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**The Dynamics of ‘Limited Hybridity’ in Migration: The Case of Zera Beita Israel from Ethiopia**

Dr. Ravit Talmi-Cohn

**Abstract**

This paper examines the concept of “limited hybridity” as it emerges from the tensions between bureaucratic migration categorizations and the everyday lives of Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) migrants to Israel. By analyzing their migration journey—from villages and transit camps in Ethiopia to absorption centers and permanent dwellings in Israel—the study reveals how the rigid categories imposed by state laws and societal expectations clash with the lived experiences of the ZBI migrant community. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research conducted across different stages of the ZBI migration, this study employs the concept of “limited hybridity” as a tool to understand the tensions emerging from the liminal experiences generated by this clash, as well as the ZBI’s efforts to maintain cultural continuity and a coherent identity while adapting to the demands of their new environment. We argue that the concept of limited hybridity is particularly relevant in an era of global migration, as more and more people move between states of liminality and limited hybridity, transiting across borders and identities.

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**Introduction and Theoretical Background**

One of the key challenges posed by global migration today is the tension created by the categories and labels nation-states use to define who will and who will not belong as legitimate future citizens in the face of the lived experiences of migrants. Such categories and labels represent an attempt to create order, as migration policies reflect a struggle with the lines of demarcation between groups of migrants: those who have come to settle permanently, labor migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and those who come as professionals, students, and temporary migrants (Sahin-Mencütek 2012).

Through legislation and policies, states intervene in global migration flows by deciding who is an immigrant, a refugee, or an illegal migrant.

Despite its ostensible logic, Moncrieffe and Eyben (2007) argue that categorization aims to transform dynamic cultural processes into defined constructs. This aligns with Zetter’s (1991) observation that labeling reduces humans to objects with material and political meaning, facilitating the translation of identity for bureaucratic purposes. Categories, as Seger and Miller (2010) note, are integral to societal and individual cognition, functioning within complex symbolic systems. Ian Hacking (1999) emphasizes that categories shape our self-perception and societal roles, influencing how identities are conceived and managed.

Policy mechanisms, by their nature, are dynamic and particular (Appelqvist 1999; McAdam 2005), with different countries imposing varied definitions of identity, resulting in diverse rights and obligations (Adelman 1988). This results in a labeling process that creates differentiation, inclusion and exclusion, stereotypes, and control mechanisms—a phenomenon where migratory paths and flows are shaped by the “interaction between the policies governing migration, the capabilities of migrants, and their aspirations” (Dimitriadi 2015: 5; c.f. Mingot & de Arimatéia da Cruz 2013``).

These categorizations, implemented through laws, policies, and practices, serve to justify mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. As Wimmer & Glick Schiller (2002) argue, migration challenges the presumed cultural and ethnic homogeneity within national territories, leading to the construction of categories like “citizen versus foreigner” and dichotomies between the “imagined national community” and “ethnic or religious others.” Beyond immigration status, binaries based on access to state benefits (e.g., “migrant” vs. “non-migrant”) further reinforce these divisions.

While rigid bureaucracies and political systems attempt to pin migrants down with fixed labels, the lived experiences of migrants challenge those categories. As both Hacking (1999) and Collyer and de Haas (2012) highlight, these categories are not static but dynamic, shifting according to geographical, political, socio-cultural, and economic contexts, with Hacking describing them as “moving targets” with “looping effects.” Migration processes, as described by Sheller (2020) and Pallister-Wilkins (2022), reveal that migrants often navigate diverse, sometimes contradictory, categories. The daily lives of migrants involve a process of constant movement, change, and creation, disrupting state-imposed rigid categorizations and creating a rich tapestry of experiences that challenge simplistic labels (Ásta 2018; Hacking 1999).

Migration opens doors to diverse perspectives and ways of life, leading to a dynamic interplay between creativity and the constraints imposed by rigid state structures. As Benson & O'Reilly (2016) discussed, and as Tosic and Streinzer (2022) elaborate, the affective economies of migration also influence how categories are shaped and contested. By challenging the limitations of existing frameworks, migrants create an opportunity for anthropology to reshape and sharpen its lenses, fostering a deeper understanding of human movement and categorization in a globalized world.

