ON A TUESDAY morning in 1972, residents of Jerusalem’s upscale Rehavia neighborhood expected to start their day as they would any other, by stepping outside to collect the fresh milk that was delivered before they awoke. But on this particular morning, where there should have been bottles, they instead found a note. It referred to the missing milk as a donation. “We thank you for giving away your milk to hungry children, instead of to the dogs and cats in your homes,” the note read. “We hope this operation inspires you to contribute to the war on poverty.”

A short while later, across town in Asbestonim, an impoverished neighborhood named after the asbestos sheets used to hastily erect the local dwellings, residents woke up to a pleasant surprise. On their doorsteps, they encountered what was an almost obscene luxury for them—freshly delivered milk. Another note was attached. “This is a reminder to all citizens and to the government, and especially to you,
that we care,” the note read. “The children here don’t have the milk they need. Meanwhile, in the rich neighborhoods, the cats and dogs have milk every day and lots of it.”

Known as Operation Milk, this stunt represents the most enduring true story from the time of the Black Panthers in Israel. The novelty of the act and the flouting of the law neatly encapsulate the spirit of these Israeli Robin Hoods. And their message about inequality, implying that some families were thirsty for milk, undercut one of Israel’s cherished myths. If the country was founded as a socialist haven for the Jewish people, why would one group need to take from another?

I heard this story in my twenties while sitting down to interview Reuven Abergel in one of countless moments that left me delighted, surprised, or confounded. The Moroccan-born radical with a walrus mustache and a guttural accent is one of the original Panthers. His roots in a country of the Middle East mean he is a Mizrahi Jew, part of an ethnic group making up about half of Israel’s Jewish population. As I write these lines, Reuven is 80 years old. I met him about ten years ago, but the origin of this book goes farther back.

Raised in Israel and California, I came upon the story of the Israeli Panthers as a college student at the University of California, Berkeley. I was writing a paper about the Black Panther Party of the 1960s and ‘70s and learned that the African American militants had inspired a group of Israelis to take up the Panther name for their own cause. I was fascinated that a movement of Mizrahi Jews had struggled against poverty and discrimination in a country dominated by European, Ashkenazi Jews. It was a narrative so different from—and obscured by—classic stories like Leon Uris’s *Exodus* or the legend of the Six-Day War. The idea that such a movement existed in Israel whet my curiosity, but, at the time, there was little about the Panthers online, even in Hebrew.

Galvanized to search further, I decided to act on a lead: an odd blog post crediting the founding of the group to Angela Davis, the African American revolutionary, who was said to have visited Jerusalem in
A friend was going to attend a talk by Davis, and I had her ask Davis about this story. She was amused at the question, and to our embarrassment, we soon realized why. Davis, famously, was incarcerated at the time on trumped-up charges of murder.

As I went on in my professional life, the story of the Panthers stayed with me. I returned to it over the years, including on visits to Israel. In part, the passion was personal. I used to consider myself an activist, and my background is Mizrahi, with grandparents who immigrated to Israel from Iraq. But my interest in the Panthers was about more than that. I was captivated by how a group of kids with criminal records and a provocative name helped redirect the course of the national conversation and forced Israel to face issues it had been denying. What I was slowly learning about the Panthers seemed deeply consequential, and in their forgotten story, I saw the roots of the country that Israel has become.

Over several years, Reuven gave me many hours of his time. We walked the cobblestone pathways near his childhood home and toured the courtyards of Jerusalem’s city hall, where he pointed out the pockmarks from the bullets that used to buzz overhead when he was young. We lingered on Jaffa Street, the bustling commercial artery of the city, running errands and chatting with his acquaintances. These are the places where much of this book takes place, and exploring them together, my feet always tired before those of my elderly but indefatigable companion. I also visited Reuven for long conversations at his government-subsidized one-bedroom apartment in East Jerusalem. It was an ironic place for him to end up given that he is a hardcore leftist who regards the area as occupied Palestinian land.

During our interviews, he cut me off, redirected my questions, and raised his voice, reflecting an impatience with how little I knew and a lifetime of feeling unheard. He was also incredibly caring and warm, often answering questions over his shoulder as he brewed me coffee or chopped vegetables to throw into a pot for our lunch. He believed that not knowing English kept him trapped and prevented his story from
being more widely known. Being interviewed by me, an American, felt like “smuggling a letter out of prison,” he once said. Through stories like the one about Operation Milk, he wanted me to understand the injustice that gave rise to the Panthers. At his most heated, he used words like “holocaust” and “apartheid” to describe the racist treatment Mizrahi Jews had experienced in Israel.

