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## From Exclusion to Leadership: The Case of the Ethiopian Community in Israel

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### Abstract

Israel comprises diverse groups (mostly Jewish), between whom the differences are sometimes greater than the similarities. This frequently leads to social exclusion and discrimination that damages the very basic sense of human security. Scholars agree that cultural misrecognition or exclusion has a deeply negative impact on a person's mental well-being and sense of security. In this paper, we show how the case of the Ethiopian community in Israel reinforces the understanding that a cultural group's experiences of exclusion and non-belonging undermine its members' sense of *personal* security and has detrimental effects on their well-being. Groups however can sometimes change the course of development. We show that 40 years after the first wave of immigration (Operation Moshe), the Ethiopian community in Israel has chosen a track of change, in which it slowly moves from exclusion to leadership. This idea calls for further study.

### Keywords

**Ethiopian Community; Israel; Multiculturalism; Cultural Security; Leadership**

## Introduction

Since the mid-twentieth century, culture has been defined as an assemblage of ideas, mechanisms, and beliefs that direct individuals' behaviors according to their belonging to a certain social group, or as a set of basic values that allow a society or group to jointly cope with their situational and environmental challenges, using methods that may be similar to or different from methods used by other societies or groups. This basic set of values, through which the world is perceived and represented, produces views on an ideal life and the standards for determining norms and values ([Goodenough \[1951\] 1961](#)). Every individual belongs to multiple cultural groups, yet as [Mautner \(2008\)](#) shows, one group surpasses the others in weight and significance, and this is the individual's 'cultural primary group'. Mautner explains that the foundational group regulates deep questions pertaining to their members' lives (such as the meaning of life, and the existence of God), reinforces their identity and offers the means to interpret the society in which they live. An individual's sense of belonging to this group is far greater than to any other group to which the individual belongs ([Mautner 2008](#)). Primary groups are typically groups of cultural and ethnic identity that shape the consciousness of its members more deeply and generate greater commitment than all other groups and provide members with cognitive perception and a moral view of the world and of their place and status in it ([Mautner et al. 1998](#)). The primary group becomes entwined with the individual's sense of self and may lead to the labels that the individual assumes for herself or himself and the way they present to others their cultural identity, identifications, and shared values.

Israel has always been a target of immigration: Its very establishment was based on its conceptualization as the homeland of all Jewish people, a country that all members of the Jewish nation could join in time. Indeed, most of its immigrants belong to the Jewish religion. As a result, Israeli society comprises diverse groups whose shared foundation is not based exclusively on religion, but also on a wide sense of nationality and tradition.

These facts distinguish between the case of the Ethiopian community in Israel from other cases of immigrants and host societies. The new immigrants share with established Israelis (residing in Israel for many years, or born in Israel) their religion, their nationality, their 2000 years yearning for Jerusalem and the holy land and some of their rituals and traditions. They also share the Hebrew language. Although most of the immigrants do not speak modern Hebrew, and do not use it as a daily form of communication, Hebrew is their language of prayer and holy books, and it is used during holidays and religious rituals. In fact, both established Israelis and Ethiopian immigrants share the same ethnicity, in its Weberian interpretation as a subjective belief, disconnected from the question of the existence (or not) of blood relations ([Weber 1978](#)), that goes back to the times of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Ethnicity 'is connected to birth and blood, but not absolutely so' ([Horowitz 1985](#), p. 52). Rather, it is rooted in myths of collective history and ancestry ([Horowitz 1985](#)). At the same time, however, established Israelis and the Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia, also differ from one another, not only because of their skin color, but also because of disparate cultural features, some believed to be innate.

Established Israelis, therefore, hold mixed feelings towards the Jewish Ethiopian immigrants. On one hand they see them as their long-lost brethren (and sisters), whose coming to Israel fulfills the biblical promise of *Shivat Zion* (the coming back to Zion, the land of Israel), and the fundamental mission of the state of Israel to be a refuge and haven for all Jews. On the other hand, many Israelis see the Ethiopian immigrants as inferior and treat them with hostility and suspicion, based on prejudice towards their African origin and their skin color. These Israelis believe that the differences are irreversible, and that they are greater than the similarities, a belief, which frequently leads to social exclusion and discrimination ([Moutner, Sagi, & Shamir 1998](#)).

Such exclusion damages the very basic sense of human security. Although the definition of human security remains subject to debate ([Paris 2001](#)), scholars concur that cultural misrecognition or exclusion has

a deeply negative impact on a person's mental well-being and sense of security ([Taylor 1994](#)). This cultural aspect of human security, which is discussed in this paper, is especially important in view of the significant role that culture and cultural identity play in people's lives and their function as 'an integral part of them, like their face or name' ([Sagi 2006](#), p. 185).

