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Border Terrains:
World Diasporas in 21st Century

Edited by

Allyson Eamer

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**Border Terrains:
World Diasporas in the 21st Century**

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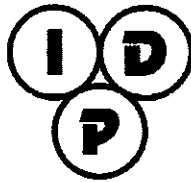
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Allyson Eamer

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Social Identification among Israeli Migrants' Descendants in North America: Is It Diasporic, Assimilative or Transnational?

Lilach Lev Ari

Abstract

International migration, especially in its transnational context, is generating ethno-national diasporas that are developing into distinct social groups in many Western countries. Individuals and families, who belong to ethno-national entities and have lived outside their homeland for several years or even generations, are deviating from the normal process of immersion and assimilation and are clearly identifying with their original national group, establishing or joining ethnic organisations. The aim of this chapter is to analyse different dimensions of social identification and the factors which influence them among Israeli migrants' descendants in North America: are they diasporic, assimilative or transnational? 206 young Israeli immigrants answered questionnaires, and 34 of them were interviewed in depth. Unlike previous research, regarding first generation of Israeli migrants, which demonstrate that they tend to develop transnational or diasporic identification, their descendants are more inclined towards assimilation among local Jews or non-Jews. Socialisation agents are the main factors that affect their ethnic identification; other variables are: gender, age and place of birth. Jewish atmosphere at home affects local Jewish identification, so that those who were brought up within a stronger Jewish home atmosphere will tend to identify themselves as Jewish and have more Jewish friends. Participants who reported that their parents' attitudes towards Israel were positive, and participated in Israeli youth movements (in the US), have higher diasporic identification which included socialising with Israeli friends in North America. Their parents' positive attitude towards Israel affects the children's transnational identification and willingness to migrate to Israel. It seems that new migrant generations have more freedom of choice in deciding their own ethnic identity than their parents did, while being significantly influenced by their parents and their ethnic identity.

Key Words: Ethnic identity and identification, diasporic social identity, transnational theory, second and 1.5 generation, Israeli migrants' descendants, assimilation, socialisation agents.

1. Introduction

Recently, international migration is also called transnational migration. This approach emphasises the differences between migration in earlier times and that of today. Transnational migration is defined as the process by which migrants shape and preserve relations that connect their society of origin with that of their new

place of residence.¹ The social space that transnational migrants inhabit is fluid and changes continually through a set of connections and commitments to more than one place.²

Today's immigrants, unlike those of the past, are seldom required to suppress certain aspects of their identity in order to blend into the non-immigrant group. Instead, thanks to the adoption of multicultural policies in most Western countries, they find ways to accommodate their range of identities concurrently by using each identity intelligently in different social contexts.³ One possible component of the transnational identity is the *diasporic identity*, in which the values, social norms, and narratives of the homeland (the origin country) are maintained in the destination country. This drawing of cultural borders amid structural integration gives emigrants a sense of being 'at home abroad.' Central to the particular identity of members of a diaspora is the maintenance of relations with the origin country, as reflected at several different and complementary levels including the familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political. Members of the diaspora disseminate the culture and knowledge of their origin country and promote its political and economic interests.⁴ Even as some emigrants reinforce transnational identities of various kinds, others totally disengage from their ethnic identity and identification and integrate or assimilate into the host society.⁵

As the title of this chapter indicates, the study investigates the social identification of the descendants of Israeli emigrants. An individual's social or ethnic identity is an inclusive conceptual matrix which the host society constructs in a process of daily interaction that may assign him or her to a certain social group within the host society (a proximal host) while inducing changes in his or her attitudes toward himself or herself as an immigrant.⁶ Ethnic identity is reflected in several indicators: identification as a member of the group, a sense of belonging and commitment to the group, positive (or negative) attitudes toward the group, a sense of shared attitudes and values, and specific components of ethnicity such as language, behavior, and customs. Some studies show that even if an immigrant identifies strongly with his or her ethnic-origin group, this does not rule out strong identity with the majority group, and vice versa.⁷ Ben-Rafael and Ben-Haim argued that the importance of identification with an ethnic group is on the rise, at the expense of the development of particularistic contents of the identity.⁸ The term 'ethnic identification' in this context signifies the demonstration of affiliation with a certain ethnic group. Some of the identification process also includes acceptance of the values and norms of the group that is targeted for self-identification as guidelines that shape the personality and behavior of the self-identifying individual.⁹

The aim of this chapter is to analyse different dimensions of social and ethnic identification and the factors which influence them among Israeli migrants' descendants in North America: are they diasporic, assimilative or transnational?

