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Making room at the table: Incorporation of foreign workers in Israel[☆]

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how foreign workers' presence is redefining the identity borders of Israeli society and the challenges posed to Israeliness by the inclusion of first, 1.5 and second generation foreign workers in the Israeli polity. We explore how these migrants perceive life in Israel, their own and their children's identities, prospects for incorporation and permanence and intersections between Israeliness and Jewishness. To inform our analysis, we conducted interviews in winter 2010 with 22 foreign workers who are first generation; about half are parents of children in Israel. Our analysis reveals that foreign workers seek acceptance into the Israeli polity, especially for their children who have been socialized into Israeli life and that their potential inclusion has real implications for the understanding of what it means to be Israeli.

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1. Introduction

Citizenship is a fundamental organizing principle delineating insiders and outsiders. The determination of who the members are is often a hotly contested idea. Israel, despite being the world's only Jewish state, is no exception and provides a useful context for understanding temporary migrants in an ethnonational state where there is a fundamental mismatch between members of the nation and all of the members of the state, an issue confronted by many states whose temporary migrants have become permanent residents.

In Israel, this debate comes in the form of asking 'what is Israeli?' and, if it is possible to conceive of Israeliness without Jewishness? Israeliness here refers to a civil, political, linguistic, territorial space. What Israeliness actually is and who could be included under the definition of Israeli, is, however, contested (Kimmerling, 2002, 2004; Liebman & Don-Yehiya, 1981; Shafir & Peled, 2002). Given the scope and rapidity of (Jewish) immigrant incorporation in Israel concomitant with developing national cohesion and coherent national myths, it is not surprising that there is no

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consensus on what Israeliness really means. Even in Israel's earliest days, elites worried about (Jewish) immigrants altering of the nascent Israeli culture (Kimmerling, 2004). Now, as in any ethnonational state in transition, defining membership becomes more complex with the addition of immigrants from around the globe who interact with natives and the state and introduce new customs, languages, religions and behaviors and whose presence invites and incites new behaviors from the receiving state.

Since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948, being "Israeli" was synonymous with being Jewish. Any exceptions, including the now 1.5 million Arabs (about 20% of the total population) residing inside Israeli borders, most of whom are Israeli citizens, were excluded from the dominant citizenship discourse.² The mutually exclusive contextual framing of Israeli citizenship held mainly because it served the Jewish–Arab divide, which remains, outside of Israel, the dominant prism through which to understand Israeli society and politics (Kimmerling, 2002; Shafir & Peled, 2002). The citizenship discourse recently has become more complicated, mainly due to the influx of new non-Jewish immigrants, especially from the Former Soviet Union (FSU), and a large number of foreign workers.³ Foreign workers pose a new reality: they are not Jews or related to Jews nor are they indigenous Arabs. Although some have found a home in Israel, these migrants live largely at the periphery of Israeli society. Nonetheless, some migrant children, born and raised in Israel – unrecognized by Israeli law – are being socialized through Israeli schools and everyday life and actually identify as Israelis. Practically, as the number of foreign workers rise, the majority of Jews in the Jewish state declines. Symbolically, as foreign workers increasingly undertake menial tasks, they challenge long honed Israeli images of "sabras" (native born Israelis) who make the desert bloom through ingenuity; of the "new Jew" whose physical labor counteracts the old European claims of unproductive classes; of the unified engaged community, as embodied in the almost mythic Israeli form of *kibbutz*; and of Herzl's *Judenstaat*, as a state for Jewish people and not only of Jewish principles.

In this piece, we explore how foreign workers' presence is redefining the identity borders of Israeli society and the challenges posed to the citizenship definition by the inclusion of first, 1.5 and second generation foreign workers in the Israeli polity. We argue that their experiences and interactions with Israelis and with the Israeli government are part of Israeli life and should not be perceived as parallel experiences. As such, their experiences in Israel bear on the Israeliness–Jewishness debate and on what it means to be Israeli. We explore how these migrants perceive life in Israel, their own and their children's identities, prospects for incorporation and permanence, perceptions of social borders and entry points and intersections between Israeliness and Jewishness. To inform our analysis, we conducted interviews with 22 foreign workers who are first generation, about half of whom are parents of children in Israel.

2. The Israeli case

Israel poses an intriguing setting for understanding contemporary temporary migrants in an ethnonational state: while its doors are wide open to Jews, regardless of national background, the exclusive nature of "Jewishness" rebuffs penetration from non-Jews. The Proclamation of the Establishment of the State of Israel reads "The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and the ingathering of the exiles. . ." This was implemented through the 1950 Law of Return, which proclaims "Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh*" (a Jew returning from Diaspora). Any Jew may "claim" his Israeli citizenship upon arrival in Israel and be offered citizenship rights and obligations available to all other Israeli citizens including voting and political participation, settlement monies and subsidies as well as military service obligations.⁴ Israel has no immigration policy: all "immigrants" are Jews, and thus, citizens at entry; related to Jews, and covered by modifications in the Law of Return⁵; or, in rare cases, refugees covered by international treaties. All Jews arriving in Israel are automatically citizens of Israel if they request *aliya* (Hebrew for "immigration" and also refers to ascending for religious honors). All others are considered temporary and expected to leave after completing tourism or work.

