An analysis of transnational life: The case of Israeli migrants living in Mexico

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Abstract

This research-based article explores the "transnational life" of Israelis living in Mexico City by analyzing the practices of and relationships between individuals, family members, social groups and organizations, as reflected in 30 in-depth interviews and the results of an online survey. More specifically, it focuses on four dimensions of their transnational life: economic-labor-professional, civil-communal-societal, cultural and political. This study finds that in the case of Israelis in Mexico, the percentage of those living transnationally far exceeds that of other migrant groups worldwide and that the economic, social and cultural dimensions of their transnational living are more predominant than the political dimension. It concludes that the specificity of the Mexican Jewish diaspora affects the transnational living of Israeli migrants, shedding light on the connection between transnational migration and existing diasporas.

Keywords: Transnational life, migration, Israeli diaspora, transnational social space, local and transnational involvement, Mexico Jewish community.

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Introduction

During the last decades, international migration has reached unprecedented levels and has become one of the main features of contemporary societies. In the 1990s the number of migrants worldwide was estimated at 150 million, a number that rose to 175 million in the 2000s and reached 250 million in 2015 (World Bank 2015; OIM 2018). The era of globalization has led not only to an increase in migration but also to transformations in the patterns of mobility. Migrant flows no longer follow the historical pattern of a single arrival destination but more often are pluri-local and assume different modalities, such as trans-locality, circularity and return.

Israeli mobility is part of the global phenomenon of voluntary migration. This type of migration is motivated in most cases by the desire to achieve a better quality of life, as expressed by levels of income, education, professional conditions and opportunities. In their search for new destinations to experience, many Israelis have joined this contemporary phenomenon and become "transnational migrants" (Glick Schiller, Basch & Szanton Blanc 1995).

Hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens live abroad today (1). Most of them are in North America— the United States (Gold 2002a,b; Rebhun & Lev-Ari 2010; Rubin & Rubin 2014) and Canada (Cohen 1999; Gold & Hart 2013; Harris 2009; Shoenfeld, Shaffir & Weinfeld 2006)—followed by some locations in Europe (Dimerstein & Kaplan 2017), with London (Hart 2004; Lev-Ari 2013) and Berlin (Stauber 2017) the main European cities. There are also Israelis living in Asia, Africa and Oceania (Porat 2018) but in undersized concentrations. Only a relatively small number choose Latin American countries, since these are considered less attractive than other developed places in the world (Aizencang 2016).

Israeli migration began shortly after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and has intensified since the 1990s. Although seminal works have been published during the last two decades (Della Pergola 2011; Gold 1994, 1997, 2002a, 2002b, 2004a, 2004b; Gold & Hart 2013; Gold & Phillips 1996; Harris 2009; Lev-Ari 2008, 2013; Lustik 2011; Rebhun 2009, 2014; Rebhun & Lev-Ari 2010; Rebhun & Pupko 2012; Rubin & Rubin 2014; Sobel 1986; Stauber 2017; Tzadik 2013), the transnational lives of these migrants—experienced in the double, complex and simultaneous processes of involvement in two or more places—have not been addressed in previous studies. Moreover, little is known about the Israeli diaspora in Latin American countries in general and in Mexico in particular, making this study among the first to examine this direction.

This research-based article explores the transnational life of Israelis living in Mexico City by analyzing the practices of and relationships between individuals, family members, social groups and organizations, as reflected in 30 in-depth interviews and the results of an online survey. It focuses on four dimensions of their transnational life: economic-labor-professional, civil-communal-societal, cultural and political. By observing the different modes of involvement in local society and the strategies of transnational engagement through these four dimensions, it will be possible to

define Israeli migrants' transnational life and infer the type of transnationalism that characterizes this population.

Theoretical Framework

The migratory trends of the current era reflect ongoing global directions as well as long-term historical constraints and opportunities. Globalization has led to economic, social, political and cultural changes that have disrupted spatial and temporal referents, without which it would be impossible to conceptualize structures and institutions, economies, social relations and cultural spaces today. The categories of globalization, diaspora and transnationalism provide analytically useful approaches for understanding past and present trends with a renewed perspective (Bokser Liwerant 2014).

