Chapter 5
'She Died While Missing Us': Experiences of Family Separation Among African Refugees in Israel

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5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we explore the experiences of family separation among African refugees from Sudan and Eritrea living in Israel. In particular, we aim to understand the causes of family separation and how refugees who have been separated for years from their immediate and extended families due to harsh migration policies in Israel live with the insecurity caused by family separation.

Between 2006 and 2013, approximately 64,000 African migrants and refugees entered Israel across the border with Egypt (Population and Immigration Authority, 2020). Previously, migrants and forced migrants had mostly entered the country in small numbers through the airport, coming from Africa, Latin America and Asia (Sabar, 2008). The arrival of African newcomers on foot was therefore a new phenomenon, greeted at first with surprise and confusion.

Most of the Africans who reached Israel arrived from Eritrea, Darfur and South Sudan. While Eritreans were escaping political oppression, refugees from Darfur and South Sudan were escaping genocide and war. According to Amnesty International (2013), an initial cause of African asylum seekers entering Israel in large numbers from 2006 to 2013 was the unrest in Cairo following the demonstrations in front of the local UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in 2006. The huge obstacles in reaching Europe from North Africa made Israel, with its amicable border with Egypt, an attractive alternative destination.

Initially, forced migrants who encountered Israeli soldiers patrolling the border were in some cases jailed and in some cases left on the streets. Following public

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outcry and petitions to the courts, the state started to devise ways of handling the new situation. Scholars such as Kalir (2015) and Yacobi (2011) have documented the state's increasing institutional hostility over time towards African refugees. A significant number of asylum applications dating back to 2013 are still waiting to be processed, and only a handful have received refugee status. Most asylum seekers receive temporary resident permits that do not provide the right to work or access to social security, health insurance or basic social rights (Orr & Ajzenstadt, 2020, p. 146). Because Israel has granted refugee status to hardly any of the asylum seekers in the country, they have no chance for family reunification with spouses or children living in other countries. Their only options are to live separately or to migrate to another country where they can reunite. Hence, the legal status of African asylum seekers in Israel, or lack thereof, has a significant effect on the lives of their families.

Baldassar et al. (2014) have demonstrated that transnational families who reside in different countries can maintain a sense of familyhood, care and reciprocity across borders. However, family separation has emotional, economic and social implications that can affect family members differently according to their location, age and gender, for example. In the case of refugees, separation is often also connected to trauma, thus impacting emotional recovery and prompting a range of emotions, such as helplessness and guilt (Rousseau et al., 2001; Savic et al., 2013).

Previous studies have demonstrated that many refugees from Eritrea and Sudan have suffered trauma in their homeland and in their escape across countries. A study on the mental health of Eritrean mothers and their children (Mayer et al., 2020) and studies on Eritrean and Sudanese refugees who were exposed to trauma (Lavie-Ajayi & Slonim-Nevo, 2017; Nakash et al., 2015; Slonim-Nevo et al., 2015) have revealed the importance of acculturation, social and family support, and solid legal status for improving the mental wellbeing of refugees and their children. Obtaining a legal status in Israel has been shown to increase migrants' wellbeing, sense of freedom and empowerment (Babis et al., 2018).

However, as Israel generally does not grant legal status to refugees, depriving them of rights, Israel's asylum policy can be seen as a form of administrative violence (Beaugrand, 2011). Leinonen and Pellander (2020) have pointed out that prolonged family separation with no prospects for unification is an additional form of administrative violence, impacting refugees' quality of life and opportunities to build a new life in the new country. At the same time, refugees try to live with insecurity (Crawford & Hutchinson, 2016), including painful emotions in relation to family separation, and to 'do family' transnationally (Baldassar et al., 2014), as well as to create new social relationships in the absence of close family members. As described in Chap. 2, Israel's reluctance to grant a status to African refugees prevents them from starting the family unification process and from freely travelling out of Israel and back again, making it impossible to visit relatives. In this chapter we wish to explore the emotional impact of this policy on African refugees, their sense of security and how they 'do family'.

