

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-56495-3 - Overlooking Nazareth: The Ethnography of Exclusion in Galilee

Dan Rabinowitz

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART 1

BIGOTED LIBERALS

1

The Ḥaj, the mayor, and the deputy prime minister

A journey with the Ḥaj

The Ḥaj walks slowly up the hill overlooking the highway which leads into the Israeli new town of Natzerat Illit.¹ Constructed in the 1960s, the modern road and the near-by motor factory lie in a flat section of a little valley, an uncharacteristic feature in this otherwise uneven terrain. It is spring and the rolling hills abound with bloom.

A resident of the adjacent Palestinian town of Nazareth, (al-Naṣira in Arabic) the Ḥaj has not set foot here since his land was seized by the Israeli government in the 1950s, to be annexed to the municipal territory of Natzerat Illit. 'This bit of level ground', he tells us, pointing at the factory yard, with rows of brand new military vehicles fresh off the production line, 'was known as Karm Ṭabariya.² Good land. My uncle, who leased it by a *Daman* arrangement from Yūsūf al-Fahūm's family, used to grow there barley, sesame and wheat.'³

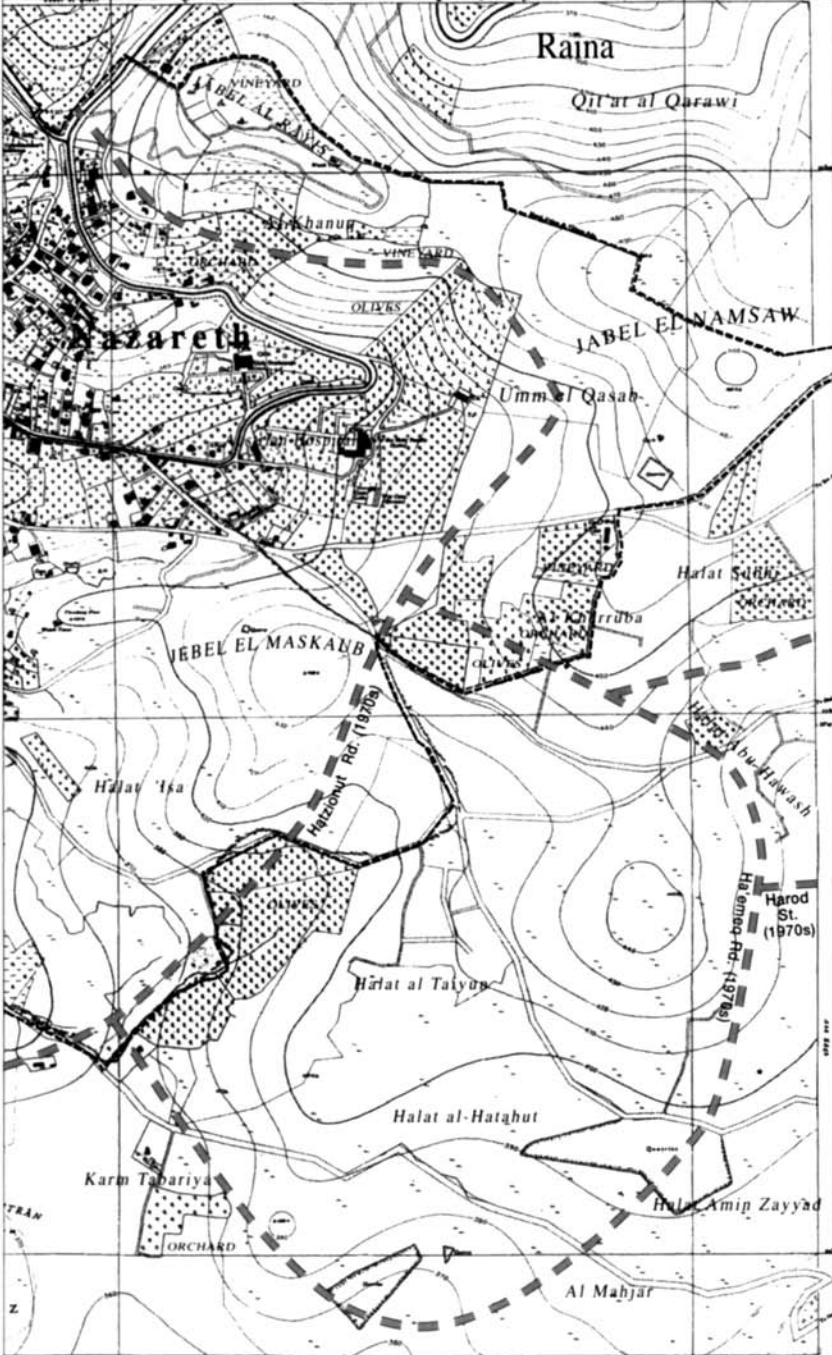
Palestinians have individual names for landscape features and agricultural plots. Hill tops, slopes and valley sections, threshing rings and water holes, trees and seasonal puddles carry specific epithets. A map of Nazareth and its environs, surveyed and published by the British in 1930, specifies some of the features which the Ḥaj remembers (see map 1).⁴

