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Ethiopian Jews in Israel : new identity constructs

The mass migration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, first known as “Operation Moses” in 1984-5 then “Operation Solomon” in 1991, resulted in much interest among Israeli researchers who rapidly began to publish works on almost every aspect of the integration of this community, which numbers over 80 000 members today¹. As for French researchers, they also took a great interest in this group, in particular thanks to the dedication of F. Alvarez-Péreyre (CNRS), then Researcher at the French Research Center in Jerusalem (CRFJ), who initiated in 1986 a Franco-Israeli scientific program on the Jews of Ethiopia ; in this framework, a number of studies in ethnomusicology and social and medical anthropology were undertaken². Through this program and thanks to a research grant from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I had the opportunity to pursue fieldwork and finish, under the supervision of F. Alvarez-Péreyre, a doctoral thesis on communication practices and processes of social, cultural, linguistic and religious integration of the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel³. This work was also an attempt to rethink ethnographic genres by combining a narration of daily fieldwork with anthropological analysis. This dimension of my study resulted in a publication on issues of fieldwork and research in a complex society⁴.

Having been recruited in 1997 as a Researcher for the CNRS and sent to the CRFJ, I had the opportunity to pursue my research in this domain and develop new topics focused on the second generation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel and the new identity constructs that emerge after a number of years in the host country. In my previous work, I had observed a gap between the generation of the parents and that of their children concerning several

¹ For a state-of-the arts account on Ethiopian Jews in Israel see S. Kaplan and H. Salamon, 1998, *Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel : Experience and Prospects*, report n° 1, London, Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

² See O. Tourny, *Systématique de la musique liturgique des Juifs d’Ethiopie*, Ph.D. thesis, EHESS, Paris, 1997 ; F. Alvarez-Péreyre and al. (in press), *Anthology of the Ethiopian Jewish Liturgical Music*, Magnes Press, Jerusalem.

³ L. Anteby-Yemini *Les juifs éthiopiens en Israël : les paradoxes du paradis*, CNRS Editions, Paris, 2004.

⁴ L. Anteby, “ L’ethnologue face aux immigrants : réflexions à propos des Juifs d’Ethiopie en Israël ”, in I. Simon-Barouh, ed. *Dynamiques migratoires et rencontres ethniques*, l’Harmattan, Paris, 1998, pp. 45-57.

issues : the elders still referred to traditional models of construction of difference with the Other, close to those used in Ethiopia to differentiate themselves from the Christians, and used a rhetoric linked to purity/impurity in the area of foodways (separate slaughtering from the Israeli Jews), kinship systems (exogamy up to seven-degree kin)⁵ and purity practices, especially concerning the women (isolation strategies during menstruation and after childbirth)⁶. In opposition, the youth rarely brought up these practices and rather used mechanisms of identity reformulation based on models of situational ethnicity and cultural hybridity. Pursuing this issue, I began to be more interested in the modalities of community mobilization, forms of alternative citizenship (post-national or even post-Zionist) and modes of participation in civil society for new Israelis engaged in complex processes of recreating identity⁷.

I therefore researched more in depth the dynamics of integration and segregation at stake in the Ethiopian Jewish community, that is the mechanisms of marginalization but also of inclusion in Israeli Jewish society and the ways to differentiate oneself but also to belong to the host country. Indeed, the young and less young claim a strong Israeli national identity, deeply anchored through their socialization in the army, the education system, their economic insertion and

⁵ L. Anteby-Yemini, "Migration et nuptialité: la transition du système matrimonial chez les juifs éthiopiens en Israël", in P. Hidioglou, ed. *Entre héritage et devenir: la construction de la famille juive*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris, 2003, pp. 373-400.

⁶ L. Anteby, "There's Blood in the House : Negotiating Female Rituals of Purity among Ethiopian Jews in Israel", in R. Wasserfall, ed., *Women and Water : Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, Brandeis University Press, Hanover, NH, 1999, pp. 166-186.

