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Israelis in Toronto: From Stigmatization to Self-Organization¹

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Israelis living abroad are no longer an unusual or condemned phenomenon. Some formal estimates indicate around half a million Israelis living abroad (Gold, S. 2002: 5), while the rumor has it that around a million Israelis have left the country since its establishment. For many years, Israelis abroad have felt ashamed and guilty for leaving the homeland. These sentiments derived from a deep internalized Zionist ideology, which depicted the act of emigration as a betrayal. The attitude of national institutions and the wider public opinion among Israeli Jews, as well as among Diaspora Jews, actively opposed Israeli emigration. The stigma was crystallized in the degrading term *yored* which literally means “goes down”. This term contrasts with the privileged concept of *oleh* which literally means “goes up”, and is associated with the sacred pilgrimage to Jerusalem (*oleh-regel*). A well-known rebuke by the late Yizhak Rabin still echoes in the collective Israeli memory. In 1976, Rabin, then in his first term as Prime Minister, gave a special Independence Day interview to the nation in which he described Israeli emigrants as *nefolet shel nemushot*, a phrase that can be translated as “the leftovers of weaklings”.

Many researches dealing with Israelis living abroad confirmed this notion of feelings of guilt among Israelis, themselves describing their act of migration as *yerida*, developing “a myth of return” to Israel, and rationalizing their life abroad as a trap of circumstances (Shokeid 1988, Linn and Barkan-Ascher, 1994), which led them to a temporary stay in America that should be over soon. Nevertheless, it appears that since the 1990s, a gradual shift in attitudes has been brought about.²

¹ This article is based on a paper I presented at the 2007 AJS conference in Toronto, the information was updated in 2018.

² See similar tendencies identified by Harris (2015) who researched the Israeli community in Vancouver, Canada in 2008-9.

In my paper I analyze the changing attitudes of three major actors in this process, namely: the Israeli government, Israeli immigrants in Toronto, and the Canadian Jewish organizations. Understanding the different perspectives will help demonstrate that nowadays Jewish-Israeli-Torontonians are no longer willing to be stigmatized; and instead are actively involved in establishing a stable Canadian-Israeli community, which is partly supported by Jewish institutions. Yet, the Israeli community still bears an ambivalent relationship with the local Jewish community. While fluctuating between cooperation and autonomy vis-à-vis the Jewish institutions, the Israeli community strives to work out a new identity, which is partly Israeli, partly Jewish, and partly Canadian.

The Israeli government position: In 1991 Yizhak Rabin in his second term as Prime Minister recanted his previous condemnation of Israelis abroad. In an interview to the Israeli-American newspaper “Hadashot LA”, he stated the following: “What I said then doesn’t apply today... the Israelis living abroad are an integral part of the Jewish community and there is no point in talking about ostracism” (Rosen 1993 in Gold S. 2002:150). As time passed, the state of Israel could no longer afford to ignore expatriate Israelis. The Israeli government reversed its position in the early 1990s, and offered a package of benefits for returning Israelis. This development makes sense if one takes into account the fact that during the 1990s Israel absorbed most of the remaining Jewish population reserve of the former Soviet Union, and was looking for new potential *olim*. Israelis abroad, who kept close attachment to Israeli families and friends and maintained their Hebrew language and culture, became an attractive target group to be brought back to Israel. One of the projects launched by the Ministry of Israeli Absorption which was oriented particularly to Israeli immigrants, was the establishment of “Israeli Houses”, which act to strengthen the relationship between Israel and Israelis abroad and help in the process of returning to Israel (www.moia.gov.il).

Israelis in Toronto – a general background: on April 2006, The Canadian Jewish News, published an article which estimates that more than 50,000 immigrants from the State of Israel reside in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), comprising around 25%

of the GTA's 200,000 Jewish population.³ The report was prepared by David Gidron, the former head of the "Israeli House" in Toronto. His data (in a conversation with me in 2005) revealed that since 2003, around 2,600 Israelis have immigrated to Canada annually.⁴ Although Israelis immigrated to Canada from the late 1940s, their numbers peaked in periods of economic and/or political crisis. After 2000, the year that marks the beginning of the *al-Aqsa Intifada*, the Israeli community in Toronto has been growing rapidly, in higher numbers than ever, and is occupied with building its inner-organizations and leadership.

