


Spring 2022

## Revisiting the Who and the Where: A Quest to Understanding the Identities of Second-Generation Israeli-American Youth

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### Recommended Citation

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Revisiting the Who and the Where: A Quest to Understanding the Identities of  
Second-Generation Israeli-American Youth

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022



## Dedication

to ima and abba, to my family in Israel, to my chosen family in New York



## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my parents, Iris Dauber Elbaz and Rafi Elbaz, for I would not be here writing this reflective project had it not been for the journey you undertook years ago. Thank you for the infinite support you have provided me, especially in the past year. I am thankful for the visits I could make back to you and Dani and Bar, always heartbroken yet recharged taking the train back to Bard. Thank you for always being there for me.

I would like to thank my chosen family here in New York, the people who I would not feel at peace without. Thank you, Lexi, for being the most supportive and loving friend and roommate I could ask for, as well as Pax for the mid-week dinners that would put me at ease after such long and difficult days. I want to thank my boyfriend Guy, who saw me at my lowest and continuously gave me the power to complete this mission. Thank you for inspiring me to pursue this thesis.

In addition, I would also like to formally thank my participants who let me into their lives and were all so vulnerable with me. I feel like I know you much deeper now spending many hours analyzing your interviews. I did this work for me and for you, and I hope we can all learn something from each other through this project.

Finally, I want to thank my advisors that sat through my messy drafts and provided me with such helpful feedback. Thank you, Yuval Elmelech, for being on board to help me with the project. Without your knowledge on the subject of Israel, this paper would not have been possible. And, thank you to Tom, for offering me the human rights perspective I needed and always reaffirming me to be proud of my work.



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## **Introduction: Who are Israeli-Americans?**

“*Yuval, what do you think?*” I hear my teacher say in the background, sitting stunned after watching a shocking video about the ways Israeli and Palestinian children were taught about one another in their schools. It was my first month back in New York since leaving at the age of nine. I was fourteen, having lived in Israel for five years. After watching the video, I realized I knew close to nothing about the history of Israel, the place my parents were born and raised. All I remembered about the conflict was running to the shelter in the middle of the night at the strike of a siren and feeling terrified in these moments. I was ashamed that I didn’t have an answer, coming up with some unmeaningful response to satisfy my teacher. Growing up in the United States with Israeli parents meant existing in a separate culture and set of values. It meant not speaking English until I left the home and eating dinner together with my family every Shabbat. Most importantly, it meant that my parents’ home was not the same as mine. After visiting Israel for the first time in almost five years, during the summer of 2021, I felt I had returned home. I felt like myself again after many years of struggling to do so in New York. Given the difficulty of admitting this to others as much as myself, I understood I wanted to dedicate my final year to research this subject and discovering how others, like me, felt about this subject.

\* \* \*

In the beginning of my research, I had to decide the topics I wanted to use to understand Israeli-American second generation identities. In combining the research that I accumulated with my personal experiences, I realized that there were three subjects that made Israeli-American immigrants unique: their exceptional success rates, the Jewish-American community they enter, and the political context in which they come from. Although there was some research available on Israeli-Americans that included success rates and religion, few studies have been done on

political engagement within this group. Still, I sensed participants would have important remarks on the subject and used more broad research on immigrant political attachment styles to analyze this subject. To unpack the story of second-generation Israelis in the United States, I first had to look at the research available on their parents.<sup>1</sup> The main book that guided my initial research was Uzi Rebhun and Lilach Lev Ari's *American Israelis*, published in 2010.<sup>23</sup>

In comparison to other Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, Israeli migration rates fall slightly below average. Since Israeli-Americans exhibit voluntary rather than forced immigration from one developed country to another, one might begin to ask, why does Israeli immigration happen in the first place? And, why is it that over two thirds of Israeli immigrants choose America out of all destinations in the world?<sup>4</sup> Although there are various speculations on the number of Israelis abroad, it is believed that there are around half a million, with a ratio of nine out of ten identifying as Jewish.<sup>5</sup> Although America is an appealing place for many immigrants, particularly those who are looking to socioeconomically advance, only a portion of them are able to do so like Israeli-Americans have demonstrated.<sup>6</sup> Success rates have surpassed both their European immigrant peers as well as their Jewish counterparts back at home. In trying to unpack these findings, I will outline the two main pull factors that attract Israelis to America and the push factor that makes them leave in order of my chapters. I will start with an analysis of the relationship between Israel and the U.S., then unpack religion, and lastly show the reason why Israelis immigrate in the first place.

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<sup>1</sup> Israelis who live in America will be referred to as Israeli-Americans and Israelis who live in Israel will be referred to as local Israelis or Israelis.

<sup>2</sup> Uzi Rebhun and Lilach Lev Ari, *American Israelis: Migration, Transnationalism, and Diasporic Identity*, vol. 13 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2010): 17, <https://brill.com/view/title/18506>.

<sup>3</sup> Although the sample I used only consisted of Israelis from the United States, America will be used interchangeably when the United States does not grammatically fit or in reference to research about Israelis in America.

<sup>4</sup> Uzi Rebhun, "Immigrant Acculturation and Transnationalism: Israelis in the United States and Europe Compared," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 3 (September 2014): 620, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12135>.

<sup>5</sup> Rebhun, "Immigrant Acculturation and Transnationalism," 619.

<sup>6</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 19.

In Chapter 1, participants' perceptions of integration into the United States was investigated, particularly in regards to their relationship to success. It was found that the American racial definition of ethnicity was used to describe the experience of parents from all economic spectrums, often conflating their parents' experience with their own. Chapter 2 explored the role religion played in the lives of the secular-Jewish immigrants. It was revealed that religion played a different role than faith, instead shaping the ethnic identification of Israeli-American youth. The bounds of ethnicity expanded when they moved to the United States to include their religiosity and parents' home country rather than their Ashkenazi or Sephardic descent. In Chapter 3, participant attitudes towards home-country politics, particularly of the Israel-Palestine conflict, were investigated. The strikingly high levels of engagement with homeland politics revealed that political opinions became ingrained in the identities of second-generation Israeli-Americans. The overwhelming loyalty they exhibited to American-liberal ideologies revealed the ways growing up in the United States pushed Israelis to make compromises, all voluntary, due to their environment.

In this paper, I will argue that living in the United States has a significant influence on the way participants viewed their Israeli identities. Although identity will be the focal point of this study, this is not to claim that identity is a fixed category, but rather is fluid and affected by various external and internal factors. In this study, identity is defined as the way people view themselves. For all participants, growing up in the U.S. created some form of internal conflict, particularly because they felt Americans viewed them in ways they did not align with. This mislabeling, no matter how much Israelis did or did not agree with Americans, had an influence on Israeli identity, one that challenged Israelis to revisit the self.

## *Historical Context*

Starting with the establishment of Israel in 1948, President Truman announced the recognition of the Provisional Government of Israel only hours after its establishment. While concerns about losing Middle Eastern allies arose, it was eventually established that the recognition would be *de facto*, meaning a recognition of the act of establishment rather than the partition boundaries.<sup>7</sup> The pivotal moment established a connection between the two countries, particularly because Israel became one of the United States' strongest connections to the Middle-East. This active American engagement in the country has left an undeniable foot-print, one that influences many local Israelis to see America as a counterpart.<sup>8</sup> Rebhun and Waxman argued that since Israel is a relatively new country, it was bound to act as a cultural sponge to the superpower that America is, particularly in that the countries have an interest in maintaining this relationship. Other than religion, Israel has few cultural traditions of its own, specifically in regards to the operations of running a country. Therefore, Israel has taken influence from America by finding the delicate balance between being a civil, global country, but also aiming for a sense of individualism and uniqueness. As a result, a phenomenon called the "Americanization of Israel" has happened, and it is one of the reasons why Israeli immigrants choose America over their country of origin.<sup>9,10</sup>

Another reason America is chosen over other countries is the overarching global, indirect influence that it holds over all nations in the world. America is seen as an appealing option for immigrants who are aspiring to something higher. The "American appeal" comes from the different philosophies it perpetuates, some of which include increased upward mobility and

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<sup>7</sup> Justus Doeneke, "THE UNITED STATES AND THE CREATION OF ISRAEL: Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 7, no. 4 (July 1, 1978): 119, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536300>.

<sup>8</sup> Uzi Rebhun and Chaim I. Waxman, "The 'Americanization' of Israel: A Demographic, Cultural and Political Evaluation," *Israel Studies* 5, no. 1 (2000): 65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30245530?seq=1>.

<sup>9</sup> Rebhun and Waxman, "The 'Americanization' of Israel," 87.

<sup>10</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 16.

standard of living, or broadening of horizons. These are all underlying ideas behind the “American Dream,” which has become a global aspiration for many.<sup>11</sup> Modernization and globalization mean that there is a constant stream of American culture and lifestyles around the world but especially within similarly developed countries like Israel. There is a certain familiarity Israelis have with America, one that eases the adjustment process for Israeli immigrants.<sup>12</sup> Israelis have an idea that their “economic returns to skills rate” will be high if they move to America, believing they will receive “life insurance” in case Israel’s economy collapses.<sup>13</sup>

Considering the risk of social disapproval Israelis take when leaving, they make significant sacrifices for the “promised” benefits they will receive in America. Israel has historically shown a disapproval of Israeli immigrants, calling them the *yordim*, the “descenders,” particularly because having fewer Jewish citizens means losing “necessary numbers” for the maintenance of the Jewish state. Without people, there is a fear the state will crash. On the other hand, those who move to Israel are called the *olim*, the “ascenders,” which implies a stepping up in society. This language is still used to refer to immigrants, and it has been normalized to a point where few question it. These biblical terms are symbolic of the religious foundations of the country, notions that even American-Jews have adapted. American-Jews have historically disapproved of Israeli immigrants, regarding them as “selfish” for abandoning the collective commitment to the Jewish state. However, attitudes towards immigrants are not as

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Schudson, “American Dreams,” vol. 16 (Oxford University Press, 2004): 566, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3568068>.

<sup>12</sup> Rebhun and Waxman, “The ‘Americanization’ of Israel,” 74.

<sup>13</sup> Yinon Cohen, “Israeli-Born Emigrants: Size, Destinations and Selectivity,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 52, no. 1–2 (February 2011): 46, 48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715210379430>.

extreme as they used to be. Since Israel is now becoming a transnational society, it places value on connections abroad and utilizes them to their advantage.<sup>14</sup>

In part, Jewish-American sentiments towards Israeli-Americans have been proven by research, specifically in that Israelis who immigrate are often less attached to the country's religious history.<sup>15</sup><sup>16</sup> Jewish-Israelis who immigrate to America do not feel Jewish to the extent that Americans view them. Instead, as Mittelberg and Waters' surveys from the late 80s showed, although Israeli-Americans identified themselves as Jewish, they felt separate from the institutionalized aspect of religion and directly stated a misalignment with Orthodox and fundamentalist religions in Israel.<sup>17</sup> Still, there is a religious reason Israelis decide to move to America, particularly in that religion produces Israeli-American communities that attract others to join. America has the second largest Jewish community after Israel, and it was only a few decades ago that there were more American-Jews than there were Israeli-Jews. Although there are tensions between the Jewish-American and Israeli-American communities, they have an undeniable religious connection.<sup>18</sup>

When Israelis enter America, they can go down three paths to religiously integrate into society. The first is to abandon their Judaism, the second is to remain Jewish but practice in 'Americanized' ways, and the third to practice Judaism in Israeli ways. The most academically supported path is the second one, "Jewish-Americanization," where traditions are eventually integrated into the existing Jewish-American institutions. Research has shown that

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<sup>14</sup> Steven J. Gold and Bruce A. Phillips, "Israelis in the United States," *The American Jewish Year Book* 96 (1996): 52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23605896?seq=1>.

<sup>15</sup> Gold and Phillips, "Israelis in the United States," 52.

<sup>16</sup> Rebhun, Uzi, "Immigrant Acculturation and Transnationalism," 620.

<sup>17</sup> David Mittelberg and Mary C. Waters, *The Process of Ethnogenesis Among Haitian and Israeli Immigrants in the United States*, 3rd ed., vol. 15 (Ethnic and Racial Studies, 1992): 422, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01419870.1992.9993755>.

<sup>18</sup> Gold and Phillips, "Israelis in the United States," 59.

Israeli-Americans become more traditional and religious with time in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

However, when studying Israeli-American youth, Uriely found that this population does not go down the route of becoming Jewish-American. Instead, second-generation immigrants create their own unique identities as “Israeli-Americans” and found ways to distinguish themselves from Jewish-Americans.<sup>20</sup>

While religion creates a more comfortable space for Israelis in America, the historical establishment of the Jewish-Israeli state is also part of their decision to immigrate in the first place. It is no coincidence that Israeli immigration rates tend to rise at times of war, terrorist attacks, and economic crises. The first significant wave of Israelis who emigrated was recorded in 1956, after the Sinai War. There was also movement in 1973, after the Yom Kippur War, in 1978-1981, due to the Likud’s rise to power, a right-wing political group, after the 1982 First Lebanon War, and after the failing economy and high inflation rates in the late 80s.<sup>21</sup> In the years after 1995, from 2001-2002, Israel had seen its highest emigration and lowest return rates to date. This was due to a combination of the second intifada uprising, a Palestinian terrorist movement, and an additional factor of high economic distress. Since then, there have been no spikes in emigration rates from Israel to America and the inflow of Israelis has remained relatively stable.<sup>22</sup>

The wars and crises evidently push Israelis away from their country, seeking to find a safer place for their future selves. High political tensions in Israel produce more people who want to leave. Israeli immigration rates are considerably low particularly because of this paradox of loyalty and fear. While some Israelis find the political context of Israel discouraging and

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<sup>19</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 138, 143-144.

<sup>20</sup> Uriely, Natan, “‘Symbolic Ethnicity’ of Israeli-Americans: Second Generation Israeli Immigrants in Chicago,” *Israel Studies Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (1994): 9, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/41805297?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41805297?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>21</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 37.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, “Israeli-Born Emigrants,” 47.



choose to leave, others find it encouraging, a reason to stay.<sup>2324</sup> In feeling unsafe, citizens turn to their government. They pay taxes in exchange for security and stability. But, for some, especially the Israeli youth, supporting the Israeli government has become an unappealing option, searching for a more stable country and economy. In turn, there has been a resistance to serve in the Israeli army, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), and many make efforts to leave the country after serving their time.<sup>2526</sup> In light of the shame that American-Israelis feel about their religious identity, it becomes evident that those who leave disapprove of Israel in some form.

### *Literature Review*

Various assimilation theories will be used throughout each chapter to test integration patterns in relation to identity. The classic assimilation theory, known as the straight line theory, argues that integration is a linear process. Warner and Srole (1945) argued that as people immigrate into the U.S. and have second and third generations, their standard of living improves both socially and economically. As time passes, immigrants become more assimilated into America, which they define as a “structural integration” into the economic and cultural spheres of the destination country.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the values of immigrants change over time. With each generation, there becomes a stronger alignment with upper-class aspirations and an abandonment of values that they came to America with. Therefore, each generation of immigrants undergoes a weakening of their previous group identification.<sup>28</sup>

In 1992, Herbert Gans came out in opposition to Warner and Srole with his second-generation decline theory, which offered a much more nuanced and economically sensitive understanding of assimilation. He argued that the increase of American cultural

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<sup>23</sup> Gold and Phillips, “Israelis in the United States,” 52.

<sup>24</sup> Rebhun and Uzi, “Immigrant Acculturation and Transnationalism,” 620.

<sup>25</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> Rebhun and Waxman, “The ‘Americanization’ of Israel,” 74.

<sup>27</sup> This definition will be used when referencing the straight-line theory.

<sup>28</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 102.

assimilation is the only accuracy of the straight-line theory. In reality, many trends showed that immigrants, especially from non-European countries, experienced downward mobility when they came to America. He says, ““while dark-skinned immigrants from overseas cultures will also acculturate, racial discrimination will not encourage their assimilation, at least not into white society (Gans, 1992:177).”” Gans believed that in the context of a racially divided America, an immigrant’s assimilation status depended on their proximity to whiteness. Although the adoption of the dominant group’s culture was possible for all immigrant groups, Gans argued that assimilation was not. The first step to this assimilation is acculturation, an introduction of two cultures to one another. While coexistence is possible, the dominant culture will eventually take over and seep into that of the minority group.<sup>29</sup>

Post-civil rights theories are more culturally sensitive, arguing that immigrant groups do preserve the fundamental values of their origin culture within wider American ideologies. Portes and Zhou’s segmented-assimilation theory (1993) suggests that immigrants are sectioned into three possibilities when they move to America. They either move upwards, downwards, or upwards but with a preservation of their immigrant identities, depending on the human capital they have and the social-class they enter. They describe human capital as an accumulation of wealth, not only physical wealth, but factors that can benefit one’s assimilation such as level of education.<sup>30</sup> Another perspective, Alba and Nee’s revisionist assimilation theory, defines assimilation as ethnic origin and therefore states that immigrants become more assimilated as time and generations pass. The more one’s ethnicity is aligned with the dominant groups’, the more assimilated they are. They argue assimilation is a two-way process and happens both in the

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<sup>29</sup> Joel Perlmann and Roger Waldinger, “Second Generation Decline? Children of Immigrants, Past and Present-A Reconsideration,” *The International Migration Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 902, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2547418>.

