Impact of Immigration on Israel

Introduction

Immigration is a challenge everywhere in the world. The recent revolutions in Arab countries have increased the questions that each country asks about their own people, their identity, and at the same time people are asking how to assimilate all these new immigrants who increase the ethnoracial diversity of their new country.

This has an effect at each level of a society; the public is not really happy seeing so many immigrants coming to “eat their bread,” to take advantage of government programs, to occupy their jobs, to marry their children, or to increase crime and crowding. The governments, too, are not happy as they need to spend more money on social issues, on making new immigration laws dealing with social and cultural diversity and security. The economy of the country can be impacted, unemployment rates can rise, and other challenges can be exacerbated.

Immigration in Israel

Immigration is a very important and special issue in Israel for several reasons. Immigration has been encouraged from the very beginning of the State of Israel in 1948, and even before that date there was a lot of immigration into the area. In fact, the country was built through immigration. However, that immigration was selective and carefully chosen. There is an immigration law in Israel which is called the “law of return” which codifies all immigration. This law of return is a law which allows every Jew to come back to Israel even though a person’s ancestors might have left the country 2,000 years ago. The requirement of the law is that the person who wants to immigrate, we say in Hebrew, who wants to make “aliyah” originally had to be a Jew himself, but in 1970 an amendment to this law was voted which granted the right to make aliyah to a person who has one parent or grandparent who is a Jew, a spouse of a child of a Jew, and to the
spouse of a Jewish grandchild. When this law asks, “Who is a Jew?” Israel answers: a Jew is anyone who is born from a Jewish mother. Then since anyone who has a Jewish father but not a Jewish mother can immigrate to Israel, he/she is not recognized as a Jew so non-Jewish immigration is possible in Israel. But there is an exception, if a person has converted to Christianity, even if that person is a Messianic Jew, if that person believes in Jesus, immigration becomes impossible.

Israel considers that any Jew who converts to Christianity is potentially a missionary who will try to convert others to belief in Jesus so they try to prevent such men and women from immigrating to Israel. This interpretation of the “law of return” practically denies the right to immigrate to a Christian or Messianic Jew who has a Jewish mother, but allows this type of immigration to a Christian or Messianic Jew only if the father is a Jew. There was a case of a Messianic Jew who was denied several times the right to immigrate to Israel by the supreme court of Israel until his lawyer discovered that his mother was not Jewish but his father was. The case was then brought back to the Ministry of the Interior with a new request, saying that this man was not immigrating to Israel as a Jew, but as a Christian who has a father who is Jew.

This situation has created many difficult cases in Israel where an entire family can be accepted except for one member of the family who has accepted Jesus as Messiah or is affiliated with a Christian denomination. The consequence of this situation is that most of the Messianic Jews who immigrate to Israel do not openly declare that they are Messianic Jews, they just affirm their Jewishness.

A new situation is emerging through the Internet. Many people innocently register on social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, write what they think and believe, and tell their life story on their blog. Suddenly they decide to go back to the country of their ancestors. I know at least two cases where people who are Jews wanted to make aliyah, started the process with the Jewish Agency, and finally were refused, all because the Jewish Agency checked on the Internet the name of each candidate for immigration to Israel. The two friends were refused because their names were associated with a Christian denomination or with Jesus.

To understand the impact of Jewish immigration in Israel one has to realize its effectiveness. See table 1 with the numbers of immigrants from May 15, 1948 to 2009, taken from the Israeli National Office of Statistics.

The Jewish population of Israel on May 15, 1948 was only about 600,000 people and suddenly in a short period of three years, from 1948 to 1951, the Jewish population doubled to reach almost 1.3 million.
Table 1. Immigrants to Israel, May 15, 1948-2009

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<th>Years</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1965 – 1968</td>
<td>82,244</td>
<td>2000 – 2004</td>
<td>181,505</td>
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<td>1972 – 1974</td>
<td>142,753</td>
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The next great immigration wave coincided with the independence of North African countries from France. Morocco received its independence on March 2, 1956, and Tunisia on March 26, 1956; the statistics show that 166,492 immigrated to Israel between 1955 and 1957. The next large influx of immigrants was after February 5, 1962 when Algeria received its independence. From 1961 to 1964, 228,793 people immigrated to Israel. The next influential events were the wars between Israel and its neighbors, the “6 Days war” in 1967, the Yom Kippur war in 1973, and the peace agreement in 1978 that was signed between Israel and Egypt. During that period almost 500,000 people immigrated to Israel, because the Zionist feeling of many Jews was revived and they wanted to demonstrate their support for their country when it was at risk.

The collapse of the former Soviet Union (USSR) in 1989 and the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1990 brought about three million Jews who were allowed to immigrate to any country. One million Russians immigrated to Israel between 1990 and 2000.

