**International Migration**

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**Categories and Labelling During Migration**

ABSTRACT

A key challenge posed by global migration is the tension between bureaucratic categories and labels and the lived experiences of migrants. Israeli categories are based on the Law of Return— immigration laws that distinguish between *olim* (Jewish immigrants), *mehagrim* (non-Jewish migrants) and refugees. Zera Beita Israel (ZBI), descendants of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity in the nineteenth century, challenge these legal distinctions. The ZBI were viewed distinctly at different points of their immigration journey to Israel—from their villages through transit camps and absorption centres—creating ever-changing definitions along the way. This paper, based on an ethnographic study conducted at the various sites of the ZBI migration journey, proposes that the difficulties faced by bureaucratic systems in categorizing this community created a unique immigration process, in which the fluidity of the migrants’ movement between categories and their daily lives challenge bureaucratic definitions.

**Keywords**: immigration, categorization, labelling, transit migration, Israel, Ethiopia

INTRODUCTION

I was sitting in a restaurant in the Dangela region of Ethiopia when I struck up a conversation with Johannes, a local, educated 25-year-old. His family lived a Christian lifestyle in a nearby village. When I told him that I was from Israel, he told me he had ZBI roots and that his brother Senbatho had immigrated to Israel five years earlier, in 2006, with his wife—also a ZBI—and their children. It turned out that I knew him from the period he spent waiting in a transit camp in Gondar, and we had even met a few times in Israel. Senbatho had been through the process of conversion to Judaism, had received an Israeli ID card, and was defined as an Israeli citizen. His brother Johannes was an Ethiopian citizen and could not get to Israel. A year later, I met Johannes again—this time in Israel. He had entered the country illegally and had no documents, and the Israeli bureaucracy refused to recognize him as an *oleh*. Instead, he was classified as an asylum seeker.[[1]](#endnote-1) (fieldwork, 2011)

The story of Johannes and Senbatho is not exceptional; my data contain many similar examples that illustrate the tension between bureaucratic categories and the lived experiences of migrants. Here, we have two brothers, both previously Ethiopian citizens, who are now in Israel: one labelled a Jew and a citizen, and the other labelled an undesirable illegal migrant. As this case makes clear, such bureaucratic distinctions are often arbitrary.

This article examines the complexity of the categorization and labelling of immigrants by countries and organizations and the experiences of immigrants during the immigration process. The malleability of categorization becomes “particularly explicit during migration” (La Barbera, 2015). In this process and the structures of the host country, migrants have to (re-) negotiate their identities within new categorizations and new social locations and in terms of new Others (La Barbera, [2015](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13504630.2020.1816952); Chryssochoou, 2004).

This article explores the various categories and labels appended to the Zera Beita Israel (ZBI) of Ethiopia as its members migrated to Israel and the tensions that were part of their everyday lives along the way. A close examination of the ZBI illuminates the urgent issues of global migration and the complex relationship between categorization and state policy. The article also examines how the ZBI migrants react to their categorization and the ways they employ their limited agency to negotiate the meaning of the labels applied to them.

Shifting classifications of people in general and migrants, in particular, are integral to the modern nation-state. The ZBI case is characterized by multiple moves that challenge the migrants and the countries they inhabit. This case is interesting and relevant because the ZBI spend a considerable amount of time in transit status in Ethiopia before even leaving and are defined by categories and labels usually used in later stages of transit migration. Once they arrive in Israel, the ZBI migrants continue to challenge and disrupt accepted local categories, as will be shown.

This article has four parts. The first introduces the theoretical context of the study and reviews previous research on categorization, labelling, transit migration and reaction to categorization. The second part introduces the methodology. The third part presents the frame of immigration to Israel and the research population. The fourth part discusses the findings and the final part concludes with a discussion of the main arguments.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A pressing issue facing global migration today is the clash between bureaucratic designations and migrants' real experiences. This paper explores the contradictions related to the migration experience of Zera Beita Israel (ZBI), descendants of Ethiopian Jews who converted to Christianity in the nineteenth century, to Israel. Israeli immigration is based on the Law of Return, distinguishing between *olim* (Jewish immigrants), *mehagrim* (non-Jewish migrants) and refugees. As non-Jewish descendants of Jews, the ZBI a priori present a challenge to this legal distinction. Their immigration journey to permanent residence in Israel takes them through various environments where they are viewed and labelled differently, further complicating their migrant experience and sense of belonging.