<sup>30</sup> Min Zhou, “Segmented Assimilation: Issues, Controversies, and Recent Research on the New Second Generation,” *The International Migration Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 984, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2547421>.

minority and majority group culture by leaving markers of the minority group culture in the dominant group.<sup>31</sup>

The latter, more nuanced theories, produced conversations about the active preservation of ethnic identities amongst immigrants and their American offsprings. These patterns are especially noted in white or white-passing immigrants. Some believe ethnic identities are preserved on the basis of wanting a more expansive community and are sought out for pure cultural reasons. This has historically been done through a preservation of institutional bonds that unite the ethnic group.<sup>32</sup> Others, such as Gans, argue that second-generation immigrants partake in ‘symbolic ethnicity’ that is self-fulfilling. This kind of ethnic identification is expressed in more unofficial, symbolic community events such as holidays or ethnic folklore. The ethnicity is symbolic in that it doesn’t impinge on the immigrant’s life and can act as a “decoration.” In this sense, a “reclaiming” of identity can also be an act of assimilation.<sup>33</sup> In addition, Mittelberg and Waters have argued that immigrants are placed in assigned categories once they immigrate, which they call the ‘proximal host’ categories. There are three main variables that define an ethnic group in their immigrant experience: self-perception, society, and the host society. In the case of immigrants moving to the United States, due to the history of racialization and racism in America, race is the primary way groups are distinguished.<sup>34</sup>

In this paper, ethnicity will be defined as a culturally constructed communal group or social identity.<sup>35</sup> But, the host country has the ability to assign an immigrant an ethnicity that might not align with how they see themselves. Meaning, immigrants might experience a different

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<sup>31</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 102.

<sup>32</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 103.

<sup>33</sup> Herbert J Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America\*,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 1979): 9, <https://herbertgans.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/13-Symbolic-Ethnicity.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Mittelberg and Waters, “The Process of Ethnogenesis,” 417, 422.

<sup>35</sup> Mittelberg and Waters, “The Process of Ethnogenesis,” 413.

kind of ethnicity after immigrating.<sup>36</sup> This study is exclusively made up of ethnically Ashkenazi and Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews.<sup>37</sup> However, there are more ethnicities in Israel than just these two. Some of the ethnicities that will not be converted in the study due to sample limitations include the Muslim and Christian populations of Israel, Palestinian people, Arab Jews, Ethiopian Jews, etc.<sup>38</sup> Ashkenazi Jews generally have a higher status in Israel, coming from origins in Central and Eastern Europe. Sephardic Jews, who are also referred to as Mizrahi Jews, usually have lower-status in Israel and are originally from North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>39</sup> While Sephardic Jews make up about half of the Jewish population in Israel, only about twenty-three percent of Israelis in America in 2000 were Sephardic, the rest were ethnically Ashkenazi.<sup>40</sup>

While research has been done on the racialization processes that Middle Eastern immigrants experience,<sup>41</sup> this attention to ethnicity has not been the main focus of studies in Israeli immigrants, many of whom come from Middle Eastern descent. In this study, race will be defined as a social construct that is used to categorize people based on the color of their skin, for example being white or Black. It is important to note that local Israelis do not necessarily see themselves as white, particularly those who have Mizrahi backgrounds, but might present as white-passing in American racial terms. In Israel, ethnic bounds are defined by religion, Jewishness, then by shared histories, Ashkenazi or Mizrahi, and lastly on their degree of Israeli identity. While ethnicity is a source of prejudice in Israel, it is not made into a racial category

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<sup>36</sup> Lilach Lev Ari, "North Americans, Israelis, or Jews? The Ethnic Identity of Immigrants' Offspring," *Contemporary Jewry* 32, no. 3 (October 2012): 287, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-012-9091-1>.

<sup>37</sup> Sephardic, Sephardi, and Mizrahi will all be used interchangeably to identify this ethnic group.

<sup>38</sup> Mittelberg and Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis," 413-414.

<sup>39</sup> Gold and Phillips, "Israelis in the United States," 66.

<sup>40</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> Moustafa Bayoumi, "The Race Is On: Muslims and Arabs in the American Imagination," in *This Muslim American Life*, Dispatches from the War on Terror (NYU Press, 2015), 185-209, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15zc812.18>.

like in the United States. This is not surprising considering Israel is a nation of immigrants and therefore has many different nuanced identities, almost eighty percent of which are Jewish.<sup>42</sup>

Only few studies have researched Israeli-America youth, particularly in regards to ethnicity. Natan Uriely's publication on 'symbolic ethnicity' (1994) in second-generation Israelis found that although the children of immigrants identified as Israeli, they tended to behave and present as American.<sup>43</sup> Uriely's research found that Israeli-Americans did not go down the route to become typical Jewish-Americans and insisted on not doing so. Instead, second-generation immigrants created their own unique identities as Israeli-Americans. Rather than practicing religion through institutionalized manners, children took on their 'symbolic ethnicity' as a way of preserving their roots. The study found that Israelis do not follow the "straight-line" assimilation model, instead following Gans' 'symbolic ethnicity' theory because they were the children of affluent immigrants.<sup>44</sup> Unlike their working-class peers, Israeli-Americans did not shy away from their background to assimilate and instead, used it as a way to distinguish themselves from other affluent people.<sup>45</sup>

One of the main ways Israeli-Americans emphasized their uniqueness was through a refusal to identify with the Jewish-American community. Ironically, second-generation immigrants can be labeled as a subgroup of Jewish-Americans, showing that they do not need to connect with an already established community to successfully integrate into the United States.<sup>46</sup> Another study done by Lev Ari also supported the 'symbolic ethnicity' theory. She found that Israeli-Americans who were of the 1.5 generation, having one Israeli parent, were more likely to

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<sup>42</sup> Central Bureau of Statistics, "Israel in Figures: Selected Data," *The Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2021, <https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/Pages/search/searchResultsIsraelnFigures.aspx>.

<sup>43</sup> Natan Uriely, "'Symbolic Ethnicity' of Israeli-Americans: Second Generation Israeli Immigrants in Chicago," *Israeli Studies Bulletin* 10, no. 1 (1994): 10, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/41805297?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/41805297?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

<sup>44</sup> Uriely, "'Symbolic Ethnicity' of Israeli Americans," 7.

<sup>45</sup> Uriely, "'Symbolic Ethnicity' of Israeli Americans," 10.

<sup>46</sup> Uriely, "'Symbolic Ethnicity' of Israeli Americans," 9.

emphasize and preserve their ethnic identity than those with two Israeli parents. But, she found that full second-generation Israeli-Americans were more likely to assimilate into the proximal host Jewish group, an idea that contradicted Uriely's.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, assimilation for Israeli-Americans can also take form in a voluntary distinction from mainstream American society.

Although there is limited research on homeland politics and identity, particularly in the case of Israel, the phenomenon of political transnationalism has become more prevalent in contemporary investigations on immigrants.<sup>48</sup> Transnational ties are referred to as the ongoing social, economic, or cultural ties that immigrants maintain with their home countries.<sup>49</sup> According to the straight-line theory, the more time immigrants spent in the host country, the less politically "loyal" they were to their home country.<sup>50</sup> Since migration is inherently a political act, an act of disapproval of one's government, immigrants often exhibit a detached, apolitical relationship with politics.<sup>51</sup> However, in taking a deeper look, research like Guarnizo's has shown that increased assimilation, such as achieving citizenship status, resulted in a rise in immigrant political advocacy towards their country of origin.<sup>52,53</sup>

Political involvement of immigrants is a gateway to understand how their identities change overtime. While rigorous political participation back in the home country is sparse, a significant portion of immigrants do show national solidarity post-immigration through symbolic

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<sup>47</sup> Lilach Lev Ari, "North Americans, Israelis, or Jews?," 303-304.

<sup>48</sup> Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, Alejandro Portes, and William Haller, "Assimilation and Transnationalism: Determinants of Transnational Political Action among Contemporary Migrants," *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 6 (May 2003): 1215, <https://doi.org/10.1086/375195>.

<sup>49</sup> Guarnizo et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1212.

<sup>50</sup> Guarnizo et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1212.

<sup>51</sup> Roger Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," in *The Cross-Border Connection — Immigrants, Emigrants, and Their Homelands* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2015): 87, <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674975507>.

<sup>52</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 86.

<sup>53</sup> Guarnizo, et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1238.

ethnicity, such as celebrating country of origin holidays in the host country. Immigrants who experience a new form of political freedom result in a phenomenon coined by Dufoix called “exo-polity” where immigrants try to challenge their country of origin. This either occurs through “state-seeking,” which is advocating for the marginalized members of society. Or, through “regime-changing,” fighting for a transformation of the home country’s government.<sup>54</sup> Yet, in exploring different kinds of political advocacy for one’s country, there is still a lack of research on the effects of migration on immigrant’s political views. Rother argues that migrants become agents of democratization due to their exposure to “new forms of government, rights and responsibilities, and democracy,” often becoming more critical of their country of origin.<sup>55</sup> There were only a few mentions of the political stance that immigrants take in their host countries. While some studies found that an immigrant’s political involvement and opinions depended on their social spheres,<sup>56</sup> others found that those who were politically involved usually aligned themselves with the “upper-hand nationals.”<sup>57</sup> Further definitions and concepts will be covered in more detail in each chapter.

### *Methodology*

This was a qualitative study conducted through twelve personal interviews, all spanning the length of about an hour. The sample consisted of Jewish participants who were between the ages 18-31. They were either born in the U.S. or moved here before the age of 12 from Israel (see Appendix 1). To find participants, I used a few methods. Firstly, I reached out to as many Israeli-Americans that I knew, either in person, through text, or social media. I offered a quick summary of the study, framing it as a research paper on the identities of Israeli-Americans and

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<sup>54</sup> Waldinger, “Engaged at Home from Abroad,” 95-96.

<sup>55</sup> Stefan Rother, “Changed in Migration? Philippine Return Migrants and (Un)Democratic Remittances,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 247, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156805809X12553326569713>.

<sup>56</sup> Waldinger, “Engaged at Home from Abroad,” 88.

<sup>57</sup> Waldinger, “Engaged at Home from Abroad,” 90.

offered participants to see the questions before-hand if they showed interest. When participants agreed to be interviewed, I sent them a digital consent form to sign. After solidifying a time that worked for both of us, I sent participants a link to an online meeting using Zoom. With the consent of participants, knowing that they will remain anonymous in the study, I recorded the meetings. After my interviews, I used the snowball sampling method by asking participants if they knew of people who would be willing to be in my study.

Although snowball sampling was used to gather the rest of my participants, I also reached out to the Jewish Day School (JDS) I used to go to and got one participant from there. In addition, my advisor helped me get in contact with another participant. To transcribe interviews, I used Sonix, a resource that I was given through Bard College. Since the account was shared, I used participants' pseudonyms, their anonymous names, throughout the transcription and analysis process. In analyzing the data, I mainly used quote references from the participants throughout the study where I was able to best represent similarities and differences between the interviews. Although the interview questions were constructed with research on the subject (see Appendix 2), I let the interviews guide the chapters and used my findings to direct the academic research I offered in each chapter. I asked participants the base-line of interview questions, but used an unstructured format by asking follow-up questions when the subject was relevant.



## Chapter 1: The Making of the Israeli-American Dream

### *Introduction*

He would kind of use the immigrant thing to his benefit. I think that probably works better for him because he's a Western immigrant. So granted, of course, but he tells me how he would write spelling errors on his resume on purpose so that people would correct it and then might feel like they're taking him under his wing. -Ari

This chapter will focus on the shaping of the American dream on ideas of success and prosperity. It will examine Israeli youth's understanding of their parents' immigration stories and observe how this has shaped their identity. Although the American dream is meant to be an ambiguous term, it will be defined here as a belief about achieving success in the United States. In President Bill Clinton's words, the path to success is through "working hard and one's God given abilities."<sup>58</sup> In other words, it is a belief and aspiration about climbing up the socioeconomic ladder and is often connotated with a degree of integration into society. As mentioned in the introduction, acculturation is the first step to assimilation in America, which eventually leads to the "achievement" of the American dream. Level of integration depends on an alignment with the dominant group culture, inherently reliant on many factors including class, religion, and ethnicity. This chapter was provoked by a curiosity with the high Israeli-American success rates, only increasing with each generation.

Since the sample only included second-generation Israelis, I analyzed the narrative they offered about their parents' aspirations in relation to theirs. I wanted to see if there was a correlation between level of integration and ethnicity, as the participants had overwhelmingly highlighted. A majority of my participants' parents were described as successful, self-employed people. But, in conducting the interviews, it was found that even the participants whose parents were not as successful, particularly those of the Mizrahi participants, generationally overcame

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<sup>58</sup> Schudson, "American Dreams," 566.

initial financial and cultural challenges in their childhood and eventually also had middle-class aspirations. While discrimination happened to the Sephardic participants, it was an obstacle rather than a barrier to their integration into American culture and values. Just like their Ashkenazi peers, they strived above their parents' aspirations and had higher achievements than them. Factors that explained the successful integration into middle-class values included acculturation, human capital, length of residence, and the 'Americanization' of Israel.<sup>59</sup> In navigating ethnicity in America, participants usually attributed their integration to their race. In this sense, participants' embodiments of the American dream depended on their understanding of their parents' and personal experiences.

#### *The Hopes: First-Generation American Dream*

When asking participants their parents' immigration stories from Israel, many trends arose. Almost all participants' parents came here at a young age from relatively financially-stable households but started their careers in working-class jobs. The sample I interviewed displayed a wide variety of success stories where parents had come here with little to their name and built a life and family for themselves in a new country. This was not surprising considering the high rates of economic success of Israeli-Americans compared to their immigrant counterparts.<sup>60</sup> However, one thing that was inconsistent in the responses was the way children explained their parents' immigrant stories. Lir explains that his father distributed newspapers when he first moved to New York.

Obviously, the money comes with it and that's great or whatever. But it took a lot of work, you know, I mean, it's like you come and then you start delivering newspapers for a while, and I think a lot of it is luck too. I think success happens and obviously hard work doesn't always mean success. But, you know, it's a combination of luck and, I guess, finding what my dad wanted to do and what my mom wanted to do. And then just kind of chasing it. -Lir

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<sup>59</sup> Rebhun and Waxman, "The 'Americanization' of Israel," 81.

<sup>60</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 59.

It is evident that Lir and his father now define money as a subsection of success, showing that there has been a development of financial stability over the years. Like Lir, there were many participants that attributed a combination of dedication, perseverance, and luck to their parents' success. He uses the same rhetoric that is nationally attributed to the American dream, even detailing that success doesn't always happen with hard work, but particularly when an immigrant is "lucky" enough. How does Lir choose to define luck? It is clear that he is relaying a narrative of the American dream, a narrative that he has interpreted of his parents' immigration story. In embodying these philosophies, Lir's explanation shows that he has integrated himself into America society and further than acculturation, has assimilated into America.

This sort of description, where the stability of immigrants increased with time, is indicative of Warner and Srole's straight-line theory. The theory explains that all immigrants eventually succeed through assimilation or integration into the dominant society. Since this theory was based on the first wave of European immigrants that came to America in the early 20th century, it was assumed that people who come from European descent were the only ones that could assimilate into American society. Although this history remains true, America has transformed in the past century. As Alba and Nee have shown, since there are more diverse groups of immigrants nowadays, assimilation does not necessarily mean whiteness but an aspiration to whiteness. One can still achieve success by assimilating into the middle-class without the help of physical appearance. This sample showed that the integration of the immigrants depended on their achievements and aspirations to middle-class values.<sup>61</sup>

Dena also chose to describe her parents' success as a story of effort and time. However, she added an aspect to her story that many other participants mentioned, the aspect of race. In

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Alba and Victor Nee, "Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration," *The International Migration Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 826–74, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2547416>.

linking her parents' success to their race, Dena is participating in their racialization and views her parents as something that they do not.<sup>62</sup>

Especially for people coming from Israel, both my parents are white, so that makes it a lot easier for them to live out the American dream type of thing because even though they do not have college degrees, they were able to find jobs that would typically need a college degree and would require that level of academic ability. But I think a lot of the American dream is kind of made up because for every person it's very different. -Dena

Dena explains that her parents did not need a college degree to find jobs in America because of their ability to fit into American culture. Since her parents are of Ashkenazi descent, she feels that they could integrate into American society because they were not viewed as racially distinct from other white Americans. Just like Lir, Dena's embodiment of the American dream philosophies shows her level of integration into society. But, by adding the ethnic aspect to this explanation, she is attributing their success to their ethnicity, what she views as their race. She believes that although her parents did work hard to get to where they were in America, they also had certain privileges that other immigrants did not. Although the explanation is much more complex than just ethnicity, why is it that Dena feels this is the main attributor to their success? While being ethnically European contributed to their success, it was also factors such as the cultural similarity between Israel and America that made it so their success would be possible. It could be that Dena does not want to admit that her parents experienced the American dream, particularly because not all immigrants do succeed in America.

