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STUDYING THE STUDENTS: INFORMATION EXCHANGE, ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANTS, SOCIAL WORKERS AND VISITORS

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The process of absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel is conceptualized and discussed in terms of the interaction of three categories of individuals involved in the process. Each of these categories – the immigrants, absorption workers, and visitors – attempts to manage its public image in different ways and with varying degrees of success. Some implications of this interaction are discussed with reference to the difficulties of absorption.

INTRODUCTION

The immigration of a new population into a well-established one is fraught with numerous problems. These problems are aggravated when there are great differences between the two populations and especially when the differences are obscured by the "good intentions" on both sides. Problems derive partly from and are exacerbated by the lack of information, and the types of information and misinformation each side possesses about the other. The interaction between parties in an acculturating setting can therefore be regarded, at least partly, as a problem in information control and image management.

Whatever the "realities" of any given set of social events and situations, the perceptions which the actors form are the cumulative result of interactions within what Goffman (1974) has called a social "frame", that is, a bordered and socially-definable situation (Garbett, 1970). Such frames are susceptible to constant manipulation by their participants. The net result of such manipulation within the frame may not be what each party desires, because the effects of the other party must be brought into account. Over the long run, the cumulative effect of many situations creates one party's particular image of the other(s). As will be seen below, such an image may not be fully satisfactory to either party. The images one presents to the outside are, to some extent, susceptible to manipulation. To condense Goffman's model, such manipulation requires control of inputs, i.e., the more an individual knows of his alter, the better he can adjust his image, and of output, namely, the kinds of information an individual gives out about himself affect the actions of alter to him. Differences in initial or later information, and in the ability to manipulate output to a lesser or greater degree, create a dynamic and sometimes tension-ridden overall context. In the case of the immigration of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, three categories of individuals are on stage: the immigrants themselves, workers and officials of the absorption agencies (The Jewish Agency and various ministries) responsible for helping them adjust to Israel, and various visitors who are interested, for different motives and reasons, in the immigrants.

Since 1980, Ethiopian Jews have been immigrating to Israel in large numbers. Many of the Ethiopian immigrants spend lengthy periods in absorption centers (Heb: mercaz klita) before being settled permanently. During their stay in the centers, the

immigrants come into contact with veteran Israelis in both official and unofficial capacities. The information they receive about their new country, derives partly from these sources, partly from their interaction with more veteran Ethiopian immigrants (Abbink, 1984; Ashkenazi and Weingrod, 1983) and partly from interaction with Israelis in various contexts outside the centers. Information about the Ethiopians and from them flows directly to two general categories of veteran Israelis: officials of the absorption agencies, and professionals (social scientists, psychologists, newspapermen) who are interested in the immigrants. Through these professionals, information flows to other academics, to the Israeli public, and back to the Ethiopian immigrants as well. This information affects the Ethiopians in various ways. Press reactions to the Ethiopians affect the reaction of the public and create a public image of the Ethiopian immigrants, and published and verbal reports of various kinds affect the attitude and behaviors of the absorption agents to the Ethiopians in their care.

The process of absorption of Ethiopian immigrants into Israeli society can be conceptualized, in a sense, as an issue of the management of information, communication and knowledge by those concerned. I will discuss some aspects of these issues with reference to three sets of actors: Ethiopian immigrants in an absorption center, absorption workers, and social scientists, largely anthropologists. Since much of the work and the relationships described are still ongoing, I have necessarily hidden any identifying features of the individuals involved, to the point of changing or even distorting situations presented, though I preserve the essential elements of each case.

FROM PEASANT TO STUDENT

The average Ethiopian immigrant comes from a rural peasant-craftsman background (Messing, 1982; Abbink, 1984) with little experience of living in industrial urban society. Part of the problems they experience are common to many rural-to-urban migrants in Africa: difficulties in assimilating to technical-economic demands of Western societies, changed rhythms of work, and emotional and other rewards from work (Ndeti, 1981), and problems of adapting hierarchical and community-oriented social arrangements to particularistic, non-familial western ones (Barou, 1981). In addition, as Abbink (1984) has noted, Ethiopian immigrants have two other major problems: they are, in the most part, refugees, with all the trauma that implies, and they are expected to settle in a country which is extremely foreign to their experience.