Moncrieffe and Eyben (2007) argued that categorization is directed at transforming dynamic cultural processes into defined constructs. Zetter (1991) maintained that labelling turns humans into objects with material and political meaning, enabling the translation of identity for bureaucratic purposes. Labelling creates conditioning through differentiation, inclusion and exclusion, stereotypes and control mechanisms. All these mechanisms are dynamic and particular (Appelqvist 1999; McAdam 2005): countries impose different definitions of identity, resulting in different rights and obligations (Adelman 1988) that become a source of tension between how newcomers define themselves and the definitions imposed by the host state (Harrell-Bond 1986; Jenkins 1994; Mazu 1986; Peterson 1958; Robertson, 2015; Zetter 1991).

The bureaucratic and political systems that label and categorize people and communities are inflexible, while the everyday activities and lives of newcomers are characterized by sociological blurring. Categories have always been an essential tool of political power, the logic of the état civil that Foucault was particularly critical of. How migrants are categorized by the state affects resource distribution, residential location and labour rights. The use of such categories in official discourse has an impact not only on public perceptions of migratory phenomena but also on the lives of migrants through enforcement of policies related to refugee status, life and death (Collyer1 and De Haas 2012; Kemp and Yona 2008)

Migration often takes more than a decade. The literature on transit migration—defined as migration to “one country with the intention of seeking the possibility there to emigrate to another country as the country of final destination, by means that are partially, if not fully, illegal” (Papadopolou 2005; See also Collyer et al. 2012; Düvell 2008; Tudoroiu 2017), highlights its ambiguity and multiple patterns. Present-day migratory phenomena include temporary and circular migration, internal migration and migration to third or even more countries, as well as all sorts of diaspora linkages between countries of origin and destination (Hugo et al. 2014; Düvell 2008; Mingot and de Arimatéia da Cruz 2013; Fargues 2009; Tudoroiu 2017). Current immigration is complex and may include moving through up to four stations in and between countries. Each station’s categorization may be different and migrants must respond to the particular categories in each station established by different actors (e.g., government, NGOs, neighbours, etc.).

This article shares a Barthian focus on group boundaries and the processes of social negotiations that construct them, rather than seeing the groups as immutable entities (Barth, 1969). Central to my argument is Jenkins’ distinction between “groups” and “categories” (1994), in which group identity is the group’s own internal definition, whereas category is a definition imposed by others, for example, by a dominant national group on minorities. In a new setting, such as after migration, one becomes subject to new categorizations (external definitions) by the dominant group. “Social Identity is never unilateral”, declares Jenkins. “Individuals have some control over how they are perceived in the interaction order, but their categorization by others is always moot” (2000, p. 8). Therefore, they must renegotiate their group identity (internal definition) in this new environment, which is also shaped by the experience of being categorized. These renegotiations depend on how consensual or conflictual the external definition is perceived and on the power relations that define the opportunities for resistance against the categorization. Jenkins himself introduces five possible responses to imposed categorization, ranging from internalization and acceptance to resisting or denying the truthfulness of the categorization (2000, p. 21). There are many other examples of theorizing responses to imposed categorization (Alba, 2005; Shelton et al., 2006; Tilly, 2004). However, it is Andreas Wimmer’s vast work on ethnic boundary making (2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2013) that makes the most ambitious claim of being a comprehensive typology of the variations of boundary making strategies. In this case study, the main meaning of acceptance of categories critical for immigration option, and the right to be an immigrant and the ability to obtain citizenship.

It is a complex phenomenon in which policy interventions and changed social networks create various categories of migrants, such as legal, illegal and irregular migrants and workers, as well as asylum seekers and refugees (Içduygu 2000; Sahin-Mencütek 2012) and those with new migratory intentions (Wissink et al. 2013).

The key point is that the state, through legislation and policies, intervenes in global flows by deciding who is an immigrant, a refugee or an illegal migrant (Sahin-Mencütek 2012). Different categories of migration and ensuing migratory paths are constructed by the “interaction between the policies governing migration, the capabilities of migrants and their aspirations” (Dimitriadi 2015: 5; c.f. Mingot and de Arimatéia da Cruz 2013:Düvell 2012).

Although labelling and categorization are attempts to create order, the movement of people and the complexity of daily lives create dissonance and undermine those definitions. This paper tackles specific social processes by employing theoretical perspectives on transit migration and studies focusing on categorization and labelling, raising important questions about how people in transit are categorized at different stations along their journey, how their movement and the “in transit” status shape the labels attached to them and what the significance is of categories and their construction in the midst of movement.