The participants described different experiences based on the integration levels of their parents at the time they were born or moved to the United States. The majority of my interviewees were either half, three-fourths, or full Ashkenazi. Only two of my participants were full Sephardic. This is not surprising considering the relatively low rates of Sephardic Jews that

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<sup>62</sup> Mittelberg and Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis," 417, 422.

live in America compared to Ashkenazi Jews, a ratio of about 23:77 for every a hundred people. The reason there are lower rates of Sephardic immigrants in America is because of their lower educational and occupational status in Israel and their stronger religious ties to the country.<sup>63</sup> The high rate of success stories of participants correlated with the high rate of their parents being from Ashkenazi descent. Still, even the Sephardic participants displayed a level of upward mobility but added that there were more challenges along the way.

Since immigrants of different ethnicities are subject to a redefinition of their ethnicity when they move, it became evident why Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews had varying experiences assimilating into American society. Although ethnic to racial distinctions are outlined in the segmented assimilation theory, it fails to explain the upward mobility of the participants, no matter their ethnicity. What it did explain are the segmented paths to integration, particularly in regards to the differences in their parents' skills and social capital when they came to America. Portes and Rumbaut argue that the more human capital an immigrant has, the more integrated and economically stable they are predicted to be. Again, human capital is not only wealth, but it can also include experiential components such as an immigrant's education level, job history, and exposure to American society and culture such as language familiarity.<sup>64</sup> Just like Dena, Elijah attributed his parents' success to their European descent. While this is part of the story, he leaves out the factor of human capital, something that can be as important to success in America. His father received an opportunity to work in D.C., meaning he already had an established occupation and connection to the country before moving.

It's America, it's a white supremacist society. So, if you're a white immigrant or a white passing immigrant, you're going to be looked upon more favorably than like if you're a person of color. So, I think that benefited my family specifically in the way that white people benefit in America. I feel like the American dream, I can't say that it's nothing because I know that my parents are glad

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<sup>63</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 33.

<sup>64</sup> Min Zhou, "Segmented Assimilation," 984.

that we're not in Israel and I would have to be in the army and stuff like that. The American dream in the sense of like, you can come here and live a peaceful life and stuff. I think there's some truth to that, but it's definitely a dream. Yeah, it's not like what happens just to every immigrant. - Elijah

Here, Elijah's story aligns with the classic assimilation theory. Just like Dena, he connects his parents' success to their ethnicity as Ashkenazi Jews, arguing that they benefited from an already existing racialized society. However, he does not mention the connections his family already established in the United States before they moved. Instead, Elijah believes their motive to move was purely as a disapproval of Israel, particularly highlighting avoiding serving in the army. While he describes the ability for his parents to live peacefully in America, he does not highlight that what led his parents to the United States was a job opening. Meaning, he sees the story in a particular way, a way that includes ethnicity but lacks an explanation for the stability and integration his family experienced. The inextricable relationship between America and Israel is further proven here, creating direct pathways for people to move to the U.S. to start a new life. In this sense, it is not only the ethnic background of his parents, but the powerful relationship between Israel and the U.S. that enabled the success.<sup>65</sup>

One of my participants, Nina, highlighted the transformation her father's accent went through with time in the United States. This is an instance of acculturation, the first step to assimilating. She explains that after taking a gap year in Israel, she realized that her dad had lost his Israeli accent to his American one.

My dad's English coming to America definitely wasn't as good. He a hundred percent had an accent. Now, it's definitely been getting better. And something interesting is that when I was on my gap year, I did speak to my parents. But then when I came back and I heard my dad speaking, I was like, 'Whoa, he sounds more American.' -Nina

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<sup>65</sup> Rebhun and Waxman, "The 'Americanization' of Israel," 65.

Nina explains that her dad's accent got "better" with time. The use of this word shows that she views his transformation to be positive. She also says that her father's English wasn't great during her childhood and was shocked when realizing how fluent he became. Nina's dad, whether consciously or not, strived to integrate himself into American society. He strived to be invisible to the American eye. Since her dad already came here with some knowledge of English, he was able to learn and use this to his advantage. Striving not to be viewed as an immigrant is a common experience among immigrants. According to the straight-line theory, the full loss of ethnicity to the dominant society's culture is an indication of assimilation. Meaning, Nina's father could better integrate because of the human capital he came to America with. Her shock came from a realization that she had treated her father's assimilation as "normal."<sup>66</sup>

#### *The Reality: Second-Generation American Dream*

A significant number of participants' parents created their own successful businesses in America. This aligned with the statistical likelihood of Israeli immigrants to be self-employed and have high average income rates compared to their immigrant counterparts.<sup>67</sup> However, there has been no research done specifically on second-generation Israeli values around wealth and economic mobility. Although the segmented-assimilation theory has not been proven in this sample, it offers a more intersectional perspective in understanding the different factors that lead to immigrant adaptation and success. There are three possible outcomes for second-generation immigrants: the first is one of upward mobility where a child is culturally and economically integrated into middle-class America, the second results in downward mobility with acculturation into the lower classes of America, and the third is an economic integration into the middle-class while still holding on to the immigrant's community and values. As mentioned

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<sup>66</sup> Perlmann and Waldinger, "Second Generation Decline?," 902.

<sup>67</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 17.

earlier, factors of human capital are important for immigrants because they reveal a proximity and aspiration to wealth. Just like Nina's dad, if an immigrant comes to America with fluent English, they will have more success integrating themselves into society.<sup>68</sup>

Only some second-generation Israelis were aware of the relative position of privilege they came from. When asking participants about their idea of success, it was revealed that second-generation Israelis chose to expand on their parents' standard idea of success and in many cases even spiritually advance it. Nina, the participant who had observed her father's accent disappearing, explains that her parents taught her that love is the driving factor for success.

I feel like no matter what you learn, no matter what you do, as long as you love it, you will succeed because that love for what you're doing will make you want to be better within that. And, if it ends up not working, you can maybe find something connected that you can build that relationship with again. My dad found that especially with the help of my mom because my mom was an English major in college... I'm not going to say that like my dad did it alone because my mom was a very, very big help in that, and my mom just loved reading and writing and learning. So, that definitely encouraged my dad as well. But I feel like it also came from both of them where they were like, 'we want to make something and build it so that our children will have opportunities and they'll be able to do things that they love.' -Nina

Nina feels that as long as one pursues something they love doing, they will eventually be able to succeed. She bases this example on her parent's experience with success and attaining financial stability, describing that this method was valuable for her Israeli father's success story. Her father met her mother shortly after moving to New York while pursuing his acting dreams. Although his dream was never achieved, Nina highlights that her dad was able to continue doing what he loved with the help of his mom. The support he received "encouraged" her dad to build a better life for their family so that Nina and her siblings could, "too," do the things they love. Nina groups her father's experience with what she categorizes as success. Yet, her father was never

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<sup>68</sup> Zhou, "Segmented Assimilation," 984.



able to pursue what he loved doing, acting, and instead was led to a path of success with the help of his American partner. This internal support for an immigrant is more powerful than is being conveyed, and it can also be categorized as human capital. It is a significant factor in the success of an immigrant and Nina is framing it as a continuing love for one's career. To be taught that success means loving your career is not the same as being able to pursue these aspirations. Although Nina is only nineteen, the non-acknowledgement of this distinction shows that she has surpassed her parents' financial worries and is entering the middle-class strata that is outlined in the segmented-assimilation theory.<sup>69</sup>

Although first-generation immigrants have to strive to integrate themselves into America, second-generation immigrants are at a point of advantage having been born in the United States or immigrating here during childhood. Their acculturation levels will automatically be higher than their parents' because they are being raised in the American environment. Yechezkel, one of the participants, outlines just this.

Definitely having been born into a more comfortable life, the thing that drives me is not the same thing that drove my parents. For my dad, it was, 'I want to be independent and financially stable and be successful' in those terms. And, that isn't necessarily what I think about all the time. I think I'm more in a place of like, I want to do something meaningful with my life, which a lot of times I doubt myself and then I'm like, what does meaningful even mean? I feel like it's something with our generation? Why am I obsessed with meaning? And why not just have a comfortable life? But yeah, definitely I see a big difference. But I also think that as a result of him, there's a big emphasis for me to be independent, and I need to also be successful in that sense, but not just that sense. -Yechezkel

Yechezkel is another example of the first kind of immigrant in the segmented-assimilation theory that aspires to middle-class goals, both culturally and economically. He explains that he got his economic drive from his dad, but that there is something in him that views success as "more" than just monetary. He wants to do something "meaningful" with his life, and although he is

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<sup>69</sup> Zhou, "Segmented Assimilation," 984.

unsure of what this means or where this urge comes from, it persists. Is it guilt that keeps Yechezkel seeking something more meaningful? It could be that the guilt of being born into “a more comfortable life” is the reason he is searching for more meaning. Or, it could be that these are standard middle-class aspirations that allow people to search for something beyond money as an indication of success. The comfort, the privilege, allows for an aspiration beyond economic stability, unlike his father’s aspirations. Yechezkel was able to acknowledge his aspirational advancement, yet didn’t tie it to his search for meaning.

Shay comes from a different background than most of my participants, with working-class parents whose socioeconomic status has not changed much since they arrived. While his father was motivated to move because he didn’t want his kids to go to the army, he also felt they would succeed better in the United States. Shay illustrates that he and his father have different aspirations and understandings of success. Although he came from a rough upbringing, he was exposed to middle-class values growing up in New York City like the other participants.

There’s the American dream and then there’s the Israeli American dream... That never happened to us. We ended up having a very different life. I wonder if that’s because my parents came here as a family. Also, with a lot less economic mobility, undereducated, which is savvy in their own way, but not having access to education. Again, for me, that’s sort of racialized because of the experience of Mizrahi-Jews in Israel... I’m in law school to do human rights law and civil rights law and help poor and marginalized people. So, it’s not what they have in mind. They were hoping for real estate or business, not ‘go help people.’ Which is its own kind of dream, the ability to sort of live in a middle-class life and not hurt people and just help... So, I wonder to what extent my desire or disposition to want to do this work comes from a privileged state. And, we grew up rough, too, sure, I know I did, but I think there was a difference. There was a different aspiration in the air for my generation. And I think for their generation, the aspiration in the air was to get out and be OK. -Shay

Shay does not believe his family experienced the American dream, but does acknowledge the transition he had from his father’s working-class status to his middle-class status. He explains that this transition was made possible because he was able to get through both undergraduate and

graduate school with full-ride scholarships. Unlike his father, Shay chose a career path for himself that was beyond a financial choice, but was geared towards a passion of his. But, his parents disapproved of this choice, setting the standard that money was more important than passion. His father's position as a working-class man meant that his want for financial stability was based on a need to survive and sustain a family, not searching beyond this. Although he frames his story as an exception to the Israeli-American dream, he was eventually able to achieve financial and occupational stability through his integration. While he and his parents do not see it this way, he was able to succeed on his own terms. It was the support he received from the American institutions, due to his parents' immigration story and economic hardships, that allowed him to aspire higher than his parents.

Here, Shay defines success not only as economic stability, but also as having the choice to do what one loves and is most passionate about, a reference to what Nina defined as success. However, what was different in Shay's case is that his parents did not support his career choices due to their financial concerns of having to support their child in a low-paying occupation. Still, he continued to pursue what he loved and has been financially successful doing so. Since Shay is studying civil rights law, he has been engulfed into the human rights world of America and is using his education to integrate himself into American society. While Shay uses a definition of the American dream that strictly observes first-generation economic mobility, the American dream and the straight-line theory can and does also apply generationally. Particularly in the cases where human capital starts low, the success of an immigrant should be measured in comparison to their parents' success. And, given that Shay now has middle-class aspirations like the rest of the participants, he was eventually able to fill this gap, despite having more obstacles along the way.

Shay's experience further disproved the segmented-assimilation theory in the case of Israeli immigration. Although Shay is Sephardic, making him more ethnically distinct than the significant majority of the participants, he was still able to have a similar success story, even more remarkable considering the low levels of human capital his parents had when they first came to New York. Later in the interview, he highlights that he was perceived as mixed race by the other public-school kids he studied with and ended up finding most commonality with this particular racial group. Another half Mizrahi participant, Tami, also described being referred to as mixed. She says, "It's been weird growing up. I got called 'sand N-word' a lot as a kid. I was also really tan because I'm Middle Eastern. But I used to be much darker as a kid." According to the segmented-assimilation theory, both Shay and Tami would have experienced down-ward mobility because of their darker skin and lower-class upbringing. However, both Shay and Tami exhibited higher aspirations than their parents. This is in part because Israeli ethnic identities, particularly those from Mizrahi descent, are ambiguous and cannot be accurately processed in American racial standards. Meaning, other factors like human capital and aspirations are left to lead the way. Mittelberg and Waters even ask: "What happens when an immigrant from one society, where the categories and the content of the categories are determined in one way, moves to a place where categories are determined differently and have a different content?"<sup>70</sup> While Shay and Tami viewed themselves as Sephardic due to their upbringings, they cannot be viewed as so in America as this is not a racial category. While being categorized as mixed race felt like it held them back, they were both still able to integrate themselves into the middle-class with the help of education.

The integration experiences of Sephardic Israeli-Americans were not homogeneous and depended on their parents' accumulated human capital. In the case of Roi, although his parents

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<sup>70</sup> Mittelberg and Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis," 415.

grew up in poverty, they were able to move up the socioeconomic ladder through education. His parents worked to support themselves during their degrees and passed on these values to him and his siblings. In comparison, Tami's parents also placed a high emphasis on education. Shay, Roi, and Tami's Sephardic parents pushed their children to achieve financial success, setting higher aspirations for them than the ones they grew up with.

Till the last day of her PhD, my mom was cleaning toilets in the university to make ends meet. My dad, as well, was working really hard to make ends meet... I definitely see the lingering effects of it. Their attitude toward money is different from ours. Their anxiety around money is different from ours. They raised us to be very financially responsible. But, I think because my brothers and I are younger, we have a higher appetite for risk. We're into investing in stocks and that kind of thing, and we talk to each other about it. And our parents are a little conservative in that way. And they made pretty basic financial mistakes that people in their age group who grew up in a better financial situation wouldn't have. So, they had some major roadblocks along the way that other people didn't... Education is what got them out of poverty, so it's not even a pressure for us, we just all bought into it. We all believe in it. You know, in the family, in terms of a more conservative, university-based path to a good career. -Roi

You know, that's hard. I think my parents see success by status, not necessarily financially, but intellectual status. They're really supportive of me getting a master's, even though I'm in a really shitty apartment and I do not have clean water like all this stuff. But when I was in the city, when I was living in New York and I was a barista and I was busting my ass, they were not here for it. They were not having it. So for them, they're very career driven, status driven. -Tami

The above participants highlighted the anxiety their parents had about their children's careers and financial decisions. Roi explains that his parents initially had a difficult time achieving financial stability since they both came from lower income families. But, contrary to them, he felt free to take more "risky" financial decisions, confident in these methods of success. He grew up in a higher-class than his parents, and therefore had higher aspirations just like the rest of the participants. Although his parents' fears were not his reality, he still believed that education is the path to success and followed their footsteps in this regard. Similar to Roi, Tami's parents wanted them to continue their education and get a degree. Tami describes disagreeing with this philosophy, yet still following it. When Tami was working in the city, they were making money

and were able to financially support themselves. However, after going back to school, they were living in much worse conditions and explained they were barely “making ends meet.” The participants showed that Sephardic parents placed an emphasis on financial success specifically through education. Although Roi and Shay felt that education was their path to success, Tami felt less hopeful about this direction. In this sense, both Ashkenazi and Sephardic parents set their children on paths to financial success.

