

## 9 Remote participants

### Lessons about Israeli identity from the experience of Israeli parents in America

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The research presented here examines the implications of the immigration of Israelis to America in terms of their identity, and what we can learn from their parenting experience about Israeli identity more broadly. Immigrant families are becoming an increasingly common element of American society with important political implications for the United States as well as for their homelands. According to the Center for Immigration Studies, the number of immigrants living in the United States reached a record high of 37.9 million in 2007, a figure comparable in its proportions to those from the turn of the twentieth century. What is more, approximately one in every ten people identifying themselves as Israeli resides in the United States on a permanent basis. Yet despite the growing significance of this group, scholars have not thoroughly explored the challenges immigrant families face and the political implications related. Based on a series of in-depth interviews and workshops with Israelis, who live in the big metropolitan areas in North America, we examine how political and national identities are influenced by immigration. To examine this question, we focus on the parenting experience. We investigate the processes of identity evolution and formation as those are reflected in the experience of emigrants as parents, and then draw conclusions about Israeli identity more broadly.

‘Think about your experience as a parent. How is it shaped by the place where you grew up, Israel, and the way you were brought up there?’. This was the opening question in all the interviews conducted for the purposes of this study. ‘It has had a major effect on me as a parent’ was the initial response of Yael, a single mother living in Manhattan with her four-year-old daughter. She then carried on with her parenting narrative, starting with her decision to leave Israel nine years earlier and continuing on to her recent plans to go back to the place she still calls home.

The move to the land of endless possibilities – the United States – allowed Yael to pursue her dream of many years; she wanted to become a mother. ‘The minute I set foot in this city,’ she tells us about New York later in the interview, ‘I had a feeling that everything was possible. All sorts of things may happen; there were no limits. For the very first time in my life, I had the feeling I could do anything I set my mind to – that I could go the distance.’

Immigration caused a fundamental change in Yael’s life. She celebrated the freedom she felt away from all those who knew her too well and used to judge every move she made. At last she could connect with her desire to have a baby.

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However, while the constraints imposed by people around her were gone, just as in Israel she was still unable to form a steady relationship in New York. Yet in this new city, which she felt offered her everything and anything, she was ready to make this move – with or without a partner by her side.

Six years later, on a humid New York summer evening, we met in her apartment. The walls were covered with pictures and souvenirs from trips to different parts of the country and different corners of the world. At this point in her life, however, Yael wanted to go back to Israel. She wanted to raise her daughter, who was sleeping in the next room, in the ‘tribal’ experience, as she dubbed it, provided by her family back in Israel. In addition, Yael had plans to have another baby. Returning to Israel, she felt, was necessary to successfully support a larger family. In her eyes, the support network in Israel was invaluable. For both practical and emotional reasons, this was the right place for her and her family to be. ‘It is important to me that my daughter sees how family members support each other,’ she explained, ‘and when people live close to each other, relationships of a different nature are formed. The connection is there, even if you do not intend for it to happen. And when it is there, when it is present, it is priceless.’

Our seven-year-old daughter, Talia, our son, Ori, who is four and a half, and our six-month-old baby, Inbal, were born in the United States. Much of what we heard from individuals interviewed for this project and who took part in workshops we conducted all over North America was similar to our own parenting experience as Israelis in America.

Just like Yael and the authors of this paper, all of the interviewees either grew up in Israel or spent a formative period of their lives there. They all think of themselves as Israelis. However, another thing they all have in common is the fact that either in the present, or at some point in the past, they raised children in America. As such, their relations with Israel are an issue they often deal with, and in some cases ceaselessly so – emotionally and ideologically.

