Israelis in New York

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Israelis residing abroad are perceived as a problem both by Israelis at home and by Diaspora Jews. Because they have lived in Israel (and increasingly have been born in Israel) and having decided to leave Israel, their very existence abroad is construed as a rejection of the ideals upon which Israeli society was built. In 1976, then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin referred to Israelis abroad as "nefolet shel nemushot," the fallen among the weaklings (cited in Waxman 1983, 198). As has been pointed out frequently, rejection of the emigrant from Israel is built into the structure of the Hebrew language. An immigrant to or from anywhere but the Land of Israel is known simply as a m'hager, a morally neutral term simply meaning immigrant. An immigrant in the Land of Israel is an oleh, one who goes up, a term borrowed from its religious usage referring to o'leh regel, a pilgrim. One who emigrates from the Land of Israel is a yored, one who descends from the holiness of the Land of Israel to the profane world of the exile.

Though most Israelis do not consciously carry the religious vocabulary with all of its overtones into their day-to-day lives, they do grow up with a sense of the centrality of the Land of Israel in the experience of the Jewish people. With that sense comes the moral obligation to live in the Land of Israel. The Israeli folksinger and composer Naomi Shemer recently wrote and recorded a song embodying these sentiments. Parodying Psalm 132 and the Hatikvah, she writes of Hayim "a golden boy," born in Jerusalem and now living in exile (i.e. out of the Land of Israel). Hayim and Tsvikah and the other young men sing the words of the Psalm of the Jews who wept in exile on the banks of the rivers of Babylon as they remembered Zion. The Land of Israel, which has waited for the Jewish people for two thousand years, continues to wait for their return (Shemer 1982).

One Israeli expatriate journalist writing in an American Zionist journal of
his own experience and that of his compatriots in the United States entitled his article "Israelis in the America—Moral Lepers" (Nahshon 1976). It is difficult to conjure harsher language in describing or labeling the Israeli who has migrated abroad. Yet, the reality is that during the entire period of Zionist settlement on the land, many Jews migrated to Israel from Europe, then reemigrated out of the Land of Israel to a second exile. There were years in which Jewish out-migration from Israel was greater than Jewish in-migration.

In addition to being a moral problem for the Israeli at home, expatriate Israelis, particularly the well-educated expatriates, are accused of having taken the investment that Israeli society has made in them and used it for their own profit abroad without recompense to the Israeli taxpayer. This perspective on the problem became termed the "brain drain" during the 1960s. Expatriate Israelis are viewed as having taken the investment made in them by Israeli society to a richer society, e.g. the United States.

Given the enormous concern about the Israeli abroad expressed in Israel and the Diaspora communities, one would have expected to find a substantial scholarly and scientific literature on this population. In fact the corpus of scientific literature is quite small. In searching the literature, I could find but one book on the subject (my own) and less than a dozen articles (Ritterband 1978). To paraphrase Steven M. Cohen's insightful essay in this collection, the Israeli abroad is handled in part by denial and in part by outrage; neither of these modes of thought leads to understanding. The purpose of this collection of papers is to advance understanding, not to stand in judgment. While the authors may well have moral positions on the issues, they have set them aside so as to clarify the issues without preachment.

In this paper I will first present some estimate of the size of the Israeli expatriate population in the New York area. That area consists of New York City and the suburban counties of Nassau, Suffolk, and Westchester. Second, I will compare the Israelis with non-Israeli Jews in New York with respect to basic "secular" characteristics. Third, I will deal with the Jewishness of the Israelis in New York.

Estimating the Number of Israelis in the Eight-County New York Area

One might think that counting Israelis is a straightforward simple proposition. In fact, it is not. There are problems of population definition, sample frames, sampling error, and all of the other complications that lurk in wait for the social scientist. There is a wide array of estimates of the number of Israelis (1) living abroad, (2) living in