There are currently 64,700 citizens in Israel who claim a Latin American background. Together with their children, these Latin American Israelis number almost 103,000 individuals, according to the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS, 2006).¹ They have migrated to the country in a piecemeal movement of *aliyah* (Jewish immigration to Israel), first attracted by the pull of Zionism and the prospects of a Jewish life in Israel and, more recently, also as the result of political and economic crises in the countries of origin.

This chapter tackles an issue of key importance in the experience of Latin American Israelis; namely, their communal invisibility. In contrast with the experience of other communities of Jews who relocated to Israel (such as Moroccans, Russians or Iranians), Latin Americans have until recently refrained from assuming communal public visibility, as evidenced in their almost complete absence from leading political positions in Israel.² They do however attain prominent positions in other fields, such as in liberal professions, i.e. academia and the arts, or in industry and agriculture.³ Yet, while projecting an image of successful integration as individuals, collectively they have until recently been an ‘invisible community’, preferring individual mobility to communal assertiveness.

For the most part, researchers have neglected to consider the case of Latin American immigrants. Most likely because the story of this immigrant group is seen as one of successful integration and amalgamation into the social texture of Israel along the lines of the ‘melting pot’

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¹ This figure includes children of Latin American fathers, not counting those of Latin American mothers.
² Even in the few cases of Members of Parliament born in Latin America, their backgrounds are downplayed and not considered a salient feature.
³ About 7,000 Latin Americans settled in the *kibbutzim* between 1946 and 1967 where they have had a paradigmatic impact (Bar Gil, 2003: 1).
absorption predicated by the traditional Zionist vision. In this paper we take a different approach and consider this invisibility as a riddle to be analyzed. We will suggest some lines of interpretation through findings on Latin American Israelis and insights from migration studies and multicultural research.

I

The first factor accounting for such relative communal invisibility and the correlated dearth of research has to do with the character of their arrival. In sharp contrast to other communitarian groups that acquired a distinctive ethnic folk identity as they arrived in one or several massive waves, the Latin American immigration was a cumulative rather than abrupt process. Between 1948 and 2005, 93,323 Latin Americans—most of them Jewish—immigrated to the State of Israel in a protracted, almost drizzling way, with some peaks in the 1970s and 1980s (see Table 1 for the 1948–2004 figures).

This finding is consistent with new approaches in migration studies which stress the difficult context of international migration due to the relative immobility of human resources and ties (Faist, 2000; Arango, 2000). Studies in this line of research have emphasized the crucial role to be played by pioneer and chain migration as triggers of bridges upon which successive waves of migrants may transit.

The protracted pace of the arrival shaped a ‘things-as-usual’ attitude among administrators and the public at large, with some—but only some—raising awareness in the late 1970s for the escapees of military repression in the Southern Cone and again for the somehow surprising phenomenon of poor Argentine Jews in the early 2000s, resulting from the devastating economic crisis in that country. By and large, the Latin American immigrants were perceived as Westerners, arriving in comparatively small numbers. They neither caused any major disruption in the host society nor effected a major review of immigration policies as were the case with the massive waves of immigration from the Soviet Union and the much smaller but nonetheless impacting waves of Black Jews arriving from Ethiopia.

Nonetheless, one could expect that sociological studies focusing especially on immigration would direct their attention to this set of Israelis. The hybrid case of the Latin Americans could have raised academic questions about the shortcomings of the bureaucratic construction of