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***religions***

Article

**Transnationalism and Hybridity in Religious Practices**

**during the Migration Process: The Zera Beta Israel in**

**Ethiopia and Israel**

**Ravit Talmi-Cohn**

The Institute for Immigration and Social Integration, Ruppin Academic Center, Emek Hefer 4025000, Israel;

ravitt@ruppin.ac.il

**Abstract:** This article examines the complexity of religious practices and beliefs among a group

of Zera Beta Israel (Falash Mura) members before, during, and a decade after their immigration

process to Israel. This community, with roots in Judaism, converted to Christianity in the 19th century,

complicating their request to immigrate to Israel along with Beta Israel members (Ethiopian Jews who

had not converted to Christianity). Following an average 15-year wait in Ethiopian transit camps, they

spent about two years in Israeli absorption centres and underwent conversion to rabbinic Judaism.

This study aims to elucidate notions of religious, cultural, and oppositional transnationalism through

life experiences described by Zera Beta Israel community members. Drawing on transnational theory

and an interpretative qualitative approach, it develops and analyses 25 in-depth, semi-structured

interviews and conversations conducted with members of the Zera Beta Israel community in Ethiopia

and Israel. The findings challenge conventional binary perceptions and conceptual categories, such as

Jewish–Christian or religious–secular and demonstrate the fluidity and complexity—the hybridity—

that exists in the contexts of religion and immigration.

**Keywords:** immigration; transnationalism; religious practices; hybridity; Israel; Ethiopia

**1. Introduction**

Studies of Ethiopian Jewry have extensively examined the issue of Beta Israel’s (BI)1

eligibility as Jews focusing on the degree to which they conform with modern the definitions

of rabbinic Judaism. Similar to the institutional view in Israel, these studies focus on the

whether the immigrants2 from Ethiopia suit the predominant religious practices in Israel

(Shalom 2019, 2022).

With insights gleaned from field work in Ethiopia and Israel, this article offers an

alternative perspective. Capturing the experiences of a subcommunity of Ethiopian Jews

prior to their immigration to Israel, it challenges the binary nature of current research as

well as institutional views around immigration to Israel. Drawing on literature exploring

religious and cultural transnationalism, it examines the ways in which religious practices

and perceptions are shaped by the immigration process itself, revealing the existence of

transnational religious and cultural spaces that express hybridity.

As described in detail below, the Zera Beta Israel (ZBI, also called Falash Mura3)

converted to Christianity in the 19th century and later returned to Judaism. The considerations

surrounding their immigration to Israel—a binary decision as to whether they are

considered to be halachically Jewish—have been influenced by ways in which their historic

identity, transition between religions, continent of origin, and the colour of their skin have

influenced how the institutions of the state and broader Israeli society, both perennially

marked by political manoeuvring, have challenged their religious identity (Cohen 2011;

Sabar 2017; Seeman 2009; Talmi-Cohn 2020). The state’s and broader Israeli society’s doubts

about the ZBI’s Jewishness strengthen these binary categorizations.

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This article draws on a body of literature on transnationalism and religion that views

religious conversion and migration as processes that take place within larger economic, political,

and sociological contexts, and that touch on personal beliefs, community belonging,

and religious practices. Referring to the concept of transnationalism in this examination of

the experiences and views members of the ZBI shared in 25 interviews and conversations

enables us to consider the possibility that physical movement in the transition between

physical stations and countries over time affects cultural, religious, community, and personality

spaces. As the interviews also demonstrate, the transnational process is ongoing and

dynamic, resulting in both a hybridity that is a product of slow maturation as immigrants

respond to the different spaces in ways that create combinations—of old and new, past and

present—that allow them to survive and achieve a sense of belonging. In this study, such

hybridity is juxtaposed with mainstream Israeli binary views as revealed in analyses of

government ministry meeting protocols and media sources. It is important to note that the

very nature of this study—focusing on individual immigrant’s reflections—itself reflects a

significant shift from the communal focus of the original BI community prior to emigration.

This shift is a likely result not only of the characteristics of the migration process, but also

the legal questions about rights the community encountered in Israel.

The first goal of this paper is to describe and analyse the tension between the state’s

binary definitions and structured categories of religion compared to the daily reality

experienced during immigration as reflected in transnationalism. The second aim is to

offer new insights into the immigration process. Together, these should help demonstrate

the importance of hybridity as a concept for understanding the ability of human beings to

create diverse practices that combine cultural and religious practices.

**2. Theoretical Framework**

2.1. The Study of Religions

Like many academic disciplines, religious studies arose in nineteenth-century Europe

and America as a result of encounters with “non-Western others” during centuries of

colonial expansion (King 2013; Martin and Wiebe 2012). The discipline has reflected a

wide range of approaches and research agendas (Berg and Katja 2016; Hinnells 2005; Orsi

2011). Therefore, it is vital to establish our context within the discipline of religious studies.

This study acknowledges that various claims made by any religion serve as important

reference points among religious actors in their social practices and imaginative horizons.

It also recognizes that such claims and the religious realities they create generate actual

experiences and become social realities with consequences for all those involved—believers

as well as those who remain undecided or actively deny any religion. This research is

not intended to determine who is or is not a Jew, or what is true or false; rather, the

goal is to understand the practices of religion during the migration process through these

social realities.

