Crucial Yet Disavowed: Thai Migrant Farmworkers and Israel's Migration Regime

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Israeli farmers have employed Thai migrants since the 1980s. In this paper, we describe the gradual emergence of an institutionalized and regulated migration regime, characterized by shifting responsibility for the recruitment, placement and discipline of migrants. We argue that these policy shifts, along with the growing number and prolonged presence of Thai workers in Israel, have shaped employment relationships. We describe how these migrants have been denied equal rights and political representation in rural communities and in Israeli society at large. We argue that despite the migrants' tremendous impact on the social fabric of the Israeli countryside, they are still perceived and treated as a temporary, dispensable and cheap labor force. Our arguments are based on sociological and ethnographic research conducted separately by each of the authors.

Keywords: *Farmworkers, migrant workers, agriculture, Israel, Thailand, migration policy, employment relations*

INTRODUCTION

Neoliberal states with liberal-democratic regimes often struggle to formulate and implement a coherent labor migration policy due to two contradictory sets of institutional logic vis-à-vis migrant workers: The liberal market logic of capitalism encourages labor in-migration to meet the needs of employers, while the logic of the territorial nation-state requires each state to control its borders (Sassen, 1999; Kemp

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and Raijman, 2008). In Israel, this tension between the demands of the market and those of the territorial state is accentuated by an ethno-national logic, leading to a stark duality in the state's attitude toward migrants. On the one hand, Israel is an immigration state that grants citizenship and benefits to Jewish immigrants and others eligible under the Law of Return. On the other hand, migration policy in Israel seeks to exclude non-Jewish migrants and grants them only limited rights (Raijman, 2009; Bartram, 2011; Kalir, 2014). Shamir and Mundlak (2013) look beyond this duality in arguing that the Israeli migration regime is driven by three functional imperatives: political, economic, and universal, created as a response to specific "spheres of migration": Palestinian workers, migrant workers, and asylum seekers.

The development of a non-Jewish migration regime in Israel has been a long, unorganized, and unplanned process. A migration regime is defined as a cluster of "principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures" relevant to migration, "around which actor expectations converge" (see Krasner, 1982: 185). When the first Thai migrant farmworkers arrived in Israel in the 1980s to work in the agricultural sector, the Israeli migration regime had yet to be institutionalized and the migrants' rights and work conditions were unregulated.

In this paper, we describe the development of the Israeli migration regime in the context of Thai migration from the 1980s to 2023. First, we argue that shifts in labor migration policy have not only regulated and controlled the employment of Thai migrants at the macro level, but have also shaped employment relationships at the micro level. Paternalistic relations between farmers and employees in the early days have slowly given way to more distant and formalized relations as the number of migrants grew, the migration regime became institutionalized and employers lost control over the recruitment process. Secondly, we describe how the growing number of Thai workers and their constant presence has changed the social fabric of the communities in which they work (mostly *moshavim,* cooperative settlements, sing. *moshav*), as these communities came to depend on their labor. Nevertheless, Thai migrants have been denied equal rights and political representation in these communities and in Israeli society.

The political weakness of Thai migrants in Israel is extreme, even in comparison to other migrant workers' communities in Israel which have developed simultaneously. While most migrants live close to their sources of livelihood in population centres, Thai migrants are concentrated in Israel's rural periphery, with limited access to public transportation and no shared language with the surrounding society, compounding their physical and social isolation. Focusing on relationships between farmers and their Thai employees over the years, we analyze how various structural factors have combined to create a situation in which Thai migrant workers are present yet invisible, and how, despite the changes their employment has engendered and the large proportion of the rural population they have come to represent, their presence as an integral part of the *moshav* fabric is maintained invisible and disavowed.

We trace changes in the Israeli migration regime over four periods, each characterized by a different pattern of responsibility for the recruitment, placement and discipline of labor migration from Thailand, highlighting the structural conditions of the migration regime and the employment relations between the Thai migrants and their Israeli employers in each period: (1) the late 1980s to 1994, when the employment of Thai migrants was barely regulated; (2) 1994 to 1998, when the Moshavim Movement controlled manpower agencies in Thailand and Israel; (3) 1998 to 2012, when private manpower agencies in Thailand and Israel controlled the migration process; (4) 2012 to 2020, when migration was institutionalized through a bilateral labor agreement (BLA) and recruitment was delegated to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In 2020, a new BLA was signed between the countries following the withdrawal of the IOM from its role. Since then, the Thai Ministry of Labor has been in charge of the recruitment process.

This article is based on the authors' separate research on the Thailand-Israel migration regime. Each of the authors contributed their perspective to the analysis, with the aim of combining their knowledge to provide a broad description of four decades of Thai agricultural migration to Israel. We trace the development of the migration industry and the implementation of the Thailand-Israel bilateral agreement (Kurlander), present the perspective of a sending migration community (Shoham) and discuss the interactions between migrants and their Israeli employers at the level of the *moshav* (Kaminer).

Our research methods included participant observation at a *moshav* in the central Aravah region of Israel where Thai migrant workers are employed, and ethnographic interviews with migrants and kin in Israel and Thailand (Kaminer 2019a; Forthcoming) ethnographic fieldwork in a sending migration village in northeastern Thailand with return migrants from Israel, analysis of cultural products made by Thai migrants and archival research (Shoham, 2017; Forthcoming); in-depth interviews with Israeli farmers, Israeli and Thai policymakers, recruitment and manpower agency personnel in both Thailand and Israel, Thai workers in Israel and returnees (Kurlander, 2019). Finally, the authors have analyzed hundreds of texts, including Israeli and Thai newspapers, Knesset (Israeli parliament) protocols, documents found in local archives in Israel, and court documents from Israeli State Archives.

