Migration, Ethnonationalist Destinations and Social Divisions: Non-Jewish Immigrants in Israel

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Abstract Immigrants in ethnonationalist destinations who lack shared ethnicity with natives typically encounter difficulties of integration. But analysis of non-Jewish immigrants in Israel shows that lacking shared ethnicity is not an insurmountable obstacle, even in strongly ethnonationalist destinations. Non-Jewish immigrants—including migrant workers—have achieved a degree of membership in Israeli society. Moreover, their presence has exacerbated certain divisions among Jewish Israelis. Even in ethnonationalist destinations, then, the immigration of non-co-ethnics does not result only/inevitably in divisions between immigrants and natives: it can also divide natives, while some immigrants and natives find a measure of common ground.

Introduction

Migration to ethnonationalist countries presents opportunities for simplistic thinking about possibilities for integration for both co-ethnics and non-co-ethnics. This article explores ideas about migration to Israel and argues for a more thoroughgoing rejection of the terms of home-grown Israeli discourse as a path towards better understanding of that migration. The critique here focuses on the notion that non-Jewish immigrants have very limited possibilities for integration in Israeli society. When immigrants are not Jewish (and not otherwise eligible under the Law of Return), it sometimes appears difficult for observers to think of them as immigrants at all; the many Thais, Filipinas, etc. who have migrated to Israel in recent years are, in both official discourse and some social-science analysis, merely ‘foreign workers’ or ‘labour migrants’ and as such not ‘immigrants’ with any real possibility of being or becoming Israelis.

The discourse underlying Israel’s migration regime is of course consequential: those entering under the Law of Return have extensive rights and social acceptance, whereas those who come as migrant workers encounter practices and attitudes that have the expected exclusionary effects; but the difference between the two groups is often
overstated, and a core argument here is that both groups must be analysed in terms relevant to the analysis of migration everywhere.

The relevant terms relate to possibilities and prospects for integration, particularly when immigrants lack shared ethnicity with natives. The strongly ethnonational character of Israel does impede integration for non-Jewish immigrants; but immigrants everywhere can encounter obstacles to integration—including natives’ beliefs that they simply ‘don’t belong’—and yet sometimes accomplish a degree of integration even in difficult contexts. Migration, especially of non-co-ethnics to ethnonationalist destinations, is easily imagined as highly divisive; but even in ethnonational contexts such migration is not just divisive: immigrants in such societies encounter ‘contexts of reception’ (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996) that contain elements facilitating their partial inclusion (as well as elements resulting in partial exclusion).

Another core argument here, then, is that, as against mainstream Zionist discourse and the practices of the Israeli state, some non-Jewish immigrants entering as ‘foreign workers’ are in the process of becoming Israeli.1 One factor facilitating this process is the more-or-less simultaneous immigration of non-Jews from the former Soviet Union, eligible under the Law of Return by virtue of having close Jewish relatives. State policies and social attitudes facilitating integration of non-Jewish ‘Russians’ have enhanced possibilities for integration of other non-Jews as well. Both groups also continue to experience varying degrees of exclusion; but the Israeli government has not stopped the inflows of people in either group, nor has it succeeded in its declared aim of minimizing the migrant worker population (e.g. via forced deportation), and even the migrant workers are developing new forms of identity that partially overlap with the identities of natives—leading natives to redefine their own identities in particular ways.

The result is a transformation of the social divisions of Israeli society that includes processes of finding commonality across ethnic lines, not just exacerbation of divisions. Moreover, when immigration of non-Jews has been divisive, that process has included aggravation of divisions among Jews, not merely division between Jews and non-Jews. In both respects, the consequences of non-Jewish immigration to Israel are contrary to what one might anticipate for non-co-ethnic migration to ethnonationalist states. Israel is one of a number of countries that are appropriately described as highly ethnonationalist, and the arguments presented here might be useful for advancing our understanding of others, e.g. Japan and Greece where migration trends show some similar features.

‘Traditional’ Immigration to Israel

Immigration to Israel is sometimes considered to be different from the immigration most other countries experience. Jews residing elsewhere live in the ‘diaspora’; the Hebrew term—‘galut’ (exile)—carries even stronger connotations of not being where one belongs. Several ideas embedded in language used regularly by many Jews, in Hebrew and in other languages, reinforce the notion that living outside Israel is an anomaly, to be corrected by return to the homeland. Jews are ‘strangers’ everywhere else—and the core premise of traditional Zionism is that this is the problem a Jewish state was designed to resolve. The ‘uniqueness’ of Israel in this regard is sometimes overstated (Shuval, 1998), but it is worth exploring, to help appreciate how recent migration waves are different in key ways.
As Joppke (2005) argues, selection of immigrants by ethnicity is on the decline in liberal states (though there are variations in the strength of that trend). Historically, it was taken for granted that ‘sovereignty’ entitled a nation-state to reproduce and ‘shape’ its population through immigration policies that used numerical restrictions and explicit ethnic preferences. By contrast, immigration policies in many liberal states today strive for a greater degree of ‘universality’ and ‘neutrality’, giving weight to ‘achieved’ over ‘ascribed’ characteristics, e.g. economically desirable skills, in keeping with a neoliberal market-oriented set of assumptions.

Israel is a clear exception to that latter trend: a central aspect of its identity as a Jewish state is the notion that it belongs to Jews everywhere, that they are already part of the Israeli-Jewish ‘nation’. The best illustration of the point is the Law of Return, the primary piece of legislation that authorizes and structures immigration to Israel. A key feature is that the Law of Return gives no consideration whatsoever to economic characteristics of the (prospective) immigrant or other factors such as age or educational level (Cohen, 2009). Under this law, the only factor that matters for immigration eligibility is Jewishness: if one is Jewish (or has close Jewish family), one belongs in Israel and can enter freely, gaining citizenship immediately on entry. The notion that one can ‘return’ is hardly unique: many citizens of one country residing in another can return to the former at any point; but the Law of Return extends this principle across generations, indeed across many centuries, so that it applies to people whose distant ancestors once lived in the territory today called Israel.

