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ON THE WINGS OF EAGLES:  
A HISTORY AND ANALYSIS OF  
THE MOVEMENT TO RESCUE ETHIOPIAN JEWRY  
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by  
Jeffrey A. Kaye

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## DIGEST

Over the past fifteen years, the remnant of the community of Jews in Ethiopia known as the "Beta Yisrael" have been brought to Israel. The over 50,000 Ethiopian Jews which reside in the Jewish State today made aliyah via massive and expedient rescue operations, smaller scale and long-term rescue exoduses, and individual initiatives. Beta Yisrael have been saved from the deserts of the Sudan, the Ethiopian capital city of Addis Ababa, Kenya and sea ports on the Red Sea. The community has reached the Jewish State by buses, land rovers, airplanes and marine craft. However, these dramatic events did not materialize magically over-night. Moreover, the Ethiopian aliyah did not result by the initiative of the Israeli Government alone.

This thesis presents a history and analysis of the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry. Following a discussion of the origins of the Beta Yisrael and the efforts of Joseph Halevy, Jacques Faitlovitch, and the American Pro-Falasha Committee, it analyzes the cycles of activity and inactivity by Israel and world Jewry on behalf of the Beta Yisrael, the efforts of the White House, State Department and Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, and the North American Pro-Beta Yisrael activist organizations. These organizations include The American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ), The Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ), The North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), and The American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ).

Additionally, the interplay between the North American activist organizations, the established American Jewish community, the various Israeli Governmental agencies, U.S. officials, the Ethiopian Government, and the Beta

Yisrael community is discussed. Significant attention is devoted to the proliferation and activities of the North American activist groups, Operations Moses and Joshua, the period of Family Reunification between 1985 and 1991, the exodus from Gondar to Addis Ababa, Operation Solomon, and the follow-up rescue operations to May of 1991.

## DEDICATION

To the Jews of Ethiopia, the Beta Yisrael, who have lived and died as Jews in the Horn of Africa for centuries.

To those Beta Yisrael who made it to Eretz Yisrael and to their family members who perished in Ethiopia and the Sudan trying to reach the Promised Land.

To Asress, Edna, Elana, Gedon, Malka, Moshe and Ora, our dearest friends, who are all trying to make a new life in the Jewish State.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Heartfelt thanks to Dr. Michael A. Meyer for his endless time, energy and patience. His direction and guidance were invaluable.

To Rhonda, my beloved wife, and the family she has given me, many thanks are in order for the numerous hours of proof reading and editing. She is my strength, my best friend and the love of my life. Ilan Yonatan, our bright-eyed three-year-old, has been patient and understanding. I still can hear his sweet voice ask, "Abba, are you working on your thesis?" The creation, birth and early months of Doniel Gershon framed the span of the thesis. Thoughts of him inside and outside the womb gave me that extra push. He was a wonderful focus and "reality check" during a lengthy process.

I feel truly blessed to have the love, care and support of my family over the years. My parents always encouraged me to pursue my dreams, and my three older brothers and their families have been a true source of inspiration. In a family full of physicians, I was not made to feel like "the black sheep of the family" because I did not pursue medicine. I have been told, "while we are healing the body, you are healing the soul."

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## PREFACE

As you preserve us through the whole night and made us attain the light of day, preserve us, O Lord, in salvation and peace. Remember, O Lord, the prayer of each of them: preserve their women; help their children; cleanse the unclean; deliver the broken; gather the dispersed.<sup>1</sup>

To gather the dispersed, that is the focus of this Ethiopian Jewish prayer which has reverberated in the hearts and minds of the Jews of Ethiopia for centuries. During the decade of the 1980s and early 1990s, the dream of Zion became magnified and the fervency of the prayer more intense as the community was divided between new immigrants in Israel and their family members stranded and languishing in Ethiopia.

Between the tenth and seventeenth centuries, over one million Jews lived in Ethiopia. By the early 1800s, this community, which calls itself the "Beta Yisrael," still numbered 250,000, but by the middle of the twentieth century, the so-called "Falashas" had dwindled to only 50,000. For centuries, forced conversions, persecution and expropriation of land by Christian and Islamic neighbors, disease and famine plagued and indelibly altered this proud and devout community.

In 1984 and 1985, world Jewry became widely acquainted with the Jews of Ethiopia after the secret "Operations Moses and Joshua" airlifted thousands of the Beta Yisrael from refugee camps in the Sudan to Israel. Yet, until public disclosure of these operations, few people knew of this isolated community, which for centuries has continued to uphold ancient Jewish traditions, while living in such total isolation that they believed themselves to be the last bastion of Jewish presence in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Wolf Leslau, A Falasha Anthology, Translated from Ethiopic Sources (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1979).

The Beta Yisrael was not totally isolated from the rest of world Jewry for all of its 2000-3000 year history until contacts and rescue efforts were initiated a few years ago. Jewish travelers, scholars and legalists have intermittently come into contact with the Beta Yisrael. A few concerned "Westerners" have dedicated their lives to ameliorating the plight of the Beta Yisrael. "Pro-Falasha" support committees sprang up in Europe and the United States. Yet, no concerted and/or unified effort was launched to save Ethiopian Jewry during the first two thirds of this century. It was not until the last third of the twentieth century that a movement began to organize for the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry.

This thesis will analyze the history of the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry. Following a discussion of the origins of the Beta Yisrael and the efforts of Joseph Halevy, Jacques Faitlovitch, and the American Pro-Falasha Committee, it will analyze the cycles of activity and inactivity by Israel and world Jewry on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, the efforts of the White House, State Department and Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, and the North American Pro-Beta Yisrael activist organizations. These organizations include The American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ), The Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ), The North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), and The American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ).

Additionally, the interplay between the North American activist organizations, the established American Jewish community, the various Israeli Governmental agencies, U.S. officials, the Ethiopian Government, and the Beta Yisrael community will be discussed. Significant attention will be devoted to the proliferation and activities of the North American activist groups, Operations Moses and Joshua, the period of Family Reunification between 1985 and 1991, the exodus from Gondar to Addis Ababa, Operation Solomon, and the follow-up rescue operations to May of 1991.

While numerous works treat the history and culture of the Ethiopian Jews, Operations Moses and Joshua, and the absorption process of the Beta Yisrael into Israeli society, apparently no work analyzes the different actors and influences affecting the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry in its totality, and presents a synthetic view. The thesis is both vertical and horizontal in nature. The chronological approach to the material is integrated with a synthesis of the organizational, Governmental and Beta Yisrael community activities within each time period.

Among the questions this thesis will address during each chronological period under discussion are: What conditions and influences led to the push to save Ethiopian Jewry? What transpired between the 1800s/early 1900s and the last third of the twentieth century to create an environment conducive to rescuing Ethiopian Jewry? How have the governmental and organizational agencies and groups facilitated the rescue effort, and how have they interacted with each other? How have individual personalities affected the rescue effort and influenced the various agencies and organizations? To what extent were the relevant organizations and governmental agencies in agreement and/or conflict over planning, tactics, and ideology? How have the American, Israeli, and Ethiopian Governments interacted? How have the various governmental agencies within each country interacted (i.e. the State Department, White House and Congress in the U.S.; the Jewish Agency, Joint Distribution Committee and the Knesset in Israel; and the various governmental factions, regional leaders, and diplomatic officials in Ethiopia)? To what extent have the means and goals of the U.S. and Israel dovetailed vis-a-vis Ethiopian Jewry? How has the Ethiopian Jewish community, in Ethiopia and in Israel, influenced rescue planning, timing, tactics and ideology? And, how has the fact that the Jews of Ethiopia, having almost unilaterally chosen to live in Israel, affected the speed and fervor of the rescue effort?

Research utilized numerous primary and secondary sources, as well as extensive archival work and personal interviews. In addition to telephone interviews between

Ohio and California, Florida and Illinois, I obtained material by mail from the files of former ARNEJ Executive Director Jane Fellman and the AAEJ's second president, Professor Howard Lenhoff. I conducted research at the American Jewish Archives on the campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Cincinnati and the library of HUC-JIR in Cincinnati. Moreover, two major research trips were conducted. Five days were spent in Princeton, New Jersey and Washington, D.C., in May of 1992, interviewing personalities in the Beta Yisrael activist movement, the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, the State Department, the AAEJ and NACOEJ; and conducting research in the files of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews and the Religious Action Center of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. I conducted interviews in the Department of State, in front of the Library of Congress, in the consultation room next to the floor of the House of Representatives and following congressional officials between meetings and votes on the House floor. I was most impressed with the accessibility of U.S. State Department and Congressional officials, and their willingness to provide interviews and information.

In June of 1992, I traveled to New York for five days and interviewed personalities in the AAEJ, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC), NACOEJ, and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC); and conducted research in the files of NACOEJ and the archives of the AJJDC.

Unfortunately, I encountered resistance when attempting to plan interviews and research with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), Almaya (a JDC/Jewish Agency subsidiary), and Jewish Agency personalities, as well as some established American Jewish organizations. This thesis reflects these voids, and relies on interviews, secondary sources and archival work elsewhere to fill-in the gaps.

During the encounters in New York and Washington, D.C., I met with the founders of the AAEJ, NACOEJ, and the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry;

Congressional officials, legislative aides and various officials in the State Department; a number of the rescue coordinators for the North American activist organizations; the executive directors of the AAEJ, NACOEJ and ARNEJ; and the three presidents of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews. Additionally, I attended a reception screening a new video and book on Ethiopian Jewry, Surviving Salvation, and honoring major participants in Operation Solomon.

The interviews and archival work were essential in structuring this endeavor on the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry. At the same time, the most important impetus sparking the initiative behind this thesis is the friendships created with numerous Ethiopian Israelis and their families in Ethiopia. Since 1985, my wife Rhonda and I have traveled to Israel on three occasions and lived in the Jewish State for two years. We established lasting relationships with olim from Ethiopia. These interactions provided the inspiration, motivation and love, as well as the initial information for, this thesis. I thought I knew a lot about the Ethiopian Jewish community and had great respect for its members before commencing my research. But my love and admiration for the Beta Yisrael, this unique and special branch of the Jewish people, multiplied with each passing day, the reading of an article or book, doing archival research, conducting an interview, or writing of a section of a chapter.

Our generation is privileged to have witnessed the return to Jerusalem and Zion of the Jews of Ethiopia. The Jews of Ethiopia themselves, as well as countless thousands, have helped to realize this eternal dream of aliyah and the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry. The words of an ancient Beta Yisrael prayer reverberate in the community's collective mind as well as the hearts of all who have worked toward their exodus and aliyah:



Do not separate me, O Lord,  
From the chosen,  
From the joy,  
From the light, From the splendor,  
Let me see, O Lord,  
The light of Israel...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 126.

CHAPTER ONE:  
THE ORIGINS OF THE BETA YISRAEL AND  
CONTACTS WITH ETHIOPIAN JEWRY UP TO  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

By the end of 1992, over fifty thousand Ethiopian Jews lived in Israel. These members of the Beta Yisrael<sup>1</sup> arrived to the Jewish State over a twenty year period and through various means: as individuals and in small groups during the 1970s and 1980s through their own efforts or aided by individuals and North American Pro-Beta Yisrael activist organizations; via small scale exoduses orchestrated by Israel, over land, air and sea during the decade of the 1980s; and through the massive airlifts of Operations Moses and Joshua in 1984 and 1985 and Operation Solomon in 1991. However, while the exodus of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel and the dramatic events of the past twenty years are the culmination of Beta Yisrael history, they only represent the latest chapter in a two to three milenia old saga. Jews have lived in the Horn of Africa for at least the past fifteen hundred years, and perhaps as long as thirty-three hundred years.<sup>2</sup> Yet, until public disclosure of these exoduses, rescues and operations, few people knew of this isolated community, which for centuries had continued to uphold the ancient Jewish traditions, while living in such total isolation that they believed themselves to be the last bastion of Jewish presence in the world.

The Beta Yisrael were not totally isolated from the rest of world Jewry for all of their history until rescue efforts were initiated around fifteen years

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<sup>1</sup> "Beta Yisrael" or "House of Israel" is the term Ethiopian Jews use to refer to their community.