AGRICULTURAL LABOR MIGRATION IN ISRAEL

The composition of the workforce in Israel's agricultural sector has changed several times since the state was founded in 1948. In the period directly preceding Israeli independence, the parties of the "labor settlement movement" (*tnu'at ha-hityashvut ha-'ovedet*, LSM) achieved hegemony over the Zionist community in general and the rural sector in particular (Shalev, 1992). After the war of 1948-49, millions of

dunams of confiscated Palestinian lands were transferred to new and old settlements of the LSM; some of these were *kibbutzim*, or communal settlements, but the majority were categorized as *moshavim*.

Despite differences between them,[1] settlements of both types adhered to an ideology of "pure settlement" (Shafir, 1989) and rejected non-Jewish membership in their communities. However, despite the ideological egalitarianism and "exploitation anxiety" which characterized their political culture (Kaminer, 2016), over the 1950s and '60s many *kibbutzim* and especially *moshavim* turned to the use of Jewish and Palestinian wage-labor (Ben Zvi, 2018). After the establishment of Israeli military rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, a growing number of Palestinians from the Occupied Territories joined the agricultural labor force. In the mid-1980s, Palestinian workers accounted for about 7% of Israel's total labor force, but up to 25% of its agricultural workforce (Bartram, 1998).

The entry of Palestinians widened the divide in the Israeli labor market between two categories: (1) citizens, who constituted a relatively protected and organized workforce,[2] and (2) non-citizens, a vulnerable and inexpensive source of labor (Lewin -Epstein and Semyonov, 1987; Shafir and Peled, 2002). In Israel, this divide is underwritten by an ethno-national logic, expressed in a stark duality in the state's attitude toward migrant workers, which is reflected in its migration regime. On the one hand, Israel is an immigration state that grants citizenship and benefits to Jewish immigrants.[3] On the other hand, Israel seeks to exclude non-Jewish migrants and grants them only limited rights under temporary labor migration programs (TLMP) (Kemp and Raijman, 2008; Raijman, 2009; Bartram, 2011).

After the first Palestinian uprising against Israeli rule in the Occupied Territories, or *Intifada*, broke out in 1987, Israeli farmers began, as part of the public discourse in Israel, to view Palestinian workers as a threat and were reluctant to employ them. Meanwhile, the government imposed frequent "closures" on the residents of the Occupied Territories, and revoked or shortened Palestinians' work permits (Farsakh, 2005; Raijman and Kemp, 2007). In the early 1990s, as Israel engaged in the Oslo negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization, the aim to "separate" from the Palestinians and end dependence on their labor became central to state policy. A concomitant shift toward neoliberal economic policy also fueled the recruitment of overseas migrant workers as a partial replacement for the Palestinians in three main sectors: agriculture, caregiving and construction (Shafir and Peled, 2002)

The workforce in Israel's agricultural sector gradually became a blend of farm owners and their families, salaried Israeli employees, commuting Palestinian workers and overseas migrant workers (almost all from Thailand). During the past decade, Thai workers were employed by about 5,000 farmers (PIBA, 2023). About 78% of these Thai workers were employed on *moshavim*, 9% on *kibbutzim*, 10.5% on other farms owned by Jews and 2% on farms owned by Arabs (Kurlander and Kaminer, 2020).

FROM "VOLUNTEERS" TO MIGRANT WORKERS: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PATERNALISTIC LABOR RELATIONS (1987-1994)

Thai migration for labor in Israel's agricultural sector evolved gradually against a Cold War background of technical, military, and agricultural connections between the countries. Thus, from 1979 to 1982, on the strength of its experience with Thai workers at bases in Thailand during the Vietnam War, the U.S. military hired Thais to construct an airbase in Ovda, in southern Israel, as part of the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt (Shoham, Forthcoming). Early interactions between Israeli farmers and Thais were facilitated through MASHAV, Israel's development agency, which organized agricultural training in Israel for Thais, together with other development projects conducted in Thailand, sometimes in partnership with the state-owned Agriculture Bank. The courses ran between three to six months, and some included practical training on Israeli farms. Between 1976 and 1982, about 300 Thai trainees participated in 72 agriculture training courses in Israel, traveling to experience the Israeli "spectacle of innovation" in agriculture (Ibid).

In 1985, General Pichit Kullavanijaya, commander of the Thai First Army, contacted the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok with a request that Israel train a delegation of military and civilian officials on the subject of "frontier settlement", with the aim of establishing paramilitary villages along Thailand's tense border with Cambodia, modeled after the settlements established by Israel's Nahal Brigade (Kaminer, 2019a). Of the first three groups of "trainees" (see below) to be essentially engaged in agricultural wage-labor, which arrived starting in late 1987, two were sponsored by Pichit and the military, and one by the Agricultural Bank. At least one of these groups stayed in the country for an entire year (Cohen, 1999; Kurlander, 2019; Kaminer, 2019a; Kaminer, Forthcoming). Israeli tour guide, farmer and entrepreneur Uzi Vered played a key role in recruiting this delegation.

These initial groups entered Israel as "temporary residents" holding a type of visa that had customarily been issued to young foreigners, mostly ideologically driven Westerners, who came to volunteer on Israeli farms for short periods. In line with their official definition, the new Thai workers were often viewed as "volunteers" (*mitnadvim*) or "trainees" (*mishtalmim*), though in fact their economic motivations were plain: their allowances of about $250 a month were competitive in relation to wages available in Thailand at the time (Cohen, 1999; Shoham, 2017). Alongside Vered on the Israeli end, private Thai actors were involved in recruiting these "trainee" workers in Thailand from the beginning and profited by exacting a share of their wages (Kurlander, 2019).

