



# Israel and the 'Holy Land': The Religio-Political Discourse of Rights among African Migrant Labourers and African Asylum Seekers, 1990-2008

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## Abstract

The religious arena created in Israel by sub-Saharan African migrants from 1990-2008 was an expanded and flexible one which touched on complex questions related not only to what some may term "purely" religious themes but, among other issues, to identity and rights. The present paper compares two waves of migration,<sup>1</sup> the first arriving in Israel by air as tourists or pilgrims throughout the 1990s, mainly from West Africa, part of a larger worldwide expansion of African international labour migration; and the second, which started in 2005, of predominantly Sudanese and Eritreans, who entered the country illegally in search of asylum or work opportunities across its lax border with Egypt. While the former cohort deployed a religious rhetoric of attachment to the Holy Land, the latter invoked international human rights to claim their rights as refugees in addition to religious rhetoric. The paper considers the context and grounds for this shift in political tactics and rhetoric of migrant discursive stance vis-à-vis the state.

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<sup>1)</sup> In this paper I have chosen to use the terms "migration" and "migrants" when referring to Africans who came to Israel rather than "emigration" and "immigrants" to emphasize the fact that we are referring to people who are regarded as people that do not have intentions of permanently settling in Israel. In addition, this choice was done to make a clear distinction between the Jews who opted to move to Israel and are referred to in the literature and in the Israeli-Jewish discourse as "immigrants" as opposed to all others who have moved to Israel as part of labor migration or other kinds of human mobility. More details on these distinctions see f.n 6.

**Keywords**

African migrants; Israel; religio-political discourse of rights

**Résumé**

La mouvance religieuse créée en Israël par les migrants africains sub-sahariens de 1990-2008 était de celles qui renvoyaient à des questions de droits. Le présent article se propose de comparer deux vagues de migrations : la première arriva en Israël par avion, au cours des années 90. Ces migrants venaient principalement d'Afrique de l'Ouest, arrivaient comme simples touristes ou pèlerins, et faisaient partie d'une expansion internationale plus large de l'immigration de travail africaine; la seconde commença en 2005, elle était composée principalement de Soudanais et d'Erythréens, entrés illégalement dans le pays pour demander l'asile ou chercher des opportunités de travail le long de la frontière avec l'Égypte. Alors que le premier groupe déploya une rhétorique religieuse basée sur l'attachement à la terre Sainte, le second invoqua les droits de l'homme reconnus internationalement pour revendiquer leur statut de réfugiés. Cet article s'intéresse au contexte et aux fondements de cette divergence dans les tactiques et la rhétorique politiques des immigrés vis-à-vis de l'état.

**Mots-clés**

Migrants africains; Israël; discours politico-religieux sur les droits

*Oh God, please help me,  
 God, they don't understand me  
 This is a big mistake, I came here to worship you  
 I came to the Holy Land  
 God, they don't understand me  
 God – Save me  
 Send me salvation<sup>2</sup>*

These are the words of James in the opening scene of the Israeli feature film 'James' Journey to Jerusalem' (2003), recounting the story of an authentic African pilgrim who journeys to the Holy Land. Upon arrival, James is detained on charges of entering the country for work purposes disguised in a Christian cloak. From his prison cell, James begs God to open the eyes of the Israeli authorities and help them realise their mistake. More than just a line from a movie, James' prayer reflects the complex story of African migration to Israel in the past twenty years which has created a mosaic of labour migrants, pilgrims and refugees seeking asylum.

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<sup>2)</sup> From the movie James' Journey to Jerusalem, Director: Alexandrovich Raanan, with Siabonga Melungisi Shiva and Arie Muskuna, Israel, 2006.

## Introduction<sup>3</sup>

African migration to Israel came in two waves. The first wave consisted of Africans who arrived by air throughout the 1990s, mainly from West Africa, using tourist or pilgrim visas, as part of a larger expansion of African international labour migration. Most were deported at the beginning of the 2000s. The second wave, from 2005 onwards, was of predominantly Sudanese and Eritrean seeking asylum<sup>4</sup> or work opportunities, which entered Israel illegally through its porous border with Egypt. I term the earlier wave 'veteran African migrants' and the latter, 'new African migrants', to avoid tangled legal debates on the newcomers' status as refugees, asylum seekers or labour migrants.

While the veterans were almost exclusively Christians, the new migration wave has included Christians and Muslims in about equal numbers. Here I concentrate on the Christian cohort. While these migrants' socio-economic profile, lifestyles, political activities, legal status and relationship with Israelis, including local NGOs, are clearly important, my discussion focuses on the religious arena that Africans have built in Israel and the religio-political discourse of rights they have evolved between 1990 and 2008.

In Africa, as in many other parts of the world, religious organisations have increasingly become a major channel, though by no means the only channel, for political and social expression (Gifford 1993; Hansen and Twaddle 1995; Haynes 1994; Sabar 2002). This is equally true of the diaspora context, where religion since the 1980s has been 'the last reservoir of cultural

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<sup>3</sup> In this article I frequently use the terms "Africa", "African Migration", "Diaspora" and "Christianity" without always making clear the geographical, ethnic and/or religious specification. I'm well aware that these are not organic and/or ontological forms of self \ community identification nor do I think that the specificities are not important; however for the sake of not limiting my study and analysis to a very small homogenic group and in an attempt to expand the analysis I made this choice. Whenever I thought that it was necessary to identify the nation and/or ethnic background of the interviewee I have done so as well as when referring to their religious affiliation, i.e. Pentecostal Christians or Catholic, etc. Throughout my study I have discussed my decision with several key informants who themselves kept using these general terms when talking about themselves and about other "Africans".

<sup>4</sup> According to international law, a refugee is defined as: 'Any person who is outside any country of such person's nationality and who is unable or unwilling to return to, and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of, that country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, and membership in a particular group.' Political asylum may be granted to any alien determined to be a 'refugee' within the meaning of section 101(a)(42)(A) of the United Nations Refugee Act.

autonomy' (Habermas 2002:1).<sup>5</sup> Hence we see how different religious institutions help migrants from various African countries to gain legitimacy and recognition in the diaspora (Ranger 2006; Tel Haar 1998; Tweed 1997; Van Dijk 1997, 2001, 2002; Vertovec 2004). As in several other diasporic communities, in Israel this phenomena was strengthened by the immense appeal of charismatic Pentecostalism to African migrants mainly – though not exclusively – from Ghana and Nigeria (Sabar 2004; Sabar 2008).

The literature dealing with African economic migrants to Israel has highlighted three main topics: (1) Israel's immigration policy and the challenges that international migrant workers pose to its ethno-national character (Kemp and Rajzman 2003; Rosenhek, 1999); (2) The legal status of African migrants in Israel, and particularly their struggle with state institutions (Mundlak 2007; Kemp et al. 2000; Willen 2007); and (3) the socio-demographic characteristics of migrants, including their creation for themselves of full social, economic and cultural lives (Kanari 2005; Sabar 2004, 2007; Willen 2007). In the veteran African diasporic religious arena in Israel, these studies have shown, African Initiated Churches (AICs), some Pentecostal, filled a central social role. By comparison, little is known so far on the religious arena of the recent migrant wave.

Hence, I begin by briefly outlining their history of migration and its socio-political context, before looking more broadly at changes in the Christian religious landscape that their arrival – and the departure of the earlier migrant wave – has precipitated. The changes have been, I argue, both in political tactics and rhetoric and in migrants' discursive stance vis-à-vis the state.

On a more theoretical level I will demonstrate how the construction of discourses by both state officials and African migrants related to labour, migration and identity have been formed and transformed in relation to changing global discourses about state, citizenship and rights. This will enable us to understand migrants as active agents who contribute to the ongoing debates about their identity and how they should be treated by the host country.