The Ethiopian Jewish peasant-craftsman in Ethiopia had a set of role behaviors which defined the proper behaviors expected of him in his society. Thus, there were appropriate roles for his position as kinsman and family member, for the execution of his economic activities, for political functions, and for dealing with outsiders (Jews and non-Jews). These roles were traditional and regulated by a comprehensive and apparently well-known set of norms.

All of these role behaviors become inapplicable or at least require massive modification upon arrival in Israel. Family disruption caused by the difficulties of immigration changes much of the traditional family roles. The authority of senior males of the patrilineage, and even of the husband in the home are challenged. The individual's economic abilities (particularly those of males) are often useless in the new context of living in an industrial society. In Ethiopia outsiders, mainly Christian and Muslim, were powerful, and the small Jewish community relatively powerless, but

traditional behaviors regulated contact between the groups. In Israel, the powerlessness remains, but the traditional behaviors are no longer applicable. For example, polluting contact with all non-Jews in Ethiopia was ameliorated by purification rituals. In Israel, the norms upon which ritual purification are based are in doubt by the absorbing society (Waldman, 1983) and even by some of the immigrants themselves (Abbink, 1984). As a result, familiar features of Ethiopian culture are no longer maintained, and the *traditonal* ritual culture, which maintained group feeling and was a real source of pride, is threatened by powerful forces and political groups.

The expectations of the Ethiopian immigrants, formed on the basis of their own traditions and knowledge, differ from the reality they experience in Israel. "We expected to be welcomed to Jerusalem, to be called brothers by other Jews, but here we are called 'blacks' (Heb: *kushim*)."

Moreover, and this is no less important, the new situation they find themselves in requires a great deal of new knowledge, most of which is initially unavailable. The staffs of the absorption centers where the immigrants are housed on arrival and for some time afterwards make that clear: "We have to teach them everything from the start. They have no knowledge of Israeli society or how to operate in their new surroundings." The immigrants themselves are aware of this lack. Reports (e.g., Friedman, 1985) indicate that the immigrants display a demand for knowledge that their instructors consider exceptional. Interviews with immigrants, as well as aspects of behavior and volunteered statements, indicate the same: a conscious recognition of lack of skills and information about their new society. As a result, Ethiopian immigrants are constantly seeking for new sources of information and attempting to cross-check that information they already have.

The lack of knowledge is compensated for by seeking and debating about all significant sources and items of available information. In addition, personal experience and observation are constantly used. A recent immigrant, employed in a minor maintenance capacity in a local supermarket, can be observed spending a great deal of time examining products, behavior of staff, and purchases of shoppers with great intentness. Similarly, academic researchers and others who work in absorption centers are often requested to serve as teachers on a private basis. Checking on information is lengthy and often the immigrants, unsure of their grounds and unwilling to expose their ignorance, attempt to disguise or conceal their interest. In one instance I was asked to confirm indirectly the sphericity of the earth, and in many others, to reexplain such matters as utility bills, formal notices, or advertisements.

MANAGING THE IMAGE

The Ethiopian immigrants are often described as "passive" by those coming into contact with them. Indeed, compared to the Israeli norm they tend to be more courteous and less vocally demonstrative. As a consequence, it is probable that veteran Israelis coming into contact with the Ethiopian immigrants and used to more rambunctious behavior, fail to notice some of the "image management" the immigrants are engaged in. The immigrants are interested in projecting a certain image of themselves, by emphasizing or obscuring certain aspects of their background and culture.