Though initially wary of the Thai workers, Israeli farmers were soon very pleased by the quality of their work and by their demeanor. Israelis grew eager to employ Thais instead of Palestinian laborers, rationalizing this through an emerging perception of Thais as naturally well-suited for agricultural work, obedient and disciplined (Kaminer, 2019b). This perception later pervaded government ministries as well (Kurlander, 2019). For example, Yaakov, an Israeli manpower agent experienced

in recruiting Thai migrants, asserted: "The best ones for the farmers are the Thai workers – because of the mentality, the type of work, knowing how to live in a village".[4] This portrayal has contributed greatly to the common perception of the *taylandi* (Hebrew for "Thai," masculine singular) as an obedient, docile and ideal farmworker. Indeed, the term *taylandi* has become synonymous with "farmworker" in Israel over the years (Kaminer, 2019; Shoham, Forthcoming).

During the 1990s, Israel became a major labor migration destination for Thais, especially from Isaan, the country's northeastern region. Isaan has a long history of internal and international labor migration, beginning in the 1950s, with a majority of households currently dependent on remittances. Though Thailand has experienced economic growth in the last few decades, Isaan remains the poorest region in the country and faces discriminatory treatment from the central regime, encouraging many locals to migrate. The top-down discourse of the hegemonic urban elite has constructed the people of Isaan as the rural "others" of Thai modernity, thus engendering further socio-economical discrimination (Rigg et al., 2012; Gullette, 2014; Keyes, 2014; Statham et al., 2020). Over the years, migration to 3d jobs (dirty, dangerous, degrading) has become a central phenomenon in Isaan, involving cycles of migration to multiple destinations and leading to precarity chains (Silvey and Parreñas, 2019). The Thai Recruitment and Job Seekers Protection Act of 1985 set the conditions for international labor migration through agencies and licensed private recruitment companies, giving rise to a large for-profit migration industry (Huguet and Punpuing, 2005; Rainwater and Williams, 2019).

At first, Thai workers in Israel often lived in quarters built for volunteers adjacent to their Israeli employers' homes, and often shared meals and family events with them. Haya, a farmer from a *moshav* in northern Israel, directly associated the two groups in her memory: "The [Western] volunteers had stopped coming [...] At first, yes, we treated [Thai workers] like the volunteers. I remember the first Thais. They'd make food for us and we'd make food for them, more like family friends" (Reef Amar, 2017:4).

Samran, from Isaan, was recruited as a "volunteer" in the late 1980s and worked on a farm in Israel's Arava region for twenty-three years. He recalled his relationship with his Israeli employer in the paternalistic language of kinship, emphasizing the importance of commensality and pleasurable gifts:

> [...] after I was there for a long time, the other employers didn't think I was a worker; they said I was the son of my employer. The employer and I met often, had dinners together; he also took me to restaurants and to see places around the country.[5]

During those early days, Thai migrants applied the sensibility often used to interpret hierarchical relations in Thailand to bear on relations with their Israeli employers. In the paternalistic framework described by anthropologist Felicity Aulino (2014) under the rubric of the "social body", such relations impose obligations and rights on both "senior" and "junior" parties. In this framework, which often utilizes

the language of kinship (Herzfeld, 2016), patrons are entitled to demand obedience from subordinates, and in return are obliged to protect them and treat them to enjoyable experiences on occasion.

Israeli employers, for their part, were ambivalent about this cultural framework, which pleased them and served their immediate needs while clashing with the egalitarian ethos of the "labor settlement movement" on which they had been raised (Kaminer, 2019b). In interviews, farmers spoke with a mixture of longing and embarrassment about how the first Thai workers (who were not necessarily much younger than themselves) called them "father" and "mother" (Kaminer, 2019a). This approach was consistent with the farmers' perception of the new workers as being "in shock" and in need of instruction.

In summary, the migration of Thais to Israel during this initial period was largely unregulated and fit into an institutional and cultural framework designed for Western volunteers. The first Thai workers lived in intimate proximity to their employers, often sharing in meals and family life. Migrants parsed this relationship in the paternalistic terms familiar to them, while farmers often perceived the Thai workers as in terms of children in need of protection. This period of employer-worker relations ended when the Moshavim Movement began managing the employment of Thai workers.

THE MONOPOLY OF THE MOSHAVIM MOVEMENT (1994-1998)

In 1994, the Israeli government decided to delegate the responsibility for the recruitment and placement of farmworkers to the Moshavim Movement, due to the increased concentration of Thai workers in *moshavim* and the movement's early involvement in regulating Thai migration (Kurlander, 2022a).[6] The movement was also assigned responsibility for monitoring all aspects of the migrants' work and life in Israel (Cohen, 1999; Kurlander, 2022a).

The recruitment of migrants soon became highly profitable, as the Thai recruitment agencies charged each worker steep fees and shared this revenue with the Moshavim Movement; in 1996, these fees amounted to $770 per worker (Kurlander, 2022a). Israeli manpower agencies such as Vered's, seeking to participate in this profitable venture, successfully lobbied the Israeli government to eliminate the Moshavim Movement's monopoly on the recruitment process (Kurlander, 2022a). In 1998, the state promulgated regulations that allowed private manpower agencies to recruit and place Thai workers, creating competition and challenging the monopoly of the Moshavim Movement.

