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### Exploring the lived experiences of Middle-Eastern and North African (Mena) Jews through narrative inquiry using a digital storytelling approach

Brandy B. Shufutinsky

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EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MIDDLE-EASTERN AND  
NORTH AFRICAN (MENA) JEWS THROUGH NARRATIVE INQUIRY  
USING A DIGITAL STORYTELLING APPROACH

A Dissertation Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Department of International & Multicultural Education

In Partial Fulfilment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by  
Brandy B. Shufutinsky  
San Francisco  
30 April 2021

## THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

**ABSTRACT**

Cultural erasure has led to the virtual erasure of many communities from learning spaces. Discrimination, ignorance, and the politicization of knowledge production are all factors that lead to marginalization that sees certain communities being excluded from academia. One such community are the Jewish communities from Middle-Eastern and North African (MENA) lands. This dissertation directly confronts the erasure of MENA Jewish communities and the knowledge they hold by providing a platform for members of these communities to share their experiences.

Storytelling is one way to combat cultural and historical erasure (Iseke, 2013). Not only does storytelling provide a way to resist marginalization, it also provides a method to disseminate accounts of historical significance. The forced exile of Jewish communities who had been present in the Middle-East and North Africa for millennia transformed traditions and practices that pre-dated the colonial forces that pushed them out. Unfortunately, we are currently witnessing similar events with the expulsion of the last Jews of Yemen.

**SIGNATURE PAGE**

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

<u>Brandy Bernice Hayes Shufutinsky</u>	<u>30 April 2021</u>
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**DEDICATION**

*For my tribe, Anton, Dmitri, Noah, Zachary, and Hannah.... Everything I do, I do for  
you.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I stand on the shoulders of giants. Those who came before me sacrificed so that I can live the life that I do, with all of the privileges earned. My maternal grandparents, my Gran and Papa, left Jim Crow Mississippi so that their lineage would be able to achieve education that was denied them. They left behind all that they knew, their family and friends, and headed west. Without their sacrifice and bravery, I would not be here, earning my doctorate from the University of San Francisco. I only wish Papa was still here to be a part of this. My aunt and uncle, Charlotte and Dan, provided me a sense of safety and love always exactly when I needed it. They showed me the true meaning of hard work and dedication and for that I am forever grateful. Rita, my mother-in-law, may her memory be a blessing. She demonstrated unconditional love. Her strength and love are irreplaceable. To my mom, I thank you for having the spirit to push through seemingly insurmountable hardships to take care of us. Anton, the best man that I have ever known, you have always believed in and supported me. I love you. Saba, Maor, and Hen, I am forever in your debt for your willingness to share your stories. Because of you, your families and communities will live on.

This work has been a labor of love. It is my intention to live all of my days in a manner which makes my ancestors proud. That is the power of stories.... Knowing where I come from, knowing where I am, and knowing where I'm going. And that is exactly what I hope to pass on to my kids. Dmitri, Noah, Zach, and Hannah I love you and expect greatness from you.

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## CHAPTER I: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

There is a Yiddish proverb, “*G-d made man because he loves stories,*” that Elie Wiesel (1966) includes in the preface to his novel. Rabbi David M. Frank of Temple Solel in Cardiff, California describes Wiesel’s use of the proverb as an example of the importance of story, even when specific details are forgotten. I believe that the importance of stories lies not only in the details portrayed, but in emotions evoked from remembering and sharing experiences.

This project centers on narratives of Middle-Eastern and North African (MENA) Jews, and uses storytelling as a methodology and seeking to contest erasure by providing a platform for the forgotten stories and experiences of the MENA Jewish community to be shared. Because of this, I want to tell you a story. This tale tells the story of the Jewish people, specifically detailing some pieces of Middle-Eastern and North African (MENA) Jewish history that outline how MENA Jews came to be in Arab and Muslim lands as part of the greater Jewish diaspora. Though indigenous to the Middle East, Jewish people have lived far and wide around the world since being cast out of their land, exiled, and forced into bondage over centuries (Julius, 2018a). Details of the MENA Jewish story have been lost to time and in certain instances purposely omitted. The following stories offer a roadmap on how the Jewish people came to be dispersed throughout the region as members of the Jewish diaspora.

The tales below offer a glimpse into the experiences and history of the Jewish people, but are by no means inclusive of the totality and diversity of stories of the Jewish people in Israel or in the diaspora. Jewish people have been banished, returned home, and banished again over thousands of years. Without stories and narrative, the experiences of Jewish diaspora would have been lost. Knowing where one comes from and how one got there is an essential component in identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The story of the Jewish

diaspora is complicated and includes details that will not be explored in this study. However, what this dissertation study will do is add personal narrative to the historical timeline of Jewish exile, serving as a platform for MENA Jews to speak on their experiences as an exiled people.

*This story begins with the tale of the first Jew, Abraham, and how he came to be in the land of Israel. Over four thousand years ago, there lived a man named Avram. Avram and his wife Sarah, traveled to the land of Canaan after receiving a covenant from G-d. He was renamed Avraham (Abraham), which means ‘a father of many nations.’ Avraham and Sarah settled in Hebron, where he purchased land from local people. Both Avraham and Sarah were well known to be good righteous people, who spread the word of the one G-d. Avraham is known as the first Jew. He and Sarah are buried at the Cave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs (The Torah, 1962/2015).*

*Many are familiar with the story of Exodus and Moses. However, many historically significant details on how the Jewish people came to be in Egypt, first as free people and then as slaves, are not included in historical texts. The experiences and contributions of Jews in Egypt have been omitted, either deliberately or unintentionally, perhaps contributing to an overall ignorance to the existence of the Jewish community in Egypt. This next part speaks of that story, the story of how Jews came to live in Egypt under the rule of Pharaoh.*

*A long time ago there were 12 sons of Israel—also known as the twelve tribes of Israel. Although not a popular parenting choice, Israel had a favorite amongst his 12 sons, Joseph. Being jealous of their favored brother, Joseph’s brothers tried to kill him. When that plan failed, they sold him into slavery and he ended up in Egypt. A great famine struck the land of Canaan, which led Joseph’s brothers and many other Jewish people to flee to the land of Egypt. By this time, Joseph had fallen into favor*

*with the Pharaoh and was no longer a slave. However, when so many Jews began settling in the land, Pharaoh Ramses II decided to enslave them all. Around the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE Moses led the Jewish people out of Egypt, and they returned to Canaan. Now, since not all of the Jews left Canaan for Egypt during the time of famine, there was still a Jewish presence in the land (The Torah, 1962/2015).*

The historical presence of Jewish people in Iran, Kurdistan, and Iraq is known, but as stated earlier in this tale, there is not much conversation about how they got there. The next few parts of this story speak on how Jews came to live as diaspora, not only in Middle Eastern lands outside of Israel, but also how they were taken out of their indigenous land to Europe.

*Many years ago, there was a period known as the time of the judges. It was a chaotic time, with disunity. The land of Canaan was divided up between the 12 tribes, with the south belonging to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and the remaining 10 tribes living in the north. Eventually, there was a time of the united monarchy, around 1000 BCE until the death of King Solomon in 931 BCE. The line of kings during this time were as follows: King Saul, King David, King Solomon, and King Rehoboam (Solomon's son). King Rehoboam's reign saw division once again, this time between the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). In fact, the region was seeing many wars. Even the Egyptians and Babylonians were fighting. Around 722/721 BCE the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians. Now, the Assyrians had a tradition that once they conquered a people, they would send them into exile and bring in fellow Assyrians to settle the land. And so—the Jewish people were once again forced from their land and the idea of the “lost tribes” was born. Some say they went to Medes (The Torah, 1962/2015), which is present day Iranian Kurdistan. Which means, this may have been when the Jewish presence in modern day Iran may have started. The*

*1979 revolution in Iran saw most of the Persian Jewish community flee out of fear of religious and ethnic persecution in the newly established Islamic Republic of Iran (Julius, 2018a). My research has found that stories from the Persian Jewish community are often left out of curricula about the Middle East, erasing Persian Jews from regional history.*

*In 614/612 BCE the Assyrians were defeated by the Babylonians, who took over every place that was under Assyrian control. There were still Jews in the south, in Judah. Now the Babylonians do not have a similar practice to exile their conquered, like the Assyrians. However, they do require the Jews to pay taxes, which they agree to pay... for a while. Once the Jews refuse to continue to pay taxes, the Babylonians destroy the Temple and exile the Jews of Judah—taking them to Babylon (modern day Iraq/Baghdad). And this is one theory on how Jews have had a presence in Iraq for over 2500 years (The Torah, 1962/2015).*

*In the year 539 BCE, Cyrus of Persia, also known as Cyrus the Great, defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus issued a decree that all exiled people can return to the land. He even gave them money and support to rebuild the Temple. Some returned and took Cyrus up on his offer to rebuild the Temple. However, many did not and remained in exile throughout the Middle East (The Torah, 1962/2015).*

*Around 200/300 BCE Alexander the Great of Greece led his people to defeat the Persians. During this time some Jews traveled to Alexandria Egypt, and other places in the Mediterranean, intermingling with people and translating the Torah. Jews had a period of sovereignty in Eretz Yisrael until the arrival of the Romans. The Romans defeated the Greeks and there was a revolt between 68-72 CE. Around 70 CE the Temple was once again destroyed, this time by the Romans. Jews were again exiled. The Romans plundered Jerusalem, using their plunder to build things like the*

*Colosseum. There was another revolt around 132/135 CE, Bar Kokhba, that was crushed by the Romans, leading to Jews being enslaved. Many say this is when the Jews began their exile in Europe—as Roman slaves (The Torah, 1962/2015).*

*The rulers of Spain, followed by the rulers of Portugal a few years later, decided that they no longer wanted Jews in their land. In the 1400s CE the Inquisition led to Sephardic Jews being exiled from the Iberian Peninsula to lands near and far. They settled in places like Amsterdam, England, Caribbean, S. America, to North Africa (Morocco, Libya, the Levant), Balkans, Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria (Ojedamata, 2017).*

Storytelling has been a method of knowledge production and discovery for centuries. Nations of peoples have relied on storytelling as a method to maintain connection to cultural heritage and history and to support knowledge. Indigenous peoples around the globe sustain and maintain their own epistemologies over time, and pass these from generation to generation (Boje, 2016; Caxaj, 2015; Datta, 2018a, 2018b; De Silva, 2019; Fernández-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2018; Gainsford & Robertson, 2019; Kawano, 2019). However, these narratives are sometimes ignored in academic institutions, and in the traditionally accepted academic literature, particularly in Western traditions of knowledge production (Ahenakew, 2016; Caxaj, 2015; Doulatram, 2016; Rosile et al., 2013; Sibel, 2019). This practice of institutionalized academic ignorance marginalizes indigeneity and the knowledge that is derived from it, and potentially degrading truth and historical and cultural facts, resulting in cultural erasure (Garren, 2017; Levy, 2017; Na’puti, 2019; Renteria, 2020; Sweeney, 2020), including in the Jewish diaspora. This dissertation study aims to play a small part in bringing ignored stories and experiences to light. Though there is knowledge about the history of the Jewish people and some conversations about how Jews came to live as diaspora outside of Israel, many experiences of MENA Jews have been left out of the narrative. The narrative

experiences of those who lived and died have been erased or ignored in favor of a narrative that is rooted in an agenda suited for the majority, favoring rights of discoverers over rights of Indigenous people (Yahel et al., 2012). International law hesitated to recognize the rights of Indigenous people, fearing instability and separatism (Yahel et al., 2012). As outlined in the tales above and considering the following factors that have been used to consider indigeneity, the Jewish people are indigenous to *Eretz Israel*, even those Jews who have been a part of the Jewish diaspora for millennia: (1) Descendants of the original inhabitants of the land, (2) living on the land for “time immemorial,” (3) sovereignty before colonization, (4) oppressed by foreigners, (5) connection to the land by the group, (6) subjugated population, (7) distinct cultural, economic, social, and political organizations, and (8) identification and recognition as indigenous (Cobo, 1982; Yahel et al., 2012).

The World Council of Indigenous Peoples declares that indigenous peoples are such population groups as we are, who from an old-age time have inhabited the lands where we live, who are aware of having a character of our own, with social traditions and means of expression that are linked to the country inherited from our ancestors, with a language of our own, and having certain essential and unique characteristics which confer upon us the strong conviction of belonging to a people, who have an identity in ourselves and should be thus regarded by others. (Cobo, 1982, p. 5)

Through storytelling, these experiences will become part of the overall story of the Jewish people, both as indigenous to Israel and as diaspora, living in exile in foreign lands. This research gives room for individual and collective narratives to be used as a method of resisting the erasure of culture, history, experiences, and knowledge. During the twentieth century over 850,000 Jews were expelled from or fled Muslim and Arab lands (Shulewitz, 2000). This project will be centered on the experiences of those MENA Jews from Middle-

Eastern and North African lands whose experiences and stories have been left out of academic circles.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Cultural genocide has impacted what information and knowledge is produced and discovered by erasing histories and negating to present narratives from marginalized individuals and communities (Bruchac, 2007). Unfortunately, it is only recently that academia is acknowledging that certain perspectives have been ignored. Over the past few decades there has been a rise in the incorporation of Indigenous storytelling in curricula. However, in my experience many Indigenous communities are still being left out of the discussion. Indigenous communities to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have largely been ignored in global conversations in academia on indigeneity and ethnic studies, in favor of narratives from peoples who are indigenous to the Americas and the Pacific islands.

Communities that are indigenous to the Middle East: Kurds, Imazighen, and Jews, have had their experiences minimized and/or disregarded by the rest of the world. Conversations and policies regarding genocides, expulsions, and war crimes do not take into consideration the experiences of the nations of peoples that originate in what are now predominately Muslim or Arab countries. History curricula simplify the stories that come from the Middle East and North Africa, ignoring the who, what, where, how, and why experiences of the Indigenous population.

This dissertation study will explore the stories and narratives of Indigenous Jewish communities that existed in predominately Muslim and Arab lands for centuries. Participants will come from Jewish communities whose stories have gone unrecognized by academia. Through the sharing and listening to the experiences of MENA Jews, perhaps this dissertation study will allow students to learn histories that they were unaware of, understanding that until we discuss **all** Indigenous peoples, we are doing a disservice to history and cultural wealth.

This study aims to shed light on the experiences of Jews from the Middle-East and North Africa by providing a platform for participants to share their lived experiences in their own words. Cultural erasure and marginalization of individuals and communities has led to ignorance about people and their experiences. This sharing, or storytelling, serves two purposes. First, it honors the experiences of MENA Jews as a way to share and gain knowledge. Second, this project provides opportunities for learning.

Experiences and stories are often left out of curricula, leaving room for history to be simplified and sanitized, using materials that are presented from a certain perspective in order to support a particular narrative (Geia et al., 2009). Students learn from materials that are presented from a certain perspective to support a particular narrative, often disregarding Indigenous ways of knowing in favour of Eurocentric knowledge (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Educators and administrators recycle texts and other learning materials that are outdated and lacking diverse voices, failing to present experiences from many communities and offering no counter-narrative to what is presented in traditional curricula (Geia et al., 2013). Geia et al. (2013) states that there has been:

A turning of the research tide in Eurocentric research paradigms, and a vital transformative emergence from the Indigenous oral methods of storytelling and knowledge creation, into Indigenous scholarly story writing and knowledge building that is crucial to privileging Indigenous voices in academia. (p. 14)

Issues surrounding diversity and inclusion are not new to curriculum development. There are active efforts to provide narratives and histories from individuals and communities of color, women, the LGBTQ+ population, and from the disabled community. Including stories from those communities combats cultural and historical erasure (Iseke, 2013).

Holocaust Studies is one field of study that challenges the omission of stories and information from institutions of learning. However, Holocaust Studies is not without

controversy. Some argue against the teaching of the Holocaust, falsely arguing that it presents a one-sided story that ignores the plight of Arab peoples living in the Levant. Others argue that studying the Holocaust is a method that can expose students to inequality and racism (Bromley & Russell, 2010). However, there have been few conversations about which stories, experiences, and narratives are and should be included in these studies. Largely, the stories, experiences, and narratives of Middle Eastern and North African Jews have been ignored in Holocaust Studies. This erasure has led to an ignorance to the experiences of Jews in Muslim/Arab lands during this time period. This research project will make space for these experiences to be documented and heard, attempting to add to the specific subject of Holocaust education and to academia in general, supporting informal Jewish learning spaces through storytelling.

### **Background and Need**

The narratives and experiences of MENA Jews have been largely missing from academic circles. When looking specifically at the subjects of history, social science, human geography, holocaust education, and cultural studies, first-person narratives from certain communities are often left out. Indigenous communities around the world are addressing this by formulating and participating in research that honors the experiences and knowledge of Indigenous peoples. Judy Iseke, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and C. Susana Caxaj are a few of the researchers who focus on storytelling as knowledge. Use of indigenous storytelling, such as explored and exhibited by the forementioned authors, is critical to the production, retention, and dissemination of knowledge of historical accounts and experiences of the MENA Jewish population in the Arab and Muslim world, and the prevention of erasure and minimization of historic significance.

In June 1941 Arab Iraqis launched a nazi inspired pogrom against the Iraqi Jewish community. This pogrom is known as the *Farhud*. Before 1941, Iraq had a Jewish

community numbering over 100,000. Although there was a history of anti-Jewish attacks in Iraq before the *Farhud*, these attacks increased as Iraq became the first Arab nation to gain independence and so became the center of the pan-Arab movement. Pan-Arabism found common ground with the anti-Jewish ideology of Nazi-ism. Iraqi Jews were subjected to murder, theft, rape, and exile. As a result of this persecution and genocide, during the next decade the majority of Iraqi Jews fled Iraq for Israel, effectively ending Jewish presence in Iraq, which existed for over 2,500 years, pre-dating Islam (Tsimhoni 2001).