Some key Hebrew words and Jewish concepts reinforce the point. For many years the Hebrew word for migration (‘hagirah’) was not used to describe Jewish immigrants (Shuval, 1998). Instead, the preferred term is ‘aliyah’, meaning ascent. That word has deep religious connotations, entirely positive/valorized ones. In synagogue services that include Torah readings, a member of the congregation can be invited for—and honoured by—an ‘aliyah’: one ascends to the raised platform where the Torah reading takes place and recites blessings before and after the reading itself. To describe Jewish migration to Israel as aliyah, then, is to approve of it at a fundamental level—as indeed most Israeli Jews do. Likewise, the word for emigration—‘yerida’ (descent)—for many years had a strongly negative connotation (Shuval & Leshem, 1998).

These elements combine to produce the claim that Jewish migration to Israel is hardly migration at all, in the normal sense of the term. The defining characteristic of immigrants in most contexts is that they are foreign, and their presence is thus an anomaly demanding resolution (e.g. through departure, or perhaps naturalization). International migration is not simply geographical relocation (Castles & Miller, 2009); instead, its most salient feature is that it involves, at least potentially, a change of national membership, entailing transformations at the individual level that would be associated with change in nationality. But, in so far as Israel is the ‘Jewish state’, Jews everywhere are already imagined to be part of the Israeli-Jewish nation. As against the experience of many other societies, migration to Israel is thus not itself an anomaly but the resolution of an anomaly—the ‘ingathering of the exiles’, to use the religious term. It hardly makes sense then to describe them as foreign—and it is entirely sensible to grant citizenship immediately on arrival, with no waiting period or conditionality. Other countries have had laws similar to the Law of Return—Germany is an important example—and other countries also give priority to co-ethnics; but the Israeli case is the most extreme, to the point that it is sometimes considered difficult to analyse in the terms used for other cases.
This, at any rate, is how things appear from a mainstream Zionist perspective. A key implication is that immigration in Israel is not a cause of social division but rather of social (re)unification, a making whole rather than a making of divisions. Again, the main distinctive characteristic of immigrants in general is their non-belonging to the nation: in a word, they are different, in ways that are held really to matter; but Jewish immigrants to Israel are held not to be different in ways that really matter and are therefore not really immigrants in the normal sense.

Other ways have, however, in practice mattered greatly, even if some Zionist discourse about Jewish immigrants has sometimes created a tendency to exaggerate the importance of co-ethnicity and downplay other dimensions of difference. Jewish immigration to Israel is distinctive in ways that merit proper attention, but Jewish immigration to Israel is not ‘aliyah’ instead of immigration (Shuval, 1998).

As an instance of migration, then, Jewish immigration has simultaneously created (or deepened) a number of significant social divisions and effected a partial reunification of the ‘Jewish people’ as intended. Outside Israel, being Jewish is in part a matter of ethnicity (also of religion, with a complex articulation between the two), typically understood as a single ethnicity. Within Israel, however, Jewishness is subject to ethnic divisions. Traditionally, the core division was between Ashkenazi and Mizrachi Jews. Its salience had much to do with the articulation between ethnicity and other forms of stratification, particularly economic and political, i.e. the fact that in general Ashkenazi Jews held higher economic and political positions (e.g. Swirsky, 1989).

One must not overstate the extent of division between Mizrachi and Ashkenazi Jews in Israel in the days of mass Mizrachi immigration (1940s/50s). Despite experiencing mistreatment, prejudice, etc. the fact that Mizrachi Jews were after all Jews reinforced a sense of national belonging. Many Ashkenazim did often treat Mizrahim as inferior—but virtually none took the view that they did not genuinely belong in Israel. The point is partly formal: they entered as full citizens. This dimension of membership, however, was not merely formal: Mizrahi immigrants, despite being foreign-born, were not ‘foreign’ in terms of nationality. Nor is the mere fact of being an immigrant sufficient to discern strong differentiation between Mizrahi Jews and Ashkenazi Jews in this period. Most Ashkenazim were also immigrants, or the sons and daughters of immigrants. Being an immigrant in 1950s Israel was common, even a core element of Israeli identity; very few Israeli Jews had no migration history in living memory. The onset of Zionist immigration is generally dated to the 1880s, at which point the Jewish population of the region was roughly 30,000 (Schölch, 1985). When Israel became an independent country in 1948, the Jewish population was 700,000—and most of these people were, necessarily, immigrants.

We thus encounter instances of Jewish immigration that add complexity to the notion that in ethnonational contexts social divisions result primarily from immigration of non-co-ethnics. In accordance with Zionist ideology, Jewish migration to Israel during this earlier period can reasonably be described as a reunification in the Jewish homeland, wherein Jews were welcomed without the high degree of antipathy and rejection that often characterizes the experience of immigrants elsewhere; but despite the fact of co-ethnicity and their eligibility for automatic citizenship, some immigrants (particularly the Mizrahim) experienced a degree of antipathy and rejection. As is widely understood, the resulting social divisions were very significant and persist into the present, though there have also been trends of convergence (Ya’ar, 2005).
Russian and Ethiopian Immigrants

If even Jewish immigrants to Israel experience a certain degree of exclusion, it is not hard to imagine that non-Jewish immigrants (or Jewish immigrants whose Jewishness is considered by some to be in doubt) would encounter greater difficulties. That expectation is borne out in the experience of Russian immigrants who entered Israel beginning in 1989 and Ethiopians arriving mainly in 1985–1986 and 1991. Most such immigrants are Jewish, but a significant number, particularly of the Russians, are not, i.e. they are not recognized as Jewish by Israel’s rabbinic authorities; but even the non-Jewish immigrants have achieved a high degree of integration in Israel, despite a traditional Zionist understanding of “aliyah” that contemplates only Jewish immigration. Non-Jews have encountered certain difficulties in Israel, but their experience belies the notion that non-co-ethnic immigrants in ethnonational contexts will find only restricted prospects for integration.