The study upon which this article is based draws mainly upon the transnational perspective, but also upon diaspora and contemporary Jewish studies, since the Jewish experience and its diaspora pattern of simultaneous dispersion and interconnections calls for transdisciplinary explorations (Bokser Liwerant 2018). Diaspora and transnationalism are two terms that point to different intellectual genealogies, even though they refer to similar processes and actors and are sometimes used interchangeably (Baubock & Faist 2010). They both allude to cross-border processes, while the changing contours of the diaspora have led to new formulations that recover and redefine traditional dimensions. Indeed, while older notions of diaspora focused mainly on forced dispersal—of Jews, Greeks and Armenians— today this concept covers diverse groups such as migrants, expatriates, refugees and displaced peoples, temporary migrant workers, groups of exiles or ethnic communities (Brubaker 2005; Nonini 2005; Tololyan 1991). In any case, there has been a recovery and even resurgence of this concept since old and new diasporas have become transnational. Even if the idea of return to homeland was one of the components of the traditional notion of diaspora (Cohen 1997), today the wider concept of return include new interactions and interconnectedness. With the broadening of these parameters, national and transnational dimensions have begun to interact, shift and overlap (Bokser Liwerant 2014). The interaction of these dimensions is well reflected in the case of the Israeli population living abroad. While Israeli migration might be considered part of the broader trends of transnational flows, it is distinguished from the migration of other national groups in its interconnections with the already existing Jewish diaspora. The uniqueness of this population lies in the fact that Israeli migrants do not just "diasporize" but also "re-diasporize" as they migrate, forming an Israeli diaspora while at the same time joining the existing Jewish one.

Transnationalism can be seen as an analytical perspective that complements and captures the current transformation of diasporas (Bokser Liwerant 2014). It refers to individuals, groups,

resources and networks that transcend national borders. Although it does not constitute a single theoretical body of knowledge, it offers a conceptual framework for explaining the transformations in mobility patterns caused by globalization.

Although some scholars conceptualize transnationalism as a symptom of a new era, i.e., a multifaceted reality (Lacroix 2014:1), it represents a different perspective though not a recent phenomenon (Portes 2003). Indeed, transnational migration is not new and, in the case of the Jewish people, patterns of transnational living have marked their existence over time. Yet what distinguishes the current period from previous ones and makes it exceptional is a new and extended transnational experience (Bokser Liwerant 2013). Several characteristics have changed and new features have emerged, mainly related to globalization processes such as the development of the media, the ease of transportation and communication, the mode by which migrants join the labor market and the increasing dependence on remittances of various national states (Levitt 2004). Moreover, the "time-space compression" (Harvey 1990) resulting from the transportation and communication revolution have made transnational back-and-forth travel and communication much quicker, easier and more readily available (Vertovec 2004; Levitt & Jaworsky 2007). Time and space cease to have the same influence on how social relations and institutions are structured. Besides, economic, social and political arrangements depend neither on distance nor on borders, nor do they have the same influence on the final shaping of institutions and social relations (Bokser Liwerant 2008; Giddens 1990).

One of the main contributions of the transnational perspective to migration studies is that it considers the act of migrating not merely as an event but as a process through which migrants forge and maintain multiple and simultaneous social relations that connect their societies of origin and reception (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller, Basch & Szanton Blanc 1995; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004). Simultaneity means that individuals' activities, social relations, cultural practices and identities are not built or represented in just one place of living but rather in and through connections between many places (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 2008). Transnational migrants continue to be active in their homelands while at the same time becoming part of their host countries (Basch et al. 1994; Faist 2000; Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Guarnizo 1997; Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Kivisto 2001; Levitt 2001; Levitt & Jaworsky 2007; Portes et al. 1999; Smith & Guarnizo 1998). Nevertheless, not all migrants become transnational. Indeed, only a small proportion of them—between 10 to 15%—engage in regular transnational practices. Even occasional involvement is not universal (Guarnizo 2003; Landolt 2001; Levitt 2004; Portes et al. 2002; Waldinger, 2006).

The present article focuses on two closely related concepts from the transnational perspective:

a) Transnational life or transnational living (Guarnizo 2003; Smith 2006)—a state or

condition that implies relations and practices that simultaneously involve people in two or more societies. This concept is also defined as a double, complex and simultaneous process of incorporation into the host society and engagement with the places of origin and/or departure.

b) Transnational social space (Faist 2000; Pries 2001; Vertovec 2003, 2004)—a contextual or analytical category constituted by the relations and practices of migrants living transnationally and the networks they form with people, institutions and organizations.

Migrant practices and relations can only be understood in the context of transnational social structures—e.g., circuits (Rouse 1996), communities (Kearney 1986), fields (Glick Schiller et al. 1992; Itzigsohn et al. 1999; Levitt 2001, 2002, 2004), formations (Guarnizo 2003; Landolt 2001) or spaces (Faist 2000; Pries 2001; Vertovec 2003, 2004)[(2)]— since economic initiatives, political activities and sociocultural enterprises are powerfully shaped by the social context in which they occur (Levitt 2002).

The varied forms of experiencing the fluid transnational social space—i.e., of becoming incorporated into the local society while sustaining transnational relations—are conditioned upon different variables, such as the time of arrival, the motivations for migrating, the mobilized resources at the time of migration (economic, social, human, political and cultural capital) and social status. Moreover, the different ways of moving inside that fluid social space are related to factors such as the stage in the individual's life cycle, previous migratory experience, regional origin, occupational incorporation, gender, sub-ethnicity and original country and/or country of departure. In sum, the heterogeneity of transnational experiences among migrants from the same country is reflected in different rates of access to opportunities in the host society. Similarly, the type, scale and scope of migrants' transnational relations and practices differ.

