assaults but do not let them dissuade him. He knows in his gut that he loves being Jewish ten times as much as anyone could ever hate him for it, as he wrote recently on Twitter. He seems a love ball of sorts; someone whose heart has not been poisoned. Not even after almost being killed in a suicide bomber attack when he was 12 while sitting in a café during the second intifada.

My only regret is the parts Mazzig leaves out. I would love to understand more about his coming of age as a gay man in a large Mizrahi family and how he navigated the emotional turbulence he experienced as a teen-ager. Or the weight problems he alludes to. Or his tenure in the Israel Defense Forces where he came out to a sympathetic commander. How has he survived these fractures without breaking apart or rupturing his soul? One hopes he is planning a more personal memoir where he will trust us enough to share with us his more intimate stories.