It must be emphasized that Ethiopian immigrants are not homogeneous. In addition to differences of place of origin (i.e., the provinces of either Gondar or Tigray) of

which much is sometimes made by the immigrants themselves (Abbink, 1982:14-15), there are other differences. A small percentage have a formal education, including secondary schools and university. Though a large majority are religious, others are not. Some have a completely rural-traditional background, others have lived in, or in the neighborhood of, cities. Most of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel are recent arrivals, but a small number have been in the country for several (five and over) years. Information flows from the veterans and from the educated to the new and uneducated. Thus, there are sources in the community which can provide information. Those with more experience in Israel are aware of the image of the Ethiopian immigrants in Israeli society, and act to "manage" it.

For example, a major aspect of this "image management" has to do with their religious identity. One of the problems Ethiopian immigrants have to face is whether their religious identity is recognized as Jewish by the official organs of the state (a summary of the argument from the religious authorities' point of view may be found in Waldman, 1983). A second problem is their identification by non-Ethiopian Israelis with non-Jewish groups of blacks in Israel (see Ashkenazi and Weingrod, 1983:45-48). As a result, many immigrants are cautioned by those who have more experience with the country to wear a skullcap – one external indication of Jewishness – as an emphasis of their position as proper Jews, and as a means of distinguishing themselves from black Beduins and the "Black Hebrews" (an American sect, members of which have settled in southern Israel).

Ethiopian immigrants are conscious that they must "play a part". They have been observed discussing the best ways to get something done in the office of an absorption center. Said one man after such a discussion, "we must present ourselves not as we are, sometimes even as sufferers (Heb: *miskenim*), to get something out of them (the absorption agency office". This same individual was concerned to see that none of his peers would pay a certain sum demanded of them because "...if we pay that, they will also make other demands, and we are immigrants and should not have to make such payments."

The picture created by the Ethiopian immigrants of themselves – industrious, poor but honest Jews who fought heroically for generations for their right to live as Jews – is not far from the truth, but those aspects of their culture, including internal divisions and customs and behaviors, thought to be incompatible with their Jewish image, are generally suppressed or hidden. Thus, Ethiopian children questioned about their lives in Ethiopia hasten to assure that "....it was all the same as here: we went to school, played with toys, had the same sort of lives" (T. Dothan, personal communication).

Image management includes both emphasis of "positive" traits and suppression of traits the immigrants assume are perceived as negative or undesirable by the host society. Some aspects of the immigrants' former lives are deemphasized: few of our informants admitted they had worked as peasant-craftsmen, either giving evasive replies to questions about past occupations, changing the subject, or lying outright. Others denied working as blacksmiths, a common occupation among Ethiopian Jews (Kahana, 1977; Messing, 1982), since in Ethiopia, though not in Israel, the occupation is demeaning and "low caste" (Quirin, 1977).

Moreover, in their dealing with the powerful (relatively to the immigrants) officials of the absorption agencies, Ethiopian immigrants tend to be circumspect and not to voice dissatisfactions. In private, their negative feelings are more openly expressed. In

one instance, a man who had been gently insisting to a clerk on his right to something, expressed himself volubly and angrily once he was out of the clerk's sight. Similarly, asked publicly by an agent of the absorbing agency whether he had any problems he wished to discuss, one man emphasized that "there were no serious problems". Later, in private conversation, a list of problem issues was raised.

ABSORPTION WORKERS AS STUDENTS: BUILDING THE WORLD OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE ABSORPTION WORKER

The immigrants are keen searchers for information about the environment that envelops them. Having made the decision to settle in a new country, they are under pressure to conform to the new order. This pressure has two sources. Internally, most of the immigrants state their interest in "becoming normal Israelis" (and see also Abbink, 1984:153-155) quite freely. Externally, the absorbing agencies such as the Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Absorption are doing their best to facilitate the immigrants' assimilation; in other words, to speed their acculturation. The absorption agencies operate through the staffs of the absorption centers: social workeers, clerks, *somchot* (para-social workers), and other functionaries. For the absorption staff, the problem is also one of information and knowledge, though in a different context and put to a different use than that of the immigrants. The staff are not enveloped by new surroundings: they are, instead, focusing on a new problem, and indeed, their formulation of the issue is in those terms. The problems of the absorbing agencies are set forth in several papers by those concerned with the absorption (Donyo, 1983; Friedman, 1985; Kola, 1983): teaching basic skills, "integration" with the new surroundings, "adapting their behavior to that of the absorbing society." These are presented as technical problems and what emerges is the need for solutions to a different and interesting professional challenge.