⁷ L. Anteby, "De nouveaux citoyens à la peau noire : les juifs éthiopiens en Israël", *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, n° 54, 1999, pp. 73-94.

their political activity which make these new immigrants Israelis who thrive for recognition above all as equal Jewish citizens, without demanding differentiated rights (to use W. Kimlicka's formulation), as opposed to minorities, such as Israeli Arabs. Yet, at the same time, one hears in the Ethiopian community more and more accusations of racism and discrimination against Israeli society, reaching a climax during the "Blood Affair" in 1996. These feelings of alienation, exclusion, and marginalization do characterize some segments of the Ethiopian immigrant population and that is why I endeavored to try and understand what were the new identity models and discourses put forth here.

On the one hand, some young people describe their relationship with Israelis not as inter-ethnic relations but as truly inter-racial relations and even make use of a discourse shaped on the north-American hegemonic discourse between Blacks and Whites ; a minority of the youth even adopt symbols in clothing and music influenced by the hip-hop or rastafarian styles. Nonetheless, as opposed to some researchers who see in this phenomena a form of "counter-culture" and resistance to integration⁸, this virtual belonging to a Black global diaspora goes hand in hand with the Israelization of the youth who speak better and better Hebrew and resemble more and more their Israeli non-religious counterparts, who are themselves influenced by a global youth culture. Therefore, it seems to me that this identification can be read, on the contrary, as a form of integration and belonging to the local Israeli culture by the detour of global youth culture⁹.

On the other hand, a "return to the roots" trend is developing simultaneously, since young people and elders are beginning to take an interest in their native country, and especially in the urban culture of Addis Ababa, which they do not know or hardly, originally coming from isolated villages of the Ethiopian highlands. In fact, since a few years, one observes the emergence of a "traveling culture" (to use James Clifford's expression) among Ethiopian Jews in Israel, who travel for short visits to Ethiopia. For some, it is to do "ethnic business" and a number of Ethiopian Jewish entrepreneurs sell at the same time Ethiopian products in Israel and Israeli products in Ethiopia, thus developing a

⁸ M. Shabtay, 2001, *Between Reggae and Rap : the Integration Challenge of Ethiopian Youth in Israel*, Tcherikover, Tel Aviv (in Hebrew).

⁹ L. Anteby-Yemini, "Urban Ethiopia and Black Culture : New Identity Models among Ethiopian Youth in Israel", in R. Eisikovits, ed., *On Cultural Borders and In Between : Young Immigrants from the ex-Soviet Union and Ethiopia in Israel*, Ramot Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 2003, pp. 11-31, in Hebrew.

vast network of underground economy. For others, these travels consist in visiting family members, being treated by local healers or simply sojourning in the capital as rich tourists. But for many, it is the nostalgia of Ethiopian culture, with its food and music, which attracts these travelers who become, for a while, individuals with a high social status, that one cannot differentiate anymore by the color of their skin but only by their Hebrew-sounding Amharic. This continual back and forth movement, leads, of course, to the circulation and consumption of material and symbolic goods which are not without influencing the constructions of Self and Other for this community in Israel. Thus, a study of the actual identity reconstructions among the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel must take into account the processes of Israelization, Westernization and Judaization as well as the processes of globalization and transnationalism which lead to multiple identities characteristic of the post-modern era¹⁰.

Nonetheless, these transnational practices and these influences of a globalized culture led me to examine more closely the literature on migration studies in Israel and realize that these models are rarely taken into account in recent works. In the first place, the transfer of cultural goods from the country of origin and the adoption of identity models conveyed through the media bring about the question of the construction of a virtual community and of global identities for an immigrant population that now lives in Israel. In effect, these processes of re-ethnicization and identity reformulation open a comparative perspective with other communities of migrants in the world for whom emerge similar issues of construction of color, racial conscience and identification with Black global diasporas. However, few studies on the immigrants in Israel exploit this comparative dimension which would situate the Ethiopian Jews in a broader analytic framework. Finally, transnationalism, which is becoming a central theme in the migratory experience of this population, is worthy of particular attention since it is these networks of informal economy that contribute to a “ globalization from the bottom ” (A. Portes), as have shown many works on migrants in other countries. In this area as well, comparisons should be made.

