**Introduction**

At the dawn of the 19th century, European artists and scholars made their way to the “Near East,” driven by the Christian-theological purpose of locating the cradle of Christianity (the “Holy Land”),[[1]](#footnote-2) as well as by anthropological-scientific aims that included documenting and researching the “Orient.” The studies and visual results of these journeys, which first appeared in painting and later in photography, reflected the ways in which the West perceived the East, a cultural-historical development that was redefined by Edward Said in its modern context as Orientalism.[[2]](#footnote-3)

This critical concept, used to analyze the relations between East and West, became established in 1978 with the publication of Said’s book *Orientalism*. Said’s book challenged the representation of the East, exposing the biased manner in which (primarily European) Western culture related to the Orient. According to Said, the principle intellectual issue sparked by Orientalism was the “altogether regrettable tendency of any knowledge based on such hard-and-fast distinctions as ‘East’ and ‘West’ to channel thought into a West or an East compartment.”[[3]](#footnote-4) Said applied the term “Orientalism” to all the interactions between the European powers and the “Orient,” in his words: “Orientalism is a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts.”[[4]](#footnote-5) Said asserts that the West invented and established the “Orient” as a monolithic surface to reflect its own inverse image, thereby imputing to the “East” everything about itself which it sought to reject, condemn, and push away – everything that helped it constitute its identity as distinct and separate from the deplorable “East.” Said claims that the Eurocentric, Western culture created a longstanding tradition of fallacious, prejudice-inflected, “Orientalist” representations of Asia and the Near East, which served as a justification for European colonial aspirations. The Orient was described as wild, romantic, and erotic – but simultaneously as primitive, passive, backwards and weak in comparison with the military and economic might of the West. According to Said, the Western colonialist, who went in search of the exotic, turned a blind eye towards the Eastern Other, constituting such an Other solely as an object of power-relations for Western domination. Thus, the term “Orientalism” does not in fact relate to the East at all, but rather to the Western subject’s perception.

Although Said did not refer to it explicitly in his book, Zionism also belongs to the numerous and diverse Orientalist perspectives. The point of view of the Zionist movement gave rise to visual representations of the Orient that were often different both from those produced by the Western powers, and from those produced by the Old Yishuv,[[5]](#footnote-6) which continued the tradition of decorative art for religious purposes. The local art that dates from the birth of Zionism as a political-ideological movement at the end of the 19th century and the Aliyah[[6]](#footnote-7) of European Zionists to the territory they defined as the Land of Israel was characterized by distinctly national motifs.[[7]](#footnote-8) It took shape as part of the formation of modern Jewish nationalism, and strove to satisfy the needs of the emergent Zionist movement. As will be clarified in the following chapters, Orientalist precepts and concepts expressed themselves in a unique way in pre-statehood art, where they became entwined in forms of national, ethnic, religious, and aesthetic representations.

An examination of the visual culture produced in the Land of Israel around the time of the beginning of Zionism explicitly discloses the roots of the fantasy surrounding the image of the “New Jew,” and this figure’s ambivalent relationship to the East. Photographs of members of the first Aliyot in full Oriental costume may cause present-day viewers to react with curiosity, wonder, and amusement. Alternatively, these photographs may evoke moral and ideological repugnance, causing viewers to recoil. Such fraught responses give us cause to consider our own culture, no less than the historical culture of early Zionism; they indicate, moreover, that visual representations are a particularly fertile ground for discussing the formation of Zionist consciousness in the context of Orientalist discourse.

This book deals with cultural products created in the early days of Zionism and thereafter, and refers primarily to “modern Orientalism”: a term coined by Said to discuss the expressions of Orientalist ideas from the 19th century onwards. This period witnessed not only the emergence of Zionism, but it was also the moment in time when two central inventions took shape: photography, and the (re)invention of the Holy Land. Both inventions – the one, technological, and the other, semiotic and theological – were fatefully tied together. The camera affixed the representation of the Holy Land to the two dimensional, photographic plane, thereby flattening its motives, and transporting the image from the realm of the imaginary into reality. The credence of these supposedly reliable representations of the East was strengthened by the perceived impartiality of the photographic device. This established the territory as flat and two-dimensional, both in the concrete sense, as a photograph that could be purchased, and in a metaphorical sense that concerns the “essence of Orientalism,” as it took shape in the Western mind. “Orientalist photography,” therefore refers to photographs taken by the West – that, is by European colonialists – for their own consumption, and accurately represents the role of the area in Orientalist thought.

