

"Making it" in Israel? Latino Undocumented Migrant Workers in the *Holy Land*

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Every Saturday evening, hundreds of persons gather at a religious service in a Catholic church where a weekly mass is conducted in Spanish by a Franciscan priest. Many of the churchgoers actively participate, reading passages from the New Testament, singing in the choir, or playing instruments. Melodies of Latin American folk music are played intermittently, breaking the solemnity of the religious ritual. Two important aspects make this event unique: first, that it takes place in the old city of Jaffa, Israel, and second, it is especially organized by the church in order to attend to the needs of an emergent non-Jewish, undocumented Latino community in the city of Tel Aviv.

The presence of non-Jewish labor migrants is relatively recent in Israel, having become notable during the early 1990s, when the government began recruiting extensive numbers of foreign workers (Bartram, 1998; Rozenhak, 1998). The increasing influx of non-Jewish migrant workers, and their incorporation into the Israeli labor market and society, has become a significant phenomenon, whose impact has yet to be assessed. At present, non-Jewish (and non-Palestinian) labor migrants (both documented and undocumented) in Israeli society amount to 10 percent of the Israeli labor force. Their presence seems to be changing not only the labor market composition in specific sectors, but the ethnic fabric of the Israeli metropolis

as well (Borowski and Yanay, 1997; Bartram, 1998; Schnell, 1999; Kemp et al., 2000).

As in most Western European countries, migrant workers in Israel are perceived as incoming temporary labor and not as prospective citizens. Foreign workers (usually from distinct ethnic groups) are considered outsiders in the cultural, social, and political spheres (Baldwin-Edwards and Schain, 1994; Schnapper, 1994; Weiner, 1996). Even the term by which they are known, *ovdim zarim* (foreign workers), with its biblical connotation of profanity, exemplifies their marginal status.

This paper explores various socio-economic aspects of non-Jewish labor migration in Israel by focusing on undocumented labor migrants from Latin American countries as a case study. More specifically, we want to analyze the 'push and pull' factors that are attracting Latino labor migration to the *Holy Land*, as well as the emergence of a new ethnic community in the city of Tel Aviv. Our purpose is to portray the process of Latino labor migration to Israel according to the theoretical framework provided by the different approaches to international migration.¹

This paper proceeds as follows. After providing an overview of the origins and development of non-Jewish labor migration in Israel (section II), we present the theoretical background against which the data will be analyzed (section III) and the methodology of the research (section IV). In section V we examine the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of Latino labor migrants in their country of origin (before migration) and in Israel. We present a preliminary description of the immigrants' incorporation into the Israeli labor market by emphasizing the process of informal recruitment, as well as the occupational cost that these immigrants pay upon migration. Acknowledging that gender structures the migratory process, we analyze how the foregoing set of dimensions varies according to gender.² Lastly, we describe the emergent non-Jewish Latino community in Tel Aviv.³

The Israeli Setting

Israel is a nation of immigrants inhabited by Jews from practically every country in the world. Unlike other receiving societies, Israel is committed to the successful absorption of its (Jewish) immigrants, and it actively encourages the immigration of Jews. The Israeli Law of Nationality, which came into force in 1952, complemented the Law of Return from 1950. The latter, based on the *jus sanguinis* principle, gives Jews—and only Jews—everywhere the right to immigrate, while the former grants them, almost automatically, Israeli nationality. At the same time, Israel is an ethnically divided society composed of approximately 83 percent Jews and 17 percent

non-Jews (Arab inhabitants), who, although legally considered equal citizens, in fact constitute a subordinate social, political, and national minority (Smootha, 1992). Israel, therefore, can be viewed as an immigrant-settler society based on an ethno-nationalist structure, and defined both ideologically and institutionally.

After the 1967 war, the government gradually began recruiting non-citizen Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza strip to perform mostly menial, low-status jobs in the Israeli labor market (Semyonov and Lewin-Epstein, 1987; Weisberg, 1992). They met the definition of day-labor commuters, entering the country by day and leaving at night. The number of non-citizen Palestinian workers rose dramatically over the next twenty years: from 20,600 in 1970 to 94,700 in 1986, by then comprising 7 percent of the Israeli labor force.⁴

The outbreak, in 1987, of the Palestinian uprising, the Intifada, created a shortage of low-status labor when non-citizen Palestinians (either because of imposed closure or self-imposed strikes) did not show up for work in Israel. The 1987 events set the stage for the initial organized recruitment of foreign blue-collar workers. In 1987, the number of workers admitted by the Israeli Ministry of Labor was 2,500, and it steadily increased to 9,600 in 1993, when Israel began importing large numbers of overseas migrant workers. Primarily, these came from Romania (construction), Thailand (agriculture), and the Philippines (geriatric care, nursing, and domestic services), replacing the traditional Palestinian labor force⁵ (Bartram, 1998; Borowski and Yanay, 1997; Bar Tsur, 1996; State Comptroller's Office, 1996). In 1996, the total number of valid work permits was estimated at about 103,000 (see Bartram, 1998: Table 3); of the holders, 72 percent worked in the construction industry, 16 percent in agriculture, 7 percent in nursing and geriatric care, and 5 percent in light industry and the hotel and catering industry (Industries, Operation and Maintenance Engineering Supplement, 1996).⁶