In recent decades, the scholarly notion that religions emerge from singular traditions

embodying one distinct corpus of ideas, practices, and artefacts has slowly been replaced

by an emphasis on the internal plurality and heterogeneity of religious traditions. Studies

increasingly recognize that the idea of one unified and hegemonic tradition is likely to

be the result of discursive struggles to establish one overriding religious narrative (Faure

2021). In the course of such struggles, contested histories are unified through a process

of purging unsuitable contingencies, forms, and developments that conflicts with the

desired canonization processes and religious histories. Thus, specific religious traditions

are often the products of proactive social constructions that create the desired history of

such traditions (Grieve and Weiss 2005).

These processes also highlight the transcultural nature and history of religion as a

concept that evolved through encounters between Christian missionaries,Western scholars,

colonial traders, administrators, and soldiers on the one hand, and their respective local

interlocutors, trading partners, informants, and colonial subjects on the other. Religion, as

understood today, is the product of these encounters and the subsequent mutual rereadReligions

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ing, appropriation, and translation of then-contemporary ideas, practices, and artefacts

(Bergunder 2016; Nongbri 2013).

The co-productive role of the “colonized other” in this global process of shaping

religion as a modern notion has generally been neglected. Nonetheless, colonized subjects

have been active agents and never mere passive recipients, sometimes speaking up and

challenging established religious categories. The studies resulting from this more complex,

transcultural perspective on the evolution of religion seek to shed light on the polyvocality

and discursive struggles inherent in the histories (and academic study) of religious

traditions. Thus, a transcultural approach allows scholars from different disciplinary, geographic,

and cultural backgrounds to engage in a dialogue in which a multiplicity of voices

is heard (Berg and Katja 2016; Goh 2015). This characterization challenges both the U.S.

view that immigrants’ religion acts as a “bridge” and the Western European view that

it is a “barrier” (Foner and Alba 2008). Instead, as Connor and Koenig (2013) argue, we

should reformulate the “bridge versus barrier” metaphor by using the transnationalism

perspective and the hybridism it engenders.

2.2. The Consequences of Borders: Migration and the Politics of Belonging

The logic underlying nation-states’ functioning influences how religion is framed,

discursively constructed, and politically controlled. The overlap between religion and

nation state becomes problematic when each is studied applying the same logic. This

criticism was first raised almost two decades ago by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002),

resulting in increased caution among scholars investigating migration or ethnic and racial

relations. They warn that state-related categories may have the intention of sustaining

and promoting specific policies; adopting them may make scholars accomplices in further

reproducing such categories (Bakewell 2008; Dahinden 2016; Horvath et al. 2017; Korteweg

2017; Schinkel 2018).

In fact, nation states create categories whereby they justify the mechanisms of inclusion

and exclusion as implemented through laws, policies, and practices. As noted by Wimmer

and Glick Schiller (2002), according to nation state logic, migration is problematic because

it blurs the alleged cultural and ethnic homogeneity of the people living within a given

national territory, establishing categories of those who do and do not belong, as well as

dichotomies such as “citizens versus foreigners” and the “imagined national community”

versus “ethnic or religious others”. Beyond immigration status, there are also other binaries

regarding who is entitled to the state’s welfare benefits—categories that make sense only in

a dialectic (e.g., “migrant” exists only in relation to “non-migrant”).

In Israel, decisions about religion and state are particularly fraught. While other

countries permit immigration based on a variety of potential migrants’ desirable characteristics,

the decision about who is entitled to immigrate to Israel and to receive citizenship is

determined solely by a unified concept of the Jewish religion. By uncritically accepting the

state’s eligibility category reflecting a notion of religion, most studies, to the extent that they

even consider the ZBI to be part of Ethiopian Jewry, have addressed the conformity of these

immigrants with rabbinic Judaism and have sought to clarify whether and to what extent

they are Jewish. In contrast, this study explores the complex—non-binary—relationship between

religion and immigration regarding religious practices during the migration process.

This view comports with that of Seeman (2009), who noted that Beta Israel members who

migrated to Israel did not think about religion, ethnicity, or national identity in a wholly

compartmentalized way because for them, each is highly contingent upon the others in

ways that render such distinctions artificial.

2.3. The Transnational and Transcultural in Migration Studies

Transnationalism as an academic term has been the subject of intense debate in recent

decades (Khagram and Levitt 2008). According to Tsuda (2012), the transnationalism

embedded in Glick Schiller et al.’s (1994) approach was first thought to consist of two

components: the transborder aspect (pertaining to the economic, political, social, and cultural

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connections migrants maintain with their country of origin), and the simultaneity aspect

(focusing on the fact that migrants engage, simultaneously, in social fields embedded in

two different societies).

Although scholars differ on various points—for example, whether the concept has

been applied over-enthusiastically (Tsuda 2012), or whether it is important to distinguish

between transnationalism initiated at the grassroots or at institutional levels (Adogame

2010)—the fundamental argument involving immigration is that transnational studies are

both a lens for describing dynamics across or beyond nations or states and an optic or

gaze that begins with a world without borders, empirically examines the boundaries and

borders that emerge at particular historical moments, and explores their relationship to

unbounded arenas and processes (Khagram and Levitt 2008).