### *Conclusion*

In trying to learn about Israeli youth’s relationship to success, it was found that children of Israelis were able to pursue their own dreams due to their cultural integration into American society. While participants strongly emphasized the ethnic part of their experiences, the increased integration that Sephardic participants exhibited compared to their parents’ told a different story. A wider frame-work that took into account the strong ties between Israel and the U.S. and human capital of the immigrant parents revealed a more accurate lens to understand the high success rates. Still, why was it that participants attributed their parents’ success to hard work and ethnicity? It seems that this was a direct consequence of the racialized society that participants were engulfed in, one that converts ethnicity to race, which will be further elaborated in Chapters 2 and 3. This is not to claim that ethnicity was not an aspect of the story, particularly in that Sephardic participants displayed having a more difficult time integrating. This group highlighted being viewed as mixed and growing up in more economically unstable homes, but were eventually able to overcome this through integration. Eventually, all participants became part of their parents’ integration story. The participants outlined a general trend of upward mobility, following the straight-line theory, showing that immigrant incorporation into mainstream America was more powerful than ethnic configurations. In this sense, success was not dependent

on European descent but on an incorporation into middle-class culture. Although ethnicity was not the main indicator for success or integration rates in this sample, the lack of academic research on the subject further complicates these findings. In learning about participants' experiences with the American dream, it was found that their parents' immigration did have a positive impact on their integration levels, whether they did or didn't acknowledge it.

## Chapter 2: Expanding the Bounds of Religion

### *Introduction*

They use being Jewish to show they are ‘so cultured.’ Yeah, I mean, I think that being Jewish is a special thing. But, I think a lot of that is often white privileged people trying to excuse themselves or to hide the fact that they are super privileged. And so, I definitely try to distance myself from that. -Dalia

This chapter will explore the impact religion has on community and identity formation patterns for second-generation Israeli-Americans. Except for one more faithful participant, the sample identified as secular with varying levels of religiosity. In this study, faith will be defined as how religious one is and religiosity as the degree of intensity in which the religion is practiced. Although the study was intended to be an exploration of religion, it was revealed that participants used their Jewish-Israeli identities as an ethnic category. Meaning, Jewish-Israeli ethnicity was not only defined as the particular family origins before coming to Israel, but also as a more general ethnically Israeli identity that was formed by growing up in Israel. Religion became one of the subcomponents of being Israeli, even if participants were not religious, specifically because it is the only Jewish state in the world. This development led to an analysis of Israeli-American religiosity through the lens of Gans’ symbolic ethnicity theory.<sup>71</sup> Although his theory speaks more about being Israeli as an ethnic category, this study will refine this analysis and also include religion and its traditions in the symbolic ethnicity category, linking being Israeli with being Jewish.

In the first section, trends revealed that all participants redefined their identities to link Judaism with being Israeli. Despite cutting off Jewish-American communities in doing so, it was found that the participants who practiced religion less were better able to create a community for themselves compared to the more traditional participants. In the second section, while some of the participants exhibited a lack of ethnic identification with their Jewish-Israeli identities in

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<sup>71</sup> Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity,” 9.



attempting to assimilate into American society, others used their identities as their ‘symbolic ethnicity,’ a point of advantage and uniqueness. These differences often depended on ethnicity and ethnic identifiers, swaying participants to be viewed and view themselves in different ways. The majority secular sample collected was not reflective of the almost 36% of ultra-Orthodox Israelis residing in America, and mainly included people from the 25% of secular American Israelis (information from a 2010 survey). The two exceptions were the Mizrahi participants who identified as Masorti, which is a more traditional, yet still secular, practice of Judaism. In America, Jewish denominational identification can be placed into four rankings from most to least faithful: ultra-Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and non-religious. In comparison, the Jewish denominational identification in Israel consists of the Ultra-Orthodox, Dati (religious), Masorti (traditional), and Hiloni (secular). Although a significant number of Israeli-Americans identify as faithful, a fourth of them do not.<sup>7273</sup>

While Lev Ari argued that more integrated Israeli practices were eventually ‘Americanized,’ this did not prove to be the case. Instead, second-generation Israelis of all degrees of religiosity and from different ethnic backgrounds, both Ashkenazi and Sephardic, rejected American Judaism.<sup>74</sup> There were three possible outcomes for the participants: they disassociated from their Jewish-Israeli ethnicity to be viewed as American, strongly associated with it to feel uniqueness and community, or identified with it and could not find their community in doing so. Trends revealed that ethnicity of the individual was a strong indicator of one’s ability to create more community outside of Jewish-Americans, which was further supported by Mittelberg and Waters’ analysis of the ‘proximal host’ influence on ethnic

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<sup>72</sup> Gilad Malach and Lee Cahaner, “Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel,” The Israel Democratic Institute, 2021, <https://en.idi.org.il/haredi/2020/?chapter=34272>.

<sup>73</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 109.

<sup>74</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 19.

identification.<sup>75</sup> In choosing to expand the bounds of ethnicity to include religion, participants rejected the Jewish-American community as their own. Instead, they had to turn to the people in their ethno-religious group for community. While the less traditional participants were able to do this through connecting with other Israeli-Americans, the more traditional participants exhibited more difficulty doing so.

### *Community Formation Through Religion*

#### *---Community*

The less traditional participants did not convey relying on faith to find community. Rather, they were able to find community in the traditions that faith produced for them. All of my participants' parents moved here having few to no family connections in the United States. Meaning, they had to build a new family for themselves in the country and many chose other local Israelis to do so. Israeli-Americans often have mutual connections because migration rates are so low, resulting in a particular kind of Israeli that chooses to leave, often more detached from Judaism.<sup>7677</sup> For example, Dena went to a Jewish school growing up. But, rather than bringing her closer to religion, it turned her against it. Still, she saw the value in traditions and referred to the people she celebrated with as family.

Well, I went to a Jewish Day School. That experience made me reject religion in every way because I felt it was forcing religion on me. So, now I very much do not believe in God. But, I still do the traditions, mostly because it's family coming together, eating good food, and being together which I enjoy. But, otherwise, I wouldn't say we're religious... I would say I could probably rely on them [Israeli network] less career wise but more in terms of other needs. I definitely think I could rely on them because a lot of these people have become almost like family. So, it's sort of like I can rely on them in a similar way that I would like on family, like my more immediate family. -Dena

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<sup>75</sup> Mittelberg and Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis," 417, 422.

<sup>76</sup> Rebhun and Uzi, "Immigrant Acculturation and Transnationalism," 619.

<sup>77</sup> Mittleberg and Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis," 422.

The immigrant experience connects Israelis, as Dena explains, and creates a familial bond. Not only this, but the secular practice of Judaism is of a particularly welcoming nature. The rejection of religion for Dena was a rejection of faith, not tradition. While her family sent her to a Jewish Day School to find a community, she still felt the most Jewish community coming from her parents' Israeli-American friends. She referred to them as an extension to her real family, showing that they were able to find a community of people similar to them by practicing Jewish traditions. Dena indicated finding community despite her disconnect with Judaism, showing she had a choice in the community she aligned with. Practicing Judaism with other Israeli-Americans meant the two were linked in some form.

The following participants also identified as non-religion, but still highly valued the community building aspects of Jewish traditions. While Yechezkel was not faithful, he believed the culture and traditions of Judaism were important. Another participant, Ari, also added that he did not identify with the faith aspect of religion but rather connected with the different cultural aspects of religion. In this sense, secular Israeli-Americans chose the different factors they most connected to within religion and based their community on these values. They viewed these religious offerings as aspects of their Israeli identity.

I think for me, it was less about religion and more about community traditions and culture. And, it was like it was always very important to celebrate the holidays. Just celebrating Sabbath, it was very important. Beyond just having dinner together, those things are very important to me, being with my family and all the traditions. But with the more religious side of it, on the one hand, I did kind of feel committed to it because I felt like as long as it was important to my dad, I felt committed to it. But, I didn't really connect to it, I didn't enjoy going to synagogue in particular.  
-Yechezkel

*Is religion a part of your Israeli identity?* No, no, for me, it's really a cultural thing, not religious at all. But, I do appreciate aspects of religion, like the history and the values and the music. I really like those kinds of things. There's a lot of wisdom in it. So, I do appreciate it. But, I definitely don't do tefillin or anything like that. -Ari

Ethnic identification with Judaism implies a connection to traditions and values that are unique to Israel. The participants both identified with Jewish values as if they were their own, showing that the purpose of religion for Israeli-Americans was deeper than traditions, it was identity building. Religion became a gateway for Israeli-Americans to shape themselves and their surrounding community. Although Yechezkel came from a religious family, he chose not to be faithful like Ari. The two saw the value in tradition, in sitting together for dinner every Sabbath or holiday with their family. Yechezkel explained that while he felt less connected to the faith aspect of Judaism today, he still placed a high significance on the practice because it brought his family together. Although Sabbath dinner is a norm for every family in Israel, it is the exception for families in the United States, even Jewish families. While Israeli children do not feel connected to Judaism, they do feel connected to various traditions as they offer them a sense of community in a country where their religion is not the norm.<sup>78</sup> While Yechezkel felt connected to the family bonding that religion offered, Ari felt connected to the history of Judaism, the values, and the music. Even if the faith aspect of religion was not powerful for secular immigrants, it still shaped second-generation Israeli identities and led them to community building paths.

The following interviews were a collection from the participants who expressed a stronger connection to Judaism. Although studies have shown that ethnicity, gender, and nationality of the first-generation immigrant are important aspects to understand their relationship with religion, no studies have observed religiosity in second-generation Israelis.<sup>79</sup> This was shown in the following example when Dalia elaborates on her and her mother's relationship to religion and Israel.

My mom once told me she felt like she had to practice more religion here in America than in Israel... I think it's because not living in Israel anymore, for me and for her, we need to keep on

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<sup>78</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 114.

<sup>79</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 19.

celebrating in our own ways. With holidays and stuff, I think it can be very fun to go a little bit extra. -Dalia

Dalia's mother felt that practicing religion was a way for her to preserve her 'Israeliness' in America, showing that religion is directly tied to people's ethnic identification as Israeli-Americans. Her mother became more religious living in America because this path allowed her to stay connected to her roots and remain Israeli. For secular Jews, Judaism and Israeli-ness were so connected they could be used interchangeably. As she explained, moving back to America meant celebrating in new ways because they felt there wasn't the religious unity they experienced in Israel. However, Dalia failed to mention that America has a Jewish religious community only slightly smaller than the total number of Jews in Israel. Meaning, both her and her mother had implicitly taken out the Jewish-American community that they could have chosen to integrate into. She described that through holidays and going the "extra-mile" when it came to maintaining traditions, she and her mom found a place for themselves within Judaism. Here, there is a religious compensation for the lack of community they personally felt, a lack of familiarity with the Jewish-American community. Dalia does not describe the increase of religiosity as an increase in community but rather as a more personal ritual being shared with her immediate family members. Meaning, the more traditional the participant was, the more personal their practices became.

Similar to Dalia and her mother, the following cases also showed that the more vigorously the participants practiced religion, the less community they found. Roi and Shay identified as Masortim, both continuing the religious practices of their parents. This unique practice consists of a vigorous following of traditions but does not necessitate that one is faithful. According to the straight-line theory, for immigrants to assimilate, they must let go of the practices they came to America with, including religious practices. However, the more traditional

participants chose not to do this, and consequently, had a more difficult time finding their community.<sup>80</sup>

We were Masortim, so you know, my dad put on tfilin every day. And, I now put on tfilin every day. There were periods when I didn't, and there are periods when I do, but I never miss kiddush on Friday night. I would always go to shul with my dad on Saturday morning. We would always do the holidays really properly. So like if you look at our Pesach seder like we would watch TV after. But the seder itself looked like an Orthodox seder. Same for any other holiday. *Do you feel like the way you practiced religion is the same as American Jews?* No, because Masortim is a unique phenomenon. Masorti is something that kind of exists only in Israel... So I don't really relate to the American way, and I also didn't relate to the Americans around me or the Israelis around me because they were all more secular or more religious to me, like they were either like modern Orthodox Americans or secular Israelis. -Roi

Roi explains that being Masorti was different from any other Jewish practice in America. Still, while this had an isolating effect on his childhood, he felt committed to it and would practice it in wider Jewish communities. Although he used Jewish-American institutions, such as shul, this did not change his practice or 'Americanize' it, instead, it further isolated him.<sup>81</sup> Rather than giving in to the ways Jewish-Americans practiced religion, he preferred to hold on to his inherited religious practices. In explaining that Roi was searching for people like him, there is a suggestion that he was searching for *his* Masorti group, just like the secular Israeli-Americans were searching for others seculars to celebrate with. Even when the practice was more traditional, Israeli-Americans searched for their community outside of the Jewish-American ones. In doing so, Roi is expanding the boundary of his ethnic identification beyond religion, rather defining his ethnicity in conjunction with Israel.

Mizrahi Israelis are typically more traditional than Ashkenazi Israelis and therefore also have lower migration rates than them.<sup>82</sup> Shay, another Sephardic participant, was also Masorti and felt isolated in his experience of religion in America. Just like Roi, Shay did not relate to the

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<sup>80</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 138, 143-144.

<sup>81</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 19.

<sup>82</sup> Rebhun, "Immigrant Acculturation and Transnationalism," 620.

Jewish people around him yet still continued to practice religion privately. He adds that in addition to feeling religiously isolated around Jewish people, he also felt that his values do not align with them.

I think this feels very Mizrahi in a lot of ways where we don't need to perform our Jewishness to feel close to it spiritually. So, it's like a very intimate, within the four corners of the house, kind of like singing over the Shabbat table kind of thing. I'm super Jewish, I am as Jewy as the Jew comes, but it's been hard for me to disentangle Jewishness from Zionism, so I don't do it in community... I put on tefillin when I go home, I'll fast every Yom Kippur, and I maintain Passover. But, I don't go and give lectures in synagogues. I don't go into communities and spaces that I feel aren't conducive for my identity. I think that's hard because Jewishness also lives on the spectrum of conservative to reform where it's hard to find something in between. And I'll say in America, it's really hard to find something that feels remotely Mizrahi and yet, is not patriarchal, transphobic, homophobic. So, there's like those things, unfortunately. -Shay

Although Shay practices religion more traditionally, he is still non-faithful and therefore has a more difficult experience finding community. This is unlike many of the other participants that found communal aspects within religion. Shay's experience of religion shows that just like religion can be uniting, it can also be isolating. In this sense, the loyalty Shay and Roi had to religion, unlike that of the Ashkenazi participants', meant they experienced less community. Their lack of community was because they were Masortim and unwilling to sacrifice their practices for the sake of a religious community in America. This experience contradicts the more communal religious experiences of second-generation non-religious participants. In using religion to describe their feelings of community isolation, they are expanding the boundaries of their Israeli identity to include religion. Not practicing in the Jewish communities meant the participants couldn't relate their Judaism to others. Although religion is something that brings people together from various ethnic backgrounds, it seems as though participants were unable to separate their Judaism with their Israeli identities.

*---Religion*

Although non-religious participants were able to find community with other Jewish-Israelis, their experience with American-Jews was described as the complete opposite. While many participants did say they had Jewish-American friends, there was a steady experience of disconnect from this group. Elijah describes this disconnect in ways that overlapped many of the other participants' answers.

I don't really feel like they [American Jews] understand us as much. I think they see Israel and Israelis in a certain way that's kind of self-centered around them. And, I guess I also have a lot of Jewish-American friends and they're great people, but I think when it comes to Israel or Israelis, they don't really understand the culture as much. I just think culturally it's so different. I think fundamentally, American Jews are American and Israeli Jews are Israeli. We're all Jewish, but it's just a totally different culture. Like, I'll go to synagogues over here, I just don't always get it, it almost seems like a church, just like stained glass windows and like this choir singing with the organ. -Elijah

Participants had different descriptions of the Jewish-American community, but united in that they thought of themselves as superior to them. Elijah does describe having and liking his Jewish friends, yet feeling culturally distinct from them. He explains this is partially because Jewish-American practices were extremely different from "what he was familiar with." Except, Elijah moved to the United States when he was two, which raises the question, which religious experience is he comparing Jewish-American practices to? He describes the synagogue as embodying a Christian atmosphere, showing that he does not feel welcome in this space. This is similar to the comment Roi expressed earlier where he felt Jewish-American communities were not communities that he could relate to. Meaning, no matter the level of religiosity, there was a wide consensus that Israeli-Jews did not feel community with American-Jews. Elijah highlights that the distinction is because of differences in nationality, but fails to mention that he, just like Jewish-American kids, grew up in America. In doing so, he boils down his identification with Judaism specifically to Israeli practices, even if they are imaged or sporadically practiced.



