

Cultural Syncretism in Definitional Ceremonies of Iranian Immigrants

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Abstract

The revival of ethnic identities among immigrants is a phenomenon that is on the rise in the modern and postmodern era. This article discusses the renewal of Ruz-e-Bah celebrations, which are traditional spring celebrations of the Iranian Jews, and highlights unique processes of ethnicisation in Israel. The study is based on diverse qualitative research methods, including content analysis, participant observations and in-depth interviews that were analysed from a phenomenological perspective. The article concludes that the ceremonies appear to serve as a collective ethnic “definitional ceremony” for these immigrants, in which crossing between ethnicity, culture and identity takes place, and in which cultural syncretism evolved. The Iranian immigrants exhibit a dual identity rooted in ethnic uniqueness on the one hand, and Israeliness on the other hand, which originates in their sense of otherness. Through the ritual practice, they stood up for their right to ethnic otherness within the national space.

Keywords

Immigrants, Iran, Definitional Ceremonies, Identity, Syncretism, Ethnic Revival

1. Introduction

1.1. Ethnic Awakening of Iranian Immigrants

This article discusses the ethnic revival of Ruz-e-Bah celebrations, which are traditional spring celebrations of immigrants from Iran in Israel. The revival of this cultural symbol since the 1970s, which was one of the main expressions for the revival of the ethnic identity of these immigrants, highlights unique processes of ethnicisation in Israel.

Upon the immigration of the Iranian Jews to Israel after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, they abandoned their traditional customs, due to

stereotypes and cultural inferiority originating in the melting pot policy. However, since the 1970s, they began a selective return to their traditional ethnic roots, which is managed mainly by their organisations: The House of Khoresh and The Central Organisation of Iranian Immigrants in Israel (<http://www.ivolunteer.org.il/?CategoryID=122&ArticleID=724>). These organisations act to strengthen social ties between immigrants from Iran, preserve their cultural heritage and raise the status of this community in Israeli society (Springer-Aharoni, 1982: p. 213; Yehoshafat, 1989: p. 3).

The ethnic awakening of the immigrants from Iran is expressed in extensive cultural activities: publication of a newspaper; production of movies; radio and television channels; entertainment nights with Iranian singers and weekend activities; publication of books in Persian. The prominent expression of their ethnic revitalisation was a renewal of the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations. The aim of the article is to test how this traditional ceremony, which was transcribed to a new social and cultural context, developed and established in Israel, and its role in shaping the identity of the young generation of Iranian immigrants.

1.2. Ethnic Revitalisation as a Global Phenomenon

Ethnic revitalisation has become a common occurrence in modern societies since the twentieth century. It is defined as a purposeful, organised and conscious effort of a group to construct a more satisfying culture, where they re-invent a new cultural system with social relations. Revitalisation is thus a cultural phenomenon for leading a change (Wallace, 1979).

The project of building the nation in immigrant societies, in particular in the United States, until the 1960s required ethnic minorities to relinquish their cultural identity (Gordon, 1964; Huntington, 2004). Since the 1960s, the assimilation theory has weakened and an image of a society composed of a mosaic of ethno-cultural groups is drawn, who preserve their identity and participate in the national social set on this basis.

Glazer and Moynihan (1970) showed that ethnic identity comprises an important motivating force in American reality, and is becoming the basis for social and political action. Prejudices and discrimination are major factors that, in their opinion, encourage the blooming of ethnic identity even among the young. Other researchers concluded that expressions of ethnic identity, resistance and creative mixing appeared in the adaptation of immigrants in the United States (Levitt, 2001). Alba and Nee claimed that due to a rise in the awareness of civil rights, an awakening took place for the ability to preserve the different and the ethnic, and expressions of ethnic identity appeared (Alba & Nee, 2003: pp. 1-16; Darieva, 2011).

Similar conclusions were reached by Hunt and Lightly (2001) who wrote about the revival of the black Pentecostal movement in Britain, whose members are Nigerian immigrants. The set of doctrines and the synthesis of African and Western beliefs in their churches supply them with a sense of identity and soli-

ilarity, as a response to their discrimination. Virankabutra and Kusakabe (2014) wrote about the struggle of youth of the exiled Sikh-Thai community in Bangkok for preserving its ethnicity in parallel to its integration into the multicultural society. They concluded that ethnic boundaries fulfil an important role among immigrants (Zhang et al., 2018).