Research has clearly shown the importance of religion in migration (Stepick 2005),

and numerous studies have looked at how migration, religion, ethnicity, and identity

formation interact. (Levitt 2004; Kouros and Papadakis 2018; Schreiter 2009). Research

focuses mainly on such questions as how migration alters and transforms religious beliefs

and practices of specific groups of migrants, how migrants shape their religious community,

or how migrants negotiate their loyalties to religious communities in the countries of origin

and destination.

While current research into transnational religious networks and practices explores the

dynamics and implications of transnational exchanges, it largely overlooks how migrants’

experiences with religion and religious diversity draw on their origins. The scholarly focus

seems to be on religious–political ideas, rather than on people as agents of change.

A multi-locational approach to investigating how migration impacts religion is needed

that comprehensively examines the connectedness of migrants and their religious communities

that considers the role of migrants as agents of change, and that examines whether and

how the contexts of their migration experiences impact religious communities, practices,

ideas, and patterns of interreligious relating.

2.3.1. Transnationalism and Religious Studies

A growing subfield in transnational migration theory pertains to transnational religion

(Adogame 2010; Csordas 2009; Frederiks 2015; Sharaby 2022). Publications use the transnational

lens as their main theoretical approach to issues of human mobility and religious

practices across borders, even if the specific theoretical or practical difference between the

transnational and the migration approaches is not always clear. While broad in scope, these

studies seek new approaches to describe the multiple ways in which religion manifests

itself through practices influenced and inspired by multiple localities.

Martha Frederiks presents various “transnational religious practices” (Frederiks 2015;

see also Levitt 2004) to describe how members of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in

London interact with church headquarters in Nigeria. Afe Adogame uses the term “transnational

migration” to describe the “complex, pendular and multidirectional movement”

(Adogame 2010, p. 56) of migrants, underscoring how their migratory narratives demonstrate

that their journey from Africa to Europe involves much more than a change of place.

Two important works explicitly addressing the theoretical relationship between migration

and religion are Tom Tweed’s Crossing and Dwelling (Tweed 2009) and Thomas J. Csordas’s

edited volume, Transnational Transcendence (Csordas 2009). Tweed underscores the close

relationship between spiritual, temporal, and spatial trajectories in the everyday lives of

Cuban Catholics in Miami. Csordas’ collection of articles proposes a variety of important

approaches. Each expands our view of migration as a hybrid process on multiple levels.

2.3.2. Transculturalism and Religious Studies

Study of religions has been characterized by an “integrated approach,” wherein the

subject matter, research material, and epistemological framework determine the methods

and approaches appropriate for answering the questions raised. The transcultural approach

suggests a different perspective (Berg 2016). Klaus Hock (2008, 2011) applies the term

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“transcultural” to describe the religious aspect of the migratory trajectory and discards the

view of both culture and religion as static entities. Instead, cultures are hybrid formations

in which meaning and interpretation are established in the context of and through complex

processes of interaction. He further asserts that religion is a “discursive field” and not a

“unit” under a cultural umbrella; therefore, it should be treated as a transcultural category.

He adds that religion in migratory settings should be studied as processes of translation,

adaption, redefinition, and appropriation created in the space where people from different

cultural and religious backgrounds meet.

Ekué (2009) and Ramakrishnan and Viramontes (2006) support Hock’s claim and

terminology but apply the transcultural term to focus on the cross-cultural sensitivity skills

that many migrants develop. Ekué argues that migration is a “transnational phase in which

people experience both vulnerability and strength” (Ekué 2009, p. 394). Both argue that

migrant religious communities can be “safe spaces” where social or cultural capital can be

developed and in which transcultural relations consequently develop with religion at the

core of cultural negotiations.

In the process of immigration, the connection between religion and culture strengthens.

The shared transitions from place to place throughout the migration process both challenge

and reinforce each other, making it necessary to see them as intertwined concepts.

2.3.3. Reactive Transnationalism

Another growing sub-area within the transnational literature examines the effect

of negative experiences in one context on the strength of transnational ties. Research

finds that some transmigrants who experienced individual and institutional discrimination

increased their transnational activity (Glick Schiller et al. 1994; Smith 2006). This has

been defined as “reactive transnationalism” (Itzigsohn and Giorguli-Saucedo 2002), referring

to increased transnational activity and identification with the homeland among

migrants and their descendants due to negative experiences (such as discrimination and

low status) in the receiving country. Reactive transnationalism is rooted in Portes and

Rumbaut’s (2001) notion of “reactive ethnicity”. Building on their work, scholars have

recently studied the phenomenon of “reactive religiosity”, which focuses on the reactions

generated by religious differences (Torrekens et al. 2022; Voas and Fenella 2012). “‘Reactive

transnationalism’ and attachment to the ethnic group is not merely ‘maintained’; it is

strategically mobilized in inter-group relations with the majority society in order to protect

minority group interests or values that are denied or rejected by the powerful majority”

(Maliepaard et al. 2015, p. 2637).