This research project deals with the parenting experiences of Israelis who are ‘remote participants’ in America. They identify themselves as Israelis but have an American identity as well. As reflected in the parenting experience of most of them, over time the latter identity becomes increasingly central to who they are. Because parenthood is a crossroads – between the personal and private on the one hand and the public and political on the other — this article seeks to clarify the concept of Israeliness itself using what we can glean about it from the parenting experience of Israelis abroad. As far as the public and political are concerned, in many cases it is the parent who is the key agent of socialization. A mother teaches her children their identity as members of the society in which they live and grow up. They learn about their religious affiliation, citizenship, their family’s political persuasion, as well as about partisanship, ideology and other components of their social identity.<sup>1</sup> Parents teach their children who they are as social creatures. On the other hand, the relationship between parents and their children is personal and private. What happens in the family forms children’s inner worlds. Their emotional stability, their attachment style, their ability to form interpersonal connections successfully are to a large extent a function of the parenting they received.<sup>2</sup>

Both the public and political as well as the personal and private came up in the interviews and workshops we conducted. There are certain emotional relations and attachment styles that are more frequent among Israeli parents. Likewise, there are certain political and ideological messages that appear more regularly in the relations those parents form with their children. Key to our argument is the notion that since parenting plays such a central role in the lives of many, and in particular in the lives of almost all those who participated in our project, how parents aim to form the identity of their children, the kind of messages they have for them and the relationship that is created as a result are highly instructive as far as the identity of those parents themselves is concerned. When dealing with the identity they would like to instill in the next generation, parents come in close contact with their own identity. Therefore, when they shared their parenting experience with us, what they essentially did was discuss not only their relationship with their children or the identity of their children, but their own identity as well. When a person discusses her parenting experience, when she talks about what she would like to pass on to the next generation, what she engages in is fundamentally discussing her perceptions of who she is.

In the Israeli experience, personal and psychological issues are often part and parcel of what happens on the national level and on the level of ideology. Being Israeli, therefore, is a complex experience that stays with many of those who grew up in Israel for the rest of their lives.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, those who start a family are influenced in their role as parents by this profound experience. On the other hand, the reality of life across the Atlantic Ocean, thousands of miles away from the Middle East, is different. Anything from moral values and language to culture and mentality is dissimilar to what they had known in Israel. One way or another, immigrant parents live on a daily basis within this gap between their home country and their new reality.

For people all over the world, immigration has become a part of modern life.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, hundreds of thousands of Israelis leave their homeland to live overseas.<sup>5</sup> For some, this is a temporary arrangement, while others leave for good. By far the most popular immigration destination for Israelis is the United States. After Israel, the United States is the nation most populated by Israelis and former Israelis. The largest concentrations of Israelis are in several of the major metropolitan areas in America. Those include New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Chicago and the San Francisco Bay area.

Like all immigrants, Israelis become part of their new home. They learn the language, find a job, go to school, and weave for themselves a new life. In addition, many of them start a family or expand the one they have. Interestingly, the immigration of Israelis to America has been studied in the scholarly literature<sup>6</sup> and discussed extensively in the Israeli media. Yet, apart from the occasional mention, the parenting experience of those same Israeli immigrants in America is largely a neglected topic.

In fact, even the literature about immigration more generally focuses mainly on the second generation,<sup>7</sup> comparing the children of immigrants to their counterparts in their country of origin or, alternatively, in America.<sup>8</sup> The challenges, difficulties

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and joy involved in raising those children are largely understudied.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the challenge of immigration, and of immigrant parents in particular, can teach us much about Israeli identity in America, as well as in Israel. These are the purposes of this article.

### **Parenting and immigration – Two life-changing experiences**

The story we are telling here involves two life-changing experiences. Parenting and immigration, even when experienced separately, fundamentally alter one's life. Combining them raises two major questions. First, is the experience of immigrant parents different in any meaningful way from the experience of non-immigrant parents? Judging by the interviews and workshops conducted for this project, there is much in common. When their children are born, parents go through several of the most dramatic changes in their lives. They deal with the education of their children, pass on values and traditions they cherish, experience love of a sort never before experienced, and face the huge challenges involved in raising the next generation. At the same time, as the personal stories revealed to us during the individual interviews and workshops indicate, important aspects of childrearing are fundamentally dissimilar when parents live away from their homeland.