Most of the sites, however, have since been transformed. Founded in 1957, the new town of Natzerat Illit now hides the natural shapes and land marks beneath residential compounds, commercial centres, industry. The past existence of Palestinians can hardly be inferred by anybody unfamiliar with the recent history of the terrain.

The Ḥaj remembers ploughing in winter, the long anticipation during spring, the summer harvest. Like the fateful one of 1948:

4 *Bigoted liberals*

1. The ridges east of Nazareth, ca. 1940



*superimposed: main roads, Natzerat Illit (built 1970s)

The Haj, the mayor, and the deputy prime minister 5

We had a good crop that year. The 31 *dūnams* my family cultivated here produced seventy *Kells* of wheat and seventy of barley.⁵ We were lucky to have managed to transport the grain back home to Nazareth before the town was seized by the advancing Israeli army. Our camels worked particularly hard that summer. . . . now, with everything covered by those apartments and the roads, the days of Karm Tabariya appear so distant.

The hill we stand on has ruined walls, scattered rubble and the shrivelled remnants of an old orchard. ‘This was Salim Mūsṭafa ‘Abd al-Khaliq’s house’, says the Haj. ‘He bought it from the Fahūms a long time back, and lived here until he was finally evicted like the rest of us in the 1950s.’

The Haj, his son and I pack ourselves into the car and drive along the road into the southern section of the Israeli town. The old man, erect in the front seat, looks out intently, as though determined to rediscover further clues of his geography. The signposts, street names and billboards neither help nor confuse him: they are in Hebrew, very few in English. Not a letter in his native Arabic, one of the two official languages of the state: it took a court order in 1993 for the all-Israeli municipal council of Natzerat Illit to lift a ban it had imposed on Arabic script in signs and billboards.

The Haj points left towards a sizeable block of flats. ‘Abd-allah al-Ḥataḥūt owned an olive orchard along this ridge’, he says. I slow down, but even at 20 kilometres per hour the pace seems indecently fast. The past rushes by us like a smoke screen.

We go by a plot which once belonged to Amin Zayad, father of Nazareth’s Tawfiq Zayad.⁶ The Haj identifies a large apartment house at the intersection of Harod street and Yizrael Boulevard and tells us it is built on Ni‘emeh al-Qassim’s land. The car then glides towards a school named after Moshe Sharet, once prime minister of Israel. From his mental map the Haj retrieves the original name of the plot: Ḥalat Abū Hawash. ‘Used to belong to my grandfather’ he says wryly. ‘Hawash means strong, ferocious man.’

A compound of red-roofed houses, erected recently for new immigrants, forces another sigh of recognition. ‘Ḥalat al-Mathūma’, the old man utters, dream-like. ‘A fair maiden lived here generations back. Legend has it she was once accused of promiscuity, and slain by kin.’

Our tour of the new Israeli town finally brings us to the Jewish cemetery, situated on a hill overlooking mount Tabor and Marj ‘ibn ‘amer – the Plain of Yizra‘el – to the east. ‘There used to stand here a pile of stones – a *rūjūm*’ the Haj tells us. ‘We called it *Rūjūm al-‘Ajami*. Folks believed the stones were holy, and whoever stole one would come to harm at night.’

We waste no time searching, knowing the *Rūjūm* is long gone. Has anybody ever paid the awful price?

6 *Bigoted liberals*

Later that afternoon, in the Ḥaj's home in downtown Nazareth, the old Ḥaja – a blood relation of her husband – says:

Oh yes, I know these places well. Our family always lived here, in downtown al-Našira, and cultivated plots up on the mountain. It's only half an hour's walk away. In summer we used to set off at dawn, riding the empty camels to the fields. We would spend the morning harvesting in Karm Ṭabariya, then haul the crop to the *bayader* (threshing ring) in Al Baiyyada. We would return at dusk, the camels carrying big piles of straw. The grain remained on the mountain, where merchants would come to purchase it directly from the ring. We kept the camels at a shed behind the house as late as 1970, then sold them off. It really made no sense any longer, with the mountain quickly disappearing under the *Shikūn*. All we have left are memories. But these are fading quickly too now.