2.3.4. Hybridity and Religion

According to Homi Bhabha, “hybridity” emerged as a concept in the 1980s as part

of post-colonial studies, recognizing the multiplicity of influences on identity formation

among colonial “subjects”. Whereas transnationalism describes the broader cultural, national,

religious, or political forces in which those who live in multiple physical and cultural

space live, hybridity describes the variety of ways in which such individuals and communities

respond to and manage transnationalism.

Bhabha points out that hybridity is “the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its

shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination

through disavowal” (Bhabha 1985, p. 159). Hybrid identity develops, for example, as

migrants cease to mimic the colonial identity. It then allows individuals to control their

identity space by adopting elements of the host land’s culture while maintaining significant

parts of their own ethnic culture. Such an experience, while fraught with difficulty, can also

present unique opportunities.

It can be argued that Bhabha’s concept of hybridity aligns with hybridity in the “third

space”—in which “even the same signs can be appropriated, re-historicized, translated and

read anew” (Bhabha 1994, p. 37). Hybridity allows us to see beyond binaries, bringing

into focus the other as something dynamic, open, and creative. Hybridity is a lens to

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scrutinize the in-betweenness of binaries such as secular/religious, modern/traditional in

contemporary societies.

2.4. Study Goals

The growing literature applying a transnational and transcultural lens to the study of

religion allows for complex and multidirectional influences and reactions among migrants.

Most importantly, it establishes the theoretical foundation for considering the religious

practices and views of members of the ZBI as a form of religious hybridity. The processes

experienced by migrant communities and individual migrants reflect a hybridity in activities,

religious patterns, and practices that has emerged as the community shapes its

own narrative across time and space, from Ethiopia to Israel. This article examines these

processes by exploring the movement of ZBI community members as they navigate the

binaries of Jewish/Christian categories and halachic/Beta Israel Judaism in their processes

of immigration.

**3. Methods**

3.1. Design

Two methods guided this study. First, cross-sectional content analyses were conducted

of the meeting protocols of the Immigration Absorption and Diaspora Committee and the

Knesset’s Interior Ministry Committee (1991–2022), and of articles in leading newspapers

(2010–2022) to examine proposed policies and value-based attitudes about ZBI immigrants.

The protocols included pre-decision preliminary discussions and the views and underlying

assumptions of various state actors. They also revealed the extent to which decisions

regarding ZBI immigration were implemented. Media sources were analysed for reflections

of mainstream views towards the ZBI.

Second, ethnographic field work involving 15 personal interviews and conversations

carried out in Gondar, Ethiopia (2005–2012) and 10 in Israel (2022) with migrants who

arrived in Israel after 2005. All the interviewees were between 25 and 40 years of age

and defined themselves as Jews. Of the 15 members of the ZBI interviewed in Ethiopia,

six were married and three were women. All were waiting to immigrate to Israel. Of

the 10 interviews conducted in Israel, eight participants were men and two were women

who immigrated to Israel after 2005, when they were age 12 or older. All had lived in

transit camps in Addis Ababa or Gondar and had been in Israel for 10 to 15 years. Three

interviewees in Israel had also been interviewed in Gondar. Each interview lasted 1–2 h

and was held in the interviewee’s home or in public spaces.

There are two major studies that deal with migration and religion (Seeman 2009;

Sabar 2017) and refer to members of the Zera Beta Israel community who immigrated to

Israel. Unlike the present study, however, these focus on ZBI immigrants who continued to

practice their Christian identity once in Israel, exploring the shaping of Christian religious

practices and existence of Christian religious spaces in a Jewish state. This article continues

the discourse on designing unique activity spaces following the immigration process but

puts its emphasis on those who chose to return to Judaism.

Relying on the grounded theory qualitative approach (Glaser 2001), questions were not

predetermined, but identified main issues. Ethnographic interview guidelines (Spradley

2016) were constructed based on participant-specific timelines listing aspects of that person’s

everyday life. In Israel, the participants responded to semi-structured questions about

immigration, religious practices and conceptions, and the connection between Ethiopia

and Israel. Interviewees were told that their identity would be protected throughout the

research, that there were no wrong answers, and that they could skip questions. The

interviewees provided verbal consent and were explicitly not asked for their signatures

given their pending immigration status.

Interviews were conducted in Amharic or Hebrew, with an interpreter’s help if needed,

and were recorded and transcribed. Patterns, themes, and categories were identified using

narrative analysis (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2011; Riessman 2008).

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In addition, there were formal and informal conversations about religion and Judaism

based on many years of acquaintance with people at the community, making it possible to

hear their informal voices as well. It is important to note that in all conversations, those

being interviewed knew about this research project.

The qualitative interpretive approach views the subjects’ reality as a whole rather

than in isolated segments. The interviews and data are not intended to be statistically

representative, nor to have the “saturation” effect of individual interviews (O’Reilly and

Parker 2013). The aim is rather to uncover collective dynamics of construction and sharing

of meaning.

3.2. The Zera Beta Israel

Ethiopian Jews preserved their religious identity for many generations in isolation

from the rest of the Jewish world (Corinaldi 2001;Waldman 1995). The community comprises

two main groups: Beta Israel and Zera Beta Israel. The Beta Israel community are

Jews who maintained their Jewishness throughout their lives. The first immigrants arrived

in Israel in the 1950s; most of the rest arrived in two large-scale operations: Operation

Moses (1984–1985) and Operation Solomon (1991). The community adhered to a religious

Jewish lifestyle based on the “halachic” tradition of Ethiopian Jews4 (Shalom 2016).