² See especially Kimmerling (2002).

³ Israel uses, and we have adopted, the term "*ovedim zarim*" or foreign workers.

⁴ Jews do not "immigrate," as they are already citizens. They must only assert claims for extant citizenship.

⁵ See "Law of Return 5710-1950", Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website, http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1950_1959/Law%20of%20Return%205710-1950.

3. Making room at the table?

Can Israel's identity borders be stretched to include still other non-Jews and yet remain a cohesive Israeli (Jewish) state? Since the 1990s, once the Israeli public discovered Philip Martin's (1994, p. 86) 'iron law of labor migration' that "there is nothing more permanent than temporary workers," national debates have moved beyond hackneyed discussions over "who's a Jew" to "normalized" national discussions of "what's an Israeli?" (Elias & Kemp, 2010; Kimmerling, 2004). This new discourse has seismic implications on Israeli national self-definition. Whether Israel can accommodate foreign workers or if their very presence is a threat to the viability of the state remains contested and part of public discourse (Rajman & Semyonov, 2004). The spectrum of thought on incorporation of the foreign workers is wide. Shulamit Aloni, supporter of foreign workers' rights and former leader of the Meretz Party (party for civil rights and peace), caustically wrote in 2009:

It is not sufficient for him (i.e., Prime Minister Netanyahu) to be Israeli – even though in all the prayers one finds expressions only about the people of Israel, the God of Israel, the Torah of Israel, while the word "Jew" is never mentioned. The simple reason for this is that "Jews" are a religious ethnic group born in the Diaspora, and whose place is in the Diaspora, while we are a sovereign country where a Hebrew community existed and where today citizens of the State of Israel reside.

In contrast, PM Netanyahu underscores the opposition of inclusion of foreign workers as a threat not just to being Israeli but Israel's way of life. He states

Massive entrance of migrant workers to Israel in recent years created security problems, drugs and mainly a collapse of the labor market and decrease in wages. . . We are firstly committed to our own (Netanyahu as cited in Greenberg, 2010).

4. Foreign workers

'And remember that thou was a servant in the land of Egypt'. This supreme decree will determine our approach towards our neighbor.

Menachem Begin, following the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel

Despite being an ethnonational state, Israel has used foreign workers to supplement labor supplies since the pre-state Yishuv period (Shafir & Peled, 2002). Then, most of the workers were Palestinians, commuting daily to Israel proper to perform dirty, dangerous and dull work (Peled, 1992). Contemporary foreign worker migration is different from this foreign labor in that it involves importing labor from abroad and the migrants reside in Israel itself. Following the outbreak of violence from the first Palestinian civil insurrection in the late 1980s – the Intifada – Israel sealed the borders to Palestinian workers; this, just as the state struggled to provide housing to more than a million FSU immigrants who were entitled to resettlement by their Israeli citizenship. Lacking workers, agricultural firms demanded immediate labor importation to harvest crops and construction firms lobbied for labor to replace the Palestinians rather than modernize conditions or make jobs more appealing to Israelis (Bartram, 2004). Over time, Israeli firms invoked pressure to import workers for other monotonous, low paying tasks including caregiving and household assistance.

Much like the temporary worker policies used in the Gulf states and abandoned in Western Europe in the 1970s, the government issues permits to specific firms for a given number of migrants per year. The government issued permits to manpower companies to conclude contracts with workers from China, Nigeria, Philippines, Romania, Thailand, etc. for work in agriculture, construction, hospitality, ethnic cookery/catering, nursing/caregiving, welding and industrial professions. In all but caregiving, there are fixed annual quotas. Table 1 reflects figures of legal foreign workers. Estimates put the real number of temporary workers closer to 350,000; two thirds of whom are illegally present. Foreign labor accounts for about 10% of the Israeli labor market, surpassing all industrialized countries (except for Switzerland) in foreign labor as a percent of the labor force (OECD, 2001).

Employers essentially indenture migrants, compelling fees for work in Israel. Employers profit by getting new workers to pay contract fees so there is little incentive to find new jobs for current workers if dissatisfied or when the

Table 1
Distribution of ‘legal’ migrant workers in Israel (2008).

Country of origin	Total number (in thousands)
Total	114.7
Asia ^a total	89.2
India	4.6
Turkey	2.6
Nepal	6.9
China	12.2
Sri Lanka	2.2
Philippines	29.3
Thailand	29.7
Other	1.7
Africa total	0.4
Europe total	23.7
Bulgaria	1.7
FSU ^b	9.8
Germany	0.1
United Kingdom	0.1
Romania	10.9
Other	1.1
America Oceania total	1.0
USA	0.4
Others	0.6
Unknown	0.2

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics.