New approaches to migration in Israel

Indeed, the theoretical models for studying migration in Israel need to be reconsidered as the myth of Israel’s “ uniqueness ” appears to be *passé*, like J. Shuval and E. Leshem underline in a pioneer article¹¹. Until recently, migration studies in Israel only focused on Jewish immigrants (*olim*) without being preoccupied by the important number of non-Jews among them nor of the new economic migrants, sometimes undocumented, who came to work in Israel for a fixed period but which often becomes indeterminate. Therefore, after

¹⁰ L. Anteby-Yemini (in press), “ From Ethiopian Villager to Global Villager : Ethiopian Jews in Israel ”, in A. Weingrod and A. Levy, eds., *Homelands and Diasporas : Holy Lands and Other Places*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto.

¹¹ J. Shuval and E. Leshem, “ The Sociology of Migration in Israel : A Critical View ” in J. Shuval and E. Leshem, eds., *Immigration to Israel : Sociological Perspectives*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 1998, pp. 3-50.

the co-editing of a special issue on migration in Israel, in which dominated studies on Russian immigrants¹², I wanted to further compare the Russian and Ethiopian communities.

The Russian Immigrants

These two immigrant groups, who arrived in the 1980's and 1990's, truly represent a challenge to the classical approaches to "return migrations" in Israel, which one commonly calls *aliyah*. In effect, comparing the two communities highlights similar processes as well of rooting and construction of an Israeli national identity as of "diasporization" and of mobility between Israel and the native country. However, these circulatory movements are characteristic of other migrants in the Mediterranean and elsewhere, and therefore question an approach that would consider these "Jewish returnees" as a unique case in migration studies. These two groups thus helped me to reflect on the notion of "transmigrant", which could one day be substituted for that of "*oleh*" (an individual who spiritually ascends by "returning" to Israel), and to rethink the models for studying ethnicity and Jewish migration in Israel¹³. Indeed, certain studies on the Russian immigrants begin to take into account their transnational practices and their links not only with their country of origin but also with other countries of Jewish Russian immigration, such as the United

¹² L. Anteby, W. Berthomière and G. Simon, eds, vol. 12, n° 3, "Les nouveaux visages de l'immigration en Israël", *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, 1996.

¹³ L. Anteby-Yemini, "Being an *Oleh* in a Global World: from Local-Ethnic Community to Transnational Community" in U. Ram and al., eds., *Israelis in Conflict: Hegemonies, Identities and Challenges*, Sussex Books, 2004.

States, Canada or Germany¹⁴. Yet, rare are those who suggest new models which would question their very status as returnees, except at least one study which analyzes in a novel way the tension between “returning diaspora” and transnationalism¹⁵. In fact, in general, Israeli anthropology seems much less critical of the approach to ethnicity and migration in Israel than sociology or history (with its post-Zionist claims), as proves, for example, a recent article¹⁶ which suggests studying more the role of the media, religion, history and hybridity in the formation of identities in Israel, without alluding to the processes of globalization nor transnationalism.

Until recently, when one spoke of migrations to Israel, one spoke of migrations of Jewish communities towards the “homeland”. However, one has given much less attention to the non-Jewish populations who arrive in Israel, whereas they constitute today more and more of the migratory movements. In the first place, the number of non-Jews who benefit from the Law of Return as parents, spouses, children or grand-children of Jews is growing, in particular among immigrant families from the Former Soviet Union. Similarly, the group known as “Falash Moras” (Ethiopian Jews converted to Christianity, sometimes generations ago) regularly enter Israel on the basis of family reunification. These non-Jewish immigrants, who are granted Israeli citizenship, bring up fundamental questions on the very notion of Jewish immigrant or *oleh* and the relationship between identity, religion and citizenship. A preliminary study on these groups was useful to continue thinking about these new configurations of migration in Israel¹⁷.