My study is based on qualitative ethnography (Elor 2002; Josselson and Lieblich 2000; Sabar Ben-Yehoshua 2001), including over 200 open-ended, in-depth interviews in Israel and West Africa mostly conducted in English,

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<sup>5</sup> This observation follows the classic studies on immigrant incorporation processes, which stress the continued salience of religion among immigrants. See, for example, Herberg 1955 (Reprint 1983).

and over a thousand hours of observations of different activities between 1998 and 2008. Once trust was established with the interviewee, I asked more about their dreams, pains and expectations from Israel and from Israelis. Migrants' ages ranged from 20 to 40 and included both men and women. Though I have interviewed people from 20 different African countries the majority of the interviewees from the first wave of migrants came from Ghana and Nigeria and most of the new migrants interviewed came from Eritrea and Sudan (both from the south and from Darfur). I began with several key interlocutors who introduced me to others. The recent migrant cohort was interviewed in Hebrew English and Arabic. Interviewee names have been disguised unless explicitly requested. An asterisk indicates a pseudonym.

Participant observation in various church services and social gatherings, in addition to countless home visits, proceeded in tandem with the interviews. Testimonies were, as far as possible, transcribed verbatim in the course of the conversation or immediately afterwards. The transcripts and notes were analysed using the constant comparative method (Elor 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1998).

### **Veteran Sub-Saharan African Labour Migrants in Israel**

Unlike in most Western countries, international migrant workers only began arriving in Israel in the late 1980s, following a government decision to use foreign labourers to solve an acute shortage of workers, mainly in agriculture and construction, following the Palestinian uprising and subsequent closure of the border with the Palestinian Authority, previously the main source of labour (Kemp and Raijman 2003; Sabar 2004). The Israeli government, through local manpower agencies, resorted to recruiting labourers from the Philippines, Thailand, Turkey, Romania and China. All these migrants arrived with valid documents and designated jobs. Still, at the time, no clear policy or adequate laws and regulations concerning international migrant workers existed, since the government regarded these groups as temporary rather than as immigrants and prospective citizens (Mundlak 2007).

Nevertheless, once Israel opened its gates, it joined a large group of countries hosting migrant labourers – both documented and undocumented. Within this context, Africans began to arrive in Israel in the early 1990s in search of work and a better life. Unlike the migrants whose arrival was arranged by the manpower agencies, none of the Africans had a work permit,

and they entered the country using tourist or pilgrim visas. The misuse of their pilgrim visa, which in the film cost James his freedom through no fault of his own, is in itself a telling act. Taken symbolically, it might be argued that even before setting foot in the host country, the prospective migrant labourer who misuses a pilgrim visa inadvertently blurs the boundaries between Israel and the Christian Holy Land whilst intertwining his or her religious faith with matters of personal expediency.

Unlike most countries in the world, the Israeli migration regime has as its most basic principle an explicit and formal demarcation between Jews and non-Jews. While Jewish immigration is actively encouraged and assisted by the state, the immigration of non-Jews is severely restricted. In line with this principle, the 'Law of Return' (1950) states that 'every Jew in the world has the right to come to this country as an *Oleh* [a Jew immigrating to Israel]'.<sup>6</sup> Jewish immigrants are granted Israeli citizenship automatically upon arrival, and special assistance is provided to facilitate their integration. With respect to non-Jews, by contrast, the Israeli immigration regime is extremely restrictive. Very few legal avenues are open to non-Jews to gain Israeli citizenship or even the right of temporary residency. Over the years, a limited number of *ad hoc* decisions were made granting Israeli citizenship or the right of residency to non-Jews, without however changing the basic legal restrictions nor challenging the ideological ground of the state (Mundlak 2007; Newman 1998; Rosenhek 1999). I would argue that as African migrants in Israel were acutely aware of these extreme limitations on their potential legal status, this inevitably created among them, especially in the earlier years, a sense of transience which impacted upon their struggle for rights.

In the last 20 years, an anomaly in the 'Law of Return', which requires only one Jewish grandparent for the entitlement to Israeli citizenship, has created a new problem. A serious challenge to the Jewish character of the state was posed by the influx of about one million immigrants mainly from the Ex-USSR and Ethiopia, thousands of whom were practising Christians nevertheless entitled to citizenship by law. This created a greater sensitivity amongst the authorities towards non-Jewish groups, including migrant workers. The potential for their establishment in the host country came to be seen by large segments of Jewish-Israeli society and the government as a potential threat to be avoided.

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<sup>6</sup> The Law of Return, passed by the Knesset on 24 Av, 5714 (23 August, 1954) and published in *Sefer Ha-Chukkim* No. 163 of 3 Elul, 5714 (1 September, 1954), 174.

This was the legal, social and political context sub-Saharan Africans faced when they started to arrive in Israel in the early 1990s. Lacking work permits, they had only themselves and each other to rely upon for finding work. Tel Aviv, the largest and most affluent city in Israel, attracted the majority of them. Commonly employed as house cleaners in and around the city, they mostly lived in cheap housing areas (Schnell and Graicer 1994; MESILA 2000). Having overstayed their visa and working without a work permit, they were automatically in violation of Israeli law. Yet for many years, their legal status (or lack thereof) did not prevent them from creating rich social, economic and religious lives.

The first Africans to arrive were mainly men from Ghana and Nigeria, with smaller numbers from almost all other sub-Saharan African countries. After the mid-1990s, African women began to arrive in greater numbers, leading to the establishment of new families in the host country. Most of the Africans were Christians, though a small number of Muslims, mainly from Sierra Leone, were also present. Given the undocumented nature of their migration, official figures are unavailable, but it is estimated that, by the end of the 1990s, out of a total of 250,000 international labour migrants in Israel, about 14,000-20,000 were Africans.<sup>7</sup> Their numbers dropped sharply following a massive deportation programme undertaken between 2002 and 2003, with only 1,000-2,000 veterans remaining in 2004, mostly single mothers with children and refugees, recognised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The latter arrived as labour migrants from Congo, Sierra Leone and Liberia, in the 1990s. Over the years, as their countries were torn by violent wars, they argued that they couldn't go back home and most have been recognised as refugees and asylum seekers by the UN and, consequently, by the Israeli authorities.

### **'Here I Have the Ability to Feel the Holiness of God'**

Given the heavy restrictions imposed by the Israeli government on international migration and the religious basis of citizenship, we may wonder what it was about Israel that drew veteran Africans there. Our findings suggest three main motives: the first relates to the economic prospects that life in

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<sup>7</sup> These figures are based on unofficial estimations made by Israeli NGOs as well as estimations given by the African Workers' Union, the largest NGO established by the African migrants in Israel.

Israel offered most migrant labourers and to the fact that life in Israel was considered fairly comfortable. In addition, veteran African migrants assisted those who followed in both material and emotional matters and created a well organized support system. The second reason relates to the fact that Israel was physically closer to Africa than other Western countries and mainly that it was fairly easy to enter the country legally using either a tourist or a pilgrim visa. The third and unique factor, though entangled with the previous two, relates to the identification of Israel with the Judeo-Christian Holy Land. Many interviewees, both those already in Israel and those planning to go there, mentioned the country's religious significance along with practical considerations as reasons for migrating to Israel. Some gave the impression that Israel's identification with the Holy Land was a primary motive, and that the economic incentives were secondary:

All my life I studied about the Holy Land through the Bible, I prayed to... [B]e there... When I was looking for a job and someone told me about coming to Jerusalem I felt that God has answered my prayers. (Interview with Moses\*, Kumasi 2002)<sup>8</sup>

Before I came I thought that Jerusalem and Bethlehem are in heaven... [A]nd I was always praying that... I shall be able to be there... But then I met someone whose cousin was in Jerusalem and he told me that it is a real place that people live and work and he told me that there is a lot of work and you can save a lot of money... I decided to see it for myself. (Interview with Reuben\*, Tel Aviv 2001)

For many veteran Africans, the identification with the idealised Holy Land seems to have infused the host country, for all of its imperfections, with a unique spiritual value, and fostered a deep bond with the country. Such religious enthusiasm notwithstanding, it is unlikely that excepting a few, Israel took precedence over other migrant destination countries simply because of biblical connotations; the practical economic benefits of migrating to Israel were kept firmly in mind.