This article introduces the notion of “Limited Hybridity,” a concept that critiques and extends Homi Bhabha’s idea of hybridity (2012). While Bhabha’s “third space” emphasizes the creative potential of overlapping cultural domains, Limited Hybridity refers to the outcome of the interaction and conflict between rigid bureaucratic definitions and the fluid, everyday realities of migrants. It addresses the constraints imposed by static bureaucratic categorizations and highlights how migrants construct and navigate hybrid identities within the confines of state-imposed categories. This concept not only challenges Bhabha’s framework but also acknowledges the practical limitations faced by migrants as they negotiate their identities within constrained global and state regulations.

Additionally, the concept of liminality, as articulated by Victor Turner (1967), adds another layer to this discussion. Turner’s idea of liminality involves individuals or groups in a transitional phase, existing between established structures or categories. Migrants often experience a liminal state, caught between their origin and destination, and between different cultural and bureaucratic definitions. This transitional space can be a site of both transformation and tension, where the boundaries of identity and belonging are negotiated in complex ways.

Focusing on the experience of the Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) of Ethiopia—descendants of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity in the 19th century—this chapter explores how the various categories and labels appended to this group and its members during their migration from Ethiopia to Israel created tensions and conflicts in their everyday lives. Their journey—beginning in their villages, spending time in transit camps in Ethiopia, moving to absorption centers in Israel, and eventually settling permanently—takes them through environments where the ZBI are viewed and labeled differently. The analysis here focuses on how hybridity evolved among members of the ZBI community as they moved between the transit camps and permanent settlements in Israel. The study illuminates pressing issues raised by global migration, shedding light on the complex relationship between categorization and state policy and the hybridity and liminality that characterize their responses and negotiations.

**Labeling and Categorization: Israeli Immigration Law and the Zera Beita Israel**

Before describing the methods used for the study, this section provides needed context for the findings that follow, focusing on the migration categories unique to Israeli immigration and on the shifting categories that have defined the Zera Beita Israel in Ethiopia and Israel.

***Israeli Immigration Law***

Like many countries, Israel employs legislation and policies that label and categorize migrants to determine which individuals will ultimately be granted legal citizenship. However, while many nations use various criteria to regulate migration and citizenship, Israel is notable for its application of ethno-religious distinctions. Despite being a liberal democratic state, Israel uniquely prioritizes Jewish migration under the premise that it serves as the homeland for all Jews worldwide, regardless of their country of birth, race, or ethnicity. This principle is enshrined in the state’s Basic Laws, which function as Israel’s quasi-constitution.

The right to citizenship in Israel is granted primarily through the 1950 Law of Return, which allows Jews to immigrate to Israel in a process known in Hebrew as *aliyah*. This law facilitates immigration almost exclusively for Jews, referred to in Hebrew as *olim* (singular: *oleh*). In contrast, Israeli laws and regulations apply much more stringent requirements to non-Jewish foreigners seeking to immigrate to Israel.

In 1970, the Law of Return was amended to include individuals with at least one Jewish grandparent and their spouses, countering strict Orthodox interpretations of Jewish law that traditionally define Jewish identity through maternal lineage. Today, approximately 73% of the Jewish population in Israel are either immigrants themselves or the descendants of immigrants from various countries. Consequently, Israel is a multicultural society in many respects, though its immigration policies remain distinctively focused on Jewish identity.

***The Zera Beita Israel***

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the ZBI, known as Feres Mura (Seeman 2009), were part of the larger Ethiopian Jewish community, known as Beita Israel. By the end of the 19th century, some Beita Israel members had converted to Christianity—some out of choice, others by force. Although these converts lived as Christians, they were not accepted as such by their Christian neighbors. Consequently, they lived a religiously liminal life, self-categorized as Christians, but categorized by the dominant Christian community as Jews (Ehrlich, Salamon & Kaplan 2003; Messing 1982; Salamon 1993; Seeman 2003, 2009; Shabtai 2006; Talmi-Cohn 2011; Waldman 1995, 2004, 2015, 2016).

In 1991, the State of Israel conducted Operation Solomon, transporting more than 14,000 *olim* from Ethiopia to Israel, most of whom were Beita Israel—Ethiopian Jews who had maintained their religious identity. Following this first mass migration, about 3,000 members of the ZBI, intending to make *aliyah*, arrived from their villages to Addis Ababa and Gondar, where transit camps had been created for those seeking to migrate to Israel. Their motives for immigrating were varied: Some wished to reunite with their families that had already immigrated as Jews, while others wished to leave problems with their neighbors because of their historical status as Jews. For yet others, economic motivations were key.

