

## Introduction

### Aliyah versus Migration

The great Jewish migration from Eastern Europe (1881–1914) was one of the formative events in the history of the Jewish people in modern times. During that period, more than two-and-a-half million Jews migrated abroad. Demographically, socially, and culturally, this wave of migration had an enormous impact on Jewish society. Those who reached their countries of destination integrated relatively quickly into their surroundings and gradually and persistently climbed up the socioeconomic ladder. This Jewish migration also led to the creation of new Jewish centers where there had been none before, while former sites gradually began to lose importance and influence until they finally disappeared during World War II.

Two outstanding centers of the Jewish world that came into existence as a result of this mass migration from Eastern Europe were located in the State of Israel and the United States. For the Jewish communities in these two countries, the years 1881–1914 were a formative period in which the foundations were laid for their growth. In Jewish communities in both Israel and the United States, new social elites developed in place of the former religious and economic elites. But despite the similarities that led to the creation of Jewish communities in Palestine and America, over time two different historiographies came into being, each dealing with the same historical phenomenon but interpreting it differently: one was the focus on Jewish immigration to the United States; the other was the process of aliyot to Palestine. I

These two historiographies refused to recognize each other and were created independently without any points of contact. Although the immigrants who reached the United States and Palestine at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries came from the same

## 2 Introduction

countries of origin, spoke the same languages, and shared the same cultures, the two historiographies chose to emphasize the difference between the two groups of migrants. According to them, the immigrant to Palestine came because of his values and ideology, while the immigrant to the United States came for economic and other prosaic reasons. In Palestine the immigrants were said to have created a model society and laid the infrastructure for the evolving Jewish State, while in the United States they sought to improve their economic status, integrate into the surrounding society, and create roots in their new country. “The world of our fathers” evoked in Irving Howe’s eponymous monumental book on Jewish immigration to the United States was not the same world as that of the Jewish immigrants who came to Palestine and sought to begin a new life there. Moreover, Zionist historiography has hardly touched on the history of Jews in America and almost completely neglected the period of the great immigration. This subject was relegated to the margins of historical research in Israeli universities without any regard for the importance of the phenomenon and the greatness of its influence. Almost nothing was written in Hebrew or translated into Hebrew about the great journey of the Jews of Eastern Europe westward, the life of Jews in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, sweatshops, the social and cultural life of Jews in the United States, or other important aspects of the subject.<sup>1</sup>

While Zionist historiography disregarded the great migration from Eastern Europe, it was fulsome in its praise of the immigration to Palestine. If the years 1881–1914 are considered “the period of the great migration,” in Zionist historiography the period is divided into two parts: the first is called the “first aliyah” (1881–1903) and the second is called the “second aliyah” (1904–1914).

Zionist historiography generally emphasized the difference and special character of the immigration to Palestine and stressed the importance of Zionist ideology in this wave of immigration, seeing it as the chief motivation. The key criterion according to these historians was quality, not quantity. The small number of immigrants who preferred Palestine to America implied a special and exceptional wave of immigration. Why else did they choose from the beginning to come and settle in Palestine and not immigrate directly to the United States?

Thus, immigration to Palestine was taken out of its broader historical context and became disconnected from time and space.

The present work seeks to revise the picture of Jewish immigration to Palestine at the beginning of the twentieth century and to question the prevailing assumption that it was something special and unique in the history of Jewish immigration. My purpose is to examine the “second aliyah”—the most ideological among the waves of immigration to Palestine—in the broader historical context of the period of the great migration from Eastern Europe. I will do so by using accepted methods of research into immigration in general and Jewish immigration in particular. Stated more precisely, this book seeks to investigate the history and origins of immigration to Palestine from the beginning of the twentieth century until World War I through an examination of the three stages that are part of every immigration process: (1) factors in the land of origin that caused the emigrants to leave; (2) difficulties and obstacles that emigrants encountered until they reached the land of destination; and (3) the degree to which emigrants were absorbed into their new social framework. Thus this study seeks to envisage the history of immigration to Palestine as the history of the immigrants themselves, based on a view of their social, cultural and demographic backgrounds in their lands of origin as the starting point for their acclimatization in the Yishuv (the term used for *Jewish* residents in *Palestine*, before the establishment of the State of *Israel*) at the start of the twentieth century. Moreover, this work is not only a chapter in the study of Jewish settlement in Palestine at the end of the Ottoman period but also a chapter in the history of the great Jewish migration that began in the mid-1870s and ended with the outbreak of World War I.

