Newcomers at the Israeli National Table: Transforming Urban Landscapes and the Texture of Citizenship

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Abstract
Advocating research of the “ethnographic present,” the article portrays the recent evolvement of two constituencies in Israeli urban society conceived as new socio-economic-cultural and spatial social “banks”: Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia residing in ethnically segregated urban neighborhoods; the gradual concentration in Tel Aviv’s downtown neighborhoods of authorized and undocumented labor migrants from Eastern Europe, Asia and Africa, as well as asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan. It reports on the growing protest by local Israeli residents, the government’s efforts to limit the presence of “uninvited strangers,” as well as the active response of the unwelcome aliens. I posit that the emergence of these new ethnic enclaves converges with other critical changes in Israeli institutional life. Major transformations in the texture and tenets of Israeli citizenry, its spatial construction and national identity are steadily progressing. [labor migrants, refugees, ethnic enclaves, Tel Aviv, Israel]

Introduction: The five/seven banks tapestry of Israeli society

In 2002 I delivered at the Berlin Institute of Ethnology the Franz Boas lecture expected to present some major issues in contemporary Israeli social life (Shokeid 2003). I decided to compose a virtual picture of the multi-faceted Israeli social structure, a socio-photo as if taken from a plane circling over the country. Titled “The Five Banks Tapestry of Israeli Society,” I developed a model for a social texture representing a jigsaw puzzle of five banks, an image originating in the post-1967 Israeli geopolitical terminology applied to the West Bank (a land its devotees call by the biblical names Judea and Samaria). I considered the ardent constituency of the post 1967 West Bank Jewish settlements as representing a major slice—ideological/political, social and economic—in the construction of present day Israeli society comparable with four other slices: 1) The “Coastal Bank” mostly metropolitan and better off, politically divided between Left-wing and Right-wing, more secular and liberal, containing the majority of Ashkenazim as well as the middle and upper-middle class of the Mizrahim (also termed Orientals—descendants of immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa); 2) The “ Peripheral Bank,” composed of the relatively disadvantaged, mostly Mizrahim, many of whom reside in the more remote locations in Israel’s geography; 3) the “Ultra-Orthodox” bank whose members have shown remarkable
demographic growth. Mostly Ashkenazim, concentrated in some crowded neighborhoods of Jerusalem, the city of Bnei-Brak and other locations in the country; 4) the growing bank of “Israeli Arabs” (Muslims, Christians, Bedouins and Druze), a constituency concentrated in a few geographical enclaves in the country’s Center, Galilee, and Negev. These imaginary banks are undoubtedly not “pure” in their social composition.

My analysis at that time raised the question: how do these five socio-economic-political-cultural banks, locked in continuing competition, conflict, and fierce cultural antipathies, manage to act together to present a functioning unified society, without displaying fatal antagonisms threatening its binding national framework? To answer, I used a few lines of explanation at my disposal. However, for our present discussion I leave only the first rationale related to Gluckman’s work in tribal Africa (e.g., 1962) whose insights made important contributions to conflict theory and who also played a major role in the building of Israeli anthropology (e.g., Shokeid 2004). Despite the deep divisions, gaps and conflicts that separate the Israeli banks, they (mostly the Jewish constituencies) are woven together by visible and invisible threads in a system that Gluckman would have defined as “cross cutting ties” (continuing or ad hoc relationships and mutual interests that link up individuals and group-members of belligerent parties—lineages or tribes in Gluckman’s observations). Israeli Arabs too, in spite of their grievances and resentments, do not aspire at this time to break away and join a Palestinian state separate from Israel.

This five banks description and interpretation seemed to me at the time a reflexive exposition, an exploratory report about some major social-political realities in Israeli society.

Twelve years later I was again invited to present an overview of present-day Israeli society (2014, at the IFK Vienna forum). Since I started my anthropological research in the late 1960s Israeli society has gone through immense transformations, often within a short period. Well known are a few easily depicted historical moments that effected dramatic changes in Israeli social and political life, such as the 1967 and 1973 wars. But other recurrent developments of momentous consequence have taken place, albeit less discernible by public perception and international scrutiny as major turns in Israel’s societal structure and its cultural-political-economic performance. Israel is still in a process of nation-building, particularly since new societal components continuously disembark on its shores.

Not surprisingly, on rereading my 2002 presentation I realized that it was now partly outdated in its geo-social construction of five banks, or more figuratively, in its reflection of the major slices of Israel’s contemporary, 2014, social-cultural-spatial fabric.

However, before I embark on redesigning my Israeli banks tapestry and its sociological ramifications, I point toward an anthropological model of ethnographic research in contemporary social life. In a recent book, Roger Sanjek (2013:83) raised an intriguing query for
What does our designation of “the ethnographic present” mean? I emphasize, the subject of my presentation is observing the flow of present day events free of the terms of a pre-designed research scheme, particularly in one’s own society (thus also advocating “anthropology at home”).

Consequently, unlike earlier research engagements, the field of my current involvement is in a state of continuous, almost daily flux, and not of a “finally” publicly perceived social reality. So, at this moment I feel myself in the position of an enthusiast observer, close to the role of a reporter caught in the stream of contradicting news. I share this situation with other ethnographers of “the present” who are not engaged in projects under pressure of limited budget and time, hence not obliged to submit a “complete” descriptive and conceptual research report.

The present investigation, however, continues the record of past stages in my anthropological engagements. It offers, inter alia, a somewhat concise overview of a wider picture of earlier major developments in Israel societal evolution and which inadvertently leads to the present day venture.

My early studies centered on the absorption of Jewish immigrants from North Africa who were settled in new villages and towns built mostly on the periphery of the post-1948 map of Jewish settlements, in the northern and southern parts of the country in particular (Shokeid 1971/1985).