2. The Study

Most respondents (122 of 206) filled in their questionnaires online in the U.S. or Canada (from September 2008 to February 2009). The other eighty-four questionnaires were handed out to participants in a 'Tzabar group'¹⁰ within a few days of their arrival to Israel. These respondents were asked to relate in the questionnaire to their lives in North America. I based the qualitative part of the research on in-depth structured interviews that I conducted in February 2009 with nineteen descendants of Israelis in the U.S. and Canada.

In research on immigrants' descendants, it is customary to distinguish between first-generation immigrants and their successors, who are termed second-generation or '1.5 generation' immigrants. First-generation immigrants are parents who chose to leave their country of origin and settle elsewhere. Their descendants, in contrast, emigrated at different ages. This group is called the '1.5 generation' because they emigrated as older children or adolescents after having been raised and socialised in their origin country.¹¹ In the present study, the 1.5 generation comprises youngsters who reached North America with their parents between the ages of eight and 18; those younger than eight upon emigration are aggregated with the 'second generation,' meaning the descendants of emigrants' who were born in the destination country.¹²

Regarding research population, almost all second-generation immigrants live in the U.S. whereas only two-thirds of those in the 1.5 generation do so; the rest live in Canada. The parents of second-generation immigrants are longer-tenured in North America than those of Generation 1.5, of course, but the distribution of years of arrival is wider among members of the first group. As for immigration cohorts, 1.5-generation families are more homogeneous.

Another salient finding in which participants in the two groups are significantly different is the countries of birth of the participants and their parents. While most second-generation immigrants were born in North America, most 1.5-generation immigrants were born in Israel and another one-fifth were born in the former Soviet Union. As for parents' countries of birth, a sizable percentage of parents of second-generation immigrants were born in Israel, whereas only half of the parents of 1.5-generation immigrants were Israel-born; the others had been born elsewhere (including some in North America).

The parents of participants in both groups had similar higher-educational attainments. More than one-third of parents of second-generation immigrants and 44% of those of the 1.5 generation held university degrees. This finding corresponds to findings in other studies regarding Israelis in North America¹³ and, above all, those concerning recent Israeli emigrants in the U.S., who gained more human capital than those in previous decades.¹⁴

3. Descriptive Findings

As for the indicators of the participants' social-ethnic identity and identification, only in Israeli identity and identification were no significant differences between the groups found in the summarising indicators; significant differences between the groups were detected in all other identity indicators examined. In each component of identity - itself composed of several variables - several differences in both averages and standard deviations make it possible to profile a generational group by its specific identity and identification characteristics.

Jewish identity and identification is strong in both groups but stronger among the second generation, particularly in feeling affinity with other Jews and frequency of social interaction with Jews in North America. The dispersion of responses in each variable, however, was different: in feeling affinity with other Jews, the dispersion was greater among second-generation participants; in frequency of social interaction, it was similar in both groups. Although feeling affinity with other Jews was stronger among second generation participants than among those in the 1.5 generation, not all members of this generation shared this sense to the same extent. In the other variables, Jewish identity and identification was stronger among members of the second generation a finding manifested in the summarising indicator, which shows a significant difference relative to the 1.5 generation.

An Israeli or transnational identity, in contrast, is stronger among those of the 1.5 generation, mainly in the sense of being Israeli, feeling common with Jews in Israel, and having social relationships with them. Also, the homogeneity of the responses was generally stronger among 1.5-generation participants, indicating that they were in consensus about this identity. However, since second-generation participants also reported a strong Israeli identity, the difference between the groups in the summarising identity indicator was not significant even though the 1.5 generation had a stronger sense of transnational identity than the second generation. Furthermore, the Israeli identity indicator was stronger than the Jewish identity indicator in both groups.

Local identity and identification with non-Jewish North Americans is more significantly distinct than the two previous identity indicators in the inter-group comparison. Although the total value of the indicator was lower here than in the previous identities, it was higher among second-generation participants. These participants identify as Americans or Canadians more than those of the 1.5 generation do, sense a bond of fate and future with them, are emotionally attached to North America, and attribute more importance to being American or Canadian. These feelings are of medium intensity and the dispersion of responses is wide among second-generation respondents, whereas the salient features among 1.5-generation participants are estrangement from North America and a much stronger consensus about it.