Our aim in this paper is to establish two main arguments. The first is that a cultural group's experiences of exclusion and cultural non-belonging undermine its members' sense of personal security, as shown via the case of the Ethiopian community in Israel. Our second main argument is that groups can sometimes change the course of development and move from exclusion to leading change. Towards the end of our paper, we show that 40 years after the first wave of immigration (Operation Moshe), the Ethiopian community in Israel has chosen a track of change, in which it slowly moves from exclusion to leadership. This idea calls for further study.

Human security is regarded as a fundamental value, from which other issues flow ([McIntosh & Hunter 2017](#)). Within these issues, the concept of cultural security still awaits a more profound understanding. While cultural exclusion is widely researched, the relation between such exclusion and the personal sense of security has not been studied enough. This paper adds an important layer both to the concept of cultural security and to the overall research of human security.

After discussing the importance of cultural identity and belonging and the sense of personal security among immigrants, the third section deals with the effects of social exclusion on immigrants. The next section examines these issues in the case of the Israeli-Jewish-Ethiopian Community (IJEC) in Israel, and the following one looks at a new and promising trend among young members of IJEC to begin a journey of moving from exclusion to leadership. The paper ends with a summary and conclusions.

#### A NOTE ON THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this paper we occasionally use the term 'racism', as do many of the members of the IJEC and many established Israelis, and as does the Israeli establishment that tries to fight it. In the scholarly literature, the term racism is often used in a generalized way to describe the hostility, negative feelings, and discrimination of one ethnic group toward another ([Fredrickson 2015](#)). However, as shown above, in the case of the Jewish Ethiopian community, the term 'ethnicity' itself is ambiguous, and the two groups have a shared and a different ethnicity at the same time. Also, there are big differences between racism in this meaning, and what [Fredrickson \(2015\)](#) calls 'overtly racist regimes' (p. 1), which, according to him, existed in the 20th century against Blacks in South Africa under apartheid, and in the South of the United States during the Jim Crow era, and against Jews and Roma in Nazi Germany. This is not to say that there is no 'new racism', which is 'a way of thinking about difference that reifies and essentializes culture rather than genetic endowment, or in other words makes culture do the work of race' ([Fredrickson 2015](#), p. 141). In the 'new racism', allegedly deep-seated cultural differences are used as a justification for hostility and discrimination especially against newcomers from the Third World to European countries (*ibid*). While we are aware of the racist elements in some of the attitudes towards the Ethiopian immigrants, based on the above remarks, we found that, in this paper, the theoretical framework of cultural exclusion is more suitable than that of racism.

### Cultural identity and belonging

The relationships between groups in a society might evolve along several scenarios on a continuum between cultural conflict — withdrawal, negation of others, and hostility — to a process of 'permeation,' in which each culture adopts motifs from other cultures. These scenarios are evident mainly in the public spaces of cultural activity (the media and the arts), but also in the private sphere, where intercultural encounters are conceived in terms of acculturation. The term acculturation ([Berry 2003](#)) signifies a process in which an

individual from a minority group adopts traits and characteristics of the dominant culture, expanding her or him competencies for adapting to their new society without relinquishing their own ethnic identity.

To discuss the connection between the cultural identity and the sense of security of minority group members, we must take into account the acculturation strategy minority group members use as a response to their encounter with the majority group. Encounters with the dominant cultures that differ from the minority group's original culture, often lead the latter to adopt a broad range of behaviors, attitudes, and values that challenge their identification with the culture of origin. Such cultural encounters put to a test the individual's experience of an integrated ethno-cultural identity, which reflects the extent to which she or he lives in harmony with their ethno-cultural identity ([Phinney 1990](#); [Phinney et al. 2001](#)). According to a model proposed by [Berry \(1970, 2003\)](#), four types of acculturation strategies may be adopted to resolve the tension between an individual's desire to maintain her or his cultural identity and her or his wish to adopt aspects of the majority culture: (a) assimilation, in which the individual gives up her or his culture of origin; (b) integration of the cultural identities of the majority and the minority; (c) separation, in which the individual maintains her or his minority cultural identity only; (d) marginalization, which is the only strategy in which the individual, through her identity, identification, and lifestyle, rejects both her culture of origin and the majority culture; As a result, the individual finds herself outside the cultural and social circles of both cultures, which exacerbates her sense of isolation and detachment.

To better understand the significance of these strategies, it is important to examine the extent of group members' interest in their cultural heritage or history, and their active participation in ceremonies and customs that characterize the group's culture of origin ([Phinney 1992](#)), or in other words, the extent to which group members feel they are part of their culture and group and the extent to which they feel that their culture and group constitutes a part of themselves. Similarly, to obtain a more complete picture of an individual's ethno-cultural identity, it is also important to examine her identification with other groups' customs, traditions, and practices, including language and social media use ([Phinney 1992](#)).

