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## Ethnic origin and identity in the Jewish population of Israel\*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the multifaceted quality of ethnicity in the Jewish population of Israel by probing into the ethnic categories and their subjective meaning. The analyses utilise data collected during 2015–2016 on a representative sample of Israelis age 15 and older, as part of the seventh and eighth rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS). Hypotheses are developed concerning the relationship between demographically based ethnic origin and national identity, as well as the effect of ethnically mixed marriages on ethnic and national identities. The analyses reveal a strong preference among Jews in Israel to portray their ancestry in inclusive national categories – Israeli and Jewish – rather than more particularistic, ethno-cultural, categories (e.g. Mizrahim, Moroccan, Ashkenazim, Polish, etc). Yet, whether Israeli or Jewish receives primacy differs by migration generation, socioeconomic standing, religion, and political dispositions. While the findings clearly add to our understanding of Israeli society, they are also telling with regard to immigrant societies more generally. First, they reveal a multi-layered structure of ethnic identification. Second, they suggest that ethnic identities are quite resistant to change. Third, ethnically mixed marriages appear to erode ethnic identities and are likely to replace them with national identities.

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Ancestry; ethnic identity; ethnicity; European Social Survey; Israel

## Introduction

Israel is a deeply divided society along ethno-national lines that separate the Jewish and the Arab (Palestinian) populations and distinguish sub-groups within each population. While the Jewish-Arab divide within Israel is generally taken for granted in light of the broader Israel-Palestinian conflict, persistence of ethnic cleavages within the Jewish population between the two ethnic groups known today as ‘Mizrahim’ and ‘Ashkenazim’ is typically viewed as a failure of the Jewish society to diminish cultural markers and socio-economic attributes that differentiate Jews who emigrated from diverse countries.

The present paper addresses the multifaceted quality of ethnic affiliation and identity in the Jewish population of Israel by probing into the ethnic categories and their subjective meaning. Most studies of the ethnic divide within the Jewish population in Israel follow the practice of the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) that uses a broad

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continent-based dichotomy to denote ‘origin’ (Cohen 2002). The distinction is between those whose origin is in Europe or America (as well as Oceania), typically referred to as ‘Ashkenazim’, and those who emigrated primarily from Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East and North Africa, heretofore, ‘Mizrahim’. For native-born Jews ethnic affiliation is determined by the ICBS on the bases of fathers’ continent of birth. With the passage of time, however, growing numbers of Jews living in Israel are third and even fourth-generation natives. Since their fathers were born in Israel, they are classified as having an ‘Israeli’ origin.

Aside from the ‘technical’ difficulty of determining the Jewish ethnic ancestry of the third generation, two processes are at work eroding ethnic distinctions within the Jewish population. First, the Zionist nation-building project aimed to highlight the common historic origin of all Jews and to downplay differences among Jews while contrasting them with the Palestinian-Arab minority (Cohen and Gordon 2018). In other words, to fortify a common Jewish–Israeli identity. Second, among younger generations, an increasing proportion of marriages cut across the Jewish ethnic divide. Their offsprings are of mixed (Jewish) ethnicity. This growing segment is under-identified, as both parents were born in Israel and information on grandparents is typically unavailable.

While this study focuses on the Jewish population of Israel, it addresses issues that are of concern to scholars of multi-ethnic immigrant societies more generally. Specifically, we empirically examine the relationship between demographically based origin and reported ancestry, as well as ethnic identity. We do so for three migration generations and expect to contribute to a fuller understanding of the relationship between place of origin and ancestry. We also probe into the relationship between particular ethnic identities and more inclusive national identities across migration generations, and test the hypothesis of eroding ethnic identification among offspring of mixed marriages.

## Migration and ethnic cleavage in Israel

During Israel’s nearly 70 years of statehood, the Jewish population grew about 10-fold, largely due to a continuous flow of immigrants. Indeed, as recently as 2015, 25% of all Jews residing in Israel were foreign born (ICBS 2017, Table 2.6). In 1948, prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, the Jewish population numbered approximately 650,000, mostly of East European origin. The 1948 war resulted in the forced emigration of about 750,000 Palestinians from the territory and was followed by Jewish mass immigration. European Jews – Holocaust survivors – arrived in 1948 and their numbers increased considerably in 1949. Concomitantly, entire communities of Jews in Middle Eastern countries (primarily Iraq and Yemen) were relocated to Israel with the active help of the State. Jews from North African countries followed in the late 1950s in a wave of migration that continued until the late 1960s. While they were all Jews, they were a rather diverse population in terms of their socioeconomic resources (Cohen 2002; Semyonov and Lerenthal 1991), family structures (Khazzoom 1998) and their socio-cultural orientations (Fischer 2016).

The influx of almost one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and approximately 80,000 immigrants from Ethiopia, in the 1980s and early 1990s further deepened ethnic diversity in the Jewish population of Israel. It is noteworthy that a sizable minority of immigrants from the former Soviet Union were not Jewish by religion and

were granted entry as family members or offspring of Jews. While most did not formally convert to the Jewish religion, they experienced what Cohen (2006) termed 'sociological conversion' and largely adopted practices and cultural beliefs of the Jewish majority in Israel. The Jewishness of Ethiopian immigrants had been contested by religious authorities; a source of ongoing disenchantment for the Ethiopian community in Israel. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that all the immigrants were entitled to Israeli citizenship and full citizenship rights upon arrival, based on Israel's 'law of return'.

### **Ethnicity and identity in the Jewish population of Israel**

At present, Israel's population of almost 9 million is comprised of a Jewish majority (approximately 80%) and a sizable Palestinian-Arab minority. It defines itself as a Jewish state and/or the state of the Jewish people; a people that for two millennia had no common territory. Although they migrated from around the globe, most Jews share a belief in common ancestry, share a common religion, and share the view of an historical homeland. The Zionist movement and the founders of the State of Israel built on the pre-existing commonalities and on the threat facing the Jewish collective in Israel from the Palestinians and surrounding Arab countries in order to instil a common 'Israeli-Jewish' identity among Jews of various origins. Indeed, the Zionist project exploited the primordial content of Jewish religion and Nationalism in order to develop a strong ideology of integration (Buzaglo 2008). This fit well with the immigrant assimilation model, which at the time dominated sociological theory on migrant societies, in general, and Israeli sociology in particular (Alba and Nee 2003; Lissak 1999). Yet, in practice, the veteran population, mostly of European origin was unwelcoming to the cultural and socio-economic diversity of populations that emigrated from countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Although accepted as brethren, the leadership of the receiving society typically held paternalistic views toward these immigrant populations and hoped to mould them in their image (Segev 1986; Shimoni 2006).