^a Includes Asian Republics of FSU.

^b Includes only European Republics of FSU.

contract expires, but great financial incentive to contract with new workers. This creates a ‘revolving door policy’ in which companies pressure politicians to deport migrant workers while simultaneously importing new migrants to fill now empty jobs, in order to increase profit margins. Due to the state’s clientelist pose (Bartram, 1998), the state responds to these demands for additional work permits and foreign workers. Since there is no policy mechanism to compel repatriation, foreign worker populations continue to swell. But since residency rights are tied to labor contracts, when jobs end, so does official residency, thus enticing migrants wanting to remain to become illegal. Migrants become illegal workers by overstaying legal work visas; leaving assigned employers to become what the Israeli authorities call a “runaway.”⁶

As a condition of employment, employers are responsible for providing accommodations, medical care, social benefits, schools, language training, etc. The government established rules to accommodate the workers to a limited extent. Israeli law mandates rest time and religious practice time, sets wage and labor standards and establishes grievance procedures. The government even published a multilingual guide for rights for foreign workers.⁷ However, enforcement is not a priority and is largely delegated to employers who are simultaneously responsible for offering work and for responding to workers’ complaints about that work (Drori, 2009). Foreign workers are in a precarious situation if they complain about work conditions, as they risk rescission of their contract, and concomitantly, legal status and contract fees. The practical result is employment rights abuse claims from workers who effectively have no place to go for assistance – aside from some nonprofit organizations – but to their employers. Symbolically, by removing the government from interaction with the migrants and leaving their well-being to the employers, the government can absolve itself from long term planning for the seemingly now permanent temporary foreign workers.

⁶ Illegal workers also includes those working after entering without papers or with false papers. Willen (2007) observes that the Israeli government has great difficulty distinguishing between pilgrims and migrants seeking work. This theme was beautifully depicted in Ra’anan Alexandrowicz’ 2003 film “James’ Journey to Jerusalem.”

⁷ See <http://www.gov.il/FirstGov/TopNavEng/EngSituations/ESMigrantWorkersGuide> for the English version.

Since Israel has no immigration policy and the government is cowed by employer pressures for additional workers, deportation remains the sole effective means by which the state can control temporary migrant population growth. During a clampdown in 2002, Israel launched a new immigration control initiative under the direction of the Ministry of the Interior (separate from the Ministry for Immigrant Absorption, which is for people immigrating under the Law of Return) including deploying an Immigration Police unit, *Oz Unit* (“courage,” in Hebrew), that is tasked to find, detain and deport workers without visas. The government has also unsuccessfully offered repatriation payments to encourage emigration. For the first time in February 2010 some African workers agreed to payment and repatriation after a year of work (Liphshiz, 2010). The government has attempted internal mobility restrictions to limit migrant population concentration. In 2008, it restricted migrants from living between Gedera and Hadera (two cities located 20 miles north and south of Tel Aviv) to reduce the numbers of migrant workers in the Tel Aviv area. The policy was rescinded after protests both from refugee organizations – claiming community isolation and restrictions on freedom of movement – and from municipalities outside the region – decrying increasing the number of foreign workers under their jurisdiction.

Since the policy direction remains unclear and the government only intermittently enforces deportation policies, many workers actually choose to become illegal workers, as paradoxically, illegal workers have more freedom than their legal counterparts. They may live where they can find housing, charge the price they wish for their labor, take or leave jobs, at will. However, clearly, they trade employment freedom for more precarious residency status.

5. Foreign workers’ children

Children of foreign workers pose a potentially more intractable problem. Israeli law generously grants pregnant foreign workers 14 weeks maternity leave but then requires mothers to leave Israel. Many remain with their children who are neither temporary workers nor citizens and thus, have no legal status in Israel.⁸ Israel estimates that 2000 children fall into this category. Some have citizenship from their parents’ countries of origin, but may have no attachment to those countries beyond legal claims to citizenship, as they neither maintain residence nor speak the local language. Some are even stateless as their nations of origin don’t, or won’t, recognize them.

In June 2005, the government recognized the growing number of foreign worker children residing in Israel who fell into this precarious non-status but who were socialized into Israeli society.⁹ It developed an amnesty option for children whose parents entered Israel legally but overstayed their visas or fell out of status, and were at least 10 years old, lived continuously in Israel, studied at Israeli schools, spoke Hebrew and deemed “removing (these children) from Israel would be akin to ‘cultural exile’ to a country with which (they have) no cultural ties” (*Cabinet Communiqué, 26 June 2005*). Parents could apply for status for minor children. If granted, the parents and any minor siblings would gain renewable temporary residency status through their children. Once the children served in the Israeli army, the government would extend citizenship to siblings and parents would gain permanent residency, thus letting foreign worker children serve the state, be socialized as Israelis and, through their children, all are reborn as Israelis (see *Kimmerling, 2004* for the role of the military and immigrants). The Population Authority stipulated that 460 families, accounting for 1400 people, have applied for status; 35 families had been approved (*Sa’ar, 2006*). Then PM Ehud Olmert noted that the Israeli state had a special responsibility to these children, binding them to clear members of Israeli society and their inclusion in Israeli society as intrinsic to Jewishness:

The State of Israel will lose its moral standing if it evades its responsibility towards the weaker populations – the elderly, the pensioners, the Holocaust survivors, the disabled, the ailing, the children at risk, battered women and those targeted for illegal trade – all those needing protection and assistance, including the children of foreign workers who grow up among us and love our country, and wish to be part of it. It is not only our duty towards them. It is first and foremost our duty towards our moral standards.