The second question is the extent to which immigration is different for parents compared to individuals who go through the same process with no children of their own. Here, too, one finds many points of similarity. Immigrants live through an identity crisis, experiencing a torn identity as Americans who in certain ways are still connected to their country of origin. While they long for the place where they grew up, they are both excited and anxious about living up to the challenges of a new language, a new culture, a new society and a new life. But again, as the narratives of the immigrant parents we met indicate, parenting gives immigration a whole new dimension. This paper is largely about the additional dimensions of parenting and immigration experienced by immigrant parents and reflected in the identity they form over time.

Our key contention is that parenting provides immigrants with a milieu in which to mend their torn identity. How parents work through their identity crisis affects their own lives and those of their children. The parent strives, in some way or form, to relate the life he used to have with the new reality in which he lives. In fact, raising children requires parents to do so. Yet as parents they have a unique setting, both in the outside world and in their mind, in which they can deal with their identity crisis.

This article is about the different ways in which emigrants in general, and emigrants from Israel in particular, shape their new identity, benefiting from their role as parents and their relationship with their children. As such, this project offers insights into the world of immigrant parents more generally. In addition, since the group studied is parents who emigrated from Israel, the project is also about what it means to be Israeli, how Israeli identity develops and what happens to national identity (Israeli and otherwise) when living away from the homeland.

## **The different identities of parents**

A parent passes her identity on to her children. She explains where the family came from and who they are. Parents associate themselves with certain identities – national, professional, religious, personal, and ethnic. Typically, parents would like to see their offspring associate themselves with similar identities; they would like to see their children live in the same identity circles. For this to happen, however, parents should first explore their own identity. Who are they? What circles of identity do they place themselves in?

Every person identifies herself in certain ways. Yet, not infrequently, there is tension between the different identities one carries. In the case of immigrants, the tension between her new identity as an immigrant and her identity from the country of origin is critical to who the immigrant becomes. In fact, because of the abrupt changes inherent in the immigration experience, there is often a disconnect between who the immigrant used to be and who this person is now. This disconnect is experienced as an identity crisis. By its nature, the transition from Israel to America is not smooth. Immigration involves a drastic change, a change that fundamentally alters the life narrative of the immigrant. This change leads to a sense of a torn identity, which is key to understanding the parenting experience of immigrants.

Every parent, indeed every person, experiences conflicts, questions and crises. Yet for our interviewees and for participants in the workshops, the crisis associated with immigration was the most dramatic and influential. The interviews indicate that the attempt to find the middle ground between Israeli and American identities occurs largely as a part of the parenting experience. How immigrants shape their parenting, the way they deal with the challenges involved, and the role parenting takes in their lives influence how parents attempt to regain a balanced sense of who they are.

The balance each of them finds between Israel and America may be different. There are those who raise their children principally as Israelis. Others think of their children simply as Americans. However, most parents mentioned that, as parents, they try to pass on to their children an identity that is somewhere in between. An identity that has in it Israeli elements as well as American ones.

Parenthood, therefore, has an intermediary role. Both Israeli and American identities live within Israelis in America. Within their parenting experience, parents mediate between two realities – the American and the Israeli. In order to pass on a coherent identity to the next generation, immigrants, within their parenting experience, attempt to bridge (in many cases successfully) the reality they left behind in Israel, and the one they currently live in America.

To provide their children with a coherent identity, parents have to face the split in their own identity caused by the decision to move to the United States. At the same time, the very same experience offers a setting in which parents can work through their identity crises and find ways to mend their torn identity. Parenting is born with the first child, and it changes and grows over the years. An immigrant's identity as a parent, therefore, grows, develops and forms alongside the children.

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As such, parenting is a place in which immigrants can deal with their torn identity, process it and often even come to peace with it.