The migration literature has proposed many classifications of transnationalism. For the analysis below, we distinguish between:

a) *Core transnationalism,* characterized by stable and frequent activities that form part of migrants' everyday lives, vs. *extended transnationalism,* characterized by sporadic practices (Guarnizo 2007; Levitt & Jaworsky 2007);

b) *Broad transnationalism* vs. *narrow transnationalism,* depending on the level to which practices have become institutionalized (Portes et al. 1999) or the level of migrant engagement in transnational practices (Itzigsohn et al. 1999);

c) *Comprehensive transnationalism* vs. *selective transnationalism,* referring to the scope of the migrants' activities: distributed across different spheres of activity or centered on one dimension only (Levitt & Waters 2002).

Finally, while diasporas and transnational social formations are both the cause and the effect of global and multicultural social contexts (Bokser Liwerant 2018), transnational living constitutes a different way of experiencing diaspora today. According to Kivisto and Faist (2010),

transnational life may be conceived as a different form of involvement as well as a different way of migrating that do not imply acculturation or incorporation into host societies as understood decades ago.

Background of the Study

I. Jews in Mexico as the context of reception

Throughout the past two generations, Latin American Jews have shifted from being mostly immigrants and immigrant communities to rooted communities of locally born citizens and, simultaneously, of expatriates and emigrants (Bokser Liwerant 2018). The richness of Jewish life in the region and its presence and relevance in the Jewish world as well as in national and communal spheres are part of the current reality and constitute the context of reception for Israeli migration.

The process of social and economic mobility experienced in Mexico throughout the twentieth century favored the development of a Jewish population and the constitution of a middle- and upper-class community. Its members succeeded in creating institutional spaces of cooperation and mutual trust, which generated platforms for becoming integrated in the national economy.

The Jewish community, comprising around 40,000 people, constitutes a complex and multifaceted ethnonational diaspora in the process of becoming a transnational one due to its intense migration processes and its high mobility and relocation (Bokser Liwerant 2013, 2014). Originally this community was based upon ethnic, religious and cultural differences, resulting in a differentiated structure organized in congregations, communities and community centers and described as a "community of communities" (Bokser Liwerant 2008; DellaPergola & Lerner 1995). Due to its high institutional density as reflected in the existence of a diverse spectrum of sectoral and functional institutions that cover almost all areas of everyday life, this community can be described by what Breton terms "*institutional completeness*" (Breton 1964).

From a comparative perspective, the Mexican Jewish community has a high rate of affiliation and participation, primarily through a network of Jewish schools. Moreover, it is identified as one of the most Zionist, traditional and cohesive contemporary Jewish diasporas, without exhibiting the symptoms of demographic and identity erosion that today characterize other Jewish communities in Europe and the United States. Two reliable indicators of this cohesiveness are the low incidence of exogamic marriages and the residential concentration as a pattern of community coexistence (Avni, Bokser Liwerant & Fainstein 2011). Among the changes the community has experienced during the last years, three elements stand out: the impact of the economic crisis, a change of hegemony in terms of ethnicity and an increase in the levels of religiosity.

For many Israeli migrants, the Mexican Jewish community represents a space for the generation of opportunities. It facilitates their integration into an institutionalized space, offering them a vast network of relationships and activity platforms. Nevertheless, while community members sometimes consider Israelis as part of their same *peoplehood*, other times they make them feel like strangers who do not belong (Aizencang 2016). Thus, the Jewish community allows Israelis to enjoy a certain level of solidarity and interconnectivity that enables them be part of a structure that partly brings together but is not always inclusive.

II. Israelis in Mexico

Around 3,000 Israeli citizens live in Mexico today(3). The first migrants arrived in the country after Israel declared statehood. They were motivated by the deprivation they experienced in the nascent nation and the insecurity produced by the armed clashes with the neighboring Arab countries. Among these migrants were native-born Israelis but also people born in Lebanon and Syria who had migrated to Israel and became Israeli citizens. Over the years, Israeli migration to Mexico became more heterogeneous, creating a diverse population in terms of legal status, occupation, levels of income, place of residence, regional origin, time of residence in the country, social extraction, level of religiosity and sub-ethnicity (Aizencang 2016).

Aside from economic difficulties and the desire to improve living conditions and to enlarge the scope of opportunities in a globalized world, other factors have also encouraged migration: the inconclusive peace process with the Palestinian people, the impact of religious influences in Israel's everyday life and politics, the lack of security in the Middle East and the fact that Israel is in a state of latent war with mandatory military service (Aizencang 2016:252). Even after more than thirty years, Sobel's terms are relevant today: migration provides a release from the pressure cooker atmosphere of the Middle East (Sobel 1986).