Libya is one of the few countries in the Middle-East and North Africa that established Nazi style concentration death camps during the 1930s and 40s. In 1938 Libya instituted Race Protection Laws, which mandated that Jewish children were no longer allowed to attend school, intermarriage was deemed illegal, and passports held by Libyan Jews indicated their holders as “Jewish race.” In 1942 Libyan Jews were deported to concentration death camps throughout Libya and also to Algeria and Tunisia. Libyan Jews who held British or French citizenship were deported to concentration death camps in Europe. At the end of the Second World War, Libya was liberated by the British and conditions temporarily improved for the Libyan Jewish population. However, there was a pogrom in 1945 against the Jewish population that resulted in the deaths of 120 Libyan Jews and the destruction of numerous synagogues and Jewish owned properties. These types of pogroms, or riots, against the Libyan Jewish community continued over the next decade and a half. Laws were passed that denied Libyan Jews citizenship. By 1969 there were only approximately 100 Jews left in Libya. As of 2004, Libya’s Jewish community ceased to exist (Yad Vashem, n.d.).

After reviewing the literature, it became clear that documented experiences of Jews who lived in the diaspora in Arab and Muslim lands are not widely included in diverse circles of learning. Much of what is known about the experiences of MENA Jews is held in museum, like Yad Vashem in Jerusalem Israel. However, those experiences and first-person narratives

have largely been excluded from traditional centers of learning like schools, colleges, and universities.

The literature incorporated in this project speaks on storytelling as knowledge production, in the following three ways. First, considering the intention of research is as important as the research itself. Judy Iseke (2013) speaks of the importance of intention of a project, where the knowledge should be gathered, not simply out of curiosity, but as a way to pass along what is learned to future generations. Iseke discusses how storytelling as an act combats erasure—where intention is not only on producing knowledge, but on resisting erasure. Second, Geia et al. (2013) discuss how storytelling resists Eurocentric research methodologies by embracing an approach that is and has been central to Indigenous ways of knowing. Lastly, Susana Caxaj's (2015) approach demonstrates the interconnectedness between people and nature, and discusses how storytelling honors this connection through witnessing.

These three scholars provide examples on storytelling as knowledge production, honoring an Indigenous methodology to research. Narratives from the MENA Jewish community are lacking in the literature that speaks to storytelling as knowledge production. However, informal Jewish education is one center of learning where these experiences can add to storytelling as knowledge production, diversifying the learning that is already done in these spaces. This dissertation project seeks to add to the literature by including narratives from the MENA Jewish community, adding experiences from people indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa while also honoring a methodology MENA Jews have used for millennia to share stories and pass along knowledge and traditions.

Informal Jewish education (IJE) refers to the many methods, places, and stories that are included in Jewish learning. Sometimes IJE occurs in a traditional classroom, other times it is at libraries, museums, international trips, or Jewish community centers. IJE provides

diverse ways to learn and teach. It also allows for different stories and experiences to be included in the production and dissemination of knowledge. While reviewing the literature on informal Jewish education I found that there is a need to add voices from the MENA Jewish community to informal learning spaces. This dissertation project will add to IJE by adding to the voices and experiences being taught in informal Jewish education settings, as well as using digital storytelling as a tool of informal knowledge production.

There are many factors related to informal Jewish education. However, experiential learning is key. Zehavit Gross and Suzanne Rutland (2017) write about the importance of experiential learning. They discuss how it is essential to learning for students to experience the knowledge being produced. This project provides space for students and teachers to share in the production of knowledge through storytelling and story-listening.

Ben-Peretz and Shachar (2012) discuss how transformation pedagogy is informed by diverse perspectives. In order to support the development of critical thinking and learning, history must be understood from diverse perspectives. Adding voices that have been long marginalized and omitted supports transformational pedagogy. For example, including the experiences of the MENA Jewish community adds additional perspectives to historical events, like diaspora, discrimination, indigeneity, expulsion, migration, and genocide, allowing students to begin to understand different points of view.

Due to the decades-long pogroms and policies against the MENA Jewish communities, much of the experiences of community members are not widely known. This can be partially attributed to the fact that (1) the ability to document experiences during violent attacks is near impossible, and (2) MENA Jews were dispersed across multiple regions, further complicating documenting their experiences. Much of the history of MENA Jewish communities has been hidden, erased, and swept aside in favor of a different narrative that seeks to paint the Jewish community as European and White.

As I was reviewing the literature for this project, it became clear to me that there is very little work that centers the MENA Jewish experience in the storytelling process. I will seek to address this need through the incorporation of digital storytelling. The following are two main issues that warrant further exploration. First, this study seeks to explore how to use digital storytelling for scholarly knowledge production. Second, this research will examine the lived experiences of MENA Jews during the Holocaust and beyond. Although answers have been provided for the necessity of a Jewish nation due to the aftermath of pogroms, genocide and ethnic cleansing against Jews living in European lands, part of the reasoning behind the necessity of a Jewish state is missing from this story. The expulsions, pogroms, and killings of Jews living in Muslim and Arab lands were occurring long before the establishment of Israel. However, upon the creation of an independent Jewish state, MENA Jews faced an increase in these attacks. This research will provide a platform to answer what is not publicly known about the experiences of Middle-Eastern and North African Jews during the Holocaust and beyond.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to share the narratives of Middle Eastern and North African Jews as their stories relate to an exploited and ignored people. This study will serve as a platform for individuals from the Middle Eastern and North African Jewish community to speak on their experiences as an exploited people, subjected to second-class citizenship (*dhimmi*) in Muslim/Arab lands, pogroms, exterminations, and expulsion. It is my hope that through these stories, a history that has been largely ignored, can serve as a learning resource for Jewish and non-Jewish college and university students to better understand the rising antisemitism on campus. Furthermore, these narratives can prove to be powerful resources to offer a more complete and diverse historical narrative for all students.

This qualitative study will provide a platform for members of the MENA Jewish community to share their experiences as an exploited people, subjected to second-class citizenship in Arab/Muslim lands. I will use digital storytelling to document the experiences of MENA Jews living in Arab/Muslim lands during the twentieth century and beyond. Digital storytelling will make the knowledge produced from this project accessible to many, both within and outside of traditional academic spaces. Participants will come from the MENA Jewish community within Israel and also from other countries.

This project will provide a platform for truth and knowledge from those who lived through the disenfranchisement and erasure of their communities. Readers and listeners will learn some of the history of MENA Jewish people and what their experiences may mean to present-day global affairs. Readers and listeners will also learn how, without documentation, history has been and can still be re-written, excluding the voices and experiences of marginalized peoples. first-person narratives provide intimate details and experiences that cannot be replicated. This project is based on narratives, so there are no specific objectives to be acquired other than the experiences of individual participants.

### **Research Questions**

The overall question guiding this dissertation study is: What were the experiences of MENA Jews living in Muslim/Arab lands in the twentieth century and beyond? The following are underlying questions that can be used for reflection and further discussion:

- How has the omission of the experiences of MENA Jews impacted historical knowledge?
- In what ways does storytelling impact erasure of the MENA Jewish experience?
- How can digital storytelling disrupt ignored and erased experiences?

## **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

For the purposes of this research, I am using narrative theory as a framework. This section will discuss how narrative theory operates as a lens in which to conduct qualitative research.

Narrative inquiry is rooted in a 1938 Deweyan concept that “life is education” (Clandinin et al., 2007). Experiences are central to narrative inquiry, elevating the importance of story as a way to express experiences (Clandinin et al., 2007). Some researchers define narrative inquiry as not only sharing stories, but also stories that are told “deliberately and purposefully” (Pitre et al., 2013, p. 118). We can expect to find contexts related to history, structure, ideology, discourse, and power dynamics within narratives (Pitre et al., 2013). Stories, which are central to narratives, are where narrators are able to challenge dominant representation of truth and omission (Pitre et al., 2013). It can be argued that it is where reality as experienced by participants is laid bare by narrators. The experience of the narrator is just the translation. The account is from the holder of the story (Pitre et al., 2013).

Consequently, storytelling, through narrative approaches, is not simply a data collection methodology. Narrative, also referred to as narrative science or theory, has received attention as a fundamental structure of human experience through which human life, actions, and meaning can be understood, and this has been recognized in numerous fields including history, literature, linguistics, pedagogy, sociology, nursing, behavioral sciences, and law (Kang & Shin, 2019). Narrative science, drawing from narrative theory, can serve as the theoretical foundations for social science research and practice, with the understanding that humans think, act, and make sense of the world narratively (Bruner, 1990; Fisher, 1987; Kang & Shin, 2019), doing so by telling stories (Koenig-Kellas & Trees, 2013; Koenig et al. 2020). Through this framework of narrative storytelling, the social sciences and humanities

can be addressed and studied via the integration of human experience, narrative ontology, and narrative epistemology (Kang & Shin, 2019).

People have practiced storytelling to communicate, express their experiences and knowledge, and to teach others for generations (Kowalewski & Waukau-Villagomez, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1988; Shufutinsky 2019; Walker, 2017). Gathering and presenting stories is a way to preserve culture and knowledge rooted in heritage (Drake, 2002; Shufutinsky, 2019). There are numerous methods for telling and analyzing stories as an approach to qualitative inquiry, including narrative, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and combined models (Shufutinsky, 2019).

Although it is also explained as narrative theory, storytelling through narrative accounts positions narrative research as a legitimate method to collect data and conduct qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019). The existing literature has surmised that the use of storytelling methods plays a critical role in transferring tacit knowledge, cultivating norms, building new knowledge, and generating emotional connections (Auvinen et al., 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019; Sole & Wilson, 2002). Storytelling research can be used as a method of inquiry that leads to better understanding of, acceptance of, and action orientation towards issues and initiatives that affect oppressed, marginalized, silenced, or underrepresented groups (Shufutinsky, 2019), such as Mizrahi Jews, among others.

Narrative inquiry as a storytelling methodology allows the qualitative researcher to show, rather than just tell, the data and the findings to the reader (Walker, 2017). The richness of the stories, collected through narrative methods, resides in the approaches' openness (Robert & Shenhav, 2014), providing levels of detail and specificity not available through traditional positivist approaches (Shufutinsky, 2019). Narrative research is becoming increasingly common, adding to the influence within the field of research (Robert & Shenhav, 2014; Shufutinsky, 2019). The structure of narrative research is diverse, grounded

in the humanities (Creswell, 2013; Lightfoot & Daiutre, 2004; Shufutinsky, 2019), and offering an exceptional model of qualitative inquiry (Shufutinsky, 2019; Smythe & Murray, 2000), thus allowing researchers to examine lived experiences (Gay, Mills, & Airsian 2009; Shufutinsky, 2019) in a variety of settings and to use stories to exchange information gathered. Narratives are a way to add feeling and texture to research (James, 2017; Shufutinsky, 2019), achieved through multiple methods or for multiple purposes, and it can take the forms of biography, life history, oral history, chronological restorying (Creswell, 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019) and digital storytelling, among other approaches, leaving room for creativity and use of diverse methods. The diversity of approaches, intensity of stories, and number of participants are able to be handled in many ways (Creswell, 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019). Including sociolinguistic, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and grounded theoretical viewpoints, all with their own ways to analyze narratives (Birchall, 2014; Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019).

Narrative inquiry captures and shares individuals' experiences, while phenomenology uses description of the experiences to elicit meaning of the group (Creswell, 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019). That said, phenomenological research is derived from direct first-person experiences of individuals' lives. This science is only valid when the knowledge is grounded in description that makes understanding the very essence of the experience possible (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Shosha, 2012; van Manen, 2014).

To understand the structure and framework of this research study, it is imperative to have clarity around what is meant by the term *Storytelling*. Storytelling, in the context of lived experience and living accounts, is not a linear ethnographic narrative grounded from a particular theoretic framework, nor are the participant responses examined through a traditional coding approach for interpreting and perceiving qualitative inquiry compared with a pre-conceived, *a priori* theory. This is because doing so without broad ontological

underpinnings collected directly from the story, can only result in violating the experienced phenomena and instead provide accounts limited to pre-determined contexts, thus voiding of the riches that develop deeper meaning (Boje, 2018; Shufutinsky, 2019; Sibel, 2019).

Collecting stories from people in a particular culture with a lens of a different culture or cultural artifacts, and coding and interpreting the stories only through these lenses, is a Western methodology, and potentially fails to encompass the participants' true meanings (Sibel, 2019). Filtering these transcendental research narratives of lived experiences through Western style linear theoretical lenses would limit the contents' richness and context, and would be akin to reading the dust jacket of a book and presuming to understand all of its content (Moustakas, 1994; Shufutinsky, 2019; Sibel, 2019). Indigenous stories, with transcendental approaches for collecting the essence of the experienced phenomena, resist such linearity (Boje, 1995, 2016, 2018; Eder & Holyan, 2010; Rosile et al., 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019).

Instead, when exploring the lived experiences through the stories of people in different cultures, the storytelling framework can be used for knowledge production through the examination of those stories in the participants' own words, within the descriptions of contexts, meanings, and beliefs expressed by those individuals, promoting their Indigenous ways of knowing (IWOK). These storytelling methods, in the form of IWOK narratives, have been exhibited as successful ways of building knowledge in practice and research, across fields and professions, including business, cultural studies, disability studies, education, engineering, knowledge management, nursing, organizational science, and psychology, among others (Boje, 1995; Boje & Rosile, 2020; Caxaj, 2015; Christensen, 2012; Giorgi, 1985; Humphries, 2016; Iseke, 2013; Kleiner, 2020; Rosile et al., 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019; Sibel, 2019).

Thus, using a transcendental approach to narrative storytelling (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Shufutinsky, 2019) is critical for an essential, undisturbed understanding of the lived experiences. Transcendental approaches examine experiences of study participants through their narratives without the personal interpretation of the analytics by the researcher (Shufutinsky, 2019), or from the researcher's previous knowledge or lens of interpretation. Thus, to be at a high level of viability, knowledge generation must emerge from the living story, with as little interference as possible. For this reason, transcendental story approaches advocate against deep theoretical dives, theoretic frameworks, theoretical lenses, and thorough theoretical analyses until after the data is collected, because the generation of knowledge is grounded in the data. This is exemplified, likewise, in grounded theory. Exploring theories and positioning research through theoretical frameworks prior to collecting the data are delimiting, in that they create a potential and likelihood for biases, and prevent the thorough collection of the rich stories, and accurate interpretation, because the questions, interviews, and analyses are then examined through a limited frame or niche (Husserl, 1970; Shufutinsky, 2019). Thus, through the use of transcendental and grounded theory-type narrative collection, using inductive logic rather than a positivist deductive logic, the researcher does not start with an *a priori* theory or theoretical lens, other than the transcendental storytelling lens, as this may bias not only the interpretation, but even the methodology and procedure (Shufutinsky, 2019). Rather, the analysis and thus the theorizing begins with data, during and post collection (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Shufutinsky, 2019), and theory emerges from the stories themselves, whether it is novel or existing theory (Beck, 2019; Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Dowling, 2007; Giorgi, 1985, 2008, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1968; Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994; Shufutinsky, 2019, 2020; Van Kaam, 1966). This process aids in ensuring that the theory is generated from the living story data rather than assumption, as well as

providing some assurance of bias prevention, analytical objectivity (Blythe et al., 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019, 2020), and honoring of indigeneity, culture, and voice (Caxaj, 2015; Humphries, 2016; Rosile et al., 2013).

Therefore, for digital biographical storytelling research, transcendental narrative approaches are fundamental and inherent. Likewise, a secondary transcendental phenomenological approach to thematic analysis is appropriate to honor the indigenous voices and their meanings during analytical sense-making (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 1985; 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Shufutinsky, 2019), without disturbing or polluting them with pre-determined interpretive translations and biases. Through this Husserlian descriptive, rather than Heideggerian, Gadamerian hermeneutic construct, this research does the important work of preserving culture in the experiences of the peoples, collecting and then distributing cultural wisdom and inherited knowledge (Drake, 2002) through unbiased accounts (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1996; Dowling, 2007; Gadamer, 1989; Giorgi, 2006; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Moustakas, 1994; Racher & Robinson, 2003; Shosha, 2012; Shufutinsky, 2019), and any interpretive theoretical lens emerges from the data, after-the-fact.

### **Educational Significance**

This dissertation project is educationally significant in three main ways. First, it enriches Indigenous storytelling as a methodology by including voices of peoples indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. This project honors the community cultural wealth of a marginalized people (Yosso, 2005). The experiences of Jews from Arab and Muslim lands are not largely known by those who are not a part of this community. The art, music, dance, philosophy, and poetry that the MENA Jewish community brought to the Muslim/Arab lands in which they lived and later, to Israel and abroad when they were expelled, should be honored and elevated. Most research studies focused on Indigenous storytelling focus on peoples indigenous to the Americas and Oceania, largely ignoring Indigenous voices from

other regions. This study will provide Jewish Indigenous voices, adding culturally relevant historical pedagogy.

Second, the narratives and experiences provided in this study will add to the stories told in historical and anthropological studies. Most survivors of the holocaust against Jews in Muslim/Arab lands are no longer living, and their experiences are dying without being shared. This study can add to the larger historical picture, diversifying curricula that have been whitewashed and exclusive. These narratives seek to correct the omission of the MENA Jewish experience from conversations on the history and culture of the Middle East and North Africa. This project aims to provide a platform to learn from the experiences of MENA Jews, allowing participants to use their experiences and knowledge to teach and share through storytelling.

