CHAPTER 9

Strong Ethnicity: The Case of US-born Jews in Israel

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Introduction

One of the ongoing battles waged over the past decade in Israel, at the intersection of religion, state, and society, revolves around the desire on the part of a group of Jewish women to organize prayer services whose style and content reflect their beliefs, in the plaza facing the Western Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem. Many Orthodox Jews regard this site as a large, open-air Orthodox synagogue, with the ritual prohibitions and gender separation that this entails (Shakdiel, 2002). The women worshippers engaged in this battle have come to be known as the “Women of the Wall” (ibid.), and they include a group of Jewish women from North America. For reasons that appear to be related to political changes in Israel, the appearance on the political stage of a popular secular activist party, and the media, the monthly prayer services of the Women of the Wall have become occasions for heated confrontation between them and some of the Orthodox worshippers at the site. During one incident, a leader of the women’s group spoke into the camera of one of the news channels covering the conflict, declaring: “Each (Jewish) ethnic group brought its own contribution (to Israeli society). The Moroccans brought the mimouna [a traditional festival celebrated the day after the end of Passover]. The Americans brought equality” (Channel 2 TV: 29 May 2013).

Some critics have interpreted this statement as just another example of the offensive and arrogant expressions that are sometimes directed by relatively stronger groups within Israeli society towards Jews of Moroccan origin or from other Arab or North African countries (colloquially known by the collective term “Mizrahim”). The latter are perceived as maintaining a strict folk-religious tradition that the former views as primitive, peripheral, and—worst of all—nullifying itself before the Ultra-Orthodox establishment, as in the case of the haredi-Mizrahi Shas party, whose voters include a large contingent of Moroccan origin (Dahan-Kalev, 2001). Once again, the depressed ethnicity narrative of the Mizrahi sector in Israel was brought to the fore; an apology was quickly issued, and the storm subsided. However, the incident is worthy of closer
attention since it reveals how—for a brief instant—the public discourse in Israel featured an ethnic issue that has not been addressed by sociological research. It presents an ethnic perspective that views its own ethnic origin not as “mere folklore,” but rather as a source of inspiration for social progress. We shall argue here that what made a brief appearance in the public sphere was the issue of what we shall refer to as “strong ethnicity”—in this case, the strong ethnicity of US-born Jews in Israel.

Migration and Ethnicity

Ongoing research into migration indicates the complexity of the motives for leaving one’s home country and the diverse ways in which immigrants assimilate in the host countries that they have chosen for themselves, or where they have been forced to go. The circumstances of migration differ from one person to the next, and from one group to the next, and obviously there are many complex factors involved. Nevertheless, we can distinguish two general patterns characterizing large-scale migration by part of a population from one geographical region to another: forced migration, and migration by choice (Light & Gold, 2000).

Forced migration has its source in the geophysical or political changes that lead to increasing pressure on individuals or groups to leave their homeland and move elsewhere. Geophysical changes include such phenomena as severe earthquakes or climate change. Political changes may take the form of war or persecution on ethnic, racial, religious, or ideological grounds. One of the results of forced migration is the appearance of exiled populations or refugees. These people often maintain a cultural separateness associated with processes of ghettoization—whether conscious and deliberate, on the part of the immigrants themselves, or forced upon them from the outside—as well as the hope of returning to their country of origin from which they have been cut off against their will. The ancient world was full of extensive exiled populations. The twentieth century offers many examples of forced migration for political reasons, and this outcome has been an integral part of the geopolitical reality accompanying violent struggles. Examples include the Partition of India in 1947 and its aftershocks throughout the 1950s (Raj, 2000); the situation of the Palestinians in the Middle East (Morris, 1987); and—more recently—the Syrian refugees fleeing from the civil war raging in their country.

The other model is migration out of choice, usually in search of better economic or social circumstances, and generally characterized by a move from developing countries to developed ones (Sandis, 1973). This form of migration