An earlier wave of Russian migration to Israel, in the 1970s, had characteristics similar to those of other Jewish influxes, and Russians in this wave largely assimilated into the Ashkenazi segment of the Israeli Jewish population. The more recent Russian immigration has had a very different character, for three reasons. One is sheer size: since 1989, Russian immigration has added more than one million people to Israel’s population, and they now constitute more than 13% of the total—a very large/rapid migration inflow by any standard. Second, the state did not impose strong expectations of ‘absorption’ (assimilation) on the Russians (as with the Mizrahim): it was considered acceptable for them to retain core elements of the cultural baggage they brought with them (Ben-Rafael, 2007). The other central fact is the significant component of non-Jews in this group, roughly 300,000 who are not Jewish according to the strict Orthodox (matrilineal) definition. The Law of Return, as amended in 1970, extends rights of immigration and citizenship to anyone with a Jewish grandparent or spouse, even if the migrant is not Jewish by Orthodox rules (see e.g. Shachar, 2000). As noted above, the Law of Return was intended to facilitate Jewish immigration, on the basis that Jewishness endowed the immigrants with a high degree of national belonging—but in recent years it has also enabled the immigration of large numbers people who are not Jewish in consequential ways (i.e. recognized as such by religious authorities).

These three factors have placed certain limits on the extent to which Russian immigrants have become Israeli, in regard to their own sense of identity and the way their identity is perceived by veteran Israelis. ‘Russian’ has become a new Israeli ethnicity, one that does not dissolve into the traditional Ashkenazi/Mizrachi divide even for those who are Jewish by religious law and might otherwise be considered Ashkenazi (Al-Haj, 2004). Many Russians give higher priority to Russian and Jewish elements of identity (over Israeli), and (halakhic) Jews and non-Jews are similar in this regard (Ben-Refael & Peres, 2005). Russians in Israel have built a substantial infrastructure that sustains elements of Russian identity and culture: newspapers, grocery stores (some openly selling pork), cultural institutions, etc. Many Russians consider it important to transmit their Russian identity to their children, particularly via maintenance of the Russian language. There is also a relatively high degree of residential segregation and a separate political party (Herzog, 2009).

Those lacking recognition as Jewish encounter additional obstacles to integration. One particular problem relates to marriage. Jewish religious authorities exercise control over matters of personal status (marriage, divorce, burial, etc.) for Jews, and there is no...
provision for civil marriage. Those who are not recognized as Jewish (but are also not members of other religions) therefore find it impossible to get married at all in Israel. An alternative is to marry abroad and then register the marriage with the Interior Ministry, and some people travel to Cyprus for that purpose; but doing so is not inexpensive, and many couples choose simply to cohabit (with a degree of legal recognition upon registration). The problem is self-perpetuating, as the offspring of non-Jewish mothers will themselves be barred from getting married in Israel.

Issues relating to marriage also affect Jewish Russian immigrants. The fact that so many Russians are not recognized as Jewish leads some Israelis to adopt rejectionist attitudes towards all Russians. In the minds of ultra-Orthodox Jews, being Russian is grounds for suspicion regarding Jewish *bona fides*—so that Russians are in general not considered suitable marriage partners. One mechanism enabling ultra-Orthodox people to act on this preference is lists compiled by rabbinic authorities who determine (to their satisfaction) whether someone is Jewish. These lists are necessarily incomplete, and a marriage can proceed if one can satisfy the rabbis (via production of documents or testimony of witnesses) that one is indeed Jewish—though succeeding in this process can be extremely difficult. The aim in producing lists is to eliminate uncertainty, to obviate the need for determination: after all, if a couple decide to get married and only then set out to establish their eligibility, from their point of view it is too late.

Even non-Jewishness is not an insurmountable obstacle to a significant degree of integration into Israeli society for Russian immigrants. One must not overstate the difference between Jewish and non-Jewish Russians in this regard. Many of those who count unequivocally as Jewish lack a well-developed sense of Jewish religious identity and knowledge, particularly as religious education and practice were discouraged by the Soviet authorities (Ben-Refael & Peres, 2005). On the other side, many of those who are not Jewish by Orthodox rules none the less consider themselves Jews—in part because they were treated as Jewish by authorities in the USSR (which, along with similar Nazi practice in Germany, helps explain the logic of extending the right of return to those with Jewish family connections).

The identification of non-Jewish Russians with the larger Israeli Jewish population is reinforced in some significant institutional ways. Once in Israel, they are ‘converted’ into Israeli Jews not in a religious sense but sociologically, i.e. socialized particularly by the educational system and army service (Cohen, 2009). Additionally, official Israeli data, e.g. published by the Central Bureau of Statistics, use population categories that appear at first to work in strange ways. One might expect to find a major division between Jews and non-Jews. Instead, the primary division is between ‘Jews and Others’ and Arabs. One explanation for this counterintuitive practice emerges from the politics of Israeli demography, where the Arab/Palestinian part of the population is considered by many to constitute a threat to Israel’s identity as a Jewish state. To counter that threat, official data include ‘Others’, e.g. non-Jewish Russians in the ‘Jewish’ category, thus diminishing the weight of the Arab category; Lustick (1999) thus observes that Israel is less a ‘Jewish state’ than a ‘non-Arab’ state. Whereas Jewish religious authorities adopt a highly exclusionary stance towards non-Jewish Russians, the Israeli state is keen to ‘absorb’ them into Israeli-Jewish nationality and thus offers them all the rights and support granted to Jewish immigrants.