Lastly, through hearing and learning from community members' stories, current Jewish college and university students may be able to make sense of the bigotry they face on campuses around the world. According to the Anti-Defamation League (2019), more hate crimes were committed against Jewish people and institutions than against any other group in 2018. Narratives related to survival, resistance, and continuity of heritage can be powerful tools against bigotry. The knowledge documented in this project will expand on what is already known about historical and cultural events. Holocaust education is an essential part of curricula. This project brings a community into curricula that was deeply impacted by genocide and racial discrimination, but whose experiences are not widely taught. This study will comment on the community cultural wealth of MENA Jewish people specifically. More broadly, this dissertation project pushes against cultural erasure and historical omission by providing a platform for ignored stories and experiences to be shared. The use of narrative inquiry and digital storytelling captures experiences that have been omitted, giving power and voice to *testimonios*.

## Definitions of Terms

- ***Am Israel Chai:*** the Jewish nation lives
- ***Beta Israel:*** Black Jewish people from Ethiopia
- ***Cultural erasure:*** Erasing elements of a culture/community to the point of eliminating the uniqueness; ignoring history, contributions, narratives, and experiences
- ***Cultural knowledge:*** Knowledge of a specific culture, including traditions, language, spiritual practices, etc.
- ***Dhimmi:*** non-Muslims living under Muslim rule after being conquered; Dhimmi status required non-Muslims to pay a tax and were subjected to obedience, restrictions, and second-class citizenship in Muslim Arab societies
- ***Diasporic:*** People who have been cast out from their indigenous land
- ***Farhud:*** Pogrom in Iraq that led to the murder and displacement of the Iraqi Jewish population
- ***Indigenous:*** Native; aboriginal
- ***Jewish Diaspora:*** Any place outside of Israel where Jewish people live(d) due to displacement
- ***Maghreb:*** Originating in the Middle-East/North Africa
- ***MENA:*** Middle-Eastern and North African
- ***Mizrachim:*** Jewish people from North Africa and the Middle East
- ***Sephardim:*** Jewish people from Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East
- ***Testimonios:*** First-hand experiences shared in narrative form

### **Positionality/Background of the Researcher**

This study uses participant voices to pass knowledge, allowing access to this knowledge to academic and community. As a researcher it is my hope to honor the stories and experiences of individuals as sources of learning. Being a member of diasporic peoples, I feel a strong connection to undiluted narratives as sources of knowledge. As a social worker by trade, I know the power storytelling holds in shaping history. I have intimate knowledge of how cultural erasure leads to the minimization of cultural wealth. I hope this study allows room for an interruption of similar circumstances.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The story of the Jewish people began over four thousand years ago and has spanned every habitable continent across the globe. Being in a position to add to the cache of stories and experiences is an honor. Knowledge production, storytelling, and informal Jewish education all play a part in making this platform whole for participants to tell of their experiences with integrity and honor. Capturing these stories audio-visually allows participants, storytellers and listeners alike, to share in the experience of learning and hopefully, growing. Including the voices of people who for so long have been pushed to the margins challenges the academy to question not only what knowledge is, but who is it that gets to decide what is knowledge, removing the power-distance gap in knowledge development, education, and academia.

Storytelling, including narrative inquiry, as knowledge production, is essential to this project for the following reasons: (1) it supports diverse learning styles for both storyteller and listener, (2) it honors traditional methods of knowledge production, and (3) it builds community through shared experiences, and (4) it counters cultural erasure that is common with marginalized communities in general and more specifically, with the MENA Jewish community (Caxaj, 2015; Iseke, 2013).

Storytelling is a natural component of life and an age-old practice, and all people, at many points of their lives, engage in telling stories (Creswell, 2013) of their experiences, for many different reasons (Kowalewski & Waukau-Villagomez, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1988; Walker, 2017). Storytelling, through narrative research, is a viable form of data collection and dissemination in academic and practical research (Creswell, 2013), and it continues to grow in popularity and utility for studying numerous topics in a diversity of professions, communities, and environments (Boje, 1991; 1995; Caxaj, 2015; Choy, 2017; Driver, 2009; Gabriel, 2000; Iseke, 2013; Shufutinsky, 2019). Storytelling narratives are used in different

ways to explore and convey anthropological histories, express population needs, teach ethics and values, pass down ancestral knowledge of cultural practices, beliefs, and artifacts, and develop or enhance formal and informal education (Boje, 2016; Caxaj, 2015; Datta, 2018a, 2018b; De Silva, 2019; Fernández-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2018; Gainsford & Robertson, 2019; Kawano, 2019). These narrative methodologies have promoted indigenous ways of knowing as valid forms of knowledge production, including academic research (Datta, 2018a, 2018b; Gone, 2019; Humphries, 2016; Iseke, 2013; Latulippe & Klenk, 2020; Rosile et al., 2013).

Storytelling as knowledge production has grown in popularity over recent decades. It is commonly used in practice in research surrounding peoples indigenous to the Americas, among other places. However, the voices of peoples indigenous to the Middle East are not often heard in research that uses storytelling. This project will add to storytelling pedagogy in the following two ways: First, by including the narratives and experiences of members of the MENA Jewish community and second, by using a digital storytelling format that will make the experiences and stories shared more accessible.

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the utility of digital storytelling as a knowledge production methodology used to combat cultural erasure of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Jews in education, and to investigate and exemplify the use of this methodology through the exploration of the lived experiences of MENA Jews during their residence in Arab and Muslim lands. The exploration of the lived experiences of MENA Jews through narrative inquiry will address the need for discovery of the details of the MENA Jewish story that have been lost to time and in certain instances purposely omitted (Hercbergs, 2016; Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

This dissertation project seeks to contest historical and cultural erasure from academic and cultural learning spaces by providing a platform for the forgotten stories and experiences

of the MENA Jewish community to be shared. This review of the literature focuses on three inter-related themes as they relate to the MENA Jewish community. These three themes are, knowledge production, storytelling, including digital storytelling, and informal Jewish education as they relate to developing knowledge. The first theme, knowledge production, looks at literature that discusses how knowledge is produced, examining both traditional and non-traditional methods of knowledge production. The second theme, storytelling as knowledge production, examines how storytelling has been used as a source of learning, informing knowledge production. Specifically, I examine how digital storytelling is used as a method to produce knowledge and how it can be used to capture knowledge that is produced within the MENA Jewish community. The last theme, informal Jewish education, considers how informal Jewish education produces knowledge, using nontraditional learning tools to broaden the scope of what education and learning is and including the experiences from the diverse Jewish community. Informal Jewish education centers students' experiences as they relate to knowledge production (Gross & Rutland, 2017), acknowledging the importance of both teacher and student. The overarching content of the literature review considers how storytelling can be and has been used to combat cultural and historical erasure, and how the methodology of digital storytelling can be used in the same spirit by acting as a source of knowledge production regarding the lived experiences of MENA Jews who historically resided in Arab and Muslim lands.

### **Knowledge Production**

Traditional centers of scholarly learning like schools, colleges, and universities, have placed emphasis on what type of knowledge is created, with a preference given to knowledge that is connected to research funding (Boyer, 1990; Fletcher & Cambre, 2009), becoming more akin to a corporation than an institution of learning (Readings, 1996). However, intellectual engagement through implicated scholarship dismisses the separation between

academia and the real world, establishing the academic as a social actor who is a part of the social systems they are researching (Fletcher & Cambre, 2009). Institutions of higher learning did not start out solely focused on research funding and publications. In fact, they evolved through the following three phases: colonial, practical, and applied research (Boyer, 1990). During the colonial phase, institutes of higher learning were established to educate and morally uplift students (Boyer, 1990). With the shifting state of production and labor in the United States, some recognized the need for practical education, education that focused on professional trade skills, and this led to schools instituting practical education in building and agricultural studies (Boyer, 1990). The final phase, which we seem to be in currently, began in the 1870s and 80s, and focused on education that was deemed by academics and policy makers as useful, meaning that applied research could be used by educators to share their knowledge (Boyer, 1990). This resulted in service and community work being viewed as expendable, leaving a separation between theory and practice, dating back to Descartes in 17th-century Europe and beliefs that “Reason could survive only in the mind, not in human practices” (Gustavsen, 2003, p. 155). This separation has been challenged, with some believing that one purpose of theory is to provide a lens into what could have been, not only what is, linking academia to activism (Gustavsen, 2003; Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

During the 1970s, Paulo Freire ushered in an era when critical pedagogy was recognized, centering empowerment, conversation, and voice in influencing political and social relationships (Oppermann, 2008, p. 173). It was also during this time that the voices of MENA Jews began to be heard in the Middle East and abroad (Hercbergs, 2016; Motzafi-Haller, 2001; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). However, this community faced obstacles in having their experiences and knowledge recognized by broader society. Although not new to the MENA community, knowledge that they held was long ignored or omitted from spheres of learning (Motzafi-Haller, 2001; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011).

Jazeel & McFarlane (2010) state that knowledge production is tied to ethics and politics, placing the power to generate knowledge in the hands of those who hold political power and determine ethical norms. When determining not only how knowledge is created, but who creates it, the following are four questions that can be examined that speak to the motivation for exploration:

1. Who does the researcher represent?
2. What are the identity and politics of the researcher?
3. Whose interest is served with the researcher's findings?
4. Is the researcher speaking for herself or for the researched community? (Motzafi-Haller, 2001)

The MENA Jewish community have been challenging the status quo for not only who creates knowledge, but also whose knowledge is included in learning spaces (Herbergs, 2016; Khazzoom, 2011). Even though Jewish communities in the Middle East pre-date Islam by 1000 years, their history and experiences have been effectively erased from historical and cultural learning spaces (Julius, 2018b). Mizrahi women face the greater challenge of being accepted, and were discriminated against for being both female and Mizrahi (Motzafi-Haller, 2001; Nader, 1989). Although the greater MENA Jewish community challenged the omission and erasure they faced, Mizrahi women used similar tools to also resist the marginalization they faced for being female.

### **MENA Feminist-Centered Research**

“Mizrahim, also known as Sephardim or Orientals, are Jews who migrated to Israel from Asia and Africa, mostly from Muslim societies” (Motzafi-Haller 2001, p. 698). Mizrahi women are not a monolith, but constitute a community of individuals who have lived diverse experiences. It is noteworthy that storytelling has emerged as a form of knowledge production within feminist scholarly circles (Cameron, 2012), even though there are still

many obstacles facing Mizrahi feminist scholars as doubly-marginalized individuals—due to gender and culture, who deserve to have their stories shared and heard (Motzafi-Haller, 2001). During the 1970s there was a turn away from modernist theories, and towards the feminist movement that arrived in Israel with a number of American and European *olim* (Dahan-Kalev, 2001). However, this shift did not result in an appreciation of the knowledge held by the Mizrahi community. Instead, there were efforts to extend ‘fostering’ to not only children, but to Mizrahi mothers as well (Motzafi -Haller, 2001).

In her research, Motzafi-Haller (2001) has only found five studies that centered research around Mizrahi women. The idea that because the founding of the modern state of Israel was rooted in socialist ideology led to equality and equity between genders and cultures is false. Socialism did not provide girls and women with equal standing to boys and men. In fact, girls and women were largely ignored in scholarship. Without the ability to speak and share experiences, individuals are unable to impact not only their lives, but history (Gal, 1989). Their stories and experiences were not researched nor were they included in academic and social spaces (Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

The 1990s saw an increase in feminist scholarship. However, Mizrahi women were once again left out and pushed to the periphery (Motzafi-Haller, 2001). One reason for the marginalization of Mizrahi women from research has been attributed to socioeconomic class. Historically, Mizrahi women held lower paying, less academic jobs, positions that are often left out of the scholarship and knowledge production, which focuses more closely on the experiences of men in the workforce (Halperin-Kaddar, 2004; Motzafi-Haller, 2001). Although Mizrahi women face double marginalization, they are not alone in being ignored by organizations that continuously fail to conduct research on issues that center women and concerns about women (Halperin-Kaddar, 2004).

In the rare instances that Mizrahi women are brought into research, they are still counted as ‘traditional’ and relegated to the margins of research as a comparative category to be contrasted with Ashkenazi women who are representative of ‘modernity.’ Haya Stier’s 1995 study, “Patterns of Entry into Marriage and Parenthood Among Young Israeli Women,” accepted the premise that Mizrahim represent traditional backwards-ness, failing to challenge or even question this supposition (Motzafi-Haller, 2001). The universal feminism, liberating women from the patriarchy, further marginalized Mizrahi women by ignoring their concerns and struggles and mimicking the oppressive environments that Mizrahi women sought to escape (Dahan-Kalev, 2001).

With little being done to counter this view of modern feminist epistemology, there is no wonder that there is a sustained and growing “ethnic gap” in scholarship and literature. Feminist scholarship addresses themes related to the significant silencing of women in society and their efforts to achieve voice in both the political and literary spheres (Gal, 1989). Those who are working to close this gap are addressing “epistemic violence” (Motzafi-Haller, 2001, p. 709). “Epistemic violence is the open aggression directed by those who define their systemic knowledge as the only ‘true’ kind of knowledge against any other claims to knowledge” (Motzafi-Haller, 2001, p. 709).

Jazeel and McFarlane (2010) argue that knowledge production must consider knowledge politics, which looks at the who, what, why, and how of knowledge production. Many scholars undertake certain research projects because they will be rewarded through “promotion, tenure, salary and professional standing” (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010, pp.110–111). Many academic institutions link the creation of knowledge to rewarding that creation, making knowledge production a transaction, indigenous epistemologies center the creation of knowledge on the people and the land, viewing them as keepers of knowledge (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Scholars and researchers have a responsibility to acknowledge that what they

produce often informs the global north about the global south, making the production of knowledge “inseparable from politics” where “interest can never be innocent” (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010, p. 144), and the West has been considered positionally superior (Nader, 1989).

The following are three questions that should be considered when creating knowledge:

- What does knowledge do?
- Who is it created for?
- Why is it being produced? (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010)

The Subaltern Studies project is an example of turning towards, instead of away from, the politics of knowledge, connecting context with scholarship (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010) and challenging the privilege and inequities that exist throughout the developed and developing world (Darder, 2019).

This project operated as a collective combatting the push away from confronting South Asian contexts (Jazeel & McFarlane, 2010). However, even with the diversification of academic related spaces, like conferences, knowledge production still remains largely “male-centered” and Eurocentric (Motzafi-Haller, 2001; Mügge et al., 2018) ignoring the historicity and counter hegemony of subaltern voices that work to decolonize learning spaces (Darder 2019; Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018). The spaces where Indigenous knowledge is produced challenges the Eurocentric claim of approaching academia objectively, when in reality these claims are separating the experiences of Indigenous people from their scholarship (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Mizrahim were pushed to the periphery, labeled as “Oriental other” who were “primitive, backward, violent, and unproductive” (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011, p. 654). The omission of Mizrahi voices from academic circles can be partially attributed to the founding of cultural Zionism, which held two opposing views of

culture, the first being traditional yeshiva, religious-centered culture and the second taking the form of secular, humanistic *Bildung* ethos (Mendes-Flohr, 1998). Where Mizrahi people, women in particular, were viewed as unenlightened due to a number of reasons including their religiousness (Dalan-Kalev, 2007; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011), other Jews were included in academic knowledge production because of the preference for secularism (Mendes-Flohr, 1998). After decades of increases in feminist scholarship, there is still little research centered around Mizrahi women and their experiences (Dalan-Kalev, 2007; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011).

### **Silencing**

Life for Mizrahim prior to *aliyah* is often undocumented, leaving a gap in knowledge about what life was like for Mizrahim when they lived in Arab or Muslim countries (Dalan-Kalev, 2007; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). Feminist scholarship has largely ignored the experiences of Mizrahi women, effectively silencing an entire community from academia and knowledge production (Motzafi-Haller, 2001). In the 1950s and 60s the interest expressed in Mizrahi women took on a paternalistic form, as a group that needed to be ‘de-socialized and re-socialized,’ according to Rivka Bar Yossef (Dalan-Kalev, 2007; Motzafi-Haller, 2001). They were ‘Orientalized,’ looked down on due to their spiritual practices, being viewed as “backwards” (Dalan-Kalev, 2007; Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

American academia peddled a modernist lens that offered two frames, modern and traditional. The answer to whose agency and whose worth is responsible for making productive contributions to society remains illusory, and the American academy is slowly accepting the prospect that historical and ethnographic truth may also be equally illusory (Behar, 2003, p. 17). Orientalism cast Mizrahim as traditional, silencing experiences from communities that did not support the modernist narrative (Darder, 2019; Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

In their attempts to ‘save’ Mizrahim from their backwardness, modernists sought to foster Mizrahi children. For Mizrahi women, who were marginalized and only studied in their roles as mothers and wives, this was an ultimate “humiliation and dehumanization,” casting doubt and judgement on their ability to parent their own children (Dahan-Kalev, 2001, 2007; Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

The ‘middle-class’ feminism that is prevalent in Israeli feminist organizations contributes to the silencing of the experiences of Mizrahi women (Dalan-Kalev, 2007). These feminists are more comfortable focusing on issues that can be defined as ‘politically correct,’ like peace, lesbian rights, and Palestinian women, than confronting issues and concerns of Mizrahi women (Motzafi-Haller, 2001).