<sup>2</sup> Even Hebrew University Professor Steven Kaplan, who gives the latest dating for the "coalescence" of the Beta Yisrael during the Middle Ages, notes that Jews have lived in Ethiopia since the first of second century of the common era. For more on his theories as detailed in his book The Beta Yisrael (Falasha) in Ethiopia, see later in this chapter.



ago. Contacts between Eretz Yisrael, Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula with the Horn of Africa have been abundant over the centuries. Moreover, from the ninth century, when the Jewish traveler Eldad Ha-Dani journeyed to Ethiopia, and the sixteenth century, when the chief rabbis of Egypt Radbaz and then Castro, validated the authenticity of Ethiopian Jewry, Jewish travelers, scholars and legalists have intermittently come into contact with the Beta Yisrael. Yet, more recently, a nearly two hundred and fifty year hiatus preceded the "modern" rediscovery of Ethiopian Jewry by Christian missionaries during the end of the 1700s. Then, in the 1860s, Professor Joseph Halevy traveled from France to Ethiopia in order to counter the Christian missionary efforts to convert the surviving Jews of Abyssinia.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Professor Jacques Faitlovitch continued Halevy's work of saving Ethiopian Jewry from forced conversion, educating the community and publicizing their desperate condition to the world Jewish community. Spurred by the efforts of Halevy and Faitlovitch, "Pro-Falasha"<sup>3</sup> committees" sprang up in Europe and North America.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, letters and other material, written by the leading halakhic authorities of the second half of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, encouraged the Ethiopian Jews to remain loyal to their faith and also called upon the Jews of the Diaspora to aid the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia with financial assistance.

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<sup>3</sup> "Falasha" is a non-Jewish derogatory name for the Jews of Ethiopia, meaning "stranger" or "homeless/landless one". Throughout this thesis, Ethiopian Jews or Beta Yisrael will be used by the author to refer to the Jews of Ethiopia. However, the term "Falasha" will be utilized when referring to the name of certain rescue movements, or to reflect the terminology employed by a certain time period, personality or group. This usage is by no means meant to degrade the Jews of Ethiopia or to utilize a pejorative term; but rather, it is intended to aid the understanding of the reader in discerning the awareness, progress and development of the rescue movement of Ethiopian Jewry.

<sup>4</sup> The next chapter will detail the activities of Faitlovitch and the American Pro-Falasha Committee.

Thus, in order to more fully grasp the inception and developments of the Ethiopian Jewry rescue movement, it is necessary to sketch the presumed origins of Ethiopian Jewry as well as contacts and communication with this unique community over the centuries. By surmising when the Beta Yisrael coalesced and how frequently or infrequently world Jewry interacted with the Jews of Abyssinia, important implications regarding the rescue movement of Ethiopian Jewry can be ascertained.

Two further notes. First, because no one knows exactly when Jewish life began in Ethiopia, the line between the origins of Ethiopian Jewry and the first contacts with the Beta Yisrael by world Jewry is obscured. Thus, this chapter will detail the varied theories as to the origins of the Beta Yisrael, examining both the presumed roots of this community and the first series of contacts and intermittent rediscoveries of Ethiopian Jewry. Second, the contacts of non-Ethiopian Jewry with the Beta Yisrael up to the beginning of the twentieth century are detailed from travel logs of Jewish journeymen and the halakhic responsa of rabbinical authorities.

## DIFFERING THEORIES ON THE ORIGINS OF THE BETA YISRAEL

### I

The tradition which accounts for the earliest dating of Israelite/Jewish presence in Ethiopia places it around 1275 BCE. According to this tradition, during the Exodus from Egypt, thousands of Jews did not manage to cross the parted waters of the Red Sea in time. They drifted down the shore of the Red Sea until they reached the Abyssinian mountains, thereby establishing an Israelite/Jewish population in the region of Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup>

However, the question is raised as to how could the practices of Ethiopian Jews resemble pre-Talmudic Judaism in Palestine if they separated during the exodus from Egypt. The patterns of Sabbath observance, dietary rituals and purity laws followed by the Beta Yisrael were formed later in Palestine, and not in the desert. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as some apocryphal books excluded from the canon (such as Jubilees and Judith) indicates a community which diverged from the rest of Jewry at an early date, but not as early as the exodus.<sup>6</sup>

### II

And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon because of the name of the Lord, she came to prove him with hard questions. And she came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bore spices and gold very much, and precious stones; and when she was come to Solomon, she spoke with him of all that was in her heart... And she said to the king: 'It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thine acts, and of thy wisdom... Blessed be the Lord thy God, who delighted in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel... And she gave the king a hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices very great

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Rapoport, The Lost Jews (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1980), p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> "The Queen of Sheba's Children," Congress Monthly, Vol. 58, No. 5, July/August 1991, pp. 6-7.

store, and precious stones... And king Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba all her desire, whatsoever she asked, beside that which Solomon gave her of his royal bounty. So she turned, and went to her own land, she and her servants (I Kings 10:1-13).<sup>7</sup>

Geographers and historians who trace trade routes confirm the likelihood of this exchange between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon.<sup>8</sup> King Solomon had copper to export, and the Queen of Sheba had spices, frankincense, and gold at her disposal. While the account in I Kings 10:1-13 details the economic transaction of gold, spices, and stones for "Solomon's royal bounty (which probably was copper)," legends have arisen as to what exactly "King Solomon gave to the queen of Sheba all her desire." According to the national epic of Ethiopia during the long reign of Haile Selassie, the Queen of Sheba lost a gamble of wits to King Solomon and thus forfeited her virginity to him. After having returned to her kingdom, she found herself pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy whom she named Menilek (possibly a contraction of Ben-Melekh?). When he reached young manhood, Menilek I took the sea route to his father's court and was educated in Jerusalem. When he returned home to Abyssinia, he was accompanied by priests from Jerusalem and young men from the various tribes of Israel. Thus, according to this legend/theory, the Israelite religion penetrated the Horn of Africa.<sup>9</sup>

### III

Another legend/theory purports that shortly after the death of Solomon, the kingdom of Solomon was split between Rehoboam, his son, in Judea, and Jeroboam, who became king of Israel in the North. The tribe of

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<sup>7</sup> Old JPS translation.

<sup>8</sup> Simon D. Messing, The Story of the Falashas (Brooklyn, NY: Balshon Printing & Offset Co., 1982), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

Dan, which lived in the farthest northern territory of the Kingdom of Israel, refused to fight against their brothers in Judea and support a king not of the Davidic line. Additionally, the Danites may have been offended by Jeroboam having set up a golden calf in Dan (I Kings 12:25-29). According to this legend/theory, the Danites left Israel, eventually reaching Abyssinia, finding other members of the Ten Lost Tribes who had been disillusioned by the events in the kingdom of Israel -- Naftali, Gad, and Asher. This would date the first arrivals of Israelites/Jews into the Horn of Africa around the tenth century BCE.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV

A second theory connecting the tribe of Dan with the Beta Yisrael, states that during the reign of King Solomon, the Danites hired themselves out as sailors to Phoenician ship owners. King Hiram of Tyre was a close ally of Solomon, and the Israelites took part in the booming trade on the Red Sea-Indian Ocean route. Thus, the Danite sailors must have been familiar with the Israelite/Jewish trade colonies that extended all along this route, including ports in Eritrea and the Horn of Africa, and thereby settled in the region of Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup>

#### V

A third theory linking the Beta Yisrael to the tribe of Dan relates to the destruction of the Kingdom of Israel by Assyria in 722 BCE. As a result of

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<sup>10</sup> Collette Berman and Yosef Miller, The Beautiful People of the Book (Jerusalem: Millhouse Publishers, 1988), p. 14. It must be noted that the Ten Lost Tribes date historically to 722 BCE.

<sup>11</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 87.

expulsion and population transfer, one of the Ten Lost Tribes, the Danites, eventually made their way from Eretz Yisrael into Abyssinia.<sup>12</sup>

## VI

The proposition that the Beta Yisrael commenced with the migration of Elephantine Jews or converted to Judaism by this Egyptian Jewish community is a fourth theory linking Ethiopian Jewry with one of the Northern tribes of Israel. The writings of Jeremiah in the sixth century BCE establish Elephantine ("Nof") as a site of Israelite/Jewish settlement (Jeremiah 44:1). Information about the Jewish community on the island of Elephantine in the upper Nile River near today's Aswan comes from the Elephantine papyri discovered in the twentieth century. A large contingent of Jewish mercenaries arrived in Elephantine around the sixth century BCE with the Persians, who carried away thousands of Jews to fight in various parts of the Persian empire. Cambyses of Persia encouraged Jewish settlement in Egypt, and himself marched into Ethiopia, taking Jewish soldiers with him. Jewish civilians, merchants and traders joined the Elephantine community, for it soon became the center of thriving commerce with Nubia and Ethiopia.

The Elephantine Jews came from enclaves in Syria which had been cut off from Judea during the Great Schism that brought the breakup of Solomon's empire, explaining their ignorance of Hebrew and later developments in Judaism. This community built a temple -- the first outside Jerusalem since the schism of Solomon's kingdom into Israel and Judea -- in contravention of the Israelite religion. These Israelites/Jews of Elephantine pushed into Ethiopia, either establishing a community or converting its inhabitants, due to Persian

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 88.



conquests utilizing Elephantine mercenaries and merchants; and/or as a result of the Ptolemaic wars which caused them to flee and follow the Nile River to its source at Lake Tana in Ethiopia.

Analysis of the Hebrew Bible provides additional support for the theory of Elephantine Jews being the direct ancestors of the Beta Yisrael, through settlement and/or conversion. The Bible of the Beta Yisrael, written in ancient Ge'ez,<sup>13</sup> diverges in form from the Hebrew Bible, suggesting that it had not been translated from the Hebrew. Comparisons show that the Ethiopic Bible had been translated from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which very well could have been brought to Ethiopia by Jews who came from Hellenized Egypt.<sup>14</sup>

## VII

The next theory professes that Judaism arrived to Ethiopia via Yemen. Over a thousand year period straddling the turn of the common era, Jews from the nearby Arabian peninsula migrated into Ethiopia. The newcomers mixed with the local population, marrying and converting many of them. They adopted their languages-- Ge'ez for sacred text, and the old Cushite languages for daily use. Trading vessels from the time of Solomon traveled extensively on the Red Sea between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa (the Danites, employed by the Phoenicians, perhaps were these very same sailors). Moreover, many socio-cultural characteristics are strikingly similar on both sides of the Red Sea.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ge'ez is the liturgical language of Ethiopia for both Jews and Christians.

<sup>14</sup> This account is compiled from The Lost Jews, pp. 91-97; The Story of the Falashas, pp. 12-13; and The Beautiful People of the Book, pp. 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> The Beautiful People of the Book, p. 15.

Two thousand years ago, during Roman control of the Red Sea region, Jewish coastal colonies in southern Arabia and Africa were flourishing, as trade was booming among Egypt, Ethiopia, and India. Eventually, there were even Jewish kings of South Arabia (the region was called Saba, Sheba, Himyar and Yemen at various periods), who emerged as Roman power declined.<sup>16</sup> The trade wars of these rulers may have inspired Abyssinian traditions of Jewish Sea Kings ("Bahr Negast").<sup>17</sup>

A sizable Jewish population existed in southern Arabia when Rabbi Akiba traveled there in the second century CE to arouse Diaspora support against the Romans. The Yemenite Jews, according to their tradition, had fled Israel forty-two years before the Romans destroyed the Second Temple, in 70 CE. In writing of his visit, Rabbi Akiba reported that the rulers of southern Arabia were conspicuously different than the Bedouin Arabs. "He and his wife were quite black in color, and he himself said that he was a Cushi [Ethiopian]."<sup>18</sup> Akiba's account of this Ethiopian ruling southern Arabia could be one of the earliest confirmations of Ethiopian Jewry.

The extensive migration of Jews from Arabia to Ethiopia fostered a distinctive Jewish community in Abyssinia which maintained relations with their brethren across the Red Sea. Moreover, when the Ethiopian king Kaleb (similar to the Hebrew/Aramaic word for dog?) conquered the Jewish king Dhu Nuwas (also known as Yosef or Asher) of Himyar, in Yemen, around 525 CE, Jews were forcibly brought to Ethiopia.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps these enslaved Jews

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<sup>16</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 114-15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>19</sup> The Beautiful People of the Book, p. 15.



from Yemen further increased the Jewish population of Ethiopia through settlement, intermarriages, and conversions.