Next we will briefly present the Israeli political context, which strongly defines the experiences of the studied African refugees. This will be followed by a section

on methodology and data. Then we move on to the analytical part, which is divided into three sub-chapters exploring how governments and politics in refugees' countries of origin and in Israel have led to family separation, the emotions caused by family separation and how refugees try to manage everyday insecurity, and how refugees create new social bonds, friendships and family-like relationships.

5.2 The Emergence of the Asylum Regime in Israel

In order to understand the origins of and reasons for Israel's current asylum policy, we need to return to the formative years of the State of Israel and its ideology. Although Israel signed the 1951 Refugee Convention after World War II, the Israeli parliament has never passed a domestic refugee law (Giladi, 2015). In its earliest years, Israel passed new laws and amended colonial British laws to serve its immigration agenda, namely, to increase the Jewish population but not the non-Jewish or Arab population. For example, in 1950 it passed the Law of Return, which privileged Jewish immigration to Israel, while amending the British immigration law that had allowed non-Jewish immigration. In addition, in 1954 it passed the Prevention of Infiltration Law, which aimed to combat political violence by armed Palestinians and the return of Palestinian refugees (Kritzman-Amir, 2012).

When African refugees and migrants started to enter Israel 50 years later, the state had no asylum law or mechanism. Instead, following a court petition in the early 2000s, the state issued an asylum ordinance that placed most of the asylum process in the hands of the UNHCR (Harel, 2015; Ben-Nun, 2017). Later, the state assumed all responsibility for asylum, and the UNHCR's role shifted to monitoring the state. Harel (2015) has described the challenges faced by asylum seekers since the state started deciding asylum claims (on the basis of an ordinance rather than a law), including the extremely low success rate of applications. In many cases, applications are left pending and claimants are given only temporary permits, which need renewing every few months and grant very few rights – primarily only protection against deportation. For a long time, certain nationals such as Sudanese and Eritreans were not even allowed to apply for asylum, as they were handled under a non-removal policy that protected them on a collective basis from arrest and deportation.

Over the years the state has passed laws and issued ordinances aimed at restricting the lives of refugees and encouraging them to leave the country. These include the amendment of the Prevention of Infiltration Law and the establishment of the Holot detention facility in the Negev desert (Yaron Mesgena & Ramati, 2017). Since implementing these policies, the number of asylum seekers in Israel has decreased dramatically. In addition, the border was fenced so effectively that hardly anyone has been able to cross into Israel since 2013. In 2018, the Israeli government made attempts to deport refugees to a third country in Africa. This was prevented, however, by a massive public campaign. Nonetheless, liberalizing reforms, such as granting status to undocumented migrant children, remain limited for fear of 'upsetting [Israel's] national politics of identity' (Kemp, 2007).

Beyond laws and ordinances, uncertainty and insecurity are used as tools by the Israeli state to unsettle African refugees and push them to the margins and out of the country (Yaron Mesgena, 2015; Hashimshony-Yaffe, 2021). Frequent changes in visa policies, new governmental decisions and even statements released by the government to the press leave refugees emotionally, socially and legally vulnerable. African refugees are seen as a threat to state security and have been criminalized (Orr & Ajzenstadt, 2020), creating everyday insecurity due to fear of deportation.

The Israeli policy towards asylum seekers, which not only denies them rights and security but generates a sense of constant insecurity and instability, pushes refugees to migrate out of Israel. According to the Population and Immigration Authority, 16,232 asylum seekers have left Israel since 2015,[1] some with the assistance of the Israeli authorities and some in other ways. For comparison, only 18 asylum applications filed by Sudanese or Eritreans had been approved in total as of July 2021 (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2021).