The frustration of the participants is rooted in the American categorization of Israeli descendants and American-Jews as one united community. Although they do identify as Jewish, this is not their primary form of identification and, on the contrary, are insistent on detaching themselves from Jewish religious communities back in Israel.<sup>83</sup> Meaning, it is a particular kind of secular practice that participants identified with, one that was cultural rather than religious. Why are Israeli immigrants and their descendants opposed to finding community through religion? What do they sacrifice in doing so? “They’re really weird. I don’t associate. Oh, they pronounce everything wrong. They don’t do it right. They don’t know. It’s weird, you have to explain stuff to them. They think every Israeli person is a Zionist, and they overcompensate by clinging to religion. They’re detached from their homeland.” Tami’s response shows exactly this resistance to “associate.” They distanced themselves when describing Jewish-Americans as clueless, specifically when it came to Israeli culture. And, they believed that Jews are detached from the homeland, something Tami did not feel. Specific remarks about the lack of knowledge Jewish-Americans had about the Israeli community showed that participants casted blame onto the Jewish community in various ways to distinguish themselves as separate from them. Although Tami was born in Israel, they moved to the U.S. at a young age, making their exposure to religion and the “homeland” similar to that of Jewish-Americans’. The rejection of this community shows how closely Israelis associate religion with their identities. Even though Tami wasn’t religious, they advocated for their form of Judaism as the superior one because they felt a powerful connection to Israel.

Since all participants spent the majority of their lives in America, it was evident that the feelings they had towards Jewish-Americans were culturally and ethnically engrained. The subversion of Israeli-American children to identify with the wider Jewish community can be best

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<sup>83</sup> Mittelberg and Waters, “The Process of Ethnogenesis,” 422.

explained through Gans' 'symbolic ethnicity' theory. While this was not the initial framework that was used for the analysis, particularly because ethnicity is not usually tied to religion, it became clear that participants used their religion as a characteristic of their symbolic ethnicity. Since Israel is a unique scenario in that it is a predominantly Jewish state, Israeli ethnicity and religion are inextricably linked in parents and, evidently, their children's identities. He says, "Symbolic ethnicity can be expressed in a myriad of ways, but above all, I suspect, it is characterized by a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior."<sup>84</sup> While the classic assimilation theory argues that ethnicity dissipates as generations pass, Gans argues that immigrant children grow attached rather than detached from their ethnic background, in this case being their attachment to Israeli-Judaism. He highlights the pride in traditions an immigrant exhibits, strongly supporting the participants' allegiance to their religious traditions. This kind of ethnic attachment is of low stakes in the sense that it is not of daily relevance to these kinds of immigrants, which was proven in that participants only celebrated major Jewish holidays or had Shabbat once a week. These findings were similar to the Uriely's research on second-generation Israelis, arguing the Israeli-American rejection of Judaism is an act of symbolic ethnicity.<sup>85</sup>

In discovering that participants did use symbolic ethnicity to describe themselves, particularly in seeing Israeli-Judaism as unique, it was important to understand if there were other factors that affected their experiences. Mittelberg and Waters' interpretation of symbolic ethnicity showed that race and racialization were powerful indicators of one's degree of ethnic identification (see figure 1).<sup>86</sup> By placing symbolic ethnicity on the left-hand side of the figure,

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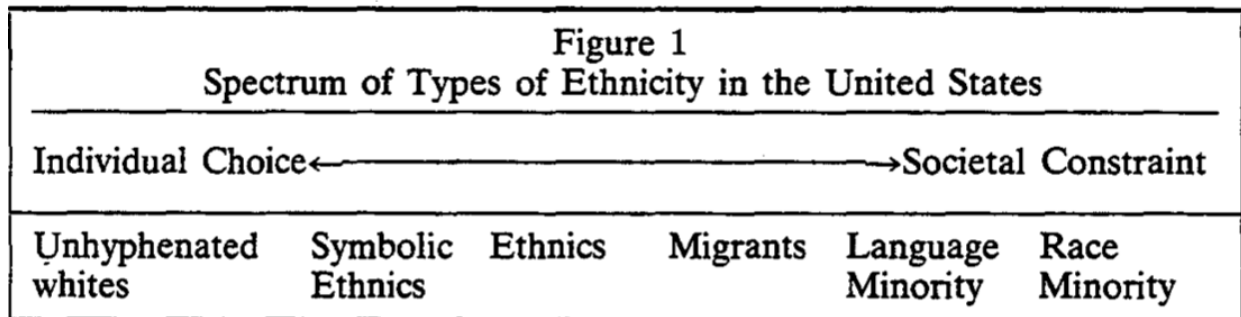
<sup>84</sup> Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity," 9.

<sup>85</sup> Uriely, "'Symbolic Ethnicity' of Israeli Americans," 10.

<sup>86</sup> Mittelberg and Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis," 417.

the authors argue immigrants who can identify with their symbolic ethnicity have a choice in how they present themselves because they are not confined to ethnic generalizations based on the color of their skin. Although Israeli-Americans are grouped with Judaism, they are able to resist this categorization and distinguish themselves as separate from the Jewish-American community. They have the power to build the boundaries of their religio-ethnic identification with Judaism. This example can be clarified by using the Haitian immigrant group that Mittelberg and Waters compare Israeli immigrants to. They argue that although Haitians do not identify as so, they are automatically codified as Black once they enter America. As was covered in Chapter 1, since participants were integrated into American society, they had more flexibility in the ways they identified.

Unlike Mittelberg and Waters, this sample was made up of people from Ashkenazi and Sephardic descent. Although participants used religion as part of their symbolic ethnicity, Mizrahi participants had a more difficult time compensating for this through community. Since Shay and Roi were the only two fully Sephardic participants, their reports of religious and communal isolation are noteworthy. When taking a look back at figure 1, Sephardic Israelis can be placed in the “ethnics” category, in the middle of individual choice and societal constraint due to race. Because of their ethnicity, they were religiously constrained and had less opportunity to shape their community, which was seen in that Jewish people made them feel unwelcome. While they are societally constrained in their options for communal identity, they push back and make a decision to hold on to their religion. By not conforming to mainstream standards of Jewishness, they go through a more isolated religious experience. Although ethnicity is part of the story, this section offers a different lens to religious integration. It reveals that while religion does shape one’s control over identity, it is possible that ethnicity plays a role in this process as well.



Mittelberg, Waters, "The Process of Ethnogenesis," (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 1992), 417, fig. 1.

*Self-Identifying: Israeli or American?*

Israeli-Judaism was the symbolic ethnicity that the participants actively maintained. As the Israeli participants distinguished themselves from American-Jews, they were also distancing themselves from being categorized as simply American. Instead, many used this difference, Uriely says, as "a decoration" for their sense of self.<sup>87</sup> However, there were some exceptions to this pattern. While some felt they had to fight to be seen as Israeli, others felt like being Israeli was an identity that was placed on them, wanting to be seen as American. These findings were different from Uriely's study and provoked various questions and explanations. Trends revealed that in all cases, participants felt others miscategorized them. There was a range of ethnic-identifiers that participants said revealed their Israeli identity such as skin color, name, hair, accent, etc. While the term ethnic-identifiers is not commonly used, it will be referred to in this context as parts of one's identity that reveals they are ethnically distinct Jewish-Israelis. Although some identifiers were more clear, others were more hidden and meant that participants could choose if they wanted to declare they were Israeli to others.

Following the 'symbolic ethnicity' theory, being able to self-identify usually alluded to a more privileged stance in comparison to those who were externally identified. Some participants wanted to display ethnic identifiers so that they could be seen as unique but others wanted to

<sup>87</sup> Uriely, "Symbolic Ethnicity' of Israeli Americans," 7.

hide it. Nina indicated that she was seen as American by her friends, feeling she had to fight to be viewed as Israeli.

When I say I'm Israeli, my friends ask me to prove it to them. It makes no sense. I speak Hebrew. I have citizenship. I took a gap year last year, but they never ask me about it. They don't care to understand. 'Why do you feel Israeli? Why is that a core thing for you?' Because that's all I talk about. I'm like, 'guys, America sucks.' I'm out of here when I finish college and they never question it. So, I feel like that pushes me to be even more Israeli, to be so straight up so that they say 'oh, this is actually part of her identity.' So, that's definitely a driving factor. -Nina

Nina described having to force her friends to understand that she was Israeli. In doing so, she exaggerated her Israeli identity, which she felt reaffirmed her 'Israeliness.' It is the lack of external categorization that made it so Nina had to assert her identity and was not questioned about it. The explanation for Nina's friends not taking her identity seriously lies in the symbolic ethnicity theory, which attests to the self-labeling that makes the immigrant feel distinct, not an external force. This is why Nina felt the need to reassert her identity to be seen as Israeli. She also describes factors that make her Israeli, such as speaking Hebrew and having citizenship, which do not characterize or determine her daily activities, supporting Gans' theory. Instead, Nina is able to claim she is Israeli and not have to face direct consequences for this both socially and externally. Mittelberg and Waters connect this type of experience to skin tone and argue that proximity to whiteness is the reason she is not viewed as ethnically distinct. On top of this, it is the frustration of being seen and treated as a "normal" American, that reveals the immigrant privilege of this type of experience.

The participants who had stronger ethnic identifiers, such as names, were often asked about their identity. Some reported Americans viewed them as Israeli more than they felt. While Nina expressed that her friends viewed her as American, Elijah and Ari explained that people viewed them as Israeli. This is different from the Uriely's argument in that there were

participants who were unwillingly categorized as Israeli. But, while Elijah felt American, Ari did not, bringing into question other characteristics that may have influenced these answers.

I feel more American, but I think sometimes I'm viewed more as Israeli, a lot of the time because of my name. I mean, I'm sure people hear your name and they're like, 'Oh, where are you from?' It's usually the first question. So, I think that's a big thing. But, I feel American, and I don't have an Israeli accent or anything like that. Nonetheless, though, I feel like people always know that I'm an immigrant or something, so it does come up like all the time when I meet people. -Elijah

Realistically, I think I am very Israeli, but I'll never be as Israeli, as someone who's lived there. I've been too influenced by the outside. So, I think especially because I decided not to serve in the army, I definitely know that in their eyes, I'm not going to be a hundred percent Israeli... But, I think it very much is a part of me and I can't really escape it, especially because of my name. But no, I definitely choose when to say I'm one or the other, depending on the situation who I'm talking to. -Ari

While Ari felt he could not escape feeling Israeli due to his name, Elijah illustrates just this by saying he felt more American. Meaning, contrary to Ari's belief, it was not the external framings that made him and Elijah identify a certain way. Instead, when looking at the background of each participant, it becomes evident that Ari spent less time in America than Elijah did, which could be a reason why he felt more Israeli than Elijah. In Rebhun and Lev Ari's research, time was the number one indication for a weakening connection to Israel, which follows the straight-line theory.<sup>88</sup> Meaning, since Elijah spent more of his life in America, he felt more American. The inconsistent patterns and experiences with identity showed that no participant identified with the way they were viewed. This shows that external factors have inconsistent results when it comes to self-identifying. And, that symbolic ethnicity is not a bullet proof theory. Unlike both Ari and Nina, Elijah felt more American but was not viewed as so.

While some people felt being Israeli was a strong part of their identities, others, like Lir felt a disconnect with the country. Although he did not express a negative association with his Israeli history, he also did not view himself as Israeli. Lir had less ethnic identifiers than the

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<sup>88</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 132.

above participants, which meant he wasn't asked where he was from as often as others. Is there a correlation between Lir's lack of attachment to Israel and his lack of ethnic identifiers?

I do feel more American. Being Israeli, that part of my identity, I kind of pull it out when I want to. It's not that I'm not proud of it, it's kind of just where my parents are from. But, that has no reflection on who I am, or who I am in terms of what I think... It doesn't feel like a huge part of my identity, just to me personally. -Lir

Like Nina, Lir was not often categorized as Israeli, unless he chose to present himself as such. Lir's reaction to a lack of acknowledgment displayed to be a relief rather than what Nina described as "infuriating." Lir and Elijah's example also shows that symbolic ethnicity does not apply to people who feel less attached to Israel, given that they did not feel a necessary urge to express they were Israeli. Instead, Lir now fit more in the "unhyphenated white" identity that Mittelberg and Waters created in figure 1 since he felt more American than Israeli and, unlike Elijah, was also viewed as so. Still, it is important to highlight that both Nina and Lir had the choice to not disclose their identity had they not wanted to. Using Mittelberg and Waters' comparison reveals that although Haitians did not see Blackness as their identity, they were always viewed as such in the American context. If Lir didn't want to reveal his ethnic roots, he would not be automatically thought of as Israeli or even Jewish due to the way he looks. The core difference is having the ability to self-label rather than being self-labeled, meaning Lir's ability to distance from his past and label himself as American confirms he had a choice in identifying himself to his liking.

Although time is the strongest indicator of immigrant socioeconomic absorption into the United States, acquiring citizenship allows all immigrants, including Israelis, to better establish themselves in America and reduces their chances of moving back.<sup>89</sup> Some of the participants, such as Tami, grew up on permanent residency Green Card status as they were born in Israel and

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<sup>89</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 91.

moved to America at a young age. Tami had more ethnic identifiers than some of the other participants and described having a different experience than the other kids around them because of their status. In feeling like an outsider, they distanced themselves from America and therefore labeled themselves as more Israeli.

Yeah, we were on permanent residency Green Card, so I wasn't a citizen growing up. Part of my identity was that I wasn't American. I knew that I didn't have the same rights as everybody else because I wasn't a citizen. It was a really strange experience knowing that I was an outsider but still being very young and growing up with all these people and there was still this thing that separated me. I never stood for the pledge. I never identified with the country. I don't love this country. I'm not proud of it. I have no national pride for the United States. I really don't identify with it. I live here, but you know, I'm not married to it. With Israel, I feel a lot of pride and love and frustration and anger. I have very strong feelings about Israel, I feel very connected to it, but also very far away from it. -Tami

The experiences Tami recounts from their childhood reveal that the lack of socioeconomic absorption of their parents played a significant role in the shaping of their identity. Even if not having citizenship didn't affect the day to day childhood of Tami, they still held resentment towards the unequal treatment they experienced. Although they felt viewed as other, this did not give them the urge to try and be American. Instead, it led them to reconnect with their Israeli side. In comparing Nina and Tami's relationship with their identity, it is revealed that different external framings can lead to the same embodiment of 'Israeliness.' But, framings can also lead one to feel more American in that they do not want to feel otherized, as was seen with Elijah and Lir. While Nina was labeled as a "normal" American and Tami was seen as a "foreign" Israeli, the two felt mis-understood in America and resorted to their Israeli ethnicities. Is Tami's case also a form of symbolic ethnicity? Or, would they be moved to the "ethnics" category (see figure 1)? It is important to note that Nina's father moving much earlier to America and establishing a family is a significantly different experience than Tami's family moving during childhood. Yet, these differences led to the same preference to identify with the place their family came from.



## *Conclusion*

The subject of religion in second-generation Israelis revealed that all participants expanded the bounds of ethnicity to include Israel and Jewishness, making it so they did not identify with Jewish-Americans. However, while the less traditional participants could still find community despite this, the more traditional participants had a difficult time doing so. Some research has tied a lack of community integration to ethnicity, evidently in that the more traditional participants were Sephardic. In both cases, participants used their religious identity to define themselves and their community. This self-definition through religion could take place because Israel and Judaism are inextricably linked, so much so that participants viewed religion as a significant component of their Israeli identity. In the investigation of one's identity, it was found that all participants felt misidentified one way or the other. On the one hand, there were second-generation Israelis who felt fully disconnected from their past and did not view it as part of their identities. On the other hand, some felt much more connected to it and considered themselves more Israeli than American. Although it was difficult to find one explanation for these trends, it seems as though ethnicity and ethnic identifiers had the most significant stake in these patterns. For example, those who had ethnic identifiers were frequently asked where they were from, while those who did not chose to identify themselves as they wanted, Israeli or American. Those who identified as Israeli used it as their symbolic ethnicity, and it was often the case that participants who had more ethnic identifiers had no choice but to embrace this identity, such as Tami. Since participants exhibited a wide range of answers, it could be that there was a social component to these patterns that was not covered in this chapter but will be explored in the next.



