

ALIYAH TO ISRAEL IN THE 1990s

Lessons for the Future

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Almost a million immigrants made aliyah to Israel during the 1990s. To meet this massive immigration, Israeli adopted new immigration policies that differed significantly from previous ones. The professional community and Diaspora Jewry played leading roles in introducing programmatic and policy changes and innovations.

The decade of the 1990s was a dramatic episode in the history of aliyah to the state of Israel. In this brief article, we discuss the nature of the challenge, the strategies adopted, the Diaspora-Israeli partnership, some of the achievements, and remaining challenges. We conclude with some general lessons from this experience.

NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

In the 1990s, 956,000 immigrants came to Israel. Of these, 824,000 were from the FSU and 40,000 from Ethiopia. Immigrants thus represented 14 percent of the Israeli population at the end of the decade. The sheer magnitude of the immigration presented a very special challenge that few other countries have experienced. However, there were several other factors that added to this challenge:

- the diversity of the immigrants, including significant differences between Ethiopian and Russian immigrants and between those from Northern and Southern Russia
- the large numbers of immigrants with severe needs and without the potential for self-support
- the very significant cultural transition required by both immigrants from the FSU and Ethiopia

STRATEGIES AND KEYS TO SUCCESS

The strategies adopted by Israel to meet the challenge posed by the sheer magnitude of the immigration represented significant departures from previous policies. The professional community played a leading role in identifying the need for change and assisting Israeli society to adopt its strategies to this unique challenge.

One of the most significant changes was the shift from the initial absorption of immigrants in absorption centers to their direct integration into the community through their rental or purchase of apartments on the open market with government financial assistance. This made it possible to deal with the dramatically increased rate of immigration, but at the same time posed many more challenges for local municipalities, which became the major agent of absorption. This arrangement was not feasible for all groups, such as the Ethiopian community or those with very weak families.

Absorption policy during this period was much more sensitive to the need to work with the immigrant communities as partners in the absorption process. Assistance was provided to develop leadership groups within the immigrant community, as well as to organizations led by immigrants that could be partners in the process. This provided opportunities to establish real partnerships with

both professional and lay leadership in the immigrant communities.

There was a special emphasis on focused efforts to promote cross-cultural understanding, particularly between professionals and the immigrant community through extensive and innovative training programs.

There were highly successful efforts during the first years to mobilize volunteer efforts within the general population and establish one-on-one relationships. There was also a particular emphasis on the mobilization of all sectors of Israeli society to address the challenges (e.g. business sector, universities, kibbutzim).

There was a shift from a policy of separate services for immigrants to integrated services that are sensitive to the needs and the cultural background of immigrants. This is even more important with regard to long-term absorption.

More than ever before, the absorption process was accompanied by extensive efforts to examine the needs and monitor results through applied research, which contributed directly to setting priorities and to programmatic and policy reform.

THE DIASPORA-ISRAELI PARTNERSHIP

Diaspora Jewry responded in a major way, mobilizing significant resources through many channels: the Exodus campaign, the reallocation by the JDC and the Jewish agency of their core budgets, and direct giving to a variety of Israeli institutions. However, the funding from the Diaspora also played a very significant role in the dramatic efforts to introduce programmatic and policy changes and innovations. These changes were implemented through demonstration programs, experimentation, training programs, advocacy efforts, and applied research. Another important contribution was the promotion of voluntary organizations and leadership development among the immigrants from both the FSU and Ethiopia. Finally, the Diaspora itself was also engaged in integrating immigrants from the

FSU in their own communities. Thus, there emerged an important exchange of ideas and experience that contributed to immigrant absorption in both Israel and the Diaspora. At the WCJCS quadrennial in 1998, a special pre-conference and professional track was devoted to the exchange of experiences in immigrant absorption.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND REMAINING CHALLENGES

From the perspective of the society as a whole, it is important to note that the period of massive immigration in the first half of the decade was stimulated by rapid economic growth, which led to low overall unemployment by 1996. Subsequently, unemployment has increased, but for reasons unrelated to the immigration process.

Immigrants from the FSU

By 1996, immigrants from the FSU had achieved high rates of employment. Even immigrants aged 45–64 had succeeded significantly in entering into employment. However, less than half of the immigrants found employment that fully used their previous education and skills.

