

Which Group Do I Belong To? The Bubble Effect: Experiences of Israeli and Jewish Women Living in Brussels

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Abstract

The recent social-science literature lavishes documentation on matters of social identity and sense of belonging (e.g., Stuart Hall, 1997). At times of social change, people question their identity all the more and, in some cases, opt to reconstruct their identity. When people switch countries and cultures, their sense of belonging is no longer stable. To restabilize it, they seek a proximal host group (Lev-Ari, 2008) and familiar surroundings.

This article discusses the identity of Israeli women who emigrated to Belgium and the changes that occurred in their identities in various aspects of life in relation to the change of life they underwent. Migrant women face new challenges and existential questions. Observing the mechanisms that they use to cope with these changes, we find an intriguing phenomenon: the creation of “bubbles.” To understand this coping mechanism, the article focuses on the relationship between the Jewish community of Brussels and a group of Israelis who moved to Brussels for a short time (expatriate Israelis) or for the long term (women who marry Belgian men). The article examines the impact of religious identity (Jewish) and national identity (Israeli) on the émigrés’ sense of belonging, integration, and assimilation, on the one hand, and the influence of mobility on their identity and belonging, on the other hand. It also discusses questions of belonging within the Brussels Jewish community.

The article highlights the integration of various cultural groups into other cultural subgroups that have a longer history in Belgium, e.g., the integration of Israeli women into the local Jewish community and the integration of Jewish women into the general community. It underlines gender and identities as factors that influence integration at both these levels.

The core of the research is a field study of the Israeli-Jewish community in Belgium and specifically that in Brussels. Although in-depth interviews were carried out, the actual research was completed through participatory observation and is based on life stories. As this is anthropological research, these stories detail the dynamism of life to which the women are exposed and stress the process of coping with questions of identity.

Where we had expected to find a proximal host group, we actually found different social networks. We also discovered a social and a definitional distinction between the two groups studied: Belgian Jews live within their groups and exhibit mild social segregation from general Belgian society. Israelis are separated from the rest of the Jewish community for several reasons, and the separation persists in the second generation. One of the most meaningful findings is that this separation is related to the society’s functional ethos. Israel figures very importantly in the life of both groups of subjects. However, where Israelis see Israel as their home and feel that they belong mainly to other Israeli groups, Belgian Jews relate more to the Jewish community. They show no clear penchant for emigration to Israel even though more and more families have been making this move in recent last years.

The article contemplates the impact of Judaism on the sense of belonging. For Belgian Jewish group, Jewishness is the primary identity, i.e., they feel they are Jewish before any other identities. Their Jewish identity is strong and very meaningful for them; they feel they are part of the Jewish community and of Jewish history. Thus, by implication, real integration in the broad sense of the term does not take place. Jews work in and use the services of general society but remain firmly within the Jewish community, directing their sense of belonging to this community rather than to the Belgian state. Israelis, in turn, do not integrate socially into the Jewish community of Brussels; generally speaking, they do not feel part of it and seek meaningful relationships with other Israelis.

The two groups' sense of togetherness reflects the impact of the general European attitude toward Israel. Demonstrations and anti-Semitic incidents and discourses bring the community together. People participate in gatherings to declare their belonging.

According to Ilani (2008), Israeli identity in the Diaspora fades with time. The study examines this point closely, showing that Israeli identity is much more pronounced in relations with the local Jewish community than in relations with the local Belgian community. By positioning themselves in an Israeli bubble and participating in events, attending social gatherings, maintaining close social relations with other Israelis, speaking Hebrew at home, and consuming Israeli media, the émigrés reinforce their Israeli identity. These are probably the most important reasons for their self-imposed segregation from the Belgian Jewish community.

One consequence of emigration for women is disengagement from the public domain and the workplace and return to the domestic sphere. The role that the Israeli emigrée women assume there brings them back to Judaism in a search for the familiar. This, however, does not necessarily mean the strengthening of religious practices; instead, it reflects the women's tendency to search for a sense of belonging.