## Chapter 3: The Conflict within the Conflict

### *Introduction*

I remember a couple of instances where I wanted to be involved in activism, and I thought, ‘oh, I should say this, should I not say this, do I have to say this?’ And then give a precursor saying: I’m an Israeli, but these are my political beliefs. -Yechezkel

This chapter will investigate how the bi-cultural identities of second-generation Israelis are shaped by the Israel-Palestine conflict. Since there is a lack of research on Israeli political engagement, this subject will be studied through the lens of transnationalism. In comparing Israeli attachment trends to other immigrants’, one of the more striking findings was the high rates of political engagement with the country of origin, no matter the views of the participants. In this sense, most participants contradicted the straight-line theory that attributed integration into society with a detachment from transnational engagement.<sup>90</sup> Instead, they aligned with more recent research about integration resulting in increased political activity, particularly because of the stability they experienced being second-generation immigrants with citizenship.<sup>91</sup> It was also the case that almost all of the participants exhibited a form of “exo-polity” in demanding Israel’s government and treatment of people change.<sup>92</sup> Although all participants’ opinions had democratized in America, only few became “agents of democracy,” fearing bringing their new ideas back to their families would risk sacrificing relationships.<sup>93</sup>

Israeli-Americans were influenced by the overwhelmingly liberal environments they grew up around, often choosing to identify with the predominantly held ideologies about the conflict.<sup>94</sup> From 2014 to 2016, liberal Democrats’ support of Palestinian people doubled from

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<sup>90</sup> Luis Eduardo Guarnizo, Alejandro Portes, and William Haller, “Assimilation and Transnationalism: Determinants of Transnational Political Action among Contemporary Migrants,” *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 6 (May 2003): 1215, 1215 <https://doi.org/10.1086/375195>.

<sup>91</sup> Guarnizo et. al, “Assimilation and Transnationalism,” 1212.

<sup>92</sup> Roger Waldinger, “Engaged at Home from Abroad,” 95-96.

<sup>93</sup> Stefan Rother, “Changed in Migration? Philippine Return Migrants and (Un)Democratic Remittances,” *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 8, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 247, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156805809X12553326569713>.

<sup>94</sup> Waldinger, “Engaged at Home from Abroad,” 88-90.

21% to 40%, while 33% supported Israel more. On the other hand, all Republicans and conservative to moderate Democrats had more sympathetic views toward Israel.<sup>95</sup> The sample interviewed mainly identified themselves as liberal Democrats, with a small number of participants identifying as moderate and conservative Democrats. However, this question becomes more complex when speaking about political opinions on the Israel-Palestine conflict since the political structure of Israel is different than that of America's. While views in Israel can be categorized as more right or left, the government is made up of many more parties than just two like in the U.S. This means that the understandings that participants have of their political views in the American context cannot accurately reflect their stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Since liberal Democrats tended to have more sympathy for Palestinian people, this will be categorized as a liberal ideology. The liberal spheres that most of my sample grew up in, specifically those from New York and Los Angeles, reflected the strong sympathy that they held for Palestinian people.

Given that this chapter is an investigation of identity formation patterns, its aim is not to argue along the lines of the Israel-Palestine conflict but to use the conflict to ask a separate question. The cited resources can be used to understand the conflict, but in the simplest terms, it has been a long-lasting fight over land between Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>9697</sup> Although no academic papers have directly studied the implications of the conflict in the Israeli or Palestinian second-generation population, there has been a circulation of articles and blogs from news

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<sup>95</sup> Samantha Smith and Carroll Doherty, "How Americans View the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: 5 Facts," *Pew Research Center*, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/23/5-facts-about-how-americans-view-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/>.

<sup>96</sup> Abdel Monem Siad Aly, Shai Feldman, and Khalil Shikaki, *Arabs and Israelis: Conflict and Peacemaking in the Middle East*, 2013th Edition (Red Globe Press, 2013).

<sup>97</sup> Neil Caplan, *The Israel-Palestine Conflict: Contested Histories*, 2nd ed. (Wiley Blackwell, 2019), <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/The+Israel+Palestine+Conflict%3A+Contested+Histories%2C+2nd+Edition-p-9781119523871>.

outlets remarking the complexities of being a child of either in America.<sup>9899</sup> The overwhelming majority of American-Israelis identifying as Democratic is shown in the following sample.<sup>100</sup> In addition to understanding why the children of Israeli-Americans would have greater sympathy for people who they do not have a familial connection to, I will interrogate the stake the Israel-Palestine conflict has on the sample's identities and assimilation status. It will be argued that participants have to partake in a delicate balancing act, one that takes an American lens in accounting for the history of Israel, their family, and their social spheres to understand and accept their identities.

### *A Family Story*

A majority of participants outlined having different views compared to their parents in regards to the Israel-Palestine conflict. While some participants described their parents as more understanding of these differences, others explained the topic was a source of internal conflict within the family. The participants often viewed discussions with their parents as unproductive, either because their opinions were so different or due to a shared feeling of defeat. For example, Lir grew up in Los Angeles and describes how he and his family felt defeated when it came to the conflict.

My parents both recognize that their position is going to be inherently different from mine because they are from there and I'm not. And so, whenever we talk about it, they're like, 'I know, you're right, but it's home.' It's kind of this depressed resignation to the fact that, 'I know it's fucked up, but what am I going to do? That's where I was born.' So, that's valid too, what can I say to that?... I think that my dejection of the conflict comes from being a child of an Israeli. That's the attitude I get at home. And there's just a lot of pain. That's the definition of the conflict is just horror and pain, and it's just too much. And so, it's just, you know, it's like you find comfort in that pain, and then you just kind of let it go. -Lir

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<sup>98</sup> Elizabeth Dias and Ruth Graham, "Gaza Conflict Stokes 'Identity Crisis' for Young American Jews," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/19/us/jews-israel-palestine.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Kathleen Christison, "The American Experience: Palestinians in the U.S.," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 18 (1988-1989), <https://oldwebsite.palestine-studies.org/jps/fulltext/39401>.

<sup>100</sup> Rebhun and Waxman, "The 'Americanization' of Israel," 81-82.

Lir's case is a classic example of the straight-line assimilation theory in that he has become an extension to his parents' integration into America. His lack of commitment to the politics of Israel reveals that as generations pass, some participants distanced themselves from the subject of the conflict.<sup>101</sup> Lir's belief that he is inherently going to have contradictory views on the conflict shows an assumption of clarity on the subject. He explains that his parents see his opinions as right, but that they can't conform to them because "Israel is their home." Lir describes a feeling of loss, specifically because this attitude is exhibited by his parents. This described defeat is important in the context of the low migration rates of Israeli citizens since the main periods people leave are during wars and economic crises.<sup>102</sup> It could be that part of his parents' decision to leave was to have a life far from the conflict. Lir's ability to describe letting go of the pain that the conflict created shows both his physical and also mental avoidance of the conflict, one that is led by being born in America. As highlighted in Chapter 2, Lir feels more American than Israeli, showing that there is a correlation between feeling American and being disengaged from the conflict. While attachment to Israel is not a fixed stance, Lir's hesitancy around the conflict shows that integration is influential in one's attachment to Israel.

Unlike Lir, Yechezkel explains that he used to seek the validation of his parents on the subject of the conflict. In doing his own research and coming to conclusions without the help of them, he realized that he became more accepting of their differences. Although this was initially a challenge, he eventually understood that their disagreements were because of their different upbringings. Similar to Lir, he labels himself as right and his parents as wrong.

I've kind of let go of the need for validation from my parents. A lot of times when I was growing up, when there'd be something that was confusing about the conflict, I would go to them and ask a question and feel like I needed a response or validation from them. Now, I'm an adult. I can look at things myself and I can analyze them myself and state my opinions without needing to have a

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<sup>101</sup> Guarnizo, et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1215.

<sup>102</sup> Rebhun and Lev Ari, *American Israelis*, 37.

conversation about them if it doesn't come up... *Why do you think your opinions are different from your parents'?* I think as a person growing up in the U.S., it's a lot easier for me to be hopeful than people living in Israel. I lived in a society that offered me different perspectives on how a community and country can look at diversity and activism, which I think a lot of people growing up in Israel don't have. I also think I have a lot of historical contexts that other people don't have, and I've had a lot of opportunities to work through difficult concepts and feelings, and fears in a safe setting. Whereas I think living in Israel, it's like really a pressure bubble and constant stress in this constant existential fear, you know. And it's also like a very militaristic society, obviously. -Yechezkel

Yechezkel was an exception to the metropolitan areas most of the participants grew up in, but he later highlights that he had much more liberal views than most of his peers. He explains that growing up in America led him to have more optimism than his parents about the conflict. In this sense, his opinions have developed past how he describes his parents' opinions to a much more democratized and "hopeful" perspective.<sup>103</sup> Unlike the straight-line theory, Yechezkel shows a further perseverance on the subject despite the distance. In comparison, Lir had exhibited hopelessness as a result of the distance. However, he has not become an agent of democracy since his relationship with his parents was not sacrificed by their differences, instead being set aside for the sake of not arguing. It is possible that the Jewish and Israeli communities he grew up in have led him to this optimism. He describes them as being safe spaces for him to explore his beliefs and learn histories that Israelis might have not. His narrative is not an exception to the rest of the participants', a narrative that viewed the conflict as resolvable, rather than indefinite.

In the following two cases, one of which is Lir, complex family ties to the IDF did not influence participants to be more sympathetic towards Israel. Shay's case shows the influence that growing up in Queens, New York had on his political identity. Just like the rest of the participants, Shay could have been raised in Israel and had completely different opinions from

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<sup>103</sup> Rother, "Changed in Migration?," 247.

those that he has today. But, he seems to be thankful that he was able to leave Israel and now sees the issue in a new light.

The 'Israeliness,' I'm not proud of, no. I think I'm very ashamed. And I'll say this has been a big part of my anti-Zionist solidarity work. It's also been a massive source of conflict between me and my family... For perspective, both of my grandpas fought really intensely for the IDF and being Arab Jews fluent in Arabic, they were both spies and they were both caught, one by the Egyptians, one by the Syrians and tortured for a really long time. And that's a really big part of my life, family legacy. My godfather, Ali, was in the Duvdevan Unit and was shot in the back of his head by his friend accidentally because he looked so Arab, and I was supposed to be named after him. My dad was doing handasa [engineering] for the tanks in the army... It's been a weird thing thinking about the violence we've perpetrated. The D9 Caterpillar bulldozer that I mentioned at the beginning is a notorious instrument of the occupation. It's demolished hundreds of thousands of homes. And, I'm in law school now, so I think I can explain it in terms of like, did they get a permit to demolish it? Did they undergo proceedings to evaluate whether those people's houses should be demolished? I think the big question is why does Israel have the power to demolish Palestinian homes and with impunity? And I'll say, no part of me has ever been able to be blind to the violence of the occupation. I don't mean just like what we do, but also the violence that it triggers back. So it's not like a naive leftist like, 'Oh, what are we doing?' I know it's hard, but I never bought into the idea that some of the violence we experience by Palestinian resistance justifies the occupation. There's something about it, like being so close to home that I'm just less forgiving and less understanding and less tolerant of the idea that Israel could be up to something good. -Shay

Shay's case shows that living in America and getting an education is what led him to abandon his loyalty to Israel and instead, take a more critical stance on the conflict. But, education also sparked an interest in the conflict, an outcome that contradicts the straight-line theory. Meaning, although education did act as an integrator into American society, rather than decreasing interest in home country politics, it increased Shay's interest in the subject.<sup>104</sup> In this case, education led Shay to become an agent of democracy, causing conflict within his family, the exact fear that many Israeli-Americans had.<sup>105</sup> Shay's description of shame about being Israeli is directly tied to the shame he feels about the conflict, taking the history of his family on his back. He particularly speaks about the factor of proximity being the reason he is less forgiving of the Israeli side of the

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<sup>104</sup> Guarnizo, et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1216.

<sup>105</sup> Rother, "Changed in Migration?," 247.



conflict. The guilt is not only because of his family history but also with the idea that he would have continued this history had he stayed in Israel. Shay highlights the legal lens he now takes in trying to understand the history of the conflict, a lens that living in America has led him to. Having the technical terms to speak about the conflict is a result of Shay's integration into America and the distance he keeps from the conflict. Although he does show sympathy towards his family members living in Israel, he places an emphasis on an understanding that aligns with more sympathy towards Palestinians. Shay describes the battle he has with his parents as a conflict within itself. It is not something he is able to set aside for the sake of peace with his family, which is different from Yechezkel's perspective. It could be that the more complex family history has led to a greater feeling of guilt, therefore, further resisting his family, however, Lir shows that this is not necessarily the case.

Although Lir did not fully agree with his family members, he believed it was not his place to resist their opinions on the conflict. Lir's aunt and uncle live in a settlement, which is against his beliefs. Still, he finds a way to balance his opinions with his family and chooses to prioritize his family's beliefs over his own.

I have an aunt and uncle who live in a settlement on the West Bank. So, my aunt is liberal, but her husband, he's my favorite uncle, I mean, he's a great guy. But, when he was 18 during the Yom Kippur War or one of the wars, he was a prisoner of war for four months and he was tortured and a lot of horrible things happened to him. And, he believes that he's allowed to live in the West Bank in a settlement, and I can disagree with it, but at the end of the day, I can't tell him he's wrong. Because I've never sat in a hole for months being tortured. I can't tell him he's wrong. And nobody really can, because that's kind of I mean, that's just that's the nature of that conflict is that there's just so much pain. I'm not going to be the guy to tell him that he can't do that. Who am I to say? Who's anyone to say? I mean, he sat in a hole for four months. But then again, it's hard to go to his house in the settlements. My aunt, I have to see her, my uncle, I have to see him. I love them. But, every year, it gets harder. -Lir

Lir displays the internal battle he experiences when he goes to visit his family members in the settlements. He expresses sympathy for his uncle who was a torture victim of the war and shows

appreciation for him by highlighting that he is his favorite uncle. Yet, he still feels uneasy when he is in the settlements particularly because of his opposition to the Israeli occupation. Lir is outlining a paradox in disagreeing with his uncle's beliefs, yet not saying anything to preserve their relationship. In this instance, Lir, unlike Shay, preferred to remain quiet to keep civility. He describes having no place to speak on the subject, having respect for his family members, and prioritizing his uncle's experiences over his own opinions. Although Rother argues that migrants become agents of democratization, bringing in new ideas when they go back to their country of origin, Lir did not want to instigate this conversation with his family members. The Israeli-America case study is unique in that although Lir's views have gone through a transformation, he feels a barrier to act on these "democratized" ideas in the presence of his family members.<sup>106</sup> Having a personal connection to the Israel-Palestine conflict has led Lir to a careful balancing act between what he and his family believe. The reason this experience feels more challenging every year is not that he is being increasingly challenged by his uncle, but that growing up in America has intensified his opinions on the conflict over time.

The liberal spheres that Lir and Shay grew up in correlate with their sympathy towards Palestinians. Unlike many of the participants, Gilad was raised in Parkland, a suburban and affluent city in South Florida. This state is more moderate than cities such as New York or Los Angeles, which meant he was exposed to different narratives when he grew up, both from his parents and social spheres. Being involved in Jewish clubs and learning about the Holocaust made him decide to serve in the IDF. While "saving Israel" was the narrative that motivated him to do this, he left the experience having a completely changed perspective.

I was very involved in everything Jewish, every Jewish club, but also looking back, I don't like the way they oriented our Judaism towards Israel. It's like 'you're Jewish, so you need to love Israel.' I'm older now, and well, Judaism has been around for like 5,000 years, so why is this our

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<sup>106</sup> Rother, "Changed in Migration?," 247.

main focus now? This is a little strange to me. Now, back then, I loved it. I was Mr. Israel back then... I think the Holocaust really hit me hard, learning about it. It really affected me. I would get really sad thinking about what happened to my family affected by Holocaust. Everyone I know at some point has some connection with family and to the Holocaust. And then I was like, well, if this happened today, this would be me, this would be my family. So it really struck me hard, and I always thought that Israel was a solution to the Holocaust. Israel is the way that we don't allow this to happen again, having this Jewish homeland that protects the Jews. So that started that. And then I was taught how basically the whole world hates us and wants to annihilate us off the map, to take Israel off the map. They hate the Jews. They hate us. And all these countries are also neighboring Israel. So, the danger is imminent, right? So I said, 'Well if I care this much about the Jews and the Holocaust, I've got to protect my people.' That was my big motivation to defend my people from annihilation. That's what I thought. -Gilad

Gilad's case shows that the shaping of the Israeli identity of second-generation participants did depend on their stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Yet, no matter what the stance was, the straight-line theory was further disproved since participants remained engaged in homeland politics no matter where they were raised.<sup>107</sup> Gilad's pride in his 'Israeliness' during high school shows how symbolic ethnicity for Israeli-Americans is an inherently political stance. His pride was directly connected to his desire to go serve in the army yet had little influence on his day-to-day life.<sup>108</sup> Growing up in a more moderate area made Gilad side with Israel and feel more Israeli. In contrast, in a case like Shay's, it was the disapproval of this history, a shame about it, that made it difficult for him to identify as Israeli. An analysis of the above cases shows that the environment Israeli youth grow up in influences them to have different political ideologies and perspectives on the conflict.<sup>109</sup> This exposure produces more and fewer degrees of pride depending on how liberal the environment is. The correlation was that the more liberal the sphere was, the more shame or internal conflict one felt and vice versa.

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<sup>107</sup> Guarnizo, et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1215.