Although many had relatives in Israel, this group of ZBI did not meet the criteria for Jewishness according to the Law of Return and Israeli immigration policies and were thus not granted *oleh* status (Rubinstein Committee 1991, Clause A; Waldman & Kimchi 1992). Because the Law of Return distinguishes between Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants and refugees, the ZBI, as non-Jewish descendants of Jews, *a priori* presented a challenge to this legal distinction. Thus, initial applications to migrate to Israel were rejected, and they found themselves stranded in the transit camps, unwilling to return to their villages but unable to continue to their intended destination.

The ensuing controversy led then-prime minister Yitzhak Shamir to establish the Rubinstein Committee in 1991 to examine the ZBI’s entitlement to make *aliyah*. The Committee’s discussions mark the beginning of the processes of labeling and categorization with regard to the ZBI, beginning with its reference in committee minutes to “the Falashmura problem.” So defined, it was indicative of the establishment’s approach to the ZBI community as a ‘problem’ and one essentially related to classification. The question was how (or if) the ZBI should be classified so as to confer upon them *oleh* status.

The Israeli establishment, and Israeli society in general, have held ambivalent positions regarding the ZBI, evident from these very first Rubinstein Commission hearings. Some argued the ZBI were motivated to make *aliyah* for purely economic reasons. Israel’s ambassador to Ethiopia in 1995, for example, described them as “residents of destitute Ethiopia in search of a better place in the wider world.” Others, including members of Israel’s Beita Israel Ethiopian community, labeled them as “gentiles” (Sharvit 2004). In 1995, one Beita Israel activist sent a letter to the head of the conversion administration complaining that, “The state is bringing in gentiles of our color, from the same country we came from” (Brendstain 2008). At the same time, others described these same ZBI as “Jews who got lost on the way,” or as “full-fledged Jews" (State Comptroller 2008). Such conflicting views, expressed across decades of government debates and resolutions, continue to resonate in the daily life of the ZBI, in the way they view themselves, and in the way they are viewed by those around them.

A major complication to the ZBI’s right to migrate to Israel was posed by the mass migration to Israel from the Former Soviet Union (FSU). This group’s migration also began in the early 1990s, and, like the ZBI, included some who did not have migration rights under the Law of Return. Both groups posed unique challenges to Israel’s existing migration laws by highlighting the tension between the reigning Halachic Judaism enshrined in Israeli state laws, and alternative streams and perceptions of being Jewish. Adding to the ambiguity of the whole situation, the different solutions for each group were not necessarily consistent with one another (Harel 2015; Kemp & Reichman 2003; Yaron Mesagna 2015) and challenged the definition of the State of Israel as exclusively a state of Jewish migration (Kemp 2008).

Questions Israeli policymakers entertained about the authenticity of the ZBI’s Jewishness led to long periods of waiting and uncertainty, a situation that has not yet changed significantly since 1991. Between 1991 and 2018, around 48,000 ZBI were eventually granted the right to migrate to Israel. Their lives in Israel began with another prolonged stay in absorption centers for around two years, and only then did they move into permanent dwellings. There are, however, other ZBI still waiting in Ethiopia to be granted the right to migrate to Israel. Some have been waiting for more than 20 years.

These long waiting periods and the ongoing ambiguity about their status reflect the tension between institutional decisions and the everyday lives of the ZBI, highlighting the complexity and challenges faced by this community throughout their migration journey.

**Methodology**

This study is part of a larger ethnographic study of migration conducted over extended periods between 2005 and 2012 and again from 2017 to 2023—time spans that offer a comprehensive view of migration. The study included in-depth fieldwork at each of the four key stages of the ZBI journey: their villages of origin in northern Ethiopia, transit camps in Ethiopia, absorption centers in Israel, and their permanent residences in Israel. Consequently, the larger project represents a multi-sited ethnography of migration, considering both the countries of origin and destinations as part of a dynamic process rather than static endpoints.

Traveling with the ZBI, living with them at each location, and participating in their experiences of waiting and moving, while employing Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 2009), allowed the main topics of inquiry to develop organically during and after the field research. At each transit station, qualitative methods included participant observation and in-depth, open-ended interviews with 106 individuals. These interviews, guided by an ethnographic interview guide (Spradley 1979) and tailored to each interviewee’s migration station, proved particularly valuable in revealing personal perceptions, thoughts, and latent attitudes (Arksey & Knight 1999).