The next assignment brought me closer to my home territory as I studied the then small enclave of Arabs, Christians, and Moslems who stayed on in Jaffa after the 1948 war (the Nakba in terms of the Palestinians’ experience). They concentrated mostly in the Ajami neighborhood, in what was then the periphery of greater Tel Aviv (Shokeid and Deshen 1982).

In the early 1980s I engaged in a new startling phenomenon in Israeli life: a growing trend of mostly young Israeli-born men and women who for various reasons moved to Europe and to the United States in particular. In the media and in ordinary discourse they were derogatively nicknamed Yordim—those going down! I spent two years in New York in a neighborhood hosting many Israelis, probing the process of their emigration and their accommodation with their new identity as Israeli-Americans (Shokeid 1988). In this context, however, it is important for comprehending the mythical perception and actual implementation of the code of citizenship in a society built on the ethos of “a home for the Jews” as symbolized in the terms Aliya (ascent) and Olim (Jews “going up”) when immigrating to Israel, versus the Yordim, who betray their national obligations by “going down” from that country. This terminology also encapsulates the idea that Israel does not consider itself an immigrant society. Essentially, the daily vocabulary and legal code do not recognize the neutral Hebrew term mehagrim (immigrants) as applicable to Jews and non-Jews who enter the country expecting naturalization. That word routinely serves for immigrants entering other countries than Israel.
I aim to investigate present-time observations of an unexpected thrust that has developed in recent years, initiating a critical revision in Israeli life disturbing the consensual social order of center and periphery (Shokeid 2011). To the five-bank design, which represented major socio-cultural-economic constituencies, also identified as occupying certain geographical spaces in the national landscape, I add the emergence of two more constituencies, which though smaller indicate wider changes in Israeli national life. In the revised topography of Israeli social morphology I consider three major evolvements witnessed in recent years and which I had the opportunity to observe on different engagements: 1) The arrival since the 1980s of a large wave of Olim from Ethiopia, immigrants recognized as a lost Jewish tribe, thus also introducing a new racial element into the national tapestry; 2) Following the outbreak in 1987 of the first Palestinian Intifada, the uprising against the continuing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians were unable to continue working in Israel (where previously they had been employed in industry, construction, agriculture, services, etc.). Gradually a new labor force of hundreds of thousands was recruited to replace them, from Eastern Europe, East Asia, and Africa (see Eckstein et al. 2007; Sabar 2008). Apart from the large troops of workers in various labor markets, an expanding group, mostly Filipina women, emerged as carriers for the elderly and disabled (Liebelt 2011). Although the majority of foreign workers were allowed to stay in Israel for a limited period (four years on average—except the carriers, who could stay on with their wards), many stayed on illegally and often established permanent family households, recruiting spouses from home or forming attachments with migrants of the same or other ethnicity, as well as with Israeli partners; c) Since the late 2000s, the influx of undocumented migrant workers and asylum seekers from Africa, entering Israel on foot via the Sinai Peninsula.

Finally, reframing my 2002 societal vista demands no less updating of the research question: also from the perspective of other significant developments in Israeli economic, social and political life, what has been the impact of these emergent constituencies on the terms of Israel’s collective spatial construction, its social constitution and national identity?

Changing the urban landscape

The Jewish Ethiopian population arriving with the support of national agencies is estimated at 120,000 legal immigrants (Olim). Official demographic data for 2013 suggest the presence of 70,500 legal labor migrants and 120,000 undocumented workers. Another 55,000 are often designated by official agencies as mistanenim (infiltrators): asylum seekers, mostly from Eritrea—40,000, and from Sudan—15,000 (Population and Immigration Authority 2013). However, unofficial sources suggest a larger number of unauthorized workers and refugees. But most importantly, these three waves of newcomers have not settled in the Israeli social-geographical peripheral localities. Though socio-economically...
disadvantaged, and often residing under a precarious legal status, these newcomers have mostly concentrated at the “center”—in major Israeli urban communities.

The Ethiopian Bank

The transformation of settlement patterns—from the periphery to the center—began with the new administrative policies on absorption of Jewish newcomers. From the 1980s the Ministry of Absorption abandoned its traditional role of providing government housing to Jewish Olim, mostly in the “periphery.” Instead, it grants them entry funds allowing them to purchase apartments as they desire and can afford, considering limited budget and family size. Consequently, Ethiopian Jews have gradually concentrated in lower-class neighborhoods in central cities and towns, in turn hastening the departure of the veteran population from those sites. These locations, in cities such as Natanya, Petah Tikva, Rishon Letzion, Rehovot, Hadera, and Ashdod, have quickly turned into segregated Ethiopian enclaves.

Set apart in low-class neighborhoods, this new urban periphery hosting Ethiopian Jews has not caused dire repercussions, particularly compared with the acute conflict, described below, developing around the residential concentrations of the labor migrants and asylum seekers. Entering the country under the privilege of their assumed Jewish roots (Kaplan 2009, Salamon 2008), Ethiopian Olim have escaped public resentment despite disappointing signs of maladjustment (Offer 2007; Shabtay 2001). Ethiopian Jews seem careful to avoid their association with the constituency of African labor migrants and asylum seekers, particularly those from Eritrea with whom they share physical and linguistic characteristics. Their residential locations are in central towns, but away from the sites hosting African migrants. It seems it might take a long time for the majority of them to integrate successfully into the mainstream of Israeli society. Not only their skin color distinguishes them from other Israelis, the majority of the Ethiopian newcomers come from a rural background without the benefits of modern education and professional skills. Israel continues to absorb the Falashmura, namely Ethiopians who converted to Christianity, but recently decided to return to their Jewish roots (Seeman 2010; Talmi Cohen 2011). Unemployment among the adult male population of this background is very high, and family life has been under further pressure following the declining status of husbands and fathers as compared with their dominant position in Ethiopia (see Youngmann and Shokeid 2012).

