

THE ETHIOPIAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE AS BLACKS IN ISRAEL

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Over a 15-year period beginning in the mid-1970s, over 40,000 Ethiopian Jews emigrated from Africa and resettled in Israel. The ingathering of Black Jews to Israel is one of the most unique phenomena of modern day Black history for two reasons; first, the Jews of Ethiopia are the only group of Africans practicing Judaism and second, they are the only group of Africans who have migrated to a predominately White society for religious reasons.

The religious history of Ethiopian Jews traces its beginning back over 2,000 years to the migration of Jews from Egypt during biblical times. Ethiopian Jews believe themselves to be the remnant of the lost tribe of Dan, one of the 10 tribes of Israel captured by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., which later vanished into history (Safran, 1987). Some believe themselves to be the descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (Kessler, 1985).

No one is really sure of their origin; however, they lived in the mountains of Ethiopia, isolated from the Jewish community at large, for over 2,000 years, practicing a traditional form of Judaism (Safran, 1987). When Ethiopian Jews had their first encounter with Europeans, they were surprised to find that there were White Jews, as they believed themselves to be the only Jewish people in the world (Waldman, 1985).

Unlike other Jewish groups, Ethiopians found it difficult to gain recognition for the purpose of returning to Israel until 1973, when Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel Ovadia Yosef officially declared them bona fide members of the Jewish community and thus eligible to return to Israel as citizens under the Law of Return (Goldberg & Kirschenbaum, 1989). Having suffered anti-

Semitism in Ethiopia and always feeling as if they were strangers (Falasha) there, the Jews of Ethiopia, or "Beta Israel" as they prefer being called, were anxious to leave Ethiopia for Jerusalem, which they called the promised land.

The Israel government and the Jewish Agency, a quasi-governmental agency in charge of immigration, attempted to have them brought to Israel but met opposition from the Ethiopian government, which had placed a general ban on emigration of its citizens. A few Jewish Ethiopians managed to escape to Israel through the Sudan, but massive airlifts from refugee camps in the Sudan did not begin until the late 1970s. In the beginning the secret airlifts brought about 8,000 Ethiopians to Israel from the Sudan. Operation Moses in 1984 brought 8,000 more Jews to Israel; by this time immigration was in full swing.

But abruptly the flights were halted when the press made the secret operation public, thus forcing the Sudanese government, which is allied with Arab nations, to stop the airlifts. The airlifts of Ethiopians did not resume again until the fall of the military government of Mengistu Haile Mariam in 1991, after a \$34 million bribe was paid by world Jewry for their release. In addition, the U.S. government promised a peaceful settlement of the conflict with rebel forces in Ethiopia if the Jews were released. Initially Mengistu Mariam had requested arms from Israel in exchange for the Ethiopian Jews, but this was rejected by the Israeli government.

The most recent and perhaps the most dramatic rescue was Operation Solomon, the airlift of more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews from Addis Ababa to Tel Aviv in less than 33 hours in May 1991. Assisted by Israeli soldiers in plain clothing, the staff of the Jewish Agency, the Mossad, and voluntary groups, the Ethiopian Jews were flown out of Ethiopia without even a day's notice to Tel Aviv, Israel. Seats were removed from the airplanes used for this operation, so that as many passengers as possible could be carried. It was a dramatic rescue operation and widely covered by the international press.

In Israel the newly arrived Ethiopian immigrants have been placed in temporary housing, either hotels, caravans (mobile homes), or absorption centers. They are given an allowance by the Jewish Agency and are expected to learn to speak Hebrew at the Ulpan (Hebrew language classes). Veteran Ethiopian immigrants,

who arrived with the first airlifts, live in the community and are either working, attending school, or serving in the military.

The crucial questions are whether race has affected the lives of Ethiopian immigrants in Israel and if so in what ways? Will racism and discrimination be a dominant feature of their life in Israel as it has been for African Americans and South African Blacks? Does inclusion in a group based on religious affiliation, most particularly an oppressed group such as the Jewish people of the diaspora, minimize the impact of color as a negative factor in social acceptance and mobility? And finally, does being Jewish supersede any other factor in the evaluation of a person's worth in Israel. This article will address these issues in regard to the Ethiopian Jewish experience in Israel.