Liberalism’s embrace of Marxism further silences Mizrahi women and ignores their experiences in the following two ways: (1) it ignores the oppression of women due to gender discrimination and (2) it ignores racial/cultural dimensions to oppression in favor of a lens that focuses solely on economic class distinctions (Dahan-Kalev, 2001; Motzafi-Haller, 2001). According to Jaggar (1983), Marxist theory adopts “gender blindness,” which ignores the experiences of women, and more specifically women of color, opting to instead solely focus on individuals as they relate to a socioeconomic class and the production of commodities. Therefore, women who do not work outside of the home are ignored (Jaggar, 1983).

### **Strategic Silence**

Although silencing is often depicted as disempowering, the same should not be said for strategic silence (Gal, 1989; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). In situations where power is unequal, as it is in scholarly settings of interviewer-interviewee or researcher-researched, silence can *be* power (Gal, 1989; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). Two questions arise from this setting with an unequal dynamic. First, what is being asked of the

participant? (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). Second, who benefits from the participation? (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). Depending on the answers to these two questions, silence can be an effective tool of power (Gal, 1989; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011).

In 1985 Lila Abu-Lugud produced “A Community of Secrets,” research on Bedouin women in Egypt (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). Her work is an example of how silence can be used to counter oppression. “Abu-Lugud’s work had shown that women’s silence is not only an outcome of patriarchal oppression but at the same time a means of resistance to such subjugation” (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011, p. 658), notably in institutional settings that have been historically oppressive (Gal, 1989). According to Susan Star-Sered’s work, *Women Spirituality in Jewish Context*, the use of strategic silence is a way to control the framing of one’s own story (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011).

### **Inclusive Knowledge Production**

For marginalized women like Israeli Mizrahi immigrants, there is no legitimate overarching model within which they can relate their life experiences. The result is a fragmented, incoherent report. We had shown that such fragments should be read not as incomplete stories but rather as strategies, with their embedded contradictions, to confront hegemonic narratives in order to shatter their oppressive, exclusionary nature. (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011, p. 660)

Instead, Jazeel and McFarlane (2010) argue that theory and practice should be connected. Creating theory simply for the sake of creating theory is not knowledge production because it ignores the importance of connecting theory to practice.

Action research is a way to produce knowledge, through connecting context with scholarship/theory and practice (Gustavsen, 2003) and Indigenous ways of knowing can contribute to knowledge production by centering knowledge around Indigenous people,

which is something that is omitted by objectivity (Boje, 2016; Datta, 2018a, 2018b; Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Research and knowledge production do not only focus on thinking, being created in a scholarship bubble. It can be actionable, contributing to “design, production, marketing, and more” (Gustavsen, 2003, p. 158). Research can be influenced by “the practices of society,” bringing theory and practice together (Gustavsen, 2003, p. 158), taking the culture of the participants into consideration (Christensen, 2012).

Three ways the gap between theory and practice can be closed are (1) social capital, (2) objectivity, and (3) entrepreneurship (Gustavsen, 2003). Social capital refers to the knowledge held within the community the research is speaking about. Objectivity indicates the applicability of the research, regardless of the community being studied. Indigenous perspectives of research include an important focus on the production and sharing of knowledge (Christensen, 2012; Peltier, 2018). Entrepreneurship allows for intellectual curiosity and creativity (Gustavsen, 2003).

Some believe that the gap between theory and practice is widening, with research becoming less practical to implement (Nijhawan, 2017; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). This raises two questions. First, how does this impact the production of knowledge? Second, why is certain research conducted if it is not actionable? (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). The following are three reasons for the gap between theory/scholarship and practice/action:

1. Knowledge transfer problem
2. Different types of knowledge
3. Knowledge production problem (Nijhawan, 2017; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006)

Those who believe the issue lies with knowledge transfer need to answer the following three issues. First, knowledge transfer accepts that an authority figure holds the knowledge and must find a way to transmit that knowledge to another. Second, those authorities are defensive about issues and concerns related to their research. Lastly, there can

be a conflict of interest, where the researcher benefits from being needed when their clients remain dependent on their expertise (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). These are just some of the reasons why knowledge should not be produced in a bubble, but rather in collaboration of those who would use that knowledge in practice (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Storytelling is one method that has been used to reduce exclusive spaces of knowledge production and increase engagement among participant, student, and researcher by offering an approach that is “creative, socially oriented, and pedagogical” (Fletcher & Cambre, 2009, p. 111). Empirical questions to examine when looking at the gap between theory and practice and the “distinct forms of knowledge,” include:

What knowledge does the practitioner of an occupation or profession use, and how does he or she obtain it? What does the practitioner think, and how does he or she go about constructing thought and action? What does the competent practitioner know, and how does he or she go about knowing “in” practice? (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 805)

Theorists and practitioners produce distinct “forms of knowledge” with theory producing objective knowledge and practice producing subjective knowledge (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

One answer to this gap is engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship can be used to create a network of theorists and practitioners and to diversify knowledge production (Boyer, 1990; Calleson et al., 2005; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) base their argument for this on *arbitrage*, when differences are used to diversify knowledge production. They believe that engaged scholarship benefits knowledge production in two ways. First, it increases the applicability of scholarship. Second, it leads to progression in the subject matter (Boyer, 1990; Calleson et al., 2005; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) argue that the main cause of the gap between theory and practice is an issue with the production of knowledge. Knowledge production should resemble a network where “negotiation and collaboration” work together to produce knowledge that is both scholarly and useful (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). If research is both socially embedded and accountable, something that does not view participants as isolated subjects, the gap between theory and practice will shrink (Calleson et al., 2005; de Leeuw et al., 2012). Using *arbitrage*, engaged scholarship relies on diverse and differing views to create knowledge (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Both engaged scholarship and arbitrage welcome the inevitability of conflict that rises when working within a network of people who hold various viewpoints on a particular subject (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006).

In order to fully engage scholars and practitioners research should (1) be designed to operate as a “collaborative learning community,” (2) allow for time for relationship and rapport building, (3) encourage and support various ways to look at the problem, and (4) reconsider and reflect on presumptions of scholars and practitioners (Calleson et al., 2005; Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Frameworks that encourage participatory research appreciate participants from academic and non-academic circles, viewing partnerships as essential to the co-production of knowledge, empowering those who have been marginalized (de Leeuw et al., 2012). The ability for women to share their stories and experiences allows for them to step out of the shadows and be visible. Storytelling can be a method of empowerment (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011), however must be undertaken carefully so as not to reduce life experiences into “text”, colonizing the act of storytelling (Behar, 2003, p. 12).

Counter-narratives produce counter-knowledge, approaching the production of knowledge “from the minority perspective” (Motzafi-Haller, 2001, p. 728), instead of from a position of oppression and domination. Knowledge production that reflects and honors self-

determination creates identity that is relational, countering the ‘othering’ that is typical of knowledge production that is done from an authoritarian/paternalistic lens (Motzafi-Haller, 2001). A structural approach can be used, as it is in social work, to offer an opportunity for individuals to examine their difficulties collectively and raise consciousness, reversing self-disempowerment and internalized oppression (Moreau, 1990). This is preferred over knowledge production about marginalized communities that seeks to answer questions about customs to increase “ethnographic knowledge” (Motzafi-Haller, 2001, p. 729).

After being marginalized and ignored many “first-generation Mizrahi women” were surprised at any expressed interest in their stories (Dahan-Kalev, 2001; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). With little to no standard model for documenting stories and experiences of marginalized people and communities, researchers and participants face challenges on how to create and share knowledge gathered from stories and experiences (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). Cultural narrative models have been used by some to compose their own stories (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011) as they are able to critically comment on society because they use language that the entire group accepts (Senehi, 2002).

However, this creates obstacles for some who do not feel that their narrative fits into these models, most of which were constructed by western White men (Halperin-Kaddar, 2004; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). One result of this is stories that do not present as linear or coherent, leading western scholars to feel the need to “translate” these stories so that other westerners are able to understand (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011). “Unlike such smooth story, women’s stories are fragmented and full of contradictions, setbacks, and silences. This is particularly the case when the women are multiply marginalized” (Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011, p. 655).

Taking advantage of an oral tradition, storytellers used a “performance-centered approach” to relay personal experiences to an audience (Hercbergs, 2016, p. 148). Although

this format allowed for marginalized voices to be heard, most of the storytellers were men, excluding the experiences of women (Hercbergs, 2016). However, constructive storytelling cultivates collaboration and recognition, supporting awareness and empowerment for individuals and communities, including women (Senehi, 2002).

Before the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948, MENA Jews were the largest group in the land that is now Israel, second to Ladino-speaking Sephardic Jews. The MENA community spoke Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, and Aramaic (Hercbergs, 2016). This presented an obstacle to sharing their experiences due to the tension between the two Middle-Eastern cultures, Israeli and Arab (Hercbergs, 2016). Many Mizrahim felt alienated because of the tension between their Jewish culture and the Arab influence to their MENA heritage (Hercbergs, 2016). The MENA Jewish community's "failure" to assimilate into the ideal Ashkenazi cultural norms created a unique ethnic identity and interest in the diversity of Jewish diaspora (Hercbergs, 2016).

### **Storytelling as Knowledge Production**

As more people recognize the importance of learning from the experiences of others, there has been a growing interest in gaining knowledge through storytelling (Cameron, 2012; Gazarian, 2010). Lived experiences offer historical and cultural knowledge and experiential life lessons that cannot necessarily be gained from typical academic learning environments. Storytelling as knowledge production adds diverse voices to circles that have been traditionally exclusive. Stories told by community elders counter erasure and silencing of voices, history, and culture (Iseke, 2013). Communities that have been historically excluded from knowledge production find themselves in educational spaces where their voices have been erased and experiences made invisible. Storytelling is a method that combats this type of erasure, by making space for the inclusion of the lived experiences of marginalized people.

“Story...forms the basic foundation of all human learning and teaching” (Cajete, 1994, p. 67).

A significant amount of Indigenous research utilizes the participatory action research (PAR) framework to generate knowledge (Caxaj, 2015; Peltier, 2018). The PAR approach encourages the following: (1) action inducing research to advance change, (2) eradicating disparities in power through sharing power, and (3) having community members as participants (Caxaj, 2015). Storytelling as knowledge production is, at the heart, a PAR framework that acknowledges community cultural wealth, while research facilitated in a non-Indigenous framework operates from a more individualistic right of and to knowledge (Caxaj, 2015). The framework is not the only factor when examining how research is conducted. It is also important to look at the intention behind research. “We must consider that the teachings were intended not only to inform a present audience but were to be passed on to the next generation and for seven further generations” (Iseke, 2013, p. 569).

The significance of cultural knowledge is not only for the members of community that heritage originates. That knowledge can be a useful part of curricula for all to contribute to and access. Without stories and narratives from lived experiences, a part of culture and history is lost. Storytelling is one method that combats cultural and historical erasure. Iseke (2013) refers to this as pedagogical witnessing, where the act of absorbing information becomes an event that allows knowledge to act as a link between present and past.

Indigenous storytelling offers a methodology that resists common Eurocentric approaches to research (Geia et al., 2013; Martin, 2018). A significant amount of research has been conducted *on* Indigenous people, but without including Indigenous voices—ignoring the narratives and stories that contribute to Indigenous knowledge. Storytelling is not only a methodology, but also provides wisdom from individuals and communities that provide

learners insight into history and culture (Boje, 2016; de Leeuw et al., 2012; Geia et al., 2013; Martin, 2018).

Experiences and narratives not only serve as a record of culture and history, but also act as a link to heritage between generations. Indigenous storytelling researchers and practitioners discuss how storytelling itself acts as a counter-narrative to colonial oppression (Boje, 2016; Iseke, 2013). The act of storytelling is an act of bearing witness, remembering, and honoring the experiences of those who came before (Boje, 2016; Iseke, 2013). Through this witnessing comes opportunities for recovery from the trauma of colonization and oppression (Iseke, 2013; Martin, 2018). Storytelling acts as a link between generations, not only telling individual narratives, but also the shared experiences of family and community members (Boje, 2016; Geia et al., 2013; Martin, 2018).

Some questions raised in the literature focusing on Indigenous storytelling include:

- How does storytelling pass down traditions, morals, and beliefs to younger generations?
- What are the contributions made to oral history through storytelling?
- How can stories help reclaim history for disenfranchised peoples?
- Is there significance in storytelling in Indigenous languages?
- How are stories related to teaching/learning about spirituality? (Iseke, 2013)

Although it may seem as if storytelling is a novel method to produce knowledge and learn from lived experiences, it is a practice that has been common in many communities for millennia (Boje, 2016; Geia et al., 2013). As Indigenous people increasingly enter into academic research spaces, it only makes sense that Indigenous research methodology also enters the same academic spaces. Because storytelling has been a manner in which Indigenous people have maintained knowledge of history and cultural traditions, storytelling is central to Indigenous epistemology (Chacón, 2016; Iseke, 2013). Some Indigenous scholars

describe story itself as a research methodology (Christensen, 2012; Iseke, 2013). Narrative methodologies in the form of storytelling should consider Indigenous views on the manner in which stories are told (Sium & Ritskes, 2013).

If this methodology is implemented from western, Eurocentric viewpoints, it may take on a format that does not honor Indigenous cultures by creating separation between human and nature (Caxaj, 2015). Indigenous storytelling is typically told honoring the interconnection between people and the natural world (Caxaj, 2015; Christensen, 2012; Gazarian, 2010). Indigenous storytelling takes on the role of narratives as testimony to lived and witnessed experiences, unlike western storytelling, which often takes the form of outsider witnessing (Caxaj, 2015). “One can see overlapping values of interconnectedness, justice-seeking, truth-telling, resistance, and survival in both testimonies and other Indigenous storytelling practices” (Caxaj, 2015, p. 3). Outsider witnessing erases the impact of the experiences told on the storyteller (de Leeuw et al., 2012).

Using storytelling as a method for producing knowledge allows support for diverse learning styles. According to the Digital Storytelling Association, digital storytelling uses modern technology to express the ancient art of storytelling (Sadik, 2008), which is the earliest mode of teaching (Pedersen, 1995; Sadik, 2008). The root aim of digital storytelling is to build community-based capability to engage in the production of digital media through community participation (Spurgeon et al., 2009). Digital storytelling supports five critical skills, including (1) digital literacy, (2) global literacy, (3) technology literacy, (4) visual literacy, and (5) information literacy (Robin, 2006). These five skills are methods that storytellers can learn and gain expertise in while sharing their experiences with others. Using this method for this research project allows this researcher the room to share knowledge in a manner that honors individual voice (de Leeuw et al., 2012; Sium & Ritskes, 2013).

Digital stories have been separated into the following three categories: (1) narrative, (2) historical, and (3) informational (Robin, 2006). All provide platforms that honor the voice of the storyteller while offering space for listeners, viewers, and audience members to listen. A main objective of this research project is to provide space for individual experiences to be honored. “Indigenous stories and pedagogies offer the possibility of Indigenous peoples in communities presenting and re-presenting Indigenous knowledge” (Iseke, 2013, p. 560). Storytelling allows for voices to be used and heard, for experiences to provide knowledge, and for culturally relevant learning tools to be honored.

Narrative inquiry has been used to document and share stories and experiences in Latin America, especially stories surrounding the treatment of Indigenous people. This form of narrative inquiry is known as *testimonies* (Caxaj, 2015). *Testimonios* are viewed as essential methods to inquiry because of their importance to “truth-telling, justice-seeking, and bearing witness” (Caxaj, 2015, p. 9). The benefit of storytelling as knowledge production relates not only to diversifying methodology, but also by recognizing the cultural wealth of Indigenous communities in the way they share knowledge. It supports “a method and methodological research practice in relation to Indigenous peoples and their communities” (Geia et al., 2013, p. 14).

From 2007-2010 monthly storytelling shows were put on in Jerusalem, Jewish communities began hosting monthly storytelling shows in Jerusalem as a way to reconnect storytelling with the creation and sharing of knowledge (Hercbergs, 2016). On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1967 war Jerusalem sponsored *Ha Bustan la Sephardi*, a play along with a festival that addressed what was lost (Hercbergs, 2016).

In this case, rootedness in the land does not draw on the pioneering Sabra ethos of the European Zionist; rather than enacting a moment of contact, these communities evoke an almost timeless sense of *being there*. Storytellers’ emphasis on holidays, chores,

and weekly events gives a timeless quality to Jerusalem of yore while according them cultural capital by embodying the “heritage of *Eretz Yisrael*.” Hence, while seemingly at odds with the Zionist ethos, Ha-Primus nevertheless arises within a Zionist framework, though, as we shall see, this discourse is troubled and multi-vocal.

(Hercbergs, 2016, p. 151)

In the early 20th century, Israelis used a kerosene stove called a *Primus* to cook, heat water, and heat homes (Hercbergs, 2016). One of the storytellers, Shuki Ben-Ami, published some of his stories in *Stories from the Jerusalem Parliament* (Hercbergs, 2016). Many of these stories centered around memory, invoking nostalgia for times passed and they were called *Ha-Primus*, in honor of the kerosene stove that was used for multiple things when many of the people were poor (Hercbergs, 2016). The phrase *Behazara le-yemei ha osher, gam ke-shelo haya 'osher*, which means “back to the days of joy, even when there was no wealth,” was printed on posters and spoken during opening remarks, demonstrating one way storytelling uses historical memory to not only share experiences, but also the emotions attached to these experiences (Hercbergs, 2016). “In *Ha-Primus*, storytellers create a world through stories about various ethnic groups’ customs and languages, and through commentary about inter-ethnic relations” (Hercbergs, 2016, p. 157).

