

Ethiopian Jews

Living in the New Homeland

Recap

Because much of the history of Beta Israel (the House of Israel or Ethiopian Jews) has been handed down orally from generation to generation, their origins are sketchy and have not been fully ascertained. The common theories that persist are: the Beta Israel may be the lost Israelite tribe of Dan; they may be descendants of Menelik I, the alleged son of King Solomon and Queen Sheba; they may be descendants of Ethiopian Christians and pagans who converted to Judaism centuries ago; or they may be descendants of Jews who fled to Egypt from Israel after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE, finally settling in Ethiopia. Though these theories are inconclusive, the most important point here is that the *Falashas*,¹ as they have been labeled by their neighbors, have always regarded themselves as Jews and today are widely recognized by Israel and the global Jewish community.

As practitioners of an ancient form of biblical Judaism, Ethiopian Jews are widely believed to be the descendants of one of the 10 tribes of Israel with some scholars connecting them directly to the tribe of Dan. Their holy book, the Orit, is the Torah translated into Ge'ez, an Ethiopian Semitic language.

It is important to note that whether Jewish or Christian, several Ethiopians share the belief that they are descendants of Menelik I. True or false, the fact is that there is evidence of Judaic influence on many aspects of Ethiopian culture. In addition, Ethiopian Christianity has many Hebrew elements while traditions of the Abyssinian Church resemble ancient Judaic practices with rituals like circumcision and the maintenance of certain dietary laws that are similar to those found in the Torah. The notion of Jews settling in Ethiopia is therefore not farfetched. The wife of Moses, one of the leading prophets in Christianity and Judaism, was a Cushite (Nubian). The Cushites occupy parts of modern Sudan and Egypt.

¹ The alien ones or the invaders

Recognizing the Jewish background of the Ethiopian Beta Israel (and to an extent that of the Quarans and the Falash Mura [or Falas Mora]), the Israeli Government with cooperation from the US Government relocated members of the group in their thousands from Ethiopia to Israel between the mid-1980s and the early 1990s. Aside from religious and cultural affinities, another reason for this migration is that Ethiopian Jews are alleged to have a history of persecution and ill-treatment at the hands of neighboring communities and local authorities. This is despite the fact that there are no official reports of their systematic discrimination by the Government of Ethiopia.

Relocation & Assimilation

Ethiopian-Israelis have been compelled to undergo a series of religious and cultural assimilatory measures in their new Israeli homeland. These include a modified conversion ceremony involving immersion in a ritual bath (mikvah)² and, for men, a symbolic re-circumcision,³ though the latter has been waived and is only required when the halakhic⁴ doubt is assessed to be significant. At present, the Chief Rabbinate of Israel requires ritual immersion for Jews of Ethiopian or any other ancestry prior to marriage.

There have been several reports of Ethiopian immigrant Jews dealing with discriminatory practices as they relate to integration, education, housing and employment in Israel. Essentially, while they were considered and called *Falashas* or strangers in their native Ethiopia, many of them feel like strangers in Israel. So, like other groups of immigrant Jews who have made the aliyah⁵ to Israel, the Ethiopian Jews have faced obstacles in their efforts at resettlement. The Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews (IAEJ) was formed in 1993 to tackle this growing crisis. In addition, Ethiopian-Israelis are the beneficiaries of huge and expensive programs initiated by the

² A declaration accepting Rabbinic law

³ This is a symbolic cut to produce a drop of blood instead of complete, standard circumcision.

⁴ This represents the entire body of Jewish law and tradition comprising biblical and oral laws as transcribed in the legal portion of the Talmud, and subsequent legal codes amending or modifying traditional precepts to conform to contemporary conditions. It is therefore the legal part of Talmudic literature that deals with the interpretation of laws on the Hebrew Scriptures.

⁵ Immigration of Jews from the diaspora to the land of Israel.

Israeli government and numerous voluntary organizations to aid their integration into Israeli society.

In all, Ethiopian Jews are gradually becoming a part of mainstream Israeli society in the areas of religious life, military service (with nearly all males doing national service), education and politics. Specific examples of their assimilation and progress follows.

- In 1985 Qes Adana Takuyo immigrated to Israel along with his wife and 11 children, and has argued for the acceptance of the Falash Mura as Jews. His oldest son, Rabbi Josef Adana, who had immigrated earlier, became the first Ethiopian Rabbi.
- After studying in Europe in the 1920s, Yona Bogale returned to Addis Ababa around 1930 where he worked in various administrative and educational capacities for government and the Jewish Agency. Fluent in Hebrew, English, German and Amharic, this author of an early Hebrew-Amharic dictionary left Ethiopia in late 1979 and immigrated to Israel. Bogale was an early proponent of Ethiopian Jews praying in Hebrew instead of Ge'ez. He believed the latter language was no longer appropriate for those seeking to be part of the modern Jewish world. He also felt that Ethiopian Jews should set Hebrew prayers to traditional Jewish melodies.
- Baruch Tegegne, a progeny of Bogale, was a leader in protests on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry in the 1980s and 1990s.
- Rabbi Sharon Shalom is a lecturer in Jewish ritual and tradition at Bar Ilan University in Israel. He is also a counselor for the Ethiopian-Israeli community in the town of Kiryat Gat.
- After going through a grueling experience, including imprisonment in Addis Ababa in the early 1980s, Rabbi Yefet Alemu finally relocated to Israel on an Israeli-organized secret flight. This was with the help of a Jewish Red Cross director. But Alemu became disillusioned with organized Judaism and the Israeli religious establishment's insistence on a conversion ceremony for all Ethiopian Jews. He helped organize an Ethiopian protest vigil opposite the Chief Rabbinate building in Jerusalem. At the vigil, he met students from the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies who were studying to be conservative rabbis and observed that they were without beards and long black coats. Alemu excitedly embraced