METHOD

THE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

Although there have been studies of the Ethiopian Jews by Israeli and American scholars and journalists, I bring a new approach to the subject—the Afrocentric perspective. The Afrocentric perspective was introduced by an African American scholar, Molefi Asante; it means to emphasize the customs of African culture and how they have penetrated the history, culture, and behavior of Blacks around the world (Schafer, 1990). This perspective means that the Ethiopian immigrants were studied through their own eyes, and that their interpretations of experiences in Israel formed the focal point of the study. In addition to this perspective, I bring to bear on the topic years of living in a similar situation (i.e., Black in a predominately White society) in the United States and the experience of having lived and worked in Africa.

THE SAMPLE

This is an exploratory study using both quantitative and qualitative methodology. A total of 72 Ethiopian immigrants were inter-

viewed, 43 of whom were newcomer Ethiopians (*olim*), with a mean of 9.4 months in Israel. Twenty-nine veteran Ethiopians (*vatikim*) were interviewed with a mean of 7.3 years in Israel. The interviews took place from June to August 1992.

The *olim* were randomly selected from the residents of two absorption centers: the Shalom Hotel, Jerusalem, and the Hulda caravan. A convenient sample of *vatikim* living in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv were interviewed. They were located in public accommodations, clubs, schools, and at their workplaces through word of mouth. Some of the respondents were nursing students at a Jerusalem hospital. A few were employees of the Jewish Agency and worked at the absorption centers.

Thirty-item questionnaires were administered personally to both *vatikim* and *olim* respondents. Although many of the questions were identical, some items were specifically designed to be answered by *vatikim* only. The questionnaires were designed to elicit information on many aspects of the immigrants' life experience in Israel. A number of questions pertained to their experiences with racism and discrimination since arrival. Because the *olim* were extremely new in the country and had had limited contact with the Israeli population, most questions of this nature were directed to *vatikim* respondents.

In addition to the structured interviews with Ethiopians, informal interviews were held with government officials, Jewish Agency officials (social workers), and members of voluntary organizations working with Ethiopian Jewish immigration. The researcher also networked with members of the Ethiopian/Israeli communities, attending social clubs, caravans, and public events where they congregate. This information was recorded in a field book.

FINDINGS

RACISM, DISCRIMINATION, AND THE ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANTS

Ethiopian immigrants were asked about their experience as Blacks in Israel and how this had affected their lives. The veteran

Ethiopian Jews were asked if they had experienced discrimination in a number of settings, such as housing, schools, the military, shops, and social events. As seen in Table 1, few immigrants reported overt discrimination.

The data suggest that discrimination on the basis of skin color is not a problem in Israel. Forms of discrimination based on other factors do exist. In the area of housing, for example, there are problems; occasionally reports of Israeli tenants objecting to the presence of Ethiopian immigrant neighbors are published in newspapers. A recent article in *The Jerusalem Post* reported that dozens of angry residents of a new neighborhood in Afula demonstrated against both the influx of immigrants from Ethiopia and low-income families. Renting to new immigrants and low-income families would turn the area into a slum, they charged ("Upper Afula," 1992). The residents maintained that their protest was not racist, but based on economic considerations. Protests were not held against Soviet immigrants who live there.

It also should be noted that there are virtually no Ethiopian residents of Jerusalem, the capital of Israel and a religious mecca for people from all over the world; as has been the practice with earlier immigrant groups, most Ethiopian families have been placed by the Jewish Agency in development towns, smaller cities, and rural areas.

Although Ethiopian immigrants did not report many cases of discrimination based on color, they did believe that some Israelis held prejudicial attitudes toward them because of their African background. When asked if coming from Africa had any effect on their lives in Israel, 61.1% of the veterans answered in the affirmative. When asked how it affected them, 27.6% said they were perceived as being backward and uneducated, whereas 24.1% saw their "black skin" as problematic, and 10.3% gave other reasons, such as, "We are treated better," "I cannot reach my goals," and so on (see Table 2).

The data show that only a few respondents thought that society viewed their culture positively. Some Ethiopians (24.1%) thought their skin color was another obstacle to tackle in the process of assimilation. The transition from a Black society in Ethiopia to a

TABLE 1
Vatikim Opinion of Discrimination

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Percentage</i> (<i>n = 29</i>)		
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No Response</i>
Schools	24.1	37.9	38.0
Military	20.7	34.5	44.8
Public accommodations	13.8	37.9	48.3
Social events	13.8	27.6	58.6
Housing	31.0	37.9	31.1
Other	10.3	13.8	75.9

TABLE 2
Vatikim Perceptions of the Effects of Coming From Africa

<i>Effect</i>	<i>Percentage</i> (<i>n = 29</i>)
Perceived as backward	27.6
Black skin is a problem	24.1
Other effects	10.3
No response	38.0
Total	100.00

White society in Israel may have had a traumatic effect on the Ethiopians' self-image, as many of them realized only recently that there are White Jews.