As with other labor-importing countries, Israeli official figures do not reflect the real number of labor migrants in society. To them should be added those labor migrants working illegally in Israel, whose number has dramatically increased in recent years. The absence of valid data makes it difficult to estimate the current number of undocumented workers who live and work in Israel. The figures differ considerably from one source to another. Although official sources estimate a conservative figure ranging between 84,000 and 100,000 illegal workers (Central Bureau of Statistics, 1998^b; State Comptroller's Office, 1996: 490), other sources suggest up to a maximum of 300,000 undocumented non-Jewish migrants living and working in Israel (Ha'aretz, 1996). For now, the number of foreign workers remains a matter of controversy and speculation.⁷

Undocumented migrant workers arrive in Israel haphazardly from every corner of the globe.⁸ They enter the country with a tourist visa valid for up to 90 days, which forbids them to work, and they become undocumented migrants by overstaying the period of the tourist visa.⁹ The lack of legal status and work permits seems to be a major catalyst, albeit not the only one, for the development of informal patterns of organization. This is in clear contrast to documented migrant workers in Israel. The pattern of formal labor recruitment in Israel has created a peculiar situation. The fact that work permits are given to employers, but not to employees, transforms documented workers into a *de facto* "captive labor force" (Calavita, 1992; Rozenhak, 1998). While the state permits provide a formal infrastructure for incorporation into the labor market, the workplace conditions resemble a kind of "total institution", so to speak, with little or no margin for migrants' social initiatives.¹⁰ Paradoxically, the lack of state regimentation of work and life conditions among undocumented migrant workers leaves room for the emergence of new ethnic communities, as a strategy for survival in an unfriendly environment. During the last decade, three ethnic communities have developed among migrant workers: Black African, Latin American, and Filipino. The great majority of African and Latino migrants are undocumented, while the Filipino community presents a mixed pattern.

Theoretical Background

Undocumented Latino labor migration to Israel can be explained in terms of (1) push factors that drove Latinos out of their homelands (unstable socio-economic and political situation); (2) pull factors that attracted them to Israel (higher wages, easy entry compared with North America and Western Europe); and (3) the emergence of social networks and institutional frameworks that connect the two foregoing factors, serving as mechanisms of informal recruitment.

The structural constraints affecting most Latin American countries provide the general context for understanding Latin American migrants' motivation to migrate. Since the early 1980s, most Latin American countries entered a transition period, where authoritarian and repressive regimes gave way to the democratization of national politics. However, such processes of democratization should be understood more as formal reforms, whereby political mechanisms were re-established (such as the re-installment of the political party system, freedom of the press, and human rights discourses), but were not necessarily accompanied by deep socio-economic reforms. The increasing foreign debt, austerity plans dictated by the International Monetary Fund, high inflation, and consequent internal recession and economic stagnation

migration flows. However, with the passage of time, new and independent factors, such as social networks and institutional frameworks, develop as a consequence of migration. These developments help, in turn, to perpetuate migration over time (Massey, 1987, 1990; Massey et al., 1998).

Once in place, migration tends to develop its own dynamics: social networks (based on kinship, friendship and *paisanaje*) expand, connecting present and prospective migrants (in the countries of origin). Migrant networks tend to become self-sustaining over time, because they constitute social capital available to prospective and new migrants. Among people considering migration, ties to an earlier immigrant present in the host country are likely to determine the probability of selecting that destination. Moreover, knowing or being related to migrants gives access to sources of information and connections, reducing the uncertainty related to migration, especially among undocumented migrants (Massey et al., 1987; Massey et al., 1993, 1998; Massey and Espinosa, 1997; Moretti, 1999). Kinship is one of the most important foundations of migrant social organization. Family connections are the most secure bonds within the networks, because there is a continuous exchange of favors and help. Friendship ties (especially *paisanaje*) are also important; particularly in the careers of international migrants, receiving help is crucial (Massey et al., 1987).

Furthermore, once labor migration begins, a system of formal and informal institutions and organizations forms at the migrant community and the host society level. At the community level, ethnic associations (e.g., sport clubs, churches, religious organizations, self-help institutions) emerge, playing an important role in the process of socio-economic integration into the host society (Schmitter, 1980; Schoeneberg, 1985; Schmitter Heisler, 1986; Gitmez et al., 1987; De Graaf et al., 1988; Jenkins, 1988; Layton-Henry, 1990; Kasinitz, 1992; Kemp et al., 2000).

The literature stresses four central functions fulfilled by ethnic associations: first, the adjustment of migrants to the host society (Jenkins, 1988; Schmitter Heisler, 1986; Kasinitz, 1992; Basch, 1987); second, the reaffirmation or transformation of migrants' ethnicity in the new environment (Schoeneberg, 1985; Gitmez and Wilpert, 1987); third, the mediation between migrants and home community in the sending countries (Schmitter-Heisler, 1986; Jenkins, 1988; 1987) and fourth, the provision of a platform for participatory politics in the host society (Miller, 1989; Rex and Drury, 1994; Soysal, 1994). In this respect, the ability by which migrant workers succeed in organizing themselves into autonomous ethnic associations, in order to defend common interests, raise support over community issues, and articulate demands before local authorities, may become a central strategy through which

widened social gaps and poverty rates (Lijphart and Waisman, 1996; Sznajder, 1993). The combination of falling incomes, frustrated ambitions, and restructuring of many Latin American economies generated powerful pressures for emigration among both skilled blue-collar workers and the educated urban middle classes.

Consequently, both political and socio-economic conditions should be considered important push factors for emigration from different countries in South America (Massey et al., 1999). Still, the question remains as to which are the ultimate factors that force people to migrate and how migration actually takes place.