As in many other diasporas, the African migrants in Israel created their own communities based on regional, national, ethnic, gender and other criteria of belonging with a wide range of social, economic and political associations. In Israel however, two distinctive features contributed to this tendency to create very many organisations and associations: their unorganised means of arrival and lack of legal status. Lacking the (very mixed) blessing of a manpower agency to provide them with work and housing, and state commitment to cater for their needs, they made their own work and living

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<sup>8)</sup> The quotes throughout this article are taken from interviews held with Africans in Israel; All the names are either first names or fictitious if followed by the \* sign.



arrangements. Aside from a handful of NGOs that provided medical and legal assistance, there was only one state-sponsored facility (MESILA in Tel Aviv) that provided information, legal assistance, professional training, and welfare services to all migrants regardless of their legal status. The enforcement of their rights in terms of wages, work hours, living conditions or health care was very lax and only in the late 1990s did human rights organisations begin to take up their cause. Their relatively high income, however, and the high percentage of well educated individuals amongst them provided African migrants with both the resources and knowledge to enable the creation of their own support networks and access to other services that were available by the city council and local NGOs.

At the heart of the rich community life that the veteran African migrants created in Israel were the many independent African Christian congregations and churches. In the beginning of 2000 there were over 40 such congregations in Tel Aviv alone, with membership ranging from a handful to several hundred (Sabar 2004, 2007). This figure is particularly significant when compared to the handful of churches established by other Christian migrant groups in Israel despite being much more numerous (Kemp and Raijman 2003).

Elsewhere I have traced in detail the lives of the veteran African labour migrants in Israel, with special emphasis on the unique Afro-Christian arena they created (Sabar 2004, 2007, 2008). The earliest cohort to arrive in Israel first attended existing churches, predominantly Catholic, Lutheran or Anglican. They recalled their feelings of linguistic, social and cultural alienation in the midst of congregations composed mostly of Arab Israelis. For many, this sense of cultural alienation was amplified by strong religious and political animosity. They identified all Arabs, even professed Christians, with Muslims, and expressed dislike on that account: 'We don't like the Arabs... Back home [Ghana] the Muslims are always related to the Arabs and we don't associate with them... Why should I pray with them here?' (Interview with Ampadu Tel Aviv 2000). Clearly, their perception of the Holy Land was one that had no Arabs or Muslims in it. 'The Holy Land is the land of the Hebrews... It was given by God to you people... [T]here is no place in this land for the enemies of the Hebrew people like the Muslims' (Interview with Jane\*, Jerusalem 1997). Siding with Israel's hardliners in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, many Africans identified Arabs as the enemy and expressed aversion to their living in the country, let alone sharing a congregation with them.

Thus by 1991, within less than two years since their arrival, small and informal fellowships and prayer groups began to grow into official African

churches. Most of them followed the new Pentecostal model that became popular in the 1990s both in Africa and in many African diasporic communities (Van Dijk 2001; Ter Haar 1998; Adogame 2001).

In spite of their deep religiosity infusing the land with holiness, however, religious regulations dating back to Ottoman law and reinforced by the State of Israel<sup>9</sup> meant that African churches, though allowed to operate, were not officially recognised by the state as religious congregations and could not associate with or benefit from the official religious arena of the Holy Land. They were not entitled, for example, to have their own cemeteries or designated praying hours at holy sites, nor were their wedding and birth certificates recognised by the state. This legal-bureaucratic marginalisation was a source of great bitterness and frustration.

Several studies have argued that ethnic minorities tend to seek legitimacy in the public sphere by privileging their religious identity (Baumann 2000; Gibb 1998; Herberg 1983; Werbner 2005; Van Dijk 2001). Initially, this was not the case for the veteran Africans in Israel, who made efforts not to project their religious identity into the public sphere. Thus, in line with Israeli law, they refrained from missionary activity among Israeli Jews and, cognisant of Israeli sensitivities, avoided externalising their Christianity in the public sphere. Israeli Jews readily accept the existence of mosques and churches in Arab areas, as well as in traditional holy sites; however, the sight of new churches in the midst of Jewish residential areas or missionary activities would probably have created a considerable sense of anxiety and perhaps even open hostility. With good grace and understanding, as well as wariness of

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<sup>9</sup> Among the regulations that rule the Jewish character of the State of Israel are a set of laws and conventions dating back to the Ottoman period (adopted with changes by the British Mandate and later by the State of Israel) which clearly define who and what are recognised as a 'religious congregation'. According to the King's Order in Council of 1922, also referred to as the Palestine Order in Council of 1922, the administration of the territory of Palestine is determined and the jurisdiction of the religious courts in matters of personal status is outlined. Moreover, the King's Order of 1922 identifies specific religious communities and gives only them full rights in the Holy Land. The two original Christian congregations that were granted this official status under the Ottomans were the Eastern-Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic.

Today the State of Israel recognises the following religions: Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Druze and Baha'i. Within Christianity it recognises: Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Chaldaic (Catholic) and Evangelical Episcopal (Anglican). No other denominations are officially recognised by the State of Israel, hence denying them the special status and privilege that the recognised denominations have.

provoking the ire of their hosts, the African churches thus relinquished the means by which they could publicly proclaim their power, legitimacy, prestige and vitality.

Apart from their religious seclusion, their illegal status meant that African migrants had no close links to the State of Israel's civic arena. Hence a peculiar reality was created whereby although they felt attachment to the Holy Land and considered themselves supporters of the State of Israel, the veteran African migrants were caught in a doubly marginalised position: as non-recognised religious congregations they were not officially part of the religious arena of the Holy Land, and as illegal migrants they were isolated from the country's public sphere. Acute awareness of both the impossibility of gaining Israeli citizenship and of their marginalised religious position impelled Africans to construct their own Christian spaces. Within these spaces they felt connected to their home and to other Africans, were able to worship in ways more fulfilling to them than in state-recognised churches, and felt that their spiritual and social needs were met.

Over the years the churches developed a wide range of religious, social and economic activities such as small child nurseries, vocational training facilities, saving and credit associations, sports and recreational clubs and ethnic organisations. This wide range of activities became the most important feature of the African-created Christian arena in Israel and central to the life of the African diaspora. Though excluded and marginalised, these social and religious activities allowed Christian African labour migrants to construct their wills, dreams, grievances and demands, while stressing their deep connection and love for the country and its people. All this was strengthened by a spiritual narrative that offered meaning and significance to their presence. While projecting an idealised image of the Holy Land, the religious arena also functioned as an essential facilitator in engaging with the profane and unwelcoming State of Israel.

Churches also became facilitators of political activities. Though limited and cautious, they became an avenue for constructing, refining and presenting Africans' desires publicly. Appealing to compassion, the pursuit of justice and similar Judeo-Christians moral ideals, the veteran Africans highlighted human rights issues in their political activities. Yet with few exceptions, they did not raise their grievances or construct their demands in terms that challenged prevailing Israeli citizenship law.

Until the start of massive deportations, these politically oriented activities were rather limited with little direct political influence. Nevertheless, church leaders, sometimes alone and sometimes in conjunction with leaders of the

African Workers Union,<sup>10</sup> lobbied to improve the living conditions and legal status of Africans in Israel, and worked to improve relations between the community and the police. They met with local and national politicians and with deportation and other police officers. They sent petitions, complaints, and policy proposals to all and sundry. Some of their activities were public, while others took place behind the scenes (Rosenhek 1999).

Relations between the African clergy and the local Jewish rabbinical leadership were also significant. Well aware of divisions within the Jewish world, some African clergymen cooperated with Reform rabbis, carrying out joint humanitarian operations as well as offering legal assistance through the Israeli Religious Action Centre, the legal aid arm of the Reform movement. Over the years, several Reform congregations held special Passover dinners, joining together Israeli and African migrant families.<sup>11</sup> These invoked the symbolism of the exodus from Egypt and the Jewish commitment to the weak and the stranger. Well aware of the exclusivist attitude of leading Orthodox rabbis, the African clergy made no attempt to meet them in an effort to bring their plea to the Israeli-Jewish public. The domination of Sephardic Orthodox cabinet ministers in the Ministry of Interior only strengthened the African clergy's disengagement from the local Jewish leadership.