However, in the same statement, there is an odd, and potentially troubling expression, to describe the transformation of foreign worker children into Israeli citizens, by saying that it “will enable the ‘laundering’ of foreign

⁸ This issue is being contested before the Supreme Court.

⁹ *Adriana Kemp (2007)* provides an interesting analysis of internal politics, “Managing Migration, Reprioritizing National Citizenship: Undocumented Migrant Workers’ Children and Policy Reforms in Israel,” *Theoretical Inquiries in Law*. July 2007, 8, pp. 663–700.

workers in Israel” (*Communique*, 4 May 2006). Whether this means that the children’s (and their parents’) status will be cleansed of legal wrongdoing through adjudication of migration status or that they are symbolically purified for mainstream Israeli society remains unclear.

The flipside of this state receptivity to certain Israeli-socialized foreign workers’ children is an intermittently implemented draconian deportation policy, deporting thousands of migrants. Government deportation efforts included promises to deport some children as they left their schools, engendering fear in both legally and illegally present foreign workers. In 2009, Israel issued a deportation warrant for 1200 migrant children, but due to mass public pressure, the government postponed – but did not rescind – the deportation order. A few NGO’s led by “Israeli Children” (<http://israeli-children.org.il>) mobilized actions against the deportations. In July 2010, the government decided to deport 400 of these children. Adult migrant deportation continues unabated. In February 2010, the government launched “Operation Clean Streets.” The February 19, 2010 cover of “Ha-Ir” (“The City”), a local Tel Aviv-Jaffa newspaper provocatively inquired “Where were you during the municipal cleaning operation?” superimposed on a picture of an Israeli immigration inspector straddling an African migrant and pressing him to the ground, the migrant’s wrists shackled and face contorted in pain. It is notable, again, that the government chose to use the word “clean” to describe the action for removing the migrants. Those who named the policy must have assessed either – disturbingly – the migrants are “dirtying” the streets of Tel Aviv and so the streets need to be cleansed of their filth or – perhaps, more positively – the Israelis must learn to clean up after themselves.¹⁰

6. Methods

We conducted a series of interviews with 22 temporary workers from 10 different countries in the winter of 2010 about their thoughts, experiences, and opinions about life in Israel for foreign workers and opportunities for incorporation, inclusion in and exclusion from the Israeli polity. Initial contact was made through postings and outreach at migrant social services organization and through referrals from participants. Interview partners consented to participation. All but three interviews were conducted in English (the remainder in Spanish) in public places. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded according to standard grounded theory practices (see *Strauss & Corbin, 1998*) to discover themes related to belonging and exclusion for migrant workers in Israel. We engaged interview data to see the Israeli polity through foreign workers’ eyes, since there are few studies that explore intergenerational understanding of identity for temporary workers, the foreign worker communities are hard to reach, and the Israeli socio-political environment is dynamic.

7. Interview partners

As a biographical profile, we note the following about the people we interviewed. The ratio of females to males was 3:1. Mean age was 34. The range of time spent in Israel was between 4 and 16 years, with a mean of 8.5 years. The region of origin was weighted toward Asians (60%), with Africans at 30% and Latin Americans at 10%. Half were caregivers¹¹; about a quarter were cleaners; the rest were construction workers/day laborers.

8. Findings

We focus on three main issues – “holiness”, arbitrariness and invisibility – which cause cleavage from the dominant Israeli citizenship definition as understood as Jewish (or, outside of the dominant discourse, Arab Muslim or Christian); community of equals; members of the community. Further, we examine intergenerational identity evolution to show that even among nonmembers, Israeli (and even Jewish) identities emerge, again revealing that “Israeli” is a malleable and adoptable concept, even for those never imagined into the community.

¹⁰ See especially *Rosenhek (2007)*, (in *Willen, 2007*) for discussions of cleanliness and disease.

¹¹ Israelis use the term “caregivers” and ‘caregiving’ for eldercare, childcare and household assistants/assistance. We use that term as here.