As Smooha (2004) pointed out, instead of a single melting pot of Jews in Israel, two major identities crystallised: that of Jews of East and West European origin (Ashkenazim), and a second comprised of Jews mostly from Arab countries (Mizrahim). While the fusion of the latter identity was slower to emerge, 'Israelis of Mizrahi origin are crystallising as a distinct group and developing an identity of their own' (69). A third melting pot to which to which Smooha refers consists primarily of descendants of mixed marriages across the Jewish ethnic groups. This is an important category as it has the potential of eroding ethnic boundaries and contributing to the emergence of a more inclusive national identity. However, this is still a rather small segment of the Jewish population.

In a recent analysis of Jewish ethnic division in Israel, Fischer argued that the origins of the distinct ethnic identities are to be found in the different processes of modernisation experienced by Jews in Europe and Jews of North Africa and the Middle East. He further contended that exclusion of Mizrahi Jews from full membership in the Zionist-Israeli project constructed by Ashkenazi Jews led to their forming a counter-collective (Fischer 2016). Various critical writers on ethnic relations in Israel support this assessment (Khazzoom 1998; Swirski 1988) and emphasise the role of the dominant Ashkenazi population and its leadership in moulding a Mizrahi category in Israeli society (Buzaglo 2008; Peled 2002). The homogenisation and dichotomisation were bolstered by ICBS use of a

binary place of origin classification. As noted earlier, this classification grouped countries of origin into two categories: Asia and (North) Africa vs. Europe and America; a classification that was used as an approximation to the distinction between 'Mizrahim' and 'Ashkenazim' (Sikron 2004, 56).

The ethnic cleavage within the Jewish population was sustained over the years by inequality of resources and socioeconomic attainment. An extensive body of research addressed the historical roots of Jewish ethnic inequality (Khazzoom 1998, 2005; Perlmann and Elmelech 2012; Shenhav 2006; Smootha 1978). Other studies uncovered the patterns of differential access to opportunities experienced by Ashkenazim and Mizrahim (Lewin-Epstein, Elmelech, and Semyonov 1997; Swirski 1988), and still others noted the educational and labour market inequalities along the ethnic divide and their persistence in the second generation (Cohen and Haberfeld 1998; Haberfeld and Cohen 2007) and even in the third generation (Cohen and Lewin-Epstein 2018; Cohen, Haberfeld, and Kristal 2007). The conflation of class and ethnic origin fuelled the sense of deprivation in the Mizrahi population and found its expression in Israel's political arena where Mizrahi Jews tend to vote for right-wing nationalist parties (Mizrachi 2016; Peled and Shamir 1990) and Ashkenazi Jews are more likely to vote for centre-left parties (Swirski 1988).

Salient as the ethnic dichotomy is in research and public discourse, the ways in which Israelis view their ethnic and national identity is under-studied. Indeed, as Mizrachi and Herzog (2012) argued in a recent study, '[T]he core tension faced by Mizrahi Jews [thus] rests on the gap between their structural and cultural inequality and their recognised participation in the Zionist project as Jewish citizens' (429). This tension is no less acute for populations that immigrated to Israel more recently from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia (Rajzman 2009). It is with this tension in mind that we aim to explore respondents' perceived ancestry and ethnic identity, and their relationship to 'objective' demographically based ethnicity.

### **Ethnic categories and ethnic identity**

A notable shortcoming of the demographic approach to ethnicity, based on place of origin, is that it determines ethnic affiliation solely by objective criteria. Such an approach, it is argued, essentializes ethnicity and implicitly assumes that ethnicity is static rather than an emergent and dynamic phenomenon (Yancey, Eriksen, and Juliani 1976). This approach can be contrasted with a more sociological approach that stems from Weber's definition of ethnic groups as '... human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration' (Weber 1978 (1922), 389).

In the present study, we follow the Weberian approach and focus on what may be termed emotional assimilation, which is manifest primarily in identificational affinities of immigrants (Esser 2007; Hochman et al. 2017). We address three issues that have long captured the interest of scholars of migration and ethnicity: the relationship between demographic origin, ancestry and ethnic identity; generational shifts in ethnic and national identity; and ethnic and national identities of offspring of ethnically mixed marriages. Although we use place of origin in order to classify respondents into ethnic origin categories, we do not assume that ethnic origin is synonymous with perceived

ancestry and ethnic identity. In fact, an important goal of this study is to probe into the relationship between 'objective' ethnic origin and perceived ethnic affinity among immigrants (and their Israeli-born descendants). While we expect that the two are related, we hypothesise that some variation exists which is related to recency of migration and access to socioeconomic resources (Waters 1990).

In the case of Israel, an issue of recurring concern is the perceived salience of distinct ethnic identities within the Jewish population. Some scholars argue that for Ashkenazim, those originating from Europe and America, and historically the dominant group, their Ashkenazi identity is transparent and subsumed by the broader national identity (Sasson-Levy 2008). However, others have argued that younger Ashkenazim increasingly experience being Ashkenazi as an ethnic category and even seek status symbols associated with it (Harpaz 2013). It is also pointed out that Jews of Mizrahi origin have been gaining salience in the political and cultural arenas after decades of marginalisation (Buzaglo 2008; Sasson-Levy 2008). This may increase their sense of belonging and strengthen their national identity and weaken particular ethnic identities.

Turning to generational differences, studies typically find that ethnic identity is strong among the first generation of immigrants and tends to weaken in the following generations. The opposite is generally true of identification with the receiving society (Lee and Edmonston 2010; Phinney 2003). This is in line with classical assimilation theory. Yet, critics have noted that many immigrants retain strong ethnic identities over several generations. The retention of ethnic identity does not necessarily imply rejection of the assimilation process, and it often represents a symbolic form of ethnicity that may co-reside with a similarly strong identification with the receiving society (Alba 2005; Gans 2017). Indeed, according to the Berry's (1997) influential model of acculturation, ethnic identity and national identity are conceptually distinct, and empirically only loosely correlated. We, therefore, expect to find that particular ethnic identities are prevalent, even if somewhat less-so among the offspring of immigrants.

Research on ethnicity often shows that ethnic identities are weaker among persons in mixed marriages and their offspring. For some, entering mixed marriages is not problematic as they attribute less importance to their ethnic identity than same-group members who marry within the group (Apitczsch and Gunduz 2012; Chen and Takeuchi 2011). For others, mixed marriages are a terrain in which complex subjective negotiations over identity occur, and reverting to more inclusive identities provides a suitable solution (Chong 2013). In either case, such marriages contribute to the erosion of ethnic boundaries. In line with this, a recent study of offspring of ethnically and racially mixed marriages in Britain found that such individuals were more likely to assert their British identity, emphasising national identity more than ethnic and racial identity (Song 2010).

