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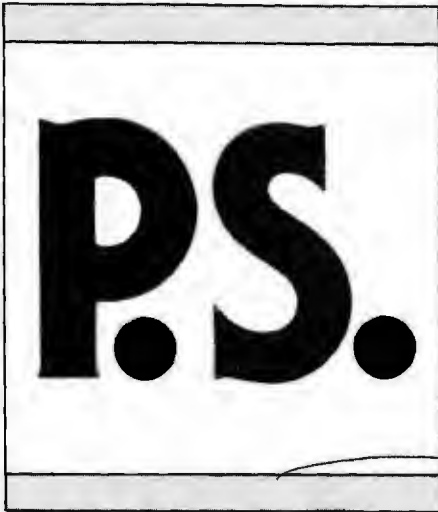
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## THE ETHIOPIAN ALIYA One Compromise Too Many

**T**he detailed report on The Ethiopian Aliya (JO, April '85) concluded with:

"We are dealing with the very grave and imminent possibility of the floodgates of intermarriage being opened in Israel, permitting — even fostering — the marriage of Jews with thousands of others who are found by almost all halachic authorities to be in need of conversion, with the official imprimatur of the State, affecting future generations for all time to come."

At that time, both Chief Rabbis of Israel had concurred that the Ethiopian *olim* should undergo the basic require-

ments of conversion: acceptance of Judaism and *tevilla*; they had dropped the insistence on a symbolic circumcision.

The public protests of *olim* unwilling to undergo conversion, reported then, had since escalated to the point where hundreds of immigrants from all over the country engaged in a month-long sitdown strike in the park opposite Heichal Shlomo, which houses the Chief Rabbinate.

The High Court of Justice issued an order to the Chief Rabbinical Council to show cause as to why the Ethiopians would not be married without *tevilla*

(the immersion ceremony) by a rabbi who agrees to do so, or alternatively, why they should not have their own marriage registrar.

According to an article in *The Jerusalem Post*, the issue threatened to force a show-down between the country's civil and rabbinical courts. A spokesman for the Chief Rabbinate said in response that the council had no intention of answering the High Court's order.

The writer is reminded that the founders of the State met with representatives of Agudath Israel in 1947, and had agreed that matters of religious status should be exclusively in the hands of the rabbinate. This has been under constant challenge and defiance in such areas as common law marriage, conversions, and religious identity, and this episode appears to be one more chapter in this ongoing confrontation.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres had promised the demonstrating Ethiopians — thought to be mostly youths who had grown up in urban centers where they had been subject to Marxist influence — that he would see to it that the rabbis would accommodate them. At first the rabbis held their own, but then, little by little, they retreated. (The rabbis' position was weakened when the former Rishon Letziyon, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, supported by the former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, altered his previous position on the subject after the mass immigration of last

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year, and both accepted the Ethiopian *olim* as Jews without any ritual or procedural requirements.) Rather than require immediate conversion, the Chief Rabbinate offered to defer the matter to each officiating rabbi, to deal with individual Ethiopians at time of their marriage. Those whose lineage was unquestioned would, of course, be married without any requirement of *tevilla*. The demonstrators recognized this proposal as a postponement, not a resolution of the problem, and they summarily rejected it.

### YOM KIPPUR HIGHPOINT

The protests reached their shrillest when some 400 youths convened at the *Kosel Maaravon* Erev Yom Kippur and chanted "The rabbis are racists!" Throughout Yom Kippur they con-

tinued to sit in the park, where they were honored by a visit from Prime Minister Peres. Finally, on Chol Ha-Moed Succos, the demonstrators went home. They achieved their purpose, accepting what they believed to be an oral understanding with the Chief Rabbis that the special *Din* to deal with the Ethiopian Jews in regard to marriage and divorce include rabbis known to consider them full-fledged Jews without need of even *tevilla*. The Chief Rabbinate, on the other hand, claims that it only agreed to a deferral of the decision, and that it made no actual concession in the halachic requirements of *giyur*.

It is interesting to note that in a recent work by David Kessler, *The Falashas, the Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia*, the author pleads for the recognition of the Falashas as Jews at the very same time

that he considers it proven that they are, in their majority, Agau tribes which were converted to a Biblical pre-Rabbinic Judaism [sic] by Jews who reached them via Egypt. He considers them a prime example of the expansion of the Jewish people by absorbing large numbers of non-Jews; and he blames their isolation on their failure to bring their Judaism in line with that of the rest of the world. We do not agree with Kessler's evolutionary interpretation of Judaism; but we should certainly be able to expect him and other scholars who hold such views to appreciate and support the halachic demand for formal conversion. After all, according to these scholars the "Falashas" represent in their majority a group that was never initiated into Torah Judaism.