The ZBI is defined by Israel’s High Court of Appeals as “being of ethnic Jewish origin

(Beta Israel) who converted to Christianity because of specific circumstances of time, place

and environment. At the same time, they preserved their uniqueness, partly because of

distinctions and aversions of their non-Jewish neighbours. Now they seek to return to

their Judaism and to immigrate to Israel” (Israel Supreme Court of Appeals 3317/93).

Their conversion to Christianity is attributed to man-made and natural disasters at the

end of the 19th century. Known as kapo-ken—the bad time—the community experienced

years of drought, hunger, and plagues. Many villages were destroyed in the war that

broke out between the Ethiopians and Muslim Dervish invaders from Sudan. Furthermore,

during the period of the Kaiser Yohannes, conversion to Christianity was made obligatory,

aided by European Christian missionaries. These forces led some Beta Israel to convert to

Christianity mainly as a means of survival (Corinaldi 2001; Waldman 1995).

Today, members of the Zera Beta Israel contend that the non-Jewish lifestyle adopted

by their forebears was the result of their being offspring of anusim—converts whose parents

or grandparents had been coerced into conversion. They further argue that their separation

from Ethiopian Judaism was never absolute; rather, the ZBI retained their original social

frameworks and maintained ties with Beta Israel families.

This view is confirmed by a variety of research (e.g., Cohen 2011; Salamon 1993;

Seeman 2009; Shabtai 2006; Talmi-Cohn 2018) showing that while ZBI left the Jewish

religion, their conversion to Christianity was far from complete, suspending them and their

descendants between Ethiopian Jews and Christians—not fully assimilated or accepted by

either group. Their arrival in Israel began around 1993 and continues sporadically today.

In summary, about 150 years ago, members of the ZBI community began converting

and living in villages as Ethiopian Christians (even if the locals continued to identify them

as Beta Israel). Around 1991, they began arriving at transit camps where they started a

process of returning to Judaism before departing to immigrant absorption centres in Israel.

There they underwent a conversion process before permanently residing in Israel. It is

important to note that their conversion was not based on Beta Israel’s written scriptures

(the “Orit”), but on the conversion requirements emerging from state-sanctioned rabbinic

Judaism’s interpretation of halacha (Jewish law)—revealing the power of the state to define

who is “in” or “out”.

**4. Results**

Analyses of interview data and the print record reveal themes challenging binary and

homogenous concepts of religion and showing that the relationship between migration and

religion is better understood as transnational expression reflecting hybridity.

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4.1. State and Public Attitudes: Binary Views on ZBI

Analysis of government decisions and discussions of the Immigration, Absorption

and Diaspora and the Ministry of Interior and Environmental Protection committees (1991–

2021), together with analysis of texts from the media clearly delineate their definition of

ZBI in terms of Christianity and Judaism, and in terms of who belonged and who did not.

In each case, state and media discussions about the transit camps, entry to Israel, or

conversion to Judaism all emphasized the equivocal status of ZBI—politically, religiously,

and bureaucratically—and expressed ambivalence about the Jewishness that entitles an

immigrant to Israeli citizenship. Whether they agreed that the ZBI did or did not qualify

as Jews, they nevertheless framed their views in binary terms—they are either Christians

or Jews. These attitudes have meant that ZBI immigrants must justify their Jewishness

throughout the immigration process.

Doubts about their Jewishness have accompanied the ZBI since at least the Rubinstein

Committee (1991) and in relatively recent media headlines (e.g., “The Falashmura are not

Jews. Don’t bring them to Israel” (2016),5 and in a suit submitted to the Israel Supreme

Court of in February 20226 contending that those waiting in the transit camps are “foreign

nationals and not Jews from Ethiopia”. These emphasize how the religion is the key to

receiving Israeli citizenship.

4.2. Religious Practices as a Resource for Coping with Migration

During the lengthy process from transit camps to acceptance as Jews in Israel, ZBI

immigrants experienced both formal and informal religious transitions. In the transit

camps, they began a largely informal process of the return to Judaism. Once in Israeli

absorption centres, they began a formal conversion process.

As interview findings demonstrate, religious practices serve as a resource for coping

with migration. This may arise from the fact that the synagogue—the religious centre of

the community—became a significant gathering space. Judaism and Hebrew were taught,

messages were transmitted from Israeli representatives, young people met as part of a

religious youth movement (Bnei Akiva), and community events were organized. This also

separated those waiting to immigrate to Israel from the local population. Overall, these

religious activities strengthened community members and served as a practical tool for

coping with the long wait and dealing with feelings connected to waiting, belonging, and

social and personal security in Ethiopia and Israel.

“I took the chain with the cross, I removed it and put on a chain with a Magen David,

and a kippa [head covering]. In this way I said to myself and to everyone that I am a Jew.

Afterwards I went to the synagogue and the community school and there we talked about

Israel and Judaism and it make me happy . . . this what make me strong” (Falka 2005).

Tago, who waited in Gondar for nine years, told me: “When I learn Hebrew, prayers

or songs of Israel with my friends, I feel good, it gives me hope, especially when people

come from Israel and teach us about Judaism and Israel” (Tago 2014).