According to the Israelis surveyed, various factors have made Mexico an attractive destination for migration. Among them are the proximity to the United States, the presence of relatives and acquaintances and the fact that Mexico is a vast and diverse country from the geographic, economic and socio-cultural perspectives that offers wide windows of opportunities. Moreover, Mexico has become a very receptive society whose citizens are reportedly kind and helpful. From a broad comparative perspective, the country also offers political and economic stability that is not offered by other countries in the region. In addition, the absence of openly violent anti-Semitic incidents has enhanced the feeling of security for potential migrants. Furthermore, Israelis arrive with high expectations for improving their standard and quality of living. The existence of a strong and developed Mexican Jewish community in a relatively privileged socio-economic position has operated as an attraction pole (Aizencang 2016). Last but not least,

there are also legal reasons that make Mexico attractive, such as the lack of an extradition treaty between the Mexican and Israeli governments, thus allowing Israeli citizens with legal problems at home to remain in North America.

Methodology

Our study emerged from the convergence between quantitative and qualitative methods. It is based on an online survey of 200 Israeli migrants and an additional 30 in-depth interviews. The survey population was made up of first-generation Israeli migrants(4), all of them Jews, who have been living in Mexico at least three years and who settled in and around Mexico City.

Due to the complexity of defining who is an Israeli and in order to shed light on the group's diversity, three subgroups were considered Israelis in Mexico: a) lineal migrants—those born in Israel (63% of the surveyed population), b) recurrent migrants—those born in other countries who moved to Israel, obtained citizenship and migrated again, this time to Mexico (26% of the surveyed population), and c) circular or returning migrants—those born in Mexico who migrated to Israel, obtained citizenship and returned to their country of origin (11% or the surveyed population). The same proportions of each subgroup represented in the survey population were preserved when selecting the people for the face-to-face interviews. The sample was diverse in terms of age, educational level, professional status and sub-ethnicity.

Like other studies of Israeli migration based on online surveys, e.g., that of Rebhun and Pupko (2012), this investigation does not presume to use a representative sample. Its results are therefore not generalizable to the entire population but rather focus on those who were interested in participating in the study. Nevertheless, the results support the elaboration of meaningful inferences for the entire population and for future studies.

Results

The following section introduces socio-demographic data about Israeli migrants living in Mexico and data about their incorporation into the host society. Then, it analyzes their transnational life in light of four dimensions: economic-labor-professional, civil-communal-societal, cultural and political. Finally, it defines the type of transnationalism that characterizes this population.

I. Socio-demographic data and incorporation into the host society

- *Citizenships and migration experience*

Almost half of the surveyed Israelis living in Mexico hold Mexican citizenship (47%), and more than a quarter have permanent residence status in the country (30%). Twenty percent, including those

with Mexican citizenship or permanent residency, have an additional nationality besides their Israeli nationality.

More than half of the surveyed population (55%) has previous migratory experiences. Thirty-seven percent reported two previous migrations, 9% reported three migrations and another 9% reported four or more migrations. Moreover, more than three-quarters of the surveyed Israelis are children of migrants, which means that their parents also have migratory experience. Thus, this group of people has the potential for experiencing a transnational life.

- *Civil status and intermarriage rates*

At the time of the survey a significant percentage of the population was married (86%): almost half of the Israeli migrants were married to Mexicans, while another 50% were married to migrants from other countries. Of the married population, 93% were parents, with an average of three children per family. Most of the Israeli migrants have formed families with other Jews (93%), suggesting the importance they attribute to remaining consistent with their original identity even when living in the diaspora. In the case of Israelis in Mexico, the intermarriage rate is similar to that of the local Jewish community (7.4%), which not only discourages intermarriage but also excludes those who have married outside the community.

This finding contrasts with the situation in the United States, where the percentage of Israelis who are married to partners within the Jewish community is lower (75%) and where the intermarriage rate of the local Jewish community differs significantly from that of the Israeli Americans. Indeed, the intermarriage rate among American Jews has risen substantially over the last five decades, reaching 58% in 2005[(5)]. Intermarriage among Israeli migrants in Mexico also differs from the situation in Europe, where the percentage of Israelis migrants married to non-Jews has risen to 50% (Dimerstein & Kaplan 2017; Dimerstein 2018).

- *Isolation levels*

The isolation level of Israeli migrants living in Mexico, i.e., living apart as a separated group, is relatively low. The data indicate that 88% of Israelis maintain relationships with Jewish Mexicans, while 52% have relationships with Mexicans who are not part of the Jewish community. This finding may be related to the fact that Israelis in Mexico do not have any association that organizes them as a group, as opposed to Israelis living in Europe (Dimerstein & Kaplan 2017, Lev-Ari 2013) or in Canada, who tend to be organized and segregated (Harris 2009; Schoenfeld, Shaffir & Weinfeld 2006).