8.1. “Holiness”

Like temporary workers the world over, our participants experienced financial difficulties in their home countries and came to Israel to make money. (Even those with political problems, explained that it made it impossible for them to make a living.) However, expectations for life in Israel were far less concerned with pecuniary matters. Despite stories of difficulty from previous migrants, universally, they imagined life in Israel as described in the Bible: surrounded by holy people who acted holy. The following echoes the expectations for Israeli behavior:

I was thinking really, because I am a Christian. I am a Christian and Israel is a holy place. So what I did expect is that I will find people who will be as good as what I have read from the Bible because of our religion. To be kind, to be always, to be God fearing and to be working like or doing good things, every good thing they can do.

All had opportunities to go to other countries, as in other studies, many saw redemption through coming to Israel for work (Fenster & Vigel, 2006; Liebelt, 2010; Sabar, 2007). They imagined “coming to the sacred place where Jesus was born. . .and living with the characters from the Bible,” as one informant explained. Our informants were not merely looking for the holy in Israel but also to spark it in themselves. They came to the holy land to work, for sure, but also to experience something holy. A Filipina female caregiver explained:

The most beautiful experience is to be born as a Christian. When I realized how blessed I am to be in the holy land, the promised land, where Jesus step on. When I realized I am very, very blessed, that I came here for this land, for the purpose of the God.

A Colombian female cleaner similarly echoed:

In school they teach us religion classes and they talk about Israel, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. The first thing I wanted to see Jerusalem and Bethlehem. I had studied it, and wanted to get to see it. Go to Jerusalem to see legends. You feel it in your heart.

Suffering isolation, local ethnic churches provide community and are often the only places where foreign workers can meet regularly with others in a non-work environment (Raijman & Kemp, 2004; Sabar, 2007). However, contrary to other studies suggesting religious practice and connection to religious institutions as a means of rationalizing illegal presence in Israel (Raijman & Kemp, 2004) or to make them more palatable to Israelis (Bartram, 2011), we find, that religiosity was unrelated to legal status and although we concur that as Christians, they now had a relationship to the land of Israel and to Jewish Israelis, religion served a more instrumental role in providing support and connecting foreigners from disparate lands in some common way (Fenster & Vigel, 2006; Sabar, 2007) and further, it gave them identity in Israel. As Christians, foreign workers became a “recognizable other” to Jews, a “someone” in Israel, whereas as foreign workers, they were “invisible” to Israelis.

However, religiosity was not a bridge to Israelis. Often the workers were frustrated by Israeli secularism and not being “like people in the Bible.” A female Colombian cleaner, expressed her shock at Israelis’ comportment:

Wow, the truth. I found what I didn’t expect. I thought the country was different. . . I imagined it would be different. When I arrived, I imagined that the people, because it was the holy land, everyone went about their lives all covered up. I brought things to cover myself didn’t realize was such a liberated country. It was horrible.

You used the Word horrible. What was horrible?

Horrible. Because in Colombia, they talk about Israel as if it were such a holy country. Something different when I arrived. I saw girls walking almost naked on the street. That’s what was horrible. In a country supposedly a holy land, they walk almost naked!...It’s not what I expected.

Disappointment from expectations about the receiving country is a problem not unique to Israel, and would be expected to be found in receiving states with strong mythic images. However, disappointment with unfulfilled expectations of holiness cannot easily be remedied by public policy.

In this way, the opposition of being non-Jewish and simultaneously being religious in Israel, positions the foreign workers in a precarious political situation. They are unlikely to find political allies within the prevailing Israeli identity politics which pits religious Jews with their circumscribed sense of ethno-Jewish citizenship and they cannot join secular Jews with their secular liberal citizenship definition. Further, there are few sources they can draw on to solidify their right to be in Israel, as they are unlike any of the other marginalized groups in Israel: Arabs hold formal citizenship and linkages to the land of Israel prior to the establishment of the state of Israel. Most Ethiopians are Jews and all are eligible for *aliya* under the Law of Return. Converts are considered by most Israelis as Jews. Non-Jewish FSU migrants hold formal Israeli citizenship based on their right of return under the Law of Return. And, FSU migrants are entitled to most of the formal rights associated with Israeli citizenship and are therefore able to bridge the difference between Israeliness and Jewishness in a way that simply is unavailable to the migrant workers. In contrast, the foreign workers remain what their name states: foreign and workers.

8.2. Arbitrariness

In a democracy, citizenship is differentiated from subjecthood by the fact that the citizen is a ruler and sovereign. Citizens have a measure of certainty in bureaucratic action and can respond when the bureaucracy does not behave in a dependable way, while noncitizens are subject to arbitrary law making and imposition and enforcement of laws. Even in states where the laws refer to persons and not citizens, that extension is at the will of the sovereign and revoked at will. Being a foreign worker in Israel means subjection to arbitrary law-making and rule enforcement. Migrants observed that police and immigration police (especially) inconsistently applied and enforced rules. A Filipina female caregiver remarks on this arbitrariness:

I can say that sometimes their decision, it's not totally firm. One minute they decide, then, they change it. Just like that. It's like if you go to the high people, what they say that they totally follow. Just like what happens in the surroundings. It's a little bit *balagan* (disorganized/crazy).