In the case of Israel, we use the term mixed marriages to refer to couples that are not of the same origin; that is mixed Ashkenazi and Mizrahi couples. We should emphasise that both are Jewish by religion and believe in a common ancestry. Yet the historical separation and socio-cultural differences between the two groups have served as barriers to such marriages. Hence, the proportion of offspring of mixed marriages in Israel is lower than what would be predicted had marriages been blind to ethnic categories. Nonetheless, we expect that our respondents who are offspring of mixed marriages will tend to choose more inclusive ancestry categories than other respondents and are less likely to report particular ethnic identities.

## Methodology

### Data

Our empirical analysis takes advantage of the fact that identity questions were included in two successive surveys conducted in Israel as part of the European Social Survey (ESS) project. Data for the seventh round of ESS were collected during May through December 2015. Data for round 8 were collected from September 2016 through February 2017. The two separate samples are multi-stage probability samples of all individuals age 15 and above, living in households in Israel. Households were randomly selected from 250 statistical areas that were clustered on the bases of social, and economic characteristics to ensure representation of the population. Within each household, one person was randomly selected for an interview. Interviews were conducted in three languages – Hebrew, Arabic, and Russian.

The total achieved samples include 2562 persons in round 7 and 2557 in round 8, representing a response rate of approximately 74% in both surveys. Of the combined sample, 4029 (79%) are Jews (including immigrants from the former USSR who reported no religion). After excluding 112 cases that lacked information on ethnic origin, or were fourth-generation Israelis who could not be classified along ethnic lines, the final working sample for our analyses comprises 3917 respondents. The relatively large sample size makes it possible to distinguish many sub-groups defined by origin and immigration generation. In all the analyses we use the sample design weights.

### *Ethnicity and ancestry variables*

*Ethnic origin* – The ESS questionnaire regularly collects information on country of birth of respondents and their parents. In Israel, a supplement asked respondents for country of birth of their parents' parents as well (the four grandparents). Place of birth was then collapsed into a five-category variable – Ashkenazim includes those whose place of birth is Europe or America, Oceania, or South Africa. Mizrahim are immigrants from North African and Asian (mostly Middle Eastern) countries.<sup>1</sup> A third category includes those of mixed origin. We also identify, separately, a fourth category of Russians who immigrated to Israel since 1989 from the former republics of the Soviet Union (whether or not they originated in an Asian or European Republic), and a fifth category of respondents of Ethiopian origin.

*Migration generation and ethnic origin* – Respondents who were not born in Israel are First-generation immigrants and they were classified as either Mizrahim, Ashkenazim, Russians (if immigrated 1989 or later) or Ethiopians according to their country of birth. The second generation consists of those born in Israel to immigrant parents. They were classified into three origin groups: Mizrahim, if both parents were Mizrahi; Ashkenazim, if both parents were Ashkenazi; and Mixed if one parent was Mizrahi and the other Ashkenazi. Likewise, if both parents were recent Russian immigrants or were born in Ethiopian, the second generation was categorised as such. The 2.5 generation consists of offspring of parents, one of whom was native Israeli and the other an immigrant.<sup>2</sup> In this case, we used the grandparents' information to determine the origin of the native Israeli parent. Here too, we identified three population groups, Mizrahim, if the origin of one parent was Asia or Africa and that of the grandparents (in the case of

the parent born in Israel) was also Asia or Africa. Respondents were classified as Ashkenazim, if the origin of one parent was Europe or America and that of the grandparents (in the case of the parent born in Israel) was also Europe or America. If one or both grandparents (on the side of the native Israeli parent) were born in Israel, the assigned ethnicity was according to that of the foreign-born parent. Finally, we defined as mixed origin those with one Mizrahi, and one Ashkenazi, parent (or grandparent).

The third generation includes respondents whose parents are native Israelis. Their ethnic origin followed that of their grandparents. The classification rule that we used, in this case, was that if at least one grandparent was born in Asia or Africa (Mizrahi) and no grandparent was born in Europe or America (Ashkenazi) the respondent was classified as Mizrahi. If at least one grandparent was born in Europe or America (Ashkenazi) and no grandparent was born in Asia or Africa (Mizrahi), the respondent was categorised as Ashkenazi. All other cases (at least one grandparent from each ethnic group) were classified as Mixed.

*Ancestry and ethnic identity* – A unique feature of rounds 7 and 8 of the ESS is the inclusion of two items that ask for respondents' subjective report of ancestry. The question was as follows: 'How would you describe your ancestry? Please use this card to choose up to two ancestries that best apply to you'. Seventeen different categories were listed in questionnaire, including broad ancestry affiliations such as 'Israeli' and 'Jewish', ethnic affiliations such as 'Ashkenazi' and 'Mizrahi' as well as country-specific categories for the largest Jewish immigrant populations.<sup>3</sup> The first two categories (Israeli and Jewish) represent inclusive ancestry categories. 'Jewish' ancestry derives from the primordial elements of nationalism that are intertwined with Jewish religion. 'Israeli' is a newer and acquired identity that rests primarily on civic and territorial components of nationality associated with Zionism. All other categories represent exclusive ancestry related to geographic origin.

Israeli respondents were also asked: 'If you had to define your ethnic origin, which of the following possibilities would you choose?' Response categories were 'Mizrahi', 'Ashkenazi', 'mixed', 'other', 'I do not use these ethnic definitions', or 'refuse'. This item along with the previous one are employed to evaluate the subjective, identificational affinities with specific ethnic categories as well as with the broader – national – collective.

In order to gauge the importance attributed to one's ethnic identity we use an additional item, based on the following question: 'Please say to what extent you define yourself according to the following identity definitions'. The categories (definitions) used were 'Israeli', 'Jewish', 'Mizrahi', 'Ashkenazi', and country of origin (one's own country of birth or that of their parents). A five-point Likert scale listed responses ranging from 'not at all', to 'a very high extent'. Also available were the options 'refuse', or 'don't know'.

### **Explanatory variables**

In analyses conducted to identify the correlates of ancestry choices, we include several additional variables. These are:

*Age* – in years.

*Education* – A binary variable denoting whether or not the respondent completed a bachelor's level or higher.



*Socioeconomic status of respondents' neighbourhood (statistical area)* – The socioeconomic score for respondents' place of residence, ranging from 1 (low) to 20 (high), based on the ICBS classifications of all statistical areas of Israel (ICBS 2013).

*Political left/right* – A general measure asked respondents to place themselves on a left-right scale with 0 indicating extreme left and 10 indicating extreme right.

*Religiosity* – A measure of religiosity based on a question that asked respondents to mark on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, how religious they are.