METHOD

This article is part of a larger ethnographic study of migration conducted between 2005 and 2012, which included in-depth fieldwork at each of the four stations of the ZBI journey: their villages of origin in northern Ethiopia, transit camps in Ethiopia, absorption centres in Israel and permanent dwellings in Israel.

The project is a multi-sited ethnography of movement, using the countries of origin and destinations not as the alpha and omega of immigration but rather as two of many reference points in a journey shaped by multiple competing practices of place-making and perceptions of time. I travelled with the ZBI, lived in each of the places they lived, and participated in their experiences of waiting and moving.[[2]](#endnote-2)

I used Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss 2009) as my primary methodology, allowing the main topics of inquiry to evolve and emerge during and after the field research. I conducted participant observation and interviews while living with the ZBI in each of the stations. In this way, I developed a close understanding of their daily experiences, social encounters, conversations, prayer and especially their experience of waiting and moving. The questions surrounding labelling and categorization emerged from the research as key elements in understanding their experiences and the state’s perceptions of them.

I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with 106 people; the interview was presumed to be a means of helping people express their perceptions, thoughts and hidden attitudes (Arksey and Knight 1999). My ethnographic interview guide (Spradley 1979) followed a chronological axis personalized for each interviewee, listing various aspects of daily life at each station of the migration journey. The interviews were conducted in Hebrew or Amharic, with the use of an interpreter when needed.

The interviews and observations are supplemented with texts drawn from the wider political and public discourse, including government resolutions and items from the press.

Immigration to Israel

Despite being a liberal democratic state, Israel is not a classical immigration destination. To be more precise, it is a country of one specific form of migration: Jewish migration. Israeli laws and regulations prohibit non-Jewish foreigners from settling in Israel. The right to immigrate is granted through *aliyah*, or Jewish migration, founded on the premise that Israel is the homeland for all Jews around the world and is enshrined in the Basic Laws of the state. The 1950 Law of Return gives Jews, wherever they live, the right to migrate to Israel and assume Israeli citizenship. In 1970, this right was extended to people with one Jewish grandparent and to people married to Jews, regardless of whether they are considered Jewish under strict Orthodox interpretations of Halakha (religious law). Currently, approximately 73% of the Israeli population are immigrants or descendants of immigrants (third generation and less). Thus, in many regards, Israel is a multi-cultural immigrant society.

The State of Israel defines different categories of immigrants, each of which has meaning in terms of citizenship and rights. *Olim*, the most common category, are those who come to Israel and receive citizenship and the absorption basket. Migrant workers, the second group, usually come to Israel through bilateral agreements. As of 2020, there were 98,188 legal migrant workers and 18,136 illegal migrant workers in Israel. Asylum seekers have temporary status and live under the constant threat of deportation. In 2020, there were approximately 30,511 asylum seekers in Israel from Africa and approximately 20,000 from Eastern Europe, with only 13 recognized as refugees.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The Research Population: Zera Beita Israel

The ZBI, known as Feres Mura (Seeman 2009), were part of the Ethiopian Jewish community of Beita Israel up to the mid-nineteenth century, when some members converted to Christianity, either by choice or force. These converts lived a Christian lifestyle but were not accepted by their Christian neighbours. Consequently, they lived a religiously liminal life—self-categorized as Christians but categorized by the dominant Christian community as Jews (Talmi Cohn 2011; Ehrlich, Salamon, and Kaplan 2003; Messing 1982; Salamon 1993; Seeman 2009 Shabtai 2006; Waldman 1995, 2004, 2015, 2016).

Beginning in 1991, thousands of members of this community left their villages and moved to Addis Ababa and Gondar, where transit camps were created for those seeking to migrate to Israel. Their motives for emigrating varied: reuniting with family members who had already emigrated as Jews, escaping problems with neighbours because of their historical status as Jews and economic motivations. Significantly, the transit camps were where they first encountered doubts regarding their Jewishness. After their applications to migrate to Israel were rejected, they found themselves stranded in the camps, unwilling to return to their villages but unable to continue to their intended destination.

Israeli policy-makers questioned the authenticity of their Jewishness, leading to long periods of waiting and uncertainty, a situation that continues to this day. Between 1991 and 2018, approximately 48,000 ZBI were eventually granted the right to migrate to Israel, where their lives began with another prolonged stay of about two years in absorption centres, after which they moved into permanent dwellings. Other ZBI, however, are still waiting to be granted the right to migrate to Israel, some for as many as 20 years.