### **Methodology – The interviewees, the interviews and the interviewers**

For the purposes of this study, a diverse sample of participants was interviewed. Some of them have traditional families,<sup>10</sup> while others are single parents. Some are in their 80s, while others are young parents in their late 20s. Some became parents not long before they met us, whereas others had adolescent grandchildren. While some are living in the US on a temporary basis, most view themselves as temporary visitors but are immigrants in reality. One couple arrived in America in 1947, before Israel's establishment; others immigrated in the 1970s and 1980s; and still others only in recent years. Interviewees' lines of business included everything from music, business consulting and medicine to contracting, academic research, and occupational therapy. Some of them were descendants of Jews who immigrated to Israel from Arab countries, while others were sons and daughters of European Jews. Their reasons for leaving Israel vary, with some moving to the US for medical reasons, others for business or to pursue higher education, and still others for a trip that turned into a long-term stay. For some of the interviewees, raising their children was a major concern in life, while others mostly trusted their spouses with the task.

One thing all interviewees had in common was their choice of a place to live. All live in the major metropolitan areas popular among their compatriots. Our sample included interviewees living in major cities in California and on the East Coast (New York, Los Angeles, Boston, San Francisco and San Diego), as well as in the Chicago area.<sup>11</sup>

Recruiting participants for this study proved challenging in some cases. Interviewees were not always forthcoming or happy to discuss a topic they found particularly personal. In some cases, ads posted in community centers or via electronic mailing lists were the best way to reach potential interviewees. In other cases, snowball sampling allowed us to get to new interviewees via word of mouth from those who had already participated. Almost without exception, however, our in-depth psychological interviews, which focused on a topic many of them felt conflicted about, made parents hesitant about taking part in the project. In fact, despite efforts to obscure participants' identity, some of those who eventually decided to participate still expressed anxiety about the possibility that their identities might be revealed.

To protect their privacy, interviewees were asked to choose their own pseudonyms. Furthermore, their places of residence were changed, as were some details about their background. All interviewees received verbatim transcripts of their interviews with the details of their identities changed to ensure they were sufficiently comfortable with the text. It was not uncommon, when we contacted participants months after the interview, to find that their lives had changed considerably. In some cases, their families had moved back to Israel. In others,



they had expanded, moved elsewhere in the United States or experienced other life-changing developments.

The conversations themselves were in-depth psychological interviews.<sup>12</sup> During the interviews, we were attentive to both conscious and subconscious messages. We paid particular attention to places where the flow of speech slowed or stopped or where the tone changed, and often made an attempt to go back to those points, where complex and painful issues often arose. Together with the interviewee, we made attempts to examine and analyze such issues.

In structure, the interviews resembled a classic psychological interview.<sup>13</sup> However, in addition to what subjects told us concerning their psyches, we were also mindful of additional aspects of their stories. As mentioned above, parenting brings up personal and psychological issues side by side with sociological and political topics. In order to fully investigate the complexities of the lives of Israelis in America and their multifaceted identities, we also paid close attention to the cultural, sociological, and political aspects of their stories.

Apart from the opening question, the interview itself was not structured – ‘Think about your experience as a parent. How is it shaped by the place where you grew up, Israel, and the way you were brought up there?’. With no exceptions, the opening question provoked emotional reactions from all the interviewees, and from this point on they shared their parenting narratives with us with little prodding on our part. The parents and their stories dominated the interviews. When we did ask questions later on, it was done for clarification purposes or to echo and thus mirror sentiments of the interviewees. When there was something we wanted to underscore or examine further, we would echo the sentiments they expressed, asking them to elaborate. Different interviews therefore proceeded in different directions, with the interviewees leading them where they desired.

Once an interview was over, the interviewers would typically be engrossed for days with everything they had heard. Right after the interview, we would attempt to give the interviewee a short summary of the insights about the narrative she had just shared. But the ability to link the psychological, political, sociological and historical aspects of the stories required the perspective of time. And so, with the benefit of time, we have deeper analytical insights to present here.

