ASSIMILATION OF ISRAELI IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNAL SERVICES

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This study of naturalized and non-naturalized Israelis living in New York City found that the vast majority felt a high degree of distance not only from American society but also from the Jewish community. In addition, while most parents were trying to preserve their Israeli cultural roots and identity, their children were embracing American culture. An Israeli niche of social services that is sensitive to the cultural and social needs of the Israeli family is therefore essential.

This article reports the findings of a study designed to examine the cultural and social assimilation of first-generation Israeli immigrants in the United States. Its objective was to determine the degree to which Israeli immigrants have assimilated into American society, specifically the American Jewish community. It also explores the needs of Israeli immigrants, with the goal of recommending policies and programs to meet those needs.

The basic theoretical proposition of this study was derived from Gordon's (1964) distinction between cultural and social assimilation. According to Gordon, assimilation has two dimensions. Cultural assimilation is that change in cultural patterns of behavior and attitudes to resemble those of the host society, whereas social assimilation is the large-scale entrance of immigrants into cliques, clubs, and institutions of the host society. Social assimilation represents the final and total stage of assimilation.

METHODOLOGY

The study was both descriptive and analytic in its examination of demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, and cultural and social assimilation patterns. It was based on a cross-sectional survey questionnaire using a descriptive-explanatory design, which was mailed to respondents selected by a random sample method. The questionnaire was printed in both Hebrew and English to facilitate responses and to test the preferred language.

The sample was made up of naturalized first-generation American citizens of Israeli origin living in two boroughs of New York City—Brooklyn and Queens. Respondents chosen for the study met the following criteria. An Israeli was defined as one who was Jewish, was born in Israel, and had lived in Israel at least 10 years of his or her life. Naturalized Israelis were randomly chosen among those granted American citizenship from 1984–1986 who currently resided in Brooklyn or Queens, and who had children living in the same household with them.

A frame list of 800 naturalized Israeli-Americans of Israeli origin was selected from about 27,000 petitions filed at the District Court in Brooklyn from 1984–1986. A random sample of 500 Israelis was drawn from this frame. By including only those who were born in Israel, cultural influences of other countries were controlled.

New York City residents were chosen as test subjects since approximately half of the naturalized Israelis who have received U.S. citizenship reside there; of these, 80% live

in Brooklyn and Queens (Freedman & Kurazim, 1983). A significantly large American Jewish population lives there as well.

Selecting a population of naturalized American citizens of Israeli origin who had undertaken the deliberate, formal act of becoming an American citizen controlled for biases linked to a lack of motivation for assimilation. It was assumed that such a purposeful act as becoming a U.S. citizen indicated a willingness to undergo assimilative processes seen as necessary to achieve the purpose for which permanent residency was sought.

To test that assumption, an additional list of 50 non-naturalized Israelis fitting the characteristics of the main sample of naturalized Israelis was created, using a quota method for comparative studies. A total sample of 205 respondents was achieved, which included 155 randomly chosen naturalized American Israelis and 50 non-randomly chosen non-naturalized Israelis. The sample offered information on 410 adults and 460 children, a total of 870 individuals.

A comparison between the random sample of naturalized Israelis and the quota sample of non-naturalized Israelis was done to test for differences and similarities between the two groups. The variables used for this purpose included age, sex, marital status, length of stay in the United States, and socioeconomic status in the United States and in Israel. The degree of cultural and social assimilation in the two groups was also compared. No significant differences between the two groups in terms of demographic factors or degree of assimilation were discovered. Therefore, our assumption that Israelis who have become naturalized U.S. citizens were more likely to assimilate was disproven, and the two groups were combined.

STUDY FINDINGS

Description of the Sample

The majority (64%) of the respondents were between 36 and 45 years of age. Eighty-two percent were married—26% to American Jewish spouses, 69% to Israeli spouses, and 5% to non-Jewish Americans. The Israeli families were overwhelmingly of the nuclear type (95%), and the majority of the respondents had either one or two children. Most of the study sample (72%) had lived in the United States for 5 to 12 years.

Both male and female Israelis experienced downward occupational mobility when they moved to the United States. For men, there was a 30% decline in occupational status as defined by income and type of occupation. In Israel, most of the women were members of the work force; upon their move, they experienced a downward mobility of 35%. Whereas in Israel only 5.3% of the women indicated "housewife" as their occupation, 26% did so in the United States.

Most of the respondents provided their children with a Jewish education. Fifty-seven percent of the children attended Jewish nursery schools, day schools, or yeshivot. Only 20% of the children received supplementary Jewish education.