Initially (i.e., 1980), the absorption agencies had no information about the background of the Ethiopian Jews (Abbink, 1984). Published material was scarce or out of date. Our own data (Ashkenazi and Weingrod, 1983), subsequent requests for information from various absorption staff members and some published material (Shifman, 1985) indicate that the lack of information is still a painful problem.

What sort of information do the absorption agencies feel they require? The basic requirement is seen as the need for ethnographic data that, in the words of one *somechet*, "....would help me understand these people and the way they think so that I could better understand their problems and help solve them better."

Primarily, absorption workers indicate that they require two sorts of knowldge: language skills, and ethnography. There are a small number who insist that the immigrants must learn Hebrew as soon as possible, and they therefore use Hebrew exclusively. A respectable number, however, make efforts to acquire a smattering of Amharic or Tigrinya. Most of the immigrants react to these attempts positively. Evaluations of the absorption workers by the immigrants are generally more positive (other factors aside) towards those who do speak their language, if only courtesy phrases.

The desire for ethnographic information is generally pragmatic. Great interest is expressed in the living arrangements and family system of the immigrants. Much less is expressed in the Ethiopian Jews' relationships with other Ethiopians, or in the types of knowledge they possess. As one worker said, "I need to know how to react to specific

things I see among the immigrants so that I'll be able to help them better, to make them proper Israelis." Notwithstanding, a general avowed recognition of the need to preserve the immigrants' cultural values (e.g., Donyo, 1983; Kola, 1983) the feeling that "...they are a 'tabula rasa' as far as our culture goes..." (Shifman, 1985:11. (My translation) is a pervasive one.

Moreover, there is much demand for information about the immigrants' previous lives, but much less for information about the way they see things in the here and now. Though elders of the community are consulted in some absorption centers about problems of the immigrants, their decisions lack force and are often ignored. Problems are dealt with by the workers of the absorption centers with little involvement on the part of the immigrants. Interest in the immigrants' own view of things is piecemeal and on a problem-by-problem basis. Housewives, for example, are told about the "Israeli way" of running their homes: few of the *somchot* asked immigrant housewives how they preferred to do things. Instead, they assumed that the "Israeli" (i.e., their) way was the correct one, and instruction proceeded from there.

The paternalism expressed overtly or through the actions of the agencies is manifest. In technical terms, it is perhaps justified: the immigrants lack the cultural baggage of most Israelis and need time and assistance in acquiring it. However, the paternalism of the absorbing agencies requires that they create an image of benevolent omnipotence. True, this is tempered by the often reiterated consideration not to make the immigrants dependent (Donyo, 1983:6) but, in practical terms, most immigrants' previous knowledge is treated as irrelevant, their behavior is frequently judged as "immature", and their decisions overridden by "practical" considerations.

There are also types of information that are often rejected out of hand as inconsistent with the self-image the absorption agencies try to project. Thus, in one case bitter and detailed rebuttal was aimed at the conclusions of a team who studied absorption (though these were borne out by other studies) and in another case, senior officials, who had actually asked for information and recommendations about absorption, were impatient and unwilling to hear the professional academic explanation and cautious assessment of the background to their recommendations. The information was rejected, considered to "interfere" with the operation of the absorbing agencies, because it was critical overtly or by implication, or was not thought to be directly applicable to the basic objectives: settling the immigrants.

Absorbing agencies and their representatives sometimes refuse to accept the view that they are part of the field in which absorption takes place, and insist they are an external, guiding factor. As a result, tensions arise between academic and other investigators and the absorption agencies. In the (often expressed) view of one absorption center manager, "You should confine yourselves to the immigrants' ethnographic background. The Jewish Agency is not part of the studied material."