This project is based on 30 interviews conducted over a period of 18 months and over 15 workshops with approximately 20 participants in each. Many of the interviews were very long, with some of them lasting more than three hours. Only a subset of the interviews is shared. Yet all interviews were crucially important for the writing.

A large variety of narratives are apparent. In some cases, the interviewees are raising babies. Others have toddlers. In some of the interviews, parents talk about their adolescent children, and in some cases the people we spoke with were octogenarian grandparents. We made every effort to minimize the editing of the interviews, attempting to provide the reader with an authentic impression of the subjects and of their stories. Some of the variation between the stories is doubtless lost in translation. For instance, the interviewees largely spoke in Hebrew as it was spoken when they left Israel for America. A rapidly evolving language, Hebrew

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was one thing when Rachel and her husband left Israel more than six decades ago, and was fundamentally different when Yael left the country 10 years ago, or when Michelle left for the US three years before we met her. While there was an attempt to reflect the differences in vocabulary, grammar and speaking style during the translation process, some of those differences were lost.

The different ways in which individuals relate their stories are fascinating. Each person we spoke with had her own way of presenting her life, emotions and the challenges she faced as a parent. Their inner worlds affected their choice of words and the vocabulary they tended to use. Michelle's husband, Uri, a businessman, works for a major high-tech company on the West Coast. During the interview, he often fell back on a vocabulary reflecting his vocation. This vocabulary was infused with masculine metaphors reflecting a goal-oriented state of mind. Conversely, Michelle, a midwife, makes use of feminine language to describe her experiences, emotions and state of mind. For example, Uri expresses his thoughts about Israel in the manner of an investment banker. 'In the early days,' he relays, 'when the state was a young startup...' Later, when describing why he considers it dangerous to raise children in Israel, he described risk in the following way: 'There is a calculated risk that you have to take if you decide [to raise your children in Israel], just like when I board an airplane for one of my business trips. Obviously, it is a relatively safe way to travel from place to place, but there is some risk involved. If I were a salesman who travels by air on a daily basis, I would clearly increase the risk I take. When this increased risk concerns me only, it is one thing, but when children are involved, it is a different story altogether. The risk is greater by orders of magnitude.'

Another interesting aspect of the interviews is the insights that many of the interviewees reached during the interviews. Many of the interviewees preferred to begin the interview with more general comments about parenting. Only after they warmed up did they reveal the more personal aspects of their stories, in some cases coming to certain realizations for the first time during the interview itself. For example, during our interview, Michelle realized that she was able to articulate emotions she had never previously experienced on a conscious level. Likewise, Yael came to recognize that her move to the United States was largely motivated by her desire to have a baby; it was the move to a new country that allowed her to live away from those who would not let her take this step. It was during the interview with Dawn that she became aware of a major theme in her life as a parent – making amends. As the interview with her moved forward, Michelle came to realize that parenthood has become a central axis around which many of the recent transformations in her life had taken place. Furthermore, she came to realize that these transformations, which stemmed partly from becoming a mother, would not have taken place had she not left Israel.

Our own status as Israeli parents in America added to the complexity of the situation. Much of the content in the interviews echoed our experience as parents. We would not be exaggerating if we said that the understandings we have of our children and ourselves were often influenced. Yet during the interviews, we made every effort not to let our own story influence the situation. After all, the interviews



were about the interviewees, not us. Sharing stories during the interview might have limited their ability to express themselves freely.

With that in mind, there were also certain advantages. The familiarity with the life circumstances of the interviewees often allowed us to better understand the challenges, difficulties and joys they shared. To create a sense of closure at the end of the interviews, we would share our feelings. Often, this sense of a common experience made interviewees feel that they had been understood. We were touched by much that we heard, and for days after the interviews would be busy thinking about what had happened. As much as possible, there was an attempt to include those feelings and thoughts in this project.