At times, our interviewees were grateful for the capriciousness, if they had forgotten required visas or passports at home or were illegally present and were simply warned to leave soon, rather than being taken for detention or deportation. Other times, the stories were disturbing. Immigration police entered in the middle of the night, seizing a spouse who had overstayed his visa or stopping people randomly on the street to check papers and threaten deportation. Bureaucrats seemed to let migrants dangle without a clear idea of what would become of them. A Togolese male construction worker recounted his experience in an immigration jail, not knowing if his application for asylum would be honored (and he would be released) or if he would be deported. He was especially concerned as the agents presented documents for his signature which were in Hebrew and he did not read Hebrew.

They followed me in the street. . . So one girl, she asked me, "How long you are here in Israel?" . . . I tell her 6 years and some months. She tell me then, "Now, you need to go." I didn't even have, I didn't even try to agree with her. That's for my thinking, she don't know why I am here and she, she has to tell me that it's enough and for me to go. . . So they kept me (in a detention facility) . . . They say "Ok, now. . . you need to sign this paper. . . otherwise we will take you and put you in the jail." And then, "Look, it's written in Hebrew. How can I know you are telling me what it's written there? How can I sign for the people that I don't know?" They tell me then "Ok, go back to stay in the place." . . . And the second time . . . They take me around 11, 12, like this. I was in their car. It was 12 already until 7PM. So they put me in the office. Nobody talk to me. 9 o'clock they took me, there is a jail there, at the airport area. They take me. They took me and left me there until the morning. When they bring me back to the office, I was waiting. Nobody talked to me until 11 o'clock! I get nervous. . . then, they let me go.

Fear of deportation and the arbitrary application of law remains the dominant discourse for our interview partners. Given the pingpong changes of policies, the simultaneous state decision to bring in more workers just as the state conducts mass deportations (including of school children born and raised in Israel), concomitant with a mass public relations campaign to make migrants aware of the deportations, it is not surprising that the experience of being a foreign worker meant experiencing fear of deportation and fear of arbitrary application of the law. The migrants

frequently engaged a holocaust trope to describe their situation.¹² This is clearly a trope that would have particular resonance with the Israeli–Jewish population. A Filipina caregiver responded when she was asked about what message she would give to the Israeli government explained that the foreign workers have found a permanent home in Israel, just as the Jews had had a home in Germany. They were invited by the state to come and they provide service. Like the Jews of Nazi Germany, the foreign workers are now living each day uneasily and fearing deportation and having to start over from nothing. She offers:

That when the Jewish or the Israelis are in Germany, they are, there were allowed entry and free there, as the government of Israel for the foreign workers in Israel. After that, later on, when the government, the German government, I think, was wants the Israelis or the Jewish to leave, thrown out, to be killed or they want to gas, they want to kill them, they want to how do you kill them, how do you call that, they want to torture them, something like that. And then they do anything bad to them. Everything bad to them. And what's happening now is like that. Foreigner workers who are at risk of being deported or being sent home, have the feeling, the same feeling that what the Israelis or what the Jewish people did before. That they have the same feeling of being rejected, being ignored and also they are tortured also mentally, emotionally, because any time they will sent home. They will be thinking of that every minute of the day, that they have the fear to be checked by the police, by the immigration police, and then they have the fear to be brought, to be jailed, to be put to jail and afterward also to then be sent home. Yes, different experiences but, ah, the feelings are have in common.

However, despite the fear of arbitrary invocation of policy, the foreign workers have developed a sense of attachment to Israel and not to the companies that brought them. The migrants expressed feelings of belonging and incorporation in Israel and an understanding that they are now part of the Israeli government's responsibility. A Filipina poignantly pleads for the government that invited them to invoke a moratorium on new migration and to let those present remain in Israel, as they have become part of the Israeli society. The migrants may have come for work, but they stay because *Israel has become their home* and they are now *an integral part of the community*, not just replaceable beings. Since the state brought them to Israel, it is the state's responsibility to resolve the situation.

I am humbly asking also for the government if they could just hear, hear everyone for what, what they want to say, for their requests for foreign workers, for what the reasons are, why they want to stay here because already, they have already, they've already found a home. Home. And then, and, they already live their lives here in Israel also, so they, they have already learned to dream while they are here. So that dreams or the life they are having right now will be. . . will be lost, will get lost, will be lost. Yes, it just will stop, if they will be sent home because they will not, they will not know where to start again. . . And, so maybe the government will have to be more considerate and try to figure out how to control the growth of the foreign workers, to manage the number, because it's continually growing . . . But I think it is the government's problem also because, the government is the one allowing this. The government is the one granting visas for people to be able to come to Israel. No nobody could come here by himself. If ever I am in my country to go here, I cannot go. I cannot just go in the plane and be transported to Israel. So it's the government's responsibility. We have our own responsibilities also, so on the side of foreign workers, we have the responsibilities of why they are staying here illegally, why they are having their children, which is not supposed to be like that. . . The government should. . . figure out what's really, what it can do. Not for the foreign workers to be deported, to be sent home, to be thrown away.