The use of *shikūn* – Hebrew for housing estate – as a name for Natzerat Illit is widespread among the Palestinian residents of adjacent Nazareth.⁷ Dismissive of the new town's name, *shikūn* tends to lump it with a country-wide architectural phenomenon, dislodging it from local specificity. This misrecognition on the part of Palestinians is one manifestation of their resentment against what they see as an unlawful invasion of their territory and an abuse of their primordial rights.

Natzerat Illit was established as part of the third stage in Israel's drive to 'Judaize Galilee',⁸ a policy initially endorsed by the Israeli cabinet in March 1949 (Kipnis 1983:723–4). The Palestinian population, while decimated during the 1948 war which brought Israel its independence, still formed an overwhelming majority in Lower Galilee. Not surprisingly, the hills of Nazareth became a prime target for the state's Judaization policy.

Oren Yiftachel's analysis of this policy (1994) indicates that it is by no means unique to Israel. Multi-ethnic states elsewhere, he demonstrates, tend 'either to disperse the minority throughout the state or penetrate minority regions with settlement of other ethnic groups' (Yiftachel 1994:43, after Gurr 1993 and Sibley 1987). The Ḥaj's memories suggest however that no matter how efficient the implementation of such policies, the heritage of those invaded or dispersed dies hard.

Israeli Residents of Natzerat Illit often refer to David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, as the figure whose ideological legacy determined the town's future role in the quest for Israeli dominance in Galilee. A letter written by Ben Gurion in 1957, proudly reproduced in an official publication issued for Natzerat Illit's thirtieth anniversary states that:

...the new settlement must be a Jewish town that will assert a Jewish presence in the area. Not a suburb of Arab Nazareth, but a separate town in its vicinity.

(*Natzerat Illit* 1987)

The Haj, the mayor, and the deputy prime minister 7

The nature of this project, whereby the minority or ethnic borderland (Anzaldúa 1987, Rosaldo 1988) becomes the dominant group's own frontier, has been successfully disguised in Israel by the concept of 'development town' (*'Ir Pitūah*). A non-problematic view of the matter,⁹ sees 'development towns' as part and parcel of the inevitable and historically moral process of settling the old–new Jewish homeland. A more critical view has been suggested by a number of researchers, including Shlomo Swirski (1985, 1989), and, in a less emphatic tone, Tom Segev (1984). Their analyses highlight this type of settlement as a eurocentric project which mobilized immigrants – mostly oriental Jews – to settle less-attractive peripheral tracts, including borderlands.

Natzerat Illit, where immigrants from Eastern Europe were and still are the majority, is not the prototypical case of Israeli new town. The fact remains however that most immigrants who settled in the town had limited effective choice in the matter.¹⁰ Many of them were brought to Galilee upon arrival in Israel, often directly from the harbour or the airport. The concept of being drafted by the core to settle the periphery, while not necessarily supporting the view of European domination over oriental Jews (see Shohat 1988), is certainly as valid in Natzerat Illit as it is elsewhere in Israel.

Natzerat Illit was thus designed by the hegemonic forces of Israel; carried out primarily by immigrants; and came at the expense of Palestinians.

Counter penetration

The Israeli vision for Natzerat Illit – a purely Jewish new town amidst the Palestinian heartland in Galilee – was eroded in the 1970s and 1980s with the gradual arrival of immigrants of another variety. Circumstances specified in chapter 2 encouraged Palestinian residents of Nazareth, typically newlyweds and families in the earlier stages of their developmental cycle, to rent, buy, or build properties in the Israeli town. By 1988, when I embarked upon this study, Natzerat Illit had approximately 3,500 Palestinian residents – almost an eighth of the town's population. Ironically, the town established to effectively exclude Palestinians from their ancestral agricultural land was now re-entered by their urban middle-class compatriots.

Israel has a number of long-established mixed towns, where Palestinians and Israelis have lived side by side for decades, sometimes longer. These include Haifa (Ḥeifa in Hebrew; Ḥaifa in Arabic), Acre (*'Acco*; *'Acca*), Jaffa (Yafo; Yafa), Ramla (Ramla; al-Ramla) and Lidda (Lod; Lidd).¹¹

8 *Bigoted liberals*

Since the advent of Zionism, and most powerfully after 1948, these mixed towns saw Jewish newcomers penetrating predominantly Palestinian turf. The arrivals either replaced the Palestinians altogether or settled side by side with them. Following 1948 and well into the 1970s this process of replacement spread to rural areas too, through the establishment of Israeli settlements on land expropriated from its Palestinian owners. The residual Palestinian community – a subdued, reluctant and largely helpless group – was reduced to a shadow of its pre-1948 past.