Seven out of ten respondents identified their nationality as Israeli. In contrast, 98% of the respondents perceived their eldest child's national identity as American and 94% perceived their second child as American. The percentage of children perceived by their parents to be Israeli was too small to test for the relationship between this perception and the parents' degree of cultural or social assimilation. However, the level of religious observance and whether the children were educated in Jewish schools did not affect the parents' perception of their children's national identity.

Cultural Assimilation

Attempts were made to assess the degree of cultural assimilation among the respondents by inquiring into their behavioral and attitudinal patterns. Cultural assimilation was measured according to the following variables:

- English proficiency—fluency in speaking, reading, and writing
- exposure to American mass media—frequency of reading American printed media for at least 30 minutes/day and watching television for at least an hour daily
- preservation of Israeli identity—adopting a new American name, use of Hebrew language in the family circle, a desire to return some day to Israel
- level of religious observance—frequency of attending synagogue and lighting Shabbat candles

The study found a low degree of cultural assimilation. Almost one-third of the sample was experiencing difficulties with the English language, and only 35% perceived themselves as being highly exposed to American culture. One might expect that Israelis coming to a new American culture would begin the process of assimilation through the American Jewish community, which is a familiar setting in some respects. However, more than half of the respondents did not attend synagogues.

As a whole, the respondents seemed to be tenacious in preserving their Israeli identity and in their strong desire to pass it on to their children. Eighty-one percent supported the need to speak Hebrew at home, and 78% rejected the idea of changing their Hebrew names to American ones. Most of the Israelis felt that they would eventually return to Israel, and about half felt they should *not* be proud when receiving U.S. citizenship.

Social Assimilation

Social assimilation was measured according to the following variables:

- close friendships with non-Jewish or Jewish Americans
- being invited to the homes of non-Jewish or Jewish Americans
- willingness to interact with non-Jewish and Jewish Americans—in marriage, work, as acquaintances
- affiliation with non-Jewish and Jewish-American organizations—political clubs, neighborhood associations, civic groups, synagogues

Study findings indicate that the majority of the respondents felt a high degree of distance not only from American society but also from the Jewish community. For 83% of the respondents, their closest friend was Israeli, and the majority interacted mostly with Israeli neighbors (68%) or Israeli acquaintances (90%). Almost three-quarters of the respondents would prefer to marry an Israeli, 87% would prefer to have Israeli friends, and 74% favor Israeli neighbors. About 70% had never been invited into a non-Jewish home; 30% had never been invited into a Jewish home. Forty-three percent of the respondents felt that Americans did not accept Israelis as their equals. Only 5% belonged to any American or community organization.

Although some variables, such as length of stay in the United States, nationality of the spouse, and children's education, did affect the degree of social assimilation, socioeconomic variables exerted no such influence. The vast majority of the respondents were not making a total (social) assimilation—the cornerstone of the arch of assimilation in Gordon's (1964) terms—into either the American Jewish community or the broader American society.

Jewish Communal Services to Israelis

About 80% of Israeli families in the United States are estimated to live in Jewish neighborhoods. Their choice of location thus seems to reflect their search for the security and familiarity of a known culture. Yet, the vast majority of the Israeli respondents were neither familiar with the Jewish communal services available to them nor made use of them (Table 1). Although most (54% to 81%) of the respondents were not aware of the available services, another 15% indicated that they were not able to make use of them because of their poor English language skills. About 20% responded

Table 1
THE DEGREE OF USE AND FAMILIARITY OF ISRAELI IMMIGRANTS WITH JEWISH COMMUNAL SERVICES

Type of Service	*Use of Service*	*Not Familiar with Services*
Family and individual counseling services	7%	54%
Homemaker and day care	2%	71%
Self-help groups	2%	70%
Adolescent services	1%	70%
Foster care services	—	82%
Adoption services	0.5%	81%
Protective child services	0.5%	80%
Legal advice services	3%	80%
Get-together networks for Israelis	2%	78%
Vocational services (training and counseling)	—	78%
After-school services for children	11%	81%

that they would use such services if they were provided by Israeli social workers.

Generational Conflicts around National Identification

One striking finding of the study was the vastly differing perceptions of national identification held by Israeli parents and their children (Figure 1). The vast majority of the parents are trying to preserve their Israeli cultural roots and identity while their children are identifying with American culture and their new American national identity. Seventy percent of the respondents identified themselves as Israelis in contrast to only 2% of their first-born children and 6% of their second children.