Throughout the 1990s, the Moshavim Movement institutionalized many of the social functions previously managed by individual employers and their households (Kurlander, 2022a). The veteran *moshav*-wide role of "coordinator for volunteers", often held by women, was also transformed without being renamed.

Now appointed and paid by the Moshavim Movement, the coordinators organized occasional trips and recreational activities for the workers, including celebrations of Thai holidays and excursions to tourist sites. Thai holidays sometimes became community celebrations in which Israeli residents enjoyed Thai food, music and dances, prepared and performed by the workers, but financed by the Moshavim Movement and the manpower agencies (Central Arava Regional Council, 1993; Shoham, 2017; Kaminer, 2019a).

This linguistic and social isolation experienced by the new workers was initially viewed by the Israeli farmers as an expression of shock and helplessness, and this also translated into a paternalistic attitude. Osnat, a farmer in central Israel, described her initial encounter with Thai workers along these lines: "We saw they were in shock. Of the first ten to arrive, two came to me [...] People came who don't understand anything. They didn't understand English or Hebrew".[7] But Lamyai, who worked in Israel for eight years during the 1990s with her husband Seksan, described her experiences in Israel in hindsight: "We didn't want to go anywhere because we couldn't speak Hebrew, and we were worried about [losing] our jobs. We just wanted to save as much as we could and then come back home".[8] Other returnees said that the only Hebrew they learned was what they called "the language of work" – that is, Hebrew or pidgin vocabulary restricted to agricultural terms (Shoham, 2017: 47-51; Kaminer, 2019: 86-90).

For many migrants, the occasional Thai holiday (especially the New Year, Songkran) were the only opportunities to leave the farms where they worked and lived and to meet with other Thais (Shoham, 2017). On several occasions, festival celebrations were organized by the Thai embassy in Israel as well as by the agencies. On at least two occasions, singers were brought specially from Isaan to perform the traditional Isaan song style, *mo lam*. Lamyai described these festivals as very enjoyable, noting that they were almost the only opportunity for meeting friends from their home village in Isaan who worked elsewhere in Israel. Israelis, including non-employers, also enjoyed the music, food and pageantry of the Thai festivals (Kaminer, 2019a).

The centrality of the Moshavim Movement ended with the rise of the private manpower agencies in the late 1990s. The trips and recreational activities continued, but they were increasingly left to the initiative of individual employers and workers rather than community institutions. The Moshavim Movement had taken on the role of a collective patron and some elements of a hybrid public culture, including Thai as well as Israeli elements, had been institutionalized in some rural communities. But insofar as this hybridity ran against the grain of the stridently ethno-national ideology of "pure settlement" (Shafir, 1989), it remained a precarious cultural mode of accommodation between employees and employers (Kaminer, 2022a).

THE HEYDAY OF PRIVATE MANPOWER AND RECRUITMENT AGENCIES (1998-2012)

In 1998, the Israeli government promulgated new regulations for private manpower agencies, mandating them to recruit migrants in collaboration with Thai counterparts and to oversee the conditions of employment. These private contractors had charged exorbitant recruitment fees, reaching up to $10,000 between 2005 and 2012, in violation of the Israeli Manpower Contractors Law of 1996. To circumvent this protective regulation, Israeli agencies made sure their Thai partners collected the fees before the workers left the country (Kurlander, 2019). Thus, migrant workers became desirable not only for Israeli farmers as a workforce, but also for Thai and Israeli brokers due to the highly profitable recruitment fees.

The high recruitment fees created a situation of debt bondage (Musikawong and Rzonca, 2023), as migrants had to work an average of 17 months just to repay the fees charged by recruitment companies (Raijman and Kushnirovich, 2012). Afraid to lose their jobs and default on their debt, the Thai migrants became totally dependent on their Israeli employers and the manpower agencies. While trapped in debt bondage they generally refrained from complaining about violations of their legal rights (Cohen and Kurlander, 2023). Nevertheless, Thai migrants found ways to contest their rights violations and exploitation through different acts of resistance, occasionally leading to collective actions and strikes (Shoham, Forthcoming). Their dependence was compounded by the "binding system" of allocating work permits to employers rather than workers, making it impossible for the latter to switch employers even when their rights were violated (Mundlak, 2003).

Itikon, who worked on a flower farm in Israel between 2001 and 2006, together with several other members of his family, had had to pay 300,000 Thai baht in commission fees. He described the uncertainty he felt before migrating to Israel and how he had to patiently endure mistreatment by his employer because of his debt:

> Oh, men have a lot of responsibilities. I'm accountable for my family. I traveled outside of the country and there you never know what can happen... I couldn't predict my fate. You never knew if you were going to a good or bad place. You were unsure if you would be able to communicate with the employers, how they would employ you, you couldn't know...when you go there you can't return home right away or you'll fall into the ocean of very expensive commission fees. The Israeli people don't care about Thai people, they don't. Probably they looked at us as if we were their servants. It's true I went there to be a worker, but they really saw me as inferior to them.[9]

Israeli's High Court of Justice outlawed the binding system in 2006, yet, de facto, it persists in agriculture as well as other sectors, given that workers still face great difficulties when seeking to leave their employers (Kurlander, 2022b; Niezna, 2022).

In the 2000s, additional players joined the migrant recruitment industry in Israel: current and former Thai migrant workers who made personal profit from the

recruitment of other workers. This method of kin and network recruitment, called the "fax system", enabled employers to choose new workers from among the relatives and friends of employees they wanted to reward, often through the mediation by the same current or former migrant (Raijman and Kushnirovich, 2012; Shoham, 2017; Kurlander, 2019).