In 1947, an inscription was discovered in the Ethiopian interior- in the region where the Beta Yisrael live -- celebrating Kaleb's victory over the Jewish king and Ethiopian hegemony over Yemen. It warned the Jewish proselytes in Ethiopia of similar consequences if they rose up against him. So it is also conceivable that the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia not only knew of their co-religionists in Yemen, but also that they joined in the fighting against Kaleb in an international Christian-Jewish war.<sup>20</sup>

## VII

Guided by the view that the history of the Beta Yisrael can only be understood when analyzed in the context of Ethiopian history in general, Professor Steven Kaplan in The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century, presents the latest chronological dating for the origins of the "Falasha" of Ethiopia.<sup>21</sup> He asserts that the Beta Yisrael are not "a lost tribe," but rather an ethnic group which emerged in Ethiopia between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries: "Indeed, the name 'Falasha,' their religious hierarchy, sacred texts, and economic specialization can all be dated to this period."<sup>22</sup>

Kaplan, chairperson of the Department of African Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, cites the lack of internal written sources of the Ethiopian Jews, leading to documentation of Beta Yisrael history from external

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<sup>20</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> Steven Kaplan, The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, cover leaf.

written materials and oral traditions collected from both Beta Yisrael and Christian Ethiopian informants.<sup>23</sup> Kaplan states:

Thus, the historical record, rather than offering a clearly defined chronologically linked narrative, provides a disjointed series of episodes, each of which is presented not for its inherent importance to the Beta Yisrael but for its usefulness in illustrating one or another of the themes of real interest to the author.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, Kaplan supposes that many of the propounders of theories surrounding the origins of the Beta Yisrael do not "consult requisite source languages," rely uncritically on "later texts," and in some cases upon "questionable secondary works."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the lack of familiarity with Ethiopian history and culture has led to "misinterpretations and misreadings, many of which stem from an unnatural attempt to squeeze the history of the Beta Yisrael into his [the author's] own concept of Diaspora Jewish history."<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, Kaplan says that there is reason to believe that Jews did come to Ethiopia from the Arabian peninsula in the first or second century CE, but he challenges those scholars who claim the current Ethiopian Jewish community grew from this nucleus. It was not until the Middle Ages, Kaplan claims, that one can find written reference to a separate group of people who stood apart from other Ethiopians, and whose beliefs and rituals did not contain Christian elements. Kaplan points out, however, that these Jewish emigres from the turn of the common era did have a cultural influence on all

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp. 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

of the Ethiopian people, which was important in the development of the Beta Yisrael centuries later.<sup>27</sup>

Kaplan points to a number of distinct regional histories of Jewish populations rather than one Beta Yisrael history prior to the sixteenth century: "[M]y [Kaplan's] own work argues for the gradual coalescence of a relatively centralized political group only toward the end of this period [sixteenth century] and in one region."<sup>28</sup> He summarizes:

Thus, a combination of social, political, economic, and religious factors from the fourteenth to sixteenth century helped transform a number of vaguely defined and politically disparate groups of ayhud [Jews] into a far more centralized and distinctive group known as the Falashas.<sup>29</sup>

Kaplan argues that the people who call themselves the Beta Yisrael coalesced into an identifiable self-ruled group in northwestern Ethiopia, where they developed their own religious ideology, practices and institutions. He notes that the ideology incorporated monasticism, ritual purity, distinctive holidays and a unique prayer book. Kaplan further asserts that the community's twenty sacred apocryphal books reached them mainly through the Ethiopian Church, and were translated into Ge'ez from Arabic in the Middle Ages.<sup>30</sup>

Jerusalem lawyer Michael Corinaldi, a leading advocate for Ethiopian Jewry, says that Kaplan "is trying to say that the Jews sprang up from texts that reached them at the time."<sup>31</sup> Corinaldi, in dismissing Kaplan's theory,

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<sup>27</sup> The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia; and "Scholar Claims Ethiopian Jewry Not so Very Old," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, week ending October 3, 1992, p. 9; and "Falashas Did Not Descend from Israelites and Date Only to Middle Ages, Book Says," Dayton Jewish Chronicle, Thursday, November 19, 1992, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>30</sup> "Scholar Claims Ethiopian Jewry Not so Very Old,"

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

notes that there is no precedent anywhere in the world of a religious sect forming via texts.<sup>32</sup> It must also be pointed out that although the Beta Yisrael perhaps did not coalesce into a centralized group in one region until as late as the fourteenth to sixteenth century, that does not preclude the previous existence, events, religious adherence, migration, contacts with and history of Jews in Ethiopia for at least a milenium before the Middle Ages. Perhaps a better characterization of the period before the Middle Ages should be noted as a significant "pre-history" or "first stage in the history of the Beta Yisrael."

The theories are many and varied. Some emphasize contact between Egypt and Ethiopia, while others stress the connections between Southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa. Still other theories point to trade routes and the Red Sea as the carrier of Judaism to Abyssinia. The Lost tribe of Dan, Elephantine Jews, and Yemenite Jewry have all been pointed to as the roots of the Beta Yisrael. The most recent theory describes the emergence of the Beta Yisrael as a later coalescence of Jews to earlier Jewish settlement and influence on general Ethiopian society and culture. For most scholars, Jews established a presence in Ethiopia somewhere between 1275 BCE and 525 CE. As the "Falasha scholar" Wolf Leslau concluded in his investigation into the origins of the Beta Yisrael, "The problem still awaits final solution."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

<sup>33</sup> Wolf Leslau, Falasha Anthology (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. xliii.

## MEDIEVAL JEWISH CONTACT WITH THE BETA YISRAEL

Beginning in the ninth century CE, a series of intermittent contacts between world Jewry and the Ethiopian Jews ensued. The following is an account of those contacts by Jewish travelers rabbinical authorities.

### ELDAD HA-DANI

During his travels around Africa and the Mediterranean shores, Eldad Ha-Dani reported Jewish tribes living in the mountains of northern Abyssinia in the year 883.<sup>34</sup> Eldad Ha-Dani's (Eldad, the Danite!!!) origins remain a mystery, although he may have been an Ethiopian Jew. Dr. Ephraim Isaac, director of the Institute of Advanced Semitic and Afroasiatic Studies states: "The news of the whereabouts of the Ten Tribes published by Eldad, whose Ethiopian origins no well-informed scholar today can doubt, was like a new light on the horizon for medieval Jews. It brought new hope and generated a new sense of world Jewish solidarity."<sup>35</sup> From his travel logs we learn that Eldad claimed that the Danites, together with the tribes of Naphtali, Gad, and

<sup>34</sup> Elkan Nathan Adler, Jewish Travelers (New York: Hermon Press, 1930), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Ephraim Isaac, Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews (Beersheva, Israel: Ben Gurion University in the Negev, 1988), pp. 3-4. Ephraim Isaac continues, that "not surprisingly, Eldad's great contemporaries like Semah ben Hayyim of Sura or Hasdai ibn Shaprut, and Talmudic scholars of succeeding generations, like Rashi and Abraham ben Maimon held him in high regard and quoted him as an authority. However, several centuries later, Eldad's fame waned; and, in the circle of some later authorities he even fell into disrepute as an imposter, unfortunately with little justification. Nonetheless, in the annals of Jewish history Eldad will always be remembered as an important catalytic agent in the medieval Jewish spiritual revival and solidarity." (p. 4).

Dr. Isaac, a leading scholar on the history and culture of the Beta Yisrael, was born in the Wellega Province of Ethiopia to his father, a Yemenite Jew, and his mother, an Ethiopian Jew. He trained at University College in Addis Ababa and Concordia College in Minnesota. Isaac did his graduate work in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Harvard, and received his PhD in 1969. A teaching fellow at Harvard University, Isaac has taught at numerous other institutions of higher education including Princeton, the University of Pennsylvania and the Hebrew University. One of his students at Harvard was Hebrew University Professor Steven Kaplan. He played a role in Operation Solomon (see chapter nine) and the peace negotiations in Ethiopia between the former government and the various rebel groups.

Asher, while leading a nomadic existence, formed an independent kingdom under the rule of their king Addiel (or Uzziel). Their kingdom was in Havilah [Ethiopia?], the land of gold (reference to Genesis 2:11 and 10:29):

And these tribes, being Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, dwell in the ancient Havilah, where gold is, and they trusted in their Maker, and the Lord helped them. These tribes placed their hands on the neck of their enemies and every year they make war with the seven kingdoms and seven countries. The names of these kingdoms are Tussina, Kamti, Kuba, Tariogi, Takula, Karma, and Kalom, and they are on the other side of the rivers of Ethiopia... and their king's name is Uzziel and the name of their great prince Elizaphan, of the children of Aholiab, of the tribe of Dan, and their banner is white and written thereon in black is "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One God"...<sup>36</sup>

Be it known to your Lordship that a man has become our guest whose name is Eldad the Danite of the tribe of Dan, and he has told us that there are four tribes in one place, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher. Its name is the ancient Havilah where is the gold... They possess the whole Bible, but they do not read the scroll of the history of Esther, because they had no part in that miracle... They keep the Sabbath in due form...<sup>37</sup>

There are also among them strong men descendants of Samson, sons of Dalilah, and the smallest of them pursues many, and the voice of every one of them is a mighty voice as the roar of the lion."<sup>38</sup>

Eldad also mentions the "sons of Moses" who lived nearby the Jews of Ethiopia, but who were cut off from the world by the Sambation:<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, they [the Jews of Ethiopia] see no man and no man see[s] them except these four tribes, who dwell on the other side of the rivers of Ethiopia. There is a place where these can see each other and speak if they cry out, but the River Sambation is between them, and they tell, "Thus it happened to us in war time," and they tell all Israel what happened to them... The breadth of that river is 200 cubits bowshot, and the river is full of large and small stones and the sound

<sup>36</sup> From the letter of Eldad Ha-Dani, sent to the Jews of Spain in 883 CE, according to the text printed in Italy about 1480, as translated in Jewish Travelers, p. 11.

<sup>37</sup> According to the text printed in Constantinople in 1519, detailing Eldad Ha-Dani's journey in the ninth century, as translated in Jewish Travelers, pp. 15-16.

<sup>38</sup> Eldad Ha-Dani's account, as translated in Jewish Travelers, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> According to legend, find the Sambation, and you will find the lost tribes of Israel. The river has been placed in many countries throughout the world. The waters of the highlands of the Great Rift region of Ethiopia rush along gorges and mile-deep ravines, creating a nearly impassable barrier to travelers. Hence, the legend/theory that Ethiopia is the region where the Sambation lies.



of them rumbles like a great storm, like a tempest at sea... The river runs and the stones and sand rumble during the six working days, but on the seventh day it rests and it is tranquil until the end of Sabbath. And on the other side of the river, on the side where the four tribes dwell, is a fire which flames on Sabbath and no man can approach within a mile. And this is my name, Eldad ben Mahali ben Ezekiel ben Hezekiah ...ben Dan ben Jacob our father, on whom be peace and on all Israel.<sup>40</sup>

Many scholars assert that Eldad's accounts are probably embroidered and/or embellished legends, based on Jewish rulers and kingdoms known to have existed, such as the Arabian king Joseph Dhu Nuwas (sixth century) of Himyar, who along with his subjects converted to Judaism; and the Jews of Ethiopia who possessed an independent kingdom in the early middle ages of nearly one million Jews.<sup>41</sup> His aim was probably to raise the spirits of the Jews by giving them news of tribes of Israel who lived in freedom and by creating an attractive Jewish utopia. The report of the existence of such Jewish kingdoms undoubtedly encouraged and comforted Eldad's listeners, by contradicting the Christian contention that Jewish independence had ceased after the destruction of the Second Temple. For the Jews, his stories obviously had far-reaching messianic implications.<sup>42</sup>

### BENJAMIN OF TUDELA

The next daring traveler, during 1160-1173, was Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish merchant from Spain, who reported Jewish villages in the mountaintops of Ethiopia and Jewish home-rule across the Red Sea from Yemen.<sup>43</sup> After a journey between Yemen and Egypt, Benjamin recounted his

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<sup>40</sup> Eldad Ha-Dani's account, as translated in Jewish Travelers, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971), "Eldad Ha-Dani," Vol. VI, p. 577.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> The Story of the Falashas, pp. 15-16.

visits to the towns and fortresses of the Jews of South Arabia and northeast Africa. "There are Jews who are not subject to the rule of others, and they have towns and fortresses on the tops of the mountains," he wrote.<sup>44</sup>

#### RABBI PETACHIA OF RATISBON

Only ten or fifteen years after the travels of Benjamin of Tudela, Rabbi Petachia of Ratisbon, who set out on his journeys from Prague, traveled around Europe, Asia, and East Africa between 1170-1187. He encountered the Jews of Ethiopia, noting:

There are large cities in the land of Ararat [Armenia]. There are few Jews there. In ancient times, many Jews lived there. However, they slew each other and separated and went to the cities of Babel, Media, and Persia. But in the land of Cush [Ethiopia?]<sup>45</sup> and Babel, there are more than sixty myriads [myriad being 10,000 individuals-hence 600,000!!!] of Jews; and there are as many in the land of Persia.<sup>46</sup>

#### ELIJAH OF FERRARA

Over two hundred years later, in 1434, an Italian Jew, Elijah of Ferrara, wrote in a letter to his family of his meeting in Jerusalem with a young Ethiopian Jew. This young man told him of long and successful wars fought by Jews in the mountains of Ethiopia, and that the Ethiopian Jews had a language of their own, "neither Hebrew nor Ishmaelite:"

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<sup>44</sup> The Lost Jews, pp. 156-57. See also The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela and Jewish Travelers, both translated travel logs by Elkan Nathan Adler.