These qualitative methods were complemented by 40 questionnaires administered in Gondar, Ethiopia, and 30 more at an absorption center in Israel in 2010 and 2011. Additionally, texts from broader political and public discourses, including government resolutions and press items, provided valuable societal context. Together, these methods facilitated a nuanced understanding of daily experiences, social interactions, conversations, prayers, and especially the ZBI’s experiences of waiting and moving. In exploring how the immigration processes across two key junctures—from the transit camps and to their permanent (after seven years) dwelling in Israel during the years 2005–2011 and 2021–2023—this study demonstrates how the ZBI’s encounters with various categories created a form of “Limited Hybridity,” underscoring the central role of labeling and categorization in the lives of the ZBI.

**Findings**

This section presents and analyzes the experiences of everyday life from the Ethiopian transit camps to settlement in Israel. It demonstrates the various ways limited hybridity is manifested among Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) migrants.

***Limited Hybridity in the Transit Camps***

an conducted in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_,

I was born in a village near Shaura, and I was a kid like everyone else. I played and I helped around the house. When friends were angry with me or wanted to make fun of me, they called me Falasha, and then I understood that Ethiopia isn’t really my home. One day, when I was nine years old, my parents said, “Come, we’re leaving the village and going to Jerusalem.” The next day we were gone. Two days later I was in Gondar. I tried to find friends and family but didn’t find many. All of a sudden, we had no land and no agriculture; I couldn’t just run around like I used to. I saw other people and they all told me I’m Beita Israel. In the beginning, I didn’t understand what that meant. Then my father told me that we were making *aliyah* to Israel and will be with the family, and we’ll be Beita Israel. Then we stayed in Gondar for many years; we waited there for nine years. Meanwhile, I grew up and started going to school like everyone, then I switched to a Beita Israel school, and we also had a synagogue and a library where I learned Hebrew. I waited many years to make *aliyah* to Israel, and when we did I was really happy. I thought it would be great fun here [that] I’ll be like everyone. I’ll have a family, I’m coming to the country that my father and grandfather dreamed about all their lives, that I dreamed about so much. And then they told me that I have to study Judaism and take tests to show them that I’m a Jew… (Elpha, 2011, Israel).

At the transit camp, Elpha was exposed to the concept of *oleh,* and changed his lifestyle accordingly, trying to adapt to the category so he could immigrate to Israel. When describing being unable to go about freely and relating his feelings of alienation and not belonging, Elpha highlights the tension between wanting to be an *oleh* and his experience of rootlessness and being a refugee in his own country. His views were expressed by other newcomers to the transit camp where they felt like migrants or temporary visitors who did not belong, while experiencing the loss of home, compounded by poverty and hunger (Talmi-Cohn 2018).

The transit camp was also where people first encountered Israeli demands, laws, and expectations regarding who qualified for *oleh* status. It was at this point that clear and open categorization took place: a person became a migrant, an *oleh*, or a refugee. To ensure their status as potential *olim* during this waiting stage, members of the ZBI community began to participate in Jewish ritual activities and to modify their behavior to match state categories. Essentially, they exercised agency in specific ways in order to conform to the immigration category to which they aspired to belong.

As part of the internal migration process, the transit camps created a unique space, challenging traditional citizenship and migration definitions in both Ethiopia and Israel. Those waiting there found themselves negotiating newly formed categories shaped by their actions, as well as the involvement of various organizations and nation-states described below. This dynamic interaction arguably contributed to the development of hybridity.

***From Local Roots to Global Reach***

Although the Israeli government did not maintain an official presence in the transit camp, there were frequent visits by government officials and the ongoing presence of aid NGOs (Seeman 2009; Talmi-Cohn 2014), the most prominent of which were the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOJ) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. These agencies provided subsistence aid, primarily food and medication, as well as spiritual help through the provision of a synagogue, library, and mikveh (ritual purification bath), as well as tutoring assistance to help the children with their studies. Other organizations provided spiritual aid focused on the return of the ZBI to active Jewish practice. Their presence also highlighted the ZBI's distinct status as those “waiting to make *aliyah*.”

This distinction had significant consequences for their relationships with local communities and their experience of everyday life. Belonging to a community waiting to immigrate to Israel set the ZBI apart from neighboring Christians—a difference that could create friction. Nazirat’s experience showcases this delicately. Her family’s decision to practice Judaism openly led to raised eyebrows, strained social interactions, and rent increases from their non-Beita Israel landlady, highlighting the complex interplay of economic disadvantage and social alienation associated with their ’otherness.’