## Findings

### *Place of origin, generation of migration and ethnic identification*

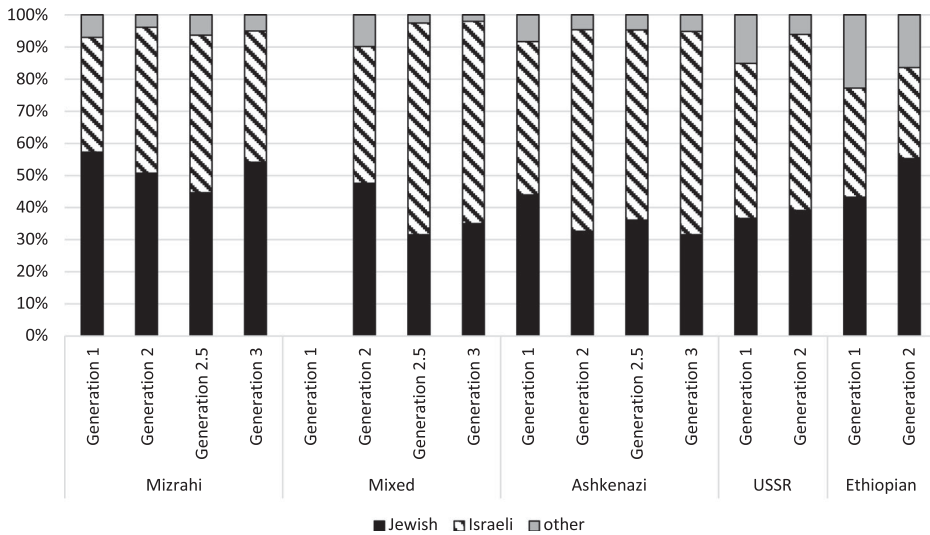
Table 1 displays the percentage distribution across ethnic origin and migration generation categories. Mizrahi Jews are the largest of the Jewish sub-groups constituting 44.9% of the sample compared to Ashkenazi Jews who constitute 31.8% of our sample. The difference between these two groups is especially evident in the second and third generations. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union comprise 12.4% of the sample. Ethiopian Jews are the smallest origin group constituting only 3% our sample. Only 7.9% all respondents (12.3% of all Israeli-born) have a mixed origin based on their parents or grandparents place of birth. The proportion, however, varies considerably by generation. In the second generation, only 1 in 17 persons had mixed ethnicity, whereas in the third generation one out of every five persons reported mixed ethnicity.

It is difficult to evaluate the representativeness of the sample since no official statistics are available on the third generation, in general, and its ethnic composition, in particular. Also, mixed ethnicity is not separately captured in official data so there are no good population statistics for comparison. Our figures, however, are consistent with estimates of previous research (Cohen et al. 2007). The first generation – those who immigrated to Israel – appears to be somewhat over-represented (36% of our sample compared to one-third of the Jewish population of Israel age 15 and above, according to official statistics). Mizrahi Jews are also slightly over-represented in the sample compared to population estimates.<sup>4</sup> These deviations are relatively minor and should be of little consequence as our analyses are conducted mostly *within* population groups defined by origin and migration generation.

Figure 1 describes the first ancestry category chosen by respondents, sorted by their objective ethnic origin and migration generation. Given the opportunity to choose from a long list of categories that included major countries of origin, the broader Mizrahi or Ashkenazi identity, or the all-encompassing religio-national identifiers, practically all respondents (over 90%) chose either 'Israeli' or 'Jewish'. The important attribute of both 'Israeli' and 'Jewish' ancestry categories is that they are inclusive and reflect the

**Table 1.** Percent of respondents by ethnic origin and migration generation ( $N = 3917$ ).

Generation	Mizrahi	Ashkenazi	Mixed	USSR	Ethiopia	Total
Generation 1	12.7	11.3	0.0	10.1	1.9	36.0
Generation 2	19.5	9.8	2.0	2.3	1.1	34.7
Generation 2.5	4.3	4.8	2.3	0	0	11.4
Generation 3	8.4	5.9	3.6	0	0	17.9
Total	44.9	31.8	7.9	12.4	3.0	100.0



**Figure 1.** First ancestry selected from a list of possibilities, by ethnic origin and generation of immigration (horizontal axis). Note: By definition, there are no first-generation respondents of mixed origin.

unity of the Jewish population in Israel (the latter, however, is also exclusive of Arab Israelis). They point to the fact that broad inclusive categories take precedence over exclusive ethnic categories when it comes to constructing subjective identities. In this sense, the findings reveal the success of the Jewish–Israeli nation-building project as these identities are instilled in the minds of most Jews in Israel across all immigrant generations.

Although most respondents selected either ‘Jewish’ or ‘Israeli’ as their ancestry there are differences as to which of these was selected as the first ancestry choice. We find that a larger proportion of Mizrahi Jews, compared to Ashkenazim, selected ‘Jewish’ rather than ‘Israeli’ as their first ancestry. This is true in each of the generations. Indeed, the differences between the two populations grow from the first to later generations and they are statistically significant. These patterns, we believe, reflect the greater tendency of Mizrahim to identify with Israel via its Jewish religion and history, more than with the secular Zionist project of modern Israel (Buzaglo 2008; Fischer 2016). We find that this is true even among third-generation Mizrahi, over half of whom select ‘Jewish’ as their first ancestry. The pattern among mixed origin Jews is more similar to that found among Ashkenazi than Mizrahi Jews.

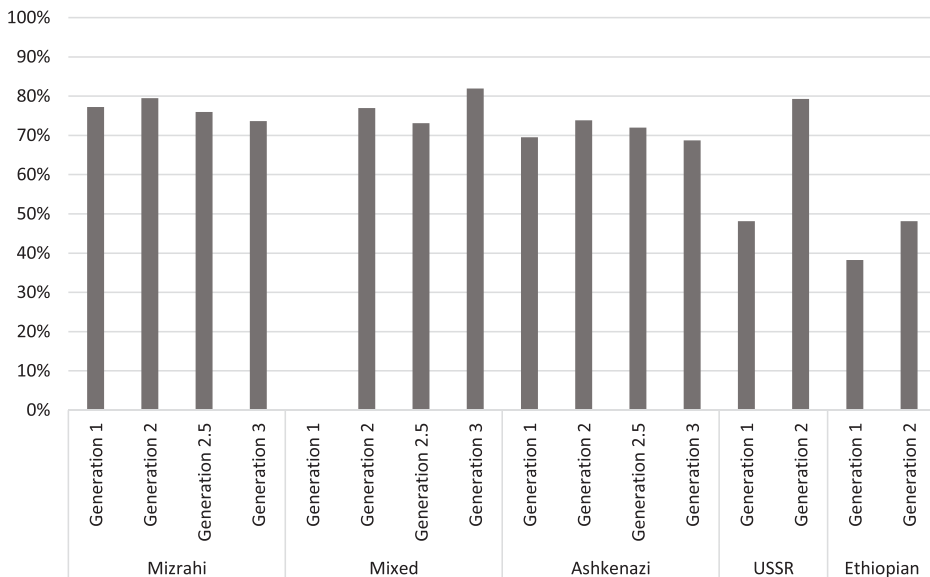
Figure 1 also reveals some differences between the established Jewish ethnic groups (Ashkenazim and Mizrahim) and immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia. The latter groups, especially in the first generation, are more likely than others to select ‘other’ ancestry as their first selection; typically, their country of origin. Ethiopians, even those born in Israel (2<sup>nd</sup> generation), are more likely than any other group to select their country of origin (listed here as ‘other’) as their ancestry. It is plausible that as recent immigrant populations whose integration met with considerable ambivalence, over 20% tend to hold onto the ethnic identity associated with place of origin.

