It Takes a Generation—Absorption from the Israeli Perspective

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During the 1990s, Israel was flooded with large waves of immigration. The dominant groups were immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU)—about a million immigrants from all over the collapsing communist empire—and immigrants from Ethiopia—a smaller group that came in two special aliya operations, Operation Moses that brought 7,000 olim in 1984 and Operation Solomon that brought 14,260 olim in 1991.[1] From a sociological standpoint, the events of this period enable a unique look at the absorption process, the concept of "absorption" and the goal of integration into a new society altogether. From a global Jewish communal standpoint, these same events are a prime example of the importance of an active Israel-Diaspora partnership.

The challenges posed by these large immigration waves continue even today. Although Israeli society has benefited in many ways from the massive immigration influx—some even claim that it essentially saved the state—Israel is still dealing with central issues and problems they generated. The New York Jewish community through UJA-Federation of New York under the leadership of John Ruskay has been central to these processes throughout, both at the time of the influx and in responding to the arising challenges. This commitment shows itself in their partnership at all levels: from planning and strategizing, to supporting the launch of innovative programs to meet the ever-changing needs. Ruskay—as an entrepreneur who brings his skills, passion, and thinking to such discussions—has been at the forefront of these efforts.

On a personal note, the invitation to write an essay in honor of Ruskay's ten-year leadership of UJA-Federation of New York presented me with a special opportunity to reflect not only on the absorption process, policies, practices, and problems but also on the invaluable partnership with our fellow Jewish communities in the Diaspora, particularly with UJA-Federation of New York. From my vantage point as former Director of Aliya and Absorption at the Jewish Agency and current Director of JDC-Israel, the Israel-Diaspora partnership is critical in ensuring that Jews from around the world who are returning to our homeland receive the support and help they need as they settle into a new, often strange, society. UJA-Federation of New York, under John's stewardship, is a leader among Jewish communities and approached the absorption challenge with a vision for a strong, inclusive Israeli society and with a long-term commitment to Israel and to its weakest immigrants.

This article reflects my professional observation of the events that took place since 1990 in the integration of Ethiopians and Russians. The opinions expressed do not reflect those of the organizations for which I work.

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[1]Today, the Ethiopian immigrant population in Israel numbers about 110,000 people.

THE LEGAL BASIS FOR JEWISH IMMIGRATION TO ISRAEL

The Law of Return enables every Jew to become a citizen of Israel, if one of his or her grandparents was Jewish. Passed in 1952, it reflected the Jewish reality in Europe after World War II and the Holocaust. It was relatively straightforward to apply the law to aliya applicants from the FSU, given the exacting records of births (including Clause 5 that relates to religion), community books, and cemetery records, as well as the exclusivity of religion. However, it was difficult for the law to answer and relate to the Jewish reality in Ethiopia where religion and the family structure are fundamentally different. In Ethiopia, there is no population registry. Family size is large, based on extended families, and the norm is for spouses to marry more than once in their adult lives.

Implementation of the Law of Return therefore created immense rifts with the Ethiopian community; the demands that they formally convert to Judaism led to feelings that they were not wanted and were being discriminated against because of their skin color. In addition, Diaspora Jewry became deeply involved in the resulting controversy.

The differences between the immigration experiences of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia also created tensions between these two communities. Looking back today as one who was extremely involved in policy implementation as Director of Aliya and Absorption at the Jewish Agency, I can say with certainty that the lack of knowledge and of a deep understanding about these different cultures caused many problems that could have been avoided.

A correct aliya policy has the potential to reduce and perhaps even prevent future absorption difficulties if it takes into account these issues from the start.

DIFFERENCES IN ABSORPTION: ETHIOPIAN AND FSU OLIM

Initial Absorption Policy

It was difficult for the law [Law of Return] to answer and relate to the Jewish reality in Ethiopia where religion and the family structure are fundamentally different.

The dramatic difference in the manner of initial absorption for the two immigrant groups must be understood in the context of the cultures, capabilities, background, and scope of each group and of the ways in which they arrived.

Initial absorption of Ethiopian olim was carried out through Absorption Centers, given their significant economic, cultural and employment gaps. The Absorption Centers enabled them to live in a protected environment where they could be exposed in a gradual and controlled way to life in Israel.