The Israeli establishment and society have been ambivalent about the ZBI, evident from the first discussions of their case at the Rubinstein Commission hearings. Some argued they 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”. Members of Israel’s Ethiopian community labelled them “gentiles” [non-Jews].[[4]](#endnote-4) One activist complained that “the state is bringing in gentiles of our color, from the same country we came from” (Brendstain 2008). At the same time, these same ZBI were also described as “Jews who got lost on the way” or “full-fledged Jews" (State Comptroller 2008). These conflicting views, expressed across decades of government debates and resolutions, also resonate in the daily lives of the ZBI, in the way they view themselves and in the way they are viewed by those around them.

Israel is not the only country where immigration and citizenship laws limit migration based on ethnicity or other categories, but it is one of the few where the distinctions are ethno-religious. The intricacies of the law are beyond the scope of this paper. It should be noted, however, that a major complication to the right to migrate to Israel was the mass migration of people from the former Confederation of Independent States (CIS)—the former Soviet Union—that began in the early 1990s, some of whom did not have migration rights under the Law of Return. These difficulties continued with the ZBI of Ethiopia. Each of these groups posed unique challenges to the existing laws governing migration to Israel, highlighting the tension between the reigning Halachic Judaism enshrined in Israeli state laws and alternative perceptions of being Jewish. Different solutions that were not necessarily consistent with one another were found for each case (Harel 2015; Kemp and Reichman 2003; Yaron 2015) and challenged the definition of the State of Israel as one exclusively of Jewish migration (Kemp 2008). It is this clash between immigration regimes that created the unique classification and labelling of the ZBI.

The politics of labelling

*“In Ethiopia, my neighbour calls me Bodea Flash and I behave like Bieta Israel. In Israel, they call me Christian and tell me that I'm not a Jew”* (Tamasgan, 2012). The struggle for acceptance that is the reality for the ZBI is a product of the ideological, religious, political, economic and racial context in which they live. Despite their attempts to belong to a defined and stable category—as Jewish migrants or Olim,[[5]](#endnote-5) part of the Jewish mainstream of Israel—they were confronted daily with issues of labelling. Multiple actors and forces, from state bureaucracies to NGOs, play a role in this complex reality, affecting the ZBI directly and indirectly. Moreover, the state’s arbitrary procedures and frequent policy changes created a sense of insecurity and vigilance for the ZBI.

Doubts about the ZBI’s Jewishness is expressed through ambiguous policies, including a years-long chronicle of changing government positions regarding their eligibility to enter Israel as *olim*; endless debates about their Jewishness and the resources directed toward them; and a long history of government functionaries evading questions of those waiting to migrate regarding their entitlement to *oleh* status (Cohn, 2006).

In 1991, the State of Israel conducted Operation Solomon, which transported more than 14,000 *olim* from Ethiopia to Israel. Most were Beita Israel—Ethiopian Jews who had maintained their religious identity. Following this mass migration, approximately 3,000 members of the ZBI arrived in Addis Ababa with the intention of making *aliyah*. Although this group of ZBI had relatives in Israel, they did not meet the criteria established by the Law of Return and Israeli immigration policies and, thus, were not granted *oleh* status (Rubinstein Committee 1991, Clause A; Waldman and Kimchi 1992). In 1991, then prime minister Yitzhak Shamir set up the Rubinstein Committee to examine the ZBI’s eligibility for *aliyah*, the discussions of which marked the beginning of the process of categorization and classification. The issue was presented as “the *Falashmura* problem”, which was indicative of the establishment’s approach to the ZBI community: first, that there was a problem; and second, that this problem was essentially one of classification, i.e., how should the ZBI be classified so as to confer upon them *oleh* status?

The very name *Falasmura* (or Falashmura, as it came to be used in public discourse) demonstrates the inclination to label and exclude the ZBI. It is a mispronunciation of a label that Ethiopians use to describe—and exclude—Beita Israel.

The name “Falasha” or “Falasa” was commonly used in Ethiopia for anyone whose origins were in Beita Israel, whether that person was from Beita Israel or had 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 the word means “lose roots, wander, immigrate”.[[6]](#endnote-6) This understanding is consistent with the perception by Ethiopian Christians that Beita Israel and those community members who had converted to Christianity were rootless and detached. In interviews, members of the Christian convert community told me that, although they lived as Christians, the Christians called them *Falashmura* as a slur.