### **Between Rights and Compassion**

Realising that acting on their own had limited effect on Israeli policy makers and the Israeli public, from the mid-1990s, the African churches joined others in the struggle for change. Together with Israeli human rights activists and NGOs they fought to bring their plight to the attention of Israeli society via the media and academic conferences (Adout 2007; Sabar 2008; Willen 2007). Israeli social activists, politicians and others visited church halls and delivered messages, distributed written material about their rights as migrant workers, and listened to the congregants' complaints.

In 1997, the African Workers Union produced a long and detailed document in which it outlined Africa's economic and political problems and

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<sup>10</sup> The African Workers Union (AWU) was founded in 1997 by several African men with the support of two leading Israeli politicians. Though all members were illegally in Israel, the AWU was formally registered with the Israeli Federation of Trade Unions and was thus recognised by state authorities.

<sup>11</sup> Most of these initiatives were led by Rabbi Meir Azari, Rabbi (lawyer) Gilad Kariv, Rabbi Galia Sadan from Bet Daniel Congregation in Tel Aviv and Anat Hoffman from IRAC.

sought to represent Africans living in Israel as “temporary economic refugees”. Their key claim was that African workers were seeking only temporary work visas in Israel in order to accumulate enough wealth to go back home. In this significant document, major themes from Zionist and Jewish history such as the Exodus from Egypt, the quest for Zion and the Holocaust were all mentioned – directly and indirectly – as means of promoting sympathy and understanding towards the African migrants’ plea. However, the document was cautious in tone, references and demands.

Many African clergymen took part in the long discussions that preceded the final draft and reported these discussions back to their congregations. Thanks to this clerical input, biblical references were frequently interpolated into the document along with resonant terms such as ‘compassion’, ‘mutual help’ and the Jewish religious obligations toward the weak and the stranger (*ger*). These biblical themes expanded the borders of the discourse from one strictly concerned with economic or human rights to one that touched upon the wider themes of Jewish compassion, common suffering and the solidarity of the oppressed. Church leaders’ perceptions of the State of Israel and the Holy Land, and consequent African religious claims for rights, though not the most radical or vocal rhetorical strand in the text, were nevertheless echoed in this document. With some modifications this document was presented and published several times between 1997-2003 in an attempt to raise debates over migrants’ fears, needs and rights amongst the Israeli public and decision makers.

However, none of the veteran African clergy were willing to sign their name to the document or take part in an official delegation that presented it to the Israeli parliament. The civic leaders of the veteran African community took the lead, portraying a clear vision of what they considered to be their basic human rights, on the one hand, and Israel’s obligation towards them as foreign labourers on the other. Still, they considered the support of the African clergy and the biblical justifications significant.

In an attempt to explain their refusal to sign the document and unite with civil African leaders who led the political campaign, one Ghanaian pastor said: ‘In this document we are not only asking the Israeli government to give us working visas for five years but we also give our commitment that our people will go back home... I can’t make sure that they will indeed leave after five years... So I don’t want to sign my name... If I promise I need to keep my word... How can I be sure they will leave?’ (Interview with Ampadu, Tel Aviv 1997). Fear of losing their unique position in the eyes of Israeli politicians led most of the veteran African clergy to take a cautious

stand. Careful not to be perceived as challenging the ethno-national character of the State of Israel, most churches made no explicit demands for citizenship or even permanent status or recognition as religious or national minorities, and no effort to participate in Israel's wider political arena.

Though this was indeed the leading policy of the African clergy in Israel, some of their activities did nonetheless promote their communities' claims to recognition and legitimacy in the public sphere from both the government and society at large. Though limited in scope, these activities did manage to raise migrants' awareness of their rights in key areas of labour relations, health, education, arrest and deportation, while bringing migrants' position to the attention of the Israeli public. Knowing that there were very few ways for non-Jewish undocumented workers to obtain citizenship, even through their Israel-born children, African migrants continued to plea via the churches and other associations for basic rights. For example, they raised the issues of state sponsored health insurance, maternity leave and other benefits. Against the backdrop of their daily hardships, even these limited political activities of the churches were significant.

As political leadership was oftentimes facilitated through and by churches and clergymen, it is not surprising that religious arguments were often politicised. Yet similar ideas were expressed by individuals too. Most lay veteran migrants whom I interviewed spoke of Israel as the Holy Land, giving them a sense of belonging. As devout Christians, they felt that they had the inalienable right to remain in Israel and to enjoy a variety of vaguely specified rights in the country.

As the gap between the biblical ideal and the imperfect reality grew increasingly apparent, this feeling of natural belonging became a source of frustration to growing numbers of veteran African migrants. As most of their attempts to gain temporary residency permits failed, the contrast between their spiritual and emotional attachment to the land and the Christian holy places, on the one hand, and their exclusion from both the official religious arena of the Holy Land and its civic horizon, on the other, was a source of barely suppressed bitterness. As one Nigerian migrant said: 'Deportation police and fear are not part of the Holy Land... This is something else' (Interview with Sara\*, Tel Aviv 2001). Another, from Kenya, claimed that: 'In the Holy Land everybody is legal... All God's children are citizens of the Holy Land... but in Israel it is different' (Interview with Ephraim\*, Tel Aviv 2001). As a result of their disappointment, the veteran migrants had to draw a cognitive distinction between the Holy Land and the modern State of Israel. Painfully aware of the complex circumstances of their lives, it was through their religion and in their churches that they sought and found the

legitimacy denied them by the Israeli legislative system. Most understood and ostensibly accepted that their stay in Israel could only be temporary and that they would never obtain citizenship or even civic recognition.

Until the early 2000s and with the aid of the churches, the veteran African migrants largely conceptualised their wills, dreams, grievances and demands within one main discourse: the compassion-based argument. Strongly grounded in a religious discourse, this argument was anchored in their deep connection and love towards the Holy Land and its people. Though signs of change may be traced to the late 1990s, it was mostly in reaction to the stepped-up deportations of the early 2000s and as part of the intensification of their political struggle that the veterans' discourse altered. This shift signalled a change from a compassion-based discourse framed by a religious approach to a rights-based discourse based upon human rights and the plea for solidarity with the oppressed.

### **'Our Rights in the Holy Land'**

Since the beginning of 2000, with the massive deportation of this first cohort of African migrant labourers, things changed. The numerous incidents of excessive use of force and the abuse of human rights as part of the deportation process were discussed in church gatherings. Prayers and other church meetings were devoted to the ramifications of the deportations. As the essence of the deportation policy was the state refusal to recognise foreign workers' right to stay, the two major theses raised by the Africans were the legal status of children born and raised in Israel and the rights of people who have lived in the country for many years and expressed their wish to become citizens.

It took almost a decade for the churches to incorporate these political issues into their sermons and prayers on a regular basis. This change reflected a shift from a feeling of transience to a sense of belonging in Israel as well as a realisation that their discourse of rights has to relate to and change according to that of the State of Israel. Hence, special evenings and prayer groups were devoted to the topic of 'deportation', 'our rights in the Holy Land' and 'God and African migrants'. In these religious gatherings prophetic healing techniques to protect against the deportation police were practised. Most of these prayers and sermons were performed with great awareness of the anger they could cause if the themes leaked to the Israeli public.

Unlike the veteran African civic leaders, until the end of 2003 most church leaders still called on their followers to abstain from public criticism of Israel and to avoid voicing their grievances in the public sphere. Following the

common African-Pentecostal path of being politically acquiescent and 'uncivic' some churches even called on all their members to leave the country and go back home peacefully (Sabar 2007). Only a few African clergymen came out publicly against the State of Israel, while declaring that though they identified themselves as devout Christians, they were expressing their views as individuals.