We must distinguish between the use of the term “Oriental” as naive word used to refer to the East – as, for example, in the speech of a subject whose place is the East, and who seeks to neutrally designate a particular region – and the critical concept of Orientalism which refers to a manner of expression concerned with imitating, representing, and reinventing the East from a Western perspective. The primary tenet of Orientalists, subjects who by definition are not from the East, concerns the manner in which they perceive the local, indigenous population. “Oriental photography,” or “Oriental attire” are, therefore, innocent representations of the East – for example, photographs from the East or costume and clothing that originates in the area defined in global geography as the East. This usage lacks a critical dimension, and is supposedly linked to an unbiased geographical marker. As opposed to this, an “Orientalist photograph” or “Orientalist clothing” are markers of the tendentious, cultural position of the person who makes use of them, and they refer to a (prior) existence of the Orient and the Oriental. As this book shows, the context of their appearance presents us with a danger of interpreting Oriental objects according to Orientalist codes. European photographers briefly visited the East as envoys of the European powers, and their photographs primarily rendered visual representations of the Holy Land. Photographs by Zionists, on the other hand, mostly served a different national ideology, which also included the desire to return to a Semitic origin and become integrated into the East. This unique Orientalist position adds another layer to Said’s thought, and the corpus of photographic works attesting to it is a wellspring of historical and cultural insights that distinguish between local Orientalist expressions and those of their European counterparts.

Jewish photographers began working in the Land of Israel at the end of the 19th century, with the first Zionist Aliyot. Some scholars consider the photographic documentation of Theodor Herzl’s meeting with Kaiser Wilhelm II, in 1898, and that of the establishment of the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael) in 1901, as the initial points of reference for the use of photography as a medium to create new support for the national ethos of the emergent state.[[8]](#footnote-9) During the Second (1904-1914), Third (1919-1923), and Fourth (1924-1929) Aliyot, professional photographers arrived in the Land of Israel from Germany, Russia, and Poland; they made a living primarily from pre-ordered studio portraits, documenting the social events of the Yishuv, and producing tourist postcards. Among the first prominent Jewish photographers who worked in the Land of Israel were Joseph Schweig (1902-1983), Yeshayahu Rafaelowitz (1870-1956), Tsadok Bassan (1882-1956), Ephraim Moses Lilien (1874-1925), and Abraham Soskin (1881-1963).[[9]](#footnote-10)

These photographers were all active during the 1929 riots and the Great Arab Revolt (1936-1939), which were key points in the history of Zionism (known as *meora*’*ot tarpat* and *meora*’*ot tartzav*, respectively).[[10]](#footnote-11) In 1929 the naively idealistic Orientalism characteristic of the first Aliyot was shattered, and with it the desire to become part of the East by living in the manner of its local residents. Photographs of Jews in Orientalist dress dwindled rapidly, as the East ceased to constitute a horizon in their process of identity formation.[[11]](#footnote-12)

Thus, it seems that while Europeans in the colonies and in Europe posed for photographs dressed as Eastern “Others” in order to reinforce, by way of opposition, their own identity as “Westerners,” the members of the first Aliyot did so in an attempt to create an array of authentic, local representations that would express their intrinsic belonging to the Land of Israel; this discloses a desire to co-opt the very concept of indigenousness, even if such a belonging could never be complete or devoid of reservations. Colonial Europeans, on the other hand, chose to dress as Orientals as a sign of their patronage and ability to penetrate and appropriate the Eastern identity at will: in donning Oriental costume, European colonialists had no intention of crossing established cultural boundaries, but only of momentarily “visiting” the opposite identity, thereby strengthening their own.[[12]](#footnote-13) Until 1929, the members of the first Aliyot, by contrast, borrowed what they understood as Oriental visual characteristics out of a desire to integrate into the Orient, albeit this desire was partial and somewhat reserved. Their “ego-photography” was an attempt to hasten and attest to their transformation into a “new Other,” whose image was cast in the presumed model of an ancient, historical, Oriental Jew. They employed the culture of Western colonialism to construct their new identity, which sought to stress the Jews’ cultural proximity to the land as a local, indigenous, Oriental people.

In order to produce their new image, the members of the first Aliyot used articles of clothing and objects belonging to local groups and peoples, including Bedouins, Palestinians, and representatives of the Ottoman Empire. Their photographs made use of turbans, keffiyehs, abayas, and accompanying accessories such as gold bracelets and earthen clay water jugs, all of which served as established features through which Orientalist practice represented the Orient. And yet, as will be made clear in the following chapters, this staged, photographic act remained purely an act of imitation; true, the roots of this act lay in a sincere desire to assimilate into the Orient, but its Orientalist practice did not reflect a real rapprochement between Eastern European Jews and the local Arabs, but only the manner in which the Zionist protagonists of these photos desired to imagine themselves. Gazing at the photographs in which they appeared wearing local costume, they were not peering through a window, but rather looking into a mirror. Their desire to identify the historic homeland – and themselves, as part of it – resulted in an act of imitation, a symbolic appropriation of the Orient by people who gazed at it with pseudo-Western eyes, enlisting the Orientalist act to actualize their own Westerness.