Knowledge generated from storytelling and story-sharing can counter spaces that have been traditionally exclusionary (Hercbergs, 2016). “Storytelling can be a rich arena for reconstituting identity over the lifespan, as well as for critiquing power relations among social groups” (Hercbergs, 2016, p. 166). The act of storytelling supports the sharing of experiences as knowledge production (Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Informal Jewish educational spaces have been centered around experiential and community learning. Storytelling supports both. “Simon, Eppert, Clamen, and Beres (2000), who contend that knowing does not occur in solitude but rather in relation within the process of ‘a communicative act’ that they call

‘pedagogical witnessing’” (Iseke, 2013, p. 568). Storytelling supports informal Jewish education by providing witnesses to the experiences of this community. Informal Jewish education has embraced diverse methods to create and share knowledge, including storytelling.

### **Informal Jewish Education and its Role in Knowledge Production**

Jewish education has always taken on diverse forms, from traditional classroom learning to place-based experiences to experiential education. In many instances, all Jewish learning can be defined as ‘informal’ due to the format including traditional learning methods with nontraditional learning/teaching methods. Central to informal Jewish education is the opportunity for students to experience the knowledge that is being produced (Gross & Rutland, 2017). No matter the format, informal Jewish education can be defined by the following eight qualities: (1) learner centered, (2) interest in the experiences of the Jewish people, (3) curricula informed by experiences, (4) collectivism, (5) collective learning, (6) an ethos that values learning and teaching, (7) engagement, and (8) well-rounded Jewish teachers (Chazan, 2003). Historically and currently, a major theme of informal Jewish education is rooted in the desire to foster students’ general Jewish disposition (Chazan, 2003). Similar to other Indigenous education methods, Jewish education is uniquely suited for experiential learning because of what curricula entail. Celebrations, daily spiritual life, musical traditions, and rites of life are all based on day-to-day life experiences, and Jewish morals are engrained in deeds (Chazan, 2003). “Informal Jewish education is rooted in the belief that education is ultimately about ‘creating culture’ rather than transmitting knowledge” (Chazan, 2003, “The ‘culture’ of Jewish education” section), countering erasure of Jewish communities that have been omitted from traditional curricula (Heller Stern, 2019). Jewish day schools, Holocaust education curricula, Jewish summer camps, youth movements, museums, Jewish community centers (JCCs), and teacher education programs are just some

of the communities that produce knowledge through information Jewish education (Heller Stern, 2019).

Most JCCs do not offer a set curriculum, but instead offer a variety of “Jewish programs, activities, learning, and observances” (Chazan, 2003, “Some examples of informal Jewish education” section) that serve to produce knowledge about the Jewish people and culture. JCCs and synagogues offer adult learning and family education programs that encourage and support multi-generational learning. Holocaust education seeks to fulfill two goals. First, through learning about the Holocaust, students’ identify how it relates to their Jewishness by examining history (Romi & Lev, 2007). Second, this curriculum seeks to increase students’ affection to the Jewish community, “recognizing the shared destiny and the historical continuity of the Jewish people” (Romi & Lev, 2007, p. 89). Informal Jewish education has taken on the role of leading students to closer connection with Jewish culture and identity through examination of historical and current events, spiritual practices, and cultural studies (Chazan, 2003; Heller Stern, 2019). “There is little doubt of the link between a strong commitment to education and perpetuation of Jewish literacy, lifestyle, and peoplehood” (Chazan, 2003, para. 4).

Although the majority of Jewish education takes place within the Jewish community, there has also been a push for non-Jews to participate as an extension of ethnic studies and cross-cultural learning/teaching. In order for students to grow and develop intellectually, history and human experience must be taught and learned (Ben-Peretz & Shachar, 2012). One possible obstacle to encouraging non-Jewish students to study, and non-Jewish educators to teach informal Jewish education as a way to produce knowledge is the level of disengagement that has been found in those who do not see shared culture with the Jewish people. Studies have shown that students who have closer connections to Europe or who were born in Western countries were more enthusiastic to learn Holocaust education curriculum

than those who do not hold origins in European or other Western nations (Romi & Levy, 2007). One question this raises is how do students from non-Western countries see the experiences of their own communities reflected in the Holocaust education curriculum specifically, and in informal Jewish education more broadly? Another issue that arises from informal Jewish education as knowledge production is how to raise interest and awareness by raising inclusive knowledge without diluting informal Jewish education.

Informal Jewish education allows learners the opportunity to take part in knowledge creation through active participation. Students learn about often-ignored experiences through information practices, travel, storytelling, and discussion instead of lecture, where student learning is central. Transformational pedagogy encourages critical thinking skills by highlighting an understanding of history through diverse perspectives (Ben-Peretz & Shachar, 2012). This project aims to stimulate curiosity and foster conversation by introducing narratives that are not commonly shared and heard. The conversational model that the informal Jewish education platform encourages aligns with this research project because (1) it places students/learners at the center, (2) it elevates the importance of participatory learning, and (3) it allows room for reflection. Exploring the lived experiences of MENA Jews as a project honors the experiences of both speaker and listener, acknowledging that knowledge will only be produced with the active participation of all parties. “Informal Jewish education is as concerned with igniting the dialogic with the learner as it is with transmitting the culture” (Chazan, 2003, “An interactive process” section).

Jewish travel is a major approach to informal Jewish education. It offers learners opportunities to learn about and celebrate community cultural wealth through direct experiences with community members. Many forms of informal Jewish education can honor community cultural wealth by being creative and flexible, both of which the Jewish community hold within their cultural wealth. Jewish travel is one example of supporting a

culture of education that does not limit learning to a particular space, like a school, but allows for knowledge to be produced anywhere (Chazan, 2003).

Such a culture can be created wherever Jews are found in community centers, Jewish family service offices, and sports clubs; at retreats and conferences; during meals and bus rides... they are real settings where Jewish experiences can be lived out. (Chazan, 2003, "The 'culture' of Jewish education" section)

Including locations like Poland, Israel, and Ethiopia on travel itinerary gives students an opportunity to witness historical Jewish sites and places that have impacted Jewish life first-hand (Ben-Peretz & Shachar, 2012).

Although informal Jewish education centers around the learner, the educator plays a central role. It is the responsibility of the educator to set the tone and shape the culture that will inform the students' experiences through interaction and interchange (Chazan, 2003). The ability for students to learn and participate in storytelling and digital storytelling in order to create and share knowledge can be seen as examples of inclusive methods of informal Jewish education.

Jewish travel affords opportunities for knowledge production from direct experiences where participants can hear and share stories within the Jewish communities, they are immersed in. Centering learning around the learner places the student as an active partner in knowledge production (Chazan, 2003; Reimer, 2007), which is similar to storytelling as a method for knowledge production. It is not enough for the student to sit and absorb, like a sponge. Instead, this source of knowledge production relies on students' active participation in the process. Informal Jewish education also values experience as central to learning, similar to storytelling. Active participation and active listening are essential to both informal Jewish education and storytelling as ways to produce knowledge. Listeners to storytelling become a part of the story by then telling their own story related to their experience learning

through storytelling, which is a part of experiential learning in informal Jewish education. Interactivity is necessary for both informal Jewish education and storytelling because it centers on the learner and provides a platform for shared experiences. “The behavior of one, it is assumed, acts as a stimulus for the behavior of the other” (Chazan, 2003, “An interactive process” section).

The trip to Prague or Venice provides an experience of Jewish and general culture coexisting. To travel to Poland is to experience the height of Jewish creativity, and the depth of human depravity. Traveling to Israel is about seeing, feeling, and touching the Jewish past, present, and future. There is defined subject matter in this kind of education and a great deal of cognitive learning that takes place, but it happens through seeing, visiting, touching, and participating, rather than through lectures or ‘looking in from without.’ Experiential and informative, travel often creates a sense of community and it is usually regarded as great fun. (Chazan, 2003, “Some examples of informal Jewish education” section)

### **Summary**

The first theme explored in this literature review examines how knowledge has been and is currently produced in relation to the experiences of MENA Jews. The experiences, omission, and marginalization of MENA Jews is explored, specifically the prejudice against Mizrahi women. The second theme considers storytelling and digital storytelling as methods of creating knowledge. The last theme focuses on informal Jewish education as it relates to knowledge production. The research demonstrates that the voices and experiences of the MENA Jewish community have been excluded from centers of learning where knowledge is produced and shared. Therefore, there is a need to fill in the gaps in the research by adding knowledge from Jewish people indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa through

storytelling pedagogy and to include storytelling as witnessing to spaces of informal and experiential Jewish education.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

### Restatement of Purpose

Prior to the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948, there were almost one million Jews living in Middle-Eastern and north African countries. Over a few decades, that number dwindled to nonexistence. Their stories and experiences of living as an ethno-religious minority in Muslim majority countries, exile, migration and more have been largely ignored or minimized. This qualitative study is centered around those who have been pushed to the periphery. This study serves as a platform for individuals from the Middle Eastern and North African Jewish community to speak on their experiences as an exploited people, subjected to second-class citizenship (*dhimmitude*) in Arab and Muslim lands, pogroms, exterminations, and expulsion. It is my hope that through these stories, a history that has been largely ignored, can serve as a learning resource for Jewish and non-Jewish college and university students to better understand the rising antisemitism on campus. Furthermore, these narratives can prove to be powerful resources to offer a more complete and diverse historical narrative for all students.

I use digital storytelling to document the experiences of MENA Jews living in Arab/Muslim lands during the twentieth century and beyond. This project seeks to fill the gap in knowledge about the experiences of the MENA Jewish community. Digital storytelling makes the knowledge produced from this project accessible to many, both within and outside of traditional academic spaces. According to Spurgeon et al. (2009), platforms like YouTube provide opportunities for direct depictions of information and knowledge, allowing for wider participation in learning.

Participants in this project come from communities that have been ignored in traditional scholarly learning spaces, digital storytelling not only provides a platform for sharing their experiences and knowledge, but it also allows for their narratives to be shared in

their own voices. Specifically, this dissertation adds to what is known about minorities in the Middle-East and North Africa and their experiences. This methodology makes space for empowerment by supporting participant decisions on what and how much they wish to share. Digital storytelling allows viewers to put a face to a narrative, humanizing the stories shared.

### **Research Design**

Using narrative theory and digital storytelling honors the storytelling process by making space for participants to share their experiences in an unstructured manner. Because of this, the results of this project are only known after the data is collected.

This project used storytelling to share the experiences of MENA Jews. I used narrative inquiry and digital storytelling, specifically to capture and share the experiences of participants. Digital storytelling has been defined as the use of modern technology to express the ancient art of storytelling (Sadik, 2008). This qualitative project allowed participants to use their own voices to express their experiences and feelings in their own words. Digital storytelling methodology allows for listeners and viewers to absorb the information presented in a holistic manner, interpreting what they see and hear without interference from others.

There were a few research questions that guided the conversations for this dissertation. However, there was space left for the conversations to flow in the direction the storytellers wish. The underlying question this research study attempted to answer is what were participants' experiences as Jews living in Arab and Muslim lands? The main purpose of this dissertation was to explore the experiences of MENA Jews, so the design of this research includes space for participants to share their stories in a manner that allows their authenticity.

There are two main reasons that I choose digital storytelling for this project. First, the platform allows participants to share their narratives in their own voices, without interpretation from me or others. The ability to share experiences in one's own voice,

regardless of language, is empowering. It also humanizes these narratives for viewers, providing a medium where stories are not only read, but seen and heard. For students, digital storytelling supports diverse literacy skills (Robin, 2006). Second, digital storytelling is superior to narrative essays and written narratives for this project because of language barriers that exist between me and participants. Although participants may have some level of English language skills, offering a platform where they can share some of what may be traumatic experiences in their native tongue provides a secure and trusting rapport building environment. It also captures the natural flow of conversation and storytelling, allowing for pauses, repeating, inflection, and other elements of storytelling that are important ways to deliver story. Digital storytelling provides an emotional element of narrative that cannot be replicated by written narrative.

There are scores of articles and texts written about the history of the Jewish people in the diaspora. This dissertation offers another platform for these experiences and histories to be shared, in the voices of the individuals who lived in these communities. Examining how narrative is able to shape knowledge, it is important that the stories shared in this project are not guided by the researcher, but by the participants whose lived experiences are central to this research. Part of honoring this methodology is accepting the stories told in the language and setting most comfortable to participants and allowing participants to take an active role in any translation and transliteration of their stories.

Although curricula are diversifying, there are a few conditions in which more should be done. First, the method of delivery for much educational programming is limited. Textbooks and articles do not leave room for individual and community voices to be heard without interpretation and misrepresentation. They also do not provide a delivery method for those who have difficulty writing and reading or accessing texts. Second, knowledge is often inaccessible to many potential learners. The gap between town and gown, is large and the

walls surrounding academic institutions high. Storytelling in general and digital storytelling specifically provide solutions to the barriers those traditional education delivery methods present (Robin, 2006).

Storytelling addresses issues of delivery and accessibility methods while also leaving room for individuals to speak on their experiences and histories through narratives (Geia et al., 2013). This methodology can make knowledge and information accessible to populations that are unable to access traditional academia. Storytelling allows narratives and experiences of those who have been victimized by cultural genocide space to exist as knowledge. There is a lack of awareness of the experiences of MENA Jews. This research seeks to at least partially fill this gap in knowledge by documenting first-person experiences through a digital storytelling methodology. Digital storytelling offers another platform for this research to be shared and accessed, providing opportunities for those without access to written research to hear and learn from these research participants.

### **Research Setting**

After expulsions and fleeing violence in Muslim and Arab lands, MENA Jews fled to Israel, the United States, and elsewhere. This research study includes narratives from MENA Jewish people in the United States, Israel, and Sweden. Israel was the preferred location because of its importance as a beacon of hope and freedom to the participant population. Israel served as a refuge for MENA Jews, a refuge that Jewish diaspora living in Europe did not have during the Holocaust. The importance of Israel being the setting is twofold: First, geographically and politically, Israel offered a place where Jewish diaspora could return to, no matter the circumstances. In modern times the necessity for the re-establishment of the Jewish homeland was never more apparent than during the first half of the 20th century. The escalation of pogroms against Jews throughout Europe and Muslim and Arab lands left nowhere for Jewish diaspora to flee to, with few nations willing to accept Jewish refugees.

Second, there is no story of the Jewish people without also including the story of Judea. Setting this project in *Eretz Yisrael*, the land, was essential to providing as complete a picture as possible of the story of the participants to this project.

Originally, participants were going to come from Iranian, Iraqi, and Tunisian Jewish communities. Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, and Syria all expelled their Jewish community members after the establishment of the modern state of Israel. Upon arrival in Israel, they were settled in periphery regions. However, in current times Mizrahi communities can be found throughout Israel. Participants for this research hold Iranian, Iraqi, and Tunisian Jewish heritage. I met with participants via Zoom due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and health concerns.

### **Research Questions**

The overall question guiding this dissertation study is: What were the experiences of MENA Jews living in Muslim/Arab lands in the 20th century and beyond? The following are underlying questions that researchers may consider:

- How has the omission of the experiences of MENA Jews impacted historical knowledge?
- In what ways does storytelling impact erasure of the MENA Jewish experience?
- How can digital storytelling disrupt ignored and erased experiences?

### **Participants**

I planned to have five to seven participants for this project. Because this project seeks to capture individual experiences, and MENA Jews were dispersed from Middle Eastern and North African countries to Israel and abroad, it was expected that participants will come from a number of countries, including but not limited to Israel. Due to travel restrictions and public health concerns related to COVID-19, I was unable to have my preferred number of

participants. However, I was able to gather the stories and experiences of three participants, Saba, Maor, and Hen.

This research used convenience sampling to identify participants due to the following reasons: (1) the population of participants is limited and will need to be identified by colleagues who are familiar with this community, and (2) the population of participants may be geographically distant to the researcher. Due to the nature of this project, the researcher contacted members of MENA Jewish communities, individuals who are familiar with English, Hebrew, Arabic, and Ladino languages for assistance with translation and transliteration.

Unfortunately, the generation of MENA Jews who fled Arab and Muslim lands is aging. For this reason, family members were included in order to capture their experiences and stories. Jews from Arab and Muslim lands in the Middle-East and Africa and their direct descendants are included in this dissertation study. Participation in this research volunteered, agreeing to participate and share their stories and experiences, and also agreeing to being recorded both visually and audibly.

Because of the aging population of Mizrahim who were expelled from Arab and Muslim countries, participants were second or even third generation Jews, sharing the stories and experiences of their families. Therefore, the age range was anyone over 18 years old. I would have liked to have participants of all genders. However, because of the multiple-erasure Mizrahi women face I was interested in having women's narratives highlighted in this project. However, due to limitations to access, because of COVID-19, this was not be possible. I included the experiences from both women and men.

As a woman, it is important to me that all of my work is feminist-centered. The voices of women have been cast aside all too often, even when those very voices hold most of the knowledge in many instances. I am grateful that I was able to have a participant who not only

represents women, but who has conducted research that is feminist-centered. This dissertation directly counters the epistemic violence that dictates *true* knowledge as being narrow and exclusive by centering voices and experiences of individuals and communities that have been marginalized.