<sup>45</sup> It is difficult to ascertain whether Cush means specifically Ethiopia, or is a metaphor for all of Africa. However, historical accounts do suggest that the Jewish population in Ethiopia during this time period was between five-hundred thousand and one million inhabitants, as noted in the Encyclopedia Judaica and various historical works on Ethiopian Jewry including The Lost Jews, The Falashas, Redemption Song and The Story of the Falashas.

<sup>46</sup> Petachia of Ratisbon, from the text based on the manuscript which was printed in Prague in 1595, as translated in Jewish Travelers, p. 71.



Meseems I have already imparted to you heretofore what a young Jew has told me concerning those men of his own country and religion, who are their own masters, and owe no dependence to any one. These Falashas dwell among a great nation called Habesh in Abyssinia; they make a show of Christianity, wearing on their faces chain and filament; they are constantly at war with them and only now and again with other Jews.

These Hebrews have a language of their own. It is neither Hebrew nor Ishmaelite. They possess the Law and a traditional commentary upon it. They have neither our Talmud nor our codes. I have obtained information from this young Jew about several of their precepts. In some they follow our doctrine; in others they conform to the opinions of the Karaites. They are in possession of the Book of Esther.<sup>47</sup> But they have not the feast of Chanukah. They are a three months journey distance from us, and the river Gozan [Nile] flows through their region.<sup>48</sup>

#### OBADIAH OF BERTINORO

Later in the fifteenth century, Obadiah of Bertinoro, who was one of the most distinguished Italian Rabbis of his time, journeyed throughout Africa and the Near East, before moving to Palestine. In his letters from Jerusalem recounting his travels, Obadiah mentions the Ethiopian Jews. He reports seeing some black Jews in Egypt, and revives the story that the lost tribes were at war with the legendary Christian monarch, Prester John. Obadiah, writing in 1489, also said that the Sambation River could be found at a distance of fifty days' journey from Aden [Yemen], where it separated the territories of the children of Moses from the other tribes:

I made inquires concerning the Sambation, and I hear from one who has been informed, that a man has come from the kingdom of Prester John [Ethiopia] and has related that there are high mountains and valleys there which can be traversed in a ten day's journey, and which are certainly inhabited by descendants of Israel... the Johannites (Abyssinians) penetrated into their [Jewish] country, and laid it waste, and the remembrance of Israel had almost died away in those places, for an edict was issued against those who remained, prohibiting the exercise of their religious duties as severe as that which Antiochus issued in the time of the Hasmoneans. But God had

<sup>47</sup> Eldad Ha-Dani in the ninth century noted that the Beta Yisrael do not possess the Scroll of Esther. See earlier section on this ninth century traveler.

<sup>48</sup> Jewish Travelers, p. 153.

mercy... and it is said that the former glory of the Jews is now in a measure restored; they have again become numerous, and though they still pay tribute to the Johannites, they are not entirely subject to them... The enemy took some of them prisoner and sold them as slaves; a few of these were brought to Cairo and redeemed by the Jews there. I saw two of them in Cairo; they were black Jews, but not so black as the Negroes. It was impossible to learn from them whether they belonged to the Karaites or the Rabbanites.<sup>49</sup>

#### DAVID REUVENI AND OTHER SIXTEENTH CENTURY CONTACTS

By the sixteenth century, there were increasing references to the Ethiopian Jews. Isaac Akrish reported from Constantinople of a "Jewish Ethiopian Prince who had allied himself with Moslems against Christians."<sup>50</sup> Moses de Rossi and Abraham Yagel wrote of Jews in the Mountains of the Moon (Uganda and East Africa region).<sup>51</sup> And the word "Falashas" appeared in the writings of the Kabbalists of Safed, where Abraham Halevi identified them with the lost tribes.<sup>52</sup>

David Reuveni, the Jewish adventurer who raised messianic hopes in the early sixteenth century, claimed to be the son of a king who had ruled the lost tribes of Reuven (hence the name David 'Reuveni'), Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh in the desert of Habor in Mesopotamia. But in his diaries and letters, he claimed to be a direct descendant of King David and the tribe of Judah. Reuveni was said to have been redeemed by the Jews of Alexandria from Arab slave traders. He then traveled to Jerusalem, spreading messianic hopes along his way, claiming that he had been sent on his mission by the "King of the Lost Tribes" to hasten the Redemption. Reuveni traveled to Rome to ask Pope Clement VII to write a letter to King Prester John of Ethiopia and

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<sup>49</sup> From the manuscripts in the Gunzburg Library, the British Museum and the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York; as translated in *Jewish Travelers*, p. 209.

<sup>50</sup> *The Lost Jews*, p. 157.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 157-58.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158.

the European monarches, recommending that they give arms to Reuveni so that his "state" could join the Christian world in the war against the Moslems. In 1525, Reuveni received a royal reception from the King of Portugal.<sup>53</sup> He related to the King:

I am from the wilderness of Habor and we have thirty times ten thousand Jews there. (May the Lord increase them a thousand fold!) They are the sons of Reuben and Gad and of the half tribe of Manasseh, and King Joseph, my brother, is their king, and I am the lord of his host and the other nine and a half tribes are in the land of the blacks of Ethiopia, in four places, and the sons of Moses are in another place and live on the River Sambation, beside the two tribes of Simeon and Benjamin, who reside at the head of the River Nile and the white river behind it. They are between two rivers, beyond the Kingdom of Sheba. These two tribes send men to us and we send men to them, and they tell us what they hear and know of the other tribes in the land of the blacks which are near to them, and our country is far from them, as we are in the east.<sup>54</sup>

#### RABBI DAVID IBN ABI ZIMRA (RDBZ OR Radbaz)

Radbaz was born in Spain in 1479. At the age of thirteen, he arrived in Safed with the first exiles from the expulsion from Spain, and shortly thereafter moved to Jerusalem. In 1513, Radbaz emigrated to Egypt, apparently as a result of harsh economic conditions in the land of Israel. For forty years, he served in Alexandria and Cairo as the head of the Egyptian rabbinical courts. Subsequently, he returned to the land of Israel where he was president of the rabbinic court of Safed, a court that included among its members Rabbi Joseph Caro. Radbaz died in the land of Israel in 1573, at the age of ninety-

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<sup>53</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica, "Reuveni, David," Vol. XIV, pp. 114-16. See also The Lost Jews, p. 158.

<sup>54</sup> From David Reuveni's diary, from 1522-1525, as translated from the manuscript found in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, England. Found in Jewish Travelers, pp. 295-96.

four. He enacted many important halakhic takkanot, wrote books in all areas of Halakhah and Kabbalah, and left behind nearly 2400 responsa.<sup>55</sup>

In two of these responsa, Radbaz dealt with questions relating to Ethiopian Jews. These responsa are especially significant because Radbaz, in addition to his great scholarship, was closely acquainted with Ethiopian Jews, serving for many years as Chief Rabbi in Egypt, which is near Ethiopia.<sup>56</sup> His attitude to the Ethiopian Jews was much more lenient than to the Karaites. The Karaites lived among Jews and rabbis, and yet, they stubbornly refused to return to the "True Faith." But the "Falashas" were like helpless children who had been taken away captive. Therefore, they only clung to the literal meaning of Scriptures, but if they were to be taught otherwise, they would not deny the "True Faith."<sup>57</sup>

The two responsa concern Ethiopian Jews who were brought to Egypt as captives. In one, Radbaz investigates whether an Ethiopian Jewish woman, whose family was killed, is considered an agunah :

...enemies attacked them and killed all the men that were in the house, but they took the women and the children as spoil. Now it is clear that they are of the seed of Israel, of the tribe of Dan, who dwell in the mountains of Abyssinia. From that time on we considered her an agunah ... And I say that even from her own words she must be deemed to be still married ( to her "Falasha" husband), for it is well known that there is always war going on between the various kings of Abyssinia, since there are three kingdoms in it. Some of them are Mohammedans, some of them Christians, and some Israelites of the tribe of Dan...<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Menachem Elon, "The Ethiopian Jews: A Case Study in the Functioning of the Jewish Legal System," in the New York University Journal of International Law and Politics, 1986-1987, pp. 545-46.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 546.

<sup>57</sup> Israel M. Goldman, The Life and Times of Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1970), p. 57.

<sup>58</sup> Responsa of RDBZ, Vol. IV, no. 219; and Vol. VIII, no. 9; as translated in Solomon Freehof's The Responsa Literature (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), pp. 122-27; and The Life and Times of RDBZ, p. 37.

From this description, we learn that the Ethiopian Jews were one of the three kingdoms in Abyssinia in the sixteenth century enjoying independence and controlling their own fighting forces. Moreover, we learn that the Beta Yisrael indeed were considered Jewish by non-Ethiopian Jews, as the Ethiopian woman in the responsum was deemed of the seed of Israel and therefore classified as an *agunah* -- a distinctly Jewish category for a woman who has lost her husband and who is assumed to be dead, but she is unable to remarry because there is no proof or testimony of his death.

In the second responsum, Radbaz addressed the status of an Ethiopian Jew taken captive in war, brought to Egypt, and purchased as a slave by a local Jew. Captives of war were often sold in the extensive slave trade present in Africa during Radbaz's lifetime.<sup>59</sup> The case presented an important issue for Radbaz, because a Jew had purchased a Beta Yisrael as a slave. The following question was thus presented to Radbaz: "A Jew purchased a freed slave who was 'of those Jews who dwell in the land of Kush.' Does this man become a free man after six years? Do the other Biblical laws relating to slaves apply to him or not?"<sup>60</sup> Radbaz responded:

...only under two circumstances can there be a Jewish slave. 'First, if the Bet-Din sold him as such because of his thievery; second, if he sold himself on account of extreme poverty. This is not at all the case with this Falasha Jew. He is to be considered as a Jewish Captive. It was therefore the duty of the Jew who bought him to redeem him, in fulfillment of the duty of 'Redemption of Captives,' in order that he should not be assimilated among the Gentiles. This Falasha has a right to go forth as a free man any time he chooses...

These Falashas who come from the land of Kush, they are from the tribe of Dan. They accept the literal interpretation of Scriptures only because there are no Rabbis among them who know the Oral law. But if the Falashas would be adequately instructed they would not deny the teachings of our Sages. They are to be likened to children who

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<sup>59</sup> "The Ethiopian Jews: A Case Study in the Functioning of the Jewish Legal System," p. 547.