5.3 Methods and Data

This chapter draws on ten semi-structured interviews conducted between 2018 and 2020. Eight of the interviews were carried out by the first author in 2018 with Eritrean and Sudanese migrants in their 20s or 30s (five men and three women). Interviewees were recruited in different ways. Some we were acquainted with as activists, while others were recruited through NGOs or by the snowball method. Six of the interviewees were single, while two were married and had children living with them in Israel. None of the interviewees had spouses or children in other countries, but they were separated from their siblings, parents, grandparents and other extended family members. All were living in rented apartments in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv and had been in Israel for 10 years or more. They had all arrived in Israel over the Egyptian border, escaping the dictatorship in Eritrea or the genocide in Darfur. Most were working in menial jobs such as cleaning or maintenance. Four of the interviewees had arrived in Israel as unaccompanied minors, like the second author of this chapter. They had all mastered Hebrew and were well-acquainted with mainstream Israeli culture. Some had completed their high school education in Israel and pursued academic degrees. The interviews were conducted in English, Hebrew or Arabic.

In addition to these eight interviews, one interview was conducted on the phone with a 27-year-old Sudanese woman, a friend of the second author from Darfur, who was living in a refugee camp in Chad. This interview helped us understand how

[1] Statistic compiled from Population and Immigration Authority data available at https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/foreigners_summary_2018.pdf, p. 7; https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/ZARIM_q4_2020.pdf, p. 9; https://www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/foreign_workers_stats_q2_2021.pdf, p. 4.

family separation is viewed from the Global South and examine whether the issues are similar to or different from those raised in the interviews in Israel. The tenth interview was conducted with an Israeli attorney from the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, an NGO advocating for refugees in Tel Aviv. This interview gave us a legal and bureaucratic perspective on the situation of African asylum seekers in Israel.

The research was conducted according to the ethical principles of qualitative research. All names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. We explained the purpose of the research to the interviewees and received the interviewees' informed consent to participate in the research. We avoided questions or topics we understood to be uncomfortable for our subjects.

Our interviews with refugees dealt with the refugees' family relationships in their home countries and elsewhere from the time of their childhood until the present day, as well as their reasons for fleeing their country, what their journeys were like and their difficulties since migrating. The interviews were thematically analysed (Guest et al., 2012), identifying categories and issues and organizing them according to the core issues and their relevance to our research questions.

In addition to the interviews, we draw on our long acquaintance with the asylum-seeker community in Israel. Both authors are members of or activists in the studied asylum communities. We have spent many hours with Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and families and have therefore gathered information via official and unofficial observations (Hale, 2008). Some of the examples in this chapter are based on our encounters and relationships with members of these communities, and the chapter is informed by autobiographical reflections on the bonds within our transnational families across Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, Israel and the United States. As activist researchers, we are also driven by the desire to empower and give voice to refugees and to promote justice.

5.4 Families, Politics and In(securities)

5.4.1 Governments Tearing Families Apart

War is a main factor that has separated African refugees in Israel from their families. The story of Usumain, the second author of this chapter, serves as an initial example of how family life may drastically change as a consequence of politics in one's countries of origin and settlement.

Usumain was born in Darfur in 1994. When he was nine, his village was attacked by the Janjaweed militia during the Darfur genocide. On that day he lost many of his family members and his home. He and other surviving members of his family fled first to an internally displaced persons camp and then to a refugee camp in neighbouring Chad, where his mother and sisters remain to this day. Usumain left the refugee camp in search of a better life in 2007 at the age of 13 and spent a year passing through Chad, Libya and Egypt before entering Israel in 2008. Only in

2020, after a long battle for temporary residency in Israel, was he able to travel back to Chad and see his family again. He cannot, however, reunite permanently with his family in Israel: Israeli policy, which aims at discouraging refugees from staying in the country, does not enable reunification.

During the genocide in Darfur, entire villages were destroyed, many people were murdered and survivors escaped to other towns or across the border. Baruch, a 26-year-old man from Darfur, told us:

> In 2003 my village was destroyed by the Janjaweed militia. It was at five in the morning, when we were still sleeping. When the village was attacked, a lot of people died. My big sister and my grandfather died. My parents and I escaped and went to a big village with a police station, which we thought could protect us.