The Russian immigrant population is very educated and places a high value on education. The high-school performance of Russian youth in Israel equals that of the general Jewish-Israeli population, which many view as a significant success. However, their achievements are lower than those of non-immigrant families whose parents have similarly high levels of education. Furthermore, although there are many successful immigrant students, there is also a very high rate of high-school dropouts and a higher rate of deviant behavior than in the general Israeli population. In general, the economic situation of the family and the educational achievements of the immigrants from Southern Russia are much lower than those from Northern Russia. Indeed, those from the Caucasus and Bukharian region have been singled out for special educational assistance due to their low achievements. Thus, as with

employment, the full potential of the immigrants was not realized, and there was considerable disappointment on their part.

One of the important defining characteristics of the interaction between immigrants from the FSU and the non-immigrant population is the gap between their perspectives on the success of the immigrants' transition from the former FSU. While the general population believes that the immigrants improved their economic and housing situation significantly by making aliyah, the perspective of the majority of the immigrants is one of decline. This is because in the FSU they represented an economic elite. The immigrants' major reason for coming to Israel was their concern for the future of their children, which makes the educational achievement of their children all the more important.

Another important indicator of success is the low rate of *yerida*, or emigration from Israel. At the same time, a major concern has been with the strength of their Jewish identity, which is a component of their broader identification with Israeli society. Clearly, this immigration has included significant numbers of family members who were not Jewish according to the Halachic definition or had little prior knowledge of Judaism. While some efforts have been implemented to make Jewish education opportunities available, an important problem remains the difficulties faced by the significant group of immigrants interested in conversion.

Immigrants from Ethiopia

Today, there are some 80,000 Israelis of Ethiopian descent. This group faced both a very significant disruption of their normal lives during their struggle to leave Ethiopia and the greatest cultural, social, and economic transition upon their arrival. In addition, they had to overcome the obstacles posed by very low education, very large families, and many one-parent families, as well as a considerable difficulty and limited success in learning Hebrew. One major consequence has been much lower rates of employment than among non-immigrants and

Russian immigrants. All of these factors have also contributed to very high rates of poverty.

In recognition of their special needs, Israeli society has provided Ethiopian Jews more extensive entitlements to assistance than for any of the other immigrant groups. In addition to the issue of the amount of assistance required, this group needed a very different set of policies and programs adapted to their special needs and cultural norms. Diaspora Jewry played a particularly important role in helping develop and identify these programs.

The Ethiopian population has important strengths that overcome the huge hurdles it faced. One is the very strong motivation of this group to be a part of Israeli society and, in contrast to expectations, the very strong commitment to education of both parents and children. A second strength has been the development of indigenous leadership among the first wave of immigrants that came in the 1980s, which went on to play a major role in the absorption of the new wave of immigration in the 1990s. This also found expression in the development of organizations led by Ethiopians that played an important advocacy role.

These factors are reflected in the degree of success of this group in the educational system, which is obviously the key to their future success in Israeli society. On the one hand, there are very large educational gaps between Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians in Israel. They perform at about 60 percent of the level of the general population. Recent evidence has shown that even among very young Ethiopian children born in Israel the gaps are similar. At the same time, the educational gaps have declined greatly since the early 1990s. The significant progress in the 1990s has been due to major shifts in educational policy and the special efforts of Diaspora Jewry. Looking ahead, there is a general consensus that without a much greater effort the educational gaps are unlikely to decline any further. This has indeed led to renewed interest among Diaspora Jewry to

launch new partnerships with Israeli society in addressing this challenge.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Much has been achieved; yet, there is much more to do to realize fully the personal potential of the immigrants and their full contribution to Israeli society.
- Absorption is not a short term process, but many integration problems are solved over time, and there can be crises at later stages of immigration, particularly among youth.
- The government may take less responsibility in the long-term absorption process while the voluntary sector plays an increasingly important role.
- The success of integration depends not only on the amount of resources but also on the strategies adopted and the willingness and ability to adapt to changing circumstances.
- It is important to recognize the unique needs of different subgroups and the varying strategies needed to address them. At the same time, we need to take advantage

of opportunities to share successful experiences among the groups.

- A major issue that came to the fore during this period of immigration is the need for recognition by Israeli society of immigrants' culture and heritage and therefore the importance of working to increase non-immigrant society's openness, acceptance, and respect.
- The organization of immigrant communities is an active force in their integration.
- Much knowledge has been gained as to what works, not all of which has been institutionalized in the structures that deal with immigration. There is an ongoing need to improve these systems and disseminate best practices.
- Professional leadership can play a major role in promoting cross-cultural understanding and in adapting policies and programs to meet needs in the most effective way that is inclusive of the immigrants as partners in the process.
- The partnership between Israel and the Diaspora can play an important role not only in providing resources but also in shaping the way in which Israeli society responds to its major challenges.