In the major cities of Canada, Israelis are generally quite involved in enclaves that offer them cultural activities, political organization, religious services, child care and many social and job-finding networks (Gold & Hart 2013). Similarly, in some cities of the United States, Israelis are

also organized and enjoy the benefits of getting together as a group. Generally, they prefer to maintain social ties with other co-nationals (Gold 2002, 1994), like in Belgium where Israelis constitute social bubbles (Tzadik 2013).

- *Age at the time of arrival and education levels*

Studies on Israeli migration indicate that naturally strong groups comprising mainly young and more educated people are overrepresented among those who decide to migrate (Rebhun & Lev-Ari 2010; Stauber 2017). Nevertheless, Israeli migration is notable for its diversity as expressed in a wide range of educational and other characteristics (Gold & Hart 2009). In the case of Mexico, the surveyed Israelis were indeed young at the time of their arrival—28 years old on average, the same age average Lev-Ari found in her study on Israelis in Europe (2013) and the United States (Rebhun & Lev-Ari 2010). In terms of education, 58% of the surveyed Israelis hold at least one university degree (35% B.A., 19% M.A. and 4% Ph.D.), 24% completed technical studies, and 17% finished high school. Only 1% of the surveyed population studied in a *yeshiva* (a religious institution).

Yet these data do not necessarily reflect the levels of education of the Israeli population in Mexico, but rather the attributes of people willing to participate in an online survey. Indeed, according to my estimation based on five years of participant observation, there is a larger population studying in religious institutions than what emerges from the results of the survey and a large number of Israeli migrants who do not have higher education(6).

- *Sub-ethnicity*

In this study, the *Ashkenazi* population—those whose ancestors came from Europe—appears to be overrepresented (almost 50% of the respondents). Here again, there is a certain bias emerging from the type of population willing to participate in the survey. Although not reflected in the results, there are many Israelis in Mexico whose origin is from North Africa and the Middle East, labeled as *Mizrahim*. There are also Israelis whose ancestors were from Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Spain and Portugal, known as *Sephardim,* from Syria (Aleppo), Lebanon and Egypt known as *Halebim* and from Syria (Damascus) and Lebanon known as *Shamim.*

- *Levels of incorporation into the local society*

Many indicators can be used to evaluate Israelis' levels of incorporation into the host society: time of residence in the country, migration status, competence in the use of Spanish, property ownership, and social, economic, cultural and political relations, among others. When considering time of residence, migration status and competence in the use of Spanish, it is possible to identify a migrant population that has incorporated into the place, with a large part no longer thinking

about returning to their place of origin. As noted above, almost half of the surveyed Israelis have Mexican citizenship and more than a quarter have permanent residence in the country. Almost 50% are married to a local partner, and more than half of their children were born in Mexico. Moreover, 63% of the surveyed population has an excellent command of Spanish and another 27% report having a very good command of the language. Fifty-nine percent of the Israelis surveyed indicate that their main language is Spanish, while 37% speak Hebrew at home. In general terms, being married to a local partner and having formed a family in the country may explain their good command of the language, all of which strengthen migrants' connections to their place of residence.

Another good indicator of incorporation into the host society is owning property. According to Rebhun and Lev-Ari, for example, the tendency among Israeli migrants to purchase a home seems to be influenced by the stage of their life cycle and the amount of time they have been in the country. The homeownership rate among Israeli migrants in the United States was 80% in 2000 (Rebhun & Lev-Ari, 2010:83). As for Mexico, 60% of the Israelis who were surveyed own their own homes, as opposed to 35% who were homeowners in Israel. Thus, property ownership may be considered an indicator both of a high level of incorporation into the place of residence and of socioeconomic mobility.

- *Incorporation and patterns of transnational living*

Like many other groups of transnational migrants around the world, one of the central elements in the everyday life of Israelis in Mexico is unpredictability. Their uncertain future is a characteristic that appears as part of their discourse. Most Israelis who have been living in Mexico moved for work reasons and frequently for limited periods of time only. Others came to Mexico for family reasons and their visit has lasted longer than they expected. Before arriving, most of them did not imagine that the subsequent evolution of events would transform Mexico into their place of residence.

Different patterns of transnational living emerged from the data, as follows:

a) life in Mexico as temporary, with the idea of keeping moving;
b) living in two ports, i.e., maintaining two residences simultaneously—one in Mexico and one in Israel—spending periods of the year in each place;
c) Mexico as a permanent residence with continuous and simultaneous connections abroad.