The “Foreign Workers”

Today it is the question of migrant workers, characterized by a purely economic migration, which is the object of my research in process¹⁸. I have decided to focus on French-speaking Africans, many of whom have received the status of political refugee from the UNHCR Bureau in Jerusalem (with a visa of temporary residence to be renewed every six months). They mainly originate from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ivory Coast (but also from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ethiopia). This new category of

¹⁴ See F. Markowitz, “Emigration, Immigration and Cultural Change: Towards a Transnational Russian-Jewish Community?”, in Y. Ro’i (ed.), *Jews and Jewish Life in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Frank Cass, London, 1995, pp. 403-414 ; L. Remennick “Transnational Community in the Making: Russian Jewish Immigrants of the 1990s in Israel”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 28, n° 3, 2002, pp. 515-530.

¹⁵ E. Lomsky-Feder and T. Rapaport, “Seeking a Place to Rest: Representation of Bounded Movement among Russian-Jewish Homecomers”, *Ethos*, vol. 30, n° 3, 2003, pp. 227-248.

¹⁶ H. Goldberg and H. Salamon, “From Laboratory to Field: Notes on Studying Diversity in Israeli Society”, *Hagar (International Social Science Review)*, vol. 3, n° 1, 2002, pp. 123-137.

¹⁷ L. Anteby, “Post-Zionism and *Alyah*: Reconsidering Immigration from Ethiopia and from the Former Soviet Union In Israel”, *Bulletin du Centre de Recherche Français de Jérusalem*, n° 3, 1998, pp. 19-31.

¹⁸ This research is undertaken in collaboration with W. Berthomière (CNRS, Migrinter) who wrote in 1999, “L’immigration des travailleurs étrangers: miroir des mutations identitaires d’Israël”, *Les Cahiers de l’Orient*, n° 54, pp. 117-134.

“ migrants ” adds on to the already existing African communities mostly concentrated in Tel-Aviv and revitalizes their communal life begun in the 1990’s (churches, soccer teams and music clubs). However, there is still little ethnographic work on the lifestyle of documented and undocumented migrants, especially since the contradictions between the policies of the State of Israel, which seems to be hostile to their presence, and those of the municipalities, who offer them social and health services as residents, show the confusion around this phenomenon unknown to Israeli society two decades ago¹⁹.

These migration flows bring about questions that European countries are already debating concerning their migrant populations (naturalization processes, social integration, spatial segregation, participation in civil society, communal organization, future of the second generation...) and that Israel is discovering for the first time. One should also remember that the Black Hebrews concentrated in Dimona have succeeded in obtaining basic civil rights (education, residence permits, health insurance) and represent a model of “ spiritual ” citizenship which offers an alternative vision to the link between identity, territory and nation²⁰. On the other hand, there are moments, such as when the migrants are victims of attacks by Palestinian extremists and are counted as “ Israeli victims ” in the press, where they become “ included ” by these terrorist acts in the nation. Simultaneously, a violent policy of expulsion of undocumented migrants is led since 2002 and thousands of people have been sent back to their countries of

¹⁹ S. Willen, 2003, “ Perspectives on Transnational Labour Migration in Israel ”, *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales*, vol. 19, n° 3, pp. 243-262.

²⁰ F. Markowitz and al., “Soul Citizenship: The Black Hebrews and the State of Israel”, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 105 n° 2, 2003, pp. 302-312.

origin. Therefore, these dual processes of inclusion and exclusion redefine identity and difference in Israeli society and challenge the notions of identity, space and citizenship in Israel.

One thus observes transformations in the very significance of immigration (*aliyah*) and migration (*hagira*) in Israel as well as in the practices of citizenship and its links formerly equivalent between religion, identity and territory (with the exception of Israeli Palestinians). Today, not only the immigrants (*olim*) have become transnational subjects (often traveling with dual citizenships) but a growing number of non-Jews among them render their relations with the State of Israel more complex, and lastly with the documented and undocumented migrants, all these populations articulate in their own manner different forms of insertion and citizenship. Therefore, one needs to develop new theoretic models for the study of these diverse migratory movements, Jewish and non-Jewish, legal and illegal. There does exist a vast literature on migration and transnationalism but it is scarcely applied in the framework of studies on Israel; furthermore, with work migrations, it is also the emergence of new diasporas (Chinese, African, Columbian...) that Israel never knew that one must now take into account; finally, if the Russian and Ethiopian immigrants (with their own media, their ethnic businesses and their social networks) behave like “emergent diasporas”, one must study this new migratory fact through the angle of diaspora studies and compare these immigrants/migrants with other migrant communities and work diasporas in the Mediterranean and more generally in the world. Such a re-framing would allow to challenge the question of the “uniqueness” of the Israeli case and would reflect the “normalization” that Israel is undergoing today in the field of return migration and globalization of economic migration²¹.