A few days before returning to Ghana, Ray, a 35 year old man from Kumasi, told me: 'You know me, I'm here almost seven years. It was good... [B]ut now I'm going back... [Y]ou don't want us here any more... I'm leaving Israel... [T]he Holy Land, the chosen land... [T]he place I dreamed all my life to be in' (Interview with Ray, Tel Aviv 2001). Ray came to Israel in the mid-1990s and over the years managed to build a family, study computers and become one of the most influential people within the Resurrection and Living God's Ministry Church. After leading endless prayer sessions against deportation and signing petitions calling on the Israeli government to be merciful and refrain from deporting economically deprived migrants, he decided to leave. Like many other African Christians, Ray tried to challenge Israeli policies using the biblical notion of compassion. In spite of his sense of frustration and failure, which were framed in terms of shattered dreams about the Holy Land, Ray was gentle in his words.

With increasing numbers of deportations, hopes of remaining in Israel collapsed and many veteran migrants, like Ray, decided to leave. Even when not coerced into leaving, they nonetheless felt the departure was forced upon them. This made some far more critical of the State of Israel:

Who are you to kick us out like this... [W]e only came here to make money and go back home... We have children here, they go to school, they play in Hebrew... [T]hey are locals... Anyway, this is not really your land. It is the land of all human beings, it is the land of God, it is the Holy Land for Christians, Muslims and Jews... [Y]ou are only Israelis, you are just temporary here... [W]e shall return with the help of Christ and the Messiah. (Interview with Judith, Tel Aviv 2001)

The words of Judith, an active Nigerian Pentecostal deaconess, were loud and clear. In her short testimony recorded in 2001, she not only criticised the State of Israel's deportation policy but also drew a clear distinction between Israel as a modern nation-state and the Holy Land as a sacred arena where humans are but temporary residents in God's world. This notion led to her belief that Israel, though a sovereign state, has no right to deport others. Judith was clearly not a detached 'born again' with no knowledge of *realpolitik*. On the contrary, being highly familiar with the Israeli political situation and policies as well as with the global realities of migrant workers and global



discourses on the rights of migrants, she tried to fight deportation on all fronts: legally, practically and, finally, eschatologically. Her perception of the host country was framed in both biblical and mundane terms, incorporating her personal struggle with her plea for salvation.

By the beginning of 2004 the veteran African migrant community with all of its social, religious and political activities had practically ceased to exist. Many African churches closed down and those remaining were greatly diminished in size, influence and ability to maintain services that had been provided for years.

Increasingly, Africans who were given special permission to remain, mostly single mothers or asylum seekers from war-torn zones, realised the tenuousness of their stay and concentrated their political struggle on gaining official status – either by registering to be recognised as refugees or, more commonly, through their children who were born or raised in Israel. They began appealing for formal recognition of their *de facto* citizenship, which included living and working in the country, raising families, loyalty to the country and cultural attachment (Mundlak 2009). Since most of their veteran leaders – both civil and religious – had been deported, their struggle was orchestrated with the aid of Israeli NGOs.

Following Sassen, African migrants' plea may be conceived as the actions of 'unauthorized immigrants whose daily practices earn them informal citizenship participation and even formal rights' (Sassen 2002: 278). In addition to challenging the State of Israel's linking of citizenship to Jewish origin, the veteran African migrants started to use similar discourses as those used by other African migrants worldwide to challenge the state on the basis of their *de facto* citizenship.

In 2004, the Israeli government engaged in a debate about children's rights and eventually passed a decree that children either born or raised in Israel who go to Israeli schools, have mastered the Hebrew Language and whose deportation could be considered a 'cultural exile', would be given the right to remain lawfully in the country. This, however, came too late for the majority of veteran African families who, realising that there were practically no legal avenues for them and their children to ever gain citizenship, had sent their children back home once they reached school age. Over the years, several thousand African children were born and raised in Israel, but by the end of 2004 when the decree was passed, of several hundred applications only 36 African children and their immediate families in Israel were eligible to receive temporary residency, according to the strict regulations established by the Ministry of the Interior (Sabar and Gez 2009).

Nevertheless, this *ad hoc* humanitarian gesture created high expectations not only amongst veteran Africans with children in Israel but also amongst newly arrived Africans, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea, who entered the country via its porous border with Egypt and sought political asylum as refugees.

### **‘We Are Refugees Seeking Life’: ‘New’ Africans, ‘New’ Discourse**

Shortly after the massive deportation of non-documented labour migrants, the collapse of their well constructed communities and the emerging discourse on citizenship via their Israeli born and raised children, thousands of new African migrants began arriving in Israel in 2005. First in a trickle, later in a flood, African men, women and children entered the country illegally by crossing the long, permeable border with Egypt.

Unlike the veteran Africans who came mainly from West Africa by air, using tourist or pilgrim visas, most arrivals since 2005 entered the country on foot. Within less than three years, more than 17,000 people, primarily from Eritrea (6,500 with 500 minors) and Sudan (approximately 5,000 with 600 minors) entered Israel (UNHCR 2008; Refugees’ Rights Forum 2009). The UNHCR prohibits deportation to these countries due to the serious danger facing returnees. An internal report of the Israeli Justice Ministry described Eritrea as a country with widespread human rights violations and political persecution, including jailing prisoners of conscience without charge or trial, persecution on religious grounds and the disappearance of citizens.<sup>12</sup>

Out of the 5,000 asylum seekers from Sudan, approximately 1,400 were recognised as survivors from Darfur, a region of Sudan which, according to the United Nations, has seen the worst humanitarian crisis in the world in recent years. The other Sudanese asylum seekers arrived from southern Sudan whose population has been brutally repressed by the Islamist central government in Khartoum for several decades. In 2005 the Sudanese government signed a peace agreement with the Christian south, but many asylum seekers complain of continuing, ongoing oppression and discrimination. Over the years several thousand asylum seekers from Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Ivory Coast also entered Israel seeking temporary protection from civil war and violence in their home countries. Many of these

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<sup>12)</sup> Internal report of the Israeli Justice Ministry, Desk for Struggle against Human Trafficking, 7 October 2007.

newcomers had lived in Egypt for many years as refugees, before security problems and harsh living conditions drove them to take the risk and cross the border with Israel illegally.<sup>13</sup> Immediately upon arrival virtually all Africans entering via Egypt sought refugee status from the State of Israel.

In January 2008, Israel granted temporary residence visas to 600 people from Darfur, thus enabling them to work and reside freely in the country. In addition, the state issued 2,000 temporary work permits to Eritrean citizens.<sup>14</sup> Fearing a 'tsunami' of African economic migrants, Israeli officials have issued several ad hoc regulations restricting the ability of most migrants to work and reside in the centre of the country and repeatedly threatened to deport the majority of new arrivals. Since 2006, Israeli NGOs, student groups and individual citizens have challenged the Israeli government's regulations, restrictions and treatment of these arrivals, and tried to fill the void left by their government's failure to provide social services.

Unlike the veteran African migrants who entered the country legally and were quickly absorbed into the local African community, the vast majority of new African migrants were caught by Israeli soldiers guarding the border. From the border they were taken to prison and were charged with illegally trespassing. Those from Sudan – an enemy country to Israel – were also considered 'a security threat.' At first, all those entering Israel via its border with Egypt were labelled by the authorities as 'Sudanese'. However, as the numbers increased, national classifications were adopted: Sudanese, Eritreans, Ethiopians. This was followed by more detailed classifications: 'Southern Sudanese', 'Darfurians'. In addition, categories were added based on the Africans' route to Israel and the length of period they spent in Egypt as well as their religious affiliation: Christian or Muslim.

Over time it became clear that Israel was facing a new phenomenon, thus leading to yet a further refinement of migrant classifications through terms such as 'survivors from the genocide in Darfur', 'refugees', 'asylum seekers'

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<sup>13</sup>) Since the outbreak of the second Sudanese civil war in 1983, which displaced some four million Southern Sudanese and left almost two million dead, Egypt has been a host to a large Sudanese population. The war between the government in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA) formally ended with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in January 2005. Since 2003, however, a separate conflict in Darfur, Western Sudan, has killed 300,000 people and displaced 2.7 million.