The younger cohorts are often disadvantaged by their underprivileged family background, aggravated by the residential concentration in crowded Ethiopian neighborhoods. At the same time the presence of Ethiopian Jews impacts on Israeli daily life and public discourse as an integral part of the national fabric. Nevertheless, that evolving new type of segregated black Israeli communities might at a later stage exhibit some severe effects observed among African Americans in poor urban
neighborhoods. Actually, since I completed the first version of this paper, young Israeli-Ethiopians have organized mass stormy demonstrations in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv (April–May 2015) triggered by police brutality directed toward Ethiopian youth, but also protesting against discrimination revealed by other governmental agencies.

Considering the high visibility of their spatial concentrations, the circumstances that influence their disadvantaged socio-economic status, as well as the conditions of cultural survival of the Ethiopian community, it seems fitting to annex that constituency to the banks model.

A bank for the foreign migrants

Probably more significant in the public forum, foreign laborers, those present legally but more particularly “illegally” (Kalir 2010), have taken up residence in the heart of central Israeli cities, often paying high rents for small and crowded apartments. In particular, downtown Tel Aviv, the area surrounding the old and new central bus station, has been transformed into a multiethnic, dilapidated urban conglomeration. In the space of just a few years the ever-expanding population of foreigners has infiltrated nearby neighborhoods of lower middle-class Israeli citizens.

Starting in the late 2000s these newly arrived residents have been joined by undocumented African migrants and refugees escaping poverty and violent conflict. The area’s business establishments have radically changed their character. For example, the long row of popular shoe stores (attracting a wide Israeli clientele) that occupied the district’s main street (Neve Shaanan) has been replaced by ethnic restaurants and coffee shops, ethnic clothing and food supplies, jewelry, cell phones, Internet, money exchange, barber shops, and a variety of street vendors (see Figure 1). The clientele is by and large of foreign extraction, although a considerable number of the proprietors are Israelis. Also, the nearby streets host innumerable coffee shops offering food and entertainment for a male ethnic crowd. The nearby municipal Levinski Park, which formerly was a popular playground for the neighborhood’s children, has become an open day and night shelter for the new refugee arrivals bussed from their entry point after crossing the Egyptian Sinai border, though more recently vacated under the police surveillance.

A tourist first entering Israel in that section of downtown Tel Aviv, in the evening hours especially, might well think he is visiting an African country, albeit with some guests from elsewhere in the world—the Philippines, Rumania, China, etc. The majority of the recent undocumented arrivals have no stable or legal sources of income. The area is also notorious for the proliferation of shabby establishments of sex workers, drug addicts, and other illicit activities. Some idea of this emerging new human blend is also gained from a description of the mixed sounds of music drifting through the Tel Aviv central bus station (Hankins 2013).

Although the population of undocumented work migrants and asylum seekers is small compared with those spilling into Europe and the
US, it makes an enormous impact on Israeli municipal and national life. This new type of social, cultural and economic periphery emerging in Israeli urban centers challenges some basic convictions and social realities in a society professing a melting-pot ideology and egalitarianism as basic tenets. Illustrating this latent tension simmering during the 2000s, in May 2012 downtown Tel Aviv became the stage of angry demonstrations (mostly at Levinski Park). Agitated Israeli residents protested the deterioration of personal safety and the quality of life resulting from the unchecked invasion of labor migrants and refugees overcrowding their neighborhoods. A few cases of rape of young Israeli women by Eritrean men in the vicinity of the central bus station (Tachanah Merkazit) triggered the first outburst.

For the first time racial prejudices were publicly expressed and a few African individuals and business establishments were attacked by young demonstrators. People voicing support for foreign migrants were accused by local Israeli residents of displaying the hypocrisy of those residing in the affluent suburbs of northern Tel Aviv, remote from the uninvited new Third World neighbors. Feelings of socio-economic deprivation among lower class residents in a decaying part of town undoubtedly found outlet at that festering notion of further decline of their neighborhoods’ physical conditions and reputation. This, however, became the moment of public labeling, leading up to the outright criminalization of the unwelcome migrants, a phenomenon observed and defined by researchers elsewhere as the “crimmigration law” (Dowling and Inda 2013: 59).

The growing discontent among the veteran residents of downtown Tel Aviv drew wide media attention, and the Knesset and government were pressured to intervene with stronger measures. But national and
municipal agencies were handicapped by material, legal, moral, and international constraints. Reminiscent of a familiar scenario in some Western countries, the emergence of neo-nationalist parties (Gingrich and Banks 2006), Right-wing Israeli politicians took advantage of these events to incite anti-immigration hostile manifestations. Against such posturing, leading intellectuals, journalists, and Leftist politicians recalled old and recent chapters from Jewish history, reminding their audiences of the tragic consequences of uninhibited racial agitation and the scapegoating of migrants for local present-day social and economic ills. However, one month later (June 2012), the Supreme Court backed up the decision by the Interior Minister (Mr. Eli Yishai, leader of the SHAS orthodox party), aimed “to save our Jewish home,” to deport about 1000 undocumented entrants from South Sudan. The ruling was imposed under the assumption there was no justified claim any longer for their refugee status since South Sudan had recently gained national independence. The deportation was carried out under vast media coverage intended to pacify local residents’ protests. To humanize and sweeten the expulsion, the Ministry promised a US$1000 farewell grant to those who volunteered to leave before arrest and forced deportation. A few weeks later a similar warrant and incentive were announced concerning Ivorians. The exit of the Sudanese seemed to demonstrate the government’s intention and ability to execute forced evacuations, but it had little practical impact considering the obstacles to more far-reaching operations.