These and other studies show that revival of ethnic and religious identities is a phenomenon that is on the rise in the modern and postmodern era (Dolma, 2017; Schnapper, 2005). Today, the struggle over the nature of the dominant national cultural capital is exacerbating in many nation-states, and it is clear that the strategy of building a united nation and state is unrealistic. The main reason for this is globalisation processes, which influence the shaping of ethnic identity and a weakening of the nation-state (Bauman, 2000).

The weakening of the dominant national cultures enabled sub-national cultural frameworks that were previously excluded, to demand recognition and legitimacy (Hall, 1991). These are not cultural demands to return to ancient traditions, but rather cultural actions that communicate with the past and draw from it, but do this using the cultural tools of late modernity, with renewed processing and interpretation (Anoegrajekti et al., 2018; Pieterse, 2015; Sharaby, 2022).

1.3. Mobility of Immigrants into the Cultural Mainstream

The multicultural global processes did not pass over Israel. Following the political changeover in 1977, demands for legitimisation of their ethnic identity increased among different groups, including immigrants from Islamic countries (Regev, 2011: pp. 381-401). Using Bourdieu's symbolic language (2005: p. 184), the struggle over the symbolic capital is depicted as a dynamic struggle between conservative veterans who hold the dominant attitude, and newcomers who undermine and aspire to receive their fair share of control in the "field".

As a result, the dominant centre in Israel has become heterogenic and its borders are losing their rigidity. Immigrant groups are moving to the cultural centre and are demanding to expand the repertoire of the definitions of the term Israeliness. At the same time, separation processes are taking place, as well as attempts to strengthen group boundaries in order to protect their identities (Author, 2016). Immigrant groups are struggling for recognition and belonging according to their interests, the types of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic) and their bargaining power, which is related, for example, to the size of the group.

Immigration to Israel is a clear case of "ethno-national homecoming". This refers to a movement of national political return under the auspices of the nation-state (Joppke & Rosenhek, 2002; Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport, 2013: pp. 1-3). This homecoming is based on giving citizenship to immigrants returning from the diaspora to their historic homeland, whose belonging to the national collective is defined based on a common blood origin (in the Jewish context, see DellaPergola, 2016). Expressions for this type of return movement were also found

in the early 1990s in a wave of German immigrants who returned to Germany (Elias, 2010) or Japanese-Brazilians who returned to Japan (Tsuda, 2010).

Research indicates that ethno-national homecoming can serve immigrants as a foundation for progress and self-actualisation, but at the same time, the new home comprises an arena of struggle for them, due to expectations for belonging which are not met (Lomsky-Feder & Rapoport, 2013: pp. 4-7; Stefansson, 2004: p. 8), as also occurs in Israeli society. Israeli society demands that the immigrants shed their foreignness and become Israelis. However, the immigrants quickly learn that the promise of full recognition is not fulfilled.

The focus of discussion in this article is ethnic revival of a group of immigrants (from Iran), whose nationality (Jewish) is identical to that of the majority in the absorbing society. As such, it is expected that tension will appear between two opposing effects in their ethnic revival: on the one hand exhibition of national solidarity and an attempt to become included in the ethos of unity and Jewish identity, and on the other hand demonstration of a particular ethnic identity and a demand to participate in shaping the national space. In this complex ethnic situation, I will examine how immigrants from Iran open and close social and cultural borders with the “other” via the ritual system.

1.4. Definitional Ceremonies and Cultural Syncretism

Symbolic boundaries comprise tools by which individuals and groups struggle and agree on the definition of social reality. They give rise to feelings of group similarity and friendship and comprise an essential condition for the creation of social boundaries (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Ethnic boundaries fulfil an important role in the intersection between ethnicity and immigration (Virankabutra & Kusakabe, 2014; Karamehic-Oates & Karamehic-Muratovic, 2020).

Studies show that cultural characteristics, such as rituals and celebrations that were preserved from the past with some change, indicate boundaries between groups, help in their preservation and become a symbol of belonging, identity and ethnic revival (Sharaby, 2016; Barth, 1969). For example, the population of immigrants from India in America is renewing and re-inventing itself via a ritual system, as a counter-response against attempts at assimilation (Nagel, 1996). Youths of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Nepali origin in the United States are conducting negotiations by adopting ethnic labels, “inventing traditions”, consuming ethnic products, and voluntary membership in the ethnic group. The created pan-ethnic identities exhibit a flexible relation to heritage and re-invention of the ceremony (Purkayastha, 2005). American students, second generation immigrants from South Asia, demonstrated their identity in an ethnic festival (Brettel & Nibbs, 2009). The Banyuwangi Regency also conducted strategies of ethnic revival via an ethnic carnival that included traditions, rites and rituals (Anoerajekti et al., 2018).

