

**Book Launch: Z"l Gali Schir: "We bring them Israel there." Cross border engagement as a case of nationbuilding (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2018); Monday, February 24th, 2020, Steinhardt Museum of Natural History, Tel Aviv University, 12 Klausner Str., Tel Aviv Yaffo**

Cohen, Nir; Faist, Thomas

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Nir Cohen\* and Thomas Faist\*\*

## Book Launch: Z”L Gali Schir:

*“We bring them Israel there.”* Cross border engagement as a case of nationbuilding (Berlin: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2018)

Monday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Steinhardt Museum of Natural History, Tel Aviv University, 12 Klausner Str.,  
Tel Aviv Yaffo

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\* Bar Ilan University, Israel

\*\* Bielefeld University, Faculty of Sociology.  
Comments welcome to: [thomas.faist@uni-bielefeld.de](mailto:thomas.faist@uni-bielefeld.de)

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Bielefeld University  
Faculty of Sociology  
Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development (COMCAD)  
Postfach 100131  
D-33501 Bielefeld  
Homepage: [http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/ag\\_comcad/](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/ag_comcad/)

## 1. Remarks by Professor Nir Cohen

First off all, I want to thank the organizers – Uriah, Ofer, Ben – for inviting me tonight. I really feel honored to be speaking about Gali and her work.

I also want to thank Avi & Nitza, Gali's parents, for their hospitality last night. It has been a pleasure to meet you both and get a sense of the kind of warm and kind environment Gali had been brought up in.

And, Friedrike, whom I just met, I hope that hearing some of the wonderful things that Gali has been engaged with professionally would give you a little bit of strength and comfort. I'm sure you all are very proud of her achievements. And I'm sure your girls will also be, one day...

It must have been 2010 or 2011 when I got an email from Gali. She introduced herself as a PhD student in Bielfield working on state-diaspora relations and had asked me for an e-copy of one of my first research articles.

This was one of the politest emails I have ever received from an Israeli...to this day, probably...and it made me really happy because as some of you know, there are about three people on the average who read a research article in the social sciences. So here I was about to almost double my readership...

I happily sent her the article and we exchanged some emails about our shared research interests. I invited her to keep in touch, but the next time I heard from her was in 2017, when she was assigned as a referee to an article I submitted to a workshop held at Sde Boker. Her comments on my article were right on... She was critical but very gentle. And it was very useful, and helped me rethink some of my arguments. Later at the workshop we've had a chance to catch up a little. We spoke mostly "business" and we agreed to meet when she comes for a homeland visit in Christmas. Possibly to think about ways to collaborate. Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

So, when I got Uriah's email I was very excited, because finally, I was given a chance to read her work, think about it, and even talk about it.

I won't bore you with details, and theories and complex conceptual frameworks, but let me just say that Gali's book is a great contribution to the field of Israeli state-migrants' relations. I

did some work on the topic myself, which the book builds on a little, but she has definitely taken it much further. Just in terms of her methods -- She conducted nearly 40 interviews, analyzed the discourse, attended dozens of relevant events, dug through considerable number of documents and came up with a fascinating thesis about the ways in which Israeli state-sponsored policies impact citizens who live abroad.

Now, we have known for quite some time that the state “narrates” its subjects in the diaspora, it mobilizes them for development projects, to be ambassadors at large, and so on. But what Gali shows in this book so perceptively is that through various programs and initiatives the state also shapes migrants’ identities as national subjects. So, the territorial divide between “us” and “them”, “here” and “there”, citizens in Israel and abroad is bridged, at least in part, through these programs.

But Gali goes one step further and tells us how exactly these programs do that, how they create this sense of Israeli identity, of ‘Israeliness’ (תוֹיִלְאוּת) as her subjects call it. Very strategically, she tells us, the state uses certain language, not just Hebrew itself, but certain idioms, certain ways of phrasing things, to cultivate this sense of Israeliness. Religious affiliation, namely being Jewish, is also very critical for the creation of this kind of shared identity. There is an incredible emphasis placed on Jewish holidays, Jewish customs and tradition. There is also bit of perhaps “moral panic” behind state programs -- though certainly not like in the 1960s and 1970s – about assimilation of Israeli Jews. In this respect the panic motivates the state not to abandon the efforts to return migrants. The whole “before Abba becomes Daddy” horror campaign is just one example Gali brings to show that the state has not entirely given up on repatriation. I called this in one of my articles – *maintain/return policy*.