<sup>108</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 95-96.

<sup>109</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 88-90.

### *Moments of Realization*

The analysis of family patterns showed that other than one person, participants felt equally, if not more engaged in homeland politics than their parents. This dismissed the straight-line theory where immigrants become more loyal to America as time passes. Various levels of support for Israel will be explored through Dufoix's exo-polity theory.<sup>110</sup> Most participants exhibited "moments of realization" about their stance on the occupation as they started to mature, either during high school or college. These instances pushed the participants to form their own opinions on the conflict, shaping their identities in directions that were not facilitated by their families. While many of these events happened in America, the participants who used to or currently live in Israel also had special insights on the subject. Tami grew up going to Israel frequently, but it was only in college that they and other participants discovered there was another side to the story they grew up with.

Well, I was really nationalistic and pro-Israel, and fuck everyone else growing up as a kid because that's what you learn. You learn that the Six Day War was a miracle and God's on our side and all that. So, I grew up really feeling that, and then I started to question during late high school and into college when I was taking a human rights course and I actually met this guy from Gaza. We spoke and we hung out and I saw his photography of what was going on in the strip and I was like, 'Oh my fucking lord.' I had no idea. And then, I also had to read some very anti-Israeli stuff in the class, which made me very angry. So, I had to start finding the truth. I just had to start finding it, because then I was also faced with so much anti-Israel at Bard. So, I was like, 'I have to defend my identity and my country and my nationality,' but I also don't want to be wrong.  
-Tami

The particular provocation Tami experienced while getting their Bachelor's degree showed that education, a form of assimilation, increased their interest in the conflict.<sup>111</sup> However, unlike Guarnizo's findings, the increase in interest did not directly reflect an increased loyalty to the host country but instigated a criticism of the country, a form of "exo-polity."<sup>112</sup> Tami grew up

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<sup>110</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 95-96.

<sup>111</sup> Guarnizo, et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1238.

<sup>112</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 95-96.

with a one-sided narrative, believing that Israel was in the right in all circumstances and that those who disagree are in the wrong. They were shocked when learning about the physical circumstances of Palestinians, realizing that there is a much greater story to the conflict than what had been ingrained in them for so many years. This moment was further complicated when the class was assigned a set of “anti-Israel readings.” While the readings angered them, they were unsure if these concerns were legitimate, and had a challenging time differentiating between history and their own biases. This internal debate and search for the truth eventually motivated them to do a research project on the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. This moment made them rethink their identity, occurring particularly because Tami was getting a liberal arts degree in America, but comes up in other ways as well.

Similarly, Shay experienced a moment of social pressure in college that made him reevaluate his identity. He was challenged in class by someone who knew he was Israeli and had his “moment of realization” while blindly defending Israel. Shay exhibits a positive light describing an event that was inevitably uncomfortable. While making claims about other histories, Shay felt he had failed to know his own. Just like Tami, integration into American society and educational attainment also made Shay more interested in homeland politics.

I was really interested in violence and state violence, in particular. And, I was studying a lot of Latin America history and the intersection with the CIA and the sponsoring of dictatorships. And then when I was at a community college, someone was like, ‘What about Israel?’ And I was like, ‘Oh, no, that's different. You don't understand.’ And they were like, ‘Why is it different?’ And I was like, ‘Well, it just is, you don't understand,’ and I realize I didn't really have the answer. I didn't really study Israel or the history of it and the violence that would be happening there in the same scrutiny. I never applied the same scrutiny to Israel as I did to those other issues or to racism. I never tried to understand my own experience or my family experience through that context. But once that started happening when I was 18 or 19, a fracture opened. This crack in the tectonic plate opened up and I could explore what was underneath a little more. And then I just educated myself and learned about who's doing what and got really interested in the Israeli human rights perspective. There was this weird thing that I was inculcated by my parents. -Shay

Here, Shay was pushed to confront the narrative he grew up with by his American classmate. Although he was in college like Tami, this event was different since Shay was being socially challenged on the subject, showing that participants were being reminded of their relationship to Israel, no matter how integrated they were.<sup>113</sup> Shay's description exhibits a feeling of embarrassment when he did not have the answer to his classmate's personal interrogation of the history of his identity. It is noteworthy that Shay does not see this as an attack on his identity, rather portraying it as a moment to be remembered as a "fracture opening." Just like Tami, Shay became passionate about the subject after this experience, in what they both felt was a blind loyalty to their Israeli side. While Tami exhibited more sympathy towards Israel, the two cases show the power education systems and social spheres had on the experiences of Israeli youth. Not only was it college that provided the environment for such a moment to happen, but it was the people and the culture of the schools that made these participants question their identities and eventually, in these cases, reshape them in accordance with the critiques. Although liberal spheres are not the American majority, it is noteworthy that there was an eventual alignment of participants with the spaces around them, becoming more active through "state-seeking" and "regime-changing" efforts.<sup>114</sup> In advocating for marginalized Palestinians and imagining a different vision for the government of Israel, the two have not become loyal to American ideologies, but particularly to the liberal-American ones.

A participant from earlier, Gilad had an experience that showed it is not all education systems that make one question their Israeli identity, it is specifically the liberal ones. Although Gilad exhibited disapproval of Israel after visiting and serving in the IDF, he grew up in an environment that didn't challenge his beliefs about Israel. Although studies have shown that

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<sup>113</sup> Guarnizo, et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1215.

<sup>114</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 96.

visiting one's home country does not change the attachment they have to it, Gilad's case shows differently.<sup>115</sup>

I actually do think I went through a pretty unique perspective of being hardcore pro-Zionist IDF and going to serve, but now knowing that this is definitely not something I support or would do again. People in America were trying to get me to understand the real situation, and I wasn't really listening to them. At school, I was like the token Israeli. I didn't know almost any Israelis in the area and I kind of wore it proudly. I took pride in the fact that I was pretty unique and Israeli. Again, it was like this is the place that keeps Jews safe, this was the answer to the Holocaust. Like, of course, I'm going to be supportive. So at school, I was very vocal. I didn't have many differing views from the people around me, they didn't care. Most of them weren't Jewish. They didn't know what Israel is or where it is, so I wasn't really met with a lot of perspectives outside of camp, in terms of people who were against what I was saying. And, of course, these Jewish youth groups I mentioned before. -Gilad

Although Gilad's loyalty to Israel transformed after serving in the army, his level of political engagement did not. Meaning, no matter the circumstances, Israeli participants were forced to confront their Israeliness and could not forget this aspect of their identities.<sup>116</sup> He describes that the environment he grew up in made it so people didn't challenge him or question his motivations, and it was only the Jewish camp that he attended that created some ambiguity for him on the subject. Still, since this was not where he lived, he did not feel as much pressure to change his understanding of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Instead, in his life before serving in the IDF, he used symbolic ethnicity in a political way to feel unique.<sup>117</sup> It was only until he volunteered for the IDF that he had his "moment," realizing he did align with the ideologies that were widely held at his Jewish camp, ones that critiqued the occupation. While Gilad's concerns about leaving the IDF were not related to the Israel-Palestine conflict, he found it easy to tie the mismanagement and mistreatment he received from the army to the subject. Gilad left America feeling proud to be Israeli but returned feeling ashamed. How is Israeli pride tied to a stance on

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<sup>115</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 93.

<sup>116</sup> Guarnizo, et. al, "Assimilation and Transnationalism," 1215.

<sup>117</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 95.

the conflict? Gilad's case shows that it is not only the conflict that shapes Israeli pride, it can also depend on the first-hand experiences that one gains and the environment that they grew up in.

Just like Gilad, Susan also had a transformative experience after moving to Israel. She expressed that being in Israel gave her a "real" perspective about the conflict, one that she would never have gotten in America. She felt attacked in America for her Israeli identity, which created the need for her to defend it. Without understanding what this really meant, Susan was defending a stance that favored Israel in the conflict. She describes feeling more neutral about her political opinions after moving, concluding that there is no purpose in fighting about political differences. Seeing the other side of the conflict made her understand the Palestinian perspective more, yet, it simultaneously also numbed her.

I used to defend Israel a lot more, sort of represent it. I had a friend who was much more critical of Israel, and she said things like, I don't believe in religious states. I had a very different mindset back then, but I definitely encountered people lashing out at Israel many times... When I moved here, I was already pretty leftish. But, I ended up making this friend who had a really big influence on me. He grew up very religious, Hasidic, in America and after he came to Israel, he became non-religious and completely anti-Israel. In his room, he had a giant Palestinian flag. He went to all the crazy protests. And, I ended up spending a lot of time with him. He did have a huge influence on me. And I think it was just the first time throughout last year that I realized, this is a country that I always loved, I always looked up to, I always really connected with, and I realized all the ugly things that I never really learned in school. They did not teach you in JDS. I mean, the whole West Coast, it's like all Israelis, but it was once not. People were kicked out of their homes. And, I guess that's sad. And that's one thing that I guess I learned. Yeah, but mainly after the rockets, I just realized how much of a lose-lose situation it is for everyone. I realized that it just doesn't really matter what my opinions are and what other people's opinions are. -Susan

Although Susan is critical of Israel, she is currently studying there and exhibits a genuine connection to the country "beyond" its political history. This reveals the complex nature of some of these responses, saying and feeling different things. Both Susan and Gilad had experiences in Israel that transformed their understanding of the conflict as they knew it in America. Although Susan grew up in a more liberal sphere than Gilad, she still highlights that she used her Israeli identity to represent Israel and defend it. Susan's experience shows that being socially



challenged, like Shay was earlier, does not influence all Israeli immigrants to change and reevaluate their identities. The love and connection she always felt with the country showed how personal the attacks felt to her. In going to Israel and being exposed to a radical, American-born Jew, she learned that there was another side to the story, one that she had refused to understand. It was only then that she was able to let go of her defense mechanisms. Since her form of symbolic ethnicity was provoked by having to defend her country, the more she defended Israel, the more Israeli she felt.<sup>118</sup><sup>119</sup> While she might have not understood it at the time, it was not Israel she was defending, it was her fight to be validated as an Israeli America, without the assumption that she was in support of Israel.

Unlike Gilad and Susan, Roi and Nina's support of Israel increased after visiting the country. Coincidentally, they both mentioned going to the settlements and leaving with changed opinions on the occupation. Unlike the findings that visits to home countries did not have an influence on degrees of political participation, these participants proved the opposite. Just like Gilad and Susan, an exposure to the home country also intensified political engagement, although it was to a different political direction.<sup>120</sup> While Roi's opinions had solidified, Nina found more trouble understanding exactly how to articulate her fears and how they translated into the conflict.

I got to see things with my own eyes and talk to people, and my attitude really changed. But that's definitely where I stand on land issues, solidly right wing. I am not a cynic nutjob, like that's not really the vibe I go with, but for me, it's more of a historical right kind of thing. . . My moment was probably when I realized the irony of people being OK with Jews living in Tel Aviv, but not in the settlements because that's so backwards. -Roi

When I was at my program, we went on a tour to the settlements. And, I was really shocked because I've never been there in my life. There was an Israeli university there and I was like, 'What's going on?' I didn't even think there was life here, I really didn't. It was just insane. In

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<sup>118</sup> This phenomenon has yet to be studied in the political context, but was also brought up in Chapter 2 with Nina.

<sup>119</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 95.

<sup>120</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 96.

school, I did learn about the zones A, B and C. But being there, I was just so appalled because it's such a hard concept to have an opinion on. I want equality, but then again, there's that fear that if, for example, we have a two-state solution, who's to say that Hezbollah, ISIS, or a terrorist group aren't going to come take control and that we're going to be in even more trouble. I am one hundred percent for an Israeli state, but there's that fear that we're always going into war. I was there when they were throwing rockets at us from Gaza and from Lebanon, it's a very scary thing. I still felt safe because Israel has a lot of measures that they take when there is a bomb or when there is something going on. So, I do feel safer, but it's so scary because I want to let those people live because not every Arab is a bad person... Civilians, innocent civilians, who even identify as Arab-Israelis are being hurt because of this stupid conflict. But then, on the other hand, I don't want to give them everything because we deserve a country, we fought for it and we won, I'm sorry, we won. So like, what more do you want? Like, leave us alone. -Nina

The circumstances in which the participants visited the settlements were quite different. While Roi was living in the settlements for four months with his girlfriend, Nina went on a day-tour with her program called Mechina which aimed to expose students to non-Israeli perspectives on the conflict. After living in the settlements, Roi understood that he had conservative, “right-wing” views when it came to land issues. Just like Roi, Nina also had concerns about being in the settlements, describing it as shocking and exacerbating her already torn self. The tour provoked thoughts about solutions, implying that the settlements had made her rethink the reasons behind the conflict. Still, her beliefs are evidently more conservative than those of the earlier participants such as Shay, Gilad, and Susan. And, she describes a similar perspective to Roi's claims about a historical right to the land. In this sense, visiting the settlements had increased the participants' sympathy toward Israel and made them feel more Israeli. These findings do fit into the straight-line theory since a set-back in integration into America, such as living in the settlements, did decrease loyalty for the liberal-American views on the conflict. And, it shows that assimilation into liberal-America is subject to change and is not absolute.<sup>121</sup> It

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<sup>121</sup> Guarnizo, et. al, “Assimilation and Transnationalism,” 1215.

became clear that although Roi and Nina grew up in America, they did not become agents of democracy when visiting Israel.<sup>122</sup>

### *Moments of Doubt*

Finally, the participants also exhibited moments of doubt, moments that made them question their identities to a point of extreme confusion and discomfort. These moments mainly happened because participants were living in liberal spaces and felt the anti-Israel backlash that came with an increased sympathy for Palestinian people. The participants' descriptions showed that understanding both sides of the story was not enough to be fully accepted as an Israeli living in liberal-America. There has been evidence that immigrant political environments affect their level of engagement, and participants tended to choose the side that gave them the "upper hand" in their environments.<sup>123</sup> As shown above, the pressures do influence the way Israeli youth identify and even how they present themselves. How does feeling under threat shape the identity of the Israeli youth? Both Tami and Ari mention similar events that they believed to be anti-Israel sentiments happening in college. In the two scenarios, the participants were not under direct attack but still felt powerless and silenced.

My school, at under-grad had apartheid week and it was anti-Israel all over the campus center. So there were maps of Israel basically saying Palestine is disappearing and it was this intense propaganda. I felt very unsafe, actually. I felt very unwelcome and very unsafe, it was a strange experience, very harrowing. But it was, you know, it's tough because I did unlearn a lot of Israeli propaganda too, so it's like you have to sit with like two stories that don't match up to each other. And when you look at the facts, really, you see a lot of outside influence and miscommunications and it sucks. It sucks to know the web and know how complicated it is and then have people scream apartheid at you. -Tami

There was an Israeli flag that got burnt during my senior year. They were low key about it, but you know how for ISO day, they put all the flags up at Kline. So, the Israeli flag mysteriously disappeared and it turns out that the Students for Justice in Palestine people burnt it in the community gardens. They had a little ceremony. Of course, no one said anything because no

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<sup>122</sup> Rother, "Changed in Migration?," 247.

<sup>123</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 90.

one's going to defend Israel. But, with all due respect, I don't think burning a flag is saving anyone's life. On the other hand though, I don't want to say that they can't do that because I also realize how fucked up nationalism can be. And so I'm not going to be like, 'Oh, you have to respect flags,' that's stupid. But obviously, it hurt in some type of way. And I think what was really interesting about that is that no one said anything. And of course, if it was any other flag, it would have been a big deal. But it kind of was swept under the rug... I think the difference between me and all the Americans is that they only know the bad and not the good. And so, we can have the same criticisms. But, mine is from a personal and experienced place and also from a place of love. -Ari

In describing their perspectives, Ari and Tami united in feeling misunderstood, unwelcome, hurt, and a sense of distress. Here, their identities were directly tied and even became reliant on the way people viewed them. Was it true that Americans viewed Israeli-Americans through the conflict? Whether it was or was not, the two participants both felt this way when they saw the hatred people in their social networks had towards Israel. While anger was directed at the conflict, much of which Israeli youth do oppose, the participants took the school apartheid week and the burning of an Israeli flag as a personal attack. This reality is particularly complex in the case of Israeli immigrants because many of them disapprove of various aspects of Israel. When liberal-Americans state their hatred of Israel, the participants experience a paradox between not wanting to defend the actions of Israel but wanting others to accept the identity they were born into. In reality, whether they are efficiently educated on the subject or not, Israeli Americans are placed in a position where they need to have some knowledge of the conflict as a way to construct their identities. Unlike all of the studies of political attachment levels on immigrants, the sample interviewed shows the unique circumstances of Israeli-Americans, where they have to be politically involved in one way or the other to understand who they are.<sup>124</sup>

Not only do events like these happen in college, but participants also dealt with significant questions of identity much earlier in their lives. For those who live in liberal spheres

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<sup>124</sup>Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 87.

like Tami and Ari, participants understood that they needed to carefully handle situations that involved the conflict. Israeli youth learn how to best display themselves to those around them while simultaneously constructing their identities. An example of a younger participant who had already experienced complex conversations with herself and others was Dena. In her later high school years, she realized that there was a tension between her and her liberal friends when it came to politics. Although Dena identified as liberal, she felt limited in what she could say to them about the conflict.