As noted, Abraham Soskin’s oeuvre is a prototypical example of pre-Israeli Orientalist photography, a unique strand of Orientalism that developed as part of local Jewish culture during the 20th century. In 1905, Soskin, who had made Aliyah a year earlier from Russia as part of the Second Aliyah, opened a professional photography studio in Jaffa. He made his living as a photographer, and later became known as the official photographer of the city of Tel-Aviv. In 1914, Tel-Aviv municipal funds were used to provide Soskin with a professional studio and home on Hertzl Street, 24.[[13]](#footnote-14) But Soskin’s status and reputation are not the only reason to select his photographs as a lens through which to view the Second Aliyah’s image of the Orient. Soskin’s studio created a far greater number of Orientalist photographs than other photographers of his time, and his body of work is accessible for archival research.[[14]](#footnote-15) Moreover, his artistic and business practices also make a study of his work particularly rewarding: Soskin instilled his photographs with multilayered, visual content by using various costumes, backgrounds, lighting props, accessories, and arrangements. His detailed notes allow us to identify the photographed figures as Jews who arrived from Eastern Europe, and thereby help us to understand the cultural and political context in which the photographs were produced. The pronounced visual similarity between Soskin’s Orientalist studio photographs and similar photographs produced by his non-Jewish contemporaries serves as a convenient point of departure for a comparative study. Finally, during the 1910s and 1920s, Soskin was the only Zionist photographer who had a professional studio in Tel-Aviv, and he belonged to a small handful of people who documented the city and its residents at this time.

The main group of photographs discussed in this book can be described as “Pre-Israeli Orientalist Photography.” These photographs were produced as part of a staged encounter between a photographer and a subject (or a group of subjects) during the first three decades of the 20th century, that is, during the time when the members of the first Aliyot were establishing their self-image as part of the process of creating a national identity. As such, these photographs also clearly attest to ideological intentions, and they are aimed at creating a new, Zionist, and local Jewish subject.[[15]](#footnote-16)

As will be related below, the photographic corpus examined here discloses that the meeting with the Orient goes beyond a Western separation and distancing from the Oriental. This meeting also suggests possibilities for a synthesis of identities, expressing a desire for integration, and a yearning to efface an identity of provenance while adopting one based on the Other. Zionist ideology viewed this synthesis as the diasporic Jew’s transformation into the “New Jew,” a process achieved by appropriating the supposedly original, ancient, national identity. The passion for the Orient, the desire for assimilation, for the unique mixing of old and new – this kind of conflictual dualism was characteristic of early Zionism.[[16]](#footnote-17) The meaning and interpretation of this Janus-faced, Eastern-Western identity was the subject of heated debates among members of the Zionist movement. The positions spanned a wide arc of responses, from the extreme “Westernizers” – who considered the Orient a primitive place, inherently equatorial and lazy – to radical “Easternizers,” such as Chavurat HaRoyim (the Shepherds’ Collective), who sought to assimilate into the East and even considered converting to Islam. The majority opinion lay somewhere between these two poles. At a certain historical moment, sometime between the First and the Fourth Aliyot, Zionists who had already made Aliyah attempted to add Oriental components to their Western identity. The photographs analyzed in this book bear the stamp of this desire for assimilation, which was seen by contemporaries as an expression of a lust for life, a form of salvation and even redemption; above all else, it expressed a yearning to belong to an authentic source.