I collected lengthy reports, photos, interviews, front-page articles and editorials published in the leading liberal daily newspaper Haaretz from January 2013 until January 2014. The collection indicates a steadily rising frequency of salient items related to the parties involved with the expanding foreign community in downtown Tel Aviv, its opponents, allies, and the national/judicial response. They amounted to an average of three or four items a week. Other newspapers also regularly reported on major developments related to the population of ha’garim (the strangers)—not mehagrim (immigrants), though often less sympathetically.

The highly visible presence of the recent fast growing African community around Tel Aviv’s central bus station has somehow overshadowed the wider presence of the foreign workers, many of whom have stayed on after the conclusion of their employment contract and the loss of their residence permit and who also reside in the downtown neighborhoods (though economically they are usually better off than the asylum seekers). Israeli observers explained the foreign workers’ motivation to extend their stay beyond the legal period of their contract; in particular, it is the need to compensate for the overblown fees they paid in advance to the recruiting agencies. But the longer they stay, the more likely they will establish families and retreat from plans to return home.

It became clear there was no way to deport the growing number of Eritreans entitled to an international human rights protection status. Instead, efforts were made to complete a massive wall along the border
with Egypt to stop the infiltration of Africans arriving via the Sinai Peninsula. Another strategy was adopted to repel work seekers: building a desert camp in the Negev to detain future arrivals.

In addition, stricter penalties against Israeli citizens who employ unauthorized migrants have been recommended. However, such a measure is not applicable to the constituency of asylum seekers. But, another rule was implemented, prohibiting banks and money exchange agents to remit personal remunerations to Eritrea; to discourage potential newcomers lured by the prospects of rewarding employment. Rumors have circulated in the media (and later partially realized) about the negotiations conducted with an unnamed African country, a “third party,” ready to accept a number of Eritrean refugees.

Completion of the wall along the border with Egypt in 2013 seems to have curtailed the stream of African refugees and labor migrants. But a ruling by Israel’s Supreme Court of September 2013 negated the legality of a three-year incarceration without trial of undocumented inmates. However, the ruling did not forbid implementation of a shorter interment. In fact, early in December 2013 the government confirmed a ruling of twelve months confinement of all new and recent arrivals in an “open camp” (the one built in the Negev). Inmates were to be provided with food and other facilities, and allowed to move out in daytime. But they had to report twice daily, before the closing of gates at night. This was to be a tough deterrent measure, denying work and discouraging future attempts to reach Israel.

But on the first day of the implementation of that policy (December 17, 2013), 250 inmates in the “open” facility set out on a march to the Knesset in Jerusalem to demonstrate against their incarceration without trial. Accompanied by Israeli volunteers representing human rights organizations they were bussed to Jerusalem. At the end of the day they were forced to board the busses taking them back to a camp serving as a jail and were incarcerated for the next 90 days as punishment for violating the law—the terms of residing in the “open” facility. The scenes of that march and its conclusion produced grim impressions and critical responses in the media. However, Prime Minister Netanyahu was recorded expressing his support for the authorities’ action: “We are a state of law! The infiltrators can either stay in the facility or return to their home countries.” Actually, the immigration authority now offered $3,500 to anyone ready to go back “home.”

A week later, 6,000 asylum seekers and their Israeli supporters marched from downtown Tel Aviv to Rabin Square facing Tel Aviv Town Hall, where they demonstrated against the new government’s policy of incarceration of undocumented immigrants without trial in the Negev “open camp.” Rabin Square is a major site for public celebrations and demonstrations, the place of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination in 1995. Marching through major streets in the more affluent parts of Tel Aviv and congregating at that symbolic site was a sort of “outing”; surging en masse from the dilapidated central bus station area and Levinski Park, the stage of earlier anti-immigration as
well as counter-demonstrations, the marchers now shouted “Freedom!” The impressive event ended with no public disturbances and without police intervention.

But a few days later, immigration authorities embarked on the policy of detaining unregistered aliens and individuals whose permits were invalid, and jailing them at the Negev “open” facility. Interior Minister Gideon Sa’ar, of the right-wing Likud party who replaced the religious party minister, seemed to avoid inflammatory pronouncements (about the danger to “our Jewish home,” and the health hazards associated with the unwanted newcomers); nevertheless, he displayed his strong commitment to carry out the uncompromising strategy intended to limit the presence of the new African Diaspora.

However, the constituency of refugees, nicknamed “infiltrators,” showed an unexpected spirit of solidarity and organizational skills, when an estimated throng of 20,000 men and women congregated the following Sunday again in Rabin Square and started a six-day walkout from work. The striking Eritrean and Sudanese workers enjoyed for a while the public support of their employers, in restaurants and hotels in particular. More than ever before, television news programs exposed the magnitude of the presence of the African migrants in Israel, bringing that reality home beyond the occasional reports on the overcrowded multiethnic Tel Aviv central bus station area.

At the time of writing, the official Israeli positions have not changed. The spokesman for the authority of immigration affairs argued that without these deterrent measures more “infiltrators” defined mostly as labor-seekers, would find their way to Israel despite the recently built wall; one way could be by sea from Egypt. He added that European countries have sent back illegal newcomers by force.

A very different position was publicly expressed the same day by the mayor of Tel Aviv, Mr. Ron Huldai, who warned about the potential escalation of the situation into violence. Demonstrating the pragmatic style of governance of mayors in global cities (Barber 2013) he demanded that the massive aggregation of stateless people in his town be allowed to work legally and live normal lives without fear. That strategy would also encourage their dispersal around the country until circumstances permitted their return to their home countries. He ended his interview with this Parthian shot: “They are here and they can’t fade away.”