Whereas my research observations may be also relevant in explaining other Jewish-Israeli communities outside of Israel, which begun their self-organizational processes (for example, Cohen 2008), I suggest that the Israeli community in Toronto has some special features that can help clarify the link between de-stigmatization and self-organization.

Being a declared country of immigration, Canada invites qualified people whom it believes can become productive citizens. Well educated people with several years of occupational experience and some financial resources are able to qualify for Canadian residency - and after a few years apply for citizenship in a peaceful, tolerant and economically growing nation. These characteristics are extremely appealing to Israelis who are in their mid-life, building up families and careers, and who strive to succeed in a peaceful environment, leaving behind the Israeli political and economical difficulties. Being legal citizens who can choose their nationality and passport, without having to hide "undercover", make the Israeli community in Toronto a visible social and economic group, which both the local Jewish agencies and the Israeli government have to take into consideration. In order to better understand the features of the Israeli community in Toronto, I will introduce the sample of Israelis that participated in this research and the methodology of this study.

³ Lungen, Paul. 2006. Israelis comprise 25% of Jews in the Great Toronto Area. *Canadian Jewish News*, www.cjnews.com, April 6.

⁴ See also Weinfeld et al. (2013, pp. 55-90) who indicate that according to the census analysis of 2001 13,545 Jews in Toronto were born in Israel (p. 67). However, since many Israelis were not actually born in Israel (especially considering Hebrew speakers from the former Soviet Union who had moved first to Israel and then to Canada) this percentage seems to be a significant underestimation of the Israeli-Hebrew speaking population in the GTA. A further classification, of how many of the Israeli immigrants are from either Ashkenazi or Mizrahi descent, is even more difficult to obtain. For the Jewish-Sephardic population in the GTA see Train (2006). For more on Canadian Jews, see Tulchinsky (2008).

Method: The field research was conducted in Toronto from 2005 to 2007 and included participant observation at varied Israeli activities, many informal talks and 52 formal interviews with Israelis living in the GTA. During the research period I was also working as a journalist for the two Hebrew newspapers, which operated in Toronto during that time. The first is “Shalom Toronto”, which has been operating continuously, and the second is “Zman Canada”, which operated during 2007 and was closed down after six months of publication. Covering important events and having access to leading figures in the community enabled me to position myself in the heart of the ongoing Israeli activities and developments.

The sample: The interviews I held were conducted with 52 Israeli Jews, using the snowball method. “Israelis” in this sample are defined as people who used to live in Israel, speak fluent Hebrew and self-identify as Israelis. The sample was composed of an equal number of men and women (26 for each gender). The age range varied from 21 to 80 year-old interviewees. Yet the main group that comprised 2/3 of the sample were people in their transitional age range of 31 to 54, occupied with building up their professional and family life. Of the participants, 75% had children and 66% had post-secondary degrees. All the participants spoke fluent Hebrew, although for 9 of them it was not their first language. 1/3 of the participants were not born in Israel, and 5 of them were former citizens of the Soviet Union who immigrated to Israel in the 1990s and then immigrated again to Canada. All the interviews were held in Hebrew.

An important component of this sample was its attempt to include different cohorts of Israeli immigration to Canada, assuming that specific cohorts have some shared experiences that are different from other cohorts in relation to their reasoning for leaving Israel, the time period in which they left, and the changing attitudes towards the concept of *yerida*. The biggest cohort, which comprised nearly half of the sample (24 people), came to Canada since the late 1990s and has lived in Canada for up to 10 years at the time that the research took place. The second cohort included 15 people who left Israel in the time period between the early 1980s to mid 1990s. The third cohort was composed of 13 Israelis who came to Toronto between mid 1960s to early 1980s. The senior participant in this study, 80 year old when interviewed, lived 40 years in Toronto at the time of the interview.