Failure to insist on such a conversion clearly makes a travesty of the halachic process and a frightening breach in the protecting walls around the sacred lineage of *Klal Yisroel*; and the perceived surrender of the Chief Rabbis on the issue of *giyur* can be interpreted as a further compromise of the integrity of the Office of the Chief Rabbinate.

### A CALL FOR INTEGRITY

The Ponevezher Rosh Hayeshiva, Rabbi Elazar, Schach שליט"א, issued a statement in response to this latest development in the ongoing struggle for the integrity of *halacha* as opposed to accommodating political pressure. We present here a free translation of his remarks:

"All my life I grew up among Sages and *Gedolei HaTorah v'Hayira* and I have never known or heard that in matters of *issur v'hetter* (the permissible and forbidden in Torah Law) there is room for compromise as a result of pressure from people who have a vested interest or from anyone else.

"Laws of *issur v'hetter* are set out in the *Shulchan Aruch* and the whole of *Am Yisroel* (is to) conduct itself according to what is stated in the *Shulchan Aruch*; and no individual Rav or Rabbinate has the right to deviate from it. In this are included the laws of *geirus* which are set out in all their details. There is therefore no greater *Chillul HaShem* than to permit a Rav to do as he wishes and to make it easier without *geirus*. Woe unto us that it has happened in our days that all and sundry are entitled, under pressure, to permit what is forbidden. I ask every Rav to join me in this protest which I consider it my duty to voice in public."

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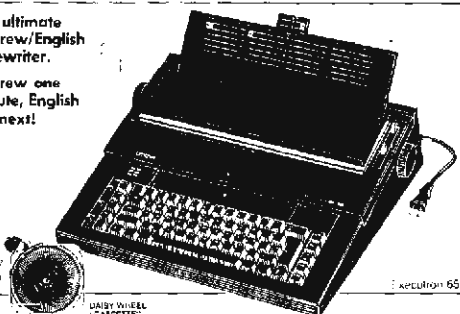
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In October 1984, a diplomat based in Khartoum flew to Geneva, where he met with officials of the Jewish Agency and the Mossad, the famed Israeli intelligence service. One million dollars was placed at the diplomat's disposal. He flew back to Sudan, bought various vehicles, including four large buses, 500 metric tons of fuel at a cost of \$175,000, and rented or purchased safe houses.

On the night of Nov. 21, Operation Moses began. Hundreds of Ethiopian Jews were loaded into the four buses and driven to Khartoum, where they were accommodated in safe houses. The following night they were driven to a Belgian charter plane in the closely-guarded military section of the Khartoum airport. After a two-hour stopover in Brussels for fuel and services, they flew on to Israel.

This remarkable rescue operation continued every night, except the Sabbath, until it was stopped on Jan. 5 with only four more flights scheduled to complete the evacuation of all the Ethiopian Jews in Sudan. Its success depended on complete secrecy. Mossad agents, assisted by the Sudanese secret service, took heroic steps to guard against leaks that occurred elsewhere—in Toronto, New York and Jerusalem.

This is the bare bones of a complex story more thrilling than an Indiana Jones movie and just as full of pitfalls, heroes and villains. A goodly portion, but not the whole story, is told in this slim volume of 140 pages by Tudor Parfitt, an Anglican professor of Hebrew and Jewish studies at London University.

The story begins with the Ethiopian Jews, who somehow preserved their religion and identity through two millennia of wars, persecution and isolation from world Jewry. Their longing for Zion and Jerusalem was as fierce as that of the Jews of Yemen or Kurdistan or any of the other exotic tribes brought home in the first years of the Jewish state.

The Ethiopian Jews were left where they were because Emperor Haile Selassie, an Israeli ally and client, and the Orthodox establishment in Israel were united in their opposition to Ethiopian Jews. When I visited Addis Ababa in the early 1970s, I was told by Ambassador Uri Lubrani that he had instructions not to give visas to Ethiopian Jews.