1. As this book examines the ideological position of Zionists shortly after the movement’s inception, we will mostly use the term the “Land of Israel,” which was common in Zionist speech and discourse at the time, and is still used in contemporary scholarship. However, when discussing European, Christian photographers, we will use the term “Holy Land,” which reflects the manner in which they understood the locale, and when indigenous, Palestinian photographers are discussed we will refer to the area as “Palestine.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The European study of the Orient began as early as the 14th century, but Said is widely credited with coining the term “Orientalism” in its current usage, and characterizing the Orientalist approach as based upon a dichotomy between the “Orient” and the “Occident.” See: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ibid., 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid., 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This term refers to Jewish communities who were living in the Land of Israel- Ottoman Palestine before the advent of Zionism. PLEASE CONFIRM THIS CORRECTION [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The meaning of the word “Aliyah,” pl. “Aliyot,” in Hebrew is “to go up.” This is the term used by Zionists to describe the immigration of Jews to the Land of Israel. Making Aliyah is the cornerstone of Zionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The term “Zionist” was coined in 1890 by Nathan Birnbaum, who established the first German-Jewish newspaper to make Jewish nationalism its motto, in 1885. The word “Zionist” first appeared in this paper as a substitute for the widely used phrase “Jewish-National.” See Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*, transl. Oded Wolkstein, (Tel-Aviv: Resling, 2007), p. 133 [Heb.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The organized use of photography began at a later stage, in the 1920s, when photography departments were opened in the national Zionist institutions. See: Rona Sela, *Photography in Palestine / the Land of Israel in the 1930s and 1940s*, pp. 17-19; see also Nisan Peretz, *Time: One Hundred Years of Photography in the Land of Israel, an Exhibition Catalog*, (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2000), p. 8 [Heb.]. At the time, the active institutions of the Zionist movement included the Executive Committee, the Palestine Bureau, the Berlin Palestine Office, and the Jewish National Fund. The protocols of their discussions and decisions are held by the Central Zionist Archives. See: Shilo Margalit, “What's Good for the People or What's Good for the Country? The Zionist Movement’s Attitude towards Aliya during the Second Aliya,” *Katedra* 46 (1987): 109–22 [Heb.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. The photographers’ work are included in the following archives: the Municipal Archive (Jerusalem), the Municipal Archive (Tel-Aviv), the Rishon LeZion Archive (Rishon LeZion), the Rehovot Archive (Rehovot), the Rosh Pina Archive (Rosh Pina), the Weizmann Institute Archive (Rehovot), the Beit Ariella Archive (Tel-Aviv), the Israel Museum Archive (Jerusalem), the Eretz Israel Museum (Tel-Aviv), the archive of the Tel-Aviv Museum of Art (Tel-Aviv), the Central Zionist Archives (Jerusalem), the Beit Hashomer Archive (Kfar Giladi), and the archive of the Lavon Institute for Labour Movement Research (Tel-Aviv). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Anita Shapira’s book deals with the ideology and perspective of Zionism in the Land of Israel in the 1920s and 1930s, and it includes a discussion of the changing attitudes in the Yishuv towards the local Arab population after the 1929 Arab riots. See: Anita Shapira, *The Futile Struggle: The Jewish Labor Controversy 1929-1939*, (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved, 1977), [Heb.]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. The original drive of the members of the first Aliyot included the desire to assimilate into the Oriental landscape, which, they held, was the ancient womb of the Jewish nation, and to create a locally based “New Jew,” as part of a process of “cultural invention.” Later, however, certainly after the 1929 riots, this initial impetus dissipated, and aspirations stressing the need for modernization, secularization, and a distinct Zionist identity, devoid of local Oriental characteristics, gained the upper hand. At the same time, the national conflict between Jews and Palestinians escalated, and Jewish society gradually abandoned the agrarian principle of its existence in favor of a militaristic one. This shift in orientation is well reflected in the visual representations of the elites and in the professional activities of the photographers. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. And yet, in certain cases the cultural boundaries were indeed crossed, and Europeans who settled in the colonies did, to a degree, appropriate indigenous culture. For example, the term *pied-noir* (“black foot,” in French), refers to French and other European colonialists who lived in Algeria during French rule, or to Europeans who were born and raised in the colonies, and thus differed from the citizens of the metropole. As Helen Cixous put it: “Algeria was French, without ever having been French.” See: “Pied-noir,” in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* second Edition, XI, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), pp. 799; Phillip Chiviges Naylor, *France and Algeria*: *A History of Decolonization and Transformation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida), 2000, pp. 9-23, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Guy Raz, *Eyes Which Have Seen Soskin: An Exhibition Catalogue*, (Tel-Aviv: Beit HaOmanim, 1999), p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Soskin’s photographs are held in the archive of the Lavon Institute for Labour Movement Research. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Hanna Naveh refers to the group photograph in relation to the Zionist ideology of the Second Aliyah: “A key component of the group photograph was the element of communal participation that turns a collection of people into a group – a collective that has more in common than not. Group photographs therefore emphasize the mental cohesion of the group by structing its physical cohesion. As a product of cooperation and inclusion, the group portrait is, therefore, a reliable marker of collective experience.” See: Hanna Naveh, “An Incidental Group Portrait: Was it Ever Real?” in Judith Bar-Elm Yigal Schwartz and Tamar S. Hess, eds., *Literature and Society in Modern Hebrew Culture: Papers in Honor of Gershon Shaked*, (Jerusalem: Keter, 2000), p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Tom Segev claims that the leaders of political Zionism – Herzl, Nordau, and Jabotinsky – presented Zionism as bringing European culture to the Orient, a defensive line staked out on the marches of Asia and Africa. Jabotinsky even held that the Jewish Aliyah to the Orient was intended to erase their Oriental identity. Segev lists a number of teachers and educators, among them Aaron Abraham Kabak and Shmuel Yavnieli, who stressed the “mental energy” of the Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, as opposed to (in their opinion) the Oriental lassitude of the Yemenite Jews. See: Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), p. 175. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)