From a neoclassical economic perspective, flows of labor move from low-wage and low-employment countries to high-wage and high-employment countries. It is assumed that the individuals' rational decision to migrate is guided by a comparison between the potential income level in the host country and their actual income in their countries of origin. Making a cost-benefit analysis, individuals decide to migrate if the benefits are estimated to be higher than the costs over a certain time span (Sjaastad, 1962; Todaro and Maruszko, 1987; Borjas, 1990).

Yet decisions to migrate are not made by isolated actors, but rather larger units of related people (households or families). As a direct response to neoclassical models, which assume a rational individual acting in an economic vacuum, several scholars taking the *household strategies* assert that decisions to migrate are not made by isolated actors but by units of related people, namely households or families (Grasmuck 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). From an economic perspective, other collaborators suggested that individuals in households or families decide collectively not only to maximize the expected income, but also to minimize the risks associated with a variety of market failures (e.g., health insurance markets). For poor families in developing countries, such mechanisms for managing risk are imperfect, absent, or incomplete, which makes immigration a possible strategy in order to diversify risk (Stark, 1988; Stark, 1991).

Active recruitment on behalf of the receiving country has been used to explain the initial link between the labor market and migrants from developing countries. Demand for labor in the host societies is caused by the inability of local employment in the secondary sector of the economy. Local employers hire migrant workers because native workers are not available due to various conditions, low salaries, instability, and lack of skills (Todaro, 1970; Piore, 1979).

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migrants can negotiate the terms of membership in the receiving society (Soysal, 1994; Soysal, 1997; Kemp et al., 2000).

Likewise, at the host society level, for-profit organizations and private entrepreneurs arise to provide services to migrants in exchange for fees, such as labor contracting, real estate, travel agencies, telecommunication services, and so forth. These institutions establish the basis for a black market fed by the existence of foreign workers (Massey et al., 1987; Massey et al., 1993; Spann, 1994; Chin, 1997). Whenever the institutional and social network frameworks described above undergo institutionalization, they become a kind of social capital helping the immigrant in all spheres of life and providing a social structure capable of supporting international migration on a mass basis (Massey and García España, 1987; Layton-Henry, 1990).

Drawing on the "cumulative causation" perspective suggested by Massey (1990), we show that different theories account for different aspects of the Latino migration process. Following the *neoclassical model*, we present a socio-economic profile of Latino migrants to Israel with special emphasis on the socio-economic achievement (occupation and wages) of these workers in their countries of origin. We show that Latino migrant workers are driven by wage gaps between their countries of origin and Israel, and they are positively selected with respect to human capital variables such as education and occupational skills. Based on the *household strategy approach*, we find that migrants are primarily driven by the possibility of gaining access to capital and productive resources that could assure their future upon their return to their home societies. Our analysis indicates that informal recruitment of undocumented labor migrants in Israel is a key factor for understanding the creation of a constant flow of Latino migrants. Finally, we show the extent to which social networks and ethnic institutions created within the Latino migrant community play an important role in fueling the process of Latino migration to Israel.

As stated by Massey, migration should be understood as a cumulative causation process. That means, "each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, typically in ways that make additional movement more likely" (Massey et al., 1993: 451). The main point is that migration acquires its own momentum and becomes a self-sustaining process.

Methodology

The research combined qualitative and quantitative data and methods. A core feature of the design was the collection of life histories according to both survey and ethnographic methods. Data collection was based on in-depth

interviews with labor migrants, as well as informal conversations and participant observation during visits in households and other sites of social gatherings during 1997 and 1998. We conducted 77 individual, in-depth, semi-structured interviews.¹¹

The semi-structured design of the questionnaire was adapted for the compilation of event histories such as migration, employment, and different experiences in the host society. The construction of such retrospective life histories took our design beyond the cross-sectional approach usually applied in conventional survey data. The length of the interview was about 3 hours.¹²

Because of the difficulties inherent in gathering data on migrant workers in general and undocumented aliens in particular, representative samples could not be assembled. Therefore, we used the so-called snowball sampling technique, in order to detect and construct a sample of Latino labor migrants in Israel. Because the purpose was to form a diverse group with respect to national origin, sex, class background and occupation, we used a multiple-entry snowball method. This was in order to avoid the danger of interviewing limited personal social networks, which is inherent in the traditional snowball approach. We conducted fieldwork in various social and institutional settings (e.g., soccer games, salsa clubs, religious services, organized tours, fairs, kindergarten, schools, etc.), thus broadening the range of interviewee profiles.

Data Analysis - Socio-Demographic Characteristics¹³

The Latino community of undocumented labor migrants in Israel comprises people from almost all Latin American countries. Nearly 40 percent of respondents in our sample came from Colombia, the largest group among Latino migrants. Approximately a quarter had migrated from Ecuador, the rest from Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. The majority of Latino migrants had lived in urban centers before migrating to Israel.¹⁴