In their review of research, [Berry and Sam \(1997\)](#) found that integration is the preferred strategy of acculturation for most minority groups across the world, although according to them, this strategy is feasible only if several preconditions exist, including broad acceptance of multiculturalism by the majority culture (a positive multicultural ideology), relatively low levels of prejudice (low ethnocentrism and minimal discrimination), and shared positive inter-group attitudes by all ethno-cultural groups. A general shared sense of attachment, or identification with society among all individuals and groups, is also necessary ([Keynan 2017](#)). The feasibility of implementing the integration strategy is also constrained by additional conditions such as visibility of inter-group differences such as distinctiveness in physical appearance, which heighten prejudices and discrimination ([Berry et al. 1989](#)). In other words, integration is a mutual process; the minority group cannot integrate without being accepted by the majority.

As we see below, Ethiopians in Israel are making efforts to implement a strategy of integration by adopting aspects of the majority society, while preserving aspects of their culture of origin ([Korem & Horenczyk 2013](#)), yet these efforts remain unreciprocated.

## Immigrants' sense of security

One's need for personal security, understood in the broadest sense as economic, food, health, and community security, is a basic motivator in people's lives ([Keynan & Harboun 2020](#)), and constitutes a key factor in decisions to pack their possessions and leave their homeland for a place that they believe offers security for them and their loved ones. The recent migration landscape indicates a move from countries with extremely low personal security for citizens to countries that guarantee a dignified standard of living and maximal achievement of personal security. Immigration is a complex, multi-dimensional process, and while motivated by a desire for personal security, this is a challenging life event that compels migrants to cope with multiple

stressors and high levels of stress, leading to mental and physical distress ([Yakhnich 2014](#)). The greater the changes that an immigrant experiences, the greater the level of stress. In the immigration experience, immigrants may feel confused and hopeless because they are no longer able to apply the rules and norms of their culture of origin while not yet having acquired the norms of their host society ([Fisher 2005](#)). The challenge of decrypting the social and cultural codes of their new environment, and the irrelevance of old schemas and structures, feed a sense of helplessness and uselessness that negate their self-esteem. These feelings that are exacerbated in the transition from countries with a traditional culture to those with a modern culture, is the experience of the majority of migrants in recent decades, including Ethiopian Jews immigrating to Israel.

[Berry \(1997\)](#) emphasizes that immigrants' integration challenges are especially compounded where cultural differences are significant. These challenges are extremely problematic for Ethiopian immigrants, whose culture of origin is rural and traditional yet their target society in Israel is urban and modern. The transition from the former to the latter marked for Ethiopian Jews a radical cultural change, accompanied by the dissolution of the cultural, family, economic, religious, and social conventions and norms that had structured their lives in Ethiopia for generations. At the same time, the new immigrants were forced to adopt unfamiliar values and norms that frequently caused confusion and disorientation ([Fisher 2005](#)). As a result of the sharp transition, many experienced severe crises in all areas of life.

Already in the 1980s, Israeli immigration authorities understood that when absorption efforts disregard immigrants' cultural specificity, absorption becomes a process of submission and renunciation of one's identity, which diminishes immigrants' self-esteem and increases their sense of humiliation ([Dotan 1985](#)). However, the administrative decision making has proven to be inflexible, and no substantive changes were made to absorption policies. Moreover, the 2016 summary report of the inter-ministerial team on eradicating racism against Ethiopian Jews clearly indicates that the Ethiopian immigrants in Israel frequently are subject to racism and exclusion, as well as discrimination and offensive attitudes at the hands of government institutions.

These obstacles and challenges create a sense of non-belonging that is experienced more intensely as age increases. The desire to become similar to, assimilated and integrated into, the majority culture — and for migrants from traditional cultures, the desire to adopt patterns of behavior typical of western liberal cultures — is especially fierce among children and youngsters, while adults have a different pace of adjustment and greater commitment to the values and customs of their culture of origin. This age-related difference creates an additional challenge for the lives of immigrant families, as parents, who not being exposed to the same elements as their children, view their children's desire to quickly integrate and adopt the cultural traits of their new society as a threat to their parental authority. A vicious circle of intergenerational tension and detachment is created and may even lead to domestic violence (Sewell-Coker et al. 1997, cited in [Bustin 2007](#)). The difficulty to preserve the traditional patterns of parental authority and supervision over children, which were customary in their country of origin, generates frustration and conflict both within immigrant communities, and between immigrant communities and government agencies that do not consider immigrants' cultural norms as legitimate. These clashes undermine immigrants' sense of security in their parental role. It is reasonable to assume that these experiences diminish the newcomers' personal sense of security and subvert efforts at successful absorption and adjustment, which require that immigrants identify with their new environment ([Fisher 2005](#)) and feel at home.