In total more than three million Jews have immigrated from all over the world to Israel to build their new homeland. It has been a real challenge for this small country which also has a challenged and struggling economy.

**Foreign Worker Immigration**

From the description above it is clear that non-Jewish immigrants were not welcome in Israel. Foreign worker immigration was not very significant in Israel until the 1990s. When the Soviet Union collapsed, thousands of non-Jews joined the Jewish immigration from the former USSR (Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, etc.) but also thousands of foreign non-Jews arrived from other former communist countries such as Romania.
They entered the country as tourists, received a visa for three months, but did not leave the country after the expiration of their visa.

Another wave of foreign worker immigration occurred in Israel after 1995, when Africans who came mainly from Ghana, Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, etc. arrived. These Africans entered Israel in the same way, entering the country as tourists, and then staying indefinitely in Israel.

Another new foreign worker immigration began in 2010 when Sudanese came who had suffered much because of the Muslim North persecuting the Christian South. Refugees left South Sudan by the thousands for Egypt, walking through the desert and arriving in Sinai where they succeeded in crossing the border between Egypt and Israel. When they arrived in Israel they went directly to the office of the UN, where they received the status of refugee that guaranteed that they could not be sent back to their country where they faced the risk of being executed.

**Immigration Impact on the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

All the various waves of immigration have also impacted the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Israel. Just before the independence of Israel most of the church members left the country. The first permanent members arriving in Israel with the first wave of immigrants between 1948 and 1951 were Holocaust survivors from Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Poland. Because of their experience they were very prudent in what they said publicly about their belief in Jesus. They were a very small minority but I have a great respect for them because they stayed very faithful to the Lord in spite of all the difficulties they experienced. There were about 50 members spread throughout the country from the 1960s to the 1980s. However, the church did not grow during those years.

Then the Russian, Romanian, and African immigration started to change the physiognomy of the church in the 1990s. The Filipino immigration started, beginning in 2000. Among all these new immigrants the church has been happy to welcome Jews from Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Romania, Moldova, and Ethiopia who were already Adventists before coming to Israel. These members have been a blessing to the church in Israel. I arrived in Israel in 1997, and at that time about 250 to 300 members were in the country attending the five churches in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Nazareth, and Haifa. These churches were organized but in a complicated way. They were multi-cultural and multi-ethnic churches: a Romanian/Ghanaian church in Tel Aviv, a Russian/Romanian/English church in Jerusalem, a Russian/Romanian church in Haifa, etc. Worship was difficult with so many languages translated during each worship service.

I also had a deeper concern: evangelism for the Jews in the country. I understood that it would be impossible to bring Jews to Jesus in multi-
cultural churches as they were organized at that time. I started to preach on contextualization and the necessity of evangelism for the local population. Very soon monolingual churches were opened in order to facilitate each group’s witness about Jesus among their own people, but also to encourage the members to start thinking more about evangelism for the local people. Success came as the church grew from 300 to 1,000 members spread among about 30 congregations. Some of those church plants are not viable; the Israel Mission is in the process of rejoining some of them with their original mother churches. Churches in Israel today are composed of Hebrew, Russian, Romanian, Azerbaijani, Ethiopian, Sudanese, Filipino, and English speaking congregations while our Jewish local members are in almost all our congregations except the Sudanese church. The membership of the Adventist Church in Israel is about a thousand members, out of which about six hundred have Israeli citizenship.

Challenges

Adventist Jewish members do not face the same challenges as the members who are foreign workers. The Jewish members who came from Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Azerbaijan, and Ethiopia do not have an easy life in Israel. It is never easy to move permanently from one country to another. They had to learn a new language, find a house and a job, and adapt to a new mentality and climate. However, the government of Israel helped during their transition. Every new official immigrant receives a grant of three thousand dollars, and the government of Israel pays for their language course (called Ulpan), gives them free accommodations during their first year, and helps them find a job. In fact, their integration in the country depends very much on their ability to learn the language and the level of their education and professional capacities.

During the years I have spent in Israel, I have noticed that most Jewish immigrants succeeded in integrating and assimilating into the country, except one ethnic group—the Ethiopian Jews. They arrived in Israel from the refugee camps in Ethiopia. Most of them are uneducated, have no professional occupation, and have great difficulty in learning Hebrew. Only the second generation will be able to integrate into the society because they will be educated in Israel. We already see Ethiopian young students integrating into the universities in Israel. It will take time, but they will succeed.

For foreign workers, the challenges are much more serious. First, the great majority of them have no legal status in Israel. Those who have legal status are the Filipinos who received visas to work as caretakers for old people before arriving in the country. Usually, their visa is for a period of five years, but if their patron dies before their visa expires, they have to
return to the Philippines. However, many overstay their visas and then become illegal. The Sudanese have official status as refugees, but Israel is facing a huge challenge because at the end of 2010 about 1,500 new Sudanese refugees entered the country every day. The government of Israel is very reluctant now to renew their visas and many of them have become illegal.