Finally, the diasporic-identity indicator, i.e., identification with other Israelis in North America, is stronger among 1.5-generation participants and is manifested in feeling affinity with other Israelis in North America and frequent social interaction with them. Expressions of diasporic identity and identification are common among 1.5-generation participants and the consensus about them is stronger among the 1.5 generation than among the second generation.

In sum, second-generation participants are characterised by the following dimensions of hierarchical ethnic identity and identification: transnational (with Israel), Jewish (local), diasporic (with other Israeli emigrants in North America), and North American (local non-Jewish). Members of the 1.5 generation have almost similar components of ethnic identity but their hierarchy is somewhat different: transnational, diasporic, Jewish, and North American. The former, alongside their transnationality, identify more strongly with local groups - Jewish and non-Jewish - while the latter identify with the homeland and its inhabitants, particularly in Israel and in North America.

4. Summary and Discussion

Are the descendants of Israeli emigrants in North America Americans, Canadians, Israelis, or Jews? What are the main focal points of their social-ethnic identity and identification: diasporic? Assimilative or transnational?

The findings of this study illuminate complex patterns of identity components and the factors that affect them. Alongside demographic variables (gender, age, and ethnic affiliation), generational affiliation, i.e., second-generation immigrants (including those who immigrated to North America with their parents by age seven) as against those of the 1.5 generation, had a considerable effect on the various indicators of identity and identification. Agents of socialisation had an even more meaningful effect on the indicators of local-Jewish, diasporic, and transnational identity and identification.

As has been claimed in respect of the descendants of immigrants to North America from other origin countries¹⁵ and in view of the transnational theory of migration,¹⁶ the identity and identification indicators of Israelis' descendants in North America are anchored in different geographical spaces and coexist with local-identity indicators and a tendency to assimilation. However, the various identity and identification indicators have different effects on second-generation and 1.5-generation descendants of Israeli emigrants in North America. While both groups have a strong transnational identity, those of the 1.5 generation are more inclined than those of the second generation to preserve it. In an even more conspicuous manifestation of this pattern, those of the 1.5 generation also tend to identify and socialise with members of their diaspora group, i.e., other Israelis in North America. Among second-generation immigrants, in contrast, it is the local Jewish identity that stands out. Those of the 1.5 generation are more estranged from local Jewry, as they also explained in their in-depth interviews. Furthermore,

while second-generation respondents expressed only medium feelings of identity and identification with non-Jews in North America, they expressed possible directions of assimilation in so doing, more than among those of the 1.5 generation.

Sigal, a member of the 1.5 generation, expressed her feeling regarding her complex social and ethnic identity (in Hebrew):

I identify very strongly with the Israeli culture and the Jewish identity Well, I do feel my American side very, very strongly But it's strange that when I'm in America I feel very Israeli ... and when I'm here [in Israel] I always feel American

Eden, another member of the 1.5 generation, had the following to say (in Hebrew):

There's no doubt that I feel more at home in Israel, even though I've spent most of my childhood and adulthood in the U.S. Somehow I felt that I was missing something. Even though I got along - I have friends - I was always missing something. That's part of the reason that I finally decided to skip university and come to Israel.

Second-generation participants, including those who reached North America at an early age, feel 'at home' in the destination country and are more inclined to assimilate into the majority - the Jewish and the non-Jewish - as Joseph, a second-generation immigrant, said: '*I have one identity. I'm an American immigrant. I was born in Israel, but I view myself as an American citizen, I'm from America, I don't know anything else.*'

Socialisation factors have a strongly perceptible effect on the various indicators of identity and identification.¹⁷ Parents' positive attitude toward Israel (which is evident among both generations of Israeli emigrants' decedents) has a powerful effect on the preservation of their children's transnational identity, strong diasporic identity, and, to a lesser extent, the local Jewish identity and identification. Jewish background in parents' home (emphasised more strongly by members of the second generation) is very important in the formation of a local-Jewish identity and identification and, to a lesser extent, a transnational identity; however, it has no effect on the diasporic identity and identification. Finally, youth-movement activity (typical mainly of the 1.5 generation) contributes significantly only to a diasporic identity.