My anthropological work on the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations of immigrants from Iran in Israel, and my experience with the celebrators’ sense of ethnic pride, in-

dedicate that the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations may serve as collective ethnic “definitional ceremonies” for Iranian immigrants in Israel, in particular for the younger members of the community. It seems that a crossing between ethnicity, culture and identity takes place in these ceremonies, and they are used to advance public legitimisation of their culture of origin.

Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986), who coined the term “definitional ceremony”, paid attention to the everyday ways by which members of the community “define themselves” in situations where cultures break down. For example, while observing community life, Myerhoff could define some of the ongoing processes by which the identities of the elders were constructed. She studied the meaning of definitional ceremonies for a group of immigrants who lost their families and their connection to their past culture and are surrounded by “strangers”.

Definitional ceremonies meet the need of adult immigrants to feel a connection with the past and supply them with a bridge to the new society. The ceremonies consolidate the identity of young immigrants and position them in an ethnic context which is acceptable in the absorbing society. Definitional ceremonies are actually presented interpretations of themselves as an ethnic group, and not as a collection of people who have some common ethnic background. As such, definitional ceremonies act to connect individuals from a given ethnic origin (Goldstein, 1985: p. 251).

Because the conceptualisation of definitional ceremonies and studies on ethnic revival indicate a selective growth of ethnic awareness and identity among immigrant communities, the theoretical principle that guides me in this article is a model of cultural syncretism in situations of immigration. Cultural syncretism can be considered a major model for analysing ethnic revival processes and the shaping of a multi-dimensional identity in the postmodern era, where encounters take place within a framework of global immigration.

Syncretism means mixing and merging of religious and cultural beliefs, customs and practices and creation of a new tradition (Juergensmeyer & Clark-Roof, 2012). It usually refers to synthesis of religious forms (Leopold & Jensen, 2004). The construct syncretism refers to cultural and social changes in general. Syncretism indicates a process of change in the personal or group identity as well as conformation of this process. This process involves processing, interpretation, adaptation of traditional symbols and customs to the new culture and adoption of foreign contents, and is created either consciously or unconsciously (Leopold and Jensen, 2004; Paganoni, 2003).

The theoretical contribution of the syncretism model compared to the assimilation model is in showing that the process of change may be mutual (Croucher & Kramer, 2017; Stewart & Shaw, 1994: pp. 11-26). It expands the discussion on the active aspect of the immigrant in choosing the elements from which identity is constructed.

Syncretism is created in the majority/absorbing group (“syncretism from the top”) and the result is a compromise, cultural diversity and a change in its cul-

tural and religious repertoire. However, cultural and religious merging occurs mainly in the lifestyle and rituals of the minority/absorbed group (“syncretism from the bottom”). This cultural pattern is considered to be a way for opposition to different forms of dominance and a strategy for social and cultural negotiation (Purkayastha, 2005; Zhang et al., 2018; Sharaby, 2022).

2. Research Questions and Methodology

I will examine how Ruz-e-Bah celebrations may fulfil a function of definitional ceremonies for Iranian immigrants in Israel. I shall explain this ethnic phenomenon of a veteran minority group that immigrated to Israel in the 1950s, and in spite of the melting pot policy and its complete inclusion in society, gathers once a year for its ethnic celebration. I will examine what meaning the immigrants afford to their rituals and how, through them, they present themselves as belonging to an ethnic group with roots in Iran, the extent to which cultural syncretism is created in these ceremonies in which these immigrants, and especially their children, adopt ethnic experiences out of choice, and to what extent they adopt Israeli contents.

I chose to examine these questions within a broad time framework: from the 1950s when the immigrants arrived in Israel, to date. I included different qualitative methods in the study.

1) I performed content analysis of articles that appeared in Israel’s newspapers since the 1970s, when public Ruz-e-Bah celebrations were first held. The newspaper reports are not numerous. They are brief, and are swallowed among extensive descriptions of the ethnic celebration (the Mimouna) of immigrants from North Africa.

2) My study is also based on participant observations which have a significant experiential value for the researcher: the order of events; the foods, costumes and tents; the family reunions; the stage, speakers and dances. I used the phenomenological-hermeneutic method that attributes importance to understanding, describing and analysing a social phenomenon (the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations) via people’s subjective experience. The method suggests an interpretation for their perceptions regarding the meaning of the studied phenomenon (Spector-Mersel & Tuval-Mashiach, 2010).