Providing the option of choosing two ancestries has the advantage of capturing (at least partially) the multifaceted nature of ethnic identity. In the context of nation states, this

may also free respondents from the dilemma of choosing between an inclusive national identity and a more exclusive ethnic identity. It also permits one to acknowledge multiple ethnic roots resulting from inter-marriage of parents or grandparents. As it turns out, in the case of Israel, these options primarily provided respondents with the opportunity to express their ancestry as both ‘Jewish’ and ‘Israeli’.

Figure 2 presents the proportion of respondents who selected ‘Jewish’ as their first ancestry and ‘Israeli’ as their second option, or vice versa. Overall, approximately 70% of respondents describe their ancestry using these two inclusive categories. Mizrahim and Ashkenazim alike, tend to identify with the larger – unifying – religio-national collective more than with specific sub-groups that may imply internal cleavage. Generational differences are not very large. Among Mizrahim they fluctuate and peak in the second generation (79%), whereas among Ashkenazim they reach 74% (in the second generation as well). Interestingly, third-generation Ashkenazim are somewhat less likely than other Ashkenazim to select both ‘Jewish’ and ‘Israeli’ as their two ancestries. They are more likely to combine ‘Israeli’ ancestry with either ‘Ashkenazi’ or a country of origin in Europe. While the differences are small and statistically insignificant, they are in line with the growing tendency among third-generation Ashkenazi Jews to seek European citizenship based on their grandparents’ place of birth (see Harpaz 2013). Respondents of mixed origin do not differ much from Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews, though the third generation have the lowest proportion of all selecting a category other than Israeli and Jewish ancestry.

The pattern found among first-generation immigrants from the former Soviet Union and from Ethiopia is markedly different. Over half of the respondents in these two groups typically embrace a hyphenated ancestry that includes either ‘Israeli’ or, more often, ‘Jewish’ ancestry along with their particular group identification (typically



**Figure 2.** The proportion of respondents who selected ‘Jewish’ and ‘Israeli’ as their two ancestry choices, by ethnic origin and generation of immigration (horizontal axis). Note: By definition, there are no first-generation respondents of mixed origin.

Russian/Ashkenazi, or Ethiopian). This is in line with research that shows the inclination of first-generation immigrants to hold on to an identity associated with country of origin (see Lerner 2011 regarding the immigrants from the Soviet Union).

In the second generation, the two groups diverge considerably. Those originating from the former Soviet Union are as likely as Israeli-born Mizrahi or Ashkenazi respondents to choose Israeli and Jewish ancestry; thus revealing a high level of what Esser (2007) termed emotional assimilation. By way of contrast, half of the second-generation Ethiopian respondents born in Israel still maintain a hyphenated ancestry, mostly Jewish-Ethiopian.

To further explore the ancestry choices made by the Jewish Israelis we analysed the correlates of selecting ‘Israeli’ as the first ancestry. To do so, we included relevant demographic attributes in a multinomial logistic regression model. The model estimates the likelihood of choosing ‘Israeli’ rather than ‘Jewish’ as first choice, controlling for the possibility of making some other ancestry choice from the 17 different ancestry categories. Table 2 presents the coefficient estimates as well as the odds ratios associated with an increase of one unit on the predictor variables.<sup>5</sup>

Model 1 estimates the effect of migration generation and ethnicity on the likelihood of selecting Israeli as the first ancestry, controlling for age of respondent. The findings show a negative and statistically significant coefficient for the first generation (contrasted with the

**Table 2.** Logistic regression coefficients and odd-ratio estimates of the likelihood to select ‘Israeli’ as the first ancestry choice as opposed to Jewish or origin-specific (N = 3820).

		(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
Categories		B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)
Generation (The comparison category is Third generation)	First generation	**−0.65	0.52	**−0.55	0.58	**	0.59	**	0.57
	Second generation	−0.21	0.81	−0.15	0.86	−0.52	0.87	−0.14	0.87
	Generation 2.5	0.02	1.02	0.07	1.07	−0.14	0.87	0.08	1.08
Ethnic origin (The comparison category is Ashkenazi)	Mizrahi	**−0.62	0.54	**−0.42	0.66	**	0.77	−0.13	0.87
	Mixed	−0.04	0.96	−0.01	0.99	−0.26	1.07	0.04	1.04
	USSR	−0.00	0.99	0.14	1.15	0.06	1.07	−0.12	0.88
Age (The comparison category is 15–27)	Ethiopian	**−0.69	0.50	−0.27	0.76	−0.13	0.87	−0.14	0.87
	28–40	*0.29	1.34	0.22	1.25	0.14	1.15	0.17	1.19
	41–54	0.21	1.24	0.09	1.10	0.06	1.06	0.05	1.05
Male	55–70	**0.49	1.63	**0.38	1.47	*0.30	1.35	0.25	1.29
	71+	0.27	1.31	0.11	1.12	−0.02	0.98	−0.13	0.87
	Academic	–	–	0.10	1.11	0.12	1.13	0.08	1.08
Socio-economic cluster	–	–	–	*0.17	1.19	0.12	1.12	0.14	1.15
	–	–	**0.12	1.13	**0.10	1.11	**0.08	1.08	
	–	–	–	–	**0.62	1.85	*0.33	1.39	
Political position (The comparison category is centre)	Leftist	–	–	–	–	**0.37	1.45	**0.22	1.25
	Left-Centre	–	–	–	–	**	0.66	**	0.77
	Right-Centre	–	–	–	–	−0.41	0.66	**	0.77
Level of religiosity	–	–	–	–	–	**	0.56	**	0.74
	–	–	–	–	–	−0.58	0.56	**	0.74
	–	–	–	–	–	−0.30	0.56	**	0.74
Constant	*0.29	1.34	**−1.26	0.28	**	0.40	0.05	1.06	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>					−0.090				
Wald χ <sup>2</sup>					0.08			0.12	
		**119.85		**222.66		**311.73		**432.31	

\*p < .05.