8.3. *Being invisible*

Previous works have discussed foreign workers as invisible to the state because of their lack of legal status and connections to Israeli society (Alexander, 2007; Rajjman & Kemp, 2004) and abdication of state responsibility for their welfare (Drori, 2009; Rosenhek, 2002; Willen, 2007). However, we note that the invisibility extends beyond the

¹² Fenster and Vigel (2006) observe that migrants frequently use (and are even trained by nonprofits and churches) to engage tropes like the Exodus from Egypt to contextualize their own experience in meaningful ways to Israelis.

state to Israelis themselves. Despite phenotypic difference, and thus hypervisibility, migrants perceive that in Israeli society they are invisible. This spectrum of invisibility includes lacking worth (dehumanization), lack of differentiation (from coethnics) and being ignored. The phrase “being thrown away” was a common expression describing their plight. One Filipina caregiver described the lack of differentiation in noting that she was treated as worthless and as interchangeable with all other Filipinos. She explains:

I would be emotionally upset here that you should be working because you are being paid. And you will not be called by name but you will be called by your nationality, “*Yesh mishehu Filipini po, Oved po.*” (“Here is someone Filipino. Work here.”) We must work like that. I was just treated like a rag that when you, after you use it, you can throw it away.

A female (black)¹³ South African cleaner explains that Israelis falsely perceive Africans as a monolith, not differentiating between them. She describes an evening when a Sudanese prowler threatened to enter her home.

One night I was sleeping and I heard the noise. When I looked out, there was a Sudanese man standing, just in front of my gate. So, we have to call the police to remove him. . . . They (Sudanese) are wild! They are completely different than us and I am sure that when they categorize him, they will say “an African.” (laughs)

A Filipina caregiver reacts to frustration that she has become nothing more than her economic role in Israel. Her voice straining, she explains that

The main problem, the problem here is they don’t see you. They don’t see me. I am a person first, a human being. I want them to see me as a human being; then as a Christian; then as a caregiver. I am not a caregiver first. I am a human being.

8.4. *Between identities and belonging*

None of our interview partners felt that they could claim an ethnic Israeli identity, but that they were “of Israel.” Further, they explained that they were becoming trusted members of the community as they were responsible for family members, households and difficult to replace in the economy. Although there is great division within Israel over permanence (Bartram, 2011; Rajman & Semyonov, 2004), from the outside, it is harder to judge who belongs. A female (black) South African cleaner explained that she is not ethnically Israeli but she *is* Israeli, as she is accepted as a trusted member of the community:

I am not an Israeli, but now I am Israeli. I feel like I am Israeli. Big time! You know I have keys from different families. My bag is full of keys. Do you think now if I go to America and Florida now, can somebody one day say that this is not my house key? I am sleeping in *my* house with *your* keys. . . . You see, so when somebody, when you have somebody’s key, that means that person is trusted.

Migrants perceive themselves on the periphery, almost voyeuristic, of Israeli life, even when there is no barrier, largely because of language, work schedules, and limited time off. They described experiences of extreme loneliness exacerbated by their immigration situation. As presented in previous work (Liebelt, 2010; Rajman & Kemp, 2004), they described active civic lives in nongovernmental organizations and churches. However, they were more observers than engaged in Israeli social life, as a Togolese male construction worker explains what happens at holiday time.

Celebrate, celebrate, I don’t think it’s a really good word. We, we, we participate. We are at home. We cannot make the food maybe because every holiday has its own way to make the food, how to prepare it, but really we don’t know all this. So we also make it the way we see that we can enjoy.

Caregiving was associated with invitations to Israeli homes for holiday and family celebrations. Non-caregivers had more limited interactions with Israelis outside work, reflecting the lack of opportunity for meeting others in addition to social exclusion. Those with children had more opportunities for interaction in schools and Israelis’ homes for playdates,

¹³ Given the number of white South Africans in Israel, and the relevance of race/skin color to the discussion, we note where our interview partners are black South Africans.

sleepovers and homework. A (black) South African woman noted “(a)ll of my children’s friends are Russians. . . His friends are Israelis...He doesn’t have any African friends.” All of those interviewed recounted episodes of kindness, friendship, generosity, etc. from individual Israelis (watching their children, carrying water bottles for them, sharing meals or holidays, treatment from doctors, nurses and teachers, etc.) but noted that on a governmental policy level, no matter how they felt about themselves, they were still “the other.” A Filipina caregiver explains:

As of now the situation here the new ministry, Netanyahu, he wants all the foreign workers to stay in their home (country). The situation and the treatment, maybe what I didn’t think, they don’t want us to join. Israel is for Israelis.