When I first visited Nazirat in Gondar in 2005, we entered a yard shared by a few small houses. While Nazirat busied herself preparing coffee, the neighbors gathered and started to chat. When I asked Nazirat which of her relatives were in Israel, she just gave me a strange look and did not answer. Not understanding what had happened, I was silent, realizing that I had done something wrong. At the end of our meeting, I asked her what had happened and she explained: “We’re new here. The landlady doesn’t know for sure if we’re Beita Israel, so we don’t talk about this. I’m actually studying for a B. A at the university and I’m not completely with those who are waiting. We don’t want any problems. Even now, she asks us once in a while why we don’t come to church.”

Two years later, when I visited Nazirat again, she had moved with her family to a house that shared a common yard with the houses of other people waiting to make *aliyah*. When I asked her why they had moved, she explained: “When the neighbors realized that we were Beita Israel, they started giving us weird looks, and we didn’t feel comfortable. We wanted to go to synagogue and be with everyone, and that’s when they heard about it. They didn’t say a thing, but their behavior toward us changed. They understood that we were Beita Israel, and then the landlady decided to raise our rent. No other neighbor had their rent increased, only us. When Mother asked her why, she said, “You’re Beita Israel; you get help and money from Israel.”

Indeed, the conflict between those waiting in the transit camps and their Christian neighbors was intensified by the fact that they received money from their families in Israel, and especially because of the ongoing assistance from the aid organizations, who helped only those defined as “waiting to make *aliyah*.” This distinction also caused problems vis-à-vis the local authorities, who viewed these organizations as exclusionary and discriminatory and called for them to give equal access to all the people in the area, prospective migrants or not.

Within the camps, however, a unique sense of collective identity began to solidify. The continuous support, regular interactions with immigrants and relatives, and exposure to global perspectives through various encounters fostered a sense of belonging to a larger Jewish community, transcending local boundaries. The desire to belong to the immigrant community along with the long wait, the move from a village to the city, and a move of residences within the city all created unique combinations of identity among those waiting for *aliyah,* being considered Ethiopian citizens, and living as internal immigrants who dream of being immigrants in Israel.

***More Than Names: Reflecting Hybridity Through Naming Practices***

The naming practices adopted by Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) families in Ethiopian transit camps offer a fascinating glimpse into the hybridity they experienced during their prolonged migration journey. While traditional Ethiopian names based on personal experiences and local customs continued to be used, the years spent waiting for *aliyah* and the increasing exposure to Jewish culture brought about a significant shift. This resulted in the emergence of a unique naming phenomenon, reflecting a complex negotiation of belonging and the formation of a distinct ZBI identity within the liminal space of the camps.

In north Ethiopia and in the ZBI community, babies receive their names a few months after birth. The name typically reflects a situation, story, or feelings. Members of the community added new names during the years of waiting in Ethiopia. For example, Habtan explained to me: “I chose to name my daughter Ziona because Israel is Zion and I am waiting to immigrate to Israel with her” (Habtam, 2021). Similarly, Mentagbush relates that, “In the village, the names were not the same. Some were called Yohannes or Jeremiah. Here sometimes they call a baby by a biblical Jewish name like Yosef or David or by other non-religious Ethiopian names. There are those who call their child a name related to the [fact that] they have been waiting for many years, such as Tesfahon which is ‘hope’ or because of something that happened to them in the transit camp” (2011).

These diverse naming practices go beyond mere individual choices. They collectively illustrate the evolving ZBI identity in a state of flux. The blend of Ethiopian and Jewish influences reveals a conscious effort to reconcile the past with the anticipated future, forging a space of belonging within the uncertainty of the present. In this way, names not only mark individual identities but also serve as a testament to the broader community’s shared experience of navigating hybridity during their migration journey.

***Language Skills***

The Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) families’ experience in Ethiopian transit camps was not limited to evolving naming practices. Their language itself became a site of hybridity, reflecting the complex negotiations of identity and belonging during their prolonged wait for *aliyah*.

Degarga, a resident of the Gondar transit camp, observed a distinct difference in the Amharic spoken there compared to his village: “It’s not the same language anymore... It doesn’t sound the same.” This shift was not purely based on regional variations. The constant exposure to urban life in Gondar infused their Amharic with the city’s dialect. More significantly, however, their anticipation of life in Israel led to the incorporation of such words as the Hebrew for ‘prayer’ and ‘synagogue.’