The situation changed, Parfitt relates, when Menachem Begin became Prime Minister in 1977. Ethiopian Jews "were high on his agenda," an aide to Begin told Parfitt. Israel, at the time, was supplying arms to the revolutionary Ethiopian government, which was fighting Arab-backed rebels in Eritrea, he relates. The first legal aliya from Ethiopia consisted of 121 Jews, who were brought in late 1977 in two Israeli military craft which had delivered arms to Ethiopia. The supply of arms was stopped soon afterwards (though it was renewed much later) and so was Ethiopian aliya.

Parfitt explains how Begin tried diplomatic pressure to get the Ethiopian Jews out without success. By 1979, the year in which Israel accepted 400 Vietnamese boat people who could find no other haven, there were still only 250 Ethiopians in Israel.

Pressure mounted for a more active rescue from the American and Canadian Associations for Ethiopian Jews and from other organizations, including Begin's own Herut Party. At a Herut conference in London in October 1979, an urgent appeal was made for the rescue of Ethiopian Jews.

#### Begin to the Rescue

Begin acted, but he resented inferences by the American Association for Ethiopian Jews that he acted under pressure. His assistants told Parfitt that he had a highly emotional attitude towards the ingathering of Africa's black Jews. He compared it to the rescue of the European survivors of the Holocaust.

In February 1980, Begin entrusted the mission of rescuing Ethiopian Jews to the Mossad. Parfitt writes: "For obvious reasons there are still operational aspects of the Mossad's involvement which can-

Mr. Lurie is former editor of *Hadassah Magazine*.



Vice President George Bush



Ethiopian Jews



## English professor chronicles rescue of Ethiopian Jews

# A New Book of Moses

By Jesse Zel Lurie

not be revealed, and over the last five years there have been many demonstrations of personal valor on the part of the Mossad agents which will have to remain unsung for years to come."

But courage and ingenuity, for which the Mossad is famous, would not have been sufficient. Parfitt reports that it was the United States government that supplied the diplomatic clout and, above all, the funds needed to bribe the Numeiri government in Sudan.

The first American initiative was directed to Egypt's Anwar Sadat, Numeiri's ally, and the second largest recipient, after Israel, of American aid. Parfitt writes:

"Sadat was successful and for some time Numeiri and the upper echelons of his secret service, the *Amnudawla*, who were also involved, were prepared to turn a blind eye to discrete and relatively small-scale operations to remove the Falashas."

Parfitt says little about bribes, but it is well-known that nothing moves in Sudan, or any other Arab country, without *baksheesh*. The new Libyan-backed government in Sudan, which overthrew Numeiri last spring, charges that the head of the secret service received \$2 million from "the Zionists." Parfitt does point out that part of the deal with Sudan's secret service was that it would inherit the million dollars worth of equipment bought to move the Jews after they had all left for Israel.

#### Lavish Baksheesh

Despite the lavish *baksheesh*, there were many obstacles to overcome. The Mossad agents risked life and limb. I have heard of several fantastic stories about their operations, none of which will be found in this book.

Two obstacles Parfitt does mention. One was the dedicated amateurs sent in by the AAEJ. Although their intentions may have been admirable, they simply got in the way, increased the *baksheesh* level of some of the lower level Sudanese and threatened the entire operation by unwanted publicity. I recall receiving a direct mail solicitation from the AAEJ's

Henry Rosenberg, who, the letter announced, was "new in Sudan." The AAEJ was also guilty of placing advertisements in the press accusing Israel of procrastinating in the rescue of Ethiopians while the Mossad was bringing thousands into Israel. I have heard no sign of repentance from the AAEJ leadership.

The second obstacle that Parfitt describes was the difficulty in finding the Jews. There were and are 500,000 Ethiopians in Sudanese camps, refugees from famine and civil war. Among them were a few thousand Jews, many posing as Christians to avoid persecution. And some of the Christians were posing as Jews because word had gotten out that Israel was taking out the Jews while no country was willing to accept the masses of Christians. The Mossad sent in Ethiopian Jews from Israel to identify their brethren. Parfitt writes that at one time there were as many as 80 Ethiopian "spotters" from Israel operating in the Sudan.

By various discreet methods, the Mossad took the Ethiopian Jews out of Sudan. By the beginning of 1984, reports Parfitt, the refugee camps were "clean." There were almost 7,000 Jews in Israel, most of them in Jewish Agency absorption centers.