Natzerat Illit, however, is quite irregular in this respect. While its early stages did see Israeli settlers taking hold of Palestinian land – largely unpopulated, though more productive than many Israeli residents now like to recognize – its recent history sees large-scale penetration of Palestinians into an essentially Israeli community.

Most Israeli residents of Natzerat Illit see the Palestinian presence in the town at best as an unfortunate hiccup in an otherwise healthy master plan to Judaize Galilee; at worst as a dreaded and highly orchestrated Palestinian onslaught – a conspiracy by Palestinian nationalists to take over the town, merge it into adjacent Nazareth and, by extension, incorporate it into a distant, threatening Arab entity. A widespread sentiment amongst Israeli residents throughout the 1980s was that the Palestinian presence is the single most demeaning aspect of Natzerat Illit, and that it alone accounts for the consistent failure of the town to attract desirable immigration from more prestigious parts of Israel. Large-scale immigration from the crumbling Soviet Union in the early 1990s, which signalled a substantial addition to the Israeli population of Natzerat Illit, somewhat modified the sense of Palestinian threat. The basic sentiment, however, has not disappeared.

The geo-political history of Natzerat Illit in Lower Galilee is somewhat analogous to that of Israel in the Middle East. An Israeli island in an Arab ocean, reluctantly hosting a Palestinian contingent it perceives as a potentially disloyal, even dangerous fifth column.

The conflict built into the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians in Natzerat Illit is not something I stumbled on once I settled in the town for ethnographic fieldwork. It was, in many ways, the reason why I chose Natzerat Illit in the first place. Consequently, this book, complete with its selective choices, may diverge from what some might expect of a first ethnographic monograph about a community.

I see this work primarily as a guided walk along a border, a sketch of interfaces, a non-random selection of friction situations, conflictual relations and cooperation. Eight scenes have been selected for detailed repre-

The Haj, the mayor, and the deputy prime minister 9

sentation: conflicting narratives of local history; the split real-estate market; notions of boundaries and territorial continuity; the split education system; the paradox of Palestinian hospitality in Natzerat Illit; the trials and tribulations of a senior Palestinian involved in a local sports club; a Palestinian general practitioner; and the campaign by Palestinians in Natzerat Illit to gain initial access to local level politics.

Some of these scenes, or others generically similar, would have been chosen probably by any ethnographer doing fieldwork anywhere. My choice in this rather problem-oriented work, however, was also to deliberately seek arenas where the complex, often paradoxical aspects of the border situation are negotiated and acted out most vividly.

The outcome, as in most ethnographies, is nothing but a sample guided by my tropes, my biases and opportunities. In some respects, it goes against the grain of ethnographic inquiry, the strength of which I always saw in its capacity to start with comprehensive, barely qualified grasps of 'culture' and 'society', then work towards some insight into undercurrents. My rather linear curiosity about the Israeli–Palestinian urban interface must be the key to both the scopes and limitations of this work.

The claim of rationality by the Western state

One theoretical preoccupation of this study is with the claims of western statism to rational and even-handed treatment of all its citizens, including ethnic and national minorities.

The state of Israel models itself on formulae of western liberal democracies. The declaration of independence, signed by a national assembly of deputies in May 1948, pledges the state's resolve to protect the rights of every individual regardless of gender, religious denomination, colour or creed. The declaration, while never legally recognized as a formal constitution, was subsequently supplemented by a complex code of legislation which defines all state affairs and guides the behaviour of individuals. The declaration and Israel's more formal legislation share a basic commitment to universalistic values and, ostensibly, to their operational directives.

David Kretzmer's work on the legal status of the Palestinian citizens of Israel (1990) convincingly exposes loopholes, intentional omissions and provisions designed to maintain Jewish Israeli control over land, water, the right of entry, citizenship, allocation of welfare benefits and more, all under a deceptively coherent legal guise. The result, he asserts, is a state system which bars Palestinian citizens from equal access to vital resources.

Kretzmer's task would not have been necessary in the first place had it not been for the claim of Israel, in line with liberal western political philos-

10 *Bigoted liberals*

ophy, that the state acts as a faithful guardian of rights and privileges of all its citizens and institutions.