Similar points can be made about immigrants to Israel from Ethiopia, who arrived mainly in two ‘waves’, in 1985–1986 and 1991, and now number roughly 100,000,
including the second generation (Ben-Eliezer, 2008). Ethiopians in Israel have encountered a significant degree of rejection by some other Israelis and in certain respects are poorly integrated, as is evident in high rates of poverty and unemployment, residential segregation, etc. (Offer, 2004; Kaplan & Salamon, 2004). A significant obstacle to integration is doubts about their Jewishness. The Sephardi Chief Rabbi in the 1970s (Ovadia Yosef) had determined that the ‘Beta Israel’ were Jewish—thus making them eligible under the Law of Return. By the time they arrived, however, the attitude among religious authorities had changed, and they were required to undergo a symbolic process of conversion (via immersion in a mikveh, a small pool of water) (Wagaw, 1993). This has not been sufficient, however, to alleviate doubts in the minds of many, especially among the ultra-Orthodox. In other respects attitudes among some Israelis amount to ‘cultural racism’, e.g. when schools refuse to accept Ethiopian children on the pretence that the children are not prepared for the type of study provided there (Kashti et al., 2009). Some Ethiopian youths have responded by developing an oppositional identity akin to American hip-hop, intended to signal rejection of what they perceive as dominant Israeliness (Ben-Eliezer, 2008).

Finally, as with the Russians a certain portion of the Ethiopian Israeli population—the so-called Falashmura (or Feres Mura) —have a tenuous relationship with Judaism, as their (apparently) Jewish ancestors had converted to Christianity, perhaps under duress (Seeman, 2009).

Ethiopian immigrants, even the Falashmura, are, after all, immigrants under the Law of Return and have been the object of government policies designed to incorporate (or ‘absorb’, from klitah) them through provisions such as subsidized housing and affirmative action in employment. Even if these policies have often failed in terms of stated objectives, they function on a symbolic level as a sign of Ethiopians’ belonging on par with other immigrants, and as with other immigrants there is a consensus among Jewish Israelis (including political elites) that the Ethiopians belong in Israel (Kaplan & Salamon, 2004). Instances of racism typically result in immediate and widespread public condemnation and policy reversals. Rates of army service—as noted, an important integration mechanism—among Ethiopian men exceed the Israeli Jewish average. Political incorporation was evident in a 1996 demonstration in front of the prime minister’s office to protest a policy of discarding donated blood on grounds that Ethiopians in general had disproportionately high HIV infection rates. The demonstration resulted in public apologies from the president and prime minister and contributed to the election of an Ethiopian Knesset (parliament) member (though it did not lead to a change in policy on donated blood) (Weil, 1996).

The fact that Russian and Ethiopian immigrants have Israeli citizenship is also important in grounding and signifying their high degree of membership in and identification with Israeli society. Having formal citizenship by no means guarantees a high degree of social membership, particularly in a context where citizenship itself is strongly ethnonational (as demonstrated in obvious ways by the situation of Arabs in Israel) (Shafir & Peled, 2002); but Israeli citizenship is (at least for Jews) quite different from the ‘thin’ citizenship that characterizes the USA, and admission into Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return is consequential.

The increasing component of non-Jews in migration inflows under the Law of Return is a significant development. These immigrants face difficult problems, and from the perspective of strictly religious Jews their presence is a problem; but one must remember that many of these immigrants are non-Jewish in only a strict religious sense. Again,
non-Jewish Russians undergo a ‘sociological conversion’ that leads to a degree of identification with and acceptance by many secular Israeli Jews. While that process is significant in its own right, it is also relevant to prospects for Israel’s relatively new population of migrant workers.

Migrant Workers

Large-scale ‘guestworker’ migration to Israel began in 1993, with strong similarities to the earlier experience of several European countries. With extremely limited prospects for formal citizenship, migrant workers’ presence in Israel might seem to carry few if any implications for Israeli identity or ‘ethnoscape’; but that common-sense conclusion, though no doubt held by a large proportion of Israelis who believe that ‘foreign workers’ are simply and irredeemably foreign, overlooks some of the key lessons available in the history of immigrants and ‘guestworkers’ elsewhere. Some migrant workers in Israel have put down deep roots and have begun to think of themselves as Israelis. Although some government policies and popular attitudes make that perspective seem implausible, there are also important instances of policies and attitudes that ground and reinforce the development of this new identity.

The proximate cause of Israel’s experience of rapid ‘guestworker’ immigration was the closure of Israel’s borders to Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza following several deadly suicide bombs in March 1993 (intended to disrupt the process leading to the Oslo Accords). Until then, Palestinians had supplied cheap labour in the agricultural and construction sectors, and although the intifadah had periodically disrupted the flow of this labour since 1987, the violence in Israel proper in 1993 led to an extended closure and thus to the severe interruption of production in those sectors. Employers might have responded to these events by embarking on a programme of labour-saving investment (particularly as the use of rudimentary construction methods was/is widespread), but it was easier and more profitable for them to import replacement workers. The relative weakness of the Israeli state—its susceptibility to clientelist policy-making dynamics—meant that pressure on the government to this end succeeded in short order (Bartram, 2005). There was also a significant geo-political dimension: Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was keen to demonstrate to the Palestinians that their labour was replaceable and thus their standard of living vulnerable in the event that the violence continued (Raijman & Kemp, 2007).

The rapid growth of the migrant worker population was not solely a result of government policy in an active sense. A great many migrant workers in Israel are undocumented. In part the presence of undocumented workers is attributable to the activities of traffickers and ‘manpower’ companies, who can make enormous profits by charging the workers ‘agency fees’ (Kruger, 2005). Another factor is Israel’s attractiveness as a tourist/pilgrimage destination: the Israeli government finds it difficult to distinguish reliably between bona fide tourists and those who use tourism as a means of entry for the purpose of finding work (Willen, 2007).