Another related issue, the fate of the children “illegally” born and raised in Israel, has wrestled with severe moral and judicial conflicting positions. Before the swelling influx of undocumented work migrants and asylum seekers, the lenient approach by governmental agencies made possible the formation of new families among the labor migrants. But at a later stage (early 2000s), even after the deportation of many male migrants with the termination of their work contracts, spouses and children often stayed behind, a situation recalling a similar one in the US after the deportation of undocumented Mexican migrants (Dowling and Inda 2013). These children attend local schools under the Israeli law mandating municipalities to provide basic education to all
school-age children residing in their jurisdiction. They all speak Hebrew fluently and have never experienced life in their parents’ home country.

A painful dilemma seemed to beset the Israeli media and the various agencies involved with labor migrants: should these children be forcefully sent back to the countries their parents had left or fled, though often for purely economic reasons? They have enjoyed public sympathy and the backing of a strong civil rights lobby demanding special legal treatment to allow them stay on with one parent or both. Thus, migrants’ children born and bred in Israel seem to have become an “insurance guarantee” for parents unwilling to return to their home country.

Before the outburst of public rage and harsh governmental efforts to curb illegal immigration, numerous local NGOs emerged to help the foreign labor force confront employers’ abuse, and provide medical, educational, judicial and other communal services. That list includes an advisory and counseling service MESILA, provided by Tel Aviv municipality at a site near the central bus station. Officials and volunteers in these agencies endure now a conflict of loyalties: serving basic humanitarian causes and spending scarce resources (mostly furnished by volunteers and private donations) against the policies advocated by government authorities, as well as the resentment and claims expressed by the neighboring Israeli residents who have become victims of a difficult situation.

The mounting feelings of neglect and danger have produced a few local leaders who have become spokespersons for their community and joined forces with right-wing politicians and racial agitators. For example, on January 17, 2014 Haaretz published a long weekend interview with a 27 year old young woman, born and raised close to the Tel Aviv central bus station. At age ten she had been featured on TV programs as representing the circumstances of poverty in Israeli society: the daughter of a single mother rejected by her orthodox family, residing next to drug addicts and prostitutes. Now she was taking a leading role at the frequent rallies organized at Levinski Park against the continuing presence of the African asylum seekers in particular. Eloquently, she narrated a history of an underprivileged life, humiliated by hatzfonim (the northerners)—teachers, classmates and their parents, now aggravated even more by African newcomers who surrounded her home and had already tried to rape her. Though probably exaggerated and partly invented, one could not dismiss the authenticity of her plea.

No owner of a middle-class apartment would rent it to a large number of single men or a few families. In any case, the labor migrants and asylum seekers cannot afford to rent better-off residences. Evidently, some present or past Israeli neighbors and rapacious real estate owners profiteer by renting crowded apartments. Inevitably, many of the local Israeli inhabitants (nicknamed hadromim, southerners) are fated to present themselves as foreigner-haters and racists.

In Saskia Sassen’s terms (1999:156) a “new frontier zone” seems to be emerging within Israel’s major city. The State Comptroller’s report of May 2014 (published in part in the Israeli media) revealed that
61 percent of the residents in five southern Tel Aviv neighborhoods are foreigners, one in eight residents of Tel Aviv are foreign nationals and 12 percent of all births in Tel Aviv are by foreign women. The report blamed the government for the continuing neglect of planning adequate social services and infrastructure for the foreign constituency and its detrimental consequences for the local Israeli residents.

Tel Aviv’s foreign population seems insignificant when compared, for example, with London’s estimated 500,000 irregular migrants (Sigona 2012:53) or with the emerging “ghetto” area in Berlin’s center (Eksner 2013). Nevertheless, Tel Aviv’s exceptional reputation as the quintessential Israeli metropolitan liberal city, free of ethnic-religious conflicts, has been greatly impaired.

Reports from the central bus station

On a personal notion, I become somewhat perplexed on my routine visits to the downtown Tel Aviv central bus station area conducting interviews and observations (January 2012–February 2014). Close to Florentin, the neighborhood of my youth, built by my parents’ generation, mostly immigrants of the 1920s who escaped prejudice or deprivation in Eastern Europe (Florentin has been included in the State Comptroller’s report among the five neighborhoods most populated with foreign nationals). I am captivated by the landscape, which could have been transplanted from another planet. I visit the grocery shop run by Gabriel, an intelligent and friendly thirty-three year old migrant from Eritrea. I observe the stream of his customers and friends, mostly young Eritrean men and women. Gabriel arrived in 2008 and obtained a work permit valid for three months with the possibility of renewals. Fluent in English and able to converse in Hebrew, he is also an interpreter with the immigration authority in interviews with newly arrived Eritreans held in the Negev detention facility. Meanwhile he married, and has two young children. He shares a nearby three-room apartment with another Eritrean family. However, his close friend Yasin, still single, who arrived a few months later, was not given that privileged legal status, but he is employed without a work permit as a janitor at a yeshiva (Orthodox school). He shares a nearby three-room apartment with eight Eritrean men. He is happy with that arrangement: “We don’t like being alone, we are used to being in each other’s company.”