#### No Secret

There was no secret about their presence in Israel. In the spring of 1984, I joined a press tour of the absorption centers, led by Haim Aharon, head of the Agency's Aliya Department. Stories appeared in all the Israeli press, radio and TV.

Meanwhile an extraordinary thing had occurred. Parfitt relates how word was received in the Ethiopian Jewish villages that their relatives who had earlier braved the perilous routes to Sudan had reached Jerusalem "on the wings of eagles." A mass exodus began and in a few months the Jewish population in the Sudanese camps was larger than ever.

For reasons that Parfitt does not make entirely clear, the conditions in the camps were far worse than before. Food

was scarce, water was contaminated and medical service almost non-existent. The refugees died like flies. Parfitt says that between April and November 1984, almost 2,000 Jews died in one camp, Um Raquba. Parfitt attributes the high death toll to the inability of the camp authorities to cope with the sudden flood of humanity. The Jews were arriving at the rate of 50 a day, but during two days in May, no less than 1,000 Jews crossed the Sudanese border to the camp.

Heroic measures were needed to get the Jews out. The former discreet methods were no longer sufficient. With the cooperation of the Americans, particularly Jerry Weaver at the Khartoum Embassy, Operation Moses was planned.

But Numeiri upped his ante. Sudan was virtually bankrupt. The International Monetary Fund had cut off its credit. The civil war in the South was escalating. "Despite the frailty of his position," writes Parfitt, "Numeiri put up a long, hard fight."

While the Jews were dying, the "difficult negotiations" with Numeiri continued. He finally agreed to a large increase in American aid. Parfitt writes: "According to some reports the operation had to be postponed until the American Congress passed the new allocation in October 1984."

**OPERATION MOSES: The Untold Story of the Secret Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia. By Tudor Parfitt. Stein and Day. \$16.95.**

A Belgian air charter firm, owned by a Jew, was hired, and the operation was on.

Then began the trouble among the Jews that almost ruined it. Parfitt writes:

"On November 15, a few days before the beginning of Operation Moses, the opening plenary session of the Council of Jewish Federations was broken up by 40 Falasha activists led by Simha Jacobovici, who demanded to be allowed to speak. Holding an Ethiopian child in his arms, Jacobovici sat on the floor with his group and demanded one minute's silence for the 2,000 Jews who had died and who could have been saved had Israel wished it. An article by Jacobovici, which appeared in *The New York Times* at about the same time, charged: "Ethiopian Jews die, Israel fiddles." The stupidity of such accusations was soon to bear fruit."

Goaded by the demonstration and many years of false criticism by the AAEJ, Leon Dulzin, chairman of the Jewish Agency, made an almost fatal error. He announced proudly to the council: "One of the ancient tribes of Israel is due to return to its homeland. When the true story of the Jews of Ethiopia is told, we will take pride in what we have already achieved in this most difficult

Please turn to *Moses*, Page 16



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## Moses

continued from Page 15

and complex rescue operation." This public statement—"hopelessly indiscreet" according to Parfitt—was not sufficient for Dulzin. He instructed his New York office to send out his speech to the press. When his press officer objected, Dulzin said that giving out some information was imperative to the UJA campaign. The "fundamental problem," writes Parfitt, was that the UJA had decided to mount a massive campaign for Operation Moses before the end of the tax year while the planes were still flying.

The *Jewish Week* of New York was the first to pick up the story. It was followed by the *Washington Jewish Week* and then *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe* and the other papers. There was an uproar over the break in secrecy, but the Sudanese failed to react and the planes continued to fly out every night.

A few weeks later, the military censor in Israel failed to stop a couple of stories on the airlift and, under pressure from Israel's large press corps, Prime Minister Shimon Peres permitted an official press conference to confirm the story. There is a world of difference between newspaper stories and official statements. This time the Sudanese had to react. The airlift was stopped on Jan. 5 with only four plane loads to go.

The Americans did not give up. Vice-President George Bush went to Khartoum in the first week of March. One hundred million dollars in promised aid had been held back on a technicality. Numeiri was badly in need of money. Bush released some of the suspended aid and Numeiri agreed to further airlift on condition that it be an American operation and not Israeli.

### Operation Sheba

On March 28, six American C-130 transports landed at a deserted air strip near one of the camps. They picked up 481 Jews, which was all that could be found by the Mossad agents. This additional airlift was dubbed Operation Sheba. The AAJE claims credit for involving 100 Senators and the White House in this dramatic rescue.