Israel thus faces an issue that has become a recurring theme in wealthy countries: the ‘place’ of immigrants who are ‘wanted but not welcome’ (Zolberg, 1987). For a large proportion of the population, the answer is easy: they have no place. Large numbers of Israelis (Arabs as well as Jews) hold negative/xenophobic attitudes towards migrant workers and oppose granting them rights (Raijman & Semyonov, 2004; Raijman 2010). Ostensibly, the
position of the government is that migrant workers do not belong in Israel, viz. the sustained deportation campaign begun in 2002 employing harsh tactics by any standard (Wurgaft, 2006; Willen, 2007). A long-term place for non-Jewish immigrants is entirely inconsistent with traditional Zionist ideology, and it is unsurprising—even if slightly jarring, in light of Israel’s extensive immigration history—to hear government officials state that ‘Israel is not an immigration country’ (senior minister in Labour and Social Affairs, quoted in Rosenhek, 1999, p. 580).

The history of ‘guestworkers’ in Europe suggests that reality might not respect ideology, not even in Israel. That history is captured in Philip Martin’s (1994, p. 86) ‘iron law of labor immigration: there is nothing more permanent than temporary workers’. The receiving society and the workers tend to become addicted to one another, and democratic countries are markedly unsuccessful at ensuring that the ‘guests’ go home. The Israeli government regularly announces that it intends to deport migrant workers and reduce their numbers; but certain key elements of the society do not share these goals, and many workers themselves want to stay permanently (Ben-Refael & Peres, 2005). Under the most propitious circumstances governments often find it difficult to implement migration policies effectively, and the circumstances surrounding migrant workers in Israel are decidedly not propitious.

Above all, the government’s own actions simply do not support the notion that it has ‘decided’ to get rid of the migrant workers. Quotas for employment permits in key sectors are regularly renewed, fostering accusations that the government operates a ‘revolving door’ policy (offering new permits despite deporting people), with ‘manpower’ companies as the main beneficiaries (Kruger, 2005). It has also failed to regulate the manpower companies and other employers in ways that implement existing laws, never mind passing laws that would constrain their activities effectively (Dahan & Gill, 2006). One of the earliest scholarly publications on migrant workers in Israel described policy-making practices as ‘overwhelmingly reactive—inadequately considered, ill-conceived, ambivalent in relation to their ultimate purpose and, in the course of implementation, vulnerable to “privatization”’ (Borowski & Yanay, 1997, p. 495), and there is little evidence of any significant change.

The question of migrant workers’ place in Israeli society ‘in the future’ is therefore the wrong question. Migrant workers are present in Israel now and have been present in the aggregate for more than 17 years, and questions relating to their place in Israeli society cannot be put off on the (dubious) grounds that at some future point they will be gone. It is more pertinent and revealing to describe the place of migrant workers in Israeli society in the present. A common perception is that workers encounter a high degree of exclusion and rejection. Although that perception is largely accurate, it is not the entire story: despite lacking a secure legal status—in part because their lack of Jewishness means that many Israelis consider them entirely unsuitable for membership in Israeli society—migrant workers in Israel have achieved a limited degree of integration.

The orientation/attitudes and actions of some migrant workers in Israel have much in common with those of migrant workers around the world. Despite an early intention to accumulate savings and return home, some immigrants (particularly those from Latin America) have decided that life in Israel is good, even without secure legal status. After satisfying debts associated with migration and securing a degree of improvement in employment, some immigrants begin to establish a more permanent and comfortable existence in Israel: acquiring better housing and consumer goods, deepening ties with native
Israelis (as well as other immigrants), etc. The most significant step is family (re-)formation—arranging for their children to come to Israel, or forming new families in Israel—which makes return ‘home’ much less likely (Kalir, 2006).

A number of government actions and policies, particularly at the municipal level, have the effect of ‘grounding’ and reinforcing migrant workers’ membership in Israeli society (cf. Rosenhek, 2002). The most significant of these is the Tel Aviv municipality’s sponsorship of an ‘Aid & Information Centre for the Foreign Community’ to mediate between various government agencies and migrant workers (even the undocumented) regarding policies that affect their welfare. Though its declared aims explicitly exclude the notion of challenging the (ostensible) national policy of reducing/eliminating the migrant worker population, its activities help carve out spaces of membership and belonging (Alexander, 2007). One key mechanism involves the recruitment of representatives from the migrant worker community, to give them a voice regarding their needs relating to health care and children’s education (Kemp & Raijman, 2004). Among the unintended consequences is the creation of a community infrastructure that can be used for mobilization regarding other issues. Already the municipality provides a number of welfare services even to undocumented workers and their children, so this ‘illegal’ population has achieved a degree of ‘citizenship’ (particularly at the level of the city—note the affinity between these words, cf. Holston, 1999) in the normal Marshallian sense.

Policies relating to pregnancy/childbirth and children are particularly consequential. As noted above, demography is a highly politicized topic in Israel, and it is not hard to find statements by politicians that demonstrate awareness of the long-term consequences associated with the birth and education of ‘foreign’ children on Israeli soil. In 2000, Interior Minister Eli Yishai (from the religious Shas party) told the Knesset: ‘They have to be deported before they become pregnant’ (quoted in Kemp, 2007, p. 679). Yet Israeli schools enrol the children of migrant workers, regardless of parents’ legal status (particularly in Tel Aviv), and some even adopt a policy of multiculturalism in dealing with ‘foreign’ children (Resnik, 2009). A similar contradiction between declared national policy and implementation at the local level is found in the provision of government-sponsored reproductive services for pregnant women regardless of legal status—despite the ostensible threat to ‘demographic security’ posed by foreign children (Willen, 2005).