This introduction is divided into three parts. The first part investigates how the terms “aliyah” and “migration” came to be adopted in Zionist historiography and examines the influence of these terms on research in the field. These terms not only created a distinction between immigrants to Palestine and immigrants to America but also determined that immigration to Palestine was investigated according to different criteria than those generally used in the study of migrations. In the first part of this chapter, there will also be an attempt to trace the point in time when the first waves of immigration to Palestine were

#### 4 Introduction

taken out of their broader historical context and began to be treated as a special and exceptional phenomenon. The second part paints a general picture of the “second aliyah” as depicted in Israeli historiography and examines the influence of Zionist terminology on historical research into the history of immigration to Palestine. In the third part, I discuss the methodological problems and the primary sources that made possible the writing of this book.

#### Olim (Ascenders) and Immigrants

The terms “aliyah” and “migration” exemplify more than anything else the dichotomy between the two historiographies of the great Jewish migration from Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. The sweeping and uncritical use of these terms was one of the main factors that led to two historiographies that dealt with the same historical phenomenon but treated it differently.

The meaning of the term “aliyah” in the Hebrew language is “going from a lower place to a higher place.” The source of the word is ancient, and it already appears in the Bible in its primary sense of moving from a low level to a higher level: “And I have promised to *bring you up* out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:17). Because Egypt was geographically lower than the land of Canaan, the children of Israel had to ascend from that low land to the land of hills and mountains that comprised the land of Israel. The same applied to the journey of the children of Israel from Babylon to Jerusalem in the time of Ezra: “Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him *go up* to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord” (Ezra 1:3).

It was the biblical commentators who transformed the term “aliyah,” giving it not only a sense of physical ascension but also a spiritual sense. Rabbi Solomon Yitzhaki (Rashi), for instance, claimed that, because of its sanctity, the land of Israel is more exalted than other countries, and therefore reaching entails ascension. Gradually, “aliyah” was taken out of its narrow context of entry into the land of Israel.

A much broader series of concepts came into being, including *aliyah la-regel* (going to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, Shavuot [the Feast of Weeks], and Succot [the Feast of Booths]), *aliyah la-torah* (reciting blessings on the Torah when the portion of the week is read in synagogue), and *aliyat ha-neshamah* (the elevation of the soul in the upper world through its rectification in this world). At the same time, despite all these idioms, the commonest use of the term “aliyah” denotes the arrival of Jews in the land of Israel. This special Hebrew word has no equivalent in any other language. In the deepest sense, the process of aliyah to the land of Israel is not simply immigration or emigration but a very special kind of migration. Hence, “aliyah” refers to the realization of the desires of a Jew who, by coming to the promised land, both fulfills the divine promise in practical terms and exemplifies the concept of the Jewish longing for the land of Israel.

In the Zionist ethos, aliyah to the land of Israel is totally different from ordinary immigration, and this special type of migration is one of the foundations of Zionist thought. The aliyah of Jews to Palestine is not comparable to the emigration of Jews who left their lands of origin and reached other destinations. With the Jewish national awakening and the rise of the Zionist movement at the end of the nineteenth century, the waves of immigration to Palestine increased significantly. Zionism, which sought to create a “National Home for the Jews” in Palestine through international law, saw the immigration of Jews as a necessary condition to achieve this end.

Zionist historiography distinguished five waves of aliyah to Palestine, each of which had special characteristics of its own. These were the first aliyah during 1882–1903, colonists who founded the *moshavot* (agricultural colonies); the second aliyah, 1904–1914, socialist pioneers who came to Palestine alone or in pairs; the third aliyah, 1919–1923, socialist pioneers who came to Palestine in groups and founded the *Kibbutzim*; the fourth aliyah, 1924–1929, groups of Polish immigrants from the bourgeois class; and the fifth aliyah, 1933–1939, “Yekkes” (German Jews) who came from Germany. After World War II, the labeling of waves of immigration came to an end, although the number of immigrants who arrived before and after the founding of the State of Israel was greater than the total number of those who came in all the previous waves of immigration.