Both Gabriel and Yasin were university students before they decided to take the road promising a better future, instead of the prospects of spending much of their adult life in the Eritrean army. They presumed Israel the best option under the circumstances, considering the expected journey there by land (via Sudan and Egypt), its economic opportunities and its reputation as a democracy. They do not regret their decision to escape a bleak future in Eritrea. For the time being they feel liberated from the permanent surveillance by the Eritrean regime’s brutal police force, free to associate with old and new friends, and spend time in the bars and restaurants in a neighborhood that has become “Little Eritrea”
然而，他们也承受着持续的焦虑，这种焦虑来自经济、社会和政治方面。他们的安全感在最近几个月里加深了，因为他们被新宣布的逮捕令打乱了。它已经让厄立特里亚人在中央汽车站的社区处于紧张状态；谁会被列入即将被转移到那个营地的名单呢？

我的达尔富尔的证人穆罕默德，28岁，单身，代表了较小的剩余苏丹社区。他在五年之前离开苏丹，当时他的村庄在夜间被阿拉伯Jangaweed民兵洗劫。他的家人四散，逃往不同的逃离路线，在恐惧和混乱的黑暗中。后来他在亚历山大区逗留了一个星期，然后他去了以色列。首先他在以色列南部的埃拉特港和受欢迎的度假小镇埃拉特工作，做当地酒店的清洁工。然后他去了特拉维夫，在利文斯基公园的避难所住了一个月。他在那里和一些其他苏丹男子交了朋友，与他们同住一个公寓，并且尽管他没有工作许可证，他还是在那里找到了一份酒店厨师的工作。他感激以色列人对他的友好待遇，并且希望也可以将以色列作为他的家。然而，他担心自己可能会被遣返回苏丹，就像他的来自南苏丹的朋友。

在我观察的最后一天，2014年2月28日，内务部长自信地宣布了“自愿”撤离1705名非洲人的决定，标志着他成功地消除了非法工作者的“侵入者”的威胁。无论如何，当我访问中央汽车站时，我就看到这些非洲人。
same evening, street life and most businesses seemed as busy as usual, with many African men strolling around enjoying a mild winter evening.

Near my home in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Tel Aviv, during my daily walks in Ramat-Gan National Park, often on the Sabbath in particular, I come across a number of wedding parties of young Eritrean couples clustered for photo sessions at a fountain resembling a waterfall at the head of a small artificial lake. To the innocent bystander they appear a merry prosperous crowd, with no sign of the serious concerns affecting their lives.

However, I recorded other life histories and experiences of a group of veteran African labor migrants who hold annually renewed residential visas and work permits. Under the auspices of MESILA, named U.A.C.L—United African Community Leaders—they try to organize the various African national constituencies of legal and semi-legal labor migrants in communal activities to help them improve their position and daily life circumstances in Israeli society. They are twelve men and women originating from Ghana, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Guinea, and South Africa. They all arrived during the 1990s as legal labor migrants or tourists, stayed on with their newly formed families and escaped the government’s determination to limit the presence of aliens that forced many others to leave. They await permanent residential status when their children, now at local Israeli elementary and high schools, will have completed their compulsory military service. They mostly work as domestic and office janitors under employment conditions and earnings terms equal to those of Jewish employees.

They do not consider themselves disadvantaged and have no wish to return to their home countries, although they travel there for seasonal visits. They often express their desire to integrate as fully entitled Israeli citizens. In 2013 they carried out several projects: a sports day and a weeklong summer camp for young school children, a series of lectures for adults on health issues, holiday celebrations, day bus trips for families to Jerusalem and other historical sites.

A new category of Israeli urban citizenship

For many years Israel conceived itself a country in conflict with its Arab neighbors and in a demographic race to expand its Jewish population to fulfill its original mission and safeguard its character as a Jewish state. In line with the agenda of a nation-state of the Jewish people, it absorbed, under the banner of *kur hahtuch* (the melting pot), Jews of various cultural traditions regardless of different racial elements. They included dark-skinned Jews from Yemen, black Jews from Cochin (India), and more recently 120,000 African newcomers from Ethiopia (whose Jewish roots are historically ambiguous and on arrival many among them are obliged to go through a process of “corrective” conversion before being granted full citizenship). Moreover, the entry during the 1980s and 1990s of nearly a million Olim from the former Soviet Union brought into Israel numerous non-Jewish spouses and family members.
members, granted citizenship status by virtue of their Jewish relatives. Diversity was thus never truly alien to Israeli society as long as the exceptional cases could be framed in terms compatible with its basic tenets as directly or by association implementing the project of a Jewish state. Actually, Israel has no legal code for naturalization except the Right of Return granted automatically to all newcomers of Jewish ancestry and their close relatives. No surprise it circumvents the implementation of a legal system to deal with the current wave of immigrants and asylum seekers (see Kritzman-Amir 2013).

Therefore, the most recent influx of many thousands of foreign workers and refugees, devoid of any actual or mythical connection to Jewish history, to the Land, to Zionist nation-building ideology, and lacking family ties to Jews, contradicts the basic doctrine of Israeli citizenship (Raijman 2012; Willen 2003). The scenarios of voluntary assimilation of these unrelated aliens in terms of the traditional melting pot ideology and practice, and of stretching multiculturalism beyond acceptance of an Arab minority, are not among the hypothetical options conceived legitimate in Israeli society. Actually, a few dozen Africans tried to begin a conversion process but their requests were rejected out of hand by the conversion authority for failure to meet preconditions; it was assumed that this was a bid to obtain residence permits. As reported by Nachshoni (2014), the head of the state conversion authority told him: “The government built a fence in the south on the state’s border, and we built one here at the entrance to the Jewish people.”

The foreign “infiltrators” constituency, concentrated in urban centers, thus imposes a third ethnic-cultural entity on the bi-national Jewish-Arab Israeli civic formation, a category of people who have also been called “margizens” (Raijman 2012:145). Denied “authentic” membership in the host society, they bring to mind Mary Douglas’ categorization in Purity and Danger (1966) of humans or animals lacking the normative characteristics of specific physical-cultural categories.