The next logical step is citizenship for children born to migrant workers. There is no jus solis tradition of citizenship in Israel, and possibilities for non-Jews to gain Israeli citizenship have always been very narrow, limited in most circumstances to marriage;8 but a government decision in 2005 created provisions for naturalization for a small number of children under restricted conditions (Kemp, 2007). After the children become citizens, their parents are granted permanent residence. The government declared that this was to be a one-time offer, applying only to people already living in the country, and the number of applications approved was very low, approximately 1,500 as of mid-2007 (Ilan & Azouly, 2007); but the initial requirements were subsequently loosened, and the notion that it will happen only once is implausible. The justification offered by proponents was familiar: these children think of themselves as Israeli, do not know any other country, and are not fluent in any other language (apart from Hebrew). These conditions are unlikely to change.

The conclusion to be drawn here is that a variety of non-Jews (who are also not Palestinian) from a diverse range of backgrounds (Ecuadorian, Nigerian, Filipino, etc.) are, in limited and specific ways, becoming Israelis. The limits are of course significant. Kemp
et al. (2000) apply the term ‘margizens’ (from Martiniello, 1992) to denote their position on the margins of Israeli society; they are not even ‘denizens’. The term ‘margizen’ describes not just exclusion but also a degree and form of social membership. The notion that they are not members—not at all—is manifestly false. Most migrant workers in Israel are unlikely ever to become Israeli in the sense of holding an Israeli passport; but the voluminous literature on Marshallian citizenship demonstrates that the passport one holds is only part of what matters about one’s citizenship. Additionally, the concept of citizenship does not capture everything that matters about social membership and identity, about ‘being Israeli’. The point has particular relevance for immigrants, given the extent to which laws relevant to migrant workers go unenforced and ‘informal’ arrangements abound.

Non-Jewish Immigrants and Ethnic Divisions

It would be easy to envision a straightforward dichotomy between Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants to Israel, leading to a straightforward conclusion that non-Jewish immigrants (at least those lacking Jewish connections) are an anomaly and have virtually no prospects for gaining any substantial degree of membership in Israeli society. This view places too much emphasis on Jewishness in relation to migration to Israel.9 Being Jewish matters, but it is not the only issue that matters for immigrants in Israel. Immigrants draw on a variety of resources to achieve a degree of membership in the destination. At early stages, non-Jewish immigrants in an ethnonationalist destination such as Israel will find it virtually impossible to use shared ethnicity as a resource in this way; but to the extent that such immigrants are successful in using other resources to achieve social membership, we then find a subsequent set of processes facilitating a certain degree of shared ethnicity (in addition to persisting ethnic divisions).

Given that the immigration in question has happened quite recently, any analysis in these terms is necessarily provisional: the situation is fluid, with a lack of clear boundaries and tendencies. But even that sense of vagueness is significant in relation to common ways of perceiving identity and ethnicity in Israel. From a mainstream Zionist perspective, Jewishness is the dominant element of identity, and Jewish unity is among its highest values (including the unity that comes from reunification of Jews via aliyah). Migration to Israel in recent years has undermined further the fit between ideology and reality in this regard: some Jewish Israelis feel and express solidarity with non-Jewish immigrants (even the migrant workers) as well as antipathy towards other Jews (i.e. to a greater extent than in the past). In other words, immigration has altered patterns of ethnic division in some surprising ways.

One arena for inter-ethnic alliances (and intra-ethnic dissension) involves the movement for civil marriage provisions, to end the monopoly of religious authorities over matters of personal status. This control has long been a source of deep resentment by secular Jews in Israel (the ceremony must be conducted by an Orthodox rabbi, irrespective of whether the individuals are members of a synagogue). In mobilizing for civil marriage, many secular veteran Israelis are making common cause with Russian immigrants (Jewish and non-Jewish alike) against the ultra-Orthodox. The practice of travelling to Cyprus did not begin with Russian non-Jewish immigrants—secular Israelis from a variety of backgrounds have been getting married this way for many years. For those who are Jewish by Orthodox rules, doing so was a matter of personal preference—while for non-Jewish
Russians there is no alternative if one is not satisfied with cohabitation and wants to get married. As Israeli journalist Alexander Yakobson pointed out, ‘anger at the religious establishment is an important cultural marker of Israeli Jewish society. This is also a kind of integration’. The religious establishment understands the basis of its power and has so far prevented passage of the various bills presented in the Knesset. This movement—a key battlefield in Israel’s Kulturkampf (Shain, 2002)—has not succeeded yet and might ultimately fail (in the sense that people stop working for it).

Changes in law are only part of the story. As a result of non-Jewish immigration, there have been significant changes in what people do, and ‘practice’ is arguably more important than law for understanding ethnic divisions. The marriage issue is central in this regard, given the generally high (though also variable) degree of endogamy in ethnic groups. The unity of Jews as an ethnic group in Israel, although never complete, has declined in recent years, in part through changes in marriage practices, particularly in the ultra-Orthodox population. As described above, individuals in this subgroup of Jews are now presumptively unwilling to marry individuals in other subgroups, particularly the Russians and Ethiopians, because of doubts about their Jewishness. While those concerns arise in relation to a specific dimension of religious law, that dimension has a strong ethnic character, in so far as it refers primarily to descent: one is Jewish by Orthodox understandings of halakha (religious law) if one’s mother is Jewish (or via conversion). In addition, the rate of marriage has been declining, with some (halakhic) Jews and non-Jews alike preferring simply to cohabit rather than submit to the demands of the rabbinate. In this central dimension of personal life, then, immigrants have helped exacerbate certain divisions (religious versus secular) while diminishing others (immigrant versus native). If the movement for civil marriage is eventually successful, it will amount to a dramatic change in the basis of Israeli identity. Even without a legislative change, however, there have been significant and complex changes in Israeli identity resulting from the Russian (and Ethiopian) immigration waves.