This linguistic blending created a unique communication style understood by fellow camp residents but unfamiliar to villagers who hadn't experienced the same transformative journey. It was a tangible manifestation of their liminal state, belonging neither fully to their Ethiopian past nor their Israeli future.

Furthermore, the presence of aid organizations and interactions with global media exposed the ZBI community to English, leading to another layer of vocabulary integration. This linguistic hybridity served as a marker of their evolving identities, reflecting their exposure to diverse influences and aspirations for a future beyond the transit camp. Many words that were combined with Hebrew were related to religion and to terms related to *aliyah (and Judaism),* such as ‘opening a file,’ ‘prayer,’ and ‘mikvah,’ while English words that were combined referred more to education and studies: ‘high school’ and ‘mathematics.’

***Social Connections and Hybridity: Navigating “In-Between” Spaces***

The desire to do everything in order to make *aliyah,* alongside the long wait, created different patterns of hybridity. Some members of the ZBI community were overwhelmed with the long preparations for Israel alongside everyday life; some decided to live as Ethiopians with little reference to the wait for the *aliyah*. Between these poles, a movement was created, a dynamism of hybrid spaces affected by the timing of *aliyah.*

Semaniw describes a gradual relaxation of social boundaries with Gondar residents. In the first years, they were enclosed within the waiting community. Sharing experiences and friendships in high school led to integration and a social network based on diverse connections that had developed over many years of waiting:

There are things that separate us from the others in Gondar, but it’s not like it used to be. Once, for example, everyone [wore on a chain a] Magen David [the six-pointed star of David], but not always... A few years ago, you came to visit us, and we were in high school. Then we were one group. Today we’ve grown up and we’re adults; we dream of *aliyah* and we are [still] waiting. We have friends and family in Israel; we talk to them and they come to visit. But we also have friends from Gonder, who, when we were little, tried to separate us so that we would only be with Beita Israel. But [they] grew up and already went to study with others, so some became friends. …. There are [also] those who really connected with the Christians and they go to hang out with them. And … there are those who continue to be friends of the community (Semaniw 2023).

Takala describes how throughout the years of waiting some of the group had to move away from the neighborhoods where those waiting lived, which also affected the complexity of their relationships:

Everyone knows everyone in the neighborhood…, but there are those who have moved to other neighborhoods, to the market, to a hospital, to all kinds of neighborhoods further away because it costs a lot of money here. Everyone thinks that the family sends us money from Israel, although it is not true. It is expensive here. For example, I live with my mother nearby, [and] my wife and her children live with her mother in the city. I go to them but also [go] with my mother because all my siblings are in Israel and there is no one to be with her. She doesn’t want to move far from the community because here she knows everyone. My children don’t attend a community school [although] they do sometimes come to the synagogue, on holidays, or sometimes on Shabbat. Those who live nearby are very strong in [their connections to] the community. There is a Bnei Akiva [youth movement] [and] there are Jewish studies. There is a synagogue. There [are many in] the community and we continue to be strong, but there are all kinds of [challenges]... For example, someone can drink coffee with Christians and not be told anything [negative], or even get married [to a Christian] (Takala 2023).

While a strong community persists, evidenced by synagogues and youth groups, there are also divisions and different individual expressions. Some maintain close community ties, while others forge relationships beyond, even leading to interfaith connections. This underscores the diversity of identities and experiences within the ZBI population. This liminal state is further complicated by economic hardship and negative local perceptions. These factors highlight the precariousness of their situation and the hybrid space they occupied, existing both within and outside the local community.

Although those waiting for *aliyah* in the city were doing so in their own country, their lives differed from those they had lived in their villages or towns. They could neither return to their earlier homes nor could they go to Israel. Their life in the transit camps was temporary, their self-definition differentiated them from the local population, and their status and everyday lives were shaped by definitions and frameworks that had been created by Israeli and American bureaucracies and organizations. These unique circumstances turned them into a new class of refugees—those waiting to immigrate (Talmi-Cohn 2006). Berhanu described the experience in 2010:

I have no place to return to [in my village]. We’re here in Gondar, that’s what we were told to do. We got an announcement from the Israeli government to get here so we could make *aliyah* to Israel.… They told us to come, and I thought that we’d be here for a little while. We rushed out and left everything in the village. Then we got here, and we’re waiting. We’re just waiting. We have nothing. Whatever we have is what people send us or the help we get from NACOEJ. We have no land, we have no food. For seven years, I thought, maybe we’ll go to Israel, but no…. It’s not good to live this way in Gondar. I have nothing here, no family, and no work. Everyone makes fun of me that I’m Beita Israel. They steal our money and do bad things.