The most common reason for moving to Canada among all cohorts was family relations. The second most common was economic opportunity and particularly

specific job offers. These two factors, economic and familial support, were often linked. However, only among the cohort of newcomers of the late 1990s and early 2000s, a third salient reasoning appeared. That was the general notion of “future” or “better opportunities” in Canada as compared to Israel. This third factor they applied either to themselves or to their children (whether they had children or planned to start a family).

The reason of staying in Canada due to “trap of circumstances” which was the basic argument of Shokeid’s study from 1988, appeared only in the two older cohorts and not at all in the latest one. Within the new cohort the word *yerida* was hardly mentioned. One informant who came to Toronto in 2006, even told me that her private narrative is that she makes an *aliya* rather than *yerida*, since she elevates her well-being in Toronto. Moreover, within these different cohorts It was illuminating to find that people who had lived in Toronto for many decades said that they still don’t feel at home in Canada, while people who came to the city in the past few years are comfortable and not ambivalent. This data strengthens the observation that since the 2000s people are moving to Canada as their preferred choice of immigration destination and take full responsibility for their actions, without the need to rationalize their stay as a result of external conditions. Moreover, the latest newcomers believe that they can create a better future for themselves and for their families even without having any prior relative networks or specific job offers, thus fully relying on their own personal resources.

The relations between Israeli immigrants and the Jewish Federation in Toronto

Starting in early 2000s, important communal self-help developments have taken place within the Israeli community in the GTA. It began with an Israeli women’s initiation to engage children in social activities and holiday celebrations that use Hebrew as first language. A major development was the establishment of the Israeli scouts youth movement *ha-Ztofim* in October 2004. After the first stages of self-organization within the Israeli community, the BJCC was convinced to enable the *Zofim* to operate in its district.⁵

Similarly to the Israeli government perspective, it seems that the Jewish Federation could no longer ignore the growing Israeli community. Instead of denying

it access to social services, the Federation decided to help the Israeli community establish itself, in order to increase the general Jewish influence in the GTA, creating a special position for the head of the “*Israeli Canadian Community Project*”, which operates from within the Federation and helps cultivate cultural and social Israeli events, also supported by the Schwartz-Reisman Centre.⁶

Furthermore, watching these fruitful developments that took place within the Israeli community, in the fall of 2005 the Jewish Federation invited a group of prominent Israeli-Torontonian businessmen to a mutual acquaintance meeting. From this initiative resulted the establishment of “*The Israeli Forum in Canada*”, which is composed of Israeli businessmen and community volunteers. The Forum is considered to be an umbrella organization for the estimated 50,000 Israelis in the GTA. In the summer of 2006 its organizational efficacy was put into a test as the Federation asked the Forum to take part in the fundraising campaign for Israel during the Second Lebanon War. Exceeding expectations, the Israeli Forum managed to raise a sum of \$200,000 in one day, considered to be the higher amount ever raised by Israeli collective community abroad up to that time.

Following this success, in September 2006 the Forum was able to give birth to another accomplishment, the establishment of *Kachol-Lavan* (blue-white), a Hebrew-speaking-only supplementary school, which attracted 150 students in its first cohort.⁷ The school is different from other Jewish supplementary schools, as it emphasises Israeli secular culture, at the expense of Jewish religious services. On a continuum that ranges from full autonomy to full cooperation with the Jewish institutions, the *Kachol-Lavan* school reflects an in-between relations, as it is sponsored by local Jewish institutions, yet incorporates Israeli-based curriculum materials that favour secular Israeli identity to a Jewish religious one. However, the last example, which deals with the celebration of the Israeli Day of Independence, demonstrates the debate and the existing split between the two Jewish communities in Toronto.