Thus ended Operation Moses, but the rescue of Ethiopian Jews goes on. There are still 7,000 to 8,000 left in Ethiopia. In Sudan, a few hundred arrived after Operation Sheba. With a Libyan-backed government in power, Sudan is no longer a valid operation for rescuing Jews. Other routes must be found.

Meanwhile the AAJE admits no fault, learning no lesson and continues its carping criticism and misleading advertising for donations. The irony is that with its large mailing list, it could be raising money honestly for the absorption of Ethiopians in Israel. The Jewish Agency provides the basics: shelter, food and instructions. But so much more is needed. Last month, I talked to the representatives of the AAJE in Israel—dedicated, hard-working Ashkenazim devoting their time and talents to bringing the black Jews into modern society. They have asked the AAJE to fund a number of worthwhile projects. Up to the day I left Israel on Nov. 11, approval had not been received. But neither was there rejection, so there is still hope.

The Ethiopian community in Israel faces many problems, not the least of which is the demand by the Chief Rabbinate for symbolic conversion in a mikvah. One problem that they do not face is racial discrimination.

The Ethiopians are strong and resilient. They have gone through living hell to reach the promised land. Thousands died on the tortuous route through rebel territory to Sudan and in the refugee camps. On their lips was the ancient Falasha prayer with which Parfitt ends his book:

*Hear our prayer, God, King of the Universe.*

*When you help your people, Israel, You help all mankind.*

*Have mercy on the city of Jerusalem.*

*Let us enjoy your kingdom.*

*With your chosen people in Israel.*

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Current Status

DATA: Data on the exact number of Jews remaining in Ethiopia since the airlifts of November 1984 - March 1985 are not available. However, most reports seem to corroborate the estimate of approximately 10,000 ~~Jews remaining in Ethiopia~~ although there were recent reports that there may be many more. A survey, based on queries to Ethiopian religious leaders and others now in Israel, is still very much incomplete. Perhaps we will have a better picture when it is concluded. We believe that most Ethiopian Jews live in the Gondar villages and towns.

ALIYAH: Since the airlifts concluded, very, very few Beta Yisrael have crossed the border into the Sudanese refugee camps, and, in general, refugee movement in the area has slowed. The likelihood for the resumption of last year's developments in the near future is bleak. Reports from embassies, from the State Department, from U.S. and foreign media monitoring events overseas, and from travellers, also point to very little movement. The long drawnout trials in Khartoum of the former Sudanese Vice President and other officials in the deposed Nimeiry government accused of involvement in Operation Moses continue. Despite the much-needed U.S. government famine aid, American influence in the Sudan remains tenuous. Soviet, Libyan and ~~other Arab-country~~ influence on the Sudan has grown. There have been several high-level Sudanese visits to Moscow and elsewhere resulting in Soviet military aid, large outright Saudi oil grants, Libyan and other Arab assistance. As the new Sudanese government pursues its complicated policies, Egypt has also sent arms. Nevertheless, it does not seem that we will see the resumption of the Sudan as a route out in the near future.

American relations with the Marxist government of Ethiopia, headed by Col. Haile Merriam Mengistu for almost a decade, have been strained for several years. This strain is still visible despite the massive infusion of assistance during the height of the famine and at present, from both the American voluntary sector as well as from the U.S. government. Except for the very few (close to 200 of recent) allowed to leave for medical reasons, studies, and some, for compassionate reunification of families, in agonizingly slow procedures, emigration from Ethiopia also appears unlikely, but diplomatic initiatives continue.

Although the picture in the Horn appears pessimistic at this time, particularly for the aliyah of Ethiopian Jews, conditions there often change rapidly, and I believe that Israel and World Jewry will respond as rapidly as needed should these changes occur. Everyone, however, must be vigilant in closely monitoring the situation.

THE FAMINE/LIFE IN ETHIOPIA: The effects of the famine have been stemmed over the peak ravages of starvation conditions which all of us remember from the stark, terrible television images of October and November of 1984. Although the famine touched the outer rim of the Gondar area, it did not reach the Jewish

villages in the same scope as in northern Ethiopia. And while the general situation in the country has improved due to the massive responses of several countries, most notably the United States, life in general continues to be grim in Ethiopia, for everyone, including Jews. The Ethiopian government's controversial resettlement programs in the north have not, to the best of our knowledge, affected Jews as a group because the north has never been a densely-populated Jewish area. Appropriate efforts are going forth for the remaining Ethiopian Jews who need help. In the Jewish tradition of concern for feeding the hungry, NJCRAC continues to support efforts in the U.S. Congress to increase various aid programs to Ethiopia and other countries in Africa and elsewhere.