The Israeli case on the global stage

A major part of my presentation introduced a familiar phenomenon of enormous import in Western Europe and the US. A few pivotal dates in that global occurrence come to mind: in September 1964 Germany celebrated the arrival of the one millionth guest worker greeted with flowers and the gift of a motor cycle. By 1990, however, more than five million “guest” workers and their families considered Germany their permanent home (Akgunduz 2008; Chin 2007). In 2012, Greece completed the construction of a wall twelve kilometers long and four meters high to stop the infiltration of undocumented work seekers and refugees across the northern land border with Turkey (Bacas 2013). Asylum seekers and other aliens have been subjected to violent attacks in various countries. Migrant detention camps under different names (“removal centers,” “zones d’attente”) have been constructed in many countries (d’Appollonia 2012; De Genova and Peutz 2010). However, the
migration apparatus of policymaking (Feldman 2012) has failed to resolve the many problems surrounding the intake, integration, and the deportation of unwelcome aliens. The recent migrant boats disasters at Lampedusa and other Mediterranean sites remind Western world spectators of the unending emergency situation of disparate newcomers pouring into their countries. The unexpected public protest displayed in Tel Aviv by the apparently silent constituency of foreign migrants has its parallel in other countries. In these so-called “migrant counter-conducts” migrants and their allies have engaged in labor and hunger strikes, asked for justice, and advocated for legalization and political rights (Dowling and Inda 2013:3). But lately, the 2014 elections to the European parliament reflected the mood in most leading EU countries, as anti-immigration right-wing parties won considerable power.

However, the inflow that was initiated in Europe in the late 1950s as a “rational” “inexpensive” and “safe” solution to energize the expanding industrial and services sectors, reached Israeli shores only from the early 1990s, but soon developed problematic features akin to those in Europe (see Kemp and Raijman 2008), though, it also displays some exceptional national characteristics. Ironically, one might consider the present situation a sign of Israel’s advantaged position in the global social-economic system.

Official data report that the presence of foreign labor in the Israeli economy is proportionally almost double that in other Western countries. Most strikingly, 50 percent of the residents in the Arava (southern Israel) farming villages are identified as foreign labor (Caesarea Report 2010:15; Eckstein et al. 2007:28). Experts and committees were assigned to deal with the matter at an earlier stage, but other forces—pressures exerted by various sectors in the economy for the supply of labor, their supporters among the politicians, strategies initiated by the labor recruiting agencies—stymied or delayed restrictions on foreign labor recruitment before the emergence of today’s confrontation with thorny issues.

Although not mentioned in Sassen’s (1998) or Abrahamson’s (2004) lists of global cities, Tel Aviv nevertheless evinces the features and disturbing encounters typical of present-day major metropolitan sites: “The global city is a strategic site for disempowered actors because it enables them to gain presence, to emerge as subjects, even when they do not gain direct power”; or “The extreme high densities in the downtown districts of these cities are one spatial expression of this logic” (Sassen ibid: XXI–XXIII). Sassen, who observed global cities of longer duration and complexity than Tel Aviv, with larger constituencies of foreign labor migrants and other newcomers, sums up the process she considers inevitable in the long run: “The denationalization of urban space and the formation of new claims by transnational actors and involving contestation, raise the question—whose city is it?” (ibid: XX). The central bus station area in Tel Aviv is becoming a multiethnic island, located geographically at the very center of the city’s body structure. Is Tel Aviv destined to join the company of global cities? Or, might it evade the inevitable?
At the same time, however, this evolvement highlights a problematic, pre-illegal migration social reality, apparently invisible before the eruption of the migrants’ invasion: the lower socio-economic Jewish “indigenous” constituency, the aforementioned dromim (southerners), nurturing their claims and anger against the better-off tzfonim (northerners) in Tel Aviv’s municipal texture.

Conclusion: The ethnographic present of seven banks—a “normalization” process

Israeli society has effectively constructed a social-cultural national tapestry of different closely interwoven threads representing a blend of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, the destiny of the West Bank settlements is still unknown, “awaiting” a definitive political resolution with the Palestinians. It is also still too early to conclude about the absorption of the more recent arrived Ethiopian Jews. This complex society now faces yet another new unexpected wave of newcomers, unwelcome and difficult to integrate into the envisioned Israeli social order. As stated earlier, the “ethnographic present” of the unwanted migrants’ fate and the explosive inter-group encounter presented above is in a continuing flux, with no end of story in the near future—in ethnographic and sociological terms.

However, I decided to add to my old five banks map also this still unstable entity of people whose fate is apparently constantly wavering under the changeable disposition of politicians and ever new legal rules. As Andre Gingrich (Gingrich and Banks 2006:47) has pointed out, anthropologists differ from other social scientists as they “do not even intend to predict future developments.” Nevertheless, not so much a prediction as a common view from other countries: whatever efforts are made to diminish the presence of foreign non-Jews—“legal/illegal” workers and asylum seekers of every ethno-political background—a considerable segment of that wave is destined to stay on. They are not going to fade away voluntarily, nor involuntarily, because Israel cannot employ brutal means of forced mass deportations without abandoning its ethos of a civilized society.