The names Falasha and Falashmura, thus, contributed to social exclusion in Ethiopia and Israel (Wethrell and Potter 1992). According to one of my interviewees, “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).

Long after many ZBI made *aliyah* to Israel, the question of ZBI entitlement and belonging remains a subject of debate.[[7]](#endnote-7) The use of seemingly permanent labels gives policy-makers, and parts of the Israeli general public, a sense of control. These labels have created a fixed perception of the ZBI that is at odds with their self-perception.

The ZBI identity is questioned throughout the entire migration process, with doubt embedded in the very terminology used by different forces. I deliberately use the term ZBI because this name has not yet acquired political significance within the interplay between the state, NGOs and other forces noted above. Nonetheless, the range of names and labels applied to them clearly reflects their complex position in Ethiopian and Israeli societies.

ZBI migration has become a unique journey, both a process of physical, cultural and religious transition and a transition between categories. Their experiences at the various stations of the journey (from the villages, through the transit camps, in absorption centres, and finally to permanent dwellings) underscore the day-to-day implications of labelling and the blurring of categories of classification.

The role of the state and its bureaucracy

*The Ministry of Interior asked me about all my family, seven generations back from my mom’s side and from my dad's. They interviewed my family in Israel, they called me several times and asked a lot of questions but, I'm still waiting, eleven years waiting. Live with Jewish people who are waiting, they once tell us that we will come to Israel, after they tell us later, we are all sad, stressed and worried.* (Gashau, Gondar 2011)

Gshus' comment reveals the uncertainty about the shifting criteria defining who would make *Aliyah* during the decades of immigration from Ethiopia, although the application process has remained the same. Their migration process is unique. Usually, relatives in Israel must apply to the Ministry of Interior and request to be reunited with their relatives. They are required to provide a detailed genealogy that is first examined by representatives of the Ministry and then by the Israeli Consulate in Ethiopia, which summons the prospective immigrants for an investigation. Details of the investigation are then returned to the Ministry, which evaluates the case and grants or denies permission. This process takes many years. Usually, if the application is rejected, the candidates are not informed and continue waiting in vain for a response from the Israeli government.[[8]](#endnote-8).

Moving between labels: classification and boundaries in the transit camp

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. I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to my friends and my home. 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, I’d be like everyone, I’d have a family, I’d come 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, absorption center).

Elpha described his transition from life in the village as a Christian Ethiopian to the transit camp in Gondar and from being an Ethiopian citizen who migrated to the city to becoming a candidate for *aliyah*. At the transit camp, he was exposed to the concept of *Oleh* and changed his lifestyle accordingly, trying to adapt to be able to immigrate to Israel. In the above ethnographic passage that describes being unable to go about freely and 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. Newcomers to the transit camp felt like migrants or temporary visitors who did not belong; they experienced the loss of home, which was compounded by poverty and hunger (Talmi Cohn 2018).

The transit camp was also where people first encountered Israeli demands, laws, and expectations, which determined who qualified for *oleh* status. During this waiting stage, the ZBI began to participate in Jewish rituals and modify their behaviour to meet expectations. In other words, they are agents who choose to act in specific ways to conform to a given category. They developed new daily practices and combined different perceptions of time and space. This is the point where clear and open categorization took place, where a person became a migrant, *oleh*, or a refugee.

The transit camps challenged existing categories of citizenship and migration in Ethiopia and Israel and encouraged those waiting to conform to the new categories created, shaped by the actions of those waiting, the various organizations tending to them, and the nation-states involved.

Below, I describe the contradictory dynamics of categorizing the ZBI and analyze the formation of categories in these stations.

Waiting to make *aliyah*

The Israeli government did not maintain a direct presence in the transit camp, although representatives visited frequently. The aid agencies were active in the camp until April 2011 (Seeman 2009; Talmi Cohn 2014), the most prominent being the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry 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), and helped the children with their studies. Other organizations, including Shevut Am and Mikhnaf Darom LeZion, provided spiritual aid focused on the return of the ZBI to active Judaism.

The aid provided by those organizations helped create a community whose members were unified by their desire to obtain *oleh* status and make *aliyah*. These characteristics distinguished them from the locals, a situation different from what they experienced in their villages, where even if a person dreamed of going to Israel, there was nothing concrete or tangible to differentiate him from the wider environment.