Saba is the first participant featured in the film. She is a 44-year-old Jewish woman born in Tehran, Iran. Saba immigrated to the United States when she was two-years old, in 1978, and currently resides in Los Angeles, California. The Jewish community in Iran represents one of the oldest in the diaspora. However, it lost around 80 percent of its population in 1948, when the modern state of Israel was re-established. Table 1 outlines some of the major events that impacted the Jewish community in Iran in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Table 1**

*20th & 21st Century Events in Iranian Jewish Community*

Year	Event	Jewish Population
1908	Constitutional rights are granted to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians	
1948	The end of World War II and the re-establishment of the state of Israel leads to 80% of Iranian Jews immigrating	100,000
1950	The Shah recognizes the state of Israel	
1979	Ayatollah Khomeini begins his reign over Iran	
2012	According to the Iranian government census, there are approximately 8700 Jews left in Iran	
2019		8,300

The second participant featured in the film is Maor. He is originally from Toronto Canada and is currently a graduate student studying in Stockholm Sweden. Maor has Iraqi Jewish heritage and discusses the experiences of multiple generations of Jewish diaspora across four countries. Table 2 outlines major events that occurred in 20th century Iraq and led to the exile of Iraq’s centuries old Jewish communities.

**Table 2***20th & 21st Century Events in Iraq*

Year	Event	Jewish Population
1918	British mandate is established	
1932	Iraq gains independence and welcomes Nazism into Iraq	
1941-1951	The <i>Farhud</i> begins, killing hundreds of Jews. Over 15,000 Jews flee Iraq through Iran	
1948	<i>Zionism</i> is criminalized and hundreds of Jews are jailed and tortured. Jewish homes and businesses are confiscated	150,000
1949-1951	Iraqi Jews are permitted to leave Iraq, but must renounce their citizenship first. Operations Ezra and Nechemia rescue over 100,000 Jews through The Jewish Agency	
1952	Iraq bans the remaining Jewish people from leaving	
1969	Persecution against Jewish Iraqis begins again, with arrests and public lynchings	
1970s	The Jews remaining in Iraq are allowed to leave quietly	
2010	Iraq's Jewish population is no more	
2019		< 10

Hen is the final participant featured in the film. He is a writer, activist, speaker, and former IDF soldier. He has both Tunisian and Iraqi Jewish heritage. Hen was raised in Petah Tikvah Israel. Table 3 outlines events that negatively impacted Tunisia's Jewish population.

**Table 3***20th & 21st Century Events in Tunisia*

Year	Event	Jewish Population
1910	<i>Agudat Zion</i> is founded in Tunisia	
1923	Tunisian Jews are able to obtain French citizenship	
1940	Vichy French rule is established in Tunisia	
1942	German Nazis occupy Tunisia, sending thousands of Jews to labor camps	
1948		105,000
1956	Tunisia gains independence, the Jewish Community Council is disbanded, Jewish neighborhoods are destroyed, Jews flee	
1961	<i>Bizerte</i> crisis leads to increased anti-Semitism. Zionists are arrested and persecuted. Jews flee for Israel or France	
1967	The Six Day War results in riots against Jews. Out of the 20,000 Jews remaining in Tunisia, 7000 flee to France	
2002	<i>Al Qaeda</i> terrorists attack <i>El Ghriba Synagogue</i> , murdering 17	
2012	There are less than 1000 Jews remaining in Tunisia	
2019		1,000

**Sample Size**

Literature on qualitative inquiry data saturation supports sample numbers between one and 12 (Guest et al., 2006; Romney et al., 1986; Shufutinsky, 2019). According to the literature, the higher end of this sample scale is often used for traditional phenomenology and grounded theory, but that the lower end is often used for narrative inquiry and for multi-method and triangulated approaches (Creswell, 2013; Guest et al., 2006; J. M. Morse, 2010; Shufutinsky, 2019). Other storytelling methodologies also show smaller numbers being effectively adequate for narrative and phenomenological storytelling studies (Shufutinsky, 2019; Smith et al., 2009). There is no standard sample size that is suitable for every narrative inquiry study (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Shufutinsky, 2019). The research design within a qualitative study determines sample size and data saturation. Depending on the make-up of participants, there is the possibility for unanimity, resulting in small samples achieving data saturation quickly. When working with marginalized populations, smaller sample sizes can

prove sufficient (Guest et al., 2006; Shufutinsky, 2019). Qualitative analysis calls for thick and rich data, describing thick in terms of sample numbers and richness reflected in the intricacy of data (Dibley, 2011; Shufutinsky, 2019). However, W. C. Morse et al. (2014) discovered that larger sample sizes were not often used out of concern for saturation, but instead because of other administrative demands.

### **Data Collection/Instrumentation**

The fundamental element to narrative inquiry is the shared experience between researcher and participant through storytelling. Digital storytelling was the platform that this project used to capture participants' experiences. Data was collected via audiovisual equipment as well as audio recordings of participants' narratives. This researcher used Zoom to record participants' stories.

Data was recorded via a web-based platform, capturing both audio and visual information. COVID-19 impacted the manner in which data was collected in the following ways: (1) in-person collection versus online platforms, and (2) recordings being conducted in participants' homes or more public spaces where social distancing can be adhered to.

I used prompting, open-ended questions that encourage detailed responses. This was not structured rigidly, but instead more of a motivational interview where participants shape the direction of the narrative based on her/his desire to share and relive the experiences they are speaking of. Conversations took place via Zoom. Participants were encouraged to share for as long a time as they are able, leaving room for follow up questions and conversations as needed. However, I anticipated that conversations will be between one and two hours long.

Originally, I planned to conduct most conversations with participants in person. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 that plan did not come to fruition. The change in how I recorded the experiences of participants impacted my research in a few ways. First, I needed to edit video and audio, but was be limited to the technology that Zoom provides for some

data. Also, rather than using an audio recorder in addition to a camera to record in person conversations, I was limited to recording audio through my laptop for the conversations that will take place virtually. I used labelling to keep the recordings organized, which helped me when it comes time to edit material. I planned on using music as a medium to aid the documentation of participants' experiences. The overall research question provides a general frame for the conversations. However, research data was participant driven.

### **Data Analysis**

Due to the nature of this project, this researcher maintained the integrity of participants' narratives. This project requires analysis to be conducted by listeners and viewers of the finished project, not solely by this researcher. However, I explored themes that arose from the narratives. Some of the common themes I expected are ones that revolve around displacement, migration, oppression, erasure, achievement, and survival, all of which speak to identity.

### **Research Ethics**

I received approval to include participants in this project from the Institutional Review Board at the University of San Francisco in fall 2020. As stated above, participation in this project is voluntary. The following factors are under consideration for this project:

- Emotional distress caused by reliving and retelling traumatic events
- Creating trust between the researcher and participants – building rapport
- Maintaining integrity to participants' experiences and stories throughout the project, while editing content for time

Ethical concerns include issues around privacy, translation, and interpretation. Maintaining personal narratives and experiences comes with a responsibility to the owner of that information, the participants. Although I gathered the information, it does not and will not “belong” to me. I went into this project with that in mind, that this information belongs to

those who participated in this project. I maintained all recordings and notes in a similar manner that I maintain clinical notes as a therapist, only sharing and disclosing what I have permission to share and disclose. It was also my responsibility as the researcher to ensure participants are aware of what will be done with their narratives. Because some participants shared phrases or words in a language other than English, I had to make sure their words and meanings are translated appropriately and correctly. This was done in collaboration with participants so that the interpretations of what they share is accurate.

Prior to conduct of research, the proposal was reviewed by the University of San Francisco's Institutional Review Board.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This dissertation gathered stories from a limited participant size, and therefore is not generalizable. Although this study aims to honor and value the experiences of marginalized individuals and communities, because of the personal nature of narrative, results are not generalizable. Each experience is unique and may not be shared by others within, or from outside of the MENA Jewish community.

Unfortunately, the structure of data collection needed to be flexible to account for COVID 19 restrictions. Participants shared their stories on a digital platform, Zoom, in order to accommodate social distancing.

## CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This dissertation shares the experiences of Middle-Eastern and North African Jews through narrative inquiry and digital storytelling. Storytelling is a powerful method used to capture and share knowledge. The film portion of this research offers a platform for participants to share their experiences directly with the audience, without being presented through a researcher's lens. However, this short chapter compliments the film portion of the study by serving as a guide, providing details regarding the format of the film, and introducing participants and some of their thoughts and experiences. I am grateful that all three participants allowed me to hear their stories. Sharing personal experiences and intimate details of one's life is not something to take for granted, and I deeply appreciate being a part of this.

The major findings are (a) multiple marginalization, (b) intra-community discrimination, and (c) self-identity and how it is impacted by place. All three themes will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. However, the following will provide guiding details on how the themes relate to the findings in this dissertation. Multiple marginalization is a form of alienation from one's culture as a form of erasure. Intra-community discrimination refers to prejudicial beliefs and treatment from segments of one's own community. Self-identity and how it is impacted by place consider how geographic and social location can influence how one identifies. Findings will be included in the discussion section of chapter five. The film can be found on YouTube at:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIXMAnKJ5ls>.

Each participant was asked to share a quote, song, or poem that speaks to their story. There are many different mediums in which storytellers use to connect with an audience. Sometimes poems, quotes, or songs are able to act as a bridge between experiences and emotions. The quotes chosen are shared before each participant begins to speak.

This film begins with a quote from Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Saba, the first participant featured in this project, chose the leading quote, “*G-d has given us many faiths but only one world in which to co-exist. May your work help all of us to cherish our commonalities and feel enlarged by our differences.*” Although this quote was chosen by Saba, I used it as a foundational inspiration for this work. Saba is a 44-year-old academic, writer, and world traveler. She is a Jewish woman of Iranian descent, an immigrant, a daughter, and a sister. Saba discusses her story, providing details about how all of the labels listed previously and more have impacted her life. Her experience is unique. However, there are many who may find commonality in her story and the story of her family and ancestors. Saba discusses her experience immigrating to the United States as an Iranian Jewish child and how that impacted her life as a student.

At the conclusion of Saba’s story, viewers see a music video chosen by Maor, the second participant. He chose *Ya um al- 'Abayah*, by Dudu Tassa and The Kuwaitis because of the optics of Dudu Tassa making such beautiful music with friends at sundown by the sea. Maor is an Iraqi Jewish man with Swedish heritage from Toronto Canada. At the time of the recording he was living and studying for his graduate degree in Stockholm. Maor’s story provides insight into four generations of Jewish diaspora through four countries. His story also demonstrates the power of storytelling in producing knowledge—as he is able to recount stories from his great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents. He goes on to discuss how one’s identity relates to where one is sitting geographically.

The section of the film following Maor is a video by recording artists A-WA. Hen, the third participant, chose the song, *Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman*, which translates to *Here is Not Yemen*. Hen chose this song because of its symbolism to the experiences many Jews from the Middle-East and North Africa faced when expelled from Arab and Muslim lands and migrating to Israel. Hen is a writer, activist, speaker, and former IDF soldier who often shares

the story of his Tunisian and Iraqi Jewish family and their experiences in Tunisia, Iraq, and Israel. After Hen speaks, the film shows the poem he chose, *Zohra El Fassia* by Erez Bitton. Bitton wrote this poem in honor of Zohra Al Fassiya, a famous Moroccan Jewish singer who died in poverty in Israel after immigrating to Israel along with many other Moroccan Jews after being persecuted by the Muslim majority in Morocco.

All three participants were recorded via Zoom. The original plan was for me to record participants sharing their stories with a camera in-person. This would have allowed for minimal editing, as participants' voices and stories are central to this project, with the researcher remaining behind the scenes. Unfortunately, COVID restrictions forced a change of plans, moving recordings to a virtual platform. Recording on a virtual platform detracted from my ability to polish the film in a manner that I would have like. However, I am grateful that participants were able to share their stories in their own voices and offer an audiovisual that is accessible to many.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

### Reflections on Research Process

My journey to become a doctoral student at USF started a few years before I applied for admission. I knew that I wanted to study international and multicultural education, but was not sure which program would be the right fit for me. After researching many different programs, I decided to apply to USF. I had two very general ideas about what I wanted to study and research, both of which encompassed exploring methods for creating and sharing knowledge outside of the traditional academy. What inspired me to conduct research on this research topic was mainly current events. The extreme rise in antisemitism from the political left and the political right in American society and the increase in antisemitism in academic institutions led to the realization that education is one of the best weapons against bigotry. The story of the Jewish people has been minimized and marginalized with Jewish people *ethnoconvenienced* in order to fit a particular narrative (Shufutinsky, 2019, 2020). Coming from a community that has also been marginalized, ignored, and erased from the American and international stage, I am drawn to sharing space with other marginalized individuals and communities.

I embarked on this dissertation viewing it as a journey, knowing that in order to truly share authentic stories and experiences I would need to strive for an open, honest, and unbiased lens as a researcher. Having intimate knowledge of migrant/immigrant stories and experiences and knowing that there would be strong opinions about participants' origins and ethnic backgrounds, I realized early on that if this project was to do justice to marginalized individuals and communities, then I would have to accept the good, bad, and ugly of the entirety of the experiences shared. Misconceptions and opinions would have to be set aside in order to sincerely listen to what participants would share. Questions asked would need to focus on the uniqueness of individual and communal experiences. Space would need to be

made for those who have been pushed to the margins of conversations and knowledge production. Radical acceptance would be necessary, accepting that information shared is true to the individual sharing and experiences are just as valid as what has been promoted by others.

## **Summary of Findings**

### **Overview of Problem**

How knowledge is produced and shared, who is given space in educational settings, and which experiences are highlighted demonstrate the significant issue of cultural genocide, specifically within academia. One only needs to glimpse at University departments dedicated to Middle-East studies to realize that Indigenous Middle-Eastern and North African (MENA) communities have been largely ignored. Kurds, Imazighen, and Jews are routinely erased from conversations and learning that is centered in the MENA region. This kind of erasure is damaging in many ways, one being that it has a direct negative impact on identity. McAdams & McLean (2013) discuss the importance personal historical knowledge has on one's identity. The inability for MENA Jews to have adequate representation in institutions of learning acts as a form of erasure. Storytelling as a form of knowledge production is meaningful for the following two ways: (a) it serves as one method used to combat erasure and (b) it has been a method used by Indigenous people around the globe to maintain their epistemologies through generations (Boje, 2016; Caxaj, 2015; Datta, 2018a, 2018b; De Silva, 2019; Fernández-Llamazares & Cabeza, 2018; Gainsford & Robertson, 2019; Kawano, 2019).

The three main themes that will be discussed include (1) multiple marginalization, (b) intra-community discrimination, and (c) self-identity and how it relates to place. The findings of this research demonstrate the rich and diverse experiences that are sources of knowledge to be shared. All three participants recounted experiences that were shared with them by family and community members, demonstrating the power storytelling has in producing knowledge.

One example of this is when Hen discusses Dihya Al-Kahina, the story of the Jewish Amazigh warrior queen who led her people to victory against the invading Islamic army:

There's a folklore story on how the Amazigh got there [North Africa]... they say that she came from Judea, she was Jewish, and Al-Kahina means the priest or the Cohen and the Islamic scholars that are studying the fights of Queen Dihya against the Islamic armies are referring to her as a Jewish sorcerer, as a Jewish witch. She had three children and their descendants are the Jewish Amazigh.

This story has been told through generations and speaks as a people's origin story, maintaining cultural links to a region through millennia. The stories, histories, and experiences shared provide an insight into historical and cultural events that have impacted many, even as the specifics shared are unique to individual participants. Participants recounting their family stories display the power of storytelling in creating knowledge and sharing it with future generations. The intimate details of family members' stories provide aspects of their experiences that would otherwise remain unknown to a wider audience. As found in the literature, the findings of this research support that diversity in learning styles, honors traditional methods of producing knowledge, encourages community building, and impedes cultural erasure that often occurs in marginalized communities and populations (Caxaj, 2015; Iseke, 2013).

A remarkable thing occurred as I listened to and engaged with the stories. I realized that the benefits of storytelling go beyond the audience and extend to the narrator. The ability for participants to share their unique experiences and have their stories respected and listened to seemed to provide a space of empowerment and healing. Saba discusses this in the film when she talks about her dissertation research, interviewing over 100 Jewish Iranian women:

When I interviewed the grandmother's generation, they would all start off by saying "What do I know? I was married off at 9, 10, 11. I had to drop out of school, I had 9

kids. I don't know anything. Too bad my husband isn't alive for you to interview him." And what they didn't realize is that these women were the rockstars. This is why I wanted to interview them.

Saba's dissertation research provided this group of women the space to share experiences and details of their lives that they had never before shared, partially due to shame, and also being ignored and excluded. The past, present, and future connected in a reconciliatory manner and also allowed room for the complexity of self-identity to be discussed and explored.

In the discussion section of this chapter, I explore the following common themes that emerged from this research, consisting of (a) multiple marginalization, (b) intra-community discrimination, and (c) self-identity, and how it is impacted by place. The conclusion explores the implications of this research, and recommendations for further research, policy, and practice.

## **Discussion**

Three common themes identified from the stories told by Saba, Maor, and Hen include (a) multiple marginalization, (b) intra-community discrimination, and (c) self-identity and how it is impacted by place. Saba is a 44-year old scholar, writer, and world traveler. She is a Jewish woman of Iranian descent. Maor is an Iraqi Jewish man with Swedish heritage from Toronto Canada. Hen is a writer, activist, speaker, and former IDF soldier who often shares the story of his Tunisian and Iraqi Jewish family and their experiences in Tunisia, Iraq, and Israel. All three participants are highly education and well-traveled individuals. The following section will use examples and comments from the participant narratives to address these common themes.