The absorption method with regard to olim from the FSU was different—direct absorption into communities. This was a new way of absorbing immigrants and was based on a monetary "absorption basket" of $12,000 per family (of four persons) paid out over one year.

This method, originally developed at the end of the 1980s by the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption to assist immigrants from South Africa, saved the absorption system from collapse because there was no other efficient, simple way to absorb the many thousands who came monthly from the FSU in the early 1990s. It was difficult to absorb the first immigrants, but after they had integrated, they served as the basis for absorbing those who followed. The ability and willingness of extended families to crowd together in one apartment

saved them much money and enabled the absorption of many people in fewer apartments.[2]

Permanent Absorption: Housing

Every immigrant's primary task is to find permanent housing; then they can establish themselves in employment, settle their children in school, and begin a new life.

Immigrants from the FSU and from Ethiopia in the 1990s did not receive public housing but rather mortgage benefits. The differences between the amount of assistance and the terms that the two groups received were extremely significant and stemmed from the differences in resources and background of each group.

Ethiopian olim were eligible for a mortgage, which was the largest component of monetary assistance in their absorption process. The average family received a mortgage of about $100,000, of which the majority was a grant. This was the initiative of then-Minister of Immigrant Absorption Yair Tsaban.

Already by 2001, 10 to 15 years after the aliya from Ethiopia, 65% of Ethiopian immigrants owned their own apartments. Even if the apartment is located in an inexpensive neighborhood, it belongs to them and gives them an asset with which they can participate in the residential real estate market.

In addition to the generous monetary grant, Yair Tsaban's policy attempted to direct Ethiopian olim to cities without mass concentrations of fellow immigrants, thereby creating small and medium concentrations in 20 to 40 cities in Israel. This policy prevented mass concentrations of immigrants that would hamper integration in Israeli society. Nonetheless, today there are problematic large concentrations in certain cities (for example, Netanya, Ashdod, Beer Sheva, and Rehovot) but still the concentrations are small enough to allow for welfare, employment, and educational responses.

However, we cannot ignore the danger that ghettos will form where Ethiopian immigrants settle and create a black "underclass" in Israel, especially where there are larger concentrations of olim. It is due in part to our failure to integrate Ethiopian olim into the education system and to help this community achieve academic success.

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Immigrants from the FSU received much smaller mortgages, but almost all took out mortgages. They did not come with plentiful personal property, but many had abundant fungible "human assets" suitable for Israeli society. Because of their human capital and at times even substantial financial resources, today—15 to20 years after the aliya waves—there is a greater proportion of homeowners among this immigrant group, almost on par with home ownership rates among veteran Israelis.

Monetary Investment in Aliya Absorption

Immigrant absorption expenses comprise a number of areas:

- Infrastructure expenses due to population expansion
- Direct outlays for various services with transfer payments (such as National Insurance payments) or services provided to every citizen

[2]The influx of 200,000 olim in the year 1990 alone had a major effect on the housing market. The financial support the olim received from the state also drove up the price of renting and purchasing apartments throughout the market. During this time, veteran Israelis, primarily young couples, found themselves without an apartment because of the high rents, and tent camps were set up in public parks. Tensions between veterans and immigrants were greatly exacerbated.

- Direct outlays for immigrants during their initial absorption stage (Absorption Centers, teaching Hebrew, etc.)

Expenses for immigrants are most substantial during the first and second years after their aliya.

The FSU Jewish community, because of its human capital characterized by education, employment, language skills and financial abilities, closed the gap between monetary investment and contribution within two to three years of aliya.

However, even 13 years after the aliya of Ethiopian olim, there remains a significant gap between the cost of absorption and services and the income from taxes that derive from their work. Recent research found that the expenditure per Ethiopian immigrant is 60,000 NIS a year, in contrast to the tax contribution of less than 3,000 NIS annually (Balasha, 2005). This gap is correlated strongly with their demographic makeup (60% are between the ages of birth to 18), education level, employment, and participation in the workforce.

Economic considerations should not drive the Israeli government's aliya policy; they never have. Yet, we should be aware of the heavy financial costs of absorption, recognizing that the Diaspora and Israel are partners in this effort, and that it will take a full generation to integrate Ethiopian immigrants into Israeli society.