This widely varying perception of national identity makes parent-child communication difficult and hinders the children's identification with their family's value system. Children may find it difficult to identify with their parents, who deviate from the dominant culture. The process of assimilation, which develops through identification with parents and the children's interpretation of the world, may greatly suffer as a result. As Orny (1951) states in an article on assimilation,

> The parents are much more confused and bewildered than their children. The mother lags in her adaptation to the new conditions. Centering her existence around the home, she has no relations beyond it except with a few people of her own ethnic background. Instead of helping and guiding the child, she has to be guided by him. His importance increases and he feels that he no longer needs the guidance of his parents. . . . They do not understand at all the children's problems. They try to inject in their children feelings of resentment toward the new reality. Such attempts to tear the ties between their children and the new social structure only result in tearing the ties between their children and themselves.

The ambivalent feelings of Israeli children toward membership in their own group stem from the threat of acceptance in American society at the primary group level.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To meet the needs of ethnic groups while at the same time supporting their unique values and family life, it is essential that communal policies and the programs stemming from them enhance cultural diversity (Berger & Newhause, 1977). Such programs should strengthen the particular ethnic group's mediating structures, such as the neighborhood, family, and cultural centers. However, Moshe Shokeid (1988), an Israeli anthropologist who has conducted research on the phenomenon of *yerida*, emigration from Israel, found that the organized Jewish community does not formally recognize the Israelis living in the United States as an ethnic immigrant group. He characterized the attitude of the host American Jewish community as one of rejection.

This study underscores the need to help Israeli parents and their children gain a

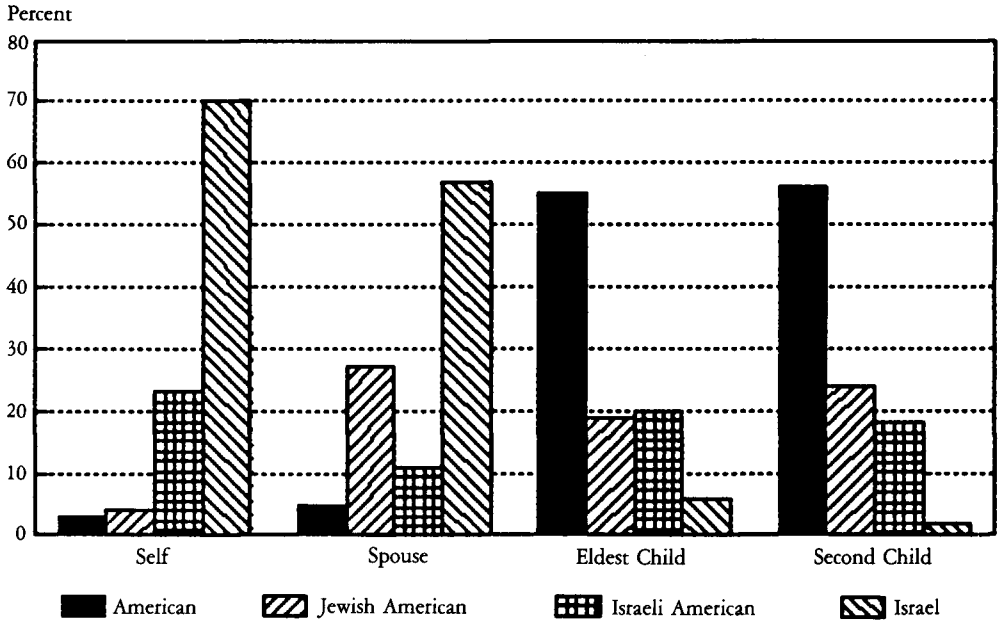

Figure 1. National identification of family members.

more positive regard for the cultural values of their ethnic group. In particular, Israeli children require special programs to facilitate both a positive Israeli-oriented and a positive Jewish-oriented perspective. Such programs should be provided by social workers of Israeli origin using Hebrew and should emphasize Israeli culture. They would thus provide the children with a healthier psychological base from which to confront American Jewish culture, a stronger sense of identification with their parents, and a reduction in intergenerational conflicts.

Because the majority of Israeli immigrants are neither integrating into the American Jewish community nor making use of Jewish communal services, there is the need to create an *Israeli niche*, services provided by social workers of Israeli origin, offered in Hebrew, and designed to meet the needs of this group. The use of Hebrew would enable the use of such services by those Israelis with poor English skills. Such a niche would operate through the existing Jewish communal service system. Until such a niche can be developed, Jewish communal professionals working with Israeli families need to be sensitized to the cultural and social ambivalence and intergenerational conflicts existing within Israeli immigrant families. Without such a niche, the ambivalence of the parents toward assimilating in their new homes will hinder the cultural and social transition of their children.

CONCLUSION

This study of naturalized and non-naturalized Israelis living in the United States found that Israeli parents have not assimilated, either culturally or socially, into American society as a whole and the Jewish community in particular. Therefore, it is essential that social service workers, teachers, and youth workers become more sensitive to the cultural and social needs of the Israeli family and that an Israeli niche of services be developed.

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