Nadiv, a 28-year-old man from Darfur now living in Tel Aviv, fled to a refugee camp in Chad with his mother. The living conditions in the refugee camp were unbearable, and like many other young men, he was pushed to migrate to Libya in 2005, which, during the Gaddafi regime, was stable compared to other countries in the region. When Libya was bombed by the NATO coalition in 2011, Nadiv fled to Egypt and, finally, to Israel. When asked about his dream for the future, he said:

> My dream is to become educated and to become a leader […] and make peace in my country. So all the citizens of the country will live in peace, without war. And to have a normal life like they have in other countries, and to be close to my family.

For Nadiv, the dream of a Sudan without war is also the dream of being together with his family. He associates political harmony and security with normality and having a family life.

Political oppression is another factor separating African refugees in Israel from their families. Our interviewees from Eritrea told us their family separation started with their military service. They see the government of Eritrea as responsible for tearing families apart. Eritrea has been a totalitarian dictatorship since the 2000s, restricting and violating the rights of its citizens and prompting an ongoing mass forced migration to neighbouring and Western countries (Hepner, 2009). The state imposes life-long mandatory military service (until the age of 55) on both men and women. During this military service, Eritrean soldiers endure harsh conditions and cannot visit their families for months at a time. Some young Eritreans flee the country before they are recruited; others escape from the service. Some need to flee the country following an unauthorized visit home. When Eritreans escape the country, the authorities put pressure on close family members such as parents or spouses, often imprisoning them and forcing their families to pay a fine or ransom in exchange for their release, or targeting them for maltreatment, sometimes pushing them to flee as well.

Moshe, a 35-year-old single man living in Tel Aviv, told us he fled Eritrea because he had been forced into military service and was therefore unable to see his family: ‘I was a civil servant. It was national [military] service. I was working for free. I suffered and was not able to see my parents because they lived in the south, close to Ethiopia.’ Because of his family’s proximity to the Ethiopian border, the authorities

suspected Moshe of wanting to flee the country and therefore prevented him from visiting his family.

Eden, a woman in her 30s from Eritrea, lives in Jerusalem with her husband and three children. Her husband escaped military service and was forced out of the country. His departure made Eden's life in Eritrea unbearable: she was harassed and even imprisoned and tortured as retribution for her husband's escape. She told us:

> It was a difficult situation. I could not wander around since my husband had escaped. I had no rights. If they look at my ID, they can see that I am married, and because he was not in the country, it was very difficult […] I travelled around looking for a job, and I had an ID saying I was married and had done military service […] I was asked, 'Where is your husband?', taken off the bus and taken to prison. I was beaten for many days.

Guerrilla warfare dating back to the 1970s, the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia, and the border conflict between the two countries in 2000, which resulted in mass expulsions from both sides (Campbell, 2013), have divided Eritrean families. In the case of Meshi, a 22-year-old woman living in Tel Aviv, her family's ties to both Eritrea and Ethiopia tore her family apart. Meshi told us:

> We moved from Ethiopia to Sudan due to the war that started between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Back then the Ethiopian government arrested and deported Eritreans, and my father didn't want to go back and be enslaved by the army there. He was born and lived in Ethiopia, but is a citizen of Eritrea. So he decided to escape to Sudan, which was the closest country, and my mum and I then joined him, because we were also harassed due to our connection to Eritrea.

Once in Israel, refugees are safe from the persecution they suffered elsewhere but are still not fully secure, as Nadiv reported: 'In Israel I feel safe, but the Israeli government sometimes threatens to deport us to Africa.' Refugees are unable to travel and visit their families; they cannot reunite with their families in their home countries and cannot even secure the status of children born and raised in Israel. For this reason, many try to migrate to other Western countries such as Canada. They thus live in Israel in a state of semi-permanent transit, sometimes for as long as 10 years or more. While attempting to find a secure place of asylum, families may be partially reunited but also continue to face separation: once they reach other Western countries, many are reunited with relatives already living there or who soon follow, but they also leave family members behind in Israel.