In return for the aid, and ultimately as a condition for making *aliyah*, community members were obliged to demonstrate the behaviour considered appropriate for returning to Judaism: shedding all characteristics related to their Christian life and working toward being classified as Jews. For some, the return was swift; as they saw it, once they stopped eating meat, avoided intermarriage with Christians, and stopped wearing a cross, they had converted and were once again Beita Israel. Many started attending synagogue, where the children learned that they were descendants of Beita Israel and adults began to acquire a deeper understanding of religious faith and practice:

When we got to Gondar, we went to synagogue and stopped eating meat. We had a ceremony there, and took off the necklaces with the crosses we’d been wearing. After this, we became Beita Israel. Now, we go to synagogue every morning, and we celebrate the Jewish holidays. We stopped being like everyone else, the way we had been in the village. We returned to grandma and grandpa’s culture. (Mersha, Gondar transit camp, 2005)

Although Mersha felt that changing some habits and espousing others was sufficient for her to regain the label “Jew”, Taganu described his return to Judaism as a complex process that required constant engagement with the choice between Judaism and Christianity:

When we got to Gondar, I knew that I was Beita Israel. I tried to follow the Beita Israel culture, but it wasn’t easy in the beginning. You see, when it was Timkat or Aba Gabriel [Christian holidays, RTC], I couldn’t stop celebrating, so I went with them. I’d be with Beita Israel all the time, but sometimes it was like before. (2009, Israel)

The prolonged waiting was sometimes interpreted as a message from a government bureaucracy that doubted their Judaism. This indirect perceived message was also conveyed through arbitrary and inexplicable acts: changes in immigration quotas and the intermittent withholding and reissuing of permits. The vague and shifting policies regarding the status of the ZBI preserved the power asymmetry between the would-be migrants and the state, regardless of the distress of the long wait for classification that would entitle them to migrate.

As part of the movement from Christianity toward Judaism, we also find a “return” to messianic Judaism, which expands and complicates the boundaries of Judaism and its meanings.[[9]](#endnote-9) The ZBI’s return to Judaism also created tensions between those waiting and their Christian neighbours. When I visited with Nazirat in Gondar in 2005, we entered a yard shared by a few small houses, and while Nazirat prepared coffee, the neighbours gathered and started to chat. When I asked Nazirat which of her relatives were in Israel, she gave me a strange look and did not answer. I did not understand what happened, but realized that I had done something wrong. At the end of our meeting, 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. 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, I visited Nazirat again; she had moved with her family to a house that shared a yard with the houses of other people waiting to make *aliyah*. When I asked Nazirat why they had moved, she explained:

When the neighbours 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 anything, but their behaviour toward us changed. They understood that we were Beita Israel, and then the landlady raised our rent. No other neighbour 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 neighbours was exacerbated by the fact that they received money from their families in Israel, and especially because of the ongoing assistance from the aid organizations that helped only those defined as “waiting to make *aliyah*”. This distinction also caused problems with the local authorities, who viewed these organizations as exclusionary and discriminatory and called for them to assist all the people in the area, not only prospective migrants.

Life as refugees

Although those waiting for *aliyah* were doing so in their own country, their lives were different from their previous lives in their villages. They could neither return home nor 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 life were shaped by definitions and frameworks created by Israeli and U.S.-based bureaucracies and organizations. These unique circumstances turned them into a new class of refugees—waiting to immigrate (Cohn 2006). Berhanu described the experience to me in 2010:

I have no place to return to. 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 into poverty and led to alienation from where they now found themselves. Although ostensibly in their own country and amidst neighbours, they were actually homeless and unemployed and lacked a sense of belonging.

Living alongside immigrants

The ZBI migration process is inseparable from other similar processes in Ethiopia (Tadele et al. 2006). There are many reasons for emigrating from Ethiopia, including seeking more income opportunities (Alula 1989; Kothari 2003; McDowell and de Hann 1997; Stark 1991; Worku 1995), reasons related to women’s status in society (Gurmu 2005), and educational, religious and medical motives.

In the transit camps, people remain Ethiopian citizens. In their own minds, however, they are transit immigrants waiting to migrate to Israel, existing in a local discourse of migration. From the perspective of the Israeli government, this group fits into no category and, consequently, is simply under investigation.