The ideological load carried by the term “aliyah” was so rooted in the Hebrew language that it was difficult to distinguish Jews who immigrated to Palestine from Jews who “made aliyah.” Zionist historiography took it as an axiom that the Jews who came to Palestine in the first three “pioneering” waves of immigration were olim (ascenders) and not immigrants. The Zionist narrative differentiated itself from the general history of Jewish immigration and made aliyah into a unique phenomenon unparalleled in Jewish or world history. It must be pointed out that this narrative was also accepted unquestioningly by the Jewish American historians who dealt with Jewish immigration and who refrained from any comparison with Palestine.<sup>2</sup>

If one wants to locate the point in time when the first waves of immigration to Palestine were taken out of their broader historical context and treated as a unique and exceptional phenomenon, it would be difficult to locate within these waves of immigration themselves. During that period it was recognized that immigration to Palestine was an inseparable part of the general Jewish migration. In newspapers of the period and even in early memoirs of immigrants’ experiences, there were articles, comments, and criticisms to the effect that those entering Palestine were not different from the masses going to America. This, for example, is what Moshe Smilansky wrote about the wave of immigration of the 1880s and 1890s:

Every ship discharged hundreds. These people were divided into various groups. A small number were rich, well-to-do people. . . . Most of them were poor people who had nothing. Some were typical immigrants who only by mistake had made their way to Jaffa, and some were passing by Jaffa on their way to New York. Those who had some money continued on their way or returned to their beloved Russia. Those who had no money remained in the country with nothing and became laborers against their will. These became a burden on the [Zionist] executive committee.<sup>3</sup>

Menahem Sheinkin, head of the information bureau in Jaffa from 1906 to 1914, described those who entered the gates of the country as follows: “Miserable paupers, depressed and patched up, with bundles like rag-merchants, the poorest of the poor, who could not possibly be a blessing to the country.” He added that as an official of the informa-

tion bureau, he could “provide this information every week.”<sup>4</sup> And indeed, as we shall see in chapter 3, analysis of the demographic profile of the immigrants who arrived in Palestine at the beginning of the twentieth century shows a great similarity to the composition of Jewish immigrants to America.

The immigration to Palestine was typified by its family character and the large proportion of women and children. Similar to immigrants to the United States, most of the immigrants to Palestine wanted to settle in the cities and continue in their old occupations in the new country. The term “*aliyah*” was known to the people and there was no doubt about its meaning, but those who entered Palestine chose to see themselves as immigrants, wanderers, or simply incomers—not as *olim*. When was the distinction made between *olim* and migrants, and between *aliyah* to Palestine and immigration to the United States? At what stage did the term “*aliyah*” become a common expression in academic discourse, uncritically accepted by all?

It seems that with the renewal of immigration to Palestine after World War I, the institutions of the Yishuv began to make a widespread use of the term “*olim*” in describing those entering the country. The neutral terms used at the beginning of the twentieth century were replaced by qualitative terms that gave expression to the strengthening of the Zionist-nationalist idea after the Balfour Declaration. In a few years, the terms “*aliyah*” and “*olim*” became expressions that were identified more than anything else with the Zionist enterprise in Palestine. Although it was obvious in the Yishuv that many of those entering the country came because of “push factors” in the countries of origin rather than “pull factors” in Palestine, they were nevertheless described as “making *aliyah*” rather than immigrating.