\*\*p < .001.

third generation), but no other generational differences. That is, first-generation respondents are less likely than others to select Israeli rather than Jewish ancestry. For this generation, it is the Jewish component of national identity rather than the more recent and locally constructed component that comes first. Irrespective of migration generation, Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews are less likely than Ashkenazi Jews to select 'Israeli' as their first ancestry identity (in contrast to Jewish). Both Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews are more religiously oriented than other Israeli Jews and many feel excluded from the Zionist project of modern Israel. Respondents of mixed ethnic origin, as well as recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union, do not differ from the Ashkenazi population in the pattern of their choice of ancestry.

Three variables are added in model 2. These include gender, academic *vs.* lower education, and an indicator of residential affluence based on a socioeconomic index of the statistical area.<sup>6</sup> No gender differences are evident. Academic education, contrasted with lower educational achievement, increases the likelihood of identifying as Israeli by 19%. The affluence of one's residential environment is positively and significantly related to the likelihood of selecting 'Israeli' as one's first ancestry identification ( $b = 0.12$ ). These findings underscore the role of socioeconomic attributes in establishing stronger affinity with the more civic-oriented Israeli identity and at the same time feature Jewish identity as a legitimate collective identity for the less advantaged, mostly Mizrahi and Ethiopian, populations.

In the final steps of the analysis, we added two important politico-cultural attributes; self-reported political affiliation (on a left-right scale) in model 3, and self-reported religiosity measured on an 11-point scale (model 4). Respondents on the left side of the political divide are more likely to report 'Israeli' as their first ancestry, compared with those in the centre and the converse is true for those on the right, who are more likely to choose 'Jewish' as their first ancestry choice. All these coefficients are statistically significant.

Not surprisingly, the more religious the respondent, the less likely a choice of 'Israeli' (contrasted with 'Jewish') as one's first ancestral identity (model 4). Additionally, when religiosity is included in the model, the coefficient associated with Mizrahi origin weakens considerably and is no longer statistically significant. The difference, then, between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews regarding the choice of Israeli or Jewish as their first chosen national identity appears to be mediated by three factors: socioeconomic standing, political affiliation and religiosity. We interpret these findings to reflect a degree of alienation, especially among lower class Mizrahi, from the civic elements of national identity, which are embedded in 'Israeliness'. Concomitantly, Mizrahi Jews tend to espouse a view of nationality that is particularistic, exclusive of Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel and closely tied Jewish religion and its definition of the collective. Although religiosity has strong and obvious implications for one's national identity, it is noteworthy that it does not 'wipe out' the statistical effects of community affluence and political orientation. These three factors operate in tandem to reinforce Jewish ethnic differences in national identity.

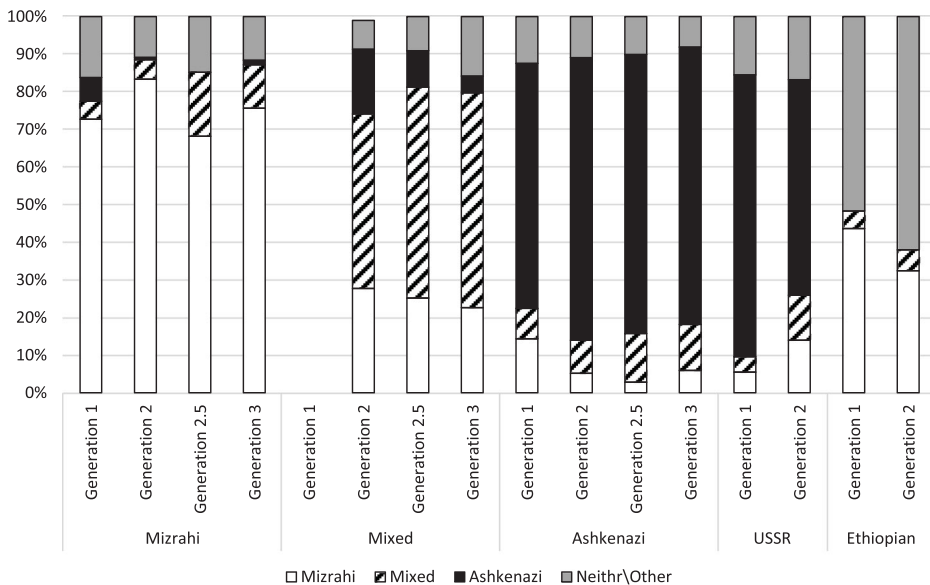
### *Inclusive and exclusive ethnic identities*

We found that when given the option of selecting two ancestry choices from an extended list, the majority of respondents prefer to report Israeli and Jewish ancestry, two inclusive

ancestry categories that jointly form modern Israel’s national identity (for the Jewish population). Does this mean that the ethnic origin classification into Ashkenazi and Mizrahi categories is merely a construct of researchers that has no bearing on the self-identification? We address this issue by examining responses to an additional item in the questionnaire that asked respondents how they define their ‘ethnic origin’. Response categories included Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, and Mixed ethnicity, but not ‘Jewish’ or ‘Israeli’. Additional options were ‘other’ and ‘do not define one’ self in these terms’.

The distribution of responses to the above question, conditional on the objective origin and generation, is presented in Figure 3. Before going into the detailed results, we note that only 11% of respondents said that the categories were not relevant, or refused to answer. Thus, the vast majority of Israeli Jews do not object to defining themselves along specific ethnic lines. The data reveal a strong correspondence between the ‘objective’ demographic origin presented in the horizontal axis of Figure 3, and self-proclaimed ethnic identity. Over 75% of Mizrahi (by origin) define themselves subjectively as Mizrahi. The figure peaks in the second generation, but is high in the third generation as well. The proportion of respondents that are demographically Mizrahi and yet self-define themselves as ethnically ‘mixed’, increases from about 4% in the 1<sup>st</sup> generation to over 10% in the 2.5 and 3rd generations. In some cases, this may represent misclassification of the demographic origin, but these figures may also reflect a tendency of some Mizrahim to resist the ethnic classification by resorting to the ‘mixed’ category.

Ashkenazim appear to be as likely as Mizrahim to report an ethnic identity that corresponds to their demographic origin. In the second and later immigrant generations, over 70% of respondents demographically defined as Ashkenazim, self-identify as Ashkenazi. The figure is somewhat lower in the first generation where more chose ‘Mizrahi’, presumably resulting from misclassified origin.<sup>7</sup> Self-identification as Mizrahi or Ashkenazi,



**Figure 3.** Ethnic identity by objective ethnic origin and generation of immigration (horizontal axis). Note: By definition, there are no first-generation respondents of mixed origin.

rather than stating that such categories are irrelevant, attests to the profundity of the ethnic cleavage among Jews in contemporary Israel.