The "official" search for knowledge is also part of the image the absorbing agencies are interested in projecting. Interest is demonstrated at all levels by constant demands for information. However, the types of information desired are instrumental in a limited sense. For example, little attention is paid to reports about the absorption process and the operation of the absorption system, but information about life in Ethiopia is in great demand.

Absorption workers are at pains to demonstrate to the immigrants and to the outside world as well, their concern for the immigrants. This concern is undoubtedly real. But the great differences between behaviors of the absorption workers and the

immigrants create a situation whereby the "office" (i.e., the entire absorption framework centered on the absorption center office) is under suspicion. The Ethiopian immigrants must deal with the office, but their dealings, rightly or wrongly, are tinged with suspicion. The image of benevolence projected is often interpreted by the immigrants as unwonted paternalism. In contrast, attempts to force the immigrants to be less dependent on the absorption workers bring claims by the immigrants that "...the *somchot* just don't care about us. They just sit in the office drinking coffee and waiting for their salary." The *somchot* are therefore caught between the two often conflicting requirements of their job, which in any case are misinterpreted by the immigrants.

The image the officials try to create is not in fact successful. The immigrants often see the absorption agents as not disinterested, and the paternal, caring image is frayed by continual difficult interactions. Some immigrants accuse the absorption workers in private of arrogance and lack of interest, and many of them distrust the absorption workers to some degree. Moreover, the image of benevolence, knowledge, and educational function is questioned, and perhaps actually threatened by a third category of individuals involved: visitors, and academic and other researchers, such as newsmen.

OUTSIDE THE FRAMEWORK: VISITORS AND RESEARCHERS

There are at present large numbers of researchers engaged in studying the Ethiopian immigrants in Israel. These include anthropologists, students of education, psychologists, sociologists, and others. In addition, media agents and visitors, VIPs from Israel and abroad are also commonly to be seen visiting absorption centers or in other ways contacting Ethiopian immigrants.

Academic researchers have a hard time explaining their presence to the immigrants. With the exception of the relatively small number of college-educated Ethiopian immigrants, the concept of an academic researcher is completely unknown to them. However, the mere presence of such individuals within their ken provides the immigrants with sources of information. Many of the researchers express affection and emotional involvement with their subjects. Some of them avowedly present themselves not as disinterested objective students, but as advocates. Eager to acquire information, the immigrants dispense it too. For the immigrants, the presence of potential alternative contacts with the outside creates opportunities they are anxious to exploit. Several organizations have been formed within the community of Ethiopian immigrants to exploit this resource (grant monies, funding agencies, various cultural programs). In addition, individual immigrants also use their interactions with these visitors as means of advancing individual claims or means of solving individual problems. Such solutions vary from requests for help in studying through requests for solving administrative and financial problems, to requests for help in finding relatives. The immigrants themselves are aware that visitors are potential benefactors, and the image such visitors present as interested, sympathetic, but essentially outside the system, is either not understood or not accepted. For the immigrants, as for the absorption workers, problems are in the here and now, not in the unknown academic future or in the potential of raising funds for the UJA.

Both the Ethiopian immigrants and the absorption agency workers require immediate and practical information. Neither group is particularly concerned with the

academic, publishable interests of the researchers. As one prominent Ethiopian immigrant said bluntly, "I am not interested in providing you with additional data for an academic publication so you will be famous. I need to know what you can do for me now." Much the same attitude is expressed at all levels of the absorption agencies. The visitors, academic or otherwise, are therefore unable in most cases to present themselves acceptably in the role they are used to and are seeking to fill.

CONCLUSION: WORLDS OF KNOWLEDGE, WORLDS OF FEELING

I note at the outset that the attitudes of all three of these categories of individuals discussed are, in the final analysis, convergent. The immigrants truly wish to become a part of their new surroundings, the agency staff truly want to help them, and the visitors as a whole feel emotionally committed to the immigrants and freely admit their advocacy stand. Yet differences of knowledge and of understanding separate the three.