The first part of this book, which draws its insights mainly from a study of the agency and rhetoric of Israelis in Natzerat Illit, focuses on the capacity of liberals to engage in marginalizing and racializing practices. It argues that the failure of mainstream liberalism to engender fair and rational action to match its noble principles does not stop at indifference and does not only breed inaction. It can easily produce predatory discrimination. In Israel, I argue, this happens mainly through the application of a double standard: Palestinian *individuals* are often treated leniently, in accord with the ethos of personal equality and meritocracy; when it comes to *The Palestinians* as collective, the application of these values is arrested, thus intensifying discrimination and abuse.

Israelis, not uniquely, tend to rationalize – and thence present *post factum* as inherently rational – what are in fact contingent, politically and ideologically motivated choices. This is related to the imperfections of rationality and its claims at large, as alluded to for example by Tambiah (1990:117–20). Specifically to inter-ethnic contexts, it is reminiscent of Bruce Kapferer's argument that ideologies ostensibly designed to benefit a given population are not immune from deployment in support of much less benign causes (Kapferer 1988). Kapferer's analysis of inter-ethnic strife in Sri Lanka rests on a description of the seemingly harmless belief that the state embodies hierarchies enshrined within Buddhism. In certain political circumstances, however, this framework pushes peace-loving Buddhist clergymen to perpetrate indiscriminate violence against the Tamils, all in the name of fighting earthly incarnations of metaphysical evil (Kapferer 1988:86–7). Similarly, his discussion of Australian 'ANZAC Nationalism' suggests that while the self image and underlying claims of Australian popular Nationalism are linked to egalitarianism, its undercurrents are essentially exclusivist and even racist. This, he argues, is demonstrated in the treatment of non-anglo immigrants into Australia since the 1950s and in the lot of urban aboriginals (Kapferer 1988:142).

Michael Herzfeld (1993) generalizes the point further in his exploration of the role of 'Western Bureaucracy in the production and perpetuation of indifference – the rejection of common humanity' (Herzfeld 1993:1). Using his own observations of Greece, alongside studies of communities in Portugal (Brogger nd), France (Zonabend 1993) and others, Herzfeld argues that once up against indifference – a self-generating side effect of modern superstructures – benevolent institutions and ideologies fail to follow their convictions with constructive action. Israel, so often repre-

The Haj, the mayor, and the deputy prime minister 11

sented as a ‘western’ bulwark against ‘oriental’ savagery, thus becomes a vivid case of the limitations and contradictions inherent in the complacent self-representation of that very ‘West’.

This book seeks to further the debate by demonstrating that a similar process takes place beyond the bureaucratic superstructure and its institutions, as part of routine agency of ‘ordinary’ individuals. The case of Israelis in Natzerat Illit and their views and agency towards Palestinian residents is characteristic of many western and westernizing states, where actors are engaged in an attempt to modernize.

Individuals who find themselves in situations which force decisions on inclusion and exclusion are often unencumbered by conscious inclinations to deal with ‘heavy’ issues on an abstract, let alone moral or theoretical level. Life in Natzerat Illit is particularly rich in such occasions. Israelis coming into contact with Palestinians are suddenly faced with dilemmas typical of members of the euro-centre preoccupied with keeping others out; the Palestinians, for their part, are forced to devise *ad hoc* strategies to deal with their exclusion.

Studying everyday exclusionism in a place like Israel is doubly suggestive given the unique history of the Jewish people. Israelis see their collectivity as the physical and moral progeny of a group consistently discriminated against, marginalized and racialized, the holocaust being the most horrific, though by no means isolated case. This notwithstanding, Israel and Israelis score no better – and often substantially worse – than other nations when it comes to humane treatment of minorities. A critique of the rational and liberal ‘western’ state is all the more poignant in such circumstances.

My first visits to Tel-Aviv in spring 1988, having moved to Natzerat Illit to begin fieldwork that January, had me and my spouse telling friends and relatives about the obstinate refusals on the part of Israelis in Natzerat Illit to tolerate the Palestinian presence in their midst. Our listeners, typical of middle-class north Tel-Aviv, could hardly stomach the descriptions of exclusivism and inegalitarianism on the part of fellow Israelis. Not surprisingly, they were soon equating Natzerat Illit with prejudice and backwardness. This was in line with the media image of the town as a peripheral pocket of bigoted intransigence – an effigy owing primarily to television coverage of local Israeli provocation against Palestinian residents in the early 1980s.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 do depict Israelis in Natzerat Illit as harbouring intolerance and downright racist attitudes towards their Palestinian townsfolk. My argument, however, is that Israelis in Natzerat Illit are not a freak phenomenon. They are by no means an exceptional and problematic