NON-SECTARIAN ASSISTANCE TO ETHIOPIA: A JDC team recently returned from Ethiopia, where they conferred with government officials about medical and agricultural programs. JDC recently turned over a completed medical clinic in the Gondar village of Tedda to the government and began work on a second clinic in Gondar City. Both installations will operate on a non-sectarian basis and serve all Ethiopians in those areas. Another U.S. medical group recently placed a small rotating assistance team in the area. It is hoped that, within this non-sectarian context, these modest beginnings will take hold in the future.

VISITS TO THE VILLAGES: Visits to Jewish villages have essentially been difficult for more than a year. But, for the first time since the last NJCRAC trip (November 1984), which reached five villages and saw the uniquely Ethiopian Jewish festival, the Seggid, a group sponsored by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) in January was able to visit three villages: Walleka, Abba Entonius, and Attege. These are mostly well-tracked villages, and although the visits were less than an hour in each village, it seems the government may now permit more tourism to the area since publicity on the famine may have caused Ethiopia's small tourism to shrink dramatically. It is hoped further trips will come about.

#### Resettlement in Israel

ABSORPTION AND INTEGRATION: Although about 7,000 Ethiopian Jews had already arrived between the end of 1979 and November 1984, that number more than doubled in the short period between November 1984, when Operation Moses began, and March 1985, the concluding American airlifts. And so, it was to be expected that the infusion of such a large group needing so much assistance, and needing it quickly, would severely test the absorption process and Israeli economy. However, the heartwarming response from the people of Israel and the generous and spontaneous American Jewish community response from the Federation and UJA campaigns, together, made a difference. With all the problems of absorbing people from an underdeveloped country, the first year of resettlement went well as thousands of Americans saw this past year when visiting absorption centers during community, UJA and organization missions to Israel.

Even though one reads about occasional negative outbursts, you still generally sense throughout Israel the warm feeling of enthusiasm about Ethiopian Jews coming home, which unfolded at the start of Operation Moses. Israelis generally continue to welcome the Ethiopian Aliyah. This is shown by the very good, high level of volunteers in tutoring, clothing contributions, many special programs for Ethiopian young people conducted by Yeshivot, Army volunteers who teach and lead seminars, weekend retreats, big-brother and big-sister programs for Beta Yisrael orphans, family home-hospitality programs for the Sabbath and holidays, etc., some of which I saw at my daughter's school and other institutions cutting across sectors of Israeli society.

A large job remains to be done. In fact, the job of integration is only at the beginning since many, if not most, Ethiopian Jews in Israel are still in the 30 or so absorption centers throughout the country. They are, as a group, however, making rapid and impressive progress in being absorbed into the high-tech Israeli society. The perennial problem of immigration influxes to Israel is more so with Ethiopian immigration in that everything has to be done all at once, sometimes making for painful choices by government officials as well as by Olim. Here are some interesting preliminary statistics from The Jewish Agency and the Ministry of Absorption:

The population of Ethiopian Olim consists of about 3,800 families and about 2,000 singles. It is a relatively young population. 52% are under 18, and 30% are between the ages of 19 and 34. Thus over 80% are under the age of 34 compared with 63% of the rest of the Jewish population of Israel. Those 45 and above, considered "old" in terms of Ethiopian culture and lifespan, constitute only about 30% of the Ethiopian Jewish emigration. The average family, including singles, numbers 3.9, but almost 30% are single-parent families, and of these, 83% are headed by women. These stunning figures underscore the ordeal of their lives in Africa and the continuing trauma of their torturous route out and the losses suffered as well as the effects on still-separated families.

About 2,000 Ethiopian Jewish youngsters are in youth aliyah villages. A tragically large number of them are orphans or became separated from their families during the perilous trek to Israel. Some 45% of the Ethiopian immigration, about 6,700 people, are between the ages of 3 and 18. These 6,700 youngsters are now part of Israel's formal education system. From a potential work force of approximately 3,400, 1,200-1,500 Ethiopian immigrants are already gainfully employed. About 100 students are in universities; another 100 or so are in pre-college programs.