The knowledge the immigrants have is acquired piecemeal, and is often not fully understood. The world they conceptualize, perhaps based on their own "cultural baggage", perhaps as a result of the continual and persisting difficulties they experience, is an often inimical one. They often see setbacks and problems as the result of inimical action by government or Jewish Agency bodies, though there is no independent evidence supporting such a contention.

The absorption agencies' staffs are most interested in controlling the image they project. Their occupation involves dealing with the immigrants' problems which are always difficult and often insoluble. They insulate themselves by denying access to their deliberations to outsiders and to the immigrants who are affected by them. There is strong evidence that the rank and file occcasionally disagree with the policies they are expected to carry out. In any case, they are wary of criticism which affects their professional self-worth and might affect jobs. Whether to support their self esteem, or to protect their positions, they must constantly and consistently generate an image of benevolent care and potency. Interestingly enough, in private conversations many agency workers have expressed dissatisfaction, doubt, and inability to come to terms with policy.

The visitors, with the small exception of those totally committed to the Ethiopian immigrants' side of things, present a double image of themselves. This image is not as coherent as that of the immigrants or the absorption workers, rather it is the aggregate result of individual views and actions taken by people of roughly similar background in the presence of the same phenomenon. On the one hand is the image of the searcher for scientific veracity which must withstand the critical evaluation of their colleagues, supposed to be detached and evaluative. On the other hand is the "involved outsider" concerned with the result of his intervention. Not all visitors share in this dilemma to the same degree. Some visitors confess to complete commitment to the Ethiopian side of things, others, privately or publicly, are more "detached". In each case, a situation is created vis a vis the other two parties to the exchange. For the Ethiopians, anyone professing an interest in their problems is seen as a potential resource, personal or communal. Whether the visitors are "detached" or not is of less interest than the potential they represent, since all visitors demonstrate their independence from the absorption agencies, obvious affluence, and familiarity with a larger system than the immigrants are familiar with. For the absorption personnel, "detached" visitors may

represent a threat: they upset the immigrants by providing them with "unnecessary" information they cannot absorb, and may be critical of the absorption process or its agents. The attitude towards the "committed" visitor element is more complex. On the one hand, they represent a potential resource in terms of possible donors (though this is less important) and witnesses to the good work; on the other hand, many of them are vehement, often implacable and unreflective critics of the absorption agencies.

Each of the three sets of individuals is seeking for information from the other two. Not surprisingly, while each side is prepared to vouchsafe information, this information is managed, consciously or not. Ethiopian immigrants are interested in presenting themselves as a particular sort of Ethiopian Jew, an image which is at least partly manufactured through emphasis and suppression of information. The absorption personnel are anxious to emphasize difficulties, successes, and the problem-solving nature of their function. The information given is directed to that end, and includes often desperate attempts at control of the immigrants' communications (e.g., limiting use of office telephones by the immigrants and forbidding unrestricted access to absorption centers to academic or other visitors). Researchers' interest in "scientific" truths – chains of causality and detailed information – satisfy neither the agency personnel (who want answers to concrete "what if...." questions) nor the immigrants, who cannot conceptualize the information they themselves lack and often cannot understand the detailed explanations of the researchers, or, more importantly, their motives. Explanations by researchers that the information they collect will be useful or helpful in some unspecified future, or that the visit helps promote understanding of the immigrants' problems, sound unconvincing at best, suspicious at worst, to the immigrants. The visitors vary from "detached" to "committed" (something that the other two parties cannot always distinguish between) but in any case try to present an attitude of interest without responsibility. This of course is not satisfactory for either of the other two sets. Both require commitment: the immigrants expect immediate help from the visitors' obvious affluence and power, the absorption workers expect the confidence by individuals not concerned with their immediate, day-to-day problems, or at least that they refrain from critical inquiry.