### **Israeli parents in America**

A growing number of immigrants from Israel (and elsewhere) are raising their children in the United States. Their parenting experience is influenced both by their personal narratives and by the political and social environments in which they grew up. The parenting they received as children influences who they are as parents. The social and political contexts in which they were raised have an impact on the parents they are today. Indeed, on one level or another, the vast majority of parents we spoke with still associate themselves with Israel, which is particularly evident in the way they raise their children. The vast majority make every effort to speak Hebrew at home, give their children Israeli names (although some of these names, such as Daniel or Maya, work just as well in English), and engage in passing on what it means to be Israeli in their eyes to the next generation.

One example of how deeply ingrained being an Israeli is comes from the interview with Edith. She lives with her husband and two young children (a one-and-a-half-year-old and a 4-year-old) in a big metropolitan area on the East Coast. At a certain point in the interview, she says, ‘We mostly speak Hebrew at home. But recently, I have come to realize that my son, who goes to a public school, speaks increasingly more English, much more than he used to when he was home with me. His Hebrew, which has always been better than his English, still is. But his proficiency in English is almost as good. He watches television and plays computer games in English. His playmates and friends from school are American. So English has become very dominant in his world in the last year. It really troubles me, because the issue of speaking Hebrew is near and dear to me. It is not only that I want him to know Hebrew, but I want his language to be at a certain level. I would like him to have a rich vocabulary. It’s important to me, because I want him to have what I have, to be what I am. And what I am is still, to a large extent, Israeli.’

Regardless of their particular country of origin, immigrant parents’ homeland and mother tongue remain important to them. Yet what characterized many of the Israeli parents we interviewed was the sense that they are in America on a temporary basis.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding how long they had been in this country, many of them considered themselves visitors or transient rather than immigrants. This temporary aspect of their life, whether real or mostly in their minds, affects how they raise their children.

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How they perceive their position in their new country affects how immigrants behave and feel as parents. When the ‘temporary’ nature of their life becomes permanent, their parenting experience is affected as well. Israel, which would have been central to their lives had they stayed there, remains relevant because of the possibility of moving back. Naturally, it also affects how their children are raised. The option of returning to Israel one day makes it hard for parents to ignore their homeland when raising their children. ‘If there is a chance my children ever live in Israel,’ many of the parents think to themselves, ‘then it is important that I incorporate certain elements of Israel into our family’s lifestyle.’

The parenting experience of Israeli expatriates is interesting also because of their reasons for moving to America. The overwhelming majority, including almost all the interviewees, immigrated by choice. Political persecution, discrimination, and other forms of distress are rarely the reasons that Israelis immigrate to the United States. Rather, their immigration is part of a global trend; the ability to move from place to place is a desirable part of life in a globalized world. Immigrants typically move to a new country in pursuit of greater freedom professionally, financially or in terms of educational opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

In light of all this, it is interesting to examine the complex relationship Israeli immigrant parents have with their country of origin. Even if their ability to immigrate is part of a success story, or at least represents a degree of freedom and the ability to control their own lives, Israel continues to play a central role. The centrality of Israel arises in the interview with Edith when she says, ‘In my view, children need a broader frame of reference. They need a context in which they can place themselves, their lives and their story. The larger context we as parents can pass on to them are the things we know. Essentially, it is who we are. As Israelis, what we are most familiar with is the place where we were born and raised, Israel. This is our cradle, this is where we come from, and this is what we know best.’

One situation in which parents’ origins come to the fore is when they get angry with their children. When our daughter, Talia, was younger, she used to walk in Central Park with her friends Elijah (whose parents were African American) and Leonardo (whose parents had emigrated from Italy). If the kids happened to climb a tree or a rock that the mothers deemed particularly dangerous, the warnings were simultaneously and instantly transmitted in three languages. Each mother fell back on her mother tongue, so that Talia’s warnings came in Hebrew, Elijah’s in English, and Leo’s in his mother’s mother tongue, Italian.