These non-Jewish immigrants have a very difficult life in Israel, but they remain in the country because it is still better to be in Israel than in their country of origin. Below are listed several of the challenges they face.

Injustice

Israeli people generally are not nice to immigrants; they do not pay them what they promised when they were hired. Immigrants have no protection because of their status; they cannot sign work or rent contracts and must live in very poor areas of Tel Aviv or other big cities.

Isolation

Immigrants are afraid to be arrested by the immigration police, and as a result do not participate in many social activities. Sometimes they are even afraid to come to church when they know that the immigration police are looking for them.

Frustration

Israel is a country where a lot of good things happen and where a lot of money is in circulation. Most people have a good education, good houses, and beautiful cars, eat whatever they want, etc. But most foreign workers cannot enjoy these benefits and thus experience a lot of frustration.

Lack of Security

The frustration of not being able to live a decent life is one of the reasons for increasing criminality among the foreign workers and illegal immigrants.

No Social Status

One of the main problems facing foreign workers in Israel is that they do not have any social status. In many countries there are human rights organizations that fight for the rights of foreign workers, but in Israel, even though there are a few such organizations, they are not strong in this area. Many foreign workers are abused because they do not know their rights and no one explains to them what to do when they face a problem.
Lack of Education

Lack of education among foreign workers is a major challenge. Some of them succeed in enrolling their children in Israeli schools, but many of them do not; they are afraid of being reported to the immigration police. Most foreign workers have no hope of advancing in their education while in Israel.

Lack of Health Care

Every foreign worker who works in Israel on a contract basis with a visa has health insurance; however, when their visa expires and it cannot be renewed, they become undocumented immigrants with no health insurance. This is a real challenge, for when they get sick hospital costs are very high.

Less Religious Freedom than the Rest of the Population

Theoretically, Israel has no official religion, but in fact Judaism is very present in the country. Religious freedom is guaranteed by law which allows one to choose the day of rest and worship. Muslims have a guarantee that allows them to have Friday free, Jews have a guarantee to have Saturday free, and Christians have Sunday free. But in reality when a religious group is not in the majority or is not very popular, life becomes difficult. This is what happens to Adventist foreign workers in Israel. They are Christians, but keep the Sabbath, not Sunday. Jews are surprised and do not understand why some Christians want to keep the Sabbath. Adventist Filipino members have problems keeping the Sabbath. When the employing company in the Philippines signed their contract with an employer in Israel, they naturally listed Sunday on the contract as day of rest (there is no two-day weekend in Israel). When Adventist Filipinos arrive in Israel, their bosses do not understand why they ask to have Saturday free. The problem is even more complicated because, according to the Jewish law, Gentiles do not need to keep the Sabbath; it is a law only for Jewish people. Many workplaces (homes, touristic attractions, hotels, restaurants, etc.) employ non-Jews especially for their needs during the Sabbaths or the festivals. They need them to turn on the gas stoves, the lights, or do any other activities that are forbidden by the Jewish law. Many Adventist members, who are originally from Africa (Sudan, Ghana, etc.), work in hotels near the Dead Sea or in Eilat. These hotels are happy to employ non-Jewish foreign people to do all the work Jews cannot perform on Sabbath. But when Adventists explain to the director of the hotel that as Adventists they want to keep the Sabbath free, the directors and managers do not welcome their requests and tell them to either work on
Sabbath or lose their work contract. According to the law of Israel they cannot fire workers on such a basis, but they never admit in writing that the real reason they fired the employees is because they wanted to keep the Sabbath. Because many members, by losing their job, become illegal in Israel, they cannot take their case to the court. The end result is that many compromise their faith and moral principles in order to have some money to feed their families.

**Conclusion**

Immigration in Israel is an important issue. First, the country has been built on immigration during the last sixty years. This immigration is mainly Jewish immigration, but foreign workers come from many countries in the world to Israel to take part in Israel’s “prosperous economy.” This foreign immigration has impacted the Adventist Church positively by increasing its membership, but many of these members have very few rights in Israel and face many challenges. I have listed above only a few of the challenges immigrants have to face just to help the readers become more aware of the problems foreign workers face in Israel. Even though Israel is considered a democracy, and their political system is a real democracy with democratic elections, there is still progress to be made especially in the area of protecting minorities from work place fraud and abuse.

**Notes**

1The word *Aliyah* is derived from the verb *laalot* which means “to go up,” or “to ascend” in a positive spiritual sense. A person who makes *Aliyah* is called an *Oleh*, meaning “one who goes up.”

2See also “Israel.” *Encyclopædia Britannica.* 2011 ed.

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