In other words, the social division apparent in ultra-Orthodox lists of eligible marriage partners is not limited to suspicion and rejection towards Russians by the ultra-Orthodox: antipathy and rejection go in the other direction as well. Many secular Israeli Jews were strongly supportive of Russian and Ethiopian immigration and are deeply disturbed by the attitudes and actions of the ultra-Orthodox, particularly the rabbinical establishment. Dissension between religious and secular Jews predates the Russian immigration wave—but that immigration has been a significant factor aggravating the tensions. From the point of view of secular Jews, it is deeply unjust for the State of Israel to accept immigrants as ‘Jewish enough’ for the Law of Return—and for compulsory army service—but then fail to address their problems of personal status relating to central matters such as marriage. ‘Veteran’ secular Jews often feel that they have more in common with Russians (regardless of Jewishness in a halakhic sense) than with people in the ultra-Orthodox population in this regard. One can also find resentment and distance between Russians and other secular Jews; but what bears emphasis here is that division between immigrants and natives is not the only consequence of the Russian immigration wave: that immigration wave has also exacerbated a central division between native Jewish Israelis, while immigrants and certain natives have found significant areas of common ground.

A similar dynamic can be discerned in the relations among the ultra-Orthodox, Ethiopian immigrants and secular veteran Israelis. Having been cut off from the development
of rabbinic Judaism in Europe and the Middle East, Ethiopians practised a very different form of Judaism. Rabbinic authorities in Israel were unwilling to accept the legitimacy of such ‘deviations’ and (in addition to insisting on symbolic conversion) were particularly keen to enrol Ethiopian children in state religious schools so that they would learn the ‘right’ version. Many secular Israelis saw the demands and actions of the rabbinate as harassment (Kaplan & Salamon, 2004). Perhaps to an even greater extent than with Russian immigrants, secular native Israelis and Ethiopian Jewish immigrants have found significant common ground.

The ‘place’ of non-Jewish migrant workers in Israel is much more tenuous; but there are also areas of commonality between migrant workers and the Jewish Israeli population. This is certainly the case in the perspective of some of the migrant workers themselves. Many migrant workers are Christians,11 and Israel’s image as the ‘Holy Land’ is one reason some of these workers have chosen to find work in Israel as against some other destination. After arrival, some workers have adopted an identity of ‘Christian Zionists’, believing (in common with some fundamentalist Christians in the USA) that God has indeed given Israel to the Jews. This identification with a traditional Jewish Zionist perspective is then enhanced by a set of innovative religious practices: wearing kippot (skullcaps) and talitot (prayer shawls) during church services (Raijman & Kemp, 2004). Extending this practice even further, some immigrants from Latin America have created and joined ‘Messianic Jewish’ congregations, and some have also expressed a desire to convert to Judaism (though the state and the rabbinate have effectively made this impossible for people in the ‘foreign workers’ category) (Kalir, 2006).

It is not clear that this attempt to develop a Christian equivalent of an Israeli Jewish identity is perceived as convincing by significant numbers of Israeli Jews. It is certainly not taken seriously by the Interior Ministry (e.g. for purposes of granting legal status); but it seems entirely plausible that migrant workers’ attempts to ‘fit in’ via adoption of elements of Israeli-Jewish culture (in addition to the basic accomplishment of learning Hebrew) would enhance prospects for developing ties with Israelis. Some Tel Aviv residents (i.e. Israeli citizens) embrace cosmopolitan and multicultural attitudes, reject what they perceive as the tribalism of traditional Zionism, and are not troubled by the presence of non-Jews: ‘I do not have any problem with the foreign workers . . . On Saturday you see colours, it’s fun to see. I feel as if I live in a city like New York’ (quoted in Fenster & Yacobi, 2005, p. 206).

A variety of laws have been passed and policy proposals offered to reverse this trend. A recent proposal for reform of Israeli immigration laws considers non-Jewish immigration a disaster, for both Israelis and the immigrants themselves (Avineri et al., 2009). Laws and policies of this sort might produce their intended outcomes, at least to a degree; but one must be careful not to read reality from laws and policies. On the contrary, sometimes the laws and policies demonstrate the new reality, the magnitude of the ‘problem’ one wants to solve. One example is the ‘Hadera/Gadera’ rule, which stipulated that migrant workers were required to live north of Hadera (roughly 25 miles north of Tel Aviv) or south of Gadera (10 miles to the south of Tel Aviv) (Weiler-Polak, 2009). As an effort to reduce the concentration of migrant workers in Tel Aviv, the rule was an utter failure, and its repeal shortly after adoption in summer 2009 merely confirmed the reality abhorred by those in the Interior Ministry who concocted it and the powerlessness of government to do much about it.
Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of the Israeli Jewish population has a migration history in the twentieth century. For those eligible under the Law of Return, immigration has had some of the unifying effects envisioned by traditional Zionism (though even Jewish immigrants encountered a measure of the exclusion experienced by immigrants everywhere). Migration to Israel in the last two decades, however, has had a very significant non-Jewish component; but even immigration of non-Jews has not been only divisive in its effects. There is a tendency in popular thinking (if not in scholarly work) to believe that immigrants are almost inevitably a divisive force, in part because of widespread anti-immigrant sentiment but also because immigrants are typically different from natives in some obvious ways. I have argued that, even in Israel where divisions are already extensive and a ‘new’ population might be expected only to exacerbate them, there are other effects to consider as well. Even non-Jewish migrant workers are succeeding, to a limited degree, in establishing new homes and identities, in part through the development of ties and affinities with native Israelis.

