

Sami Shalom Chetrit

My Black Panthers (in Israel)

I was almost 11 years old when the Israeli Black Panthers (inspired by the American movement) first took their social rage to the streets of Jerusalem, in March 1971. We watched them on the evening news reports on our black and white TV, in our public housing little apartment in Ashdod, a working class immigrant town at that time. My father was inspired by those young men, mostly Moroccan immigrants, like us, of their courage, their determination and clear message: we want equality! Stop poverty!

It did not take long for my father to organize the residents of our neighborhood for a demonstration for the improvement of our bad living conditions in a neighborhood that rapidly was becoming a slum. It happened all over Israel in our communities. People got the message and joined the wave of protest. Our demonstration was mainly about poor infrastructure, community services and general neglect. I remember marching with hundreds of residents, men, women and children, to city hall, holding banners and yelling, “we want equality” and more. We stopped in front of the city hall building and my father was yelling demands into the megaphone in his hand, calling the mayor to come out and talk to the residents. Some people started throwing stones at the building. I heard a glass break. My father begged people to stop any violence act. It went under control. I got scared. The police arrived. I ran away with my friends. Later that evening I was surprised to hear from my father that the mayor agreed to meet with a delegation of the residents to discuss improvements for our neighborhood infrastructure and services. It didn't make sense to me then as a child. Not too long after that my father joined the workers union and forgot about that demonstration. Then came The October (1973) War and demolished the Panthers. It seems that we all forgot about them. I went to high school and developed interest in writing and soccer. Years went by.

Only many years after that experience, when I did my PhD research on the Black Panthers, I've learned that their aggressive demonstrations that sometimes turned violent with many arrests, were very successful – they achieved a big change in the next government budget, to be nick named “the Panthers budget”. In that budget all the sections dealing with education, welfare,

health, housing and youth programs, doubled and some tripled. That budget was issued only after a special committee for the investigation of poverty was formed to discuss the issues brought up by the Panthers. The Committee made recommendations to the government of Golda Meir, to address, for the first time, the poor treatment of 1 million Immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa.

I was fortunate to get to know the leaders of the movement, although it was years after the movement wasn't active anymore. I was inspired by their on-going passion for action and by their modesty and to some extent naive attitude towards life: It was in the end of the 1990s, and they still believed in change. They still had faith in people and their ability to unite and mobilize. I had simply fallen in love.

During my graduate studies in Jerusalem, it became clear to me that I had a social duty to tell the story of the Black Panthers. I was an activist myself (among the founders of KEDMA an alternative education movement and HAKESHET, a social movement for change) and I regarded my research about the Mizrahi social struggle as yet another link in the struggle itself. I remember the frustration while I was working on my research (came out in English as well: **Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel – White Jews, Black Jews**, Rutledge 2010), because I was having a hard time finding significant work about the panthers. I couldn't stand the fact that Israeli historiography continued to push the Black Panthers' movement to the outermost margins of the Israeli historical narrative, by largely labeling them a negative event that everyone would be better off forgetting. The challenge was to change terminology itself: "struggle" instead of "riots", "oppressive relationships" and "racist policies" instead of "inferior complex" and more. Decades after their initial emergence, only a handful of academic studies about the Black Panthers have been published and no documentary film was made. I knew that I had to do something about it, to bring their legacy back to life and reconnect their story and still valid message with young activists and new movements for change.

The documentary film "The Black Panthers in Israel speak" which I produced and directed with my beloved friend the late Eli Hamo (who was a young panther himself during the 1970s), was in fact a by-product of my research on the panthers. It started as interviews for my research and very fast became the real thing. It became clear to us that a 50 minutes documentary has a grater

potential to reach thousands of people in Israel and all over the world. It was almost a non-budget production with no support of the main film foundations (beside MAKOR foundation that helped with post-production) and most disappointing – the film was rejected by all Israeli television stations, until this very day. We believed the film should become an educational tool for high schools, as a trigger for a class discussion about social and ethnic issues in Israel.

Unfortunately I do not expect the educational system to deal officially with the Black Panthers movement or with the Mizrahi struggle in general, largely because I do not expect anything from such a system to begin with. But the larger question that disturbed me in the 1990s was why Mizrahi researchers, writers, intellectuals and organizations also choose to ignore the Black Panthers? After 30 years, many of these people were still afraid to identify with the Black Panthers struggle, as if it was a case of a private struggle carried out by a particular band of ‘not nice’ youth (to use former Israeli P.M Golda Meir’s famous remark about them) from the Musrara neighborhood. Mizrahi politicians then loved to emphasize that ‘We are not Black Panthers’, thus implying that in contrast to the Panthers, they are indeed ‘nice’. All of that has changed! During the last decade and a half, we have seen young Mizrahim directly identifying with the Black Panthers and more so organizing in groups with names such “The New Black Panthers” and “the Not Nice”. We see more and more publications about the Panthers and the struggle, we hear politicians using the language of the Panthers and even seeking their endorsement! I feel very privileged to have lived through this change, and more so being part of the change.

Once again, from today’s 45-year retrospective, and after engaging in a thorough research of my own, I state without hesitation that the Black Panthers were the groundbreaking catalyst for the Mizrahi struggle in Israel. Israel before March 1971 was a different Israel than that of after March 1971. In the former, the economic and cultural oppression was accepted by Mizrahim with submissiveness, except for short rebellious outbursts which were repressed with an iron fist by the government and its Mizrahi collaborators, as in the case of the Wadi Salib Uprising in 1959. The Panthers contributed to unmasking the economic and social relations in Israel and revealed it to be a sheer battlefield. Israel before the appearance of the Black Panthers, refused to admit its policy of inequality and denied its oppressive treatment of Mizrahim. Yet almost half a

century later, Israel can no longer deny this economic and cultural oppression which today is becoming increasingly acute. The state is therefore in need of far more sophisticated mechanisms and means of manipulation than those of mere denial that it used in the past. Today, this increasing inequality is conspicuous in the undisguised war of the rich launched against any policy or self-organization of the Mizrahim aimed at addressing their socio-political woes. Of course, it is only a question of time before the masses of oppressed workers fight back.

Sami Shalom Chetrit, PhD

Sami Shalom Chetrit is a Poet, writer, filmmaker and activist. Studied at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and Columbia University in New York. He was among the founders and leaders of KEDMA, the association for equal education in Israel, and HAKESHET, a Mizrahi social movement. He is the author of numerous articles and books on ethnic relations, culture, society, education and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Lives in NY and teaches at Queens College.