Latino migrants, whether men or women, were young (34 years of age, on average), which confirmed the findings of other studies that migrants are concentrated in the central labor-force ages. The age range oscillated between 20 and 56 years, and about 80 percent were aged between 20 and 40. The bulk of the Latino migrants had arrived after 1993, when the legal and organized recruitment of guest-workers was initiated by the state (but which did not include Latin American countries). For most immigrants, their current stay in Israel was their first trip to the country. This is not surprising, since the policy of deportation implemented in 1995 obstructs (but does not eliminate) the creation of a pattern of circular migration. Strict controls at the ports of entry have caused the immediate deportation of several arrivals trying to enter as

tourists in recent years. The data suggest several patterns of migration according to family situation: (1) family migration (spouses and children migrate together); (2) family migration in stages (one spouse migrates before the other spouse and children); (3) single-parent family in stages (single parent migrates before the children); (4) independent migration (single men or women migrate independently); (5) spouses migrate together, leaving behind the children; (6) single parent leaves the children in the country of origin; and (7) one spouse migrates to Israel, leaving the spouse and children in the sending country.¹⁵ As expected, gender groups displayed significant differences in the patterns of migration according to family situation. Over half the migrant men were single, traveling independently to Israel, compared with only a third of the migrant women in this category. Particularly interesting is the fact that a high percentage of women migrated alone, leaving their children in the home country, in the care of ex-husbands, parents, or other family members (25 percent). Likewise, many of the male migrants left wives and children behind (15 percent); or both parents migrated to Israel and left the children with relatives in their countries of origin. The high proportion of married (men and women) and separated (women) migrants suggests that the role of income provider pushes men and women alike to look for migration as an alternative to local employment. Both male and female migrants send money to their kin who care for their children. Over a quarter of female and male respondents reported having children residing with them in Israel. Fifty percent of these children were between the ages of six and twelve and attended primary school at the time of the interview. Approximately a fifth were younger than six and attended private kindergartens run by other Latino migrant women. Another 20 percent comprised children aged between 12 and 18 who attended secondary schools. At the time of the interview, most of our respondents in the sample lived in south Tel Aviv, in the vicinity of the central bus station, which in recent years has become an immigrant enclave.

Contrary to stereotypes concerning labor migration in Israel, Latino migrant workers displayed relatively high levels of human capital acquired in their countries of origin. They were positively selected, in contrast to their counterparts in their countries of origin, and the reported levels of education were at least comparable with those of the local population in Israel (12.0 years on average). The data underscore considerable differences between men and women regarding human capital characteristics. Men, on average, possessed higher levels of formal education (13.0 years of schooling as opposed to only 11.0 for female migrants) and were more likely to hold academic degrees (22.6 and 14.3 percent for males and females, respectively). Half of the respondents had worked in white-collar occupations in the

country of origin, 15 percent in professional, technical, and managerial occupations. This is not surprising, given the levels of education already reported.¹⁶ One-third of the female migrants had worked in pink-collar occupations (clerks and sales). Over half of the male migrants had worked in blue-collar jobs (taxi and truck drivers, mechanics, welders,¹⁷ electricians); many of them had been self-employed.

On average, respondents reported that in their country of origin they earned \$326 per month, with significant differences between men and women: women earned 60 percent less than men. These low income levels contrasted with those expected to be earned in Israel. Respondents reported having expected to earn, on average, between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per month. This means that for a sub-sample of migrant workers (especially women), the wage gap might have acted as a strong magnet drawing them to Israel.¹⁸ This explains why men and women were willing to abandon their (white-collar) jobs and careers in their country of origin and pay the price of downward occupational mobility.

Our data clearly show that economic incentives for migration from Latin American countries to Israel were considerable. From a neoclassical perspective, the average wage differed by a factor of 3, that is, that in Israel they would earn at least three times the salary they earned at home. This was especially relevant for Latino women. The primary motivation for migration was economic, and the major aims were to save money for the acquisition of housing, land, and vehicles, and the establishment of small businesses that would secure the respondents' well-being in their countries of origin.

Besides economic arguments, other interesting reasons were advanced by migrants as motives for choosing Israel as a country of destination. "Easy entry" and the "positive social climate for migrants" in Israel were singled out as important factors distinguishing Israel from other receiving societies (chiefly, the United States and Western Europe), where facility of entry and general attitudes toward migrants have become harder in recent decades.¹⁹

To these general incentives, one that is idiosyncratic to Israel should be added. Being the Holy Land, Israel poses a unique attraction for Christians all over the world, who aspire to visit as pilgrims. Moreover, as the millennium approached, many of them wanted to settle and await the coming of the Messiah. The significance of the religious motivation should be taken into consideration for two main reasons: first, one-fifth of our respondents adduced religious reasons for choosing Israel as the preferred destination; second, and most significantly, religious motivations were being translated into action. In recent years we have witnessed the creation of religious organizations that have mushroomed and expanded within the Latino

community. In the following sections we show that religious life is one the most important aspects of Latino community organization and development.

Patterns of informal recruitment

Our study suggests that social networks established in Israel prior to the respondents' migration were quite extensive. We measured social networks by including the proportion of migrants with family and friends in Israel before migration. Almost half of the respondents in the total sample had family members residing in Israel prior to migration, and almost two-thirds had at least one family member residing in Israel at some time before or during the migrant's stay in Israel. Friendship ties in Israel before migration were relatively less common, albeit still significant, considering the recentness of the phenomenon in Israel. On average, one-fifth of the Latino migrants had friends living and working in Israel before their current trip. Migrant men were more likely than migrant women to have had such social ties in Israel before deciding to go to that country.

An interesting case of the role of social networks in fueling Latino labor migration to Israel is provided by Jorge.