## Immigrants and the effects of social exclusion

Social exclusion is defined as marginalizing certain groups, distancing them from the center of social power, and preventing them from taking part in significant activities, while also using oppression mechanisms toward them as part of covert social constructions ([Osem & Hertz-Lazarowitz 2012](#); [Hills 2004](#);

[Eisenberger, Liberman & Williams 2003](#)). [Wesselmann et al \(2016\)](#) define social exclusion as the experience of being kept apart from others, physically or emotionally, and they specify two main categories of exclusion: 'rejection (defined as direct negative attention suggesting one is not wanted) and ostracism (primarily characterized by the experience of being ignored)' (p.3).

Exclusion is a complex, multi-dimensional process that relegates the excluded to a position of inferiority relative to society's dominant power centers, resources, and values ([Barnes 2019](#); [Estivill 2003](#)). Excluded groups are marginalized and prevented from fully participating in the life of the society in which they live ([Doron 2006](#)). The exclusion practices drive the excluded to narrow their cooperation with integration opportunities and diminish their identification with the excluding society ([Roer-Strier & Rosenthal 2001](#)). Exclusion's adverse psychological and economic effects have been repeatedly demonstrated in decades of research (e.g. [Barnes 2019](#), [Aranda & Vaquera 2015](#); [Fraser 1995](#); [Taylor 1994](#)). There are myriad techniques of exclusion. They may be inflicted through legal, social, ethnic, economic, or other means, and they reflect the failure of social, legal, political, and economic institutions, which are expected to facilitate civil society's cohesion ([Roer-Strier & Rosenthal 2001](#)). Exclusion effectively prevents excluded individuals from 'feeling at home' and denies them the satisfaction of one of the basic needs of human beings – the need for belonging ([Keynan 2017](#)). The yearning for belonging is a primary human motivation that propels individuals to establish and maintain social ties and to adopt social identities as a means of satisfying this basic need. Non-belonging may have powerful adverse effects on the functioning of excluded individuals ([Leary & Baumeister 2017](#)).

[Baumeister et al. \(2003\)](#) show that social exclusion's effects are not limited to emotional functioning, but also affect cognitive functioning. Findings of this study, which compared pupils from excluded and from non-excluded groups, identified no differences in reading comprehension but found significant differences in pupils' ability to recall and apply information. One of the study's conclusions was that while the excluded pupils' lower-level cognitive functions were unaffected, their high cognitive functions, such as logical reasoning, problem solving, and judgement, were negatively affected by social exclusion. Moreover, exclusion also triggered self-defeating behaviors, which reinforced exclusion through a vicious circle of increased anti-social behaviors, such as aggression toward others (including but not limited to the 'excluders'); withdrawal, such as a decline in willingness to help others; and a tendency to assume excessive risks and make dangerous choices ([Baumeister et al. 2003](#)).

Some of the cognitive impairments were related to time misperceptions, specifically the inaccurate perception of the amount of time that has elapsed: Time passed more slowly for excluded individuals, compared with socially involved individuals who are active in social settings ([Baumeister et al. 2003](#)). The researchers also found that a lack of preparation for and orientation to the future decreased willingness to sustain losses or make sacrifices in the short-term for the sake a significant long-term gain. This is an indication of the ability to delay gratification, is related to self-regulation, and has important implications for the capacity to adjust to changing conditions. The authors note with concern that similar outcomes of disrupted time perception and a decline in the capacity to sacrifice in the present for a better future were also obtained in studies on individuals with suicidal tendencies ([Baumeister et al. 2003](#)).

The emotional effects of exclusion are equally serious, and there is growing awareness of social belonging's effect on mental health and well-being ([Greenaway et al. 2015](#)). Although emotional responses to exclusion tend to be disguised by excluded individuals' defense mechanisms, and they prefer to describe their emotional state as 'emotionless', the consequences are serious. Failure to satisfy the basic drive to belong to a group creates cognitive dissonance and efforts to minimize the difference between their self-perceptions and their perceptions of the reference group. One of the disturbing outcomes is that the excluded individuals themselves obliterate the differences between their individual identity and the collective identity of the hegemonic group, not only from the perspective of the excluders, but rather from their own perspective ([Baumeister et al. 2003](#)), which causes emotional detachment.

According to one explanation, this emotional detachment is an unconscious strategy designed to erase the pain and frustration stemming from exclusion and from society's representations of the differences between the excluded individuals and society. [Taylor \(1994\)](#) believes that nonrecognition or misrecognition may imprison individuals in a reduced and distorted mode of being. Indeed, debasement of one's culture of origin is also lowering of the self, because, as [Sagi \(2006\)](#) argues, culture is an integral part of the individual and not a mere supplement affixed to human existence: Without culture, a person is not a human being.