Next stop, Israel

The fragility of categories, as is clear in the case of the brothers Senbatho and Johannes—an *oleh*, and an asylum seeker—remains even after the ZBI finally arrive in Israel. Senbatho made *aliyah* and successfully completed all the formal requirements, including strict conversion to Judaism supervised by Israeli rabbinical authorities. Eventually, Senbatho received an Israeli ID card. These milestones indicated that his journey had concluded and that he could now feel like a citizen among his equals. Yet, even after many years in Israel, ZBI like Senbatho may still be perceived as refugees and asylum seekers by Israeli society, especially if they live or work in the same areas as asylum seekers from Eritrea or Sudan.

Upon arrival in Israel, the *olim* are housed in absorption centres, and only after a period of time there do they move to what will be their permanent residence. Whether by choice, necessity, or government directive (e.g., earmarked aid), many settle in neighbourhoods populated by other *olim* from Ethiopia (Central Bureau of Statistics 2020). Their children attend schools where most students are from marginalized backgrounds and most adults work in unskilled, poorly paid jobs. Teenagers are often referred to vocational schools, the assumption being that they have the potential for nothing more. Others are sent to residential schools to ease the financial burden on their parents; following official thinking, it is believed they will receive a better education there.

The official differentiation in education, employment and conversion is a clear, albeit indirect, expression of racist labelling by the establishment (Ben Eliezer 2008; Goodman 2008; Seeman 2003). Although this differentiation may reflect a genuine desire to help this group, it also reveals assumptions about their abilities, limits their possibilities, and preserves the differences, marginality, and the nonbelonging that excludes them from Israeli society.

Compounding this differentiation is the ambiguity created by asylum seekers and refugees, some of whom are from areas bordering Ethiopia (e.g., the Sudan and Eritrea) and speak Amharic. Despite significant differences between these migrants and the *olim*, who officially belong to the dominant national group, in the eyes of the state and parts of society, the ZBI are considered closer to that of labour migrants and refugees.

Some of the ZBI complained about asylum seekers and refugees, at times in stereotypical terms, adopting the local discourse: “The refugees rob us of our employment”; “They drink lots of alcohol”; “They do drugs”; “They carry diseases”; and, “Sometimes they take our girls, and that’s really dangerous.” Some of these claims are based on ZBI prejudices toward non-Ethiopian Africans (often eerily similar to how they, themselves, are perceived by other Israelis). Other claims, however, reflect the underlying class struggle in Israeli society in which they find themselves participants. Only a few ZBI expressed positive or empathetic opinions about the refugees, with statements like “poor people, what a way they had coming from the Sudan,” or “lots of people say lots of things about them, but really, they are just people”.

Israelis who are not of Ethiopian origin find it difficult to distinguish among these groups, and the labels they use for all dark-skinned people reflect this difficulty. A kitchen worker in a hotel in Eilat told me in 2008: “What’s the difference between a black person with a cross on his face and one without? […] We have *olim* and refugees working here. On the outside, they are just the same, and it’s only after I get to know them that I see the difference.” Sarah, a resident of Tel Aviv, told me, “Black is black. Makes no difference if he’s from Ethiopia or the Sudan. He comes from Africa and, anyway, there are rabbis who say that the Ethiopians aren’t Jews at all.”

Despite the seemingly clear bureaucratic distinction between asylum seekers and *olim*, Israelis from Ethiopia must constantly prove that they are citizens and Jews. In his home in Israel, Sferau told me about his experience in the job market in 2007:

I worked all summer in Eilat. I needed money to help my parents buy their home. But I’m not going back there. You have no idea what it’s like, everyone treats you like you’re a labour migrant or a refugee. I told them a few times that I have an Israeli ID, but they don’t care. They treat us as if we came from the Sudan, they look down on us …. It’s not good.

Rivka, also permanently settled in central Israel, reported discrimination in schools in 2010:

I wanted to enrol my son in a religious school. I came to register him, and I was told that he can’t be accepted. I asked why? They didn’t answer, and then I heard that they tell all the Ethiopian kids that they can’t. Later they told us that we’re not Jews. They told us that it’s because we came from Ethiopia, I don’t understand. What do they think? That we’re Sudanese? We came from Ethiopia. Our parents were Beita Israel, we learned Judaism and were converted, and they won’t take our kids because they aren’t Jews.