The characteristics of these patterns become more complex when combined with other variables, such as type of migrant: lineal, recurrent or circular. In the case of lineal migrants—native Israelis whose families still live in Israel—their constant engagement with home is logical. In contrast, connections to Israel become less frequent as time passes in the case of circular migrants—those who were born in Mexico, migrated to Israel, obtained citizenship and then

returned—and even in the case of recurrent migrants—those who were born in other countries, moved to Israel, obtained citizenship and then migrated to Mexico. Moreover, when recurrent migrants are considered as a separate group, their transnational living is even more complicated. Many of them visit their native country at least once a year—especially if they still have family there and/or maintain social, cultural and even professional relations—which makes their transnational living a more intricate experience.

II. Transnational living in light of four dimensions

As previously stated, transnational life is understood as a dual, complex and simultaneous process of incorporation into the host society and engagement with the places of origin and/or departure. This section examines the transnational life of Israelis in Mexico in light of four dimensions.

1. The *economic-labor-professional dimension* is the most important when analyzing transnational migration processes. In their everyday life, many migrants build networks of relations and interchanges that include investments, technological negotiations, entrepreneurial initiatives and commercial transactions. Additionally, they mobilize connections across borders when looking for products, supplies, provisions, new markets and capitals. The practices considered under this dimension include a broad spectrum of activities ranging from more informal or small-scale actions such as sending remittances to more formal and larger scale practices, e.g., transnational business ventures (Faist, Fauser & Reisenauer 2013). Moreover, transnational labor practices include many activities that range from providing professional services to companies located outside the country of residence to working for a national or multinational company abroad.

In the case of the surveyed Israeli population, 37% maintain labor and/or professional foreign relations and 39% engage in economic and/or commerce transnational activities. In terms of the type of practices that Israeli migrants engage in abroad, 42% report on sending economic remittances (18% send money to their families, 17% participate in philanthropic initiatives and 7% invest money across the borders in business and new ventures), 11% participate in international commerce, 6% work for a foreign company and 6% give professional advice to Israeli or international companies.

In terms of economic-labor-professional relations or activities in the host country, the survey revealed that 71% of Israeli migrants in Mexico work. Among them, 30% work in commerce and 21% in the field of education. Twelve percent work in the service sector, 7% in industry, 6% in technology, 6% in the finance sector and 4% in security. Regarding their position at work, 30% are employers or entrepreneurs, 30% are directors or managers and only 22% work as employees.

In comparative terms, most of the Israeli migrants surveyed have improved their labor and/or professional situation, and thus many have experienced economic mobility. Moreover, the interviews suggest that in many cases this success was achieved by personal contacts and relations within the local Jewish community.

2. The *civil-communal-societal dimension* refers to the relations migrants maintain with their families and friends as well as with other individuals, groups and institutions abroad and in their country of residence. These include activities that build collective relations and ties and practices that influence the reproduction of a sense of community within the transnational social space. They also encompass relations and practices that are neither political nor economical, such as religious and sports activities. Since transnational networks connect people, places and memories (Richter & Nollert 2014), this dimension is heavily influenced by feelings and emotions.

According to the empirical findings, the most fluent transnational relations are those the migrants sustain with their families, followed by their relations with their friends. These results match those of other studies on Israeli migrants conducted elsewhere (Harris 2009; Lev-Ari 2013; Rebhun & Pupko 2012; Stauber 2017; Tzadik 2013). Communal relations are less frequent. The distance between the place of residence and the country of origin as well as the time spent in the host country are two variables that make maintaining communal practices across borders difficult.

Examination of this dimension in terms of incorporation indicates almost half of the surveyed Israelis identify with Mexico (47%), while 59% feel they are part of the local society. Additionally, 45% feel integrated into the local Jewish community to a large extent and 29% to some extent. According to these percentages—two-thirds of the surveyed population—it would be possible to suggest that the Mexican Jewish community constitutes a proximal host for the Israelis (Lev-Ari 2013). Yet the findings of the in-depth interviews convey different feelings. Israeli migrants express a longing for the type and quality of relationships they had in their home country, which many of them have not been able to reproduce in Mexico, at least in the Jewish sphere. This finding seems to shed light on the intersection between the concrete experience of difficulty in moving toward circles of more intimate interaction and the idealization of more informal patterns of sociability, an issue that also arises in other studies about Israelis living abroad (Dimerstein & Kaplan 2017; Harris 2009, Stauber 2017, Tzadik 2013).

Regarding the everyday practices that characterize this dimension, 66% of the surveyed Israelis participate in professional, cultural, social and sports activities in Jewish institutions, indicating a high level of affiliation. Of them, 65% attend a synagogue, 59% are members of the CDI (the main Jewish sports and social club), 41% are affiliated with a Jewish school and 27% participate in a community center. Moreover, 17% are connected to some charitable association

and 16% belong to a Zionist organization. In sum, the synagogue and the CDI constitute the leading community organizations of reception, followed by educational institutions.