A male Togolese cleaner, who said that return migration was not an option “*Chez nous* (at home), there is no life. We cannot go back,” explained that foreign workers are outsiders but that does not mean that the state cannot find mechanisms of accommodation to recognize the contributions of the foreign workers. He explains

Before we need to understand that this country is theirs, you need to understand that. The migrants come and the ministry has to start to formalize people who are here for more than 5 years. They pay taxes every day, that’s the upsetting thing. We migrants pay taxes, so the population has to understand that.

Identity is generationally in flux. Even if foreign workers felt on the periphery of Israeli life, they describe their children as feeling not only “Israeli” but, sometimes, even “Jewish.” Regardless of parents’ status, job or national origin, the parents noted that their children’s identities were remarkably impacted by socialization in Israeli schools and among Israeli peers. Their identities are largely malleable and selected by the children themselves (as opposed to perceived as imposed by Israelis). In this way, being Israeli supersedes belonging to the Jewish nation and, perhaps, even to the Israeli state, but being born into the Israeli people.

Parents reported that their children all speak Hebrew, even when the parents have limited or no Hebrew abilities. Ironically, many spoke to their children in English rather than their native tongue, because they asserted that English would benefit their children in Israel more than their native language. Parents lamented their children’s lack of linguistic ability in the native tongue, when not spoken at home, but were proud of the children’s achievement in Hebrew. They made the connection that a life in Israel meant developing Hebrew abilities and that even when their children stated their (formal) nationality, the children expressed a distance from those places, as if they were foreign countries and not their own countries. A Filipina caregiver remains in Israel because her son refuses to return to the Philippines. He speaks no Tagalog and she communicates with him in her broken Hebrew and his broken English. She says “He considers himself Israeli. He knows his blood is Filipino, but he considers himself Israeli.”

The malleability of children’s identity goes beyond nationality to religious identity. “Jewish” for these children is an available identity, as they are being socialized into Jewish practices in schools and among their Israeli friends. Their parents explain they demand costumes for Purim (a Jewish holiday marked by masquerade parties) and know the holidays of the Jewish calendar. This behavior does not reflect expressions of Christian-Zionism (Rajman & Kemp, 2004) as the parents did not engage in such behavior, but rather, reflected socialization and expectations for normal behavior in a Jewish state. A female Colombian cleaner explains that she has sent her children to a religious school because she thinks “it’s a better school.” Although she is a religious Catholic, her children practice Judaism at home, following what they have been socialized to do in school:

When the kids are asked where they are from, they say they are from Colombia. They always identify as Colombian. Always. In terms of religion? They need to study in a Jewish school. Whatever. They live in the school. I understand they want to be Jewish rather than Catholic or Christian. Because when they get in home, and kiss the mezuzah, they say “Mom, let’s pray before eating.” My son puts on a yarmulke. So they are closer to the Jewish religion than mine.

Troubling, parents reported that their children had even adopted Israeli negative stereotypes about foreign workers. It was clear that the children did not imagine themselves as foreign workers or even as Filipinos, Togolese or Ghanaians, etc., but as part of the receiving country population. A female (black) South African cleaner observes internalized negative stereotypes during a conversation with her 7-year old. She recounts:

He is asking me, “Why you speak English?” “Because it is the only language you can communicate with you.” And he said to me, “Oh! That means you’re a Cushy¹⁴ now, Mommy!” (laughs) You know, it’s not offending me, but I just feel like maybe he sees some difference. And you know, children born here, they have this Israeli mentality. Even if you talk to him, now, you will see the difference between him and me. There’s a huge difference. And he loves Israel a lot. I have to help him a lot with English because he speaks too much Hebrew. If I tell him “Now you must speak English. It’s very important for you to speak English.” He says, “Only Cushis speak English!” (laughs). . . He said to me he would never go to Africa! Because only Cushis there in Africa. So there’s nothing nice about Africa.

9. Conclusion

Contemporary Israel is probably not the place its founders would recognize and they would likely be perplexed by the presence, areas of inclusion and exclusion, contributions and costs of the foreign workers in Israel. Israel is in a moment of transition. Despite the closed nature of the Israeli state vis-à-vis non-Jewish immigrants, the state has constructed a policy that permits *de facto* immigration and settlement of non-Jews to Israel and eventually, it will have to contend with this issue. Potentially, the major concern will not be the labor problem the migrants were invited to solve, but the changes in Israel because of their presence. By building lives in Israel, they force Israelis to question what Israel should be and what it is to be Israeli. One of our interview partners, noted “We don’t *have to* be here. We stay because we *want* to stay in Israel.” They believe that their children are not simply in Israel, but now, of Israel. Whether Israel allows them to stay remains an open question, but whether they are part of the Israeli story is clear.

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¹⁴ “Cushi” is a derogatory term for people of African descent. For a socio-linguistic discussion, see Steven Kaplan (1999), “Can the Ethiopian Change His Skin? The Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jews) and Racial Discourse,” *African Affairs* (1999) 98, pp. 535–550.

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