⁵ See the Shevet Hermon Tsofim website: <https://jewishtoronto.com/directory/israeli-scouts-tzofim-shevet-hermon> (accessed in May 2018)

⁶ See an article from the Canadian Jewish News on that published in June 2008 (accessed in May 2018):

<http://www.cjnews.com/news/toronto-israelis-unite-single-organization>

⁷ See the Kachol Lavan Center website : <https://jewishtoronto.com/directory/kachol-lavan-centre-the-school-for-hebrew-and-israel-studies> (accessed in May 2018)

In the years 2006 and 2007 the Israeli community in the GTA managed to separate its celebration of the Israeli Independence Day from the organized UJA celebration; sponsoring it mainly by Israeli businesses and volunteers, attracting a crowd of 3,000 participants. The major reason for the split was the fact that Israelis wanted to celebrate a full day festival, similarly to the one that they were used to in Israel, and therefore chose Sunday as a long family celebration day. The Jewish Federation on the other hand, insisted to correspond with the precise Israeli date of celebration, therefore dedicating one evening during the working week to this festival. Ironically, instead of making use of the Israeli Independence Day as a unifying event, this day by itself became a bone of contention, crystallizing opposing attitudes and diverse needs which reveal the differences of interpretation and habits between the two Jewish communities in Toronto.⁸

To sum up, Israeli immigrants and especially newcomers to Toronto no longer apologize to themselves, to the Israeli public or to local Canadian Jews, and no longer feel that they need to justify their life decisions. That is not to say that there are no feelings of longing for the homeland. On the contrary, most of the Israelis abroad are indeed homesick. They live in an Israeli environment, make Israeli friends, work with Israeli colleagues and prefer Israeli cultural and social events. However, these Israelis evidence a new attitude. Instead of participating in “random encounters” (Shokeid, 1988) or constantly packing “imagined suitcases” (Linn and Barkan-Ascher, 1994); Israelis in Toronto are now actively involved in establishing a strong, organized and outspoken community, in which the word *yerida* seems rather anachronistic. In these new circumstances, Torontonians not only refuse to be stigmatized as *yordim*, but they proudly declare their ability and unique position to support Israel from afar. In doing so, they have adapted the long lasting practice and rhetoric of their local Jewish co-ethnics. Thereby turning into another proud Jewish community which resides away from Israel, yet this time a diasporic Israeli one.

⁸ See more on the tensions and co-operations between the Israeli and the Jewish-Canadian community in the GTA, published in the Canadian Jewish News in January 2014 (accessed in May 2018): <http://www.cjnews.com/news/canada/federation-outreach-israelis-starts-pay-off>

Table: The sample included 52 Israeli Jews from the Greater Toronto Area

Gender	Women 26 (50%)	Men 26 (50%)						
Age	21- 30: 10 (19%)	31-54: 32 (62%)	55-80: 10 (19%)					
Marriage	Singles 9 (17%)	Married 37 (71%)	Divorced 6 (12%)					
Children	Have 39 (75%)	Don't have 13 (25%)						
Highest Degree	High school 20 (38%)	BA 17 (33%)	MA 10 (19%)	PhD 3 (6%)	(Missing) 2 (4%)			
Occupation	Self employed Businesses 12 (23%)	Services 9 (17.5%)	Teaching & Social sciences 8 (15.5%)	Arts 8 (15.5%)	Physicians & exact sciences 6 (12%)	Students 4 (7.5%)	Retired/ Un- employed 4 (7%)	(Miss) 1 (2%)
Cohorts of immigration	late 1990s to 2007: 25 (48%)	early 1980s to mid 1990s: 15 (29%)	mid 1960s to early 1980s: 12 (23%)					
Place of birth	Israel 34 (65%)	Abroad 15 (29%)	(Missing) 3 (6%)					
Reasons for leaving	Family, partners 20 (38%)	Economy, Jobs 13 (25%)	Future, opportunities 8 (15.5%)	Studies, internships 5 (9.5%)	War 2 (4%)	Politics 2 (4%)	"Stuck" 2 (4%)	

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