As activist researchers, we have noted that children find it especially difficult to process the family separation experienced in Israel. One Eritrean family living in Jerusalem had shared their apartment with members of their extended family, who had left, one by one, for the Netherlands, Ethiopia and Canada. The eldest daughter expressed her sadness at this separation: 'Before, the house was full of uncles, and now they are gone.' Another Eritrean family, a couple and their young son, left Jerusalem for Canada in 2018, leaving behind the mother's sister and nephews. While the mother, a woman in her 30s, found it hard to leave, her son struggled even more with being separated from his cousins, whom he referred to as his siblings. As a child born and raised in Israel, he felt attached to his aunt and cousins. Yet, since his parents did not have status in Israel that would have provided them with the

opportunity to settle permanently and have civil rights, they chose to find a place where they would feel more secure, despite leaving their family behind.

In sum, family separation for Eritrean and Sudanese refugees in Israel started when they were initially persecuted and forced to leave their countries. Separation continues in Israel because they do not have access to refugee or other permanent status; they are unable to even visit their families outside of Israel, not to mention family reunification. For refugees who have family ties outside Israel, emigration to a third country may be possible. Migration and resettlement in Europe or North America, where other family members may already be residing, makes seeing one's family and face-to-face caring possible, but may leave other relatives behind in Israel.

5.4.2 Painful Emotions and Living with Insecurity

Many of our interviewees spoke about members of their families outside Israel, and in Africa in particular, with great sadness, often expressing a sense of deep loneliness. Michael, a young man from Eritrea who arrived in Israel as an unaccompanied minor and is now in his 20s, told us:

> Family is family… I grew up in Israel. I could have an easier life if I had someone to talk to, someone who can listen to your pain. Sometimes you are upset, you ask: Who am I? What am I doing here? […] As far as I am concerned, I would have gone back to Eritrea to live with my mother and brother […] No one [in Israel] can hear me, everyone thinks that I am walking around wearing nice clothes and smiling. They have no idea.

The emotional toll of separation is apparent in Michael's interview. Although in many ways Michael has integrated into Israeli society and culture, he also feels different and estranged. These are difficult emotions, and he feels he has no one to share them with, except his family, who lives far away.

Eden also described the effect of separation on her emotional wellbeing: 'I don't think I have ever been happy in a celebration here. I had fun over there – less here. I miss the holidays. Now I don't even remember [when the holidays are]. I see on Facebook sometimes. Sometime we are at work [during the holidays].' For Eden, separation from her family, culture, holidays and homeland are all entangled and fill her with pain.

Not being able to reunite with or even meet their families fills many interviewees with a sense of helplessness. Refugees in Israel are often expected to support their families back in Africa and worry about changing circumstances in the places their families are living, for example, in refugee camps. While some try to locate lost family members, others avoid communicating with their families in Africa. Moshe told us he only speaks to his siblings and not to his parents:

> You cannot travel, you cannot see your family […] I don't like to call [my parents]. They worry about me. I speak to my siblings every six months. I speak to one of them every week though. He is the one calling and passing on news.

Likewise, Eden told us: 'We are not in touch so much over the phone… because if I call, then I want to return home to them. I miss them. It is difficult. If I call it is really difficult.'

Some of our interviewees reported a change in their view of what family is due to distance and separation. Moshe explained:

> [Before] we had good relationships with the extended family. Now I don't want to hear about them. There is nothing I can do, so it's better not to hear. There are two groups: group one are those who are very connected and call their brothers and cousins, and group two are those like me.

This reaction, stemming from guilt and helplessness, has also been noted in recent research. Belloni (2020) found that Eritreans living in Italy maintain transnational family relationships around the world, but not with their parents in Eritrea. Only when they reach their final destination and can support their families do Eritrean migrants in Italy restore communication with those remaining in Eritrea. Our interviews, however, reveal the emotional component of refugees' avoidance of communicating, rather than guilt due to the inability to support relatives, as has also been described by Sabar (2008).