Finally, the empirical findings coincide with previous research showing that religious networks, celebrations and rituals are important channels for building social capital (Herman & Lafontaine 1983; Rebhun 2014; Rebhun & Lev-Ari 2010; Spence 2008; Tzadik 2013). As indicated by Spence, Israelis tend to be actively Jewish in their diaspora communities to a disproportionate extent, creating and participating in formal and informal organizations. In the United States, for example, the longer Israelis stay the more they observe significant Jewish practices as well as ethnic and religious precepts that are meant to preserve their Israeli identity (Lev-Ari 2008; Rebhun & Lev-Ari 2010; Rebhun & Pupko 2012).

Concerning the differences within local Jewish communities, the case of Mexico differs from that of the United States. American Israelis were found to be more connected to Judaism than American Jews in terms of synagogue membership and attendance, *kashrut* observance, participation in Jewish charity events and membership in Jewish community centers (Greenberg 2009). In Mexico, however, the most prevalent Jewish practices among Israelis parallel those of the Mexican Jewish community, which is not just highly affiliated but also very active in its Jewish traditions.

3. The *cultural dimension* refers to cultural roots and connections. Culture operates as a route toward becoming incorporated into the host society and as a central element for explaining the group's continuity. In this study, cultural practices were defined as symbolic activities related to the formation of identities, preferences and values (Itzigsohn et al. 1999).

Israelis in Mexico are highly involved in cultural practices, both in their place of residence and in their country of origin. Three-quarters of the surveyed Israeli migrants keep track of what is happening in Israel through online newspapers and half of them through radio and television. Furthermore, many of them are connected to Israeli culture through literature, music and movies. The findings of this study suggest that the variable "time period abroad" has not affected the extent to which the migrants consume information and Israeli culture products. It is possible to assume that today's easy access to the Internet and low-cost communication channels will sustain the high demand for Israeli culture, even among those who live far away. In addition, these findings contradict Rebhun's affirmation regarding a causal relationship between a large concentration of Jewish people and consumption of Israeli culture. In his words, "…the presence of a large number of Jews diminishes the consumption of Israeli culture" (2014: 631). Conversely, in the case of Mexico, the presence of a strong Jewish community facilitates and even encourages the consumption of Israeli culture. Many activities, such as inviting Israeli artists to perform, organizing

study groups on Israeli movies and literature or celebrating national festivities, enable Israelis to continue strengthening their identity while living abroad.

On the other hand, Israeli migrants are also embedded in Mexican culture and language: Three quarters of them watch television and listen to local radio and half of them read local newspapers and literature in Spanish. Cultural practices of incorporation into the host society are in many cases facilitated by the origin of some of the Israeli migrants. Of the fifty recurrent migrants surveyed, 32 are of Latin-American origin, implying that they are culturally more familiar with Mexico or at least with its language. Moreover, a quarter of the surveyed people have at least one parent who was born in Latin America. That is, their migration to Mexico is a way of connecting with family roots and of beginning a new experience of living in a place where the culture is not completely unrelated to them.

According to Ben Rafael et al. (2006), as time goes by migrants adopt norms and values related to the host society while maintaining their original cultural patterns; thus, the cultural heterogeneity of each migrant becomes more significant and singular.

4. The *political dimension* refers to migrants' political practices in the host country—such as showing support for a political party, exercising their right to vote or participating in a plebiscite—as well as to the mobilization of political interests regarding their country of origin even while living far away.

This study's empirical findings indicate that most of the surveyed population does not show interest in local or transnational political actions. Less than 2% engage in political actions with some frequency, indicating a lack of transnational ties in this sphere.

In view of Østergaard-Nielsen's distinction between homeland politics, immigrant politics and translocal politics (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007, Østergaard-Nielsen 2003), my findings show that Israelis in Mexico are not involved in any of these alternatives, as manifested in a) the absence of any political expressions in favor of Israel in their host country, b) the lack of organization among Israelis as a particular group and c) the absence of transversal relations between Israeli migrants living in different countries.

It is possible to assume that the context of life influences Israeli migrants' participation in political activities. In some cities in the United States, such as Los Angeles or New York for example, the pro-Israeli lobby is organized by the local Jewish community and many Israelis living there have expressed their support (Handwerker 2014, 2015; Katz-Shenhar 2015). In other American cities, Israelis have even organized themselves as an independent group, representing their interests and participating in activities in favor of Israel (Handwerker 2014). In Mexico, however, the trajectory of a non-participatory political system and a weak public sphere have led the Jewish community toward more informal and personal practices for mobilizing official support for the State

of Israel. This pattern has changed recently as a result of a process of democratization, a certain detachment from nationalistic ideology and a sustained move toward a pluralistic and more multi-cultural vision in the country (Bokser Liwerant 2011; 2013).

III. Defining transnationalism and the transnational life of Israelis in Mexico

Having examined the transnational life of Israeli migrants living in Mexico in light of four dimensions and keeping in mind the classification of transnationalism presented above, it is now possible to define the type of transnationalism that characterizes this population.