If we examine data about Operation Moses immigrants who arrived in 1984, we can see a significant increase in the money earned and the number of breadwinners per family. Recent figures show a dramatic increase in the participation of Ethiopian women in the labor market, from 20% to 50% (the average for women in the country overall is 53%). PACT–Parents and Children Together, an early childhood program that focuses on preparing the Ethiopian community for the education system created in partnership between UJA-Federation and JDC-Israel, has contributed to this increase. The prolonged investment in their absorption, particularly in their education, has led to a relative improvement in their position and integration in society.

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Education, Employment, and Social Mobility

The educational achievements of FSU immigrants have been very impressive. In fact, a higher percentage of Russian olim than veteran Israelis receive matriculation certificates, particularly quality matriculation with high levels in the sciences and/or English.[3] The significant parental involvement, the cultural and academic background, and the value placed on education still leave their mark, and the results are also evident in the job market.

FSU immigrants, who arrived in Israel with a noticeably higher level of education than average in Israel, may have taken a step down in their employment status in Israel relative to their home country, yet they were absorbed well in the sphere of employment. The rate of participation in the workforce among FSU immigrants is high, and it has risen above that of veteran Israelis. Similarly, unemployment rates among FSU immigrants are lower than among veteran Israelis. This is the basis for social mobility, and when we look at the second generation

[3]At the height of this aliya, in the early 1990s, many of the FSU olim felt that the Israeli education system did not meet their expectations in core subjects, especially in the sciences, and given their desire to maintain the Russian language and culture among their children, they set up a network of afterschool learning centers.

(children of immigrants who arrived in Israel under the age of ten or who were born in Israel) we see that their employment and social situation are on par with or even surpass that of veteran Israelis.

Within the FSU community are olim from the Caucuses mountain region, whose integration has not gone as smoothly. Their culture—mainly agricultural and influenced by their Muslim neighbors—has led to many challenges. UJA-Federation did not overlook this group and has invested in their absorption over the years. Most recently, it launched a pilot program in Beer Sheva that will create a continuum of care for their youth—from those most at risk to those with the potential to excel—and including both in-school and afterschool initiatives.

Ethiopian immigrants, for reasons mentioned earlier, are in a different place from most of the olim from the FSU. There has been a significant investment in their education; for example, JDC-Israel's PACT and Birth to Bagrut programs (the bagrut is the high school graduation exam) that were supported and led by UJA-Federation's support. The rate of passing the bagrut among Ethiopian students has increased from 10% to 40%.

Nonetheless, this and other impressive achievements are not yet reflected in the employment sphere or in the socioeconomic standing of Ethiopian immigrants. It will take a generation and will happen only if together—the Diaspora, Israeli society, and the Israeli government—make the necessary effort.

The Young Generation Is the Generation in Danger

Despite the obvious differences in the absorption processes that both groups went through, I see much similarity in one area—absorption of youth and young adults—and unfortunately, this is not a favorable result.

The great danger is the emergence in both immigrant populations of significant groups who are disconnected from society. These groups are comprised of detached 14- to 30-year-olds, and they pose a difficult problem for the authorities and for society as a whole.

Among Ethiopian young adults, groups of youngsters, some even as young as ten years old, are engaging in socially deviant behavior—dropping out of school, flouting the authority of the family unit, and committing petty crime, alcohol abuse, and delinquency. The percentages of young Ethiopian-Israelis arrested or in jail, dropping out of school, and unemployed are much higher than the proportion of Ethiopian immigrants in the overall population. In addition, there is the emergence of an African subculture that expresses disfavor with and rebellion from Israeli society.

We see similar end results among young FSU immigrants, though for different reasons—school failure because of cultural transition difficulties, the breakup of the nuclear family because of aliya, financial difficulties during the absorption process, and questions of identity that are more acute during adolescence and that are heightened by the cross-cultural transition.

The connection between parents' education, employment and income levels is a strong one, and all have an influence on the next generation.

Social and Cultural Tensions in Absorption

Each immigration wave, even those before the establishment of the state, has been accompanied by many tensions in the process of absorption into the

veteran society. This is a universal phenomenon, and even when Israeli society is highly supportive of the absorption process, these difficulties and tensions occur.