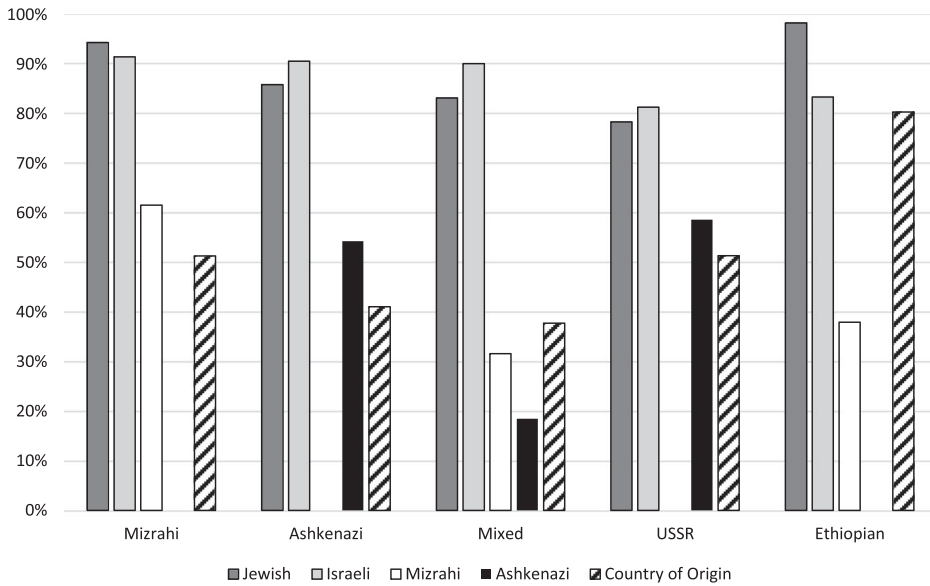
Respondents of mixed origin mostly choose 'mixed' as their ethnic origin. Surprisingly, those who do not choose to identify as 'mixed ethnicity' are more likely to define themselves as Mizrahi than Ashkenazi. This finding contradicts earlier small sample interview-based research, which reported that individuals of mixed origin tend to identify as Ashkenazi (Sagiv 2014). A possible explanation for the difference emerges when we compare respondents of mixed origin with-and-without higher education (data not shown). Respondents of mixed origin with lower education who did not select 'mixed' as their self-identity overwhelmingly chose Mizrahi as their identity. By contrast, academically educated respondents who did not select 'mixed' as their identity either rebuffed these ethnic categories altogether, or chose Ashkenazi as their identity. There seems, then, to be a class element in reporting ethnic identity among those of mixed origin, who have greater flexibility in choosing what ethnic category to identify with.

Most respondents from the former Soviet Union (75% in the first generation and 57% in the second generation) self-identify as Ashkenazim. In the second generation, a large minority self-identify as 'mixed' and even as Mizrahi. This probably reflects the fact that about 5% of Russian immigrants were born in the Asian Republics of the former USSR and may view themselves as Mizrahi. In addition, ethnographic research suggests that some immigrants from the former Soviet Union, irrespective of republic of origin, particularly in the economic periphery, align themselves with the more disadvantaged Jewish population (see, Idzinski 2014).

In line with the earlier findings, Ethiopian immigrants are most likely to choose their country of origin as their ethnic identity. Yet it is noteworthy that a sizable minority selected Mizrahi as their ethnic affiliation. As with some second-generation immigrants from the former Soviet Union, noted above, these findings reflect a form of segmented assimilation, whereby immigrants who have been marginalised seek affiliation with established populations that represent an alternative to dominant group and its culture.<sup>8</sup>

Further examination of the relevance of exclusive ethnic identities focuses on the importance of ethnic and national identities for respondents' self-identity. The question on which this analysis is based asked: 'Please say to what extent you define yourself according to the following identity definitions'. The categories (definitions) used were 'Israeli', 'Jewish', 'Mizrahi', 'Ashkenazi', and country of origin (one's own country of birth or that of their parents). A five-point Likert scale listed responses ranging from 'not at all', to 'a very high extent'. Figure 4 shows the proportion of respondents from various origin groups (all defined by geographic origin) who chose the two highest responses, namely 'to a high, or very high extent'.

National identities are highly important for self-identity of the overwhelming majority of respondents. Yet, this does not preclude the importance of ethnic terms for self-identity. Over 60% of Mizrahim and over half of the Ashkenazim stated that their respective Mizrahi and Ashkenazi identities were highly important for their self-identity. Almost 40% of Ashkenazim and over 50% of Mizrahim claimed that their specific country of origin was also highly relevant to their self-definition. These patterns did not vary in any systematic way by immigrant generation (data not shown) and a sizeable portion, even of the third generation, stated that they define themselves to a large extent according to their ethnic identities, along with the more inclusive national identities. As might be



**Figure 4.** The importance attributed to national and ethnic identities (percent reporting high or very high) for respondents’ self-identity, by ethnic origin (horizontal axis).

expected, ethnic identities play a much smaller role in self-identity for Jews of mixed origin. To the extent that such identities are considered important, they are based more in specific countries of origin than in Mizrahi or Ashkenazi identities.

The proportion for whom Jewish or Israeli identity is important for one’s self-definition is lowest among immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This may be due to the fact that some are not Jewish by religion. Still, over 75% of these respondents reported that Jewish and Israeli identities were important to them. Virtually all Ethiopians place high importance on their Jewish identity and most of them (80%) also place equally high importance on their Ethiopian identity. The strong emphasis on Jewish identity resonates with their high level of religiosity. Given the colour and deep cultural differences between Ethiopian immigrants and the rest of Jewish society in Israel, common (Jewish) religion is also paramount in their seeking acceptance into the host society.

Overall, these findings reveal the persistence of ethnic identities even in a society with a strong national ethos and identity that in a symbolic way preceded the migration process. These identities are not in opposition to inclusive national identities but appear to be embedded within them. While migration generation, per se, does not seem to alter this pattern much, mixed marriage does. Offspring of mixed marriages between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim are least likely to hold on to ethnic identities, and this may eventually erode the ethnic-based cleavage among Jews in Israel.