'People are born into culture and not into existence disconnected from culture, and culture establishes their identity as concrete entities and establishes their language and most of the mechanisms through which they experience existence. Culture provides the material of memory and shapes one's consciousness, and it plays an important role in determining the patterns of hopes and the future ([Sagi 2006](#), p. 185).

## Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel

According to the [Central Bureau of Statistics \(2017\)](#), 144,000 Ethiopian Jews lived in Israel in 2016. They arrived in Israel in several waves of immigration beginning in the late 1970s (The Jewish Agency for Israel, n.d.). As mentioned above, although immigration may constitute an opportunity, it also contains a threat of stress and pressures that are manifested in mental distress and adjustment problems. In effect, most findings concerning Ethiopian Jews in Israel reveal adjustment problems and personal crises ([Korem & Horenczyk 2013](#)). Some of the reasons for these effects are rooted in the traumatic immigration experience of many Ethiopian immigrants. Families were torn apart when several family members emigrated, and others were left behind. For many, the immigration process involved a long, arduous, and dangerous journey on foot and a lengthy stay in a refugee camp.

After their arrival in Israel, Ethiopian immigrants' roles and status changed radically, leaving them helpless. For example, their former occupations (mainly traditional farming and handiwork) and the tools they developed for survival in Ethiopia were no longer useful or relevant in Israel. Such a radical transition generates shock accompanied by a sense of helplessness, described by M in an interview conducted by [Fisher \(2005\)](#): 'In Ethiopia I could be a teacher and a guide... Now, everything that I knew is worthless: identity, food, attire, speech [...] like a baby, blind, deaf, and dumb' (p. 5).

Where an immigrant's culture of origin and host country culture are significantly different, immigrants are precluded from applying the rules and norms of their society of origin, even though they have not yet acquired the customs of their host society. As a study among junior high school students found, this is the major cause of the higher degree of passivity that has been found to characterize Ethiopian students: Ethiopian students were found to be more bashful and speak more timidly than their Israeli peers ([Ringel et al. 2005](#)). In general, Ethiopian Jews in Israel are considered restrained, introverted, and shy ([Shechtman & Tsaghun 2003](#)), but these traits cannot function as effective adaptive strategies for integration because they might be interpreted in Israeli society as passivity and naivete.

The reasons for the problems experienced by Ethiopian Jews in Israel are not only individual but are also rooted in the general and group exclusionary practices noted above. These were found to be salient in established Israeli residents' attitudes toward Israelis of Ethiopian origin. As [Salamon \(1998, in Korem & Horenczyk 2013\)](#) demonstrated, from their arrival in Israel, Ethiopian Jews encountered a system that supports 'perpetual racial differentiation between blacks and whites' (p. 56), where skin color is a 'dominant category' and the weighty factor in their life experiences. This evaluation is also supported by a report by the Team for Eradication of Racism (2016), which includes examples from testimonies of Ethiopian Jews.

In one example, Ethiopian women recounted their humiliation when a hospital acceded to other patients' requests to move them to a different room in the maternity ward due to their skin color, which

was supposedly justified by the hospitals' desire to 'understand and be considerate of other patients' wishes' (Team for Eradication of Racism 2016, p. 3). The hospital's admission confirms that these incidents were not merely subjective experiences but rather were the results of actual policy: the public hospitals in question found nothing illegitimate in such patient requests or in their own accommodation of these requests. The fact that the incidents were grounded in policy compounds the offense and its effects, by underscoring that the women's humiliation was the result of institutional rather than random prejudice. The report indicates that Ethiopian Jews in Israel are subject to pervasive racism and exclusion that stem from prejudices and stereotypes based mainly on skin color, and lead to marginalization and isolation.

Another example of racist and exclusionary practices toward Ethiopian Jews in Israel is the denial of access to Ethiopian youngsters by many clubs across the country, despite a law that prohibits owners of public venues from discriminating against customers ([The Association for Civil Rights in Israel 2009](#)). These practices cause Ethiopian youngsters to feel unwanted, subjecting them to one of the above-mentioned categories of exclusion: rejection ([Wesselmann et al. 2016](#)). This heightens the young Ethiopian Israelis sense of non-belonging and undermines their self-esteem and identity development compared with their peers. This example is especially important as an indication of the unilateral efforts by Ethiopian Jews — in this case, youngsters — to assimilate into the majority society, including its modes of leisure and entertainment. Their rejection from venues frequented by other Israelis feeds a sense of humiliation, alienation, and non-belonging.