Jorge came to Israel for the first time in 1990. Within a short time, he managed to get a job. Upon marrying an Israeli woman, he regularized his legal status and settled down in Tel Aviv. When he visited Colombia two years later, Jorge spread the rumor that Israel rather than North America was now the new "paradise" for potential Colombian migrants. Encouraged by his own "success," Jorge promised close relatives and friends economic and moral support if they decided to give Israel a try. Jorge offered his kin a place to stay for the very first days and volunteered to pick them up from the airport. He would also teach them basic Hebrew and lend them money, if necessary. As many took up his invitation, Jorge soon began to function as an absorption agency, allowing newcomers a fairly smooth entry into the new society. Being their permanent reference in the Holy Land, he served as a guarantor whenever migrant kin were interviewed by Israeli authorities abroad. They would phone Israel to check if the person did have an address in the host country. Jorge filled an essential role in helping newcomers contact local labor agencies, rent apartments, and sign contracts, as well as send remittances to the host country. As time went by, Jorge's address in Israel turned into the extended

family's headquarters, where all decision-making (such as the provision of saving money for tickets for potential newcomers and counseling as to which member of the family to bring) was discussed and implemented.

Jorge's vignette illustrates how relatives initiated other people into the migration process by providing them help and information, thus reducing the costs and risks of migration. In this way, migration, like a virus, "spreads from person to person and from family to family" (Massey, 1987: 1398), and increases the probability of other people migrating to the same country. As social networks mature, they acquire a momentum that feeds labor migration. According to our research, this seems to be the major mechanism perpetuating Latino labor migration to Israel.

Parallel to these patterns, a black market for labor recruitment has materialized, where private entrepreneurs flourish in both the host and the sending country. This institutional infrastructure ranges from travel agencies in the home country (which propagate the image of a "Golden Israel," a land of opportunities, with high salaries and excellent labor conditions) to local Israeli opportunists who make a living out of illegal migrants. A case in point is that of Moshe.

An Israeli Jew originally from South America, Moshe worked as a subcontractor for a workforce agency in south Tel Aviv, recruiting foreign workers for the construction sector. Moshe used to go to the old Tel Aviv central bus station in his van and search for new non-Jewish migrants looking for work. Moshe's fluency in Spanish attracted Latino workers. Doing business with Moshe meant that all the arrangements were "de palabra," that is, no formal contract, no forms to fill in, and business being conducted on a "mutua confianza" (mutual trust) basis. Being in charge of bringing workers to the construction sites and paying them their salaries, Moshe acted as the "segundo intermediario" between workers and the real employers, a strategic position that left him ample room for maneuvering and profiting. In order to make sure that workers completed long-term jobs, Moshe would pay salaries 15 days after normal pay day. Conversely, in order to get skilled workers among Latino co-ethnics, he was ready to pay them a higher fee per hour than to other nationalities, and even facilitated loans in advance whenever "loyal" workers required it. During the mid-1990s,

Moshe helped to create a Latino enclave of male migrants in construction and light industries.

Alongside intermediaries like Moshe, established manpower agencies also operate informal schemes of labor recruitment by using the mobilizing capacity of immigrant social networks. For example, a well-known manpower agency offered monetary compensation to migrants who could bring additional fellow workers to the agency pool. Both recruitment channels, private entrepreneurs and workforce agencies, attest to the existence of a common feature which is concomitant with the growth of undocumented migration: the development of informal sectors in the host economy which flourish from labor migration and at the same time encourage it.

The Costs of Migration: Occupational Downward Mobility and Illegality

While Latino labor migrants come to Israel searching for a better life and/or to acquire the means for the pursuit of socio-economic mobility in their countries of origin, they have to face the price inherent in the migration process, especially if they are undocumented. This price is downward occupational mobility, illegal status, and the disruption of normal family life.

Usually, the employment patterns of new labor migrants follow the occupational path of their ethnic or national predecessors. Earlier immigrants of the same or similar ethnic identity opened up "occupational frontiers" and created channels that were frequently followed by recent labor migrants, who learned about and obtained jobs through relatives and friends from their ethnic group (Marshall, 1987; Waldinger, 1996).

The existence of such niches facilitates the intensive recruitment of other group members for a specific occupation (Liebersohn, 1980). Earlier Latino migrants to Israel created channels that were frequently followed by recent labor migrants, who learned about and obtained jobs through relatives and friends.

The pre-migration occupational characteristics of Latino migrants clearly contrast with the current patterns of labor force participation in Israel. Latino migrants, like other non-Jewish labor migrants, have a limited range of economic alternatives available. Because of their undocumented status, non-Jewish migrants are excluded from most jobs, regardless of their human capital, and they cannot enter the occupations in which they earned their qualification. The great majority of Latino women are employed as domestic workers in Israel, but only 10 percent had worked in domestic service in their countries of origin. Likewise, 41 percent of Latino migrant men were employed as domestic workers in Israel; they were called *nikyoneros* or

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cleaning guys — a hybrid of Spanish and Hebrew. The other Latino men worked in construction (19 percent), light industry (22 percent), and other services (restaurants, moving services, religious services: 18 percent). Married couples were hired as live-in domestics in the private households of wealthy Israelis.

While it has been argued that the achievement of their goals as target earners is a source of pride for temporary migrant workers (Piore, 1989), for our respondents, downward mobility was traumatic, even though they saw their stay in Israel as a transitional experience. Although the mismatch or status inconsistency (between education and skills and the menial jobs they held in Israel) applied in the case of both men and women, the entry of female migrants into the domestic service niche was perceived as extremely traumatic—especially for new arrivals who tend to take live-in jobs (*internas*) in private households—on account of the limitations on freedom and their isolation from Latino social ties.