<sup>14</sup>) Those receiving this permit entered Israel before 25 December, 2007. They received the renewable work permits ('B-1 visas'). Eritreans who arrived in Israel after that date began to receive work authorisations in February 2008, but these permits had to be renewed monthly and imposed severe restrictions on place of residence and employment.

and 'opportunists seeking a better life'. A scale of suffering was added to these classifications placing the survivors from the genocide in Darfur at the top and the opportunists at the bottom of it. For many Israelis, officials and non-officials the genocide survivors were entitled to some state assistance while the others' rights were questionable.

By 2008, the roughly 17,000 new African migrants were distributed in four main locations: 2,000 in prison, waiting for their case to be heard; 3,000 in the southern city of Eilat, living and working in hotels; 7,000 in agricultural settlements around the country; and 5,000 settled in various locations in the centre of the country, including organised shelters and rented flats in Tel Aviv. Virtually all have registered at the UNHCR offices in Israel, seeking recognition and temporary immunity.

The unexpectedly large wave of non-Jewish asylum seekers challenged the State of Israel's under-resourced asylum procedures and lack of national legislation to allow implementation of its obligations under the United Nations Refugee Convention (Ben Dor and Adout 2003; Refugees' Rights Forum 2008a; Refugees' Rights Forum 2008b). The result was an enormous backlog in asylum applications.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, many Africans remained without clear status, and consequently had limited access to health care and welfare services. A successful court appeal in 2007 by Israeli and refugee-founded NGOs against the Prevention of Infiltration Law have meant that Israel no longer subjects border crossers to indefinite and unreviewable detention.

As mentioned, the arrival of the new wave of Africans coincided with the celebration by several veteran African families of their newly gained temporary residence status. This heated up the already complex and multifaceted debate within Israel regarding the government's humanitarian gesture, the 'proper' way to treat the distressed newcomers, the long-term implications of African migration to Israel, and the future character of the State of Israel in the face of massive non-Jewish migration. Notwithstanding other issues, significant for my argument is the way in which new Christian African migrants constructed the host country and framed their discourse vis-à-vis

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<sup>15</sup> In his annual report, submitted to the Israeli parliament on 20 May, 2008, the State Comptroller revealed that Israeli authorities recognised only 11 out of 909 asylum applicants in 2005 as refugees; 6 out of 1,348 applicants in 2006; and 3 out of over 3,000 applicants in the first nine months of 2007. The Comptroller's report found that officials took six months to reject asylum seekers and almost three years to decide cases deemed worthy of adjudication. See: State Comptroller Annual Report. Jerusalem: Israeli Parliament Press, May 2008.

the State of Israel, and the way in which the existing African Christian religious arena in the Holy Land related to them.

### **Escaping Persecution**

As we have seen, the first wave of Africans presented their choice of Israel as the host country in terms of economic advantage, ease of gaining entrance visas and faith. Their perception of Israel was a combination of the holy and the mundane, of temporality and permanence, and of vaguely termed residential rights within a limited vision of citizenship. Their understanding of Israel was embedded in the activities of their religious arena built at the centre of the modern State of Israel, at the heart of the Holy Land. Above all, they related to their countries of origin as home and most spoke of a desire to return.

The newcomers, by contrast, hardly spoke of economic advantages and their Christian attachment to the Holy Land was, at least initially, tangential. Their discourse was based on terms related to survival, desperation, life and death. Yet once the Christians amongst them felt these arguments alone were not sufficient in their struggle to gain asylum, religious persecutions in their homeland were added to their discourse. Although the latter had strong impact in several western countries' asylum procedures, in Israel it was never the main issue invoked. Moreover, the way the new comers inserted religious claims into their discourse differed from that of the veterans and came only when other claims and issues seemed to fail.

As said, the newcomers' discourse was based on terms related to survival. Most of them knew that crossing the border between Israel and Egypt meant risking death or imprisonment for themselves and their families, yet they felt that the situation at home or their place of refuge in Egypt left them with few alternatives. As J.B., a man from Darfur who was arrested by the Egyptian border police, said: 'My choice was to stay in Cairo, go through Libya [to Europe] and maybe die at sea, or go to Israel and die by a bullet. I preferred to die by a bullet' (Human Rights Watch 2008: 16).

Stressing the sense of urgency felt prior to the decision to go to Israel, M.B., a 28-year-old man from Eritrea, said: 'Life in my country became so difficult that we had no choice but to go. We heard that in Israel we can live... we heard that after prison you let people go. So we came' (Interview with M.B., Ketziot Prison 2006). Needless to say, those who came directly from war-torn zones, mainly from Darfur, gave horrific personal accounts:

I left El Ginena [West Darfur] in 2003... [B]ecause the Janjaweed attacked my village... They raped women, they killed the eldest and the kids and they threw them in the fire. I saw. I saw my parents, my mother, father, brother, and sister being killed and they burned our houses... I saw them rape women. This happened to me. I was alone when I left, none of my family made it. (Human Rights Report 2008: 17)

At the very beginning, the new wave of Africans explained their arrival in Israel in practical terms of survival. The slim chance of not only securing their personal safety but possibly even improving their living conditions drew them to Israel. As more and more Africans managed to enter Israel and even to secure basic means of survival, their reasoning for doing so became more intricate. A Southern Sudanese community leader in Cairo summed up the reasons why people in his community were leaving for Israel:

We don't have the right to be in Egypt and work or to live decently, and if we went back [to Southern Sudan] we don't know what we'd find; everything that we had there was destroyed. The UN says that Southern Sudan is now at peace and they won't take us [for resettlement]. But there is no infrastructure there... [M]ilitias and rebels are still fighting. There is no way for the government in Southern Sudan to protect anyone who returns. And we can't go to other Arab countries. This is why people are going to Israel. If America or Canada or Australia were next door we'd go there. But Israel is it. (Human Rights Watch 2008: 28)

In his terms, the main arguments for entering Israel were failure to gain legal status within Egypt, fear of resettlement and the physical proximity of Israel. Yet it seems that when realising that these alone were not sufficient to be granted asylum of any kind, the Christians among the new African migrants framed their arguments differently, stressing the religious persecution they suffered in Muslim countries: 'The people in Egypt hate us [Christians] because we are Arabs but different... This makes us different... [I]t was more difficult for people like us to find a job in Egypt' (Interview with Fassil\*, 2007). While speaking to an Israeli activist in an Israeli prison, one man from Sudan made an interesting link between his national and religious identity and the fact that he had to escape Egypt and come to Israel:

At the border, the police say you are a Jew, and they beat you. But they really shout at people from the South [of Sudan, many of whom are Christian]. They tell them: 'you are the enemy of Arabs and Islam'. (Human Rights Watch 2008: 48)

For these and others, referring to their Christianity as the reason for being persecuted was not always raised directly but rather entangled with other reasons. K.J., from Southern Sudan, however, directly established the link between his religion, his decision to come to Israel and the fact that Israel is

the land of Jewish refugees, saying: 'We Christians are exactly like you Jews... refugees seeking life. In this country I can find others like me who will help me' (Interview with K.J., Tel Aviv 2008). The fact that in Israel there were already other African refugees who came, survived and even thrived, and who had established a local infrastructure to assist refugees, was indeed important. On a more abstract level, the fact that Israel is in itself an immigrant-based country was kept firmly in mind. Moreover, the newcomers more than the veterans frequently invoked the Jewish-Israeli history emphasising the collective memory of immigrants.

In a rather long interview conducted in one of the African churches in Tel Aviv, Malcolm, a 24-year-old man originally from southern Sudan, tried to explain some of his views about his life, Israel and questions of identity:

Sudan is no longer a place for human beings... [I]t is a place for animals or for slaves... No one can live with such a government... [N]o one can stay in a place where you have to fight all the time about everything. You have no freedom, you can't decide about nothing... We are in war with Khartoum for so many years and they kill us [Christians] but you Israelis always helped us. I heard about Israel since I was a child in my church... My uncle was trained by your army so I heard from him that you are good people... [S]o when I decided to escape my country I heard I can come and be a citizen in Israel... It took me a long time to come here... I was some years in Cairo... At the beginning you put people in jail but then we heard that some people came and got refuge in the country. We know that churches here help refugees... Then we heard that other whites [Israelis] in Tel Aviv fight for us with the police and give people beds to sleep and clothes and food... [S]o we all decided to come... We were lucky; we were not in prison for long. We got shelter and work in some village... [N]ow we are in Tel Aviv working... Some church people still assist us when we need... We were fighting with the Muslims in our country just like you... [W]e are Christians just like you so we always knew that you will help us. (Interview with Malcolm\*, Tel Aviv 2007)

Though Malcolm and a few others did relate to Israel as a safe haven for Christians, most of my interviewees did not speak of their arrival in Israel in clear religious terms, nor did they speak about the importance of Israel as the land in which Christ lived and preached. For them, Israel seemed to be mainly a place where they could live and even – so they thought – become citizens. They perceived churches mainly as catering to their immediate material needs.