<sup>60</sup> Responsa of RDBZ, Vol. IV, no. 219; and Vol. VIII, no. 9; as translated in The Life and Times of RDBZ, pp. 57-59.

have been in captivity among the Gentiles... It is therefore a meritorious deed to redeem them.<sup>61</sup>

Thus, these two responsa of Radbaz not only demonstrated his contact with and recognition of Ethiopian Jewry, but also showed his concern for fellow Jews who were cut off from the rest of the Jewish people and wished to return to the fold. For purposes of the halakhic process, he recognized the Ethiopians as Jews, who did not require any acts of conversion whatsoever. "He thus acted to prevent a discriminatory policy from developing with regard to marriages between the Ethiopians and other Jews."<sup>62</sup> As Israeli legal scholar Menachem Elon notes, Radbaz's responsa are important examples for our modern day commentators and decision makers to follow, as the decision of Radbaz concerning the status of the Ethiopian Jews was accepted for many generations by all of the leading halakhic authorities.<sup>63</sup> Rabbi Castro, who was a disciple of Radbaz and who later replaced him as Chief Rabbi of Egypt, agreed that the Beta Yisrael were full-fledged Jews.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> "The Ethiopian Jews: A Case Study in the Functioning of the Jewish Legal System," p. 554.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. See also J. Castro 'Maharikas,' Ohalei Ya'akov, no. 11.



**MISSIONARIES AND COUNTER-MISSIONARIES:  
THE STRUGGLE FOR JEWISH SOULS IN ETHIOPIA**

After the responsa of Radbaz and Castro, nearly a two hundred and fifty year hiatus ensued. Reference to the Jews of Ethiopia is non-existent during this time, only to reappear in the writing of James Bruce in 1790. Moreover, the Beta Yisrael were cut off from the Jews of Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora, and regular contacts between Ethiopian and other Jews began only in the mid-nineteenth century. At that time, reports began reaching Jewish centers that missionaries had launched a vigorous campaign to convert the Ethiopian Jews to Christianity. "Jewish leaders and scholars of the Diaspora rose up to help the proud Ethiopian Jews resist the influence of the missionaries."<sup>65</sup> Letters and other material, written by the leading halakhic authorities of the second half of the nineteenth century, including Hildesheimer and Malbim, encouraged the Ethiopian Jews to remain loyal to their faith and also called upon the Jews of the Diaspora to aid their fellow Jews in Ethiopia with financial assistance. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a letter bearing the signature of forty-four rabbis and halakhic scholars from around the world was sent to the Jews of Ethiopia, encouraging them to maintain their faith and not to bend to the activities of missionaries. And during this same period, Rabbi Abraham Kook, who later became the Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote many letters concerning the Ethiopian Jews. He called them "brother", as the Beta Yisrael, although they maintained slightly different customs, did so for historical reasons, since they were cut off from the remainder of the Jewish people.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the work and life-long

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<sup>65</sup> "The Ethiopian Jews: A Case Study in the Functioning of the Jewish Legal System," p. 554.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 556.



dedication of Joseph Halevy and Jacques Faitlovitch brought to the attention of world Jewry the culture, longevity and plight of Ethiopian Jewry.

The Jewish-Christian struggle over the Beta Yisrael was to have profound effect on the tribe's fate.<sup>67</sup> Jesuits preceded the Protestants to Ethiopia by three hundred years, accompanying Portuguese soldiers into the country in 1541.<sup>68</sup> The Jesuits, who charged that there was a "dangerous Hebraic mould" to the Abyssinian Christian church, had some initial success converting the Jews. However, their political meddling enraged the Abyssinian priests and by the middle of the seventeenth century, the Society of Jesus was banished from Ethiopia.<sup>69</sup> There were no more Christian missionaries from the West until the nineteenth century colonial era, when the great explorers were followed by waves of missionaries, soldiers and merchants.<sup>70</sup>

In 1770, James Bruce, the Scottish explorer of the Blue Nile, 'rediscovered' the Jews in the Gondar area north of Lake Tana.<sup>71</sup> The publication in 1790 of Bruce's travel account, Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, included a history of Ethiopia and references to the Jewish elements within the country.<sup>72</sup> This account provoked much interest in Europe, but made little impact on the Jewish community, despite Bruce's articulation of persecution against the Jews and astonishing sagas of Jewish survival in "the depths of darkest Africa."<sup>73</sup> Perhaps the bulk of European Jewry at the time

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<sup>67</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 161.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 162.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>71</sup> Louis Rapoport, Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), p. 36.

<sup>72</sup> David Kessler, The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia (New York: Africana Publishing Company, a division of Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982), pp. 104-05.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105.

paid no attention to non-Jewish writings. Some scholars theorize that the world Jewish community did not react to accounts of a Jewish community in Ethiopia until increased Protestant missionary activity in the mid-nineteenth century because there were many other exotic Jewish communities throughout the world of whom little was known, such as the Tats of Dagestan and Azerbaijan, the Cochins of Kerala, and the Krimchaks of Crimea; and the "Falashas" were just one more such community.<sup>74</sup> Another reason may be that the mid-nineteenth century coincides with the emergence in Western and Central European Jewry of a "modern" community which looked out beyond the ghetto walls.

James Bruce's encounter with the "Falashas" inspired a movement of British missionaries, namely, pious Anglicans, who read his popular travel account and vowed to convert the Abyssinian Jews. The Protestant crusade began in 1809, with the founding of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity Amongst the Jews, which aimed at converting the Jews of Africa, Europe, Asia and North America.<sup>75</sup> Samuel Gobat became the inspirational leader of the movement's effort to win over the Beta Yisrael. He first sought out the Ethiopian Jews in 1830, and later became the Anglican bishop in Jerusalem. He worked with several German-Jewish converts to Protestantism, including the Reverends Wolff, Isenberg, Rosenthal, and the most fanatical of them all, Henry A. Stern.<sup>76</sup> In 1855, Gobat sent two missionaries from Jerusalem to Abyssinia to obtain permission from Emperor Theodore of

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<sup>74</sup> Tudor Parfitt, Operation Moses: The Untold Story of the Secret Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia (New York: Stein and Day, 1985), p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 162.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

Ethiopia to convert the "Falashas." The missionaries, who were baptized into the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, were allowed to convert the Ethiopian Jews.<sup>77</sup>

Stern, who was bent on bringing evangelical Protestantism to Jews in the remotest areas of the earth, was spurred, perhaps, by his own apostasy. In 1859, the London Society provided funds for Stern to conduct an intensified mission to the Ethiopian Jews. In 1860, Henry Stern left his mission work in Jerusalem and set out to "bring the Gospel of Christ" to the Falashas, as set out in his book Wanderings Among the Falashas in Abyssinia, which was aimed at an English audience hungry for information about the exotic black Jews of deepest Africa.<sup>78</sup> Stern went back to England after only a few months in Ethiopia and got on the lecture circuit to raise more money for the mission. By 1862, Stern returned to Ethiopia, as his missionaries began to baptize their first "Falasha" converts. Stern appointed converted "Falashas" as lay preachers, and sent them out to the villages to preach. New converts were baptized into the Ethiopian Church in accordance with an agreement between the Church Mission to the Jews and the emperor, a practice which was still being followed by the mission until the Marxist revolution of the 1970s.<sup>79</sup>

Stern told the Beta Yisrael that he too was a Jew, a "white Falasha," and he was outspokenly critical of Emperor Theodore and of the Ethiopian priesthood.<sup>80</sup> "And Stern's book, in which he criticized the emperor, soon became a casus belli in Theodore's quarrel with the British government."<sup>81</sup> In 1864, Theodore ordered the imprisonment of all European missionaries as well as the British consul, as thirty European hostages were held for more than

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, pp. 162-63.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 163.

<sup>79</sup> The Lost Jews, pp. 163-64 and Redemption Song, p. 37.

<sup>80</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 164.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid

four years, until Queen Victoria's government sent a military expedition of twelve thousand men to Ethiopia, led by Lord Napier. The British forces defeated the emperor's army in 1868, and drove Theodore to suicide. All of the hostages were rescued and missionary activity continued unabated for the next thirty years.<sup>82</sup>

The missionaries' efforts set off a fundamentalist reaction among the Beta Yisrael religious leaders. "Faced with the breakdown of the monarchy's mediative and military abilities in the late eighteenth century and the direct impact of external forces on Beta Israel religion in the nineteenth century, the Beta Israel priests and monks attempted to rejuvenate their religious principles and institutions through new activism."<sup>83</sup> In the 1840s, Abba Wedaje, the chief monk (religious leader of the Jews) of Quara, led a revival to bring his people back to Judaism.<sup>84</sup> In 1862, following a religious dispute between a Jew and a converted "Falasha" to Christianity in front of Emperor Theodore, Ethiopian Jews left en masse for the Promised Land. A false prophet, Abba Mahari, had persuaded thousands of the Beta Yisrael to leave for Jerusalem, vowing that a new Exodus, this time from Ethiopia to Israel, would soon occur;<sup>85</sup>

He vowed that the miracles of the Exodus would recur for them. They crossed the Tekeze River and circled the Christian holy city of Axum in Tigre [Northern Ethiopia], whose cathedral was said to hold the Ark of the Covenant taken by Menelik from Solomon's Temple. The Falashas believed the Christians would return the Ark to the Jews, who would carry it back to the land of Israel. 'To their dismay,' a

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, pp. 164-67.

<sup>83</sup> James Arthur Quirin, The Beta Yisrael in Ethiopian History: Caste Formation and Cultural Change, 1270-1868 (Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota, August, 1977), p. 219.

<sup>84</sup> Redemption Song, p. 37.

<sup>85</sup> The Lost Jews, pp. 165 and Redemption Song, pp. 37-38.

missionary wrote of the 1862 march toward Zion, 'they received nothing but blows and insults. Many died of hunger and malaria.'<sup>86</sup>

Those who remained returned dejected to Ethiopia.

By 1864, the same year Stern was imprisoned and flogged, the Beta Yisrael found a religious champion in the person of Rabbi Israel Hildesheimer of Eisenstadt, Hungary (1820-99). Hildesheimer, who founded and led the Agudat Yisrael branch of Orthodox Judaism and the Orthodox Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin, was the first religious leader of stature since Rabbi David ben Abi Zimrah (the RADBAZ) in the sixteenth century to declare unequivocally that the "Falashas" were Jews, and that it was the duty of world Jewry to come to their assistance.<sup>87</sup> Hildesheimer thoroughly examined the credentials of the Beta Yisrael, and satisfied himself, on the basis of RADBAZ's responsa, the writings of Samuel David (Filosseo) Luzzato<sup>88</sup> and inquiries he made in Jerusalem, that they were authentic members of the House of Israel.<sup>89</sup> Alarmed by reports that missionaries in Ethiopia were attempting to convert the Beta Yisrael to Christianity, Hildesheimer issued a circular in Hebrew and German in the Jewish press of his day.<sup>90</sup> He not only affirmed the position that these people were Jewish and that it was the obligation of world Jewry to assist their brothers and sisters in Ethiopia during their time of need, but he

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<sup>86</sup> Redemption Song, p. 38.

<sup>87</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 119.

<sup>88</sup> Samuel David (Filosseo) Luzzato, the noted Italian-Jewish scholar writing in the 1840s, was one of the first to interest European Jewry in the "Falashas." Luzzato's Galician contemporary and friend, Rabbi Solomon Rapoport, wrote an essay on the Jews of Ethiopia in 1832.

<sup>89</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 119.

<sup>90</sup> David Ellenson, "Our Brothers and Our Flesh: Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Jews of Ethiopia," Judaism, Winter, 1986, p. 63.

also called for an urgent mission to be dispatched as soon as possible to make contact with the community.<sup>91</sup> Hildesheimer exclaimed in his circular of 1864:

I knew full well that the heart of every man in the Household of Israel, upon hearing of this, would be agitated, for are not all Jews responsible for one another?... From all this [a detailing of proofs as to the authenticity of the Beta Yisrael's Jewishness] it is clearly known to us that they are our brothers and our flesh, and the time has come to rescue them and restore them to life... Have pity, dearest fellow-believers; save, deliver, and aid this holy matter in the name of G-d; organize committees, offer yourselves as members thereof... contribute abundantly and frequently, and what seems to be so difficult will be accomplished in a comparatively short time.<sup>92</sup>

Despite the visionary remarks and prodding of Rabbi Hildesheimer, "it cannot be said that the appeal created much more than a ripple of interest on either side of the English Channel."<sup>93</sup> Some scholars, such as David Kessler, believe that little was done immediately to aid Ethiopian Jewry because of doubts concerning the Jewishness of the Beta Yisrael:

The mid-nineteenth-century was a period when great efforts were made by the Jewish communities of Western Europe, and especially of Britain under the energetic leadership of Sir Moses Montefiore, to secure their less fortunate brethren in other parts of the world. Philanthropy was in the air. It might have been expected, therefore, that the plight of the hard-pressed and impoverished Ethiopian Jews would attract widespread and sympathetic notice. That this did not occur can be attributed principally to the uncertainty which existed among the orthodox as to whether the Falashas should be considered as part of the Jewish people...<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> "Our Brothers and Our Flesh: Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Jews of Ethiopia," p. 63, and The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 119.