However, after a while, female domestic workers managed to move away from live-in domestic service and rent an apartment with friends or other family members. They worked as freelancers in private houses, usually in two houses per day, and an average of 12 daily hours (many of them seven days a week).

Although the majority of the Latin American migrants were salaried workers, some entrepreneurial activities developed within the community: private kindergartens organized by Latino women (who took care of Latin American children living with their parents, many of them born in Israel), hair salons operated at home, tour organizers (especially to the Holy Places), cooking, photography, moving services, and electric appliance repairs. In most cases, these additional activities generate complementary earnings.

The other factor of the cost of migration, stated above, was the matter of illegal status. As undocumented workers in the informal sector of the economy, these workers did not have access to employment benefits, nor were they protected by local labor laws. The occupational cost of illegal status may be increased by exploitative employers. There are a number of ways in which employers may cheat their employees: pre-arranged pay rates may be lowered, earnings may be paid much later than agreed, or they may not be paid at all. Although undocumented workers might have been able to claim their rights as victims (through non-profit organizations such as Kav LaOved),²⁰ they rarely took this option. As a rule, they preferred to lose their money and change jobs rather than run the risk of being caught and deported by the police.

But costs are also evident in terms of how people experience the fact that they are illegal in their everyday lives. The way they experience illegality is

related to the different policies implemented by the local authorities, mainly the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Labor. Until 1995, there was no explicit deportation policy. This was undoubtedly one of the main reasons why people chose Israel as a target country for migration. Prior to 1995, people did not consider illegality problematic.

Although males were targeted for arrest and deportation more frequently than females, men and women equally suffered on account of their illegal status. Since the police concentrated the raids in the old and new central bus station areas in Tel Aviv (where the majority of the foreign workers reside), many migrants decided to move out of Tel Aviv to surrounding areas with less concentration of foreign workers. In that way, they reduced the chances of being caught.²¹

The Emergence of the Latino Community

At present, the community evinces a wide array of social arenas, including religious, social, and sports activities. Although during weekdays labor migrants are dispersed throughout the host society in their workplace, many of them take active part in religious and leisure activities, especially during the weekends. Religious organizations play an important role for Latin American migrant workers, not only as a source of spiritual and moral support, but also as a place for exchanging vital information about jobs, housing, recreational activities, as well as useful information about remittances, health care, kindergarten, and schools arrangements. Churches offer their congregations the opportunity to learn Hebrew, the local language, and English, the country's unofficial second language, as well as a variety of activities such as sewing and hairdressing lessons, or youth groups for the younger members of the community. As such, they constitute a source of individual empowerment.

Latino migrants attend two kinds of religious organizations: (1) Catholic churches in Jaffa, where they congregate once a week; (2) independent religious organizations, mostly evangelist, created by the migrant workers themselves. Many of them are supported by headquarters outside Israel, while others have established connections with the network of Protestant Arab churches in Israel.

The Church plays an important role for Latin American migrant workers. First, as the House of God, the Church symbolizes for undocumented migrants a place where they are *always* welcome and respected. Many of them attend on a regular basis, in order to pray and receive moral support. Second, the Church is, in some cases, the only institutionalized framework in Israel that is ready to perform marriages among illegal migrants and baptize Israeli-born children. Frequently, migrants approach the priest or pastor to discuss

details regarding weddings, communions, and baptisms. Third, the Church also serves as the site of regular meetings for Latin American migrants who, besides praying, also meet friends and exchange information about jobs, apartments and rooms for rent, among other matters relevant to everyday life.

The other most important institutional site for Latino migrants are soccer grounds. The Latinos' presence is conspicuously felt in soccer matches in public spaces far beyond the boundaries of their residential area. The game is taken seriously, to the point of nation-wide championships being held (Copa América and the Mundial), with the participation of foreign workers' teams representing different countries. Other social gatherings are organized in public parks, mainly around soccer games. Stalls with traditional food are set up and genuine Latin music resounds in the air. Preparing typical Latin American meals is an intrinsic part of the happening; it also means that the Latino migrants can make extra money at weekends.

Religious organizations and sporting events provide a suitable institutional basis for money-raising and mutual aid, mainly through the *ad hoc* organization of fairs (*kermesse*), raffles, and other creative arrangements (the food basket)²² designed to help those having difficulties in finding employment, experiencing health problems, or facing deportation. Indeed, migrant associations provide important support for the adaptation and survival of immigrants in new urban, and mostly unfriendly, environments.

Despite this wide array of activities, which attests to the emergence of a lively community endowed with a rich religious and leisure agenda, attempts to associate along national or supra-national lines have not endured. From interviews conducted with active members of the community, we learned that their communal efforts have often ended in the initial stages. According to them, personal enmities, gossip, intrigue, and power struggles seem to undermine these efforts. Latinos, therefore, have so far not succeeded in transforming their communal activities into a source of collective empowerment. Their efforts remain uncoordinated and ephemeral, due to their misgivings about politics in general, lack of support and even distrust of self-appointed political entrepreneurs (within the community itself), social fragmentation of the different national groups, and the absence of an organizational infrastructure that could effectively mobilize community members when needed. The fragmentary character of the community further diminishes an already vulnerable sense of reliability and trust among the co-ethnics, which is indispensable for mobilizing undocumented migrant workers.²³