That said, even when calm, Israeli parents largely associate themselves, emotionally and ideologically, with Israel. When it comes to parenthood, many become nostalgic. Amir, a musician and his spouse, Lilly, who was engaged in research in chemistry, told me:

Amir: When you are away from Israel, you get a different perspective on things. We were watching some YouTube clips of a music festival from the 1980s with Shimi Tavori [a well-known Israeli singer] with Saul [their 3-year-old son]. Watching the kind of music productions they used to have in Israel made me nostalgic. In fact, it really gave

me the blues. All of a sudden, I longed for the country, for the music, for the people. I felt sad.

Interviewer: Why did you feel sad? Was something lost?

Amir: You cannot turn back time. Watching Saul sitting there with me, watching clips from days that will never return, and from a place that seemed so far away, made me feel sad. At the same time, though, there was a sense of comfort. It was something I felt connected to fundamentally, and it was nice to have Saul there with us.

Interviewer: Does it have to do with the fact that you now live in America?

Amir: Definitely. Things look different from across the Atlantic.

Lilly: I think the only reason we even watched Shimi Tavori on YouTube was because we were here. It was snowing outside, and we could not leave the house. But in addition, when you are here, these kinds of things become particularly meaningful. It is something you cherish.

Amir: I agree. We did those things for Saul. We wanted to entertain him. We wanted to show him the songs we used to love so much.

Lilly: The nice thing was that Saul found it really amusing, too. He really loved it.

Amir: It's about what you experienced when you were young, and now you're trying to give your kids something similar.

Although less than a year had passed since they arrived in the United States, Amir and Lilly had already developed nostalgic feelings toward Israel. Those feelings came up most strongly in connection with their son. As fall passed and they were bracing themselves for the cold New England weather, the temperatures outside felt particularly unwelcoming. Watching YouTube clips of their favorite 80s hits turned out to be a perfect activity for the entire family. Nostalgia for Israel appeared in many of the stories we heard from Israeli immigrants, particularly in the context of raising their children.

Ironically, the way those immigrants are viewed in Israel is largely negative. In the media, in academia, and in political speeches, they are perceived as having abandoned the country, parting with the idea of Zionism and choosing to live away from their families. As such, all references to Israeli expatriates in America, even when not openly ideological (for instance, when personal stories of those immigrants are discussed), revolve around the question of whether they plan to return, and if so, when.

This project, which focuses on their parenting experiences, takes a different perspective. Interviews about parenting, with its obvious social and political components, shed new light on their lives. That said, the possibility of a return to Israel also remains a pertinent question in their role as parents. In sum, not least because so many of them live while pondering that option, Israel is a major element in how they raise their kids, and therefore remains a major element in the parents' identity. This, however, is not easily transferable to the next generation.

The desire to pass on a coherent identity is almost universal. At the same time, the understanding that parents' identity is multidimensional is commonplace,

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particularly among immigrants, for whom identity crises are a part of life. As such, parents in general, and immigrant parents in particular, have to work through their own identity issues and crises before feeling ready and able to pass a clear sense of who they are on to their children. Simultaneously, parenthood provides immigrants with a framework within which they can process their identity issues. For many of them, our interviews indicate, it is within parenthood that their identity can take on its new form after the rupture of immigration.

### Conclusions

‘It’s possible to take the Jews out of exile, but not to take the exile out of Jews.’ There are those who cite this as one reason that there are Jews, some of them Israeli, who prefer to live in places other than Israel, their national home. We do not know if there’s genetic truth to this statement, or any truth at all. Based on the interviews, we would amend this to say, ‘It’s possible to take Israelis out of Israel, but not to take Israel out of Israelis.’ Israelis can leave Israel and live elsewhere, but it is very hard for them to stop their constant internal dialogue over Israeliness. This dialogue with their identity as Israelis is conspicuous in their experience as parents.