<sup>92</sup> Excerpts from the translation of Hildesheimer's circular of 1864 as rendered in "Our Brothers and Our Flesh: Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Jews of Ethiopia," pp. 64-65, and The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, pp. 119-20.

<sup>93</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 120.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.



Other Ethiopian scholars, such as Ephraim Isaac, contend that the real cause for the lack of immediate aid to Ethiopia Jewry cannot be separated from Jewish and world social, political, and economic conditions of the time:

For West European Jews, political emancipation did not mean social equality and unlimited freedom in international operations. On the other hand, East European Jews were themselves needy. A major operation in far-away, hardly accessible Ethiopia, beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire, would have not been a realistic goal for a discriminated and as of yet not totally unified minority.<sup>95</sup>

In any case, tragically, this cycle of a call for action heralded by Rabbi Hildesheimer -- met by indifference and apathy of world Jewry -- would be repeated numerous times in the years to come. Apart from a single letter of support in the Jewish Chronicle of England by its editor Abraham Benisch in reaction to Hildesheimer's call, little stirred until over two years later, when it was announced that the Alliance Israelite Universelle of Paris was prepared to send a mission to Abyssinia.<sup>96</sup> The Alliance Israelite Universelle decided to take action largely due to detailed reports of missionary efforts to convert the Jews of Ethiopia finally reaching Europe as a result of the imprisonment of Stern, and British advances against the kingdom of Ethiopia. They sent Joseph Halevy, a French Semitics scholar, to Ethiopia in 1867-68, the same year as Theodore's defeat and suicide. "His reports confirmed that they [the Beta Yisrael] were Jews and that the Western missions were sparing no effort or expense to convert them to Christianity."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 7.

<sup>96</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, pp. 119-20.

<sup>97</sup> Operation Moses: The Untold Story of the Secret Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia, p. 21.



The Beta Yisrael members who first met Halevy were extremely distrustful, because the only reason a "white" would visit the black Jews of deepest Africa was to convert them to Christianity:

"You know my dear brethren that I also am a Falasha" Halevy said to them, just as Stern had said. The response to him was: "What! You a Falasha! A white Falasha! You are laughing at us. Are there any white Falashas?" Halevy assured them that all the Falashas of Jerusalem, and in other parts of the world, were white. "The name of Jerusalem, which I had accidentally mentioned changed as if by magic the attitude of the most incredulous. A burning curiosity seemed all at once to have seized the whole company. 'Oh, do you come from Jerusalem, the blessed city? Have you beheld with your own eyes Mount Zion, and the House of the Lord of Israel, the Holy Temple?'... I must confess I was deeply moved on seeing those black faces light up at the memory of our glorious history."<sup>98</sup>

Halevy viewed how well-financed Protestant missionaries were winning converts, and he resolved to do something about it. Upon his return to Paris with manuscripts and notes on his travels, Halevy brought two Beta Yisrael children to be educated in Jewish and rabbinic studies in Europe, and sponsored another "Falasha's" rabbinical studies in Cairo. Unfortunately, over thirty-five years passed before another major proactive exploratory trip was taken to Ethiopia on behalf of the Beta Yisrael. Dr. Ephraim Isaac notes:

In the least, Halevy opened the way for future contact with Ethiopian Jewry. He brought first hand information about the need to assist them and to counteract foreign Christian missionary propaganda. Soon after his visit, Emperor Yohannes IV (1871-1889), did the latter by curbing the activities of foreign missionaries temporarily; ironically, however, the same monarch issued a decree ordering all non-Christians, including Jews, to be baptized. This decree was not totally successful but caused the conversion of many Jews. So, the need to rescue Ethiopian Judaism remained of great importance. Unfortunately, some time lapsed before any Western Jewish rescue effort was resumed.<sup>99</sup>

<sup>98</sup> Halevy's diary account as rendered in The Lost Jews, pp. 173-74.

<sup>99</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 8.

Upon his return to Paris in 1869, Halevy wrote a number of accounts of his interaction with the Beta Yisrael, and resumed his teaching career at the Sorbonne, where a few of his students took an interest in the situation of the African Jewish tribe. One of those students would make this his life's endeavor. It is to the life-long work and dedication of Jacques Faitlovitch and his Pro-Falasha Committees to which the next chapter will turn.

CHAPTER TWO:  
 ACTIVISTS AND INACTIVITY:  
 JACQUES FAITLOVITCH, YONA BOGALA,  
 THE AMERICAN PRO-FALASHA COMMITTEE  
 AND WORLD JEWRY BETWEEN 1900-1970

The leaders of the Alliance Israelite Universelle,<sup>1</sup> a prominent Jewish philanthropic organization in France during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, did not expeditiously act upon Joseph Halevy's plea for action to aid the Ethiopian Jews. The Alliance doubted Halevy's reports; and despite genuine concern manifested by certain important figures in European Jewry, most of the European Jewish leadership did not pay much attention to the situation of the Beta Yisrael. In the 1880s, the Alliance sent Dr. A. Rapaport to Ethiopia, but after a matter of weeks recalled him for "no good reason," seemingly smothering the very spirit of Jewish solidarity the Alliance helped to kindle.<sup>2</sup> It was not until the turn of the twentieth century and the entrance of Jacques Faitlovitch (1881-1955) into the Ethiopian Jewry arena that the Beta Yisrael had an advocate and champion outside the Horn of Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter called "The Alliance."

<sup>2</sup> Ephraim Isaac, Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews (Beersheva, Israel: Ben Gurion University in the Negev, 1988), p. 8.

### JACQUES FAITLOVITCH

Born in Lodz, Poland, on January 15, 1881, Jacques Faitlovitch moved to Paris as a young man, where he devoted himself to Oriental Studies at the Sorbonne. While studying Ethiopian languages under Joseph Halevy, Faitlovitch began to take an interest in the Beta Yisrael. In 1904, he gathered language books, maps and diplomatic documents and set out from Paris for Ethiopia's Semien Mountains. French banker Baron Edmond de Rothschild and the Alliance helped to finance the Sorbonne scholar's trip. His mission also received the support of Chief Rabbi Zadok Kahn of Paris.<sup>3</sup> For eighteen months, Faitlovitch lived amongst the Beta Yisrael in the Gondar region, devoting himself to studying their culture and teaching the Beta Yisrael Hebrew and Judaica.

Faitlovitch traveled from Asmara to Gondar via Axum and Adowa. The Ethiopian Jews were initially suspicious of Faitlovitch. They viewed him as "an outsider" who called himself a Jew, particularly since some European missionaries had used this as a ploy to convert the Beta Yisrael. Despite this initial impediment, Faitlovitch succeeded in convincing the community that he was not a missionary. At the same time, he won over their confidence because he did not question their Jewishness, but rather, deplored their "isolation," "poverty," and "ignorance."<sup>4</sup> "Earlier world Jewish desire was to counteract evangelization. Faitlovitch combined this with a new social and economic objective as well as a desire of introducing Ethiopian Jews to European Jewish culture and western education."<sup>5</sup> Education was of primary

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<sup>3</sup> Altogether, Faitlovitch made six trips to Ethiopia – 1904, 1909, 1913, 1920, 1924 and 1946. In the trips after 1904, he received the support of other Jewish religious leaders, including Chief Rabbi Hertz of England and Chief Rabbi Kook of Palestine.

<sup>4</sup> Jewish Chronicle, October, 1905.

<sup>5</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, pp. 9-10.

concern -- the best means to strengthen the bridge of solidarity between Ethiopian and world Jewry. Faitlovitch, recognizing the importance of training young Ethiopian Jews abroad in Western Jewish education, returned to Europe in 1905 with two young Ethiopian Jews, Gete Eremyas and Tamrat Emanuel.<sup>6</sup> He enrolled the students in the "*Ecole Normale*" of the Alliance in Paris. Through Faitlovitch's influence, the "*Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*" decided to sponsor other young Ethiopian Jews to study in Europe and at its training school in Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup>

Faitlovitch was convinced that the Beta Yisrael were truly Jewish, and that unless they were encouraged to resist the missionaries, their very survival as a Jewish community was threatened. He concluded that they needed education and contact with Jews from the rest of the world. Thus, Faitlovitch attempted to convince the European Jewish communal organizations, especially the Alliance, to take a closer look at the Ethiopian Jewish situation.<sup>8</sup> When he returned to Paris, Faitlovitch submitted a report to his patron, Baron Edmond de Rothschild: "You see, M. le Baron... the Falashas are really Jews. They have the same aspirations that we do; they believe, like

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<sup>6</sup> The system of naming in Ethiopia has no parallel in Western societies. Every person, both male and female, is known by his or her first name. Rather than being joined to a family name, this is joined to the father's first name, which is taken to be a person's second name. The father's second name, which was his father's first name, is not handed down. It is a faux pas, as well as a basic error in identification, to call or refer to an Ethiopian Jew by his second name. This denies his/her identity; as it is not him/her who is being addressed, but rather his/her father. Throughout this thesis, in respect to the Ethiopian custom of naming, Beta Yisrael will be referred to by either their first name alone, or their first and second names together (for example, Gete or Gete Eremyas). Ethiopian Israelis who have assumed Hebraicized names will be referred to by either their second name alone or their first and second names together (for example, Elazar or Rachamim Elazar). For more on the Beta Yisrael and Ethiopian customs of naming, see The Ethiopian Jews' Names and How They Get Them, Dr. Chaim Rosen, written with the support of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, estimated date: 1985-86; from the files of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York.

<sup>7</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, pp. 9-10.

<sup>8</sup> Marc Shapiro, "Return of a Lost Tribe: The unfinished Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews," The World & I, April 1988, pp. 483-84.

us, that they are the future of Israel... They are an active, intelligent, moral people, with a thirst for learning."<sup>9</sup> He implored the philanthropist to extend his humanitarian efforts to the Ethiopian Jews. However, aid never materialized from Rothschild or the Alliance, neither of whom appeared to be interested in helping 'primitive black Jews.'<sup>10</sup>

Faitlovitch launched an aggressive lecture tour to raise funds, primarily for the purpose of education and the building of a school in Asmara.<sup>11</sup> Faitlovitch was deeply worried by the success of the Protestant missions, and he appealed to Jews around the world to help preserve the Beta Yisrael. He set up "Pro-Falasha" support committees in Europe and later in the United States to help offset the work of the missions. Faitlovitch moved his headquarters from Germany to Florence, Italy, and successfully recruited Samuel H. Margulies, Chief Rabbi of Florence, well-known both as a scholar and as an activist in charitable organizations, to head the movement.<sup>12</sup> "They expect fraternal help from us," Faitlovitch lamented in his 1920 article, "The Falashas."<sup>13</sup> "They ask us to help them to establish schools and to secure books for them from which their children may get instruction and the knowledge of Judaism," Faitlovitch asserted. "They have an ardent desire for knowledge, are disposed towards progress, and strive to attain perfection." Faitlovitch

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<sup>9</sup> Louis Rapoport, The Lost Jews (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1980), p. 175; and Louis Rapoport, Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Asmara had a Yemenite Jewish community, whose history is also deeply rooted in Ethiopia.

<sup>12</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Faitlovitch, "The Falashas" (Geneva, Switzerland: University of Geneva, 1920), p. 21 [Reprint from the American Jewish Year Book, 5681, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1920].



concluded: "To preserve them from destruction and from assimilation is a duty incumbent upon all Jews."<sup>14</sup>

In 1906, he got the signature of forty-four leading European rabbis on a letter proclaiming the authenticity of the Beta Yisrael's Jewishness and a fervent hope that they would soon be reunited in Zion.