Israeli farmers' enthusiastic reception of the Thai workforce led them to organize lobbying efforts to raise the quota of workers allowed to migrate to Israel. As these efforts succeeded and the number of workers increased, the relatively intimate, paternalistic fabric of employer-worker relations began to unravel, and relations grew colder and more distant. Manut, who worked on a flower farm in Israel from 1998 to 2010 (and was joined by his wife as part of the kin and network migration trend), succinctly described both the public and private dimensions of his relationship with his employer:

> We were only workers, so we didn't go and talk with the employer. He respected the employees [...] We respected him. Sometimes we had a chance to talk, such as when the workers were having a party, the employer would come and join, and if the employer was having a party, the workers would join them as well, so we talk by chance sometimes. But as long as we were just at work, the employer would just give instructions. We had different paths.[10]

Until 2003, Thai workers were allowed to stay in Israel for two years only and married couples were barred from migrating together. But in practice, as in the case of Manut and his wife Atchara, many migrants circumvented the restrictions by changing their names on official documents, returning for multiple periods of work with the same employer, and often staying a decade or more in all, sometimes accompanied by their spouse and other family members (Shoham, 2017).

The recruitment method of network migration played an important role in the weaving of paternalistic relations and enabled employers to ensure the reliability of prospective workers while also offering an incentive to current workers who wished to recruit their relatives and friends. Thus, during this period it was not unusual to find farmers who employed large numbers of Thai workers from the same family or village.

The practical possibility of employing migrants long beyond the expiration of their work permits sustained the development of the paternalistic hierarchies described above, but these faced new strains when biometric technology was installed at Israel's main airport in 2004, thus closing off the name-change loophole (Kurlander, 2019). These strains were only partially compensated for by the extension of the legal limit to migrants' stay from two to five years in 2003, though the pattern of recruiting close relatives continued until 2012.

During this period, working conditions in the agriculture sector in Israel became more and more exploitative, with migrants working long hours at below-minimum wages. They were exposed to pesticides without sufficient protective equipment and safety instructions and were placed in substandard housing. These and other rights

violations continue today (Raijman and Kushnirovich, 2012; 2015; McGeehan, 2015; Kurlander and Zimmerman, 2022; Kurlander et al., 2022).

Itikon[11] reflected about the abusive treatment of his employer and the harsh labor conditions, including work in the greenhouses at temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius, and described his attempts to find ways to resist and protect himself and his peers through daily forms of resistance (Scott, 1990). Such acts practiced by Thai workers are mostly undocumented and invisible in the Israeli public discourse since they are localized on the farms, in the intimate context of labor relations (Shoham, Forthcoming). Itikon recalled:

> The employer didn't allow us to rest. One day I asked him how I could bear such hot weather. It was so hot. The employer just came to see if we were working or resting. He sat in his air conditioned truck and kept his eyes on the workers, then he disappeared and then his son would come to monitor the workers. I used to tell him "they're working, not sleeping, they are not lazy, we know that we came here to work and you're so mean."
> So I told the other workers to stop working. Even though we had opened all the [greenhouse's] covering sheets, the temperature was still very high. I told them to go outside. Humans are not machines, how would you be able to take that? The Israelis thought we had come to work there and if that could kill you, let it kill you. That's so wrong, you know, we're all humans. I was mad but I couldn't do anything.

During the 2000s, the growth in the number of Thai migrant workers exacerbated problems of unsuitable housing. In some *moshavim*, especially in southern Israel, separate neighborhoods were built for migrant workers. Elsewhere, they were housed in barrack-like quarters in the work areas of the family farms. The law stipulated clear housing standards but the implementation of these standards often fell short.

In *moshavim* where a large number of workers were employed, such as in the Arava region, small local Thai communities developed and operated according to an internal hierarchy based on seniority and age, as is customary in Thailand. According to Song, a migrant worker who lived in the Arava for over a decade, the growth of the community where she worked during her stay had a positive impact. She felt less isolated and, over time, "the Israelis became more familiar with the Thais' character".[12]

To a limited extent, these small-scale communities assisted Thai workers in handling local labor disputes. Occasionally, workers managed to organize short-term strikes demanding the resolution of wage grievances (Ash Kurlander, 2014; Shoham, Forthcoming). Somchai[13], who worked on an Israeli fish farm from 2011 to 2016, reflected on the way the "revolving door" created by Israel's migration policies and restrictions prevented acts of resistance by the workers:

> I think maybe the government of Israel is afraid of the veteran workers, because they know their job very well. The employers want the veteran workers to stay, but the government doesn't allow it. The veteran workers can unite in a union and organize a strike, because they know their rights in Israel

> and they know the salary they are supposed to get each month. If the salary is higher or lower they know, so the government doesn't allow the veterans to work. Another reason is that when a new group of people is coming to work in Israel, the government gets money from the recruitment fees again. So there are many reasons why they prefer to have new people coming to work all the time.

Officially, migrant workers in Israel have the right to organize in trade unions (Mundlak and Shamir, 2014; Bondy, 2022). In 2013, the grassroots trade union federation Koakh La'ovdim attempted to organize Thai migrants in collaboration with NGO Workers' Hotline (Kav La'oved). This attempt failed, and only very few strikes by Thai workers have been documented, usually lasting just a few hours in individual *moshavim* (Shoham, Forthcoming) and not on a regional or national level. One such strike took place in Moshav Ahituv in 2011 (Aberman, 2011).