3) Additional research instrument suitable for achieving this goal is a semi-structured in-depth interview (Shkedi, 2003: p. 23). This interview contains structured questions, but the investigator also affords the interviewees an opportunity to clarify and express themselves independently. Thus, I was exposed to the points of view, perceptions, values and experiences of the immigrants from Iran, and these afforded insights and knowledge on the studied phenomenon along the time axis.

The study included 35 interviews with men and women of the Iranian community. The interviewees’ age ranged from 19 to 87. They live in different cities and rural settlements, mainly in the periphery. I noted the advantage of the older

research population who emigrated from different regions of Iran, mainly in the 1950s. Their experience in the ritual system in their country of origin and in Israel and their comparative perspective helped me understand the ritual change. I reached the first interviewees through close friends, and they referred me, via the snowball method, to additional people.

The interviews were analysed using a qualitative method based on the phenomenological-hermeneutical approach which analyses the “objective reality” as reflected from their stories (Butler-Kisber, 2018; Chase, 2005). Use of a method that reconstructs culture through interviews, particularly with older people, has a limitation characteristic of research of life stories in general (Atzmon, 2001: p. 137). Nonetheless, these primary sources, which comprise an “oral history”, are an important social and cultural text.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The Ruz-e-Bah holiday in Iran

The Nowruz is a traditional Iranian holiday commemorating the New Year. It takes place between the 20th and 21st of March, on the Vernal (spring) equinox. The meaning of the name Nowruz in Persian is “new day”. The holiday originates in the ancient Zoroastrian religion that dominated the Persian Empire from the sixth century BC until its fall into the hands of the Arabs in the eighth century AD. The Nowruz symbolizes a beginning, happiness, joy and hope in human life and nature (Rahimian, 2008; Shkalim, 2015: p. 82).

The family members gathered on the eve of the holiday, blessed each other and exchanged gifts. The holiday table was laden with vegetables and foods that symbolise light, financial bounty, health and fertility. Coins, lit candles, decorated eggs, fish and a mirror symbolising the bringing of light to new life were also placed on the table (Shkalim, 2015: pp. 87-91).

The Nowruz holiday symbolises peace, fraternity, reconciliation and equality. At the end of the Nowruz ritual at home, the family members visited neighbours and acquaintances. Many families used this multi-participant event for match-making and engagement rituals. The joyous atmosphere and the closeness between people were reflected in dressed-up celebrators who wandered the streets (Eilam-Gindin, 2011: p. 108).

The Iranian Jews did not celebrate the Nowruz together with the other Iranians, due to its proximity to the Passover holiday, which involved many preparations and special prohibitions. They therefore celebrated their own Nowruz, that began on the evening of the last day of Passover. The Jews to a great extent adopted the structure and symbol set of the Nowruz, indicating that they were influenced by their surroundings and wanted to be included in Iranian society (Rahimian, 2008: pp. 199-202).

The Iranian Jews spent the holiday in parks, and the location distant from their permanent residence turned the picnic into a socially significant event. The interviewees’ descriptions reflect the prominent characteristics of the celebrations:

great happiness and branched family and social relations that create a dense community network essential for preserving individual identity, directing people's actions according to community norms and preserving its unique patterns.

The festivities apparently fulfilled a function of between-community solidarity, expressed in ritual activities such as shared meals, games, sport competitions, dances accompanied by traditional musical instruments. The social encounter served as an opportunity for acquaintances between youths and for engagement agreements. Muslim neighbours were also invited (Shkalim, 2015: pp. 70-71).

3.2. Immigration and Absorption in Israel

The Iranian Jews had a strong religious and national affinity to the Land of Israel, and small groups immigrated there over the generations (Mizrachi, 1959: p. 26). The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 aroused a sense of national pride among the Jews of Iran and a desire to become included in the new life in the Jewish state. When ceasefire agreements were signed in 1949, the Iranian government allowed immigration of Jews to Israel (Netzer, 2010: pp. 348-349).