Diaspora studies and the case of Israel/Palestine

Re-situating studies on Israel in the framework of broader migration studies means replacing the Israeli case in studies on transnationalism, deterritorialized populations, traveling cultures and diaspora studies. In fact, diaspora studies constitute a framework which seems to be relevant for the Israeli case but also to compare Jewish and Palestinian diasporas for whom the questions of exile and return are essential.

These reflections were first developed during a research seminar titled “Traveling Cultures” that I gave from 1999 to 2002 at Ben Gurion University in Beer-Sheva. The seminar attempted to rethink the theoretical and methodological frameworks in the study of deterritorialized populations who are the object of more and more contemporary anthropological research; it also reconsidered the relations between identity, space and culture. The course focused on different forms of travel, migration and mobility, such as tourism, pilgrimages, work migrations, exiles, diaspora situations, transnationalism and virtual travel on the Internet. Furthermore, by participating in a year-long workshop directed by U. Rebhun on contemporary forms of Jewish identities (Salman Shazar Center,

²¹ See W. Berthomière, “Nouvelle Intifada, mondialisation et immigration de travailleurs étrangers : une nouvelle réalité sociale pour Israël”, *Maghreb-Machrek*, n° 177, 2003, pp. 79-99.

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2002-2003) and in a working group directed by T. Rapoport and E. Lomsky-Feder on “Identity and Migration” (Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem, 2003-2004), I have become familiar with the research projects of Israeli scholars in these fields.

It was through this angle and in the course of my work on migrants and “emergent diasporas” in Israel (Ethiopian and Russian but also African and South-American) that I became more interested in the theoretical literature on the concept of diaspora; and thus, the idea to organize in collaboration with W. Berthomière (CNRS, MIGRINTER) and G. Sheffer (Hebrew University of Jerusalem) a conference on this theme, which was held in Poitiers, France in February 2002 (the proceedings are in press). This international colloquium, where historians, political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists and geographers gathered, endeavored to discuss the concept of diaspora, by adopting a critical and interdisciplinary approach. This meeting attempted a methodological and theoretical reflection on the evolution of classical diasporas (Jews, Armenians, Greeks...), on the emergence of new diasporas (North-African, Russian, Asian), on the construction of the notions of exile and return, on the representations of the homeland, real or imagined (Gypsies, Cambodians, Palestinians), on transnational networks (Chinese, Turks, North-Africans) and on the future of diasporas when integration and assimilation play a determining role.

Diaspora Studies Today

The actual flourishing of diaspora studies offer more and more examples of the diversity of deterritorialization and exile without giving a clear definition of the term diaspora. How did the concept evolve in history, since its original Greek meaning of “dispersion” or its Jewish meaning of “exile”? Which characteristics differentiate today a migrant group from a diaspora? A few years ago, only certain studies focused on these theoretical questions, beginning with the seminal article by W. Safran²². Since, a number of typologies have been suggested, such as those by R. Cohen (1997). Later, scholars such as H. Bhabha, S. Hall, J. Clifford and A. Appadurai gave a more metaphorical meaning to the term diaspora in the wider framework of cultural studies; some, like P. Gilroy, introduced the concept of the “Black Atlantic” to define a Black diasporic culture between Africa, Europe and the Americas.