The growing number of Thai workers also had an economic impact on Israeli agriculture, especially in the *moshavim*. The central Arava, Israel's most agrarian region, was the most dramatically affected. Between 1988 and 1999, the employment of Thai laborers enabled farmers to expand land under cultivation by almost a third, to shift from open-field cultivation to labor-intensive greenhouses, and to replace a variety of vegetables grown for the local market with a monoculture of bell peppers intended for sale in Europe (Kaminer, 2019a). By the end of the 1990s, the number of Thai migrant workers equaled the number of Jewish residents in this region (Strom, 2004; Kaminer, 2022b).

Gal, who works at the Ministry of Agriculture, summarized the nationwide dimensions of the change:

> When the Thais came here, they pushed us in the direction of a large, efficient, farm [...] Without them, we might be lagging behind a lot more. The farmers wanted more, and this process pushed Israeli agriculture to where it is today and, so, it's impossible to go back now. The four-dunam farms of twenty or thirty years ago – today, you can't make a living out of them. We've reached forty dunams, and thus require permanent employees here to do the work.[14]

This newfound dependence on non-Jewish, non-citizen migrant labor ran contrary to the Zionist ethos of the LSM.[15] However, Thai migrants' sensitivity to the implicit demand that they vacate public space in order to maintain the "face" of the purely Jewish settlement enabled the latter to maintain an appearance of a homogeneous Jewish community (Kaminer, 2022a). Only in this light can we understand how the Central Arava Regional Council, representing an area whose population is 50% Thai, could feel no qualms about releasing a promotional video (Central Arava Regional Council, 2015) inviting Israelis to settle in the region without including a single Thai face (Kaminer, 2016).

As their numbers grew, the Thai migrants in Israel came under increasing pressure to isolate themselves in social enclaves. For example, while not officially barred from

doing so, Thai workers in the *moshav* studied by Kaminer refrained from using the community swimming pools that play a central role in community life, especially during the hot summer months. They head out to work at dawn, long before the women and children of the *moshav* wake up and start their day, and they return in the evening. Israelis who live on *moshavim* and do not work in agriculture can easily avoid any contact with the migrant workers, despite their large numbers (Kaminer, 2019a; Kurlander and Kaminer, 2020).

As labor forces have grown, many Israeli farmers have selected one of the workers to manage the other Thai workers. These appointed "headmen" – referred to variously as *boss katan* ("small boss" in Hebrew), *balabay* (a corruption of the Hebrew *ba'al ha-bayit*, literally "owner of the house") or *hua naa* (Thai for head or leader) – usually receives instructions from the farmer, conveys them to the workers and supervises their implementation during the workday. While officially selected by the employer, such headmen are usually also at the top of the informal hierarchy recognized by the workers themselves, which revolves around age and seniority on the farm. Skills like knowledge of English or Hebrew and previous experience in relevant work, such as welding, also play a role (Shoham, 2017; Kaminer, 2019). While this position is not rewarded with material benefits, it sometimes offers other benefits, such as closer relations with the employer and his family. This management structure reinforces the separation and hierarchies between the employer and the workers, as all communication is conducted through the headman. It leaves the workers to discipline and control themselves, with the gaze of the employer hovering above, sometimes directly through security cameras, and otherwise via the headman. Many of the workers who are assigned this role consider it a burden; it entails an added workload and creates a situation of dual loyalty. On the one hand, there is pressure to carry out the farmer's directives. On the other hand, there is a desire to maintain solidarity with their fellow workers and protect their rights and needs (Shoham, Forthcoming).

While largely invisible at many scales in the migration regime, Thai migrants have created a rich cultural spaces for comment, complaint and critique of the way they are treated in Israel. This array of cultural products includes an active and voluble online public sphere, on Facebook and other platforms (Kaminer, 2022a); a rich variety of kitchen gardens (Shvarzberg, 2023); and a repertoire of songs that Shoham (Forthcoming) contextualizes as the "Thai farmworkers migration archive". One of these songs, which was posted on YouTube by Sombat Khaopuk, portrays what Shoham describes as the creation of the "migrant hero" figure as a path to process through the experiences of the Thai workers in Israel. Here is an English translation of the Thai lyrics (Shoham, Forthcoming):

Thai workers in the Jews' land"/ Unknown[16]

Left our hometown to pursue our dreams
Work so hard every day in a foreign land far from home
As workers, we make only enough to feed ourselves

Yet we still need to set aside the money for our mortgaged land
Working in the Jews' land makes us heroes
We have to tolerate hard work and harsh words
The lover back home has been changing and it's heavy on my heart
It's hard to make ends meet with the salary they pay
Is there anyone who sympathizes with us?
Working for other people means no comfort
Some nights there is fighting, dangers surround us
The pay they promised, we've never gotten it
We don't know who to turn to
This is the truth about Thai workers in the Jews' land
The wage we make is barely over 30,000 [baht]
Then come these bills for electricity, water, taxes, and food to pay
Only 10,000 left to send home to Thailand
Is there any organization that can fix this?
If you can't, you'd better not send more workers
Because we feel like we are being buried alive here.

THE BILATERAL AGREEMENT: INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND REGULATION OF THE MIGRATION PROCESS AND DISINTEGRATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKS (2012-2020)

For many years, Israel refrained from signing bilateral labor agreements (BLA) with migration-sending countries, as these would legally make it a party to the employment of migrant workers (Rosenhek, 1999; Sitbon, 2006; Kemp and Raijman 2008; Kurlander, 2022b). This changed in December 2010, when Israel and Thailand signed a bilateral agreement to regulate the recruitment of migrants. The agreement became operational in June 2012 under the Thailand-Israel Cooperation on the Placement of Workers (TIC), jointly administered by the Thai Ministry of Labor and the Israeli Population and Immigration Authority (PIBA). Responsibility for overseeing the recruitment of Thai migrant workers and their placement with Israeli farmers was assigned to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Thailand, with the cooperation of the Thai Ministry of Labor and the Center for International Migration and Integration (CIMI) in Israel.