From these sketchy preliminary figures one can see that despite the difficult economic picture in Israel, enormous efforts have been poured into ensuring a successful absorption and integration into Israeli society for Ethiopian Jews. What is needed for these Olim, as well as for all immigrants, are the funds to ensure vocational training, education and employment, and the special care necessary for this unique group. Considering inflation and the sharp budgetary cuts into so many aspects of Israel's shaky economy, the integration of Ethiopian Jews into Israeli society has been going well --or as well as can be expected.



TENSIONS IN ISRAEL: At the moment, there appear to be deep divisions within the Beta Yisrael community leadership due primarily to the intransigence, or better still, impatience of new, younger leadership groups and the fragmentation of the leadership and influence of the older generations of Kessim, or priests, who held sway in the villages of Ethiopia but whose influence has declined in a free western society so radically different from their matrix. At present, there is only one Ethiopian-born, Amharic-speaking, Israeli-ordained rabbi to serve almost 16,000 Ethiopian Olim. Quick quantum leaps have to be made in this direction of encouraging and training indigenous and religious community leadership. The Israelis have followed the recommendation of initiating seminars to upgrade the younger Kessim --priests-- and Shmuglies --non-priestly religious elders and leaders-- with classes and sessions in the Hebrew language, Jewish history, Bible, and leadership development. This is a vital and good beginning, but the emergence of such trained leaders takes time.

Despite the problems of religious recognition, the tensions one reads about do not seem quite the same when you are in Israel. Face-to-face talks with Olim, citizens and officials who work on the subject daily, lead me believe that there's more reason for optimism about integration than appears on the surface.

Some things will not go away easily. Most observers feel that the issue of full religious recognition of Ethiopian Jews by the Chief Rabbinate will be resolved as it was with other immigrant groups, such as the Bene Israel of India and with the beginning of Soviet immigration. The move from the African condition into the modern western society of Israel; made under very trying circumstances, surely had an effect on this question as well. The Halacha and the Rabbinate are not likely to be changed overnight, and certainly not by confrontation although the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has been impacted by the passion of the Beta Yisrael for Jewish survival and their dream of reaching Jerusalem. Many Olim, however, still refuse to undergo even token immersion procedures of "reunification" or "conversion" before marriage. Recently, however, a few rabbis have begun to perform marriages without these procedures.

It's important to remember that the Rabbinate's requirements apply to their ruling of token immersion procedures that must be taken before a rabbi conducts a marriage ceremony, which is tantamount to a civil marriage in Israel. This is, according to the Rabbinate, so that in the future there will be no doubt about the Jewish background of Ethiopian Olim. Beta Yisrael children born of Jewish mothers in Israel and circumcised according to traditional Jewish practice and law, as other Jewish Israelis, are unquestionably Jewish according to the Rabbinate. Ethiopian Jews, who have suffered for their Jewishness and made it to Israel despite incredible obstacles, only to meet with one more test of their faith --even if they understand it intellectually-- are often left with a deep hurt.

This is a painful dilemma on both sides which will only be overcome by time and good will. Even without this procedure, however, the Beta Yisrael are welcomed, considered to be Jews in all other respects, being granted burial rights, citizenship, medical aid, education, vocational training, housing and old-age assistance, etc.

Role of the State Department

Though the full story has not yet been told, it can be said that we have been very fortunate to have dedicated and highly-skilled personnel in the State Department, and the Congress, who are deeply concerned for the fate of Ethiopian Jews during these critical times. Dr. Princeton Lyman, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, the Ethiopian Country Officers, and the staff at the American Embassy in Ethiopia, have been critical in this regard. Of course, Ambassador Eugene Douglas, the former State Department Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, and his especially sensitive deputy, Richard Krieger, have been of invaluable assistance in the last few years. New people will be filling these positions in the coming months, and we hope that these replacements will be just as concerned as their predecessors. Nevertheless, we continue to work with all of these officials, and will do the same with their successors.

The intense will and desire to bring all Ethiopian Jews home is still felt strongly by the Israeli government and people and by the Jewish community of North America. However, we must also overcome the tragic history of Beta Yisrael's long separation from the Jewish people and their terrible suffering and languishing before their dramatic reunification with us in the last few years. As the State of Israel continues to work toward the total rescue of Ethiopian Jews, so, too, will we in the NJCRAC and our associated bodies continue our commitment to Ethiopian Jews, a good thought as we enter the Passover season.

Chag Sameach v' Kasher.

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