On the other hand, it seems that, in academic discourse, the use of the term “*aliyah*” as a typological expression with a different meaning from ordinary immigration began at the beginning of the 1930s with the publication of Arthur Ruppin’s book *Ha-sotziologia shel ha-yehudim* (The Sociology of the Jews). This book was intended as a sequel to Ruppin’s previous book, *Die Juden der Gegenwart—eine sozialwissenschaftliche Studie* (The Jews of Today), written in Berlin in 1904. In the light of changes that had taken place in Jewish society in the twenty-five years since the first book appeared, Ruppin wanted to reexamine

the social structures of the Jews as they were in 1930. In his introduction, Ruppin observed it was important “to state the facts in the book in an objective way without omissions, and in this way to create a scientific basis for sociology of the Jews.”<sup>5</sup> At the same time, in the chapter dealing with immigration, it was difficult for him to free himself from the Zionist terminology that was in general use during that period. If Jewish immigration to the United States was due to natural population increase, economic distress, and pogroms, those who came to Palestine, according to Ruppin, were not immigrants but olim supported by the Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) movement.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1940s and 1950s, demographers and sociologists like Jacob Lestschinsky, Aryeh Tartakower, David Gurevich, Roberto Bachi, and Shmuel Eisenstadt continued the line pursued by Ruppin in the 1930s. They removed the term “aliyah” from its broader historical context and placed it in the narrow Palestinian space of the Zionist endeavor. Thus a Zionist narrative began to emerge that stressed the special nature of aliyah and the Zionist enterprise in relation to Jewish immigration to other countries.

The researches of the demographer Jacob Lestschinsky represent an interesting case of an expert on immigration who adopted Zionist terminology in the 1940s, although he devoted most of his life to a struggle—mainly intellectual—against the Zionist ideology.

Lestschinsky wrote many books and articles on Jewish society in general and on immigration in particular, and by this means attempted to understand the core problems of the Jewish people in his time.<sup>7</sup> He began his research career as a Zionist with the publication of his article “Statistika shel ayara ahat” (Statistics of One Town) in the newspaper *Ha-Shiloah*. After the Uganda affair he left the Zionist movement, and together with Ze'ev-Latski-Bertoldi and others founded the territorialist Socialist-Zionist Party (S'S) in January 1905. After World War I he immigrated to Berlin, and joined with Boris Brutzkus and Jacob Segall to edit the journal *Bleter far Yiddishe Demografia, Statistik un Ekonomik* (Journal for Jewish Demography, Statistics, and Economy). Five issues of the journal appeared in Berlin, including articles on subjects concerning the Jewish people: the development of various Jewish communities throughout the world, movements of Jewish populations, the number of Jews in the world, the economic situation of Eastern



European Jewry, and so on. In 1925 he assisted in the founding of YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut) and organized the economic and statistical section of the institution.

From the mid-1920s until his death in 1966, Lestschinsky published many books and dozens of articles dealing with various aspects of Jewish migration.<sup>8</sup> In 1959, Lestschinsky immigrated to Israel. Upon his arrival, he donated his library, containing thousands of titles, and an archive built up during many years of research to the Hebrew University.<sup>9</sup>

An examination of his researches through the years shows that the closer Lestschinsky drew to the Zionist idea, the harder he found it to investigate immigration to Palestine using the same criteria as for investigating Jewish migration as a whole. The quantitative and qualitative methods that characterized this phase of his work were not used in his late researches into immigration in Palestine. Questions about the demographic composition of immigrants to Palestine, which were an inseparable part of his researches into Jewish immigration, were not asked at all in the context of the immigrants' chosen land of destination. He seems to have completely adopted the Zionist terminology and, like Ruppin, saw immigration to Palestine as something unique and a special case. In his book *Nedudei israel* (Israel Wandering), he wrote that aliyah to Palestine was an incomparable model of human migration:

Aliyah to Palestine is a little current in the huge, broad sea of migration; a pure, clean current rooted in elevated, distant national and social goals; an organized, planned current that is all idea and vision, and therefore is limited in scope and has never attracted people who are fanatical about making money and getting rich; a current that has never thrilled the hearts of those who need to earn a living but rather self-controlled people who can see the future, pioneers of the nation and lovers of the homeland.<sup>10</sup>

This father of Jewish demography, who devoted his entire life to the investigation of Jewish society at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and who published scores of academic papers, edited important journals, and took part in pioneering research projects, saw immigration to Palestine in value-related and not critical terms, using phrases such as “lofty social objectives,” “idea and vision,” “seeing the future,” “vanguard of the people,” and “lovers of the homeland.”