Ethnic relations in Israel have become extraordinarily complex in recent years (especially considering the relatively small size of the population). To summarize the changes described above in relation to recent immigration: ‘Russian’ is a new Israeli ethnicity, and while many Russians are Jewish, some are not, and yet even the non-Jews in the Russian group are fully Israeli. A similar pattern describes the smaller group of Ethiopians, whose acceptance as Jews is sometimes compromised by racist attitudes among some other Israelis. The migrant workers (by definition, non-Jewish) are barely accepted as ‘immigrants’, let alone potential full members (citizens) of Israeli society—and yet their position as ‘margizens’ constitutes a certain degree of membership in addition to exclusion, and a small number have been granted a path towards permanent status (even citizenship, in the case of some children). Among natives the presence of the non-Jewish immigrants has exacerbated divisions between certain groups of Jews—mainly the secular and the ultra-Orthodox—particularly as people in each group deeply resent the attitudes and behaviour of some in the other group towards the non-Jews (or, in the case of the ultra-Orthodox, even towards other Jews).

As Kimmerling (2001) asserts, there is no unified notion of ‘Israeliness’, even among Israeli Jews. Israeli ethnicity was never as simple as some might assume, with a straightforward division between Jews and Arabs denoting a set of internally undifferentiated identities and social processes. Instead, there were always internal divisions in both groups (e.g. Kop & Litan, 2002), and those divisions involved stratification and, sometimes, oppression. The process of creating the Israeli nation-state produced profound changes in the identity of both groups, and that process was strongly marked by interaction between the two main groups (Jewish and Arab) as well (Kimmerling, 2008). Until the early 1990s, the ethnic landscape of Israel was characterized by a high degree of exclusivity in relation to those two main categories: Israelis were either Arab or Jewish, with little relevance for other ethnic categories. The immigration of non-Jews has transformed that landscape profoundly—not merely through the presence of the immigrants themselves, but through their effect on the identities and interactions of natives.

Israel is by no means the only highly ethnonationalist destination country that struggles with the immigration of non-co-ethnics. Migration to Japan, consisting of Nikkeijin and prototypical ‘guestworkers’, evinces some similarities to Israel. There are important
differences as well, particularly in so far as it is considered extremely difficult for foreigners to become Japanese. The Japanese case helps reveal the relative accessibility of Israel to non-co-ethnic immigrants. One reason for that relative openness is that the Jewish core of Israeli identity contains an important disjuncture between its religious and social/ethnic elements. If non-Jewish Russians can become Jewish (not just Israeli) in an ethnic sense via a ‘sociological conversion’ while lacking recognized religious status, then it becomes difficult to see what would prevent a similar process for other non-Jewish immigrants. Many Israelis do not want to see migrant workers integrated into Israeli society in this way—and while this preference is consequential, comparisons with other cases (including the partly contrasting case of Japan) suggest that it might not prevent at least some migrant workers from becoming Israeli to a significant degree.

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Notes
1. This article does not deal with the place of non-Jewish immigrants in relation to Israel’s Arab population. The term ‘non-Jewish immigration’ could be taken to include the movement of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza to Israel via marriage to Israeli citizens, which in the post-Oslo period amounted to an estimated 30,000 people (Rebhun & Malach, 2009). I am not aware of any other scholarly research on this migration stream.
2. In the early 1950s some Israeli elites wanted limitations on the entry of people in categories considered undesirable, even if Jewish—but restrictions of this type were not implemented (Hacohen, 2003). On the other hand, such concerns did apparently contribute to a studied passivity in relation to Ethiopian Jews, who were not actively encouraged to move to Israel until the 1980s (Kaplan & Salamon, 2004).
3. Some so-called ‘Russians’ come from other countries in the former Soviet Union, and some writers use ‘FSU’ to describe the entire group. However, ‘Russians’ is commonly used in Israel, and it makes sense at least in so far as those from other countries typically speak Russian.
4. The total population of Israel at the end of 2010 was almost 7.7 million (not including migrant workers). Population estimates for each year since 1998 are available from the Central Bureau of Statistics at: http://www.cbs.gov.il/www/yarhon/b1_e.htm
5. The Reform Jewish practice of recognizing patrilineal descent, common in the USA, is not well established in Israel, except for purposes of the Law of Return.
6. As evident in a long article in the New York Times Magazine (Gorenberg, 2008).
7. The issue of religious conversion to Judaism among Russians is complex. In brief, possibilities for religious conversion are extremely limited, and many of the conversions for Russians that did take place were revoked in 2008 (Hacker, 2009). The rabbinic establishment sets extremely stringent demands, and in any event most Russians are secular by outlook and practice and are not interested in adopting Orthodox (or ultra-Orthodox) ways. Various government initiatives to increase rates of conversion for immigrants have all ended in failure (Sheleg, 2004, 2009).
8. A policy change in 1995 rendered non-Jewish spouses of Jewish Israeli citizens ineligible under the Law of Return and imposed a waiting time and other requirements for naturalization (Hacker, 2009). Additionally, as of 2003 a controversial law has made it very difficult for Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza to gain Israeli citizenship or residence permits via marriage to an Israeli citizen—such citizens being in virtually all cases Arab (Peled, 2007). This ostensibly ‘temporary’ law, upheld by the High Court of Justice in 2006 partly on ‘security’ grounds, is a blatant instance of indirect ethnic discrimination against Arab citizens of Israel and has helped revive the ‘ethnocracy’ debate. The demographic intent of the law—reduction of Arab population growth—is entirely
obvious, as acknowledged (and supported) by the former director of the Association for Civil Rights in
Israel, Ruth Gavison, in a 2008 HaAretz op-ed.
9. It also imagines that it is possible to know, definitively, whether someone is or is not Jewish. As is
evident above, there are different ways of categorizing, emerging from different notions of what it
means to be Jewish.
10. ‘Despite the ultra-Orthodox’, HaAretz, 8 July, 2009, available online at: http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/
spages/1098628.html
11. The Chinese are an exception, though some have converted to Christianity in Israel (Kalir, 2009).

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