During 1949-1953, more than 30,000, who comprised approximately one third of the Jewish population in Iran, immigrated to Israel (Netzer, 2010: p. 348). In 1958 there was a large immigration wave from Iran (Operation Cyrus) that included 5000 people. A total of about 37,000 Jews emigrated from Iran to Israel between 1949 and 1959. After this the immigration rate decreased to several hundred a year (Sasson, 2006: pp. 166-167; Springer-Aharoni, 1982: p. 12). Immigration renewed following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1978-1979 headed by Ayatollah Khomeini (Netzer, 2010: pp. 358-359). Similarly to other immigrants during that period, immigrants from Iran in the 1950s and 1960s, which are at the focus of the present study, experienced absorption difficulties in immigrant camps, and dispersal of their families did not facilitate their adjustment. The cultural gap undermined the cultural values and religious beliefs of many of these immigrants (Ezri, 2001: p. 53; Yehoshafat, 1989: p. 3). In spite of their lack of agricultural experience, they established many successful agricultural settlements (moshavs), mainly in the southern periphery. Some settled in kibbutzim and development towns (Netzer, 2010: pp. 350-359). However, similarly to immigrants from Asia and Africa, they did not gain recognition in Zionist historiography.

In the first decades after the establishment of the State, the national and cultural hegemony applied a cultural strategy of assimilation among the immigrants, mainly those from Islamic countries. The cultures of these immigrants were considered primitive, irrational and irrelevant for consolidating the ethos of the Jewish national movement. They were perceived as a threat to the building of the nation in the spirit of Western Zionism. This paternalistic viewpoint forced the immigrants to shed their cultural characteristics and adopt the dominant Israeli culture, with its Western orientation (Hever et al., 2002).

The stereotypic attitude toward their cultures and the "melting pot" policy in-

fluenced the self-image of immigrants from Islamic countries. Many thought that the customs of the past should not be continued in the new society (Author, 2009: 66). Many of the immigrants from Iran, especially the youth, relinquished their ethnic tradition and identity, including the traditional spring celebrations.

3.3. Ethnic Solidarity in the Open Hospitality

The interviews indicate that in the 1950s, the celebrations on the night of the seventh day of Passover were abolished, or were celebrated in a small family circle, among members of the community only. The interviewees explained that the attitude toward them as “others”, their financial situation and harsh life conditions during the first years of absorption made it difficult to hold the celebrations as in the past. Abraham explained:

In the first years in Moshav Zerachia, we celebrated. We were a large community of immigrants from Iran and many from the city of Shiraz, so the traditional atmosphere was preserved, in spite of financial difficulties. We celebrated the evening as in Iran, with the same foods and customs. With time, the Israeli atmosphere overcame tradition. We became more Israeli, and wanted to be such. We saw this as something good, to be an Israeli. This was also the message of the State.

Moshe, who emigrated from the town of Takab near Teheran, recalled:

When we immigrated, we lived in a moshav near Jerusalem, together with Jews from Kurdistan and Iraq. We celebrated with what we could due to our poor means, with the nuclear family. We did not want to stand out, because the trend was a “melting pot”. After some years we moved to Moshav Meliluach, where there was a united community of immigrants from Iran, so we celebrated as in Iran.

These and other testimonies strengthened my insights regarding the evolution of the celebrations in Israel on the eve of the holiday since the 1950s. My impression is that at the beginning, erosion in the immigrants’ willingness to celebrate occurred because of their desire to be Israeli. However, many of them, including youths, gradually became strict about participating in the tradition of open hospitality on the eve of the holiday, and do this today as well. This is prominent mainly in the rural settlements, where there are large communities of immigrants from Iran. The geographic and ethnic segregation to a great extent fed the local Iranian consciousness and identity, and these communities turned into “micro-cultural” frameworks (Regev, 2003: p. 891), where cultural patterns that the public culture labelled as marginal existed.

Interviews with young Israeli-born Iranians supply a look into the multi-generational family celebrations on this holiday. Lea, from moshav Noga, third generation, told: “Grandfather and grandmother live in my moshav, and we eat with them almost every Saturday morning. They tell me about Iran. Every year, we celebrate the holiday at their house and eat traditional dairy foods. My friends

arrive and also family members and guests from all ethnic communities”.

From the interviews I conclude that cultural syncretism evolved on the eve of the holiday, which is characterised by ritual variation: some families celebrate as they did in Iran, others choose to preserve only some of the traditional customs. There are those who sometimes celebrate or relinquish them completely. The table is set with Persian and Israeli foods and vegetables. Many place coins in a vessel with water, a mirror and candles, but few place grains of wheat or a fish as in the past. The custom of matchmaking has ceased and Israeli songs have been added to the authentic Persian music. Guests from different ethnic communities participate. The new ritual character shows that today, after the demand for assimilation has weakened, the immigrants from Iran feel more comfortable in being Iranians in Israel and combining between their identities.