As noted earlier, the preferred strategy of minority immigrants is integration ([Berry 2003](#)). This is also the case for Ethiopian Jews in Israel. In their study of youth counselors from various cultural groups in Israel, [Getahun et al. \(2016\)](#) found that the majority (76.7%) of Ethiopian youngsters shared a preference for an integrative strategy. For the sake of comparison, the strategy of separation was dominant among Arab youngsters and youngsters of Former Soviet Union origin. As the examples brought above and in the report by the Team for Eradication of Racism illustrate, in their efforts to implement the integration strategy, established and new Ethiopian immigrants encounter a host of obstacles posed by the host society, which prevent the desired integration.

Obstacles to integration are encountered as early as elementary school. [Warko-Menegisto and Horenchik \(2018\)](#) present findings of youngsters of the Ethiopian community, some of whom attend school, some are 'concealed dropouts' of the education system, and others are disengaged. These findings show that although parents encourage them to remain in school, the youngsters speak of the difficulties they encounter as a result of the discrimination in the system. The dropouts reported their sense of alienation in their former schools, the disengaged youngsters reported ethnic racism. The youngsters in school also reported group discrimination (although described fewer reports of having personally experienced discrimination). Both learners and concealed dropouts report having few friends outside their group of origin, and the disengaged youngsters reported having no non-Ethiopian friends.

Military service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which is typically considered an 'admission ticket' to Israeli society, also poses barriers to integration: Ethiopian soldiers are excluded from high-status positions and are channeled into simple, low-skilled assignments. In a discussion held in the Israeli Parliament (Knesset) Foreign and Security Committee on Equality Day for the Ethiopian Community, commemorated by the Knesset, exclusion and labeling of Ethiopian soldiers were harshly criticized. MK (member of the Knesset) Pnina Tamano Shatta (a member of the IJEC) stated (cited by [Bender, 2018](#)):

We are being told fantastic tales, that we may become better if they put us into separate groups in courses and conferences. I have received complaints that we asked to close the separate tracks, but [the tracks] are not the problem! Our community loves the army, and the conscription rates prove this, but the army isn't tackling the existing discrimination. The community is capable of serving

not only in menial jobs. I believe in our children, and the State of Israel should also start to believe in them.

In the same discussion, Attorney Awaka Zena, head of the government unit for coordination on anti-racism, stated, 'According to the IDF, based on current data, almost every second Ethiopian soldier has a KABA score below 45 [...] this means that we are retarded [...] there are graduates of preparatory courses who matriculated with 10 units in science-related subjects and were placed as military prison guards' (cited in [Bender 2018](#)). Clearly the discrepancy between their desire to integrate and the rejection they experience pushes Ethiopian Jews to select a strategy of social marginalization, which entails a rejection of both their culture of origin and the host culture ([Berry 1970, 2003](#)).

[Peled-Elhanan \(2012\)](#) analyzed representations of Ethiopian Jews in school textbooks, using a multi-modal modality approach to examine the contexts in which messages are conveyed, and therefore she studied text alongside other visual symbol systems including images, graphs, diagrams, colors, fonts, and maps. Her conclusion unequivocally pointed to a racialized discourse surrounding Ethiopian Jews in textbooks, which stems from 'ignorance about the pupils, their culture, their language, and traditional modes of learning, and from the problematization of Ethiopian Jews' (p. 36). Peled-Elhanan argues that textbook representations of individuals of Ethiopian origin reflect expectations of complete assimilation and relinquishment of most of their original culture and heritage. According to her, it is the dominant culture's intransigent attitude to the minority culture that creates encounters in which 'inter-group differences are not accepted by the dominant group but are rather conceived as problems that must be resolved' (p. 40).

These attitudes by the army and in school textbooks subject the young members of the Ethiopian community to the second category of exclusion: ostracism ([Wesselmann et al. 2016](#)). It seems that Ethiopian immigrants of all ages in Israel clearly experience a deep sense of cultural exclusion and non-belonging, two elements that are significant in undermining their sense of personal and community security.

## From Exclusion to Leadership

In April 2015, a distressing video had been disseminated in the social media, showing a police officer together with a police volunteer forcefully beating Demas Pikada, a young soldier of the IJEC. As a result, hundreds of young Israeli-Jewish-Ethiopians started furious demonstrations all over the country. They demonstrated against the excessive and racist attitude of the Israeli police towards them and their community members. At first, it seemed that the demonstrations were successful, as the policeman carrying out the beating was suspended, and the volunteer was expelled from the police ([Eli 2015](#)); the government started several programs for improving the integration of the IJEC members; and also set up a Team for Eradication of Racism against Ethiopian Jews, whose report was presented in 2016 with harsh criticism against the authorities and a list of important and serious recommendations (Team for Eradication of Racism 2016, p. 3). However, less than four years later, in January 2019, two youngsters of the IJEC were shot and killed by policemen. The death of Yehuda Biadga and Solomon Tecka re-ignited the demonstrations, which were more furious and more raging than those in 2015.