Following my conversation with Malcolm I was approached by other Eritreans. In May 2007, seated in my office at the University, Abraha told me his life story. When I asked him about his whereabouts in Tel Aviv he said that he worked in a restaurant, shared a room with a friend and 'most of my free time is for art. Art is my life and in this country I can be an artist... I

want to have an exhibition... [so] most of my time I look for sponsors... I have a temporary work permit and a visa so I'm not worried I will be deported' (Interview with Abraha\*, Tel Aviv 2007).

As this was the first time in over ten years of research that an African migrant had presented himself to me in such a way I was a little surprised. As the official reason for our meeting was his request for assistance in some matters concerning his refugee status, the fact that Abraha chose to present himself as an artist seeking support and praising Israel as a country that has a vibrant art scene was for me not only novel but also intriguing. In an attempt to understand him I started our talk by asking about his art work. While telling me how he came to Israel via Egypt he presented some photos of his paintings and sculptures, many of which clearly drew on biblical motifs. 'Are you a Christian?' I asked. 'Oh yes, definitely,' he replied. 'Do you go to Church in Israel?' 'Oh, yes, every Sunday.' 'Is it important to you?' I continued to ask.

Well, sometimes I go and sometimes I don't... I need to find sponsors. This is my main mission, this will not come from the church... [B]ut [laughing] in the beginning when I needed clothes and blankets I went to Jeremiah's church [in Tel Aviv], they had it all for Sudanese refugees so I said, I need too... They gave me... They are a big church that is there for many years... [they] know much about refugees and papers [legal documents] needed for UNHCR. They gave me much help. I don't think they do other things, not many of us go there... [W]e are too busy looking for jobs, for rooms to rent, for assistance in getting papers. (Interview with Abraha\*, Tel Aviv 2007)

Although Abraha said that he goes to church, for him the church seems to have functioned as a provider of basic necessities and information about the possibility of gaining official documents and recognition. The veteran African migrants, unlike him, related to the church not merely as a religious venue or as a provider of basic necessities but rather as an arena within which many of their more subjective needs were fulfilled or at least acknowledged, including emotional needs, their frustration vis-à-vis the State of Israel in relation to their civic status and, most of all, their need to empower themselves and to maintain their pride.

Abraha came to Israel after he escaped an Eritrean prison where he was jailed for defecting from compulsory military conscription. His wife and children were left behind and, according to him, suffered harassment due to his escape. Abraha came to Israel in search of a better future and was well aware of international laws concerning refugee rights, asylum procedures and international conventions. At the same time he was well aware of the complex Israeli policies and regulations concerning non-Jewish migrants as well as the



fact that Israel had signed the United Nations Refugee Convention. Hence, whatever institution, local or international, religious or civic, that could help him was welcomed by him. Like many others in his position, he constructed and re-constructed his claims using themes and terminology borrowed from various discourses, ranging from international human rights to artistic zeal and Jewish compassion. His arguments echoed local and international debates on issues of citizenship and identity but were constructed to fit the Israeli context. In his actions he demonstrated the notion of refugees as active agents and key participants in the ongoing framing and reframing of the global debates about who those people who migrate, seek refugee and asylum status are, how they should be treated and what their rights are.

### **Christians and Jews in the Holy Land: the Religious Arena, 2005-2008**

Unlike the rather warm welcome the veteran Africans received from fellow Africans, Abraha faced a crumbling local community with limited capacity and little enthusiasm to assist newcomers. National and ethnic barriers clearly played a role in the veterans' refusal to support fellow Africans but they were not the only reason. The remnants of the veteran community, which for years had tried to avoid direct confrontation with the Israeli government, met with a new and radical form of diasporic political tactics. Abraha, like many of the new Africans from Eritrea, Sudan and other countries, constructed his discourse vis-à-vis the State of Israel and Israelis around issues of misery, asylum and the commitment of Israel to the sufferings of refugees. The veterans saw how thousands of new migrants from Africa gained shelter, humanitarian assistance, public sympathy and even official recognition by the state along with an entitlement to temporary documents. The veterans as individuals were both furious and jealous.

However, in spite of this animosity, some of the veteran African churches did join in the efforts to assist the newcomers. Supported by local Israeli NGOs and local messianic congregations, they offered emergency assistance, temporary shelter, clothes, food and spiritual comfort. Clearly, the arrival of several thousand potential new congregants offered an opportunity for the churches' revival. Since 2005, the African Initiated Church arena has undergone major transformations, and in 2008 comprised three main church types. The first consists of veteran African churches which managed to survive in spite of their greatly diminished congregations. Their members included those who gained refugee status from the UN – mainly Congolese, Liberians

and Sierra Leoneans, alongside single parents with young children mostly from Nigeria and Ghana. Most of these churches, among them The Church of Pentecost and Assemblies of God, did not engage with the newcomers and provided them with neither material assistance nor a religious safe haven. The second group was composed of veteran churches which opened their doors to newly arriving Africans, mainly from Eritrea and southern Sudan. Among them was Jeremiah's Church. Most of these churches already had some Eritreans who had entered the country many years before and could easily relate to the newcomers. As newcomers' membership increased, some of the veteran congregants felt themselves alienated and left these churches. In the churches, the sermons delivered related to the complex situation of African migrants – both veteran and newcomers – in Israel. In a special naming ceremony at Jeremiah's Church, one of the deacons told the mixed congregation:

Hold your hands up high... [C]all on our Almighty God, tell Him that we need his help... [A]sk Him to open the eyes of the people of this land... ask Him to give them wisdom to understand our situation... [A]sk Him to insert mercy in their hearts... [D]on't let them forget what they have suffered. (Interview with Pastor George, Tel Aviv 2007)

The prayer was relevant to all those present, regardless of the length of time they had been in the country or how they came and where they came from.

The third type was composed of newly founded African Initiated Churches. All its members were new African migrants claiming to be refugees of one kind or another. As these churches were rather small and new they had to struggle to survive by investing energy and funds. The Church of Our Sister Miriam, for example, did not have a regular meeting place and its members met first in the temporary shelters that the city council had provided for the refugees, and later in their own rented rooms. This church had members mainly from Eritrea and southern Sudan. In one of its first prayer meetings, Negas, a 32-year-old man from Eritrea, called on the others to join him in a prayer that "would open the eyes of the Israeli government to understand that we are 'all children of God and Abraham... [T]here should be no difference between us and the Jews of this land... [S]ome of us are children of King Solomon... [W]e are part the same people" (Interview with Negas\*, Tel Aviv 2008).

Following a new report about Egyptian soldiers shooting at several Eritreans who attempted to cross the border to Israel, a special prayer group was convened in a private house in a southern Tel Aviv neighbourhood. During that meeting Minty, an Eritrean woman who came to Israel in 2007, asked the other women in the room to join her in a prayer for peace. She said:

We are all people... I love this country just like all the others that have papers [legal documents]... [M]y daughter speaks Hebrew better than some of her friends in class that came from Russia... I know that God is looking at me, I know that He is with me... I know that He is supporting our stay in his land... We must pray for him to help us. (Interview with Minty\*, Tel Aviv 2008)

While she prayed the other women in the group hugged her, standing nearby, whispering with her.