The organizational weakness is reflected in the internal difficulties experienced by the community members in creating an umbrella organization

to protect the common interests of the Latino community as a whole. Following the African experience,²⁴ Latinos attempted to create a Latin Workers' Union (Organización de Trabajadores Latinoamericanos, hereafter OTL) that would function as a channel for interaction with the Israeli authorities and organizations dealing with labor migration. This initiative took place in 1998, but suffered the same fate as previous attempts by community activists to unite Latinos from different parts of the continent within one common organization, and failed.²⁵ The significant factor that prompted the idea of founding a supra-national organization was the encounter between members of the Latino community and Israeli social activists and academics, who encouraged them to follow the Black African example. Indeed, the process that led to the creation of the OTL was one known in organizational theory as isomorphism: a process driven by a mixture of competition with and imitation of another body, in this case the Black African community. The first assembly of the OTL was convened by a local journalist and was later followed by a series of meetings and consultations of the members of the OTL with Black African leaders of the African Workers' Union (AWU), Knesset (Israeli parliament) members, and NGO activists. During these meetings, participants discussed the steps to be taken in order to successfully address both Israeli public opinion and members of the community reluctant to participate in political activities. Latino activists called weekly gatherings to organize the community along national lines inspired by the Black African model. The OTL's short-lived political activity reached its peak at a meeting of Latino and Black African representatives with the chair of the Knesset Committee on Migrant Workers (17 May 1998), during which an alternative policy to deportation was discussed. The meeting resulted in the submission of a joint proposal by migrant community representatives and members of the Knesset committee recommending the issue of one-year work permits to undocumented migrants already resident in Israel and a US\$ 5,000 deposit to ensure that migrants would leave the country after the permit expired. This proposal was rejected by the government.

The nascent Latino political organization was seriously undermined when police raided the houses of some of the leaders of the Latino community (*Ha'ir*, 16-4-998). From interviews conducted with Latino leaders, we learned that members of the community thought that the escalation in the arrest and deportation policy was a direct reaction to the community's organizational activities. Although intimidation, and in some cases persecution, are a serious stumbling block for the empowerment of both Black African and Latino undocumented communities, in the case of the latter, it endangered the survival of an already fragile and fragmented organization. The combination

of a lack of recognized leadership, the lack of an integrated and coordinated organizational infrastructure, and the lack of a ready-made participatory political culture imported from the country of origin apparently accounted for the Latinos' inability to create a viable channel for advancing their claims in the public political sphere of Israel.

Access to the public political sphere would mean the opening of new platforms where the new migrant communities could negotiate the conditions of participation and membership in the host society. Its absence puts the Latino community at a relative disadvantage *vis-à-vis* its Black African counterpart in the competition for public attention and resources. This disadvantage has manifested itself so far in the success of the Black African community in gaining greater exposure in the Israeli media and clearly articulating their claims and expectations from the host society in a variety of forums.²⁶

Conclusions

Three driving forces fuel Latino labor migration to Israel. The first is the unstable socio-economic and political situation in Latin American countries, which pushes men and women to look for alternative channels for social and economic mobility abroad. The second is the opportunity structure offered by the Israeli labor market for earning a living and saving substantial amounts of money, which are remitted to their countries of origin. This explains why Latino migrants are ready to pay the price of occupational downward mobility and illegality.

The third force relates to the social foundations of migration, exemplified by the personal and community networks created by the migrants over time, which perpetuate labor migration. As social networks mature, they acquire a momentum that feeds labor migration. According to our research, this seems to be a major mechanism perpetuating Latino labor migration to Israel.

Despite similarities to other labor-importing countries, labor migration to Israel presents a unique feature that needs to be stressed. As the Holy Land, Israel exerts a unique attraction for Christians all over the world, who aspire to visit it as pilgrims. Moreover, at the time of the millennium, many of them want to settle and await the coming of the Messiah. The significance of the religious motivation should be taken into consideration for two main reasons: first, one-fifth of our respondents adduced religious reasons for choosing Israel as their preferred destination; second, and most significantly, religious motivations are being translated into action. In recent years we have witnessed the creation of religious organizations which have mushroomed

and expanded within the Latino community and serve as the main axis around which community life is structured.

On the other hand, the Latino community also generates isolated and ephemeral autonomous religious and sports associations. However, the variegated and fragmented nature of Latino social life hinders the possibility of engaging in collective action and creating a political platform aimed at negotiating community interests and needs within the host society.

Despite the fragile organization of the undocumented Latino community in Israel, its mere presence as an emergent ethnic minority is already challenging the ethno-national character of the state. Like other labor-importing societies, Israel is now forced to confront new dilemmas posed by the presence of the new illegal migrant populations—the Latino community included—and their reproduction costs. As the increasing interest shown by the media, academe, and the local authorities attests, the migrants' rights to basic education, health, security and police protection have evolved into a new conflictive arena, where the limits of membership in the traditional ethno-national state are implicitly being questioned. Illegal migrant communities, local authorities, and a diverse array of non-government organizations are currently trying to work out a bearable *modus vivendi* for what seems to have become a *de facto* multi-ethnic society far beyond the limits of ethno-national Jewish Israel.