Bound by their detached and difficult situation, the ZBI had no choice but to do what they were told, especially as they hoped that compliance would lead to confirmation of their *oleh* status and an *aliyah* permit. The situation drove many to poverty and a sense of alienation and detachment from the place where they now found themselves. Although ostensibly they were in their own country and amidst neighbors, they were actually homeless and unemployed and lacked a sense of belonging to the place where they were.

Over time, they understood that the definitions of *aliyah* that allow the acceptance of future citizenship were always limited.

**Limited Hybridity After Migration to Israel: Navigating “In-Between” Spaces**

Upon arrival in Israel, the Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) community encountered significant challenges as they navigated their hybrid identities in their everyday interactions with the broader Israeli public and with the bureaucratic structures of their new country. Each challenge reveals the complex interplay between their Ethiopian heritage and the demands of their new environment.

***Not Belonging Anywhere***

Even after undergoing the processes of *aliyah* and official conversion to Judaism, immigrants from the Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) community continue to face significant identity challenges. While the conversion provides essential bureaucratic validation of their Jewish status, doubts persist among some segments of Israeli society. For example, Asmalesh (2022) recounts an experience of trying to enroll her daughter in a religious school:

I wanted to enroll my daughter in a religious school. We have completed the conversion process and have all the required documents, but they told us no. I asked why. She has good grades and is a well-behaved student. Later, I realized that they said we are not considered religious in the same way or not Jewish enough. What more do we need to do? In the end, she was accepted into another good school, and she is happy there, as am I, but it is always on my mind. I know not all religious people are the same, and not all schools are alike, but after several years, there are still those who think of us this way. What will the future hold?

Asmalesh’s reflections highlight the ongoing struggle of navigating the gap between bureaucratic recognition and social acceptance, underscoring the persistent liminality experienced by ZBI immigrants in their new environment, alongside the limited hybridity.

***Everyday Encounters with Bureaucracy***

In their daily lives, ZBI individuals frequently faced the rigidities of Israeli immigration policies. These policies often categorized them in ways that did not align with their lived experiences, creating friction and necessitating constant negotiation. For example, the process of obtaining legal status involved navigating a labyrinth of paperwork, interviews, and various requirements that often felt alien and burdensome.

One ZBI member recounted the frustration of dealing with immigration authorities: “We’re going through a conversion process, studying Judaism, and have an upcoming exam. We’re really stressed about the test, and we won’t be able to relax until we pass. It sometimes feels like they don’t believe we are Jewish. They check us and watch us all day.” As Asmalesh explained, “In Ethiopia, we say hello, shake hands, and kiss. In Israel, religious people don't give kisses or shake hands between boys and girls. Now my 16-year-old son has decided that he is religious and won’t shake hands with girls, even with family, and it’s hard.”

***Limited Hybridity in Employment***

The concept of limited hybridity is particularly evident in the professional lives of the ZBI community. While in Ethiopia, achieving a professional qualification, such as becoming a nurse, is seen as a major accomplishment and is highly valued, the transition to Israel often revealed the frustrations faced when these qualifications were not adequately recognized or valued. As Tadesa explains: “In Ethiopia, I studied for many years to become a nurse. We lived in Gondar and faced many challenges, but I succeeded. When we arrived in Israel, I wanted to complete my studies… but I was told to start from scratch. How can I do that? I need to buy a house and support my children. In the community, everyone knows I studied and helped there, but here I have ended up working in a factory” (Tadesa, 2023).

Tadesa’s experience highlights the concept of *limited hybridity*, where the disparity between the recognition of qualifications in Ethiopia and the requirements in Israel creates a challenging reality. Despite these obstacles, within the immigrant community, individuals are still highly valued. They are seen as resources and are relied upon by others in their community, reflecting a continued sense of respect and support. The internal respect and support they receive within the immigrant community contrast sharply with the societal and bureaucratic challenges they face, illustrating the tensions inherent in limited hybridity.

**How Labeling Practices Dictate and Limit Hybridity: A Critical Analysis of Hybridity Through the Lens of Political Labeling**

The ZBI migration has taken the form of a unique journey, one that has not only been a process of physical, cultural, linguistic, and religious transition but also one of transition between externally imposed categories. Their experiences at the various stations of the journey underline the day-to-day implications of labeling, the blurring of categories of classification, and limited hybridity.