### Discussion

There is considerable ambivalence in Israel concerning ethnicity among Jews. On the one hand, there exists an ethos of unity that emphasises the shared ancestry of all Jews and their collective stake in the nation-building project. Yet, socioeconomic disparities along



ethnic lines are regularly reported in studies of education, labour market earnings and economic wellbeing. Some view the cleavage between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jews primarily as a class phenomenon manifested by socioeconomic differences. Others argue that the Mizrahi/Ashkenazi schism is not only a conflict over resources, and its roots may be found in earlier periods prior to migration. According to this view (Fischer 2016), the Zionist idea, propagated mostly by Ashkenazi Jews, aimed to emulate the European view of a universalistic nation-state that was associated with modernisation in Europe. By the way of contrast, in North Africa and the Middle East, European colonisation discouraged universalistic ideas of citizenry and the state, and fostered ethnic and religious particularism among Jews as well as Muslims. These different viewpoints, it is argued, are reinforced by the competition over real and symbolic resources and are reflected in differential perceptions of national identity.

Using a large-scale survey of nationally representative sample, we set out to examine how Israeli Jews use national and ethnic categories when thinking about ancestry and identity. Our study offers several novel observations. First, there is a strong preference among Jews in Israel to view their ancestry in inclusive (Jewish/Israeli) categories rather than more particularistic (ethno-cultural) categories. This can be viewed as a triumph of the nation-building project in Israel that aimed to subordinate particularistic histories and traditions to the imagined shared past and to emphasise the common present and future. Yet, whether 'Jewish' or 'Israeli' receives primacy in framing national identity is a source of growing contention, and it differs by generations, socioeconomic standing, religiosity, and political left-right standing. The stronger affinity of Mizrahi, especially the socioeconomically disadvantaged, with Jewish rather than Israeli ancestry alludes to the fact that many still feel excluded from the Zionist nation-building project, are more religious, and seek inclusion via religion and taking a hard stance on the Israeli – Arab/Palestinian conflict.

Second, our findings reveal the multifaceted and multi-layered nature of ethnic identification. The overwhelming majority of respondents selected the broad national categories Jewish and Israeli to describe their ancestry. Indeed, respondents view national identity categories as highly important for their self-identity more so than ethnic identity categories. It is important to note, however, that the choice of 'Jewish' identity (but not 'Israeli') is at once inclusive (of all Jews) but exclusive of the Palestinian-Arab minority of Israel. Indeed, we found that *inter alia*, right-wing Israelis tend to prefer 'Jewish' over 'Israeli' identity, presumably because the exclusion of Palestinian-Arabs is more important for them than for centre-left Jewish Israelis.

Even though respondents define their ancestry using the broad and inclusive Jewish and Israeli categories, most do not part with their more exclusive affiliations. Indeed, many respondents selected a particular ethnic identity when given a chance to choose one. Their actual choices of ethnic identity coincided to a very high degree with their demographic origin, giving credence to this indicator of ethnicity.

Placing these findings in the broader perspective of migration and acculturation, it is noteworthy that unlike immigrant populations in most other societies, national identity (particularly Jewish) was present among many immigrants to Israel even prior to their migration. Hence, even first-generation immigrants tend to view their ancestry in these inclusive, national, terms. Second, as might be expected, the likelihood of selecting Israeli or Jewish ancestry is highest among respondents of mixed parental origin. On

the other hand, these ancestry choices are considerably less prevalent among immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia, reflecting their recency of migration and integration difficulties they face, especially of the latter group.

Third, our findings do not reveal a clear pattern of decline in ethnic identity across generations. Such persistence of ethnic identities in a society with a strong unifying Jewish national ethos and identity such as Israel has wider implications for our understanding of ethnicity and ethnic identity in multi-ethnic societies and immigrant societies, in particular. It attests to the viability and potency of ethnic categories and the importance of ethnic affiliation for individuals. While maintaining such identity may be instrumental in some instances, the overall pattern of ethnic identity nested within highly prevalent and inclusive national identities seems to fit what Herbert Gans (2017) termed 'symbolic identity' which is primarily an expressive identity. It reflects a nostalgic affinity to the cultural attributes of the immigrant generation. In this regard, ethnic identities co-exist with broader national identities and reflect the complexity of the prolonged process of acculturation.

Fourth, what seems to make a clear difference is marriages across ethnic lines. Offspring of ethnically 'mixed' parents tend to shy away from the dichotomous distinction and to identify themselves as having mixed ethnicity or no particular ethnic identification. Concomitantly, respondents of mixed ethnicity are more likely than others to espouse inclusive national identity categories. In the Israeli case, this appears to set mixed ethnicity as an identifiable category (Smootha 2004), yet only marginally distinguishable from the Ashkenazi. In the broader migration context, the identity patterns of respondents with mixed ethnicity re-inforce our understanding of the relationship between structural assimilation and emotional assimilation and the crucial role of marriage across ethnic lines in blurring ethnic while strengthening national identity.

As a final point, we call attention to the very strong association between one's objective origin, based geographic region, and subjective ethnic identity. This suggests that in the absence of information of country of birth of previous generations, self-reported ethnic identity can serve as a reasonable substitute. Moreover, such a measure recognises the fact that ethnic identity is complex and fluid and is meaningful when reflective of one's own subjective being.

## Notes

1. We used the ICBS algorithm for coding countries into the two categories.
2. For similar identification of the 2.5 and 3rd generations see Cohen, Haberfeld, and Kristal (2007) and Ramakrishnan (2004).
3. The list included, Israeli, Arab, Palestinian, Muslim, Jewish, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Sephardi, Bedouin, Druze, Ethiopian, Iraqi, Moroccan, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian. Not all categories, of course were relevant for the Jewish population. Furthermore, respondents had the option to add an ancestry that was not included in the list or refuse to choose any ancestry.
4. For first- and second-generation immigrants, official statistics show that immigrants from Asia and Africa (15 years and over) constitute 47% of the Jewish population (ICBS 2017, Table 2.6), whereas the sample figure for Mizrahi and Ethiopian Jews combined (excluding the third generation) is 50%.
5. The dependent variable in the multinomial model has three categories – Israeli, Jewish and other. We set Jewish as the comparison category. Two equations are then estimated

simultaneously, one contrasting the choices of Israeli and Jewish, the other contrasting other and Jewish. The coefficient estimates in Table 2 are derived from the first equation.

6. This index is more sensitive to socioeconomic context than a cruder measure of geographic centre and periphery. Yet, there is a high correspondence between the two variables. Consequently, when a variable contrasting the Northern and Southern regions (the best geographic measure we have) with all other regions was added to the analysis it had no statistically significant effect after controlling for socioeconomic standing of the statistical area.
7. One example of this would be Jews from the Balkan. According to their European origin they are listed as Ashkenazim. Yet, most them are Sephardi Jews and may define themselves as Mizrahi.
8. We cannot reject the possibility of an order effect whereby for some, especially older first-generation respondents, this was an easier option to select than going to the last option on the list and choosing one's own country of origin.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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