As a result, each group forms certain perceptions about the others, and these inevitably color the way they act and react to one another. The Ethiopian immigrants as a whole seem to exhibit a great deal of resentment against the absorbing agencies. Individual agency workers are liked and even sought out, but this does not detract from the feelings they exhibit towards the agencies themselves. It is of course conceivable that this too is part of a general image management: all immigrants complain about the Jewish Agency, and those who do not tend not to get any attention from media or visitors, a factor of which the acculturated Ethiopian immigrants are well aware.

Regarding the visitors, the Ethiopian immigrants seem to be equally ambivalent. On the one hand, they are anxious to present their self-image, and researchers and other visitors are a channel for doing that, perhaps the major channel. On the other hand, the incessant prying into their affairs, including those matters they would prefer to suppress or ignore, and the lack of obvious benefit, cause many Ethiopian immigrants to become negatively attuned to the idea of having a stranger poking into their affairs. Unconsciously echoing Delorea, an American Indian activist (1973:136), one veteran

Ethiopian immigrant said, "I simply don't care about your academic careers. If you are of no benefit to me, why should I allow you to study me?"

The absorption agency workers still tend to view the immigrants as dependent. This view persists notwithstanding the immigrants' often aggressive attempts to free themselves from supervision (particularly when they rent their own apartments outside the center) and their obvious attempts at manipulation. In many cases, the agency workers are proven right: some immigrants who leave immigrant centers for their own apartments are forced – out of loneliness or inability to cope – to return to the center.

Researchers are, on occasion, blamed for many of the difficulties the absorption agencies encounter with the immigrants. Researchers have been barred from absorption centers, harassed, and in one case arrested for coming into contact with Ethiopians. They are perceived as uncontrollable agents. VIP visitors, in contrast, are more easily controlled, and generally yield more positive benefits for the charges (in material terms) and in terms of satisfaction and commendations for the workers themselves.

I have conceptualized the problem of the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants to Israel in terms of the interaction of knowledge and information by three categories of individuals. Obviously, other problems and ways of conceptualizing them are of no less importance, and the categorization itself is a relatively gross one: each category has several sub-divisions. However, it is impossible to deal with the matter without recognizing that part of the issues involved are obscured, unintentionally or not, by the way the actors perceive one another, and by the expectations that are generated by these perceptions. For example, absorption workers expect the immigrants to be simple, ignorant farmers. When they display political sophistication and organizational abilities, the absorption establishment and many workers react with shocked indignation. In addition, there are ramifications that have not been dealt with here. The Israeli public and its reaction to the presence of the Ethiopian immigrants is one of these. But the reactions of this public are largely conditioned by the interactions of the three main categories of actors and cannot be explained without at least partial reference to the issue dealt with here.

Formation of policy about the immigrants is based partly on such perceptions. Decisions about aid by donor agencies, for example, and the general interest by outsiders are maintained by an ongoing interaction and image-creation. *Inter alia*, each of the sides involved is attempting to make order of both the information it receives and the information regarding itself that goes out. This is done with differential success and skill, and with or without conscious recognition of what is going on. But it is the cumulative effect of these activities that creates a global perception of the issue.

Finally, it is worth noting that both the process and the effects of the manipulation of public images differ from one set of individuals to another. The immigrants are not a cohesive force. They are divided internally by rivalries having to do with place of origin, age, and experience in the country and in Ethiopia. Nonetheless they appear to maintain sufficient communication so that the image they present is a relatively coherent one, and one that for a number of reasons (some not under their control), is accepted by the Israeli population at large: they are generally accepted as "lost brothers", as pleasant and well-intentioned "potentially successful immigrants". The absorption workers have the advantage of official organization, organizational discipline, and large resources. Nonetheless, the image they present is only partly

successful. The absorption agencies are looked upon with suspicion by the immigrants (perhaps because their major efforts are aimed at the visitors and the public?) as well as by academic researchers. The visitors' image is coherent only in the sense that the cumulative results of the behavior and demeanor of each individual visitor are similar. However, the image is not acceptable to the absorption officials, and is viewed with great doubt by the immigrants. The rare cases where a visitor actually produces a resource are far outweighed by the many instances visitors come and go without producing any visible result.

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