Opinion polls taken in Israel during the 1970s showed the formation of two main attitudes with regard to immigrants.

1. Supporters primarily comprised veteran, educated (post-high school education), adult (typically over age 40) Israelis with above-average incomes. As these parameters rose, so did their support, in the sense of understanding the need to assist financially and to accept olim in society.

2. The "opponents" profile was characterized by young adults who were typically in their 20s and 30s, married men with one to two children, with a high school education and working in technical professions. This group primarily comprised North African immigrants or children of immigrants from these countries.

When we asked the overall population, about 90% expressed their support for aliya, but there was significant opposition to supporting aliya financially. This profile has remained consistent over the years, although the proportion of opponents and detractors even reached 30% of the population during large immigration waves. When there is no aliya, this proportion declines. It is worth noting, however, that the most disadvantaged groups, those with only an elementary school education, do not display a hostility toward olim. This support stems from their general acceptance of basic values, and maybe because of passivity or a traditional religious approach.

The Ethiopian aliya has provoked tensions on a number of occasions. In 1985, Ethiopian olim staged large sit-ins opposite the Chief Rabbinate building in Jerusalem over the conversion issue. In 1997, tensions exploded when blood donations from Ethiopian Israelis were discarded because of fears that they carried AIDS.

Unfortunately, a hurtful racist attitude does exist in relations between the Ethiopian immigrant community and Israeli society, and this phenomenon cannot be ignored when discussing the integration of Ethiopian olim in Israeli society. The recent events in Petach Tikva, when private national religious schools tried to reduce the number of Ethiopian students studying there, received a great deal of attention in the media.

The attitude toward aliya from the FSU is not fundamentally different, though it does not include issues of exterior appearance. Nevertheless, clashes, resentment, harm, and criticism all exist with relation to this aliya as well, and they too have erupted in conflicts on more than one occasion.

Without a doubt, the large scope of the FSU immigration eased social absorption, particularly their ability to endure and respond. When there is a large concentration of tens of thousands of immigrants in one city representing 30–40% of the local residents, the ability of the group to cope is much greater.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Globalization and Absorption

Absorption of immigrants since the 1990s has differed significantly from that of earlier migrations from distressed countries because globalization has opened up

the world. Immigrants can now visit their birthplaces, wire money to relatives, send children abroad for studies or for summer vacations, and work overseas for limited periods. All this is happening in Ethiopia and the FSU and influences the absorption of their olim. Aliya no longer requires people to "burn bridges."

"Melting Pot" Versus "Salad Bowl"

When the state was established, the dominant approach was integration at all cost; this "melting pot" approach also characterized the integration of immigrants in the United States. Tensions that arose in Israel and worldwide relating to different customs, cultural differences, and other gaps led to a much more considerate and accepting multicultural approach characterized by a respectful, appreciative, and accepting attitude. The analogy was no longer one of a "melting pot" but rather of a "salad bowl" with a variety of vegetables of different colors and tastes that are combined into a tasty dish. Yet, the "salad bowl" approach is missing a dynamic element, which results in each community, group, or Diaspora being left unto itself. This missing basic element was not sensed initially, but its mark can now be seen in the tensions between groups that seek to justify their differences. Today, the question is being asked whether it is worthwhile to return to a version of the "melting pot" to deal with the unresolved tensions and the growing gaps between immigrant groups arriving in Israel.

Test of Mutual Respect and Responsibility

John Ruskay represents a generation of young Jews who were raised in a notably free country after World War II. I belong in Israel to this same generation.

Ruskay's generation fought successfully for freedom for Soviet Jewry, and, primarily in the United States, for the aliya of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. The government of Israel, with the assistance of Diaspora Jewry, absorbed most of the Jews from the FSU with a large degree of success. Certain groups among Ethiopian Jewry were absorbed with relative success in overcoming significant cultural gaps. Our work is not over. There exists the danger of creating an "underclass" in Israel. This will be a test of respect for Israeli society and for the partnership with the Diaspora, of which the New York Jewish community and all Diaspora Jews are a part. It is our collective obligation to ensure that this underclass does not form. Past collaborations show that together we have the power to make a real difference in the lives of olim in Israel.

REFERENCE

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