In addition to the emotional and moral dimensions of keeping in contact with family in Eritrea, communication is considered potentially dangerous because the Eritrean government may monitor telephone conversations. Communicating with relatives in refugee camps is also technically difficult.

Haya, our informant who was living in a refugee camp in Chad, told us in her telephone interview:

> Some of my siblings have left for other countries. With some I am in touch and some not. I have a sibling living in another refugee camp whom I am not in touch with at all. I don't know what is going on with those I am not in touch with, and it scares me. I don't know what is going on in their lives.

Haya's feelings about her family are similar to those of our interviewees in Israel, despite their different circumstances. Both in Israel and in Chad, refugees lack a secure status and have no prospects for family unification, thus enduring insecurity and no sense of freedom. Lacking freedom of movement to visit relatives and a status that could offer the opportunity to reunite results in refugees feeling a sense of helplessness due to their inability to safeguard their relatives and family life.

Due to family separation, refugees often do not have the chance to care for sick relatives or say goodbye to dying grandparents or parents. A few years ago, while the first author, Hadas, was visiting her Eritrean friend Tsgai in Tel Aviv, a friend came to deliver the news that Tsgai's mother had died unexpectedly in Eritrea. The room was suddenly filled with loud expressions of loss and grief, and Tsgai cried, 'She died while she was missing us', expressing his sadness not only at losing his mother but also at the long, never-ending separation imposed on them. Having witnessed many cases of loss and mourning over the years, we have realized that losing close family members after a period of long separation is a common reality for many African refugees in Israel. They then need to find a way to grieve and to

process this loss while removed from other members of their family and from their original cultural environment and customs.

Separation from one's family as a refugee often also means separation from other circles of belonging, such as one's country of origin, village or town, culture and tradition, and language. For many, their families have not necessarily remained in their country of origin, but are scattered around the globe. For some, such as refugees from Darfur, their homes and villages were destroyed, and there is no place to go back to. Identity thus becomes a complicated issue, especially for those who were separated from their home country and families at a young age.

However, Meshi, who reached Israel at the age of ten, presents a different reality. Meshi travelled to Israel with her father, who died during their journey. Meshi's mother and brother lived in Israel for a while but subsequently left:

> They went back because life was really hard for my mum, raising children as a single mother. So she preferred to live in Ethiopia. So when I was 16, she decided to go, and I wanted to stay here, so I did not go with her. I wanted to stay because back then I was about to finish high school, which was really important to me.

Meshi was surrounded from an early age by both her native Eritrean/Ethiopian culture and the new Israeli culture that she absorbed. Although her mother left Israel, Meshi remained. Ever since, she has been separated from her mother. Meshi's identity, divided between cultures and countries, created an expanding gap between her and her mother, adding to the geographical one. Her desire to pursue academic studies and the way she felt about her Israeli surroundings contradicted her mother's cultural and social norms. Only recently, after many years living apart, had Meshi been willing to reconnect with her mother.

For young men and women who made the journey to Israel as unaccompanied minors and have grown up there, identity is torn between different cultures and communities, and separation and distance add another layer to how they navigate their everyday lives. Many of these young people do not have a legal status that would allow them to feel that they belong in Israel. So, while they experience both a cultural and geographical gap with their families, Israel does not provide them with the legal option of belonging. As Meshi told us: 'I'll finish my studies in half a year. And I am sure that I won't be able to get a job without a visa or status. So this is another thing that is an obstacle for me.'

As young people growing up in a new culture, those who arrived at a young age or were born in Israel grow apart from relatives in their home country (Haan, 2011; Juang & Schachner, 2020). To counter this tendency, Eritrean refugees in Israel have established afternoon and weekend schools for their children to study in Tigrinya, even using textbooks sent from Eritrea. Such initiatives are common among Eritrean refugees in Israel, and also among West African refugees, but not among Sudanese, for reasons which need further exploration. Gebre, an Eritrean man in his 40s and father to five children who established an afternoon program in Jerusalem, told us it was important for him that his children speak his mother tongue, even though he speaks Hebrew fluently. Although migrants and refugees in other countries may also initiate similar projects, there is a difference: parents in

Israel are well aware that their children do not have legal status in Israel and may 1 day face deportation, as native-born Israelis of the Southern Sudanese community did in 2012. Since their residence in Israel is not secure, parents say they need to bear in mind the possibility of needing to reintegrate in their home country someday in the future.