This was not the first time that members of IJEC had protested against government policies. In 1996, 2006, and 2013 there were demonstrations against the policy of the Ministry of Health and the MDA (the Israeli parallel organization to the Red Cross) not to take, and sometimes to take but not use, blood contributed by members of the IJEC; and over the years there were demonstrations against the exclusion of pupils of the IJEC from certain schools, or against the objection of some citizens to the purchase of apartments by IJEC families in their building or neighborhood, claiming it would lower the monetary value of their own apartments. The difference, however, is the atmosphere and the message of the demonstrators in 2019. Both in 2015 and in 2019, the demonstrations expressed the long term restrained rage of IJEC members about the overall failure to integrate the community in Israeli society, and the long-drawn

exclusion, discrimination, and racism ([Abebe 2015](#)). While some of the demonstrators resorted to violence in opposition to the organizers' intentions (both in 2015 and in 2019), most of them kept their self-control. More importantly for the topic of this paper, in 2019 the demonstrators spoke from a different position: that of strong young Israelis, and not from the inferior stance of weakened new immigrants, and they succeeded in recruiting vast support among the general Israeli population. Journalists, members of the Knesset, and ordinary established Israelis of diverse background, joined the demonstrators, to show their identification with the community, but also to express their rage over the police behavior in a wider context. Thus, in addition to the country-wide demonstrations, 20,000 people gathered in Tel Aviv, demanding that the policemen who carried out the shooting should immediately be put on trial, and that the police adopt a new set of rules to fulfill its role as a defender of the citizens and civil security (MK Ilan Gilon, chairman of the lobby against police violence in the Knesset, see, [Gilon 2019](#)). What we wish to emphasize here is that these demonstrations marked a new path for the IJEC youngsters, who said out loud that a new generation has emerged, and that this generation stands on the shoulders of a glorious culture, on the one hand, and sees itself as proud Israelis, on the other hand. In multiple interviews in the media, the leaders of the demonstrations emphasized their connection to the past and the blessing they received from the spiritual leaders of the Jewish Ethiopian community.

These events mark a whole new phase in the self-esteem and self-identity of young members of the IJEC. In complete opposition to the coping methods of the community in previous years, these youngsters have chosen to put an end to the segregation: they began a process of becoming leaders, by adopting the customary tool in all democratic countries, and a popular one in Israeli society in fighting for civil rights.

In their rallies, however, the young members of IJEC not only demanded their rights, but also demonstrated their ancestors' tradition of struggling to preserve their culture in a non-accepting majority society. All differences notwithstanding, it is our conviction that it is this tradition of taking the community's destiny into their own hands, that empowered these youngsters. Born in Israel to the Ethiopian community, they mix the old culture with the modern one and set an example to their brethren counterparts established Israelis. Their choice to fight for change, shows their understanding that they must create their place in Israeli society by themselves, while leaning on the power of their community's historic heritage.

It is hard not to connect the youngsters' new way of coping with exclusion to other changes in the community, among them the establishment of the Center for Ethiopian Jewish Heritage (a state corporation established in 2012, after years of joint effort by all the different organizations of and for the IJEC). The center's mission is to bring to the members of IJEC and to the general public the heroic history of the Jewish community in Ethiopia (Beita Israel) for over 2000 years. Since its founding, the center's activity has gained the attention of history and culture researchers as well as the vast public, thus bringing to light the uniqueness of Jewish Ethiopian culture. Gradually, the IJEC heritage is revealing itself as a source of pride to its members.

Indeed, it seems that the new generation leadership is tied to the leadership of the Jewish community in Ethiopia before immigrating to Israel, over its long history as a minority of circa 300,000 among a non-Jewish majority of about 100 million. During their history, they endured continuous pressure from missionaries and perpetual attempts, often violent, of the Ethiopian authorities to convert the Jews to Christianity. A letter from Ababa Baruch Adhan, the leader of the Ethiopian Jewish Community in Gondar, written in 1862 to the Jews of Jerusalem and France, echoes this pressure: 'We have severe problems with the authorities. Atze Tiodros is forcing Ethiopian Jews to convert to Christianity. Times are very hard, and we fight to remain loyal to our belief' (cited in [Tzegahun 2010](#), p. 12-13).

While, in this respect, the history of Ethiopian Jews resembles that of Jews in other countries who had to fight to keep their Judaism, it is important to mention, that the fact that Ethiopian Jews kept their

faith is even more impressive. The reason for that is that there were many similarities between Ethiopian Christianity and biblical Judaism ([Erlich 2013](#)), a fact that made it very easy for Jews to cross the fence and integrate in Christian society. Their insistence on remaining Jewish may be explained in the backdrop of [Moutner's \(2008\)](#) theory of the intensity of cultural primary group. Nevertheless, the tradition passed on by the elderly of the IJEC is a tradition of inner strength, of taking the community's destiny into its own hands, and of setting an example to others both by sticking to Jewish values and by leading them towards a better future.