Ethnocentric attitudes held by some Israelis were exacerbated by the vast amount of publicity surrounding the airlift of Ethiopian Jews. The image portrayed by the international media was of villagers rescued from Third World backwardness by their Jewish brethren and plummeted into the modern world (Hull, 1991). An Ethiopian soldier's remarks best illustrate this:

Israeli is modern, so the Israelis treat you as if you came from the jungle; it upsets me. . . . I date Israeli girls sometimes, and people around hurt me by commenting regarding my origin. I don't let them know that I am hurt.

Another soldier complained that Ethiopian and Soviet soldiers were separated from others. He said, "I feel bad because I like them (Israelis)." Ethiopian immigrants who are highly educated and had professional jobs in Ethiopia were particularly resentful of stereotypical images. Ethnocentrism rather than racism appears to be a problem for Ethiopian immigrants in Israel.

ISRAELI AND ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANT SOCIAL INTERACTION

A measure of the level of acceptance of Ethiopians in Israel was an examination of their interactions with Israelis. When vatikim were asked if they had any non-Ethiopian friends, 72% answered in the affirmative; however, when asked how many, most vatikim reported that they had less than five non-Ethiopian friends. Further questioning determined that most of the non-Ethiopian friends were Sephardic Jews from Morocco, Yemen, and Iraq and friends from other African countries. Few mentioned Ashkenazic friends of European origin.

When vatikim were asked about the perceptions held by Israelis toward Ethiopians, 41.4% believed they were viewed favorably and 34.5% believed they were viewed negatively, whereas 13.8% believed that Israelis had no strong feelings either way (see Table 3).

When the question was reversed, as seen in Table 4, the majority of the vatikim (51.7%) saw Israelis in a favorable light, and 13.8% had no strong feelings, whereas 3.4% viewed Israelis negatively.

The data show that vatikim Ethiopians perceived themselves as having a slightly more favorable opinion of Israelis than vice versa. A newcomer summed it up best when he said, "Everybody has a different character, so there are some people who help us as sisters and brothers, and some who do not."

ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER IMMIGRANT GROUPS

The questionnaire did not include questions regarding Ethiopian relationships with other immigrants, but informal interviews with

TABLE 3
Ethiopian Immigrants' Views
of the Perceptions Held by Israelis Toward Them

<i>Perception</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	
	<i>Olim</i> (n = 43)	<i>Vatikim</i> (n = 29)
Viewed favorably	34.9	41.4
Viewed negatively	9.3	34.5
No strong feelings	14.0	13.8
Other	4.6	0.0
No response	37.2	10.3
Total	100.00	100.00

TABLE 4
Vatikim Perceptions of Israelis

<i>Perception</i>	<i>Percentage</i> (n = 29)
Viewed favorably	51.7
Viewed negatively	3.4
No strong feelings	13.8
No response	31.1
Total	100.0

Jewish Agency officials and Ethiopian immigrants gave interesting insights into this aspect of absorption. What happens when two groups of immigrants find themselves competing for scarce resources? How do different immigrant groups interact as they experience the problems of adjusting to a new life?

A Jewish Agency employee reported that Soviet immigrants often objected to the presence of Ethiopians in Israel on the grounds that they "carry diseases" and are "primitive"; some Israelis suggest that Ethiopians are AIDS-infected. Most certainly the health status of Ethiopian immigrants was affected by inadequate health facilities, drought, and famine in Ethiopia. Some Ethiopian immigrants arrived in poor health, a result of malaria, intestinal parasites, tuberculosis, syphilis, Hepatitis B, and so on, conditions associated with low-economic status and a tropical climate. Some were under-

weight in comparison to the norm for Israelis (American Association of Ethiopian Jews, 1991).

Ethiopian olim, however, posed no treat to other immigrants, as within a week of arrival, complete medical exams and any needed immunizations were given. According to a report of the American Association of Ethiopian Jews (1991), "the seriously ill were sent to hospitals, and treatment was started for those who needed it" (p. 17). Furthermore, the insular nature of the Ethiopian Jewish community protected it from interaction with other groups in Ethiopia; therefore, there have been few reported cases of HIV positive or AIDS carriers among Ethiopian olim. Most cases of AIDS were acquired in Addis Ababa while Ethiopian Jews awaited transportation to Israel. In fact, Israel has a very low rate of AIDS infection when compared to other countries. The greatest at-risk groups probably are gay males and intravenous drug addicts, not Ethiopians.