The primary objective of the bilateral agreement was to sever the link between Thai and Israeli recruitment companies. Before TIC, the Thai agencies had charged exorbitant fees, transferring the bulk of the profit to their Israeli partners, in violation of both Israeli and Thai law. In other words, the agreement aimed at significantly reducing the cost of migration from Thailand to Israel by shutting Thai recruitment agencies out of the process completely and by narrowing the purview of Israeli agencies considerably. The agreement put an immediate end to exorbitant recruitment fees, which plummeted by over 66%, from about $9,000 to less than $2,000 (Kushnirovich and Raijman, 2017). Despite the dramatic reduction in the

cost of migration, however, violations of migrants' rights continued in the absence of proper enforcement by the authorities. Non-payment of minimum wages and overtime pay, insufficient protection from sexual assault, substandard housing, and inadequate safety protections at work – all continued unabated (McGeehan, 2015; Kushnirovich and Raijman, 2017; Kurlander, 2019; Kaminer, 2020; Kurlander and Zimmerman, 2022; Kurlander et al., 2022).

The TIC agreement also stipulated that workers be placed on farms on a completely random basis to prevent the extraction illegal fees (Livnat and Shamir, 2022). The random placement of workers cut the longstanding ties that employers had developed with families and villages in Thailand through the "fax system" described above (Shoham and Ben-Israel, 2022). Dorit, a farmer in northern Israel, described the change: "At first, we employed the members of a single family, all sorts of branches of the family, but still one family. [...] Today it's not like that. We have no idea who will come to us. We no longer have control".[17]

The randomization of placement also wrought havoc on migrants' social networks, further isolating and weakening them socially and politically. Consequently, relations between the farmers and the workers became less paternalistic, and their stereotypical image of the Thais as industrious and docile was destabilized. The farmers we interviewed spoke longingly of the "Thais of the past," who were diligent and quiet in comparison to the "insolent" workers of today. Furthermore, the randomization of placement, together with the ban on migrating with family members (newly enforced through the biometric measures), had a severe effect on women, who comprise a small minority within the overall population of Thai workers in Israel (Kurlander, 2019). These changes weakened the women's social support networks by eliminating the possibility of migrating to Israel with spouses or other acquaintances and choosing their employer, as practiced before TIC. This increased the vulnerability of single women who now lacked their family's protection against sexual harassment and assault by their fellow workers, Israeli employers and other men. Some of the women we interviewed reported various protection mechanisms they had adopted for protection from violence, such as choosing a "boyfriend" from among the workers on the farm. Violence against Thai women farmworkers is severely underreported, as many are afraid to complain and risk losing their jobs (Shoham and Kurlander, 2021).

In Israel, as in the rest of the world, the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020 led to a sudden and major upheaval in the labor market. Workplaces and border crossings were closed, and people were asked to remain at home. Infection rates among disadvantaged groups such as migrant workers were high, as these groups could not afford to stop working and their living conditions were overcrowded and insufficiently hygienic.[18]

Israel, like many other countries in the world, adopted a policy of lockdowns that remained in effect through July 2021. In March 2020, movement restrictions were imposed on all Israelis, restricting their ability to travel to work. Agricultural

workers, however, both Israelis and migrants, were declared "essential workers" and their movement was therefore unrestricted. This meant that Thai migrants in Israel, together with other farmworkers, including Israelis, continued to work as usual – even when the entire country shut down (Niezna et al., 2021).

Since the living quarters of Thai farmworkers are typically in close proximity to the fields, they were able to maintain their daily routine with regard to freedom of movement (Kurlander and Zimmerman, 2022; Kurlander et al., 2022). Once the borders were closed, new migrants could not arrive and migrants with expired contracts and visas could not return home. Furthermore, many migrants who traveled to Thailand to visit their families in the middle of their contract could not return to Israel. This resulted in a shortage of farmworkers. Due to the high demand for labor, migrants had a bit more bargaining power and job mobility, making it easier than before for them to leave abusive employers (Kurlander et al., 2021).

In July 2020, the IOM withdrew from the agreement and responsibility for the recruitment of workers in Thailand was taken over by the Thai Ministry of Labor.[19] On reason for the IOM's departure may be its incorporation into the United Nations beginning in 2016. As a result, the organization sought to align itself with regulatory changes in Thailand which require recruitment costs to be covered by employers rather than employees.[20] While this transfer of responsibilities did not change the fundamental principles governing TIC, given past experience and in the light of anecdotal evidence there is room for concern that exorbitant fees are once again being charged. Be this as it may, it is clear that recruitment and employment practices aimed at bypassing the bilateral agreements have become more prevalent. For example, training programs for agriculture students sometimes employed migrants under false pretenses and violated their rights (Kurlander, 2019; Kurlander and Cohen, 2022). Further research is needed to ascertain the effect of these changes.

CONCLUSION

Macro-level polices and control structures not only regulate labor migration but also shape employment relationships at the micro level (Aguilar, 1999; Kurlander and Cohen, 2022). We have endeavored to show that the paternalistic relations that developed between employers and workers in the early days of employing Thai farmworkers unraveled in the wake of subsequent changes in the migration regime and in Israel's agriculture sector. The growing number of Thai workers, together with changes in the recruitment system that shortened the average stay and weakened social networks, greatly influenced relations between the Thai farmworkers and their Israeli employers. Although the permanent presence of Thai migrant workers left its mark on the social fabric of Israel's *moshavim*, migrants remain invisible as individuals and disavowed as rights-bearing human beings, both at the local and

national scales alike. Some workers attempt to resist abusive treatment, but these attempts remain mostly invisible in the Israeli public sphere.