In my school, there was a burning of a free Palestine flag. And then, there was an uproar of students, who were like, 'that is awful, that's racist.' And so then they put the sign back up and then that student who burned the flag, she was Jewish, got a lot of hate from all these students. There were a lot of people saying 'Fuck Israel' and this very intense discrimination against Jews. I do really understand because in this context, she was being violent and she was escalating the situation. But, it was a weird thing to hear. I remember I was talking to one girl who was really outspoken about it, and she was against the girl who burned the flag and I said something about having an Israeli friend. And, she looked at me funny and she was like, 'What do you mean?' I was like, 'What do you mean? I mean, that's just where they live.' There is just this weird tension, especially because of the whole Palestine and Israeli conflict. It made everything a little bit more intense. I've definitely heard a lot of stuff like I wouldn't feel targeted by any of it, but a lot of the anti-Israel things that could be argued to be anti-Semitic in a way. I'm not sure if I really feel hurt by it or not. I don't really know how I feel about it, but I think it is something that's there... In class, I mentioned I'm Israeli. And then now they box me into this category when I don't even know if I fit there. So, it's difficult because you want to be able to, at least for me, see my family in Israel. I want to be able to agree with them. But, I also want to be able to live in New York and have the friends I have without messing it all up. It's hard to balance the two.  
-Dena

When comparing the burning of the "Free Palestine" flag with Ari's story of the burning of the Israeli flag, it is revealed that there was a separate standard that the two instigators were judged on. While the burning of the "Free Palestine" flag received a powerful backlash with social consequences, the burning of the Israeli flag was swept under the rug with few objecting to it. This is the kind of "upper-hand" that one receives when they side with liberal-Americans on the subject of the Israel-Palestine conflict.<sup>125</sup> Ari did want to comment on the situation but felt

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<sup>125</sup> Waldinger, "Engaged at Home from Abroad," 90.

worried it would not be received well. The frustration was not about the actual loyalty he had to the flag, but the lack of social reaction or consequences the people who did it received. Dena explains that once people found out she was Israeli, she was unable to escape the narrative that she was in support of the occupation. She describes the fear of “messaging up” her friendships in New York because she is Israeli, a fear that is rooted in the majority liberal sympathy for Palestinian people. Dena’s remarks show that while there is an over-conflation of Israeli Americans with support of Israel, the tension is that Dena did have a direct connection to the conflict, one that gave her the “lower hand.” It is not a question of support for the Israeli government’s actions, it is a question of proximity to the conflict and having her personal experiences say something different than what is being told to her. In describing the dichotomy between her friends and her family’s opinions, she exhibits a feeling of an internal loss, one that shows that the conflict and American-Israeli identities are inevitably intertwined.

### *Conclusion*

Unlike the research on immigrant attachment to homeland politics, all participants showed some level of engagement with Israeli politics due to the complex political history of the country. Although there was a different story for each participant, identification with Israel, which was shown through pride, proved to be inextricably linked to the conflict. While this is not the way local Israelis define themselves, Israeli-Americans found it difficult to separate the two, specifically because of the liberal climate most of them were raised in. Overall, participants had more sympathy for Palestinians than they did Israelis, except those who became more sympathetic of Israel after visiting. Although loyalty did not increase for America, as the straight-line theory argues, loyalty did increase towards liberal-America. In this sense, Israeli-Americans were integrating into the America that they were raised in, one that had

stronger sympathy for Palestinians. In the process of growing up with parents who had offered a one-sided view of the conflict, participants had “moments of realization,” moments of alignment, with the Palestinian side of the story.

Mostly taking place in American education systems, it was also the people and the students inside the institutions that provoked participants to understand the conflict in a separate way from the one they were raised with. Interestingly, two participants who had more sympathy towards Israelis became more sympathetic towards Palestinians after living in Israel. These cases can be explained through symbolic ethnicity as an initial act for participants to feel unique, rather than forming their personal opinions on the subject. Most participants expressed getting provoked for being Israeli, which either led to a disconnect from their Israeli identity or a stronger embrace of it. Given the circumstances, many participants who grew up in liberal spheres felt like they had to carefully articulate their identities. Coming off as feeling responsible for their Israeli history and family members, it was actually their Israeli-American identity that they were defending. In this sense, Israelis, just like Americans, also fell victim to the conflation of the conflict with their Israeli identity. And, because of this, identification with Israel correlated with the level of support one had for Israelis.

## **Conclusion: Unpacking the Self**

*Would you consider moving to Israel?* I think the most honest thing I can say is that it makes me really sad to say probably no. There's this song by Shlomi Artzi, and it really captures what I feel, which is that this place is so beautiful and it lives in my memory, especially the West Bank. I mean, it's such a beautiful place. But, I just don't feel like I belong anymore...My whole family is there, except mom and dad and my siblings, everyone is there. So, it's really sad not to get to see them and my grandma all the time.  
-Shay

In my final question for my participants, I asked whether they would consider moving to Israel, what I now see was a test to see the participants' connection to the country. As Shay highlighted, all participants, no matter how definitive their answer was, exhibited some internal frustration, one that stemmed from an inability to *see or accept* their parents' home as their own. Participants landed on both sides of the spectrum when asked if they would move to Israel, from direct refusals to people who were currently living there. No matter what their answer was, it was clear that participants seriously debated the subject, particularly because of their overwhelming disapproval of the actions of the Israeli government, both towards Palestinian people and even Israeli citizens. While some acknowledged being able to set this disapproval aside and would consider moving there, others felt doing this would mean abandoning their set of beliefs for their personal benefit. In this sense, being Israeli in America made participants think about their heritage and identity in ways that had direct consequences for their future both in where and with whom they felt most accepted, most at home.

In Chapter 1, participants exhibited either a direct or indirect embodiment of the American Dream based on a perception of their mobility in America. In describing their family and personal stories, it was revealed that participants used a narrative of race to explain their parents' success stories. While this was not the intention of the interview questions nor the chapter, scarce research has been done directly on the subject of racialization when it comes to Israeli-American assimilation. The results showed that although Ashkenazi parents seemed to



move up the socioeconomic ladder faster and more often than Sephardic parents, all second-generation participants, no matter the ethnicity nor their narrative, exhibited middle-class aspirations and achievements. Due to an initially lower level of human capital, Sephardic participants did display having a more difficult time integrating into society and some even mentioned being discriminated against for their ethnicity. But, they also explained that their parents set high expectations, leading them to a path similar to the one that their Ashkenazi peers were on. Although racialization did not prove to be an indication of Israel-America second-generation integration, the participants' insistence on this narrative shows that they have embodied the American lens in which ethnicity is processed.

Moving onto Chapter 2, it was found that participants expanded the boundaries of ethnicity to include religion. But, the less traditional the participants were, the more they could control the way religion defined their ethnicity and vice versa. Most participants practiced religion through traditions and were, therefore, better able to build a family-like community for themselves compared to the more isolated experience of the traditional participants. They conflated Judaism with 'Israeliness,' a unique phenomenon that was possible because of the country's religious basis. Meaning, except for a few exceptions, people who felt less connected to Israel also felt less connected to Judaism. Although self-definition was variable to religiosity, all participants rejected Jewish-Americans as an extension to their community, even when this rejection meant having no community at all, as for the more traditional participants. It was evident that ethnicity was connected to an ability to build an ethno-religious community, but it remains unresolved if this was a correlation or causation relationship.

Finally, in Chapter 3, it became clear that the Israel-Palestine conflict was at the core of participants' Israeli-America identities. Since second-generation Israelis mainly resided in

metropolitans, they were exposed to liberal ideologies growing up, including a stronger sympathy for Palestinians in the conflict. Because of this, participants were consistently being reminded of their Israeli identities and home ties, a unique occurrence considering the comparably low level of political engagement immigrants usually have with their home country. Since they were being reminded of their connection to Israel, they grew to understand their own identities through the conflict. With a significantly stronger sympathy for Palestinians, the sample showed that there was a predominant loyalty given to American-liberalism, more than a loyalty to their families. This prioritization is not a given, considering the homeland ties participants had, but was a sacrifice in part of their socialization in America. Even if they were unable to discuss their sympathy for Palestinians with their families or in Israel, the mental effect the conflict had on participants was tasking and never-ending.

In disentangling how the identities of second-generation Israeli-Americans are shaped by their upbringings, their personal narrative in comparison to the facts they presented was a powerful indicator of one's identity. It seems as though American-Israeli youth have been 'Americanized' in many ways. In terms of their views on success, the emphasis of race encapsulated the liberal environment they were part of. This was also seen in the final chapter, where participants eventually became encapsulated in liberal ideologies, ones that local Israelis rarely exhibit when speaking of the conflict. It seemed as though the more shame one felt about the conflict, the less attached they were to Israel. Another factor that affected attachment to Israel was religiosity, given that Israel and Judaism proved to be so intertwined. All participants viewed and presented their Judaism as part of their Israeli identities. Although the less traditional participants could compensate for this redefinition of ethnic bounds, the more traditional ones

exhibited more difficulty doing so. Nonetheless, the dedication to their traditions was pursued despite the lack of community this resulted in.

The elaborated adaptation to American ideologies did not come without consequence. Almost all participants outlined feelings of an “identity crisis” somewhere along the line of the interview because they felt unable to express their Israeli identities in the way they wanted. While they had moments where they could choose how they presented themselves, they were often seen from the outside as something different than what they felt. Although they knew what they were not, many had a more difficult time saying what they were. Israeli youth tried to control the shaping of their identities, particularly in their caution not to “become” Jewish-Americans, yet they were constantly being reminded of their identities particularly because Americans know or feel like they know the history of Israel. This is why some participants felt doubtful about identifying as Israeli, many worrying that people will associate their heritage with their political views. Although Israeli-Americans became enmeshed in American society, many still fought for their Israeli history and family. But, most exceptionally, they all still fought, whether internally or externally, whether for or against, their Israeli identities. It was present, it wasn’t near dissipating, despite the assimilation, and despite the pain.

It is important to highlight some of the limitations of this paper, including how this influenced the findings. Since twelve subjects were interviewed for this study, significant trends and societal generalization for this group cannot be made. More time in future studies could be allotted to interviewing, therefore expanding the number of participants. The small sample size, particularly that of the Sephardic participants, meant trends often boiled down to two or three interviews, not enough to make concise conclusions. In addition, the sample that I was able to contact also lacked political, geographical, and religious diversity, therefore creating a study that

was mainly done on participants who were Democratic, raised in liberal cities, and Jewish.

Another shortcoming was that the focus on second-generation Israelis gave more leeway for participants to describe their parents' stories in the way they had seen it and in a less objective manner, which could be fixed in future studies by interviewing children with their parents.

Similarly, particularly for Chapter 1, the sample was done on participants whose parents stayed in America and not gone back for financial reasons, which could have had an influence on success rates.

When taking a step back to understand how this case study compares to other immigrant experiences in America, the Israeli-American second-generation shows that some immigrant groups are pushed to hold on to their heritage. First, the case shows that the straight-line theory proved true, even for those who were ethnically ambiguous and had lower human capital.

Meaning, ethnic ambiguity can be manipulated into the mainstream with enforcement of higher aspirations. Second, when it comes to community building for immigrants, religion did not prove to play a significant role in cultural integration because they were able to integrate into American society in other ways. The subject of symbolic ethnicity showed that attachment to home did have an effect on identification with the home country. The more support one exhibited for their home country, the more ethnic pride they felt. Third, the political straight-line theory was not proven in this unique case of second-generation identity because the political context of the country remained relevant today in America. The home country's historical and current political issues increased their engagement with the home country, but not particularly their loyalty to it. Instead, loyalty was given to the political environment that they grew up in, an influence that was only briefly mentioned in one of the studies.

Just as I entered this project with a curiosity about the exceptionalism of Israeli immigrants, I leave with more questions, ones that I could not cover in the scope of this paper. One of the significant outcomes of this paper was the narrative that participants had about their parents. With further research, the analysis would have benefitted from a comparison of interviews with the participants' parents. In addition, while I found the most interesting aspect of Israeli identity to be success, religion, and politics, further research can expand on these subjects by adding categories such as an investigation of gender. The question of *identity* when it comes to second-generation immigrants has not been as researched as one might assume. Identity formation patterns are not simple nor set and proved to be constantly morphing within the sample interviewed. The question of identity for second-generation youth is complex because their parents' identities came to existence on a completely different continent than their own. Participants had to balance their heritage with the place they were born into. In this process, they were confronted with moments of choice, loss, confusion, and eventually had to figure out their personal formula for understanding *who* they were and *where* they could best do this.

## Appendices

### 1. Participant Demographics

Name of Participant	Generation	Age	Pronouns	Ethnic Descent	Education Status
Ari	2nd Gen.	23	He/Him	Ashkenazi	High School Diploma; Bachelor's Degree
Dalia	2nd Gen.	18	She/Her	½ Ashkenazi; ½ Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Enrolled to Begin Bachelor's Degree
Dena	2nd Gen.	18	She/Her	¾ Ashkenazi; ¼ Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Enrolled to Begin Bachelor's Degree
Elijah	2nd Gen.	22	He/Him	¾ Ashkenazi; ¼ Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Bachelor's Degree
Gilad	2nd Gen.	24	He/Him	Ashkenazi	High School Diploma
Lir	2nd Gen.	21	He/Him	¾ Ashkenazi; ¼ Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Completing Bachelor's Degree
Nina	1.5 Gen.	19	She/Her	¾ Ashkenazi; ¼ Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Completing Bachelor's Degree
Roi	2nd Gen.	23	He/Him	Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Bachelor's Degree
Shay	2nd Gen.	31	He/Him	Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Bachelor's Degree; Completing Master's Degree
Susan	1.5 Gen.	22	She/Her	½ Ashkenazi; ½ Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Completing Bachelor's Degree
Tami	2nd Gen.	26	They/Them	½ Ashkenazi; ½ Sephardic	High School Diploma; Bachelor's Degree; Completing Master's Degree
Yechezkel	1.5 Gen.	24	He/Him	½ Ashkenazi; ½ Mizrahi	High School Diploma; Bachelor's Degree

## 2. Interview Questions

### - **Intro**

Why did your parent/parents decide to immigrate to America? How long have they been here?  
Do you know how their family and friends reacted when they left? (Did they experience support or disapproval?)

### - **Economics**

What is your parents' occupation? How did they get their job? (Do you know if they work in a network with other Israelis or American Jews?)

How would you describe your parents' socioeconomic status before they came?

How would you describe it today?

Can you define what success means to you and if you think your parents have achieved it?

What are your values/opinions about social mobility and economic success in America (American Dream)?

How do your values on wealth differ or align with your parents'?

Would you recommend other Israelis to move to the United States?

### - **Religion/Identity**

Do you feel a sense of belonging or community in America?

Do you think Israelis have created a community in America?

Do you have Israeli friends or family members? If so, have you or do you think you will use this network as a resource? If not, what other networks can you rely on?

Do you see American Jews as a resource?

How do you and your family practice religion? (Are you more or less religious)?

Does religion hold a place in your Israeli identity?

What do you think about Jewish-American life? Do you identify with American Jews/Judaism?

What do you think about the relationship between Israelis and American Jews?

Have you encountered antisemitism throughout your lifetime or do you know of anyone who has?

Do you feel more Israeli or American? Both? (Do you speak Hebrew?)

What do you think about Americans?

What does being Israeli mean to you?

Are you proud to be Israeli? Why or why not?

### - **Politics**

How would you define yourself on the American political spectrum (liberal, moderate, conservative)?

Where do you stand on the Israel-Palestine conflict?

How would you define your parents' political views in America and Israel?

What kind of discussion do you have with your parents about American politics? What about Israeli politics?

Do you have similar or different political views to your parents?

Do you have similar or different political views to your friends?

Do you feel pressure in America to hold certain political views over others? Do you feel pressure from your family?

Are you closer with your friend's political views or your parents'?

Would you ever move to Israel?

- **Demographics:**

How old are you?

What are your pronouns?

Where were you born and raised (city, state)?

What is your current education level?

What is your ethnicity?

How many Israeli parents do you have?

Were they born in Israel or another country?

Are your parents Ashkenazi or Sephardic? What is their ethnic background?

What is their marital status?

What are your parents' education levels?

Did they study in Israel or in America?



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