A letter bearing the signature of forty-four rabbis and halakhic scholars from around the world was sent to the Jews of Ethiopia, encouraging them to maintain their faith and not to bend to the activities of missionaries... The letter opens: "Shalom to you, our brothers, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who live in the land of Ethiopia... You are our flesh and blood... We your brothers will do everything in our powers to send you help."<sup>15</sup>

In 1908, Faitlovitch returned to Ethiopia with a translation of the above letter, and a promise from the rabbis to provide books and create educational facilities. Faitlovitch went to Eritrea, located in the northwestern region of Ethiopia, and then under Italian rule, seeking the approval of the Italian officials to start a school in the capitol of Asmara. He returned to Europe after a year and published his *Quer Durch Abessinien* [*Travels to Abyssina*] in 1909 in Berlin. He enrolled Gete and Solomon Isaac at the "Hilfsverein der Duetschen Juden" in Jerusalem for further education. Along with Gete, he later established headquarters in Amba Gualit in the Seqelt district of Ethiopia. Additionally, Faitlovitch established an aid center in Frankfurt-am-Main in March of 1914, where Yona Bogala and Mercuria Segay later attended the "Klibansky Schulerheim" from 1922 to 1923.<sup>16</sup> Further, in 1914, Faitlovitch founded a school for the Beta Yisrael in Begembar; and in the 1920s, he and his

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Menachem Elon, "The Ethiopian Jews: A Case Study in the Functioning of the Jewish Legal System," *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, 1986-1987, p. 556.

<sup>16</sup> *Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews*, p. 11.



sister Leah set up a teacher training school for Ethiopian Jews in Addis Ababa. This boarding school educated the children of six Beta Yisrael families who were brought to the capital to work for Haile Selassie as builders and blacksmiths, and remained open until the Italians ordered it shut in 1936 at the beginning of their occupation of Ethiopia.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his successes, not the least of which was constraining missionary activities, Faitlovitch's relationship with the Alliance never seemed to flourish and consisted of mutual distrust.<sup>18</sup> Overlapping with Faitlovitch's second journey to Ethiopia in 1908, and in spite of the 1906 letter of the forty-four leading rabbis reaffirming Jewish kinship and common destiny with the Beta Yisrael, the Alliance sent Rabbi Haim Nahum to Ethiopia to check on the reports of Faitlovitch.

[A] degree of scepticism remained [in Europe] and not least in the circles of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, which not only controlled large sums of money but was very effective in founding and maintaining many excellent schools for Jewish communities, especially in Muslim countries. This powerful organization was almost ideally suited to bring educational aid to a backward Jewish community but the plight of their Ethiopian co-religionists failed to excite the worthy French Jews who presided over its destinies... The Alliance were [sic] at best lukewarm on the whole subject. They had done nothing to follow up Halevy's findings and they had shown little interest in Faitlovitch's proposals. Indeed, they seemed to be searching for an excuse not to get involved. They were anxious to show that the Falasha problem was marginal and that the numbers were minimal.<sup>19</sup>

In short, the Alliance apparently sent Nahum, a Turkish rabbi, to counter increased pressure generated by Faitlovitch.<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Nahum differed

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<sup>17</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 176; and Redemption Song, p. 39.

<sup>18</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> David Kessler, The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia (New York: Africana Publishing Company, a division of Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982), pp. 136-37.

<sup>20</sup> "Return of a Lost Tribe," p. 484.

completely with Faitlovitch, stating categorically that the "Falashas" were not Jewish, that they were happy where they were, and that there was no need to teach them modern Judaism. Rabbi Nahum even went as far as praising the work of the Christian missionaries.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Nahum acted on his findings by "not going out of his way either to find Falashas in remote areas or to raise their expectations."<sup>22</sup> Thus, "the Alliance were [sic] let off the hook and they naturally followed the advice of their trusted and distinguished representative."<sup>23</sup> Faitlovitch, angered by the indifference of the Alliance, accused Rabbi Nahum of being overly influenced by the Protestant missionaries, and lamented the Beta Yisrael's fate, calling them "those martyrs of Judaism."<sup>24</sup> It is upon his return in 1909, that Faitlovitch wrote the aforementioned account of his second journey, *Quer Durch Abessinien*, which he intended to be a response to the views of the Alliance.<sup>25</sup> He persisted in setting up his own "mission," countering Protestant conversion efforts, and helping to bring the Beta Yisrael into the Jewish mainstream. "Faitlovitch worked unceasingly to persuade world Jewry to come to the assistance of their brethren in Ethiopia. At the same time, he sought to close the gap between the Beta-Israel and other Jews by raising their educational standards and reforming their religious practice."<sup>26</sup>

Not unlike the role played by certain complacent world Jewish leaders during the Nazi era, Nahum failed to see the damage his fallacious and self-serving report did to Jewish solidarity. To be sure, it generated an energy-draining dispute which diverted attention from the central issues. It was fortunate, however, that the setbacks he caused in

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<sup>21</sup> *Redemption Song*, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> *The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia*, p. 138.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>24</sup> *The Lost Jews*, p. 176.

<sup>25</sup> *The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia*, p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> *Redemption Song*, p. 39.

Ethiopian and world Jewish solidarity did not dampen the enthusiasm of Faitlovitch and his dedicated supporters.<sup>27</sup>

In 1913, Faitlovitch traveled to Ethiopia for the third time. On this trip he was finally able to establish the first village school with funds he raised in Europe. He appointed Gete Eremyas as its teacher. Upon his return to Europe, he visited England and formed a pro-Falasha committee with the new Chief Rabbi Dr J. H. Hertz serving as president.<sup>28</sup> However, due to the onset of the First World War, the plans of this new committee were either abandoned or postponed. Faitlovitch during the war years sought refuge in Switzerland where he lectured on Ethiopian languages at the University of Geneva. He was not able to travel to Ethiopia again for his fourth visit until 1920. At that time, Tamrat Emanuel and Solomon Isaac returned to Ethiopia from abroad, and when Faitlovitch left Abyssinia after three months, he took with him four young boys to be educated in schools in Europe and Eretz Yisrael.<sup>29</sup> Among them was Yona Bogala, age thirteen, who later played a leading role in organizing the Beta Yisrael, educating his people, and acting as a key liason with world Jewry. In 1924, Faitlovitch again returned to Ethiopia and arranged to open the first Jewish boarding school in Addis Ababa with Tamrat Emanuel as the headmaster.

For over fifty years, Jacques Faitlovitch helped the Beta Yisrael not only by his contacts with the community in Ethiopia, but also by his fund raising efforts in Europe, America and Palestine. Faitlovitch immigrated to Israel in

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<sup>27</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 144.

As mentioned, Faitlovitch had previously set up "Pro-Falasha committees" in Italy and Germany. A section later in this chapter is devoted to the efforts of the "American Pro-Falasha Committee," which was founded in 1922 by Faitlovitch.

<sup>29</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 144.

1948, and managed to persuade the Jewish Agency's Torah Education Department to send two rabbis to Asmara in Eritrea, where a boarding school for the Beta Yisrael had been established. Unfortunately, the project was soon abandoned.<sup>30</sup> Faitlovitch devoted his entire life to the Ethiopian Jews, and when he died in 1955, he left his large house in Tel Aviv to the Beta Yisrael community. One testimony to Faitlovitch remarks:

The common thread that ran through all aspects of his program on their [Beta Yisrael] behalf was the attempt to bring them closer to other Jewish communities. To this end, he sought to raise their standards of education and created a Western-educated elite capable of interacting on a more or less equal basis with their foreign Jewish counterparts. He also promoted an image of Ethiopian Jewry that was both familiar and attractive to European and American Jewish audiences. Thus, he portrayed the Beta Israel as an alien Jewish element in a strange African environment...

To this day the popular image of Ethiopian Jews is largely that created by Faitlovitch less than a century ago. perhaps even more importantly, many of Faitlovitch's policies and the changes he initiated foreshadowed the more intensive encounter of the Beta Israel with World Jewry many years later.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 177.

<sup>31</sup> Ruth Westheimer and Steven Kaplan, Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 18.

## RABBI ABRAHAM ISAAC KOOK

During the same period as Faitlovitch, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who later became the chief Rabbi of Palestine, wrote many letters concerning the Ethiopian Jews. He called them "brothers," who, for historical reasons, had been cut off from the remainder of the Jewish people.<sup>32</sup> On December 4, 1921, Rabbi Kook wrote an appeal to the Jews of the world:

[S]ave our Falasha brethren from extinction and... rescue 50,000 souls of the House of Israel from oblivion. A holy obligation rests upon our entire nation to raise funds with a generous hand to improve the lot of the Falashas in Ethiopia and to bring their young children to Jewish centers in Palestine and the Diaspora.<sup>33</sup>

Although this forceful declaration must have helped Faitlovitch to raise funds, it failed to create more than a ripple in the Jewish world, where other pressing matters were demanding urgent attention; namely, pogroms, confusion following the end of the First World War and the birth-pangs of the Jewish National Homeland.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> "The Ethiopian Jews: A Case Study in the Functioning of the Jewish Legal System," p. 556.

<sup>33</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, pp. 144-45.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 145.

## YONA BOGALA

Yona Bogala was born in 1908, in the village of Wallaca near Gondar. Yona studied Hebrew with Faitlovitch every day after sunset for several months while the Sorbonne scholar was in Walleca in 1921. Yona's parents reluctantly agreed to Faitlovitch's proposal to take Yona, along with some of the other students, to Palestine and Europe to be educated.<sup>35</sup> Yona and the other three youths were part of the "student chain" that had begun in the 1860s. After several years of education in Palestine and Europe, these students returned to Ethiopia and taught Hebrew and spread the message of Zionism. Yona studied for over two years at a Jerusalem yeshiva and then went with Faitlovitch to Frankfurt, where he studied German and Yiddish. In his midteens, he continued his education at a Jewish school in Switzerland, studying French and Hebrew.<sup>36</sup>

After completing his education, Yona Bogala joined Faitlovitch's very first pupil, Tamrat Emanuel, who had become a professor and director of the teacher-training school set up by Faitlovitch and his sister in Addis Ababa in 1924. Yona, as the school's assistant director and head teacher, helped to educate dozens of the Beta Yisrael, many of whom walked hundreds of miles from Gondar Province to study at the boarding school. After two years of study, graduates of the program were sent out to start schools in the main Beta Yisrael villages.<sup>37</sup>

From 1924 to 1935, Faitlovitch and the Pro-Falasha Committees sponsored the education of about forty students in Eretz Yisrael, France, Germany, England and other countries. On their return, some of them became

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<sup>35</sup> *Redemption Song*, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43.



teachers in the Jewish/Hebrew schools, and others became employees in Ethiopian government offices.<sup>38</sup> The Ethiopian clergy and the local Ethiopian officials reacted negatively to Jewish students studying abroad and the operation of Jewish schools in the capital, Addis Ababa, and in the Beta Yisrael villages. The clergy, pushed by Protestant missionaries, petitioned Emperor Haile Selassie and provincial governors to close the schools. Several of the schools were shut down, their teachers imprisoned, and their students dispersed.<sup>39</sup> In 1936, when the Italians occupied Ethiopia, Emanuel Tamrat, who was on the Fascists' "wanted list," fled to England. Yona, in addition to teaching, took over the administration of the college until the Italians shut it down. Five of the school's teachers and outstanding students were imprisoned by the Italians and later murdered. The Italians also executed thirty-three Ethiopian Jews in the Woggera region, where the Ethiopians had carried on a guerrilla war against the invaders.<sup>40</sup>

After the Italians destroyed the school, Yona went to work for coffee merchants. He took on the burden of financially supporting sixty Jewish students from the Gondar area who still lived in Addis Ababa after the closing of the school. He continued to tutor them in Hebrew and other subjects privately in his home.<sup>41</sup> In 1938, after the Italians intercepted a letter he sent to Tamrat Emanuel in England, Yona became a fugitive. He fled to Wallaga, and worked in the gold mines, eventually becoming the chief supervisor of the mines. When the Italians withdrew from Ethiopia in 1941, Yona went back to the capital and became head of the Education Ministry's Department of Schools.

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<sup>38</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, pp. 145-46.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p. 146.