Empowered by history and tradition, on one hand, and by the new options of a democratic society, on the other hand, these youngsters decided to take action to improve their situation and at the same time began influencing the larger group of activists in Israel. Born in Israel, they do not carry the huge burden of first-generation immigrants, the weight of leaving families behind, and the disappointment of the non-welcoming majority, while at the same time having to fight for their daily bread. The young generation therefore is freer to integrate the old and the new, thus beginning its journey from exclusion to leadership. This can be seen in their success in recruiting not only their own community, but also other groups, including journalists and MKs who identify with their cause and extend it to the larger context of society.

## Summary and Conclusions

Minority group members use several acculturation strategies as a response to their encounter with the majority group. One of the dominant reasons for their choice of strategy is the nature of the social and cultural dialogue between them and the host society. In all societies individuals are shaped by the culture into which they are born and in which they live. Yet they are also engaged in dialogues with other cultures to which they maintain ties over time, and they 'build their identity through their ties to the various individuals and groups with whom they come into direct or indirect contact' ([Sagi 2006](#), p. 186). When no dialogue takes place, minority group members are forced into a strategy of marginalization, leaving them in a state of 'limbo' — a forgotten, excluded enclave where the ground is unstable. As a result, they usually withdraw and isolate themselves both from their culture of origin and from the dominant host culture. When the dialogue with the dominant host culture is dominated by negative, inferior images of the culture of origin, the minority group finds itself subject to racism, humiliation, exclusion, and misrepresentations with which they cannot identify.

In these conditions, not only is the strategy of integration closed off to the minority group, neither isolation nor separation are viable strategies, due to the dissonance between the community members' self-perception and their misrepresentation by the dominant culture as inferior and contemptible. On the other hand, relinquishing the culture of origin in favor of assimilation is equally impossible because the host culture denies them this strategy. In the case of Israeli-Ethiopian Jews, their skin color labels them and impedes assimilation, even at the high price of detachment from their culture of origin.

This situation is especially acute among youngsters who encounter a formal education system that lacks a deep cultural understanding of the Ethiopian community. Many education teams have adopted a collective stereotyped approach to pupils of the IJEC and forgone any chance of assisting them to advance within the system or to cope with their problems and the challenges they face ([Israeli Association of Ethiopian Jews 2003](#)). Beyond the school system, IJEC youngsters are frequently humiliated and denied access to entertainment venues that could potentially function as a common ground with the members of the dominant group, where shared traits might evolve, and are humiliated by government and public officials, including the police. Added to this is the emotional tension between the youngsters and their parents, which is heightened by the specific absorption practices in Israel, which frequently led to children's placement in boarding schools away from home ([Warko-Menegisto and Horenczyk 2018](#)). The heightened post-

immigration tension between children and teenagers and their parents eclipses parental respect, one of the key culture values that young Ethiopians reported (Korem & Horenczyk 2013).

This painful picture underscores the fact that when minority groups suffer from exclusion and their efforts to belong to the host culture are rejected, they fail to satisfy their basic desire for a sense of belonging (Baumeister et al. 2003) and are forced into social marginalization, which inevitably erodes their sense of psychological security.

It is therefore inspiring and hopeful to see the emerging power of the young Israeli-born Ethiopian Jews. The new strength that these youngsters find in themselves is an impressive example of the second strategy in Berry's model of acculturation (Berry 1970, 2003): integration of the cultural identities of the majority and the minority. Interviews and conversations with elderly leaders and young activists of IJEC (carried out by one of the authors) show that the new method of action embraces the democratic principles of their new home, while standing on the shoulders of the community's heritage. This is a heritage of determined insistence on the community's Jewish values, culture, and customs, which eventually led the local population in Ethiopia to respect the Jewish leadership (interviews and conversations with elderly leaders of the IJEC in different dates during 2020). It is also a tradition of leading towards values of humanism and social justice. In the words of the Kes Ababa Baruch Adhan to his followers on his deathbed: 'Be those who make peace among people, stick to values of helping others, of truth and social justice ... Be genuine leaders, set example to the next generations' (Tzegahun 2010, p. 12-13). In today's phrasing this would be called values-based leadership, which highlights what is right or wrong and not who is right or wrong' (Rao 2017).

The young leadership of IJEC decided to pursue this new path, refusing to silently accept exclusion and discrimination, and instead taking responsibility and action to strengthen their community in order to achieve their lawful rights. It is difficult to combat exclusion, and the way to do it requires a broader action, a combination of education and political activism against injustice (Giroux & McLaren 1994). In the case of IJEC, as seen in the demonstrations of 2019, the younger generation has begun to adopt political activism not only as a weapon to fight injustice, but also as a basis for mobility from exclusion to leadership.

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