### **Multiple Marginalization**

The stories shared exhibit rich narrative accounts of marginalization from multiple perspectives, a shared phenomenon expressed through the stories and their overarching

meanings. Sadiki (2019) defines multiple marginalization as “a form of regional, spatial, and cumulative estrangement manifested through a state of socioeconomic and political disadvantage” (p. 1). For the purposes of this research, multiple marginalization also includes cultural estrangement, where specifics related to heritage are erased or ignored. The stories resounded with theoretical description of being multiply marginalized people. This is exemplified in the context in which MENA Jews were a minority population, facing *dhimmitude*. This was not to be dismissed or absent after expulsion of survivors from those lands, creating a forced identity of being a minority within a minority in countries where they fled. Jews with roots in majority Arab and Muslim lands have been multiply marginalized (Cyrus, 2017). First, they represent a minority population that lived within MENA lands for centuries, facing *dhimmitude*, second-class citizenship (Julius, 2018a). When survivors were expelled, they represented a minority within a minority population in countries where they fled.

This multiple marginalization is exemplified in Saba’s story. Saba left Iran with her family when she was two years old. They settled in the United States, where they joined a growing Jewish population with roots in Iran. However, attending a Jewish day school in Los Angeles, Saba found herself one of a few Persian Jews attending an Ashkenazi majority school, with most students being Jews from Germany. The challenges she faced as a Persian Jewish girl were comparable to many immigrants, even though the overall school community was also Jewish. Being a girl and being Mizrahi, Saba was doubly-marginalized, an experience many Mizrahi girls and women face (Motzafi-Haller, 2001; Nader, 1989). Saba discusses multiple marginalization when considering how Jews in Iran held *dhimmi* status, which is an institutionalized form of second-class citizenship held by Jews throughout Arab and Muslim lands. Although there is no official form of *dhimmitude* in the United States, Saba was marginalized as a student because she was an Iranian Jewish immigrant whose first

language was not English. As a student at a predominately Ashkenazi Jewish day school, Saba was placed in classes that did not support her academic abilities. She did not conclude whether she was treated differently as a student because she was an immigrant, an Iranian Jew, a girl, or due to all of these factors. When discussing her doctoral research focus on the experiences of Jewish women from Iran, Saba speaks about a common theme where her research participants expressed surprise that she was interested in their stories, opinions, and experiences (Soomekh, 2012). These women were used to being ignored and cast aside, which corresponds to what was found in the literature, where Mizrahi women are commonly left out of academia (Halperin-Kaddar, 2004; Motzafi-Haller, 2001). Although a researcher and an academic herself, Saba shares the experience of being multiply-marginalized as a woman, Jewish, Mizrahi, and an immigrant.

A corresponding example of the theoretical foundation of multiple marginalization is evident in the story of study participant Maor, a Canadian citizen, currently living and studying in Sweden. All four of Maor's paternal great-grandparents were born in Iraqi Kurdistan. His paternal grandmother's parents immigrated from British Mandate Mesopotamia (Iraq) to London England, where his grandmother was born and raised. His paternal grandfather's parents left Iraqi Kurdistan for Haifa British Mandate Palestine, where Maor's grandfather was born. After serving the U.K. during World War II, Maor's grandparents relocated to Toronto Canada. Although born and raised in Toronto, Maor discusses how his name identified him as *other* within Canadian society because of its Jewish Israeli origin. Many automatically assumed that he was Israeli. During conversations, Maor would state that his father is Iraqi Jewish and his mother is Swedish Jewish. Upon hearing this, many would either respond that they were not aware that there were Jews in Iraq or Sweden or that they were also Sephardic. Iraqi Jews are not Sephardic, but Mizrahi. Maor's family has a complicated immigration story that brought them from British Mandate Iraq, to

the United Kingdom, and eventually to Canada, adding up to nearly a century since his relatives left Iraq. According to the Berman Jewish Databank, approximately 1% of Canada's population is Jewish (Brym et al., 2018). Of that 1%, only nine percent are Mizrahi or Sephardic (Brym et al., 2018). Maor's story provides context into how he experienced multiple marginalization within Canadian society. His participation in Jewish organizations in Canada allowed him to experience how Mizrahim are marginalized within the Jewish community. One such example Maor provides is when he worked for the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, archiving films. He discusses how Mizrahim featured in the films were often *othered*, depicted as low-class and uneducated. Not only were Mizrahim marginalized within Jewish films, but films by and about them were excluded from the film festival. Maor's work led to Mizrahi films being included in their own category within the archive for the first time in history. He also worked to get a category for LGBTQ+ films included. Maor discusses how art in general and film specifically contribute to the multiple marginalization experienced by Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews. As a Jewish, gay man of Iraqi heritage who is currently living, working, and studying in Sweden, Maor is part of a group of people who are marginalized in multiple ways. He discusses how Sweden's immigration policies have led to a significant Iraqi population within Sweden. However, the vast majority of Iraqis in Sweden are Muslim. Maor discusses how, as an Iraqi Jew, his identity is most often contextualized as either Jewish or Iraqi, but rarely as both.

The third participant likewise discusses his and his family's experiences of multiple marginalization. Hen is an Israeli activist, writer, and speaker, born in Petah Tikvah and currently living in Tel Aviv. His work focuses on Israel, the geopolitics of the Middle East, Mizrahi Jews, and LGBTQ issues. Hen's mother's family migrated to Israel from Iraq in the 1950s. His father's family moved to Israel from Tunisia. They are descended from the Indigenous Imazighen people of Tunisia, who are said to be descendants of Diyah al-Kahina,

a Jewish warrior queen who led an Indigenous resistance force against the invading Islamic army in the seventh century. As a gay, Jewish man of Iraqi and Tunisian heritage, Hen has experienced marginalization on multiple levels. Upon moving to Israel, both his mother's family and father's family experienced similar hurdles that other (im)migrants face, including learning a new language, finding housing, and looking for employment. Like other Jewish refugees from Arab and Muslim lands recently arriving in Israel, Hen's grandparents were placed in a *Ma'abarot*, transit camp. *Ma'abarot* lacked basic resources, with residents living in tents with little protection from the heat and cold. Supplies were rationed and water had to be boiled due to lack of sanitation (Julius, 2018a). After living in the *ma'abarot* for years, Avram, Hen's Iraqi grandfather moved the family to Petah Tikvah in the center of the country, where resources and jobs were more accessible. Avram used resources to buy one dunam of land in order to build a home. However, members of the Labor party, which was in power at the time, moved Avram and his family into a social housing apartment in exchange for taking his land. In order to secure favorable employment, Israelis had what Hen describes as a red card that indicated an individual was a part of Labor. The Labor party was dominated by Ashkenazim, with Mizrahim unable to access the privileges that went along with party membership. Hen describes the poverty that his parents, grandparents and aunts and uncles experienced—saying that it was common amongst their community. Hen's father, along with other Mizrahim, was not given career options for their compulsory military service. Jobs that were open to them were things like truck driver. Upon completion of his army service, Hen's father was unable to secure “real” work because of his lack of the red Labor card. When Menachem Begin established *Likud*, Hen's father felt that for the first-time political leaders recognized Mizrahim. He was able to get a job as an aerospace industry mechanic. This was the first time that Hen's father was able to secure a “proper job” where he was making enough money to be financially independent from his parents.

The idea of being marginalized for (im)migration status, sexual orientation, and gender by those from outside of the Jewish community is not inconceivable. However, the concept of being discriminated against from another segment of the community in which one belongs raises distinct issues, concerns, and questions. Conceptually, one does not experience discrimination from within one's community. What would otherwise be considered racism cannot exist from those who share cultural heritage with each other. Nonetheless, Saba, Maor, and Hen all discuss experiences of this type of prejudice from fellow community members-either Jewish or Middle Eastern. The next section discusses experiences of intra-community discrimination that all participants disclosed within their stories.

### **Intra-Community Discrimination**

Exploring the lived experiences of Mizrahi Jews allowed me to document individuals who are part of a minority-within-a-minority community. Specifically, I was able to hear from participants whose stories include immigrant stories, stories from an ethnoreligious group that has been ignored, the experiences of girls and women, and LGBT+ stories. Because of the diversity in these stories, participants' experiences included the unexpected theme of intra-community discrimination. Before beginning this research, I did not think about the consequences of discrimination from within the larger community. It was only after reviewing the literature, speaking with participants, and discussing the intricacies that go along with immigration, linguistic differences, and different spiritual practices that the theme of intra-community discrimination emerged. Evans et al. (2017) discussed intra-community discrimination within the LGBTQ community, stating that the lack of conformity to "community norms, such as in appearance, mannerisms, gendered roles, and behaviors" (439) contributed to prejudice from fellow community members. Although Evans et al.'s description of intra-community discrimination was applied to the LGBT community, they are applicable to the MENA Jewish community, as evidenced through the stories shared by the

participants in this study. All three participants described the intra-community discrimination they or their family members faced as part of Middle-Eastern or North African communities and also as members of the Jewish community at large. As part of Iraqi, Iranian, and Tunisian communities, they were discriminated against because of their Jewishness, officially being categorized as *dhimmi* in many cases. Hen discusses this in the film, stating “She [his grandmother] told me how she had to serve food for nazi officers of the Vichy regime. The French Vichy regime was controlling North Africa and my grandparents had to work for them because they were Jewish.” Within the larger Jewish community, they faced intra-community discrimination by being classified as other, Oriental, or Eastern. Although intra-community discrimination occurs/ed in both spaces, it is not equal. Within the larger Middle-Eastern/North African communities the discrimination against Jews has been violent and deadly. Intra-community discrimination within the Jewish community has been marginalization and erasure, but not physically violent.

As a grade-school student, Saba attended a Jewish day school in Los Angeles. This school had a student population that was majority Jews whose families immigrated to the United States from Germany, Russia, and other places in Europe. Saba attributes her treatment as being unintelligent to the teachers and staff not believing that she was academically gifted because of her ethnic background and immigrant status. Switching from a private school to the local public school, taking advanced classes, and attending top universities validated her intellectual abilities.

Saba’s experiences as a student highlight the complexities of intra-community conflict that can result in discrimination that often parallels prejudice from outside of the community. An interesting pattern emerged in this research, where newer immigrants become the majority demographic, while those who immigrated earlier were able to form community institutions over their years in their new location. This may be a reason why, even though Los

Angeles has the largest Persian Jewish population outside of Israel, Saba's experience in school was not unique. In fact, research shows that Persian Jewish stories, history, and experiences are often left out of learning and cultural spaces, both within and outside of the Jewish community. Tabby Refael, a Los Angeles based writer and speaker, attributes ignorance regarding Mizrahi experiences to the fact that very few people are knowledgeable about Mizrahi history. Refael (2020) states that even though Persian Jews represent almost half of the student body of the public schools in Beverly Hills, she does not remember any guest speakers lecturing about her community. Refael's answer is to get schools to employ speakers, videos, and Mizrahi students as resources for knowledge production and dissemination.

Maor's work within Jewish organizations accomplished some of what Refael (2020) suggested, diversifying voices and including stories from the Mizrahi, Sephardic, and LGBTQ communities.

During his last years at university, Maor began working with the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, where he was responsible for digitalizing Jewish movies, creating an online library of the films. This experience exposed him to the lack of representation as well as the misrepresentation of Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews in Jewish films. While digitalizing films from the 1990s to the 2000s, Maor witnessed the transformation of the representation within Jewish films. Mizrahim and Sephardim were *racialized* through their speech patterns and slang, which he deemed as integral to how stereotypes formed. Maor describes how he began,

To see chronologically how representations of non-Ashkenazi Jews, which is to say mostly Mizrahi, Sephardic Jews from Arab or Muslim countries, how they're being presented in the films... with the kinds of extremely racialized performances that were being played out on screen. I became fascinated with how these racialized characters were being made to sound... and how this way of talking became key in

images and performances and how in cinema and propaganda studies how that translates into stereotypes.

His undergraduate thesis research examined how film impacted speech patterns, accents, and slang throughout the Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish communities within Israel, regardless of which part of the country they lived in. Similar to Saba's experience, Maor discusses how specific communities within the larger Jewish community are portrayed in and impacted by community institutions, like media—sometimes leading to intra-community discrimination. Conversation around his inability to travel to Iraq and experience where his ancestors lived as a part of the Jewish diaspora for millennia, exposed the intra-community discrimination that Jews who are a part of the MENA population face due to their Jewishness. Although Iraqis who live in Sweden often travel to Iraq to visit relatives and sight-see, Maor's Jewish identity would complicate his travel to Iraq.

During World War II in the 1930s both of Hen's Tunisian grandparents were in forced labor camps, forced to work for Nazis who were part of the French Vichy regime that was controlling North Africa. Muslim Tunisians turned against their Jewish neighbors, informing the Nazis of their locations so that they could be rounded up and placed in labor or death camps. Although Jews were present in Tunisia before it existed as a state, they became second-class citizens, *dhimmi*, when Muslims began to rule. Beginning in the seventh century, Muslims began a campaign to conquer the Middle East and North Africa. These religious and political imperialists “subjugated indigenous peoples, colonized their lands and expropriated their wealth” (Julius, 2018b, p. 7). This status of *dhimmitude* made clear that Jews were not considered equal to Muslims and would not be truly free in Tunisia.

On June 1, 1941, the *Farhud* occurred in Iraq (Julius, 2018a). The *Farhud* refers to when Iraqi Muslim population violently attacked the Jews of Iraq after being inspired by the Nazis. Hen's grandmother witnessed a friend brutally raped and murdered in the street. This

was a most brutal example of how Jews in Iraq and the greater MENA region were never considered Arabs and would always be looked at as *dhimmi*s. Before making *Aliyah*, Hen's grandparents faced discrimination at the hands of their Iraqi and Tunisian peers. Hen discusses how, like other Jewish people living in Arab and Muslim lands, his grandparents faced persecution and accusations of being "more loyal to Israel than to the country that they lived in." He describes how his grandparents felt "safe until the ruler doesn't want them to be safe," highlighting how precarious the position of MENA Jews was while living as diaspora. Hen speaks about how Jews living in Iraq distinguished their time in terms of "before the *farhud* and after the *farhud*" and "before 1961 and after 1961," which is when the public lynching of Jews began.

In 1951, Hen's grandparents were able to move to Israel, seeking safety from the brutality inflicted upon Iraq's Jewish community members. They were stopped by an Iraqi police checkpoint, where everything was taken from them with the exception of clothes. Their passports were stamped *never to return*, making them stateless refugees.

Once in Israel, Hen's maternal and paternal grandparents were placed in transition camps, along with thousands of other Jews fleeing Arab and Muslim lands. Life in Israel was difficult for his family. They experienced poverty and hunger and intra-community discrimination that was impacted by the Labor party, which was composed of majority Ashkenazi Jews. Hen describes how the Labor party kept good paying jobs for fellow party members, excluding Mizrahim from these coveted positions. When the Likud political party came to party under Menachem Begin, Hen's father stated that he, like many other Mizrahi Jews, felt listened to and seen. Many believe that this is why Likud continues to have strong support from the Mizrahi community in Israel. Hen's mother worked at a bank for about 30 years, facing mistreatment and harassment about her hair and her language. Hen expresses how much more difficult it is to think about the poor treatment his parents faced in Israel

because of the history of poor treatment of Jews in Arab and Muslim lands and the expectation that they would no longer be subjected to intra-community discrimination because they were no longer *dhimmis*. Hen also experienced intra-community discrimination as a school student, where Mizrahi culture was put down and the West and Europe was elevated as ideal. Hen states,

For me to grow up as Mizrahi isn't something I was proud of... I remember by teachers always making jokes about Mizrahim and things that were acceptable that no kid in the school thought that it should be called out. I remember that when I said that I enjoyed Arabic music the teacher saying how we have no culture.

### **Self-Identity and How it is Impacted by Place**

Stryker and Burke (2000) discuss the connections between social roles and identity, defining social roles as “expectations attached to two (or more) positions occupied in networks of relationships” (p. 286). Saba, Maor, and Hen all provide examples on how their self-identity has been impacted by place. The following section will describe their experiences with the connections between identity and geographical and societal place.

Those from outside of the Jewish community placed their pre-conceived notions on who Saba should be and what interests she should hold. Some of those notions include ideas on Persian Jews as a ‘model minority,’ within the context of the United States. Outsiders also looked at Persian Jewish women as being materialistic, maintaining a certain physical look including high-end fashions, plastic surgery, and living in mansions, driving luxury vehicles. Saba discusses how she never fit into the mold that others, Jews and non-Jews, tried to place her, including the way she speaks. As a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, Saba teaches students from diverse backgrounds, including students who share her Persian Jewish heritage. She discusses when they express their surprise that she does not speak with the Persian cadence that is common amongst Persian Jews in Los Angeles, she

responds with her own surprise that they speak with what can be described as an accent, even though they were born and raised in Los Angeles and do not share her experience being born in Tehran and immigrating to the United States.

Accents, or speaking cadences, are not uncommon amongst ethnic groups who include a high immigrant demographic. However, it does raise questions as to what having or lacking particular speech patterns have on self-identity and individual identity within a community group. One of the main themes identified during this research regarding self-identity was that of conformity versus individualism. Immigrating from Iran as a young child, Saba learned to speak English with an American accent. Her friendships with individuals outside of the Persian Jewish American community added to Saba's speech pattern, which does not follow the pattern exhibited by many other Persian Jewish Americans. If she were living in a place that did not have a large, established, Persian Jewish community, this difference may not be so obvious. However, given the large Persian Jewish demographic in Los Angeles, Saba's speech pattern is magnified as different than others within the community. Questions arise on how this difference may impact self-identity and community acceptance.

Speech patterns, accents, and linguistic abilities are all common factors that impact immigrants in both their new homes and their countries of origin.