First-generation Israeli emigrants usually exhibit a transnational and diasporic identity; few of them identify or socialise with local inhabitants, Jewish or not.¹⁸ Their children, especially those born in the destination country, are more exposed than their parents to social relations with local people and, therefore, are much

more prone to assimilation. Obviously, parents and their attitude toward Israel, as well as Judaism and, to some extent, participation in youth movements of Israeli educational complexion, are meaningful agents of socialisation that affect various focal points of identity and identification, as argued here. However, they do not suffice to prevent the assimilation of members of the 1.5 generation and, *a fortiori*, of second-generation immigrants in the host country. Immigrants' descendants, as noted above, can choose among different identities. Accordingly, they may choose to affiliate with their origin group in the country of origin, with their origin group in the host country, or to pursue total assimilation. The choice between 'there' and 'here,' between living in Israel and being American-Israeli or Canadian-Israeli, is up to these young people. Some of them are influenced by agents of socialisation, primarily their parents' attitude toward Israel, and may establish their homes in Israel for this reason. Most of them, however, especially those of the second generation, are equally susceptible to the influences of various social groups in North America, including non-Jewish ones.

Notes

¹ Linda Basch, Nina Glick Shiller and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation States* (Basel: Gordon and Breach, 1994).

² Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, 'Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society', *International Migration Review* 37 (2004): 565-575. Michael P. Smith, 'Transnational Urbanism Revisited', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31 (2004): 235-244.

³ Levitt and Schiller, 'Conceptualizing Simultaneity', 235-244. Steven Vertovec, 'Transnationalism and Identity', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27, No. 4 (2001): 573-582.

⁴ Yossi Shain, *Marketing the American Creed Abroad: Diasporas in the U.S. and Their Homelands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-15. Gabriel Sheffer, 'A New Field of Study: Modern Diasporas in International Politics', in *Modern Diasporas in International Politics*, ed. Gabriel Sheffer (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

⁵ Thomas Faist, *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000),

⁶ David Mittelberg and Mary C. Waters, 'The Process of Ethnogenesis among Haitian and Israeli Immigrants in the United States', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 15, No. 3 (1992): 412-435. Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

⁷ Michal Tur-Kaspa, Dana Pereg and Mario Mikulincer, *Psychological Aspects of Identity Formation and Their Implications for Understanding the Concept of Jewish Identity: A Review of the Scientific Literature* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2004, in Hebrew).

⁸ Eliezer Ben-Rafael and Lior Ben-Chaim, *Jewish Identities in an Era of Multiple Modernities* (Ra'anana: The Open University of Israel, 2006, in Hebrew).

⁹ Uzi Rebhun, *Migration, Community, and Identification: Jews in Late 20th Century America* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Magnes, 2001, in Hebrew).

¹⁰ The 'Tzabar' youth movement in the US is an integral part of the Scouts movement in Israel. After finishing high-school, members of the movement can choose to enlist in the IDF (Israeli Scouts Website, 2010).

¹¹ Larissa Remennick, 'The 1.5 Generation of Russian Immigrants in Israel: Between Integration and Socio-Cultural Retention', *Diaspora* 12, No. 1 (2003): 39-66.

¹² Yinon Cohen and Yitchak Haberfeld, 'Economic Integration among Children of Israeli Immigrants in the United States', *International Migration* 41, No. 4 (2003): 141-159.

¹³ Lilach Lev Ari, *The American Dream - For Men Only? Gender, Immigration and the Assimilation of Israelis in the United States* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2008).

¹⁴ Uzi Rebhun and Lilach Lev Ari, *American Israelis: Migration, Transnationalism, and Diasporic Identity* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010).

¹⁵ Jerry Z. Park, 'Second-Generation Asian American Pan-Ethnic Identity: Pluralized Meanings of a Racial Label', *Sociological Perspectives* 51, No. 3 (2008): 541-561.

¹⁶ Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick-Schiller, 'Conceptualizing Simultaneity', 235-244. Vertovec, 'Transnationalism and Identity', 573-582.

¹⁷ Based on Forced steps regression models.

¹⁸ Steven J. Gold, *The Israeli Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2002). Lilach Lev Ari, *The American Dream*.

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