Other parents we have encountered throughout our years as activists in the community also stressed the importance of preserving their language in order to maintain close relationships between children and parents and to allow communication between their children and their relatives elsewhere. This is especially important because due to Israeli policy, children are not exposed to their parents' culture by way of reunions and visits, as they may have been in a country that offered them status and the ability to meet their families. In addition, some Eritrean parents in Israel whose children study in Israeli schools, which are based on Jewish traditions and religion, make sure that their children regularly go to church and wear a cross, and do not encourage them to participate in social activities with their classmates. However, one should bear in mind that such parental choices are also designed to maintain control over younger generations, to monitor their behaviour and to preserve existing hierarchies and inequalities, especially related to gender.

Yet, these parents' active approach also aims to reduce the cultural distance between themselves and their children who are growing up in Israel – a distance which may become geographical if these children someday make the same choice as Meshi, opting to live in a place where they feel they belong culturally, while their parents choose to or are forced to return to Africa. Their actions pull them out of a state of helplessness and empower them, enabling them to feel they can shape their children's cultural identity and relationships with members of the family both in Israel and in Africa. While they may not be able to do much about the politics that imposed family separation in the first place, they can be active within the cultural arena and shape their sense of belonging and identity. Education is therefore a way of obtaining security in relationships between parents and children, and between children and their extended families in Africa, while also offering the ability to integrate into the parents' home country, culture, religion and language.

5.4.3 New Bonds, New Families

Several interviewees told us that in their home countries, they had lived among their extended family, with very loose boundaries between the nuclear and extended family. For example, Nadiv told us: 'My grandmother had many cows […] After school I would come back home and go to help with the cows and see my grandmother.' Likewise, Moshe reported: 'I spent most of my time with my grandparents. I grew up with them and slept with them at night.' Others described living with other members of their extended family. John, a man from Eritrea in his 40s, often talked about the house he grew up in alongside 20 other children, a mixture of siblings and cousins.

While fleeing one's country removes closeness to one's family, it may also bring new intimacies: individuals who share journeys and lives in exile may become very close. Such relationships may function like families, sharing everyday life and providing support. Tov, a man from Darfur in his 20s who arrived in Israel as an unaccompanied minor, described his peers from boarding school as family: 'We were one group for five years. Some are in the army, some got married and went abroad, but still, still we are a family.'

Some of our interviewees have relatives in Israel – spouses, children, siblings or cousins; others have close friends from the same home country and ethnic group with whom they share a culture and a language. Some unaccompanied minors were unofficially adopted by Israeli families as minors or young adults. The meaning of these relationships varies. Meshi, for example, told us that although her uncle lives in Israel, 'I also have another family, Beit Hashanti [a shelter for homeless children and youth in distress], where I grew up for 6 years. They helped me a lot. I was born again at Beit Hashanti, so they are another family for me.' According to Meshi, in addition to differences in skin colour, there are also cultural differences between her two families, such as their approach to expressing and discussing feelings: In her African family, emotions are constrained and not named or discussed. In contrast, in her Israeli family, expressing, discussing and validating feelings is a legitimized form of communication. Baruch, on the other hand, told us:

> I am not with the Israeli family all the time. In high school, I was with them once a week. But now we meet whenever I can. If they are home, and if I can. Now I'm busier and have a lot of things to do. So, I see them every month, sometimes every two months. But I call them, we always speak on the phone. So, I think the thing I got from my [Sudanese] family is that I can call and ask for anything. Anything. The Israelis, I can't ask for anything. There is a limitation.