A majority of our interviewees were a part of the business, artistic, academic or professional communities in the US. They were familiar with the American way of life, and had succeeded in going about their business within it. And yet, in their own homes, the Israeli experience remains central in a way that is clear when it comes to raising children. The identity crisis brought on by immigration plays a central role for Israeli parents in the US. Yet their identity as Israeli is very much alive in the parenting experience of the vast majority of our interviewees.

Each of the interviewees experiences her role as a parent in the most profound and meaningful way. Among a portion of them, parenthood takes center-stage immediately after the birth of their first child. The standout example was Michelle, whose life changed completely after her daughter was born and she changed her career, switching over from business consulting to being a midwife. By contrast, there were others for whom parenthood, and particularly the Israeli component of parenthood, became meaningful only after a while. Only after he became a grandfather did Benjamin come to recognize the cultural divide that had opened between him and his son, and only after his son’s family moved to Australia did he allow himself to decry the emotional and ideological distance between them.

Subjects such as continuity, identity, assimilation and isolation are central concerns among Israeli parents in America, as are issues of values, the Hebrew language, Jewish identity and connections with family in Israel. Struggles over these issues are shared among many of those we spoke with. They sense that these are the things that form the basis of their identities, both individually and as parents.

And yet each interviewee has her own predilections. Not all the parents are trying to raise Israeli children. There are those trying to do the complete opposite. Reuma, for example, wants her daughter to know a language other than English –

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but it does not matter to her whether this second language is Spanish or Hebrew. There are those who feel liberated from family ties after leaving Israel. For others, the pain of separation burns in their bones even years later. There are those who are happy to see their children grow up with American manners and discipline, and those who would prefer to see them 'waste' more time on games, rather than learn to read and write before they hit four.

And yet everyone, without exception, is almost always negotiating with his Israeliness, questioning how much they can, or want to, pass on to the next generation.

In its different variations, Israeliness remains dominant in the lives of Israeli parents in America, with their identity crises a central axis around which raising children revolves. Yet among those whose children have grown and left home, it's not clear that Israeliness can truly be passed on. After they leave their parents' homes, whether for college or work, most children move farther from the Israeli world of their parents. They may identify as Israeli-Americans, but few of the qualities valued by their parents remain. The features that do survive will, for the most part, be Jewish and thus religious in nature, and not those of secular Israelis.

What does all this mean, broadly, about Israeliness? What does it say about the Israeliness of the Israelis still living in the Middle East, in Israel? It is difficult to make a clear-cut determination. It is obvious that national identity remains important for immigrants, and that the identity of Israelis is particularly strong. This identity stays with them upon leaving Israel, and manifests itself most strongly at key moments in life and in experiences as important as parenthood.

And yet Israeliness as a national identity is very much connected to the place where it sprouts: is Israel. Israeliness is a dynamic idea, and the meaning of being Israeli is different today than a year ago (when Chavezelet and Amir moved to America), five years ago (when Reuma left Israel), or 25 years ago (when Naomi immigrated).

Consequently, it is hard to develop Israeliness, or even to preserve it, overseas. By this we mean that while the parents may have a clear component of Israeli identity, the same may not apply to their children. Parents identify as Israelis to themselves as well as to their friends and family years after their children have stopped sharing the same identity, if they ever did. Parents have talked about their attempts at passing Israeliness on to the next generation, but at the same time admitted, in most cases, the futility of such efforts. For better or worse, the American way of life carries the next generation to distant places, far from what the parents left behind. Even if some traces of Israel remain, such as language, names or religious components, it seems that something elemental, at the root level, is lost.

Parents' identity crises as immigrants remain central during the process of raising children. It's an issue accompanying many of their most important struggles as parents. Yet when Israeliness is cut off from its roots back in Israel, it struggles to bloom. Even if parents draw on these roots as they deal with their experience as Israeli parents in America, with the passage of time it becomes relatively peripheral in their lives, and in particular in the world of their children.

## Notes

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