From the data collected, the vast majority of migrants practice an extended form of transnationalism, with sporadic transnational activities. Most of them engage in a narrow transnationalism marked by a low level of institutionalization of practices and a comprehensive transnationalism marked by activities distributed across different spheres. Most of the Israelis' practices take place in the private sphere, i.e., are not institutionalized. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between two levels of analysis: the personal dimension marked by a low level of institutionalization of transnational practices, and the communal dimension—that of the Jewish global sphere—which constitutes a very institutionalized space (Bokser Liwerant & Senkman 2013). Even when most of their individual transnational practices are not highly institutionalized, Israeli migrants benefit from a transnational social space characterized by dense levels of institutionalization. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the difference between the low level of institutionalization in the private sphere of activities and the practices carried out in the highly institutionalized space of the Jewish community, which maintains relationships with other diasporas and with Israel, which even today much of the Jewish diaspora considers to be the center.

Consequently, the core of the analysis of transnational life as a state or condition does not derive only from the individual. The diverse and multiple forms of engagement—both local and transnational—are negotiated every day in a context or a structure of opportunities. This structure is offered to individuals within the transnational social space of which they are a part. The denser and more diverse that space is, the greater the number of routes and opportunities offered that enable migrants to be active and connected to their home. The more institutionalized the relationships are, the greater the possibilities for migrants to maintain transnational practices (Levitt 2001:9). Undoubtedly, the existence of a consolidated, attached, structured and Zionist Mexican Jewish community allows the Israeli migrants to become incorporated into the host country and to feel, in Sheffer's terms, "at home abroad" (Sheffer 2003).

Final Reflections

This article has analyzed the transnational life of Israelis living in Mexico by exploring the dual, complex and simultaneous process of migrant involvement in two or more places. Among the central findings were the high level of the migrants' incorporation into the local society, as measured by the duration of their residence in the country, migration status, property ownership and competence in the use of the language; the high percentage of Israelis living transnationally; and the fact that the specificity of the Mexican Jewish community–identified as one of the most Zionist, traditional and cohesive Jewish communities—affects migrants' transnational living.

The finding that the percentage of the Israeli population in Mexico living transnationally far exceeds that of other migrant groups worldwide makes this population distinctive. Two interconnected reasons may explain this distinctiveness. One is related to the context of their reception—the local Jewish community and even the Jewish Diaspora condition—while the other is related to the context of their country of origin—namely Israel as a country of migration. Regarding the first reason, the Mexican Jewish community is strongly interconnected with world Jewry. A broad set of links and bonds facilitates the integration of migrants into an institutionalized space, which offers a vast network of relationships and activity platforms—at home and abroad—as an integral part of a diversified transnational social space that many Israeli migrants enjoy. Concerning the second reason, Israel is permeated by the notion of mobility. Many Israeli families extend back no more than one or two generations and many Israelis have family abroad. As a result, a large number of them were familiar with the state of living transnationally even before their own migration. These contexts explain not only the relative ease with which Israeli migrants become part of a transnational social space, but also their ability to share a transnational conscience as a sphere of common values and representations that encourages a transnational way of living.

The results of this study suggest that the characteristics of the local Jewish diaspora are directly related to whether or not an Israeli diaspora is constituted in each specific location. No doubt, one path to be explored in future comparative studies is the connection between the specificities of Jewish diasporas in different localities and the patterns of Israelis' transnational lives in the context of a shared transnational social space.

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Endnotes

(1) There are no reliable data regarding the number of Israelis living abroad. Existing estimations are based on information provided by several organizations that use different definitions of the object of study and even different methods for data collection. In addition, most of Israeli consulates do not have any record of Israeli citizens living in their jurisdiction.

(2) For a deeper understanding of the type of social spaces that produce and are produced by transnational migration, see Aizencang 2013 and Levitt & Jarowsky 2007.

(3) There is no official data from the Mexican Office of Migration or the Israeli Embassy. The number provided here is based on a snowball sample created by myself and on an estimation given by the Israeli Consulate in Mexico in 2015.

(4) The concept "first generation" of Israeli migrants refers to those who migrated on their own, as opposed to the "second generation", representing the children of those migrants who were already born in the actual place of residence (Levitt 2004; Portes & Rumbaut 2001). Lev-Ari has published several studies on the second generation of Israeli migrants (Lev-Ari 2012, Lev-Ari & Cohen, 2018). She has also referred to the "first-and-a-half" generation, those who were born in Israel but left as young children. (Lev-Ari 2012, 2013).

(5) Pew Research Center, October 1, 2013. http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.

(6) There is a significant number of Orthodox Jewish Israelis living in Mexico who were not willing to participate in the survey. Furthermore, those who have a higher level of education appreciated the importance of the research from the beginning, as expressed in the high number of participating Israelis with high educational levels.

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