3.4. Celebrating on Carpets in the Orchard

In the first decades after emigrating from Iran, the Ruz-e-Bah was celebrated outdoors in a limited family-community framework, mainly where immigrants from Iran were concentrated. According to the interviewees, the public invisibility of the Ruz-e-Bah during those years stemmed from the immigrants' coping with livelihood, housing and adjustment difficulties, and particularly shame of their traditional culture. The limited festive framework was compatible with their ethnic cultural invisibility, as “others”, during that period. Nava indicated: “In the 1950s we did not celebrate the Ruz-e-Bah openly in parks, but rather celebrated it modestly”.

Interviewees described how they gathered on the Ruz-e-Bah holiday in a garden, orchard, grove or park close to their homes or settlement, with foods and music. Joshua from Beer-Sheva told: “In the first years, we would go the orchard at the end of the holiday and would take expensive and beautiful rugs with us and use them to decorate the orchard. The girls would take the wheat and lentil sprouts from the eve of the holiday table and would throw them in the river, to symbolise the renewal for the new year”.

Lydia from Moshav Zarchia told: “In the beginning we would celebrate, all immigrants from Iran in the moshav, together in an orchard. We would take carpets, mattresses, bring a Persian band or singer and barbeque together, happy and joyful”.

Naama from Moshav Maslul recalled the outdoor celebrations in the 1950s:

We sat in the grove near the moshav, families, families, wearing holiday clothes. We spread foods, sweets and paraffin stoves for making tea on blankets, and the joy was great. Men and women danced, in different rows, to the sounds of a flute. They sang traditional and Israeli songs. The youth also knew the dance and the traditional songs they absorbed from childhood.

3.5. Political Speeches in the Park

Organised Ruz-e-Bah celebrations in the public sphere in Israel were held for the

first time in the 1970s, by initiative of activists from among the immigrants. Organisations of immigrants from Iran contributed to the public ritual plan that took shape in the Ramat Gan National Park (Netzer, 2006: p. 21; Springer-Aharoni, 1982: pp. 13-14). They still conduct them today, with collaboration of the Ramat Gan municipality and support from the Ministry of Absorption.

The tradition of a mass picnic near rivers was thus preserved in Israel. However, while in Iran the celebrations took place in different places and preserved the community structure, in Israel the celebration took place at one central site. The celebrations had a broader pattern of demonstrating ethnic identity and belonging, similarly to other ethnic celebrations, and the new location became a tradition.

From the oral testimonies I conclude that the initiative began under influence of the Organization of Immigrants from North Africa in Israel, that began to organise their traditional spring celebration, the Mimouna, in the late 1960s (Sharaby, 2009). This celebration also served as a model for renewal of the traditional celebration of immigrants from Kurdistan—the Seharane—in the 1970s (Sharaby, 2016). The electoral power of the Iranian immigrants was weak compared to that of immigrants from North Africa, who in the 1970s comprised a demographic majority in Israel (Sikron, 2004: p. 59). The Ruz-e-Bah celebration was therefore “discriminated” against, compared to the Mimouna, and the interviewees referred to this. For example, Mazal (70) said: “When immigrants from Iran saw the success of the Mimouna celebrations and the great support they were given, they were jealous and also went to the park to celebrate, similarly to immigrants from Kurdistan in the Seharane celebrations.

According to reports published in the Israeli press, thousands of people came to the celebrations in the Ramat Gan National Park, but they were held in a relatively modest format. In 1972, approximately 30,000 Iranians participated (about one-third of the community in Israel), with singers, dances, barbecues and home-made foods. On the same day, the Mimouna celebration took place in a park in Jerusalem, with about 80,000 celebrators. The President of Israel, the Prime Minister, the Chief Rabbi, the Chief-of-Staff, ministers and public figures participated. However, none bothered to visit the celebration of the immigrants from Iran (*Ha’aretz*, April 7, 1972).

A few years later, the politicians apparently understood the political power embedded in the festive encounter of immigrants from Iran and came, albeit in a limited presence and lower-rank dignitaries. The Ruz-e-Bah celebrations of 1979 were held with approximately 20,000 people, including immigrants who had emigrated from Iran following the Islamic revolution headed by Khomeini. The Minister of Defence and the Minister of Agriculture came to the central assembly and members of parliament. However, the President of Israel, the Prime Minister and ministers who visited the Mimouna did not come (*Ha’aretz*, April 17, 1979; *Ha’aretz*, April 20, 1979).

In the early 1980s, about 30,000 people celebrated at the Ramat Gan National

Park. Among the speakers were the Minister of Communication, a deputy minister and one parliament member. In contradistinction, the President of Israel, the Chief Rabbi and other public dignitaries spoke to approximately 150,000 celebrators of the Mimouna in Jerusalem (*Ha'aretz*, April 16, 1982).