These mundane occurrences reveal the discrepancy between official classifications and the actual experiences of *olim* from Ethiopia in everyday encounters with institutions and parts of the Israeli public. Their official status as *olim* with full citizenship does not prevent the labelling that accompanies the “Falashmura problem.” The ZBI yearn to be accepted as citizens and as Jewish *olim* and to partake fully of the spiritual, symbolic and material resources that come with belonging to the dominant group. The gap between the desire to belong, to shed all labels and become part of mainstream Jewish Israeli society and the realities of life seems as wide as ever. At the time of this writing, the daily struggles of people of Ethiopian origin, whose classification is in doubt and whose attribution to one category or another is vague, prompts questions regarding the suitability of categorical definitions to the realities of life.

CONCLUSION

Every country has determined who is allowed into its territory based on classifications of citizen, migrant or refugee. This is the principal instrument by which states control their national “character” and social order. The everyday experiences of people, however, do not necessarily conform to these definitions, leading to the creation of marginal—and marginalized—groups that struggle for acceptance by the mainstream.

The ZBI, a group whose definition is as unclear in its country of origin as it is in its country of destination, highlights the confluence of categories in one group. However, they are not unique; all migrants encounter various categories along the journey of migration, each place stamping them with cultural values and bureaucratic labels. This is a global issue of increasing relevance, as people seek refuge regardless of whether they have been recognized as refugees. Indeed, it is this tension between human needs and desires and bureaucratic definitions that lies at the heart of the immigration experience.

The Israeli state’s treatment of ZBI immigrants is a combination of acceptance and embrace on the one hand and rejection and alienation on the other. Paradoxically, the journey they embarked upon, motivated by doubts about their belonging to religious and social categories in Ethiopian society, leads to new doubts, this time about belonging to the dominant socio-religious category in Israel. Doubts about identity have made the immigration and absorption process of this community unique in the history of Israeli immigration. Despite the considerable resources invested by the Israeli government and aid agencies in bringing the ZBI to Israel and integrating them into society, the state’s insistence on strict categories makes the ZBI a community in perpetual waiting, which must fight for its place in Israel.

This study examines the different statuses of a specific group of immigrants, illuminating citizens’ and societies’ perceptions of migrants, of what they are required to do, how they are required to act, and how these processes shape the migrants and their migration. Finally, it also illuminates the power of states and organizations in shaping categories of people.

The process of migration, beyond the physical movement from place to place, is a dialogue with stronger forces that shape migrants’ own perceptions of citizenship and belonging through the labels and categories applied to them as migrants. (1) The question of status and possibility of citizenship hang over them constantly. (2) It is the states that define the migrants’ status, and definitions of citizenship vary depending on their country of origin. In other words, definitions are not applied uniformly to all migrants. (3) The interactions at each stage along the migration route further challenge the very categories applied to the migrants, generating new labels and provoking novel responses. (4) Migrants act in response to the categories imposed on them, but they exercise their agency in some circumstances by choosing the categories to which they adapt themselves, for example, by beginning to practice Halachic Judaism to qualify for the category of *Olim*.

Finally, categories and labels do not merely define a migrant’s status but have a powerful effect on the migrant’s daily life and being. This categorization both affects migrants and defines the state's own social boundaries and hierarchies, profoundly shaping the state and society at large.

**Endnotes**

1. There is no Israeli legal category for labor migrants from Ethiopia, Sudan and Eritrea; that is, there is no way for them to legally enter the country other than as Jewish immigrants. Thus, they are categorized as asylum seekers. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I have reflected elsewhere on how my identity as a white, Jewish, Israeli woman shaped my relationships with my subjects, the questions I asked, the responses I received and my interpretation of the social reality within which I existed (Cohn 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign\_workers\_stats/he/ZARIM\_q4\_2020.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In a letter sent in 1995 to the head of the conversion administration (Sharvit 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Olim* is the plural of *oleh—*literally, “ascender”—the Hebrew term used to describe Jewish migrants to Israel. The specific act of Jewish immigration to Israel is *aliyah*; both words derive from the same verb root. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Cohn (2006) chronicles the position of the State of Israel toward the ZBI from 1991 to 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Only in 2011 did the Ministry begin regularly informing candidates of their rejection, and even then, the message was not always delivered. Thus, distrust of the system developed among those waiting, and even those with scant chance of acceptance continued to wait. Certain prospective migrants who were initially rejected were later allowed to migrate. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I did not encounter converts to messianic Judaism among the subject community I worked with, but it nonetheless existed in the research field, posing a challenge to the Israeli government and complicating the binary choice between Christianity and a return to halachic Judaism. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)