I believe that these changes in my map, partly self-produced as in the case of the intake of Ethiopian Jews, and partly initiated by apparently unexpected circumstances as the case of the undocumented labor migrants and the asylum seekers, reflect a continuing process of national evolution. These developments are part of a gradual wider transformation of the Israeli ethos, highlighting its uniqueness as a society whose social-cultural borders and membership, besides the Arab minority, are defined by one major signal: a real or assumed Jewish connection and its associated Jewish communitas. I perceive these events, the discourse and conflicts they elicit, as a stage in a process of “normalization” (in a sense akin to Weber’s depiction of “the routinization of charisma”) that is changing the building blocks at the foundations of the state of Israel,
begun at the end of the 19th century and culminating in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

The assumed uniformity of its national presentation under the Jewish umbrella, and the melting-pot ideology of assertively mixing the incoming assorted ingredients of ethnicities and cultures into the imagined “Israeli” model of coherent national identity and culture, is giving way to a new, albeit contested, more diversified presentation of its social construction, its human composition and its mundane culture. Ethiopian Jews are made welcome and supported on arrival, but are not pressured, unlike earlier waves of Third World Ḫalwānim, to quickly shed their unique cultural heritage. They are left to set themselves apart in “mono-ethnic” urban enclaves where they can also preserve their traditional culture (a similar mode of tolerance has been displayed with the acceptance of newcomers from the former Soviet Union). Also, the assumption that except for the Arab minority no other aliens might cultivate the wish and be invited to join the Jewish state—still struggling to survive, short of natural resources (amidst oil-rich and belligerent Arab countries), supported mostly by the generosity of the Jewish world and its few allies—has radically changed. The Israeli economy and technology have proved inventive and stronger than ever imagined, for example, the emergence of the celebrated “high tech” globalized industry. The physical risk seems less threatening, with Israel holding the position of a major power in the region.

So much for the labor migrants recruited to supplement the missing workers in the major fields of construction, agriculture, caring for the elderly, and so on, against the egalitarian socialist ideals and the creed of Ḥavaḥ Tivrit (Jewish work), a basic tenet of the Zionist project intended to transform the history of Jews, who mostly engaged in non-physical occupations. Moreover, the disparities between rich and poor in Israeli-Jewish society compete with those in many capitalist societies. The more recently arrived Africans, the genuine or fake asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan, were also tolerated and employed as low-cost cleaners and dishwashers in hotels and restaurants until the outburst of protests by the Israeli inhabitants of downtown Tel Aviv.

For better or for worse, Israeli society, economy and urban center are part of a globalizing world and seem to endure the dynamics and socioeconomic-national processes that other Western societies have undergone already. In this context I quote leading social commentators on the conditions of modern existence in a globalized world, for example: “Old fashioned modernists believe (positively or negatively) that only an all-embracing national project, held together by language, military service and patriotism makes possible the integration of modern society and guarantees it. Cosmopolitanization by contrast means that ethnic identities within a nation become plural” (Beck 2000:91).

From my more recent perspective, the assumed Israeli national “unity” lost its efficacy long ago, soon after 1967 with the start of the West Bank settlements project which replaced the post-1948 mission of absorbing and transforming the mass immigration of Jews in the newly
founded villages, towns and other locations around the country. The advent of the West Bank settlements era was also followed by a widening ideological-political cleavage in Israeli society. The assassination of Mr. Rabin signaled the end of the pre-1967 real or imagined Israeli communitas. No less significant has been the expanding social and cultural division with the fast growth of the Ultra-Orthodox constituency. Its members conduct a “state” of their own, shunning the quintessential symbol of national unity, namely compulsory army service.

But more than anything else, the growing tolerance for Israeli citizens who have gone away permanently or temporarily seems to encapsulate the end of an era of a deeply entrenched solidarity of a “society in arms.” My research in the 1980s of the Yordim in New York did not identify Israeli-born citizens who had wished to emigrate, and they often regretted the circumstances that initiated their stay away. The title of my ethnography *Children of Circumstances* (1988) symbolized that major observation. However, since then, the stigma and the justifications for leaving Israel have mostly disappeared from private and public discourse (I do not delve into the various elements explaining this change, except for my indication earlier about the development of the high tech project and the “relocation” of young Israeli specialists).

That perspective and interpretation about the state of “Israeli unity” these days evokes my opening argument for the ethnographic present. Ethnographers who are not committed to a research project and reporting it under a limited time schedule are able to scour the minute transformations of various social-economic-ideological circumstances in the society. They can stay in the field for long spells or visit regularly and reveal the changes that take place continuously.

I believe that the present state of affairs represents a forthcoming condition of “normalcy,” Israel becoming comparable to other Western societies that have already shed some of the restrictive marks of ethnic-social-cultural exclusivity. I do not argue that Israeli society is approaching that stage without bitterly fought battles on the diverse fronts of its social texture. It is not implied that the mythology, ideology and daily perception of Israel’s national uniqueness and exclusivity as taught at schools and proclaimed in the public forum have altered in the different camps of the national body. Still, it seems too early to imagine the implementation of a standard legal naturalization process as in other Western nations, free of the Jewish connection.

One may dispute the structural balance of my present model and reject my association of two new “marginal” groups with momentous changes in Israeli society and national identity. Certainly, I link my long-term study of Israeli society, and my witnessing its past transformations, to the observations of the new groupings occupying pivotal urban landscapes that I got close to in a concentrated ethnographic venture. In conclusion, the “audacity” to weave a web of critical though sometimes disparate observations is an indispensable method in our tool-kit assembled to make sense of a perturbing social reality as we wait for time to prove or disprove our limited ability to envisage the future.
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1 About fifteen Israeli voluntary associations work to satisfy the needs of labor migrants, refugees and other groups in distress; they defend their rights and offer them advice and material help. A few of the most effective ones are the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, ASSAF- Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, the Worker’s Hotline (Kav LaOved), Physicians for Human Rights, Amnesty International Israel, and MESILA, mentioned in the text.


3 Glick-Schiller and Caglar (2011) are more hesitant about the future evolution of the new globalizing urban front. They claim there are many studies on migration to cities but very few on the relationship between migrants and cities and how migrants actively contribute to the restructuring of cities. The dynamics of these emerging migrant enclaves is undoubtedly still in flux everywhere, and in Tel Aviv in particular.

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