Participation of senior public figures in the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations occurred for the first time in the mid-1980s. The President of Israel, Prime Minister Shimon Peres and other dignitaries spoke (*Yediot Aharonot*, April 15, 1985). In the 1990s, about 30,000 celebrators gathered in the Ramat Gan National Park, with participation of important guests (*Yediot Aharonot*, April 23, 1992; *Yediot Aharonot*, April 29, 1997). The main event of the celebrations has continued in the Ramat Gan National Park since 2000, with 30,000 participants from around the country. The guests of honour include the Prime Minister, ministers, members of parliament, the Chief-of-Staff, IDF generals, etc. (*Yediot Aharonot*, April 28, 2000; *Yediot Aharonot*, April 15, 2001).

Media reports and descriptions of the interviewees indicate that the main stage of the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations turned into a political event. In their speeches, the heads of state expansively praised the Iranian community and indicated that their ethnic celebration is a holiday of the entire Jewish People, and is part of Israeli culture. These declarations, even if intended to advance elections propaganda, afforded legitimisation to the inclusion of Ruz-e-Bah celebrations in particular, and traditions of immigrants from Iran in general, in the cultural mainstream.

In recent decades, in parallel to the main event in the park in Ramat Gan, celebrators of Iranian origin celebrate in several parks around the country, which are near their main settlements. Interviewees explained that this is due to the difficulty of first-generation immigrants from Iran who have aged to reach the park in Ramat Gan.

3.6. Social and Cultural Syncretism

The observations, the descriptions of the interviewees, and the media coverage (*Yediot Aharonot*, April 15, 1985; *Yediot Aharonot*, April 22, 1987) indicate that a unique intercultural combination was consolidated at the celebrations site. The celebrators gather on the day of the Ruz-e-Bah in the early morning at the Ramat Gan National Park, which reminds them of the place where they used to celebrate in Iran.

Joy and the social encounter are the main elements of the celebration. Old and young celebrators explained that because the community is dispersed, the celebration is a day of family reunion for them. The Ruz-e-Bah celebration, which in Iran had a family and community nature, now has the nature of an ethnic celebration and great solidarity. Tikva, from the city of Holon where there is a large community of immigrants from Iran, said: "In the Ramat Gan National Park we meet many acquaintances and friends from Persia who come with their families. This gives us joy. We meet old friends and neighbours from Persia and people

we have not met for years. The excitement is enormous”.

Aaron added: “We come here to meet the Jews from Iran, to meet everyone together once a year and see each other. I know almost all the celebrators in the park. I meet people I have not seen for years”.

In recent decades, with the increase in mixed marriages of the immigrants from Iran (*Akbar Ha'ir*, September 9, 2007; Netzer, 2006: p. 21), the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations opened to other ethnic groups. This strengthened public recognition of the festival and its nature as a Persian-Israeli celebration. Rivka said: “We celebrate in the Ramat Gan National Park every year, until now. With time, family members, neighbours and friends from other ethnic communities also joined. Today this holiday is better known in Israel. With time we could finally celebrate the holiday with pride, without thinking about what others say about us”.

Pinhas told:

When the celebration began in Ramat Gan, we went with our heads held high, without thinking about what they would say about us. All Israel came, regardless of their ethnic community. Obviously, the majority who came were Iranian. There was a special atmosphere there. Today we have aged, and do not go as much, but my children go every year with their wives and children. My grandchildren love the holiday. I sit for hours and tell them stories about Persia and they listen excitedly.

The interviewees' testimonies indicated that youths of the community come to the parks en masse, even if they do not know the significance of the holiday. The holiday succeeds in being an agent of change that creates communication between the young and old immigrants from Iran in Israeli society. This phenomenon reflects family solidarity, which gathers people in spite of generation gaps. A youth who continues to maintain relations with his relatives is not ashamed of these relations, and does not necessarily disengage himself from the ethnic group (Bar-Yuda, 1990: p. 27).

The description by Sharona, a granddaughter to immigrants from Teheran, reflects the strong connection of the younger generation to the family and ethnic framework via this holiday:

When my grandfather and grandmother were alive we would travel, the entire extended family, to the Yarkon Park and have a barbeque together. It was rather Persian, Persian singers, all the celebrators barbequing together until evening, eating and drinking. Even after grandfather and grandmother died, all the families, with the children, go there. The special thing is meeting the entire Persian community, with relatives from other places.