the students' pluralistic approach to Judaism. He was later accepted by the Schechter Institute and after six years received a BA, an MA and his rabbinical ordination.

- Mazor Bahaina, a rabbi of an Ethiopian community of 10,000 in Beersheba, studied at Porat Yosef Yeshiva, one of the most prestigious Sephardi yeshivas⁶ in Israel. He has also worked in several socially-oriented positions to support immigrants from Ethiopia. Though Bahaina did not win a seat in the Knesset,⁷ he eventually served in the legislature when a colleague resigned.
- Adisu Massala of the Israeli Labor Party and, later, One Nation Party, is the first Ethiopian-Israeli to have served in the Knesset.
- Esti Mamo is an Ethiopian Jewish model. She is one of the first Ethiopian-Israelis to make it into the entertainment industry and is a budding actress. The first Ethiopian-Israeli model was Mazal Pikado in 1990.
- Avraham Negussie is one of Israel's most prominent Ethiopian activists and a member of the South Wing to Zion, the leading advocate for the continued immigration and better absorption of the Falash Mura into Israeli society. His struggle, with the support of many other Ethiopian-Israelis, has resulted in continued relocation of thousands of Ethiopian Jews from Ethiopia.
- Meskie Shibru-Sivan is an accomplished female Ethiopian-Israeli actress and vocalist, well known in Israel and beyond for acting on theater stages, in television programs and in movies.
- Moses Michael Levy, born Jamal Barrow and better known as Shyne, is a multi-platinum Belizean born rapper whose grandmother is an Ethiopian Jew. During a 10-year prison sentence for attempted murder and reckless endangerment, Levy was offended when a rabbi employed by the New York Department of Corrections did not allow him to attend a service as he questioned the authenticity of Shyne's Jewishness. The rapper thus made the decision to change his name to avert any misunderstanding about his religion and culture.

⁶ Jewish educational institutions that focus on the study of traditional religious texts, primarily the Talmud and Torah. Sephardi refers to the descendants of Jewish settlers.

⁷ Unicameral legislature of Israel

- In 2009, Tzion Shenkor, the highest ranking Ethiopian-Israeli officer in the Israel Defense Forces (with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel), became the first battalion commander of Ethiopian descent.

Essentially, therefore, Ethiopian-Israelis have been increasingly participating in Israeli political, religious and cultural life. The Atid Ekhad Party sees itself as the political representative of the Ethiopian immigrants, though other parties have embraced Ethiopian members. In 2006, Shas, a party representing Haredi Jews of Sephardic and Middle Eastern background, included an Ethiopian rabbi from Beersheba in its list for the Knesset in a conscious attempt to represent diverse geographic and ethnic groups. Shas is not the only party that has attempted to appeal to the Ethiopian vote. Herut and Kadima Parties have also included Ethiopian contestants on their lists.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, also considered the Shas Party's spiritual mentor, enthusiastically embraced Ethiopians when they first began immigrating to Israel in the 1970s. But despite his halakhic ruling, there are those rabbis that still refuse to marry Ethiopians that have not converted in accordance with the official Chief Rabbinate policy. Ethiopians are married without immersion in a ritual bath or, for men, the symbolic re-circumcision only in cities and towns with rabbis that accept Yosef's ruling or the ruling of Rabbi Shlomo Goren.⁸

A museum highlighting the culture and heritage of the Ethiopian Jewish community is to be built in Rehovot and will serve as a research, interpretive, historical and spiritual center. The Jews of Ethiopia have a rich legacy and are the only Jews who strictly, though arguably, preserved their Judaism even while entirely cut off from the Jewish people. The museum will thus present Ethiopian Jewish traditions to Israelis and young Ethiopians who are not familiar with them. Some of the latter are not connected to their ancestral heritage while others sometimes find it hard to settle into the dynamic and unfamiliar life of Israel. The museum, which will include a model Ethiopian village, an herb garden, an artificial stream, an amphitheater and classrooms, will also be a memorial to Ethiopian Jews who died in Sudan on their way to Israel as well as Ethiopian

⁸ Born in Poland, Goren moved with his family to Palestine in 1925. As Israel's Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi he attempted to reconcile religious teaching and technological progress, for which he often clashed with the Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic tradition.

Zionist activists. Rehovot is a befitting location for the museum as the city is home to numerous Ethiopian Jews.

-- Philip U. Effiong

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