Following Werbner's analysis of diasporas as chaordic structures, i.e. communities that reproduce cultural institutions in different circumstances, beyond the control of either their home state or receiving state (Werbner 2005), I would suggest that the Christian religious arena within the heart of Jewish Tel Aviv, with all of its branches, factions and diversity, was indeed at the centre of such chaordically generated social formations. By providing essential services to the migrants whilst maintaining a high degree of flexibility and adaptability, the churches remained vibrant and important to their members that now included new African migrants.

Well aware of the debates in Israel about migrant labourers and asylum seekers, the churches maneuvered on two levels. The first was the practical level, which mainly included the struggle to survive in spite of diminishing numbers and members' widely varied social, economic and emotional needs. The second and probably no less challenging was the political-ideological level. Though not for the first time, the African churches found themselves maneuvering the political and religious arena by alternating between civic rights and religious-humanistic discourses. This time, however, the civic rights discourse, touching specifically on their status as refugees and asylum seekers, was part of a much larger, louder and more direct debate on citizenship – debate that went on not only in Israel but was a worldwide one that they took an active part in.

Gordon and Berkovitch (2007) claim that the widespread dissemination of 'a human rights discourse enables oppressed groups to translate events into rights language and to appeal to courts, politicians and media in order to seek remedies for their grievances' (Gordon and Berkovitch 2007: 244). Indeed, unlike the veteran African migrants, who for many years refrained from talking about civic and residence rights, the newcomers adopted, from the beginning, lines of argument that not only stressed that they had no place to go back to, but also that they considered the State of Israel responsible for their well-being. As they were aware of the political debates in Israel in relation to their presence, they managed to engage in them using different claims and constructing different modalities to enhance their plea.

Three types of arguments were most commonly employed by the new African migrants: an appeal to the Israeli state and society's obligation toward refugees, due to the Jewish people's own history of persecution and statelessness; an appeal to universal human rights, emphasising the obligation of the State of Israel to international conventions, including the Refugee Convention; and thirdly, holding fast to the religious right of Christians to take refuge or otherwise reside in the Holy Land.

Since only about half the newcomers were Christians, only part of their political activities were pursued via the churches and with the churches as their basis. From the very beginning, the Christian newcomers like their Muslim counterparts engaged with Jewish Israeli society in a debate much more vociferous than the veteran migrants had ever dared. This could to some extent be attributed to three interconnected reasons: first, the difference between labour migrants and asylum seekers, with the latter's often horrific personal experiences lending itself more truthfully to stronger rhetoric; and second, the veterans' experience of claim-making that laid the foundation for the present more confident discourse, following the lessons learned on how to deploy the rhetoric strategically. The third reason may be attributed to the fact that the debate developed by the Africans coincided and was interrelated to the debate within the larger Israeli society about the nature of the state of Israel, including challenging discourses about the essence of Israeli citizenship. These debates were much more evident and widespread since the early 2000s than ever before.

Among the new African migrants, the Darfurians in particular represented themselves and were represented by Israeli activists as similar to the Jews in their experience of genocide. As a result, their position in Israel, in comparison to other refugees, was privileged in all respects. Though a small, predominantly Muslim minority, their presence enabled other African refugees to join the struggle using, among other platforms, their churches.

Equally, some Israeli politicians, NGO activists and ordinary Israeli citizens drew upon Jewish history in their debate about the African refugees. In various news articles and TV reports, images were shown of refugees standing near the barbed wire border between Israel and Egypt, echoing Holocaust pictures from the concentration camps. Choosing this image was a deliberate attempt to kindle compassion based upon particular Jewish memories. This strategy, with all of its rhetorical pathos, was emphasised at the expense of the appeal to universal values of justice or to other vague rights associated with

the Holy Land, which were deemed to be less effective lines of argumentation. Seven years earlier, similar allusions to the Holocaust evoked by veteran Africans claiming the right to stay were largely rejected by the Israeli public and authorities.

Paralleling the discourse on common suffering, many of the activists among the refugees, supported by Israeli activists, did nevertheless attempt to draw on the universal human rights discourse. They emphasised international law and the obligation of the State of Israel to each and every arrival as individual. Indeed, this discourse assisted the newcomers because it helped to codify their aspirations as subjugated peoples, supplying an authoritative language to the semantics of their claims (Alves 2000; Jochnick 1999). As other research has shown, the power of the human rights discourse stems from its ability to constitute social events by interpreting the grievances and interests of actors who have some bearing on these events and to define them as violations that should not and need not be tolerated (Falk 2000; Forsythe 2000; Gordon and Berkovitch 2007; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Risse *et al.* 1999; Sikkink 1993). Moreover, it constructed the African newcomers, both individually and as groups, as legitimate claimants and helped facilitate actions that aimed to rectify the situation, now defined as unjust (Stammers 1999).

Furthermore, by making these claims the newcomers were able to join in the debate first initiated by the veteran African migrants, especially in relation to migrant children. As some of the African children born to veteran African migrants have indeed gained legal status, the newcomers opted to use the same arguments that had previously proven successful. Alongside the external struggle against government authorities, special prayer sessions were once again held in several African churches in Tel Aviv. Relevant stories from the Bible, mainly from Exodus, were read with special contemporary interpretations that incorporated terms from human rights debates. Compassionate and universal images of the Holy Land were thus used once again to support political claims both internally, within the community, and externally, *vis-à-vis* policy makers. It became clear that for the African newcomers, religion was not the only recourse in their survival struggle to gain rights and construct their identity within the African Diaspora in Israel. They did indeed deploy biblical images and use church structures and mechanisms in their struggle for survival but it was one – though significant – amongst many other recourses.

## **Conclusion**

Within the Israeli complex socio-political and legal context, African labour migrants managed to construct their socio-political, economic and religious lives. In less than 20 years, two different socio-religious trajectories developed. The first consisted of self-organised economic migrants from Africa who used the religious arena to survive and improve their lives. Their churches positioned themselves as pivotal in the lives of members as they provided practical assistance and emotional support along with conduits to the Israeli authorities. Until the large deportations of the 2000s, churches had limited involvement in public and political actions and refrained from framing their demands in universal terms. Instead, they stressed the value of compassion and other Judeo-Christian notions of morality to underscore their religious right of belonging, as Christians, to the Holy Land. The mass deportations made the churches more visible in the public political arena, as they joined other NGOs in pleading for their members' rights, mainly through their Israel-born and raised children.

The second wave of Africans, which started entering the country in 2006, conceptualised Israel as their safe haven and led, from the very beginning, a far more assertive human rights campaign. They did not deploy religion as their main recourse in their survival struggle to gain rights and construct their identity within the African Diaspora in Israel – rather it was one amongst other recourses. Their discourse was closely linked to that constructed by the veterans in their political struggle. It included: civil rights language, asylum and refugee discourse and children's rights regulations and touched on questions of citizenship, the global rights of migrants and supra-national identities.

One of the more controversial rhetorical instruments employed by the new African migrants has been the tendency to invoke the Holocaust. In her recent research on African asylum seekers in Israel, Hadas Yaron describes this appeal as 'a particular discourse' (2008). Yaron claims that, regardless of their religious affiliation, 'the refugees located the obligation of the [Israeli] State and society in Jewish European history and the Holocaust'. The basis for this discourse, she claims, lies in the conviction that 'refugees who enter Israel ran for their lives just as the Jews did during the Second World War, and therefore both Israeli society and State have a unique moral commitment towards them' (Yaron 2008). Unlike Yaron, I would suggest that even this line of argumentation, more befitting asylum seekers than labour migrants, was not invented, in fact, by the new Africans. Rather, their statements about

common suffering and the obligation of onetime refugees to assist present refugees had already been voiced as early as 1997 in the African Workers Union document, and again in the early 2000s (see Sabar 2004). The place of the Holocaust in the discourse thus presents itself as another example of the new African migrant wave building on the veterans' discourse, amplifying previous arguments.

The African newcomers were less sensitive to Israeli-Jewish concerns about the Jewish character of the state. Unlike the veteran African migrants, they used any and every possible idiom, image and notion from Jewish history, world history, Holy Land stories and human rights discourse to support their case. With pride, courage and self-conviction they articulated – and continue to articulate – their plea for citizenship, residency and the alleviation of their acute predicaments.

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