We based our arguments on the analysis of four periods of changes in agricultural migration to Israel:

> (1) 1994-1987: Thai migrants entered the existing slot of volunteers and engaged in relatively intimate relations with employers, living near them, dining and socializing with them. Migrants commonly interpreted the relationship through the paternalistic vocabulary available to them, while employers often perceived their workers as helpless and "in shock".
> (2) 1994-1998: Migration from Thailand was gradually institutionalized, with the Moshavim Movement assuming a central role as an institutional patron. The growing number of workers led to the establishment of separate accommodations for Thai workers in some *moshavim*, which furthered their social isolation.
> (3) 1998-2012: The heyday of the private manpower and recruitment agencies. As private Israeli agencies replaced the Moshavim Movement, migrant workers became desirable not only for Israeli farmers as a workforce, but also as a source of profit for Thai and Israeli recruitment brokers. Kin and network migration was salient during this period, while migrants' rights continued to be abused under the binding arrangement.
> (4) 2012-2020: A period was marked by the signing of a bilateral agreement between Thailand and Israel (TIC) and the involvement of the IOM. A sharp reduction in recruitment fees followed, but violations of migrants' rights persisted in the absence of adequate enforcement. Furthermore, TIC and the randomization of worker placement increased the vulnerability of workers, especially women, by further isolating them from social networks. Recent changes in TIC raise concerns, and further research is needed in order to observe their effect on workers and their relations with their Israeli employers.

To conclude, despite the tremendous impact of Thai migrants on the social fabric of *moshavim* and the agricultural sector at large, they are still perceived and treated as only a source of temporary, expendable and cheap labor. New regulations and the institutionalization of the migration regime have improved workers' rights and conditions in some aspects, but left them exposed in others. Their growing numbers made them a crucial workforce valuable to the rural economy, yet they are functionally dehumanized as *moshav* members ignore their presence, isolate them in residential enclaves, reproducing their position as invisible and disavowed.

These processes are shaped by the dominant logic of discrimination along ethno-national lines. Disciplinary structures were created to keep the migrants docile,

obedient and available for exploitation as a cheap labor force. At the same time, Thai migrants reacted to and participated in the regime, applying their own cultural understanding of labor relations and mounting localized acts of resistance.

EPILOGUE

As this article was being prepared for publication, the Hamas-Israel war erupted in the horrifying events of 7 October 2023. As discussed in the introduction to this issue, 39 migrant workers from Thailand were murdered and 31 abducted to the Gaza Strip. As of 25 December, 8 Thai workers are still being held hostage in Gaza. Immediately following the attack, the authors of this article, together with other civil society actors and volunteers, established a grassroots group titled Aid for Farm Workers, dedicated to helping agricultural workers in any way possible. The group has assisted in extricating migrants from settlements under conflict, creating secure spaces for rest and recuperation for evacuated workers, establishing a psychological support hotline, communicating with the families in Thailand, and more. The authors wish to dedicate this article to the memory of the murdered workers, and to express their heartfelt hope for the safe return of the abducted.

NOTES

1 Historically, on *moshavim* each family functioned as an independent economic unit, while marketing, implements and other aspects of economic life were pooled; on *kibbutzim* agricultural lands and other productive assets were owned collectively. However, since the 1980s processes of suburbanization and "privatization" have impacted settlements of both categories differentially.

2 The citizen segment of the Israeli labor market is also ethno-racially split, between Mizrahi Jews (who migrated from the countries of the Middle East and North Africa), Ashkenazi Jews (who migrated from Central and Eastern Europe) and Palestinian citizens. See; Kricheli-Katz et al., 2018; Kaminer 2019b; Bitton and Katz, 2022.

3 According to Article 4B of the Israeli Law of Return, a Jew is defined as "a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has become converted to Judaism and who is not a member of another religion".

4 Interview by Kurlander, central Israel (2012). All names of interviewees have been changed.

5 Interview by Shoham, Ban Phak Khad, Thailand (2016).

6 The Moshavim Movement was established in 1933 to represent the *moshavim* vis-à-vis the government though this status has been contested.

7 Interview By Kurlander, central Israel (2013).

8 Interview by Shoham, Ban Phak Khad, Thailand (2016).
9 Interview by Shoham, Ban Phak Khad, Thailand (2018).
10 Interview by Shoham, Ban Phak Khad, Thailand (2016).
11 Interview by Shoham, Ban Phak Khad, Thailand (2019).
12 Interview by Kaminer, Isaan, Thailand (2017).
13 Interview by Shoham, Ban Phak Khad, Thailand (2016).
14 Interview by Kurlander, central Israel (2013)
15 The term is a historical expression denoting Jewish settlement within rural areas, established on the foundations of cooperative principles of work and community.
16 Published by Sombat Khaophuk (2016) "Thai workers in the Jews' land". YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-0gUx5HoQA&ab_channel=sombatkhaophuk
17 Interview by Kurlander, northern Israel (2018).
18 Israel did, however, launch a vaccination campaign for its entire population, including migrant workers (Niezna et al., 2021).
19 This came in the wake of a significant organizational change in Thailand. See Kurlander and Cohen, 2022
20 See "The Law amendment concerning management of migrant workers in Thailand", 2017.

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