“I arrived in Israel, every morning I would go to the synagogue near the absorption

center, all the Farang [“white person”] saw me and knew me. It took a long time until they

allowed me to go up to the Torah and even then, not everyone was happy about it, but I

knew that it was really important for me to know and to understand a lot. That’s how I

got to know the Farang who invited me to Friday night and holiday meals where I met all

sorts of people . . . A few years later I moved into an apartment and I also wanted to go to

synagogue. Their welcome was less hearty, and you know how it is . . . we were busy and I

worked a lot so I decided that I know I am Jewish and [that I am] Jewish enough, so I can

go to synagogue only on Shabbat and on holidays. Since then I also found a synagogue I

like so I go there from time to time. I am not as religious as I once was, but I am Jewish and

I observe the mitzvoth [commandments]” (Muloalem 2022).

These interviewees spoke of religious practices, including Jewish study, befriending

local people, going to synagogue, wearing religious symbols, learning Hebrew and creating

community. Such activities helped them with the difficult experience of waiting and then

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of absorption and provided a sense of religious identity and a feeling of belonging. After

many years in Israel, the interviewees relate that for them Jewish religious identity is

obvious and they don’t always feel the need to prove it with external practices, such as

wearing a kippa, and they can continue to act as they believe.

4.3. Religion as Signifying National and Social Belonging

As analysis of meeting protocols and media sources reveal the main arguments about

the ZBI’s focus on separate units of different religions—Jews or Christians—each perceived

as homogenous and binary. As exemplified by the words of the Interior Ministry in a

Knesset discussion: “For 20 years they have been bringing in people who are not Jews, not

the children of Jews and not the grandchildren of Jews. These immigrants deviate from the

Law of Return and therefore they were brought in as part of a government decision”.7 It is

evident that most of the discourse refers to the question of the right to immigrate, which is

legally possible only for Jews, but also expressed in relation to their lifestyles in Israel.

The ease with which the ZBI could be placed in convenient, homogenous categories

underlies covert and overt components of establishment and interpersonal behaviours

towards them in life spaces such as schools, synagogues, and workplaces. This view is

responsible for not accepting children in school or adults for a job because of doubts about

their Jewishness. The ZBI must deal with these views every day, knowing that state-defined

Jewishness is the key to national and social belonging:

“When I look at all this over the years, [I see] the attempt to define me and my attempts

to define myself as a Jew or a Christian, as an Ethiopian or an Israeli. For many years I felt

that people were looking for a justification for having brought me here. For one thing, I’m

OK as a Jew and for another, it’s OK that I’m in Israel. I remember that in high school, some

teachers did not completely believe I was Jewish. The truth is, I myself did not always

understand. I saw my mother had a cross tattoo. I wore a kippa and all the time I tried

to understand. She believed truly in Judaism but the tattoo with the cross was not . . .

[appropriate]. Today, I’ve grown up and I’ve studied, I know that yes, I am a Jew. But

all the time they gave me a feeling that I am not completely a Jew and I was young so I

believed it. You know how hard it is to be in a religious school when all of the others doubt

that you’re Jewish and you yourself don’t know what you are and you try to be the most

religious. Today I’m angry about that” (Tesfa 2022).

4.4. Religion as a Heterogeneous and Varied Unit (Within the Community)

The interviews depict the many ways that immigrants encounter diverse religious

issues and practices related to different conceptions of Judaism and Christianity in their

day-to-day lives. The transitions between religions along with multiple and diverse social

and sometimes even family ties lead to a multiplicity of encounters and interactions that

challenge the homogenous religious concept as a Jew or a Christian. The interviews show

that these various expressions of religion have not undermined their self-perception as

Jews but strengthened it. They understand that their legitimacy as Jews in Israel and the

complexity of their lives in Israel is part of a processes requiring patience. Three expressions

of transnationalism and hybridity will be described in the following subsections.

4.4.1. Myriad Religious Experiences

The immigration process of ZBI includes a transition from the historic Judaism of

Ethiopian Jewry (Beta Israel) to Christianity, and then from Christianity to rabbinic/halachic

Judaism. Throughout, most members maintain ongoing and complex relationships with

each in ways revealed in ideological conceptions, life practices, and contacts with friends

and family.

“I am Jewish, my aunt married a Christian but when he immigrated to Israel, he

underwent a conversion and he really keeps Jewish law and Judaism. You know, for

example, on Shabbat and holidays he says the blessings and talks about Abraham, Isaac

and Jacob . . . ” (Dasta 2022).

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“We established a synagogue of new immigrants, well, not really new, but with our

group. We follow Halacha according to the rabbinate in Israel, but we also keep things

connected to Ethiopia, for example in blessings for adults, in food that we bring for the

Groom’s Shabbat that are both Farang and Injera. We are always trying to fit in. I know it’s

not like the Beta Israel synagogue but more like the Farang. We have an Ethiopian rabbi,

but he follows the Halacha, not the Kes (a rabbi of Beta Israel)” (Yosef 2022).

“My parents and I go to the Farang synagogue. It’s close to our house and they

welcomed us very nicely. Father and mother go every Friday, Shabbat and holidays and I

go from time to time . . . It doesn’t matter to them that they don’t speak Amharic there, they

are happy to be there. Slowly, another few who my parents know joined, but the majority

are Farang” (David 2022).