What’s interesting to me is that if you read the book carefully you find that Gali is in fact quite critical, in subtle ways, of state projects. For example, when she keeps pushing her interviewees to answer the inevitable question – do your programs also “target” Israeli Arabs, for example? So, it’s not a blind acceptance of the official narrative, but a very inquisitive exploration of the process by which states determine who is a worthy diasporic subject? Who is worth reaching out to? And, of course, who isn’t, and why?

So in conclusion let me just say that Gali’s work opens up new avenues of research concerning the dyadic relations between Israel and its citizens abroad. And **I think and hope** that even in her absence, it would inspire a generation of young(er) scholars – sociologists, political scientists, geographers, and anthropologists – to follow in her footsteps and explore these relations in a very critical way.

I suspect that’s what she would have wanted. Thank you!

## 2. Remarks by Professor Thomas Faist<sup>1</sup>

Dear family and friends of Gali, colleagues, and audience:

Let me tell you how honoured I am to be here on this occasion. First, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the organizers: Uriah, Ofer, Ben & all the others who make this happen – certainly also Gali's family.

Gali's book, the book we're helping to launch today although it's been out for a while is indeed a pioneering work. It is the first of its kind to look at the Israeli diaspora abroad – in this case in the US – from the point of view of the emigration state itself.

It is worth to point out that the Israeli diaspora is not just any diaspora. The Israeli diaspora in the United States is a sort of "diaspora within the diaspora," that is, an Israeli diaspora within or next to a Jewish diaspora. The Israeli diaspora is a sort of "incipient diaspora" (Gabriel Sheffer).

Gali's book is an admirable empirical study, not only because of its rich material data base which includes dozens of interviews with policymakers, program administrators and experts. It is more than that: it preys open the black box of the Israeli state in analysing very precisely the various organizations involved, such as the Israeli House and Connecting. These organizations pursue different goals; for example, the Israeli House is much more in advocating return to Israel while Connecting is more focused on maintaining and creating an Israeli identity also among second-generation Israelis living abroad. The results achieved and the questions raised are a veritable treasure box for future research – an invitation to all interested!

The book launch also opens an opportunity for all of us tonight to honour the person behind the book. If I understand correctly, the abbreviation written before Gali's name on the invitation is *zichrona livracha* (Z"l): I think that "May her memory be a blessing" is indeed stimulating and fitting motto for my remarks on the occasion of this book launch. Remembering her to me is a way to express my gratitude for having been able to share some of the journey during the 10 years I worked with her as a supervisor of her dissertation.

First of all, I distinctly remember Gali's and Friederike's hospitality: They had just moved to Bielefeld (of all places!). On this occasion invited all doctoral students at the time, and there

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Eveline Reisenauer for providing all the pictures used in this document.

were quite a few, at least a dozen, to their home. What is memorable is that Gali showed us all the rooms in her home, her abode – quite uncommon by German standards. Such a gesture was not known to the “Bielefelders,” the Bielefeld doctoral student crowd. The “open house” approach, as Friederike calls it, touched me as a gesture of familiarity.



We held regular workshops with all doctoral students at a retreat nearby Bielefeld, an old farmhouse. I remember our times in Vlotho when she was full of energy, positive and a conversation starter. She would be the one person to talk to and engage with ALL members of the Research Class. Gali was always dedicated to her work, always engaged, yes even enthusiastic – these traits characterized all what she touched. What I remember most is her

contagious enthusiasm! If I wanted to bring it down to one world, I'd say: I've rarely seen academic work characterized by so much passion!



I remember, for example, that Gali was quite engaged in talking about her volunteer work at the time. Almost single-handedly, she built a network of the Reform youth movement in Germany. As I recently learned, the network is still operative – what an achievement! In a way, her work for the youth movement on the one hand and her dissertation work on the other hand, fed into each other. To use the words of the sociologist Max Weber, the in Gali's case the two were “elective affinities.” In this case it was the elective affinity of civil society work and research. Gali proved to all of us that the “both ...and” viz. “as well as” is crucial for “a good life.”





A KEY episode – involving an actual key - is an event which usually comes first to my mind when thinking of Gali: During the doctoral workshops in Vlotho, at night, we usually played table tennis.

One night, the key for the refrigerator which held our beverages got lost and entangled in a shaft behind a bench; you can see it on the picture. I vividly remember how Gali was – among all the participants – the most engaged fishing out the key. And she finally succeeded!