However, today, with a growing transnational dimension, how can one maintain a diaspora when the group itself crosses continually the borders between the host country and the homeland and when the exchanges are so numerous that one does not know anymore where the diaspora and where the center are? Finally, is any migrant group bound to become a diaspora or are there deterritorialized communities that never become a diaspora? It is in the continuity of these reflections that I also began to think of the case of Israel/Palestine. To begin with, it seems relevant to take as a starting point the Jewish diaspora, the archetype of diasporic groups.

²² W. Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return”, *Diaspora*, vol. 1, n° 1, 1991, pp. 83-99.

The Jewish Diaspora

In effect, the Jewish diaspora, often considered as the classic diasporic example, is actually undergoing profound transformations, linked to the borders of the group and to the very definition of a "Jewish community". For example in the United States, Judaism is becoming more and more a "symbolic ethnicity" confined to the private sphere whereas Israel is playing less and less a role of reference in American-Jewish identity, a situation that W. Safran defines as "de-Zionisation". In addition, the very definition of homecoming in the context of recent (but also older) return migrations brings about questions that could be precursors for other diasporas. Thus, Israel has not always been the preferred destination of the potential returnees, who often opted for France (in the case of Moroccan Jews) or more recently for Germany (in the case of the Jews from the Former Soviet Union) instead of immigrating to Israel. In this sense, some scholars consider that diaspora is a necessity for the survival of Judaism and the construction of Jewish identities²³. Let us recall that fifty years after the creation of the State of Israel, the majority of Jews in the world live outside their homeland, in the United States, France or the new Russian independent states, representing a polycentric model of dispersion²⁴. Furthermore, Israeli emigrants (*yordim*) are beginning to form in Europe and the United States a new "Israeli diaspora" separate from the Jewish diaspora of these host countries. Therefore, challenging the very ideology of the "ingathering of the exiled" and the "return" to the homeland becomes urgent, since it has hardly been discussed because of the dominant Zionist ideology. Concerning this point, if the Russian and Ethiopian immigrants are perceived as returnees, they also show features of emergent diasporas in Israel, putting into question the relations between a center and its diaspora. Concerning more precisely the immigrants from Ethiopia, I endeavored to cast a critical look on their "return" to their homeland²⁵ as well as to evaluate the relevance of the concept of Black diaspora for this group²⁶.

But rethinking the concepts of homeland, exile and return also made me attempt a comparison with the Palestinians. Indeed, if, to produce a Jewish identity one often needs to be in the diaspora, it is also since the Palestinians have experienced exile and uprooting that they have constructed a national Palestinian identity and a discourse on homeland and return.

²³ R. Azria, "The Diaspora-Community-Tradition Paradigms of Jewish Identity: a Reappraisal", in E. Krausz et G. Tulea, eds., *Jewish Survival: the identity problem at the close of the XXth century*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 1998.

²⁴ G. Sheffer, "A Nation and its Diaspora : a Re-Examination of Israeli-Jewish Diaspora Relations", *Diaspora*, n° 11 vol. 3, 2002, pp. 331-358.

²⁵ L. Anteby-Yemini (in press), "Promised Land, Imagined Homelands : Etrhiopian Jews' Immigration to Israel" in F. Markowitz et A. Stefansson, eds., *Homecomings : Beyond Return Migration*, Lexington Books, USA.

²⁶ L. Anteby-Yemini (in press) "Une nouvelle diaspora noire ? les juifs éthiopiens en Israël", in L. Anteby-Yemini et al., eds., *2000 ans de diasporas*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes.

Conclusions

These are some of the various research directions that I am at present trying to develop since I have left the CRFJ in 2003 to become affiliated to the IDEMEC (Institute of Mediterranean and Comparative Ethnology) in Aix-en-Provence, France. I have organized a first workshop titled “ Israel/Palestine : diaspora and return ” (May 2004) which is part of a wider scientific program on migrations and diasporas in the Mediterranean at the Maison Méditerranéenne des Sciences de l’Homme in Aix-en-Provence. Both the Palestinian and the Jewish diasporas highlight the complex relations between the center (real, virtual, symbolic or imagined) and the periphery in the relations between diasporic

groups and their homeland. This research project will attempt to reflect on the notions of diaspora, exile and return, homeland and memory, diasporic identity and transnational networks.

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