Soviet immigrants also complained that Ethiopians were given more in term of material goods. This is true, because many items were donated specifically to Ethiopians, who had fewer material possessions than other immigrant groups. According to Jewish officials, the government wanted to give the Ethiopians a good start in Israel, so they provided them with more services than the Soviets, who have high levels of education.

On August 26, 1991, the tensions between Ethiopians and Soviet immigrants rose so high that a brawl erupted at the Jerusalem Diplomat Hotel and four people were injured. According to the Ethiopians, Soviet olim did not want to occupy the same elevator with them. The Ethiopian olim were told not to get on the elevator by the Soviets. If Soviets were the first to enter, Ethiopians were forced to wait until the elevator returned empty. Understandably, the Ethiopian immigrants objected to this form of discrimination, and struggles over the elevators erupted into a free-for-all fist fight in the lobby of the hotel. The incident was reported by the media the following day. A month later, the Ethiopians were moved out of the Diplomat Hotel to absorption centers around the country.

Social workers at a mixed Soviet/Ethiopian caravan reported that some Soviet Jews refused to send their children to the same nursery

school with Ethiopian preschoolers. The government, however, did not succumb to pressure from the Soviet immigrants to establish a separate school; they left them to decide for themselves if they wanted preschool education in an integrated setting or not at all. Many of the Soviet families opted later to allow their children to attend the integrated school.

ISRAELIS AND THE SEPHARDIC JEWS

When discussing Israeli and Ethiopian social interaction, it is helpful to look at the experiences of other groups who immigrated to Israel in similar circumstances. The Sephardic Jewish experience in Israel has been one of a struggle to maintain identity, and thus self-respect, under tremendous pressures brought on by the controlling European elite (Ashkenazim). Absorption in this context meant Europeanization, and the Arabic-like culture of the Sephardic Jew was considered inferior.

Elazar (1989), in his book, *The Other Jew*, tells of some of the experiences of dark-skinned Yemenite Jews. They were airlifted to Israel for a brief period in the 1950s, newborns and young children were removed from their parents and sent off to live with Ashkenazic families, who, it was believed, would help the children overcome their "backwardness." In 1985, 35 years later, an investigation was held and apologies made, but the damage had been done; the children were lost to their parents forever.

Other examples cited by Elazar (1989) involved Sephardic children leaving school after the seventh grade to work as farm laborers and Iraqi Jews being forced to live in tents so that Romanian Jewish immigrants could take over the permanent buildings. The assumption was that Jews from Arab lands were used to living in tents, whereas immigrants from Europe were not. The lesson learned from the Sephardic Jews is that Ethnocentrism among government officials and the Israeli community is a serious problem. The mistakes of the past should not be repeated with Ethiopians. Immigrants should be allowed to reach an adjustment consistent with their cultural background yet functional in terms of the society at large.

DISCUSSION

Overt racism as exhibited in many countries with large Black populations doesn't appear to exist in Israel. Ethiopian immigrants reported very little discrimination based on skin color, although there have been some problems with housing. Prejudice in the form of ethnocentrism is more problematic, as Ethiopians feel that Israelis hold stereotypical ideas about them based on their African origin. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's culture is superior to another culture. European culture is the norm in Israel.

Lack of social intimacy with Israelis was common. Ethiopians reported having few friends outside their own group. Despite their lack of social interaction with Israelis, Ethiopians held favorable opinions of them; yet, they did not believe that Israelis felt the same toward them. Many of the *vatikim* thought they were being perceived as backward and primitive by the public.

The most hostile element in Israeli society appears to be the Soviet Jewish immigrants, many of whom resent the Ethiopian presence in Israel. They are in keen competition with Ethiopians for housing, jobs, and scarce resources.

Despite this, Ethiopian Jews have not been subjected to legalized segregation in Israel as were African Americans in the United States. This is probably because Ethiopians were voluntarily brought to Israel as part of a religious group that has also suffered discrimination and persecution. Unlike African Americans, who came to the United States involuntarily as slaves, Ethiopian Jews do not have to fight for basic rights such as citizenship, the vote, and equal opportunity for employment.

Yet only time will tell if the early acquisition of these fundamental rights in the absence of blatant racial discrimination will make a difference in the lives of Ethiopians in Israel—particularly in light of the fact that the economic resources of Ethiopian Jews are extremely limited. The early experience of Ethiopian Jews has been that skin color in Israel is not as important as religious and ethnic identity. The struggle to firmly establish their identity as Jews may be a better indication of a successful adjustment to Israeli society than race.

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