NOTES

1. We are aware that, in order to study the determinants of migration, the relevant units of analysis should be individuals within their households in the country of origin. Unfortunately, we only have data collected in the host society for those who already have migrated to Israel.
2. The present report is part of a larger project on Latino labor migration in Israel that addresses several dimensions of the migratory process: pre-migration background and reasons for migration, patterns of labor market incorporation and income attainment, patterns of spatial mobility in the host society, development of social networks and community organization.
3. Our research focuses exclusively on the Latino community in Tel Aviv. For an analysis of non-Jewish Latino migrants in Jerusalem, see Roer-Stier and Olshtain-Mann (1999).
4. In 1986, out of the total number of workers employed in the Israeli labor market, 48.5 percent were employed in construction, 17.5 percent in agriculture, 16 percent in manufacturing, and 18 percent in other industries such as public services, hotels, and catering (Weisberg, 1992).
5. The decreasing number of non-citizen Palestinians in the Israeli labor market is concomitant with the increasing number of foreign workers concentrated in specific occupational niches. For example, in 1992 there were 85,900 Palestinians working in the construction industry, while in 1994 their number fell to half that figure (42,100 Palestinians). At the same time, the number of work permits given to foreign workers in construction and agriculture increased from 1,730 in January 1993 to 64,230 in February 1995 (State Comptroller's Report, 1996: 479).

6. In contrast to Palestinian commuters, whose daily work in Israel did not involve a change in place of residence, overseas migrant workers' participation is not limited to the Israeli labor market but is also extended to other spheres of life. The fact that they have to reside within the host society implies the creation of a new category of foreign residents, with all its implications. It means that the host society does not only benefit from their participation in the production process, but is also forced to take responsibility for their reproduction costs.
7. It should be noted that the exact number of migrant workers has become a highly controversial and politicized matter, especially in light of the high rates of unemployment and economic recession for 1997-1999. See, for example, the Social Security Office research by Ya'acov Condor, 1997.
8. Undocumented non-Jewish labor migrants come from every corner in the world: East Europe (15%); former USSR (25%); South Asia (20%); Arab countries (11%); Africa (14%), and Latin America (15%).
9. Overstaying the tourist visa is not the only path to illegality. Another way to become undocumented is for workers to enter the country with work permits and later leave their employers.
10. Legally recruited workers arrive alone, without their families. They live and work in the same place, thus transforming the way specific jobs are performed. For example, construction workers living at the construction site, agricultural workers living at agricultural sites and nursing workers living in the patients' homes.
11. Interviews were guided by a questionnaire that included items regarding (1) household information and pre-migration background; (2) incentives and reasons for migration; (3) the migration process; (4) occupational history in Israel; (5) patterns of residence; (6) income, savings, and expenses; (7) leisure time; (8) social networks; (9) community participation; (10) future plans.
12. All interviews were conducted in Spanish. As well as the questionnaire, all interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.
13. The socio-economic characteristics of Latino migrant workers are presented in Appendix 1.
14. For example, migrants from Colombia come from Cali, Armenia, Caicedonia del Valle, and Bogotá. Ecuadorians come from Quito, Guayaquil, Cuenca, and San Andrés. Chileans are from Valparaíso, Concepción and Temuco. Bolivians are from Santa Cruz and La Paz.
15. For the analysis of patterns of migration, we partly rely on the classification of Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994).
16. Gender differences should be highlighted: 19 percent of the men had worked in professional, technical, and managerial occupations, compared with only 11 percent of their female counterparts. One third of female migrants had worked in pink collar occupations (clerks and sales). Over half of the male migrants had worked in blue-collar jobs (taxi and truck drivers, mechanics, welders, electricians), many of them self-employed.
17. Welding is one of the occupations for which work permits are most commonly issued in Israel.
18. Although not the focus of this paper, it should be noted that women working in domestic service in Israel, an average of 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, might get an average income of \$1,200- \$1,500. The patterns of labor market incorporation and income attainment are the focus of another paper.
19. However, the perception of Israel as an "easy entry" destination has been changing since 1996, when a policy of stricter border control was implemented by the Ministry of the Interior.
20. As a non-governmental organization, Kav LaOved was originally created to defend the rights of non-citizen Palestinians from the Occupied Territories. However, with the increasing presence of overseas migrant workers in Israel, this NGO has been playing a major role in defending the rights of foreign workers in Israel, in cases such as unpaid salaries, exploitation, and forced deportation.

21. Paradoxically, many women working as live-out domestic workers were considering the possibility of taking a live-in position as a strategy for reducing the chances of being deported.
22. The food basket is a form of self-help we found in one of the religious associations. It consists of collecting different food products from all the participants and later donating them to those most in need.
23. Several authors have discussed the lack of ethnic solidarity among Latino immigrants abroad (see Pessar, 1995 and Guarnizo et al., 1999).
24. Beyond national and regional level organizations, the Black African community of labor migrants in Israel created the AWU (African Workers Union). This supra-ethnic organization is used as a platform for advancing claims in the Israeli public sphere. For a full account of the Black African community in Israel, see Kemp et al., 2000.
25. Even the attempts at creating nationally-based organizations had meager results. An exception is the census conducted by the Ecuadorian community living in Israel in 1998. The census aimed to collect information about their community and recruit funds for use in emergencies. The successful mobilization of Ecuadorians served as a model for other Latino groups, such as the Bolivians, Peruvians, Chileans, Colombians, and Argentinians.
26. Besides the above-mentioned visits to the Israeli Parliament and meetings with members of the Knesset Committee on Migrant Workers, members of the AWU have been involved in a series of lobbying attempts with members of the Israeli Parliament from various political parties, with the Students' Association and with the Neighborhood Representatives (*Nezigei hashechunot*), among others. The most salient example was the general "emergency" assembly convened by the local newspaper *Ha'ir* and various NGOs regarding the mass deportation policy of the Israeli government. The media coverage of the event focused almost solely on the Black African community situation. See, for example, Gideon Levy, "Violation on the next street," *Ha'aretz* (30-8-98).

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