“Key” is also an apt metaphor if we want to understand Gali’s book which evolved out of her dissertation: the dedicated and systematic ways which Gali used to fish out and relocate the lost refrigerator key also applies to her dissertation work as well.

Her enthusiasm was an indispensable **key** to opening the **lock** of understanding the Israeli diaspora!

Thinking about our event, one of the foremost questions on my mind has been: What has been the lesson I learned in supervising Gali’s dissertation out of which the book we launch today has evolved?

Again, I would like to start with substantive issues related to the dissertation before moving on to the main lessons. One of the key lessons I learned when working with Gali, and this is one of my very tentative conclusions: diaspora is not only an important part of building new states. But it is also important to maintain national cohesion. More and more states around

the world have begun to reach out to their emigrants living abroad, not treating them as “traitors” or “illoyal citizens” anymore. Instead, states such as Russia, the Philippines, Ghana, India, China and many others have started to see them as assets.



In the case of Israel, as in other cases as well, understanding the diaspora is not simply a case of applying patterns such as black & white anymore, i.e. immigration as *aliyah* (ascent, going uphill to the promised land) and emigration as *yerida* (descent, going downhill in living abroad). This also applies to the view from the state: there are more and more shades of grey.

All of this has been a formidable question to Israeli statecraft – all the more because one of the main goals of the state of Israel has been to serve as a place where all Jews from around the world could or even should gather. Seen in this way, Israel is not only a case among many states which have changed their diaspora engagement policies. It is also a unique case because immigration has been of the highest priority.

Gali conceived of her specific study of the Israeli diaspora as a case of nation-building: We could speak of an emerging horizon of a “global nation.” This is where it gets interesting because Israel has been a global nation from the very beginning in the late 1940s. The goal from the start was the ingathering all Jews into one state. (Keep in mind that the concept of global nation does not necessarily imply cosmopolitan in the sense of boundless solidarity.)

Let me get back to Gali’s book. In the practices of Israeli citizens, especially those living abroad, *aliyah* and *yerida* are not necessarily mutually exclusive strategies anymore, thinking

ahead. Seen in this way, Gali's book poses a fundamental puzzle. We usually think of loyalty to a group or a country as an "either-or" matter. But perhaps, sometimes, there are situations – like the one Gali studied – when some of the emigrants themselves think in terms of "as well as" or "both ... and"! No matter where you stand politically and morally, such a constellation presents a formidable challenge for the emigrants and for statecraft.

This is getting me closer to what I learned from engaging with Gali's dissertation work all these years: Perhaps it is best not to search for a single key or a single straightforward answer or solution to crucial challenges such as the one just sketched.

I would like to use an everyday example to approach the lesson. It is a bit like looking for keys you have misplaced. We all are familiar with the situation when we may need to lock up our office in the afternoon or evening but can't find the keys. You do not remember anymore where you put them in the morning. In situations like that we look in the vicinity where we usually sit, circle around the chair, the desk, etc. – until, at some point, we find the keys.

There seems to be some similarity of this everyday situation with intellectual challenges. And it may apply to the writing of the book we're launching today. When writing an academic book, we often and usually deal with existing literature and studies first, with methods which were used in the past. This also is how Gali started on her quest for understanding changing Israeli diaspora politics and policies. After looking at dozens of studies and methods, do we find the answers we're looking for in a straightforward way? No, not really, at least most of the time because research is a messy process in which we as researchers try out well-known answers and methods – but also new ones we come up with and which fit the case we study.

Still, in the end of a process such as a dissertation, we often find and then add new insights. This is what Gali did. Achieving new insights is a creative process. Yet there is no single key, no single method, and no single solution which guarantees a certain outcome. There may not even be a single lock which needs to be opened! After all, the questions we pose may also change in the process of research; at the very least, the questions get more specific along the way. To live this change and to master it: this is the excitement of all those who engage in social scientific research. All there is is a process of searching – and that orientation toward searching in a passionate way Gali mastered in extraordinary ways.

All in all, I feel privileged to have been a part of Gali's search over the years during her dissertation work. I feel very privileged and I am deeply thankful to have been part of this journey. It is in this spirit in which I think the achievements of the book we're launching today are to be read and understood. And that's also the way in which I want to remember Gali. The

book we're launching today is a testimony that Gali's journey is ongoing. Others now need to take the lead.

"May her memory be a blessing."

Thank you for your attention!