Constructing and Transcending Boundaries, Questioning Identities in Palestine/Eretz Yisrael

Guest Editors’ Note
Na’ama Ben Ze’ev and Anat Kidron

This issue of *Journal of Levantine Studies* presents papers from the 2015 workshop “Boundaries and Crossing Boundaries between Communities in Palestine/Eretz Yisrael in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” conducted at the Gottlieb Schumacher Institute for Research of the Christian Presence in Palestine in the Modern Era, under the auspices of the University of Haifa. The workshop’s starting point was that borders, physical as well as symbolic, should be regarded as spaces for negotiating identities. Drawn by elites and other powerful agents, borders are aimed at constructing a homogeneous, stable, and consistent identity. Simultaneously, borders constitute a liminal space in which identities are consolidated, negotiated, and transformed. Hence, border areas, by definition, reflect the duality of the social world: they are stable and constantly transforming, pre-given and constructed, and they separate and connect categories and actors.¹

Negotiating identities and their boundaries often involves the use of force and coercion. Efforts to preserve separation in border areas include explicit means, such as prohibitions and sanctions, and implicit means, such as justifying cultural hierarchies of “us” and “them.” Maintaining the separation between social and cultural identities often serves as a mechanism for preserving a social hierarchy.² Hence, challenging rigid identities and blurring border areas can be seen as a form of resisting hierarchies and undermining power structures. Whereas the construction of social boundaries is usually controlled by elites or by those with the power to do so, the blurring and crossing of these borders may very well reflect the agency of more marginalized actors, who—by their very actions and interactions in and across communal borders—challenge well-defined identities and social categorizations.³
The articles collected in this themed issue of *Journal of Levantine Studies* focus on this latter form of agency. They examine individuals or groups who questioned national, ethnic, and social separations in their daily life in 20th-century Palestine/Eretz Yisrael. The last two decades have seen a rise in scholarly interest in the history of mixed urban spaces, blurred cultural categories, and personal interactions that transcended ethnic and national divisions in Palestine/Eretz Yisrael. In his pioneering study Zachary Lockman criticizes national historiography that tends to focus on either the Zionist or Palestinian collective and to portray conflict as the only mode of interaction between the two communities. He implements an alternative, relational history, while observing the history of labor unions in Palestine from the late Ottoman period to the end of the Mandate. Deborah Bernstein’s work on Jewish and Arab workers in Mandatory Haifa examines the national boundaries that were created despite common class interests. Bernstein and Tami Razi examine the connections between nationalism and patriarchy by combining the categories of nation and gender. The writings of Boaz Lev Tov, Michelle Campos, Menachem Klein, Abigail Jacobson and Moshe Naor, and others show that belonging to a particular community, mainly a religious or ethnic one, did not invalidate other affiliations until the 1948 war and the establishment of the State of Israel.

With this issue we wish to contribute to this discourse and emphasize the important role played by individuals and local communities, usually marginalized, in negotiating identities by crossing the boundaries of their times.

**Dotan Halevy** presents the agonies of a Zionist teacher sent by the Hebrew Teachers Union to Gaza in the early twentieth century. The teacher’s writing reveals the intricate relations between the Zionist institutions in late Ottoman Palestine, the Sephardi Jews in Palestine and elsewhere, and the indigenous Jews of Palestine, as well as the Palestinian Jews’ relations with their Arab neighbors. Halevy contends that prior to World War I, relations between these groups were still in flux.

Tensions between communal identities, national activity, and the Zionist institutions also concern **Anat Kidron**. She suggests that the hardships of World War I generated new coalitions within the Jewish urban communities. Their cooperation, in organizing mutual help and the distribution of foreign aid, blurred the prewar categories of Sephardim versus Ashkenazim and Orthodox versus Zionists.

**Yair Seltenreich** observes the distress of an individual teacher dealing with the pressures issuing from the Zionist cultural hegemony. Based on a careful reading of the diaries of a high school teacher in Haifa written during the years 1938–1940,
Seltenreich presents a subtle mechanism of rewards and sanctions used to mobilize all employees of a prestigious educational institute for the national cause. He highlights the inner conflict of an individual struggling to adapt to collective social and national boundaries.

Na’ama Ben Ze’ev is concerned with the undermining of social and cultural differences between rural and urban Palestinian Arabs during the Mandate. She observes rural migration to towns, stressing the migrants’ role as agents of change through their frequent return visits and the material and leisure cultures they brought with them. Their lives combined urbanization, as part of the transition to modernity, with continuity of the patriarchal social order. Hence, rural migrants problematize the national historiography that portrays villagers as impeding modernity.

The last article focuses on symbolic and concrete mechanisms of boundary construction between Jews and Palestinians in the State of Israel. Amer Dahamshe explores an initiative of official street naming and signage in Tur’an, an Arab town in the Lower Galilee, during the years 2008–2013. This initiative of the appointed Jewish mayor serves to illustrate how state control over local space is justified by the discourse of modernity. Dahamshe uncovers the national subtext of this specific discourse and points out local forms of resistance to the municipal project.

The documents section features an act of an ongoing translation, as explained in Nathalie Alyon’s introduction. Holekh al ha-ruah (Walking on winds), translated by Yonatan Mendel, is the Hebrew title of Salman Natour’s Safar ʿala safar, originally published in Arabic in 2008. Mendel’s Hebrew translation of the book was published as part of the Maktoub series in 2016. Following the publication in Hebrew, we have chosen to publish in the document section a selection of the first chapter, and to name it “The Journey Without.”

We thank the editorial board of the Journal of Levantine Studies for their professional assistance and collaboration. We wish to thank the anonymous readers of the articles comprising this issue: their comments helped improve the final versions. We also acknowledge with gratitude Esther Yankelevitch, Gal Amir, Reuven Gafni, Moriel Ram, Orit Manor, and Eldar Alfasi, who participated in the workshop, for sharing their knowledge and valuable insights, which contributed to earlier versions of the articles.
Notes


6 Deborah Bernstein, *Nashim ba-shulayim: Migdar u-leumiyot be-Tel Aviv ba-Mandatorit* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2008); Tami Razi, *Yaldei ha-hefker: Ha-hatser ha-ahorit shel Tel Aviv ba-Mandatorit* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009).