I decided to build on Reuven’s recollections, aiming to get as complete a picture of the Panthers as possible. I combed through more than a dozen archives in Israel and the United States. One of the key sources of information would take two years to obtain—a cache of classified police intelligence files on the Panthers. Meanwhile, I collected thousands of news articles—nearly every single story that mentions the Panthers from at least 20 periodicals. I also tracked down dozens of individuals, many of whom had never been interviewed before. Reaching them was a triumph, but subsequent interviews produced mixed results. Many Panthers survived childhood poverty and malnourishment and went on to experience trauma from drug addiction, violence, and incarceration; their recollections were often meandering, inconsistent, and abstract. Five of the people I interviewed have died since I started working on this project. I feel especially indebted to them.

No one has told the full story of the Israeli Black Panthers before, at least not at this length, and certainly not in English. But the project of this book is not only to plug a shameful hole in the public record. It is to provide readers with a unique vantage point on Israeli history. The narrative avoids the typical tropes and ideological cliches regarding Zionist triumphalism. And, to the extent the story represents an indictment of Israel, it does not reproduce the most common critique, which tends to come from a Palestinian perspective. With its focus on Jews of Arab backgrounds, this narrative breaks the binary of Arab and Jew, offering a fresh intervention into a topic that has been debated ad nauseam. Learning the story of the Panthers is key to understanding the
rise of right-wing politics in Israel over the past several decades as well as the ongoing polarization and instability of Israeli public life.

Perhaps it’s important to pause and spell out the meaning of “black” in the context of the time and place in which this book takes place. In the first few decades following the country’s founding in 1948, there was almost no one in Israel who would appear racially black to American eyes. The Jews of Ethiopia had not yet arrived nor had the non-Jewish refugees and migrants from Africa. Mizrahi Jews are typically a few shades darker than most Jews of European origin. In the Israeli context, however, they were commonly referred to as black, by themselves and others. For derogatory purposes, Ashkenazi Jews sometimes turned to Yiddish and called their darker-skinned countrymen *shvartse khaye*, meaning “black animal,” in the language of European Jewry. By picking the name they did, the young Mizrahi radicals were saying, “Yes, we are, in fact, black animals—we’re the Black Panthers.”

It wasn’t just ordinary Israelis who spoke in racist terms about their fellow Jews. So did Israel’s towering founding figure, David Ben-Gurion. In 1950, while serving as prime minister and presiding over a military command meeting, he complained about the Jewish immigrants arriving from Muslim lands. “We must educate the young man who has come here from these countries to sit properly on a chair in his home, to take a shower, not steal, not capture an Arab teenager and rape her and murder her,” he said. “The ingathering of the exiles has brought us a rabble.”

The exodus of more than 700,000 Jews from places like Yemen, Iraq, Kurdistan, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Iran in the 1950s and their arrival in Israel turned out for many to be a story of alienation, not redemption. These immigrants entered an Israeli narrative that assigned them no role. The young country had forged its identity upon the horrors of Europe and the rejection of the old diasporic Jew, who was seen as meek and stale. There was no accounting for the rich, diverse, and long history of Jews in the Middle East; Europe, for all the harm it had done, was still embraced as the model. Even the term
originally used to refer to these non-European immigrants was something of a misnomer. They were dubbed “Sephardim,” a historical identity for people with ancestry in the Iberian Peninsula before local rulers signed edicts expelling Jews at the end of the fifteenth century. While many of the Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal migrated to various countries in the Middle East, Jewish communities in the region existed before the expulsion and continued to maintain their distinct customs long after the influx of Sephardic Jews. Over time, the term “Mizrahi” took over in Israeli public discourse, and while it used to be translated into English as “Eastern” or “Oriental,” that is no longer the practice today. Even though most of this story takes place when the terms “Sephardi” and “Mizrahi” were used differently than they are today, the book uses “Mizrahi” outside of direct quotes.

In their anxiety over the quality of immigrants from the Middle East, Israel’s leaders constructed a binary separation between Arab and Jewish identities. Mizrahi Jews who had once inhabited both identities fluidly were now compelled to shed the former. Perhaps no one expressed this concern as directly as senior Israeli statesman Abba Eban. In his 1957 book Voice of Israel, Eban argued against cultural integration with the wider Middle East and warned of “the danger lest the predominance of immigrants of Oriental origin force Israel to equalize its cultural level with that the neighboring world. So far from regarding our immigrants from Oriental countries as a bridge toward our integration with the Arabic-speaking world, our objective should be to infuse them with an Occidental spirit, rather than allow them to draw us into an unnatural Orientalism.”

Galvanized by such concerns, Israel attempted to legislate and otherwise enact the segregation of Mizrahim from the Ashkenazi population. Mizrahi immigrants were housed in dusty transit camps in remote areas for years even while Ashkenazi immigrants were moved into proper housing. When the state did provide housing to Mizrahim, that usually meant assigning them to homes abandoned by Palestini-