Maor discusses his grandmother's pride in her British nationality and her profession as a dancer as an influence on his family's assimilation into Canadian society. This assimilation did not take away from Maor's interest in his culture as someone with Iraqi Jewish heritage. He studied both the Hebrew and Arabic languages as an adolescent and double-majored in Jewish studies and linguistics at the University of Toronto. Maor's study abroad at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem influenced his identity because this is when he experienced attending parties with other gay, Middle-Eastern, mostly Jewish men. It was

during this time that he felt a strong sense of community pride in a way of being Mizrahi and gay, living in Tel Aviv Israel. Maor's work with the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, which is the largest Jewish film festival in the world, led to the first time an index included stories of the Jewish *other*, with the inclusion of a category for Mizrahi film.

Now living in Sweden with his Iraqi Muslim partner, Maor is experiencing his Iraqi heritage from a Scandinavian lens, without the political perspectives that are prevalent in the United States and Canada. Ways in which he is able to identify as both Iraqi and Jewish are influenced directly by where he is geographically in the world. Sweden's liberal immigration laws have supported the acceptance of Iraqi immigrants for years, allowing for Iraqi communities to become established throughout Sweden. Unlike Canada, the ideas about Iraq and Iraqis are not influenced by years of wars between Iraq and Sweden. Maor's identity as an Iraqi Jewish man place him in a minority-within-a-minority category in Sweden. Although there are many Iraqis and people of Iraqi descent living in Sweden, a small minority of them are Jewish. There have been community events, bringing Middle Eastern people together to celebrate holidays, display art, and socialize. However, most of those events were centered around Muslims, not including those from religious minority communities. The events that have focused on Jewish culture are commonly presented as being Israeli, not specifying heritage even when the individual holds additional cultural heritage. Maor describes his thoughts on how he would like his future family to connect with their Iraqi Jewish identity,

When I think about the family that I would like to build with my Muslim Iraqi partner I want us to do Iraqi Jewish things... like we eat certain foods at Jewish New Year and we do certain things at Passover –I want our kids to understand them as being Iraqi, not that they're these Jewish things that get tweaked because they're in Iraq, but that this is Iraq, we are doing an Iraqi thing right now.

Although all three participants shared commonalities about self-identity and how it relates to place, the uniqueness of each experience is evident. Hen's stories how they connect to his grandparent's experiences as refugees from Iraq and Tunisia to Israel offer a distinct glimpse into how self-identity and social status impact one another. He considers how ideas about freedom and safety can be dependent on immigrant status.

Hen discusses how his grandparent's view on what it is to be free is similar to other communities' opinion on being free—where Hen's grandparents believed that being free and safe was related to being free from violence, not being equals. He discusses how Jews in Europe held a different perception because in Europe Jews had individual freedom that Jews in Arab and Muslim lands did not have. Ashkenazi Jews were told that, even though they were Jews, they were their nationality first. History has shown that this thought process did not last, given the horrors of the inquisition, Nazi-ism, and other anti-Semitic ideologies ignored the nationality of Jews and focused on ethnicity and origin as an excuse for expulsions, pogroms and genocide.

When Hen lived in Seattle Washington for two years he began to speak and write about Mizrahim. He found that many people were unaware of their stories, experiences, and very existence. Hen discusses how those who hold anti-Israel opinions do not want to hear what he and other Mizrahim have to say because it contradicts their narrative that Jews are not Indigenous to the Levant and that Jews are White European colonizers. The fact that Mizrahim are 55% of the Israeli population contradicts their ideology. There has also been pushback from segments of the pro-Israel crowd, who minimize the discrimination that Mizrahim face in Israel. Left-leaning political circles ignore Mizrahi Jews and instead focus on concerns about the Arab population. Right-leaning political circles ignore the lack of Mizrahi representation in academia, media, politics, and business, blaming this lack of representation on Mizrahi work ethic, ignoring that the Moroccan Jewish population in other

places, like France, are the economic and academic elite within the Jewish community at large. The structural barriers, including access to academically challenging high school courses, exist for Mizrahim. However, Hen discusses how his family would not exist if it was not for the existence of Israel.

Most places where Mizrahim live, they hold minority-within-a-minority status, with the exception of Israel, where the Jewish population is approximately 55% Mizrahi and 45% Ashkenazi. The ideas about identity are also complicated because of the grouping of Jews from the Middle-East and North Africa as *Mizrahi*, minimizing the uniqueness of each community, and their experiences and culture. The blending of Jews from Tunisia, Iraq, Iran, and Morocco into one category fails to recognize how each community contributes to the overall Jewish community and the overall MENA community. In Israel, distinctions between MENA Jews are visible because of established of Yemenite, Iraqi, Moroccan, etc. neighborhoods and communities. It is less common to see distinctions made between MENA Jewish communities outside of Israel, instead, these communities are often labeled under the monolith of *Mizrahi*.

During the 20th century the almost one million Jews living in majority Arab and Muslim lands in the Middle-East and North Africa were subjected to second-class citizenship, exploitation, pogroms, exterminations, and eventually expulsion. Many survivors went to Israel, Europe, and North America. This dissertation explores the stories and experiences of survivors and their descendants, a history that has been largely ignored in academic spaces. It is my hope that through storytelling, these narratives will offer a powerful and more complete look at the complexity and diversity of the histories of marginalized and ignored people, specifically those belonging to the Jews who have lived for thousands of years in the Middle-East and North Africa. The purpose of sharing the experiences of participants through storytelling centers on sharing and gaining knowledge in a manner that

challenges the confines of traditional academic learning by allowing space for knowledge production that is accessible to a wider audience. The overall question this research seeks to answer is what were the experiences of Jews living in Middle-Eastern and North African lands in the twentieth century and beyond. Narrative theory is the framework this research uses to capture and share the stories and experiences of participants. I chose this framework because it centers experiences, elevating them in spaces where they have been erased or marginalized.

### **Review of Methodology**

Saba, Hen, and Maor shared their stories and experiences via Zoom. Originally, I planned to record participants sharing their stories in person. Unfortunately, COVID-19 restrictions limited the format because of travel restrictions and concerns about in-person meetings. One of the benefits of using Zoom is that I was able to speak with all three participants for this dissertation, even though they were in California, Sweden, and the United Kingdom at the time. Zoom allowed for me to speak with participants who have a variety of experiences, partially due to coming from different MENA Jewish communities and also because they come from different cultures, Iranian, Iraqi, and Tunisian and American, Canadian, and Israeli. Another benefit to having a way to connect with participants virtually is that it eliminates geographic impediments to connecting. In future research, both in-person and virtual conversations may be useful. As a researcher, I benefitted from all three participants being wonderful speakers. They were able to share their stories and experiences in a natural way, that I do not believe was impacted by the Zoom platform. However, capturing the stories via Zoom proved difficult when it came time for me to edit the film. Had I been able to record on my camera in person it would not have been necessary to edit my voice and picture out of the film. However, because of the online platform, I had to edit in a different manner than originally planned. I also had to contend with issues with internet

connectivity. The visual of the film is not as clear as it would have been had it been captured on a camera. Lighting and sound were impacted by using Zoom.

### **Findings as They Relate to the literature**

Two major findings are significant in the following two ways. First, participants were able to use their own voices and words to convey information that is beneficial to audiences. Their stories and experiences are not filtered by this researcher, either through interpretation or through editing. This allows audience members to reach conclusions that are not colored by another's lens. Participants were able to share stories that they wished, while this researcher honored what they wanted to remain silent about. Second, much of the knowledge conveyed in this research by participants was gained through storytelling. Participants shared stories that they heard from family members, displaying the power storytelling has on knowledge production. Stories related to multiply-marginalized individuals and communities are given space to be shared and explored on a platform that has traditionally been reserved for others.

The three common themes identified in this research include (a) multiple marginalization, (b) intra-community discrimination, and (c) self-identity and how it is impacted by place. Although participants' stories shared commonalities amongst these themes, each story and experience was unique.

The experiences of marginalized individuals and communities have been silenced through exclusion. This frame kept participants at the center of the research and included them in the production of knowledge. There is a growing movement to gather and share stories and experiences, as is done in this research. Both Iseke (2013) and Boje (2016) discuss how Indigenous storytelling is becoming a more common methodology to counter colonial oppression and as an act of bearing witness. It is important to note that while it may not be as common as more traditional forms of academic methodology, storytelling as

knowledge production is not new, but something that has been in practice in many communities for generations (Boje, 2016; Geia et al., 2013).

Increasingly, methodologies commonly practiced in Indigenous communities, like storytelling as a way to produce knowledge, are making their way into mainstream academia. Informal education practices are being implemented in spaces where they have been ignored for decades. Curricula that centers diverse learning styles is being elevated. However, there are two interrelated ways in which this dissertation confronts how knowledge is produced and shared that are not as common. First, sharing participants' experiences as knowledge moves in the direction of eliminating, or at least decreasing, the amount that political ideology influences academia. Fletcher and Cambre (2009) and Boyer (1990) discuss how the connection between research funding and scholarship influenced the type of knowledge produced. Attaching money to the production of knowledge automatically politicizes academia because it determines whose interests will be researched and shared. This dissertation study, and others that make space for participants to openly share their experiences, elevates voices without regard to who is speaking and what repercussions arise from their stories. Those who learn from these experiences have room to raise their consciousness about issues without ingesting political biases of the researcher or institutions. Oppermann (2008) discusses the introduction of critical pedagogy by Paulo Freire, where political and social relationships began to be influenced by the academy. Although this led to the diversifying of institutions of learning in multiple ways, it also added to the politicization of knowledge production. Subjects that were elevated were those that could influence political and sociological institutions, neglecting knowledge that did not suit a specific ideological narrative. Providing space for individuals and communities to share their experiences circumvents the politicization of knowledge production. The second way this dissertation confronts the way knowledge is produced is related to the first. It adds to what

has already been researched and written about Indigenous communities by contributing to what Jazeel and McFarlane (2010) describe as knowledge politics, the who, what, how, and why of how knowledge is produced. The inclusion of the MENA Jewish community in academia has been minimal at best, and mostly with a narrow, *Orientalised*, focus. This dissertation makes space for Jews Indigenous to the Middle-East and North Africa to include their stories and experiences in scholarly settings.

Taking the aforementioned contributions into consideration, I describe how this dissertation study adds to overall scholarship by acting to elevate the *De-politicization of Knowledge Production*. Elevating the experiences of individuals and communities to scholarship without regard to how those experiences impact political or social ideology directly confronts marginalization that leads to erasure. Unbinding the production and sharing of knowledge from funding and politics is a way to make learning inclusive.

## **Conclusions**

### **Implications for Scholars and Implications for the Profession**

This research recognizes those who are multiply marginalized and demonstrates the need for a nuanced, inclusive, and constructive approach to fields like ethnic studies, history, cultural studies, and education. Scholars should acknowledge those stories which have been ignored and excluded from academic spaces. The following are two ways this research impacts scholarship. First, scholars and educators should appreciate the amount of knowledge held within stories and other untraditional academic sources. Maintaining the status quo, where sources of knowledge are limited to peer-reviewed journals and scholarly articles, ignores wisdom held in other places. Elevating sources of knowledge challenges academic norms and systems that have been in place for years, in a manner that has fashioned academia as elite and disregarded traditional knowledge as primitive. However, due to issues like climate change and mental health and wellness, more professionals are seeking assistance

from those who hold traditional cultural knowledge (Ahenakew, 2016; Battiste & Henderson, Cajete, 1994). Second, making space for untold stories to be spoken and learned from validates the knowledge produced in non-academic spaces. Hopefully, this encourages more researchers, academics, and scholars to look outside of the academia box for knowledge that is present in spaces and communities that have been excluded. Although academia has been exclusionary to some, there have been recent trends where marginalized people have made inroads into academic circles, conducting research within their own communities. This has led to a wealth of knowledge being included in what were once strict academic spaces. However, scholars should also be comfortable operating in unfamiliar spaces. The overall way this research impacts scholars and the academic profession at large is by making knowledge production and sharing inclusive and diversifying the voices that share, teach, and learn.

### **Implications for the Community**

Findings from this research demonstrate the need for the experiences of Jews from MENA lands to be elevated. The exclusion of these stories is very real, along with the knowledge they hold. In order for these experiences to be acknowledged and elevated, there needs to be community involvement from the Jewish community and from the communities in the MENA region. The intra-community discrimination experienced by Jews needs to be addressed within the communities, resolving issues pertaining to erasure, marginalization, and displacement. Jewish people who have lived in Middle Eastern and North African lands for thousands of years have been ignored in conversations about the Middle East and North Africa. They have also been omitted from Jewish circles, occupying peripheral spaces in conversations about both MENA and Jewish communities. Discussions about the wider MENA region primarily focus on Arabs and Muslims, ignoring Indigenous communities. Scholarship about Jewish people place the experiences of Ashkenazim front and center,

oftentimes at the expense of sharing the space with Mizrahim, Sephardim, and other Jewish communities. If the MENA and Jewish communities work together with MENA Jews to be more inclusive of the experiences of all members within the broader regional story. In doing the work of building inclusivity, the community would be better served if they decide how they identify, instead of this being left up to outsiders, who so often have gotten it wrong. As Geia et al. (2013) discuss, storytelling is a methodology that directly counters Eurocentric approaches to research. Self-identifying is another way to challenge dominant ideology. Western concepts of race and ethnicity do not apply to the MENA region, where color is not an indicator of heritage. This is one reason I made the explicit decision to not center American ideas on race, ethnicity, and colorism in this research. Peoples who are Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, Jews, Imazighen, Kurds, have a variety of skin tones. Often times, Western-centric beliefs equate skin color to ethnic origin. The implication for the Jewish community is to reject outsider influence on identity and reconnect to Jewish roots, which acknowledge Indigeneity, regardless of skin color.

The overall implications for this research, and other research that challenges the assumptions of race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity may lead to the discovery of uncomfortable realities, including some ideologies that impact identity of self and identity of others by equating color to race or ethnic origin. This can be disruptive to commonly held beliefs about heritage, race, and belonging. It can also lead to discoveries that are more than just surface level and skin deep.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Participants in this research come from a specific community whose stories and experiences have been excluded from a substantial amount of academic research and curricula. Although participants shed light on some of the experiences of Jews from the Middle-East and North Africa, it is only a glimpse into what can be learned. This research

should be conducted again with individuals from other communities that have been excluded from academia, and also on other members of the greater MENA Jewish community. As participants in this study have demonstrated, storytelling is capable of producing knowledge that is not widely available in traditional places of learning. Sometimes this is due to explicit exclusion, and other times it is due to implicit marginalization as a result of methodology. Space should be made for knowledge production to be inclusive of stories and experiences. Hyper-focus on peer-reviewed journals as the standard to what is considered scholarly should be challenged. Students, educators, and community members should work in a collaborative manner in order to build a library of knowledge where learning can occur. As a way to center the research on participants and not the researcher, the four questions asked by Motzafi-Haller (2001) should be considered when conducting further research:

- Who does the researcher represent?
- What are the identity and politics of the researcher?
- Whose interest is served with the researcher's findings?
- Is the researcher speaking for herself or for the researched community?

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Other considerations include working with community to build connections between traditional academia and homegrown cultural and community knowledge. At the same time where there has been a sharp rise in anti-Semitic incidents, there has been an increase in willful ignorance about the Jewish community and homeland. Some purposefully ignore historical facts to suit political narratives. The exile of hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees has been disregarded and their displacement accepted. Opinions about the Jewish homeland have been colored by thinly veiled bigotry, with blame laid at the feet of those victimized by pogroms, death camps, and terrorism. The most important recommendations for policy and practice are for conversations to begin at the point of historical fact where

marginalized individuals and communities are not erased and ignored. Specific policies surrounding research should be revisited, allowing students to explore methods that honor multiple ways of learning, sharing, and knowing while maintaining academic integrity.

Policy and practice recommendations include the following:

- Direct community involvement in knowledge production
- Practical policy-making
- Evolution of policy to acknowledge realities

Community members would be better served if knowledge is not produced in an inaccessible ivory tower that is difficult to easily access. Community involvement is one way to resist exclusionary practices in knowledge production. Often times, community members hold information that is not widely known and may be first-hand knowledge that scholars can learn from. Direct community involvement in the production of knowledge is essential. Policies that are ideological, but lack practicality are useless. Practicality is necessary and should be elevated when policies are being considered. Some scholarship strives to be inclusive and participatory, but hold requirements that make community participation near impossible. Policies should also be flexible so that they are able to evolve in accordance with real world circumstances. An example of this is access to knowledge produced. Because of wide-spread use of the internet and the commonality of smart phones, many individuals are able to access information online. However, when schools closed in-person learning and went online during the COVID-19 pandemic, the disparity between well accessed community members and those who are underprivileged became apparent. Students who did not have access to WiFi or those who do not have computers at home have been left behind. The public health policies that arose due to the pandemic allowed many to maintain their health and safety but were slow to evolve to address economic inequities amongst students.

It is my hope that this research can positively impact how policies are formed and implemented into practice by adding inclusivity in producing knowledge, observing practicality when making policies, and encouraging flexibility that allows for evolution in place of revolution.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It was an honor to have been in conversation with all participants. To have individuals openly share intimate details of their stories and experiences is something that I deeply appreciate. Each story highlighted the uniqueness of experiences, while allowing for community and bridge building. Initially, my research was going to take a much more personal approach, examining my own community. Due to unforeseen circumstances, I centered my research on a community that I am only distantly a part of. Being an outsider to this community forced me to rethink preconceptions and reflect on how outsider perceptions impact individuals and communities. I hope to continue this work of storytelling and story sharing.

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