“I know that in Israel few people go to church. [Some of] my wife’s family go but I

know who I am and who my family is. I cannot decide about others, only about me and

my children . . . of course I speak with them and everything but I don’t do holidays that

aren’t mine with them and sometimes I argue with them. I tell them why did you come to

Israel, why are you doing those things. But at the end you have to remember that we are all

people, we are all family. If we are tolerant and if we give our children and their children a

good education, a strong Jewish education, everything will be good” (Reuven 2022).

4.4.2. A Variety of Religious Levels

In the villages and transit camps being religious is obvious and religious actions are

reflected in all ways of life, whether overtly or covertly.8 The encounter with the options

for religious practice that exist in Israel after the migration processes mainly enabled the

younger generation to choose a variety of (non-binary) religious expressions, while still

expressing the view that being Jewish is critical (no interviewee questioned the existence of

the religion, for example).

“In the village in Ethiopia everyone is religious. In Israel we see there are many types

of Jews, secular, traditional, religious. They always expect us to be religious, to prove we

are Jews, so they’ll see we are religious. We immigrated to Israel, and they sent me to a

religious school, they gave us difficult examinations to check our circumcision, they gave

us a test that I can’t forget to this day, to see if I’m Jewish. Today, when I’m an adult, I

understand things differently. And that I’m from Ethiopia doesn’t mean that I always

have to prove how religious I am or that I’m a Jew. I know I’m a Jew and what I know

and believe in my heart is what’s important . . . You know, in the Judaism test they asked

us about blessings—blessings are words and not necessarily belief. What’s important is

mainly the belief in the heart and what you explain to your children. I know I’m Jewish and

I believe in God. Now even if someone tells me something else, I don’t care” (Mulo 2022).

“My parents are really strict about religion and are religious. My children attend a

secular school because it’s close to our home. I travel on Shabbat and go without a kippa,

but I do observe many things; for example, I’m a member of a synagogue community, pray

on Fridays, fast. I think that life today in Israel is not the same as it was in Ethiopia or that

corresponds to what’s written in the Torah, so I’m a Jew, a believer and observant but I

decide what suits me. The main thing is to be a good person and believe not only show

practices as taught us” (Desta 2022).

“Look, we have them all, those who are strongly religious, almost haredim [ultra-

Orthodox] . . . One who lives in Beit Shemesh, he really got deep into religion, you wouldn’t

believe it. And then there are those who are religious with a knitted kippa, and those

without a kippa but keep the commandments, and there are those who have become

secular . . . The Farang also have them all . . . I do think that with us we believe more

strongly in God and Judaism because I haven’t met anyone else who told me he doesn’t

believe in any God, and they always talk about God, at meetings and so on . . . It’s not like

everyone is one way or another” (Mulo 2022).

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4.4.3. Religion and Culture in the Hybrid Space after Immigration

In the Ethiopian villages, the conceptions of religion and culture tie community

members closely together and are interwoven parts of daily life. In the villages and

transit camps, the prevailing conception is that everyone believes in something (God, Jesus,

Mohammed). As Sara said, “In the village there is no such thing as secular, you’ve got to

believe in something” (Sara 2006). Religion and culture are together. She continues, “In this

village, a cross in Ethiopia is not only a symbol of Christianity, it’s a symbol of culture, of

shared life” (Gondar 2009). Everyone together practices their religion.

After migration, new combinations connected to culture and religion are created,

challenging the local communities in Israel and those who stay in Ethiopia.

“Sometimes people think that if you walk around in Ethiopian clothing or with

Ethiopian symbols, you’re not Israeli or Jewish. When I was new in Israel, I was really

afraid at first that that’s how they would think of me. Today I don’t care. I walk the way I

want. I know who I am” (Mulo 2022).

“We celebrated Rosh Hashana in the village in Ethiopia, Enkutatash; it was really

happy. We danced and sang and I remember that when I was small there were lots of

yellow flowers. In Israel, when we immigrated, we didn’t celebrate it, because it’s like

it’s not ours anymore; we only watched on television with my parents what happens in

Ethiopia. Now, after many years in Israel, we say that maybe we’ll have a joyful gathering

with the family, we’ll drink buna [Ethiopian coffee] and celebrate together. On Facebook I

also saw that we’re talking about it. For example, if I celebrate this doesn’t mean I’m not

Israeli or Jewish but that I respect what was in Ethiopia. That was also my culture” (Ziona,

Israel 2022).

“When there are holidays in Ethiopia, for example timkat [an Ethiopian Orthodox

Christian holiday], I want to watch and remember what it was. That doesn’t mean I believe

in it; I don’t pray like there but I see Ethiopia on television in the holidays. I have friends

who travelled there to see the timkat. The holiday reminds them of the culture of Ethiopia

and the atmosphere, you know . . . I’m Jewish and my children are Jewish but I don’t forget

what was, it’s part of who I am today and if I know how to accept this, I know that it will

be better for my children and for me” (Mulo 2022).