Talks with the celebrators indicated that the custom of matchmaking in the Ruz-e-Bah in Iran, that served as a control mechanism for preventing assimilation with Muslim youth, was preserved in the celebrations in Israel to a great extent, until the late 1980s (*Yediot Aharonot*, April 15, 1985). In the past few decades, mixed marriages are more common, but immigrants from Iran choose to

marry within their community (*Akbar Ha'ir*, September 9, 2007; Yehoshafat, 1989: p. 4). Many of the celebrators, including the youth, regard the outdoor mass family-ethnic event as an opportunity to meet partners and their families.

According to the testimonies, in the first years singers accompanied by a band of traditional musical instruments appeared in the park. However, according to observations and interviews, today a DJ plays songs in Persian together with modern rhythms, which enable the younger generation to connect to the event. Dances are an integral part of the celebration, and circles of people, including many youths, dance on the lawns and encircle the stage. Zvia told of her experiences: "Every year I come to celebrate with my family in the park, because this holiday is very important for us. All celebrators sing and dance. Some bring musical instruments. During dancing everyone holds hands, and we young women wave kerchiefs over our heads and dance a traditional Persian dance".

The familiar music and dances, the sounds of joy, the excited conversations and the close physical contact, all renew a shared and hidden ethnic pride.

4. Conclusions

This article discusses the ethnic revitalisation of the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations, which are traditional spring celebrations of immigrants from Iran in Israel, from the 1970s. The findings indicate that the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations may serve as a collective ethnic definitional ceremony in the ethnic revitalisation of these immigrants, in particular the youth, where a crossing between ethnicity, culture and identity occurs, and cultural syncretism evolved. The Iranian immigrants become closer to themselves through the definitional ceremonies and represent themselves as an "Iranian" community or ethnic group. Together they create interpretations of a consensual past that creates a heritage of symbols that represent "Iranian ethnicity" in Israel.

The general conclusion from the ethnographic material is that on the one hand, the celebration fulfils a major function of liberation from the restrictions of ethnic community behaviour that were forced by the demands for social merging during the first decades after their immigration, preservation of family and community solidarity and demonstration of ethnic pride. The celebration actually symbolises belonging and boundaries of belonging, through which they want to preserve and even create ethnic borders with the collective culture shaped by Israeli cultural hegemony, and to emphasise their unique identity with singing, dancing, food and family relations.

On the other hand, these immigrants stress messages of national Jewish-Israeli unity in the celebration, where they are part of it, by hosting celebrators not of Iranian origin, shows of artists and bands of other ethnic communities and participation of politicians. Similar to celebrations and ritual forms that are by nature liminal events where hierarchic partitions are removed (Da Matta, 1984), the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations are an opportunity for blurring social and cultural boundaries with the "other".

With the renewal of the Ruz-e-Bah, the immigrants from Iran simultaneously opened and closed boundaries. This is a dual identity, rooted in ethnic uniqueness on the one hand, and Israeliness on the other hand, which originates in the sense of otherness of the Iranian Jews in Israel, whose immigration is a clear case of ethno-national homecoming.

By traditional ritual practices such as the Ruz-e-Bah, the immigrants from Iran demanded their right to ethnic otherness that is included in Israeli society, and wanted to relocate themselves in the national space. They use the practice of “marking boundaries” (Lamont & Molnar, 2002) for conducting constant negotiation which indicates their complex situation: part of the collective, but marginal.

The mobility and institutionalisation processes of the Ruz-e-Bah, similar to traditional celebrations of other ethnic communities (Sharaby, 2015; Sharaby, 2017) in the current Israeli experience, and the legitimisation afforded to these ethnic symbols in the public space, show that the space itself is changing, and “syncretism from the top” is taking place in it (Paganoni, 2003).

A process of renewal of the ethnic tradition developed during the Ruz-e-Bah celebrations concomitantly to its movement to the centre. This is actually “syncretism from the bottom” that involves processing, adaptation of traditional symbols and customs to the new culture and adoption of new contents (Anoegrajekti et al., 2018). This cultural syncretism positions immigrants in a current ethnic context and connects between cultures and generations and serves as a means for advancing public legitimisation of the immigrants’ culture of origin (Smith & Levy, 2008; Zhang et al., 2018).

The result is a variation of ritual syncretism that exhibits the multiplicity of social positions and the choice paths and adaptation of immigrants (Keyes, 1981: pp. 4-30; Zhou, 1997), as well as the multiple conformations of modern life itself (Eisenstadt, 2000).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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