Has refugees' idea of what family is changed because of separation, exposure to other cultures or changes in life style? Interestingly, when we asked interviewees directly who they call family, they referred to various family members, but not necessarily all of them and not necessarily their nuclear family. Eden defined her family as: 'The children and my husband, also my father and mother and brothers.' Haya, a 30-year-old woman from Eritrea who lives in Jerusalem with her husband and children, said that her family is her mother, who was still in Eritrea and with whom she was hoping to reunite in Canada. Similarly, Baruch told us that his family is his mother, who lives in a refugee camp in Chad, although he also said he is close to his older brother, who lives in Sudan and whom he talks to on the phone.

In contrast to refugees' past experiences of familyhood, their extended and nuclear families are now spread geographically. As a result, some refugees form new bonds, which provide them intimacy and security and are considered second or alternative families. Scattered families also lead refugees to define their families in inconsistent ways, or in ways that do not encompass all of their relatives in their different locations. The transition from one country and cultural setting to another may also redefine families and family ties. These findings echo the scholarship describing transnational families. Families living apart, residing in different

countries, often challenge normative Western understandings of family (Baldassar et al., 2014).

5.5 Conclusion

In this chapter we explored how refugees in Israel feel about and cope with family separation and how separation affects their transnational relationships with their families, their emotional wellbeing and their sense of security. We found that this separation is rooted in trauma, such as war, political persecution and harsh, extended military service. For refugees, family separation is connected to their reasons for fleeing their homelands; therefore, the story of separation is the story of persecution and escape.

Insecurity continues to dominate the lives of refugees when they reach Israel. As refugees in Israel do not receive asylum, they lack the status and papers that would allow them to visit or reunite with relatives. Israel's asylum policy does not provide a real option for permanent status or civil rights and has pushed many refugees out of the country in search of security. We therefore claim that politics, policies and different forms of violence are inseparable from refugees' most private relationships and feelings. States and conflicts are embedded in personal experiences of loss, loneliness and despair.

Prolonged separation caused by war or dictatorship in Africa and ineffective asylum in Israel has an effect on family relationships, on the emotional wellbeing of refugees and on the ways refugees define themselves and their families. On the one hand, it generates a sense of helplessness and loneliness. Communicating with their families is difficult, and when asked to describe their families, refugees find it hard to include all the various family members living in different locations. Their varying answers to this question may also represent the disintegration and fragmentation of their families.

On the other hand, refugees work to achieve everyday security by creating other social bonds and educating their children. Prolonged separation motivates refugees to bond with others originating from their home country, as well as with native Israelis and other migrants. Though these new relationships may be defined as a 'new family', they do not necessarily replace old relationships.

The efforts of refugee parents to teach their children their language and culture can be seen as an attempt to bring children closer to their nuclear family in Israel as well as to members of the extended family in other countries, thus maintaining continuity between past and present and managing geographical and cultural distances. Education bolsters refugees' non-Israeli identities and allows them not to rely solely on gaining status in Israel, instead broadening their options, including the option of returning to Africa 1 day. While individuals may not be able to change or bring an end to the politics and conflicts that tore their families apart, they are able to find ways to build new relationships and restore a sense of control and continuity in their lives.

Based on our research, we conclude first that it is clear that politics, violence and governmental policies are embedded in the life stories, daily actions and emotional wellbeing of individuals. Israel, on the one hand, enables refugees to stay in the country, giving them the space to have families and provide for them, and to educate their children in Israeli schools. But refugees' status is unstable and poorly defined, and refugees endure administrative violence. Losing one's family and living with no hope for reunification undermines refugees' wellbeing. Second, while individual refugees are unable to change government politics or immigration regimes, they may find ways to empower themselves and gain better control over their everyday lives and futures. They may not redefine altogether what family is, but they may be able to better accommodate to the gaps and uncertainties created by administrative structures and old definitions of family. Refugees may find micro spaces and mechanisms that, while unable to repair what was torn, can assist in finding ways to cope and replace despair with hope.

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