“When it came to weddings in Israel, we had a lot to talk about. On the one hand, we

wanted the [marriage ceremony] to be with boys and girls together, like in Ethiopia, with

songs in Amharic and in Hebrew. There was a rabbi from the rabbinate who said all the

blessings exactly as you’re supposed to, and in general, everything was the way they told

us in the rabbinate, the mikveh and all . . . But about dancing, there were arguments: boys

and girls separate like the religious do in Israel or together like in our culture. I thought

that if we made it mixed it doesn’t mean we are not religious or Jewish. It’s our culture and

it’s better that we should respect it so that we can be really happy” (Adana 2022).

In their reflections, these participants clearly demonstrate identities that combine the

religious and cultural traditions typical of their pre-immigration communities, while also

adjusting or attuning to the demands of the dominant religion and culture of Israel.

**5. Conclusions and Discussion**

This article draws on a body of literature on transnationalism and religion that sees

religious conversion and migration as processes that take place within larger economic,

political, and sociological contexts, and touch on personal beliefs, community belonging,

and religious practices. Referring to the concept of transnationalism in our exploration

of the experiences and views of members of the ZBI shared in 25 interviews and conversations

allows us to consider the possibility that physical movement in the transition

between physical stations and countries over time affects cultural, religious, community,

and personality spaces.

Recent literature has proposed that the theoretical lens offered by transnationalism, and

the hybridity it produces better describes the complex experience of migration. Taking place

within larger, transnational, political, economic, and sociological contexts, this literature

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argues that migration touches on and transforms personal beliefs as well as cultural and

religious expressions. In this regard, the complex experience described by the 25 interviews

with members of the Zera Beta Israel community no doubt shares characteristics with other

immigrant groups around the world. However, because deep religious traditions describe

both the ZBI’s community of origin and that of the majority culture in the country to which

they immigrated, this study provides an important opportunity to specifically explore the

ways in which transnationalism and religious hybridity are expressed by ZBI immigrants to

Israel as they grapple with migration. The interviews demonstrate that, despite prevailing

binary and homogenous views about immigrants in general, and the ZBI in particular, their

day-to-day religious and cultural expressions are heterogeneous, dynamic, and hybrid.

This dynamic is evident both before and after immigration. During the migration

process, transnationalism was expressed in religious activities that combined Hebrew

language learning, prayer, and synagogue focus with cultural activities from Ethiopia.

As the ZBI entered Israel, however, the manifestations of religious transnationalism are

reflected in the study and action of halachic Jewish practitioners and not of their community

of origin (Beta Israel). After a decade of living in Israel, however, a new hybridity emerged—

freer, but acceptable to the broader public and recognized among community members. For

example, ZBI members describe combining halachic Jewish activities with cultural activities

from Ethiopia at community events, weddings, funerals, prayers, and holiday meals,

concluding that such practices are “acceptable”. They describe the celebration of the holiday

of Simchat Torah in the Israeli synagogue as including a meal with injera and tala. Their

wedding celebrations reject the Israeli religious community’s preference for a separation

between men and women during dancing. Such hybrid communal practices enable shades

of religious sharing that produce a sense of heterogeneous, dynamic partnership between

pre- and post-immigration spaces. Importantly, the emerging, diverse hybridity is defined

by the immigrants themselves, who see themselves both as a single religious unit (Jews),

but also as free to choose a variety of religious behaviours.

It is noteworthy that resistance among dominant societal groups to the immigration of

minority groups can engender feelings of frustration among immigrants that can lead to

“reactive transnationalism” such as the abandonment of Judaism. Although documented

in other studies, those interviewed here, instead, expanded the definition of Judaism in

ways that made it possible to remain within Judaism and have a sense of belonging.

This study represents a new effort to view immigrants from Ethiopia not only across

time and space, but as part of immigrant groups around the world who, despite the

hegemony of the receiving society, exercise agency to create their own narratives. It

shows how religion, and especially religious practices, can serve as central resources in the

processes of immigration and absorption, enabling the bridging of different geographical

and cultural spaces. It further reveals how transnationalism is demonstrated in religious

hybridity as community members confronted the binary concepts of religion and culture

advanced by the receiving state, as well as institutional opposition to their immigration.

Rather than focusing on their suitability for integration or assimilation in Israel, those

interviewed for this study make clear that the lived experiences of migrants allow for

Jewish religious hybridity alongside a sense of belonging.

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**Notes**

1 The Beta Israel community has preserved its Judaism throughout its existence.

2 The Hebrew word for immigration is hagira. Aliyah (literally, ascension) is a word used specifically for Jewish immigration to

Israel. This study uses the word immigration throughout, even referring to aliyah.

3 They are known as Falash Mura, but in this article I will use the name Zera Beta Israel and the initials ZBI (Talmi-Cohn 2020).

4 It is important to note that this study was not conducted on the immigration process of Beta Israel, but only on ZBI who define

themselves as Jews.

5 Kelner Gil, 08.03.16 Srogim (Hebrew) https://bit.ly/2FPRhfz (accessed date: 15 October 2022).

6 https://www.inn.co.il/news/539942 (accessed date: 15 October 2022).

7 https://www.israelhayom.co.il/news/politics/article/5943799 (accessed date: 15 October 2022).

8 In the areas where the immigrants came from in Ethiopia, religion and culture form one unit.

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