The ideological, religious, political, economic, and racial context in which the ZBI live has meant that struggling for acceptance is their daily reality. Despite their attempts to belong to a defined and stable category as *olim,* and thus as part of the Jewish mainstream of Israel, they are confronted daily with issues of labeling. Multiple actors and forces, from state bureaucracies to NGOs, play a role in this complex reality and affect the ZBI both directly and indirectly. Moreover, the state’s arbitrary and ambiguous procedures, and the resulting frequent policy changes, have created a sense of insecurity and the need for vigilance among the ZBI. For example, the community has experienced a years-long chronicle of changing government decisions regarding their right to enter Israel as *olim*, endless debates about their Jewishness and the resources directed toward them, and a long history of government functionaries evading the questions about the immigration status of those who are waiting to immigrate (Author 2006).

The very name *Falasmura* (or Falashmura, as it came to be used in public Israeli discourse) demonstrates the inclination towards labeling and exclusion directed toward the ZBI. It is not the name the community uses for itself, but rather a mispronunciation of a label that Ethiopians have used to describe—and exclude— Beita Israel, the Jews of Ethiopia, even after they converted to Christianity. Eshkoli (1943) understood the root F-L-S as derived from the Ge’ez (biblical and classic Ethiopian) for “immigrant” or “exile”; Leslau (1976, 244), a linguist, claimed that the word means to “lose roots, wander, immigrate.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This understanding is consistent with the fact that Ethiopian Christians perceived Beita Israel, as well as those among the community who had converted to Christianity, as rootless and detached. In interviews, members of the Christian convert community noted that, although they lived as Christians, the Christians called them *Falashmura* as a term of abuse.

The use of the names Falasha and Falashmura thus contributed to social exclusion in both Ethiopia and Israel. According to one interviewee, “When they wanted to tease me in Ethiopia, they called me Falasha, and in Israel, the state and the people call me Falashmura. There they tell me that I don’t belong, and the same here. So, where’s my home? Where do I belong?” (Yosef, Israel, 2010).

Decades after the Rubinstein Committee meetings and long after many of the ZBI made *aliyah* to Israel, the question of ZBI entitlement and belonging remains a subject of debate.[[2]](#footnote-2) The use of seemingly permanent labels creates gaps between the perceptions of policymakers and parts of the Israeli public regarding Ethiopian Jews and the self-perceptions of Ethiopian Jews themselves. These gaps stem from the differences between the static and predefined notions held by policymakers and the dynamic and complex reality of the lives of Ethiopian Jews. The identity of the ZBI has been questioned throughout their entire migration process and this doubt is embedded in the very terminology used by different actors. The name ZBI, used here, specifically avoids this history as it has not yet acquired an explicit political significance. Nonetheless, the range of names and labels applied to them clearly reflects their complex position in both Ethiopian and Israeli societies.

**Conclusions**

This study presents a nuanced examination of the concept of “limited hybridity” and “liminality” through the lens of the Zera Beita Israel’s (ZBI) immigration to Israel. Using detailed ethnographic research, it explores how these migrants navigate their daily lives along two points in their migration journey—the transit camps in Ethiopia to permanent settlement in Israel. It describes attempts to blend Ethiopian traditions with Jewish and Israeli customs, even as their hybridity is constrained by the rigid labels imposed by Israeli immigration policies and societal frameworks that impact access to resources, employment opportunities, and social services. The research highlights the creation of liminal spaces in which ZBI individuals navigate the gap between Ethiopian heritage and Israeli identity, forming unique social networks to support their hybrid existence.

The study sheds light on pressing issues raised by global migration, illustrating the interplay between categorization, state policy, and the practical adaptations that characterize migration experiences. By challenging existing frameworks, the study enhances our understanding of how migrants manage daily life and adapt to a globalized world. In so doing, it offers insights into the broader implications for migration studies and the complexities of practical adaptation.

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1. Another explanation of the word *Falashmura* is that the Amharic word “*mora*” was added following the conversion to Christianity and that the word means “converted foreigners.” (Corinaldi 1998, 121; Elizur 1998; Salamon 1993, 67–69). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Talmi-Cohn (2006) for an in-depth review of the position of State of Israel toward the ZBI from 1991 to 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)