<sup>40</sup> Redemption Song, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*



But shortly after Haile Selassie expanded the office to include supervision of schools run by the Christian missionaries, Yona read a report that four thousand Falashas, about one-eighth of the Jewish community, had been baptized in these institutions. He resigned in anger and vowed to devote himself to preserving his people's identity.<sup>42</sup>

The Italian invasion of 1936, and the outbreak of the Second World War three years later, spelled disaster for the Beta Yisrael educational programs. Until that time, the schools had developed a level of proficiency and success, creating a group of Beta Yisrael with a good base in general and Jewish education. The war, however, caused delays in essential aspects of these educational programs. Such delays included the publicizing of the plight of the Ethiopian Jews, the creation of essential contacts, and the establishment of rescue and relief organizations. The ties that were severed required reestablishment. This hiatus resulted in the loss of valuable time, energy and most importantly, lives.

In the 1950s, with the aid of funds from the Jewish Agency, Yona set up and ran a teacher-training school in Asmara, Eritrea, which was later transferred to the village of Wuzava, near Ambover, the largest Beta Yisrael village. The establishment of this educational institution came at a critical time because after his return in 1941, Haile Selassie encouraged the conversion of his Jewish population, and the missionaries had actively pursued conversions in the Beta Yisrael villages. The school seemed to be the needed link to forge a connection between the Ethiopian Jews and their brethren in Israel. The school in Asmara opened in January of 1954 with fifty-seven students of both sexes, including seven kessim (Ethiopian

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, pp. 44-45.

cohanim, or priests).<sup>43</sup> A year later, twenty-seven boys and girls were sent to the children's village of Kfar Batya at Ra'anana in Israel, most of them returned to Ethiopia to teach.<sup>44</sup>

Tragically, in 1958, neighboring Christians razed the synagogue, classrooms, kitchen, and dormitories of Asmara and Wuzava, while the Ethiopian government authorities did nothing to help the Beta Yisrael. After Faitlovitch's death in Tel Aviv in 1955, the mild support for the Beta Yisrael that the Jewish Agency had expressed immediately waned. "Around the same time, the Jewish Agency decided to cut off most of its aid to Falasha schools, a move that was welcomed by the English evangelical missionary chief, Eric Payne."<sup>45</sup> The Beta Yisrael, relying on their own meager resources and the guidance of Yona Bogala, set up a new central school in Ambover with teachers who had returned from Kfar Batya in Israel. They spent the next twenty-five years teaching Hebrew, introducing the Beta Yisrael to the customs of other Jews, and waiting for the time when they could return to the Promised Land. The Zionist zeal of the Kfar Batya veterans clearly inspired the younger generation, and the introduction of Zionist ideology reinforced the Beta Yisrael's religious longings for redemption. However, it was a quiet and gradual process in the 1960s, bearing Yona Bogala's mark.<sup>46</sup>

Yona Bogala petitioned the emperor in writing and in person on numerous occasions – pleading for protection and an end to the violence and discrimination directed against the Beta Yisrael. Equally as important, Yona

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<sup>43</sup> The kes, or cohen, is the spiritual leader of the Beta Yisrael. Because the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia did not receive the majority of the Oral Tradition, there have never been "rabbis" per se leading their religious community.

<sup>44</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 149. Following is more on the student programs at Kfar Batya.

<sup>45</sup> Redemption Song, p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 45-46.

regularly appealed to prominent rabbis around the world to reach a conclusive decision regarding the Beta Yisrael's Jewishness, and in his various correspondences quoted the rulings of well-known rabbis such as Radbaz and Kook. Yet, his efforts did not pay off until 1973 when Israel's Chief Sephardic Rabbi, Ovadia Yosef, ruled that the Beta Yisrael were Jewish according to Halakhah.<sup>47</sup>

The Jewish financial aid Yona Bogala received and dispensed to thousands of the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia from the 1950s through the 1970s was miniscule, about \$30,000 a year, and never exceeded \$50,000.<sup>48</sup> Most of the aid came from the Falasha Welfare Association in England, headed by Jewish Chronicle publisher David Kessler, the American Pro-Falasha Committee and the American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ).<sup>49</sup> In the 1970s, Yona Bogala became increasingly critical of the Israeli government for not moving fast enough to recognize the Beta Yisrael as Jews and helping them to immigrate. "[B]ut his approach was always diplomatic."<sup>50</sup> Yona believed in the values of "negotiation" and "compromise."<sup>51</sup> "His primary goal was to educate, to prepare his people for the day when they would be brought to Israel. But he learned that the Beta Yisrael would have to push for their aliyah..."<sup>52</sup>

He encouraged the Ethiopian Jews to ameliorate their own condition, by such actions as participating in the Setit-Humera Development Project, organized by the Ethiopian government with the assistance of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Bank. "In the

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<sup>47</sup> Subsequent chapters provide more detail on the ruling of Ovadiah Yosef in 1973 .

<sup>48</sup> Redemption Song, p. 47.

<sup>49</sup> More on these groups follows in this and subsequent chapters.

<sup>50</sup> Redemption Song, p. 49.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

absence of any prospect of an organized aliyah Yona saw in this scheme the possibility that his people could once again secure farming land in their own right, free from the oppression of greedy landlords, where they could found their own settlements."<sup>53</sup> The 1969 project involved clearing malaria-infested lowlands in Western Begemeder, near the Sudanese border, and developing farms. The Ethiopian Jews initially regarded this as an opportunity to acquire their own land and to grow cash crops. A group of the Beta Yisrael formed a commune, working for five years to clear and cultivate some 5000 acres of land.<sup>54</sup> Despite their efforts, some of the Sudanese harassed the Beta Yisrael, accusing them of being "Zionist agents." Additionally, poor climatic conditions and the general lack of safety in the area due to the various warring factions made life unbearable. Thus, the Ethiopian-Jewish farmers were forced off the land when Haile Selassie was deposed in September of 1974. The little settlement was caught between revolutionary Marxist troops in Ethiopia and counterrevolutionary pro-Royalist forces on the Sudanese frontier.<sup>55</sup>

From his aliyah in 1978 until his death in August of 1987, Yona lived in a modest home in Petah Tikva in semi-retirement, translating and writing for the Absorption Ministry's new Amharic<sup>56</sup> newspaper.<sup>57</sup> Despite all the suffering his people endured, Yona Bogala expressed thankfulness for the eventual rescue of the Beta Yisrael in the 1980s through a combined effort of many individuals, organizations and governments:

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<sup>53</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 158.

<sup>54</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, pp. 158-59; and "Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews," p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> Most of the Beta Yisrael, those who come from the Gondar region, speak Amharic. Other dialects, namely Tigrean (those Jews who come from the province of Tigrey), are spoken by a smaller segment of the Ethiopian Jewish population.

<sup>57</sup> Redemption Song, p. 219.

[I]t is a miracle we have been saved. In my last years in Ethiopia, I thought our tribe was lost, without hope for aliyah. Everything -- our schools, the aid projects -- everything seemed in vain. Every day, our tribe was being reduced, as youths left the villages and tradition broke down. Life in Ethiopia was a punishment. Even our liturgical language, Ge'ez, was a punishment; we had to adopt it because we had lost Hebrew. But suddenly, we have Hebrew again. That is our tradition... We're here, thanks to G-d. Now it's up to the people of Israel to help our people with what we lack -- education. It's not an easy task, but I believe it will be done.<sup>58</sup>

Although Yona Bogala remained a venerated figure among the Beta Yisrael community throughout his life, after he opposed a major demonstration in 1985 by the Ethiopian immigrants against a ruling by the Chief Rabbinate,<sup>59</sup> "some of the militants and their supporters dismissed him as an Uncle Tom."<sup>60</sup>

Yona, who had been an educator of his people for well over fifty years, believed to his last days that the key to successfully integrating Ethiopian Jews in Israel lies in learning. His efforts helped spur the aliyah of the Beta Yisrael, and his words and deeds continue to serve as a basis for the absorption of the Ethiopian Jews.

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<sup>58</sup> The words of Yona Bogala, as rendered in Redemption Song, p. 220 and p. 219.

<sup>59</sup> The Ethiopian immigrants demonstrated in the courtyard of the Plaza Hotel in Jerusalem, which faces the office of the Chief Rabbinate, protesting the rabbinate's requirement that the Beta Yisrael be converted, immersed and circumcised prior to marriage in Israel. See chapter eight for more details.

<sup>60</sup> Redemption Song, pp. 218-219.

## THE AMERICAN PRO-FALASHA COMMITTEE<sup>61</sup>

After establishing Pro-Falasha committees in Italy, Germany and Great Britain, Faitlovitch established a chapter in the United States in 1922, dedicated to "rehabilitat[ing] our co-religionists."<sup>62</sup> Headquartered in New York and supported by Jacob Schiff, Louis Marshall, Cyrus Adler, Solomon Schechter and Israel Goldstein, the American Pro-Falasha Committee became the hub of Faitlovitch's activity and support for the Beta Yisrael. A 1938 information pamphlet, issued by the American Pro-Falasha Committee, entitled "The Romance of the Falashas," outlines the purpose and activities of the organization:

The American Pro-Falasha Committee is composed of prominent religious and lay Jewish leaders who realize the importance of the activities being conducted for the rehabilitation of the Falashas and who are eager to implement the program of culture and spiritual elevation of their Abyssinian coreligionists. They feel that it would be utterly disastrous and fatal for the Falashas should world Jewry be remiss in fraternal duty towards them. For the tragic history of our people has taught the Committee only too well that, owing to the indifference and oversight of their fellow Jews, several exotic Jewish groups have been permitted in the past to disappear completely. The American Pro-Falasha Committee is resolved to spare the Jews of Ethiopia that sad fate.

Since the activities in behalf of our Abyssinian coreligionists were initiated in Europe, and during the sixteen years of the existence of the American Pro-Falasha Committee in this country, there were actively identified with the movement some of the most outstanding Jews in the United States, who gave generously of their time and means to the furtherance of this important work...<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Many of these details about the American Pro-Falasha Committee are appearing in print for the first time.

<sup>62</sup> *The Lost Jews*, p. 176.

<sup>63</sup> "The Romance of the Falashas," pp. 13-14, pamphlet produced by the American Pro-Falasha Committee, 1938, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Nearprint File-Special Collection, "Falashas."



Another pamphlet of The American Pro-Falasha Committee entitled, "For the Educational and Religious Rehabilitation of the Abyssinian Jews (Falashas)," proclaims as a subheading that the organization is "The Only Missionary Enterprise Conducted by Jews among Jews."<sup>64</sup> While Dr. Cyrus Adler functioned as the Honorary Chairman, Dr. Israel Goldstein served as the Chairman, and the tri-continental Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch filled the Executive Director position, numerous national Jewish religious bodies -- Conservative, Orthodox and Reform -- expressed their approval and endorsement of the work of the American Pro-Falasha Committee. These organizations included the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, the National Council of Jewish Women, the United Synagogue of America, the Women's League of the United Synagogue of America, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations in America, and the Women's League of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations in America.<sup>65</sup>

Dr. Cyrus Adler, who at the time was President of the American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Theological Seminary, stated, "The Jews of the world owe it to themselves that the Falashas be given the opportunity to recover their faith. The remnant of this interesting community eagerly desires knowledge of Judaism."<sup>66</sup> Rabbi David Lefkowitz, President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and staunch supporter of The American Pro-Falasha Committee remarked: "The duty of reclaiming our own should ever be a challenge to the House of Israel. The reeducation of the Falashas in Jewish life

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<sup>64</sup> "The American Pro-Falasha Committee: For the Educational and Religious Rehabilitation of the Abyssinian Jews (Falashas)," front cover, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Nearprint File-Special Collection, "Falashas."

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

and knowledge is part of this duty. It should have an appeal to every loyal Jew."<sup>67</sup> Additionally, Mrs. Rebekah Kohut, President of the World Congress of Jewish Women and organizer for the American Pro-Falasha Committee, felt that "the preservation of this remnant of the tribe of Israel is one of the strange phenomena of Jewish history. We must help them to maintain their identity, since they have been so providentially preserved these many centuries."<sup>68</sup>

In a summary report of the activities of the American Pro-Falasha Committee from 1923 to 1927, the goals and activities of the organization, namely educational efforts and relief work, were clearly spelled out:

In August 1922, we succeeded in organizing the American Pro-Falasha Committee which undertook the responsibility of raising the annual budget that we needed to carry on our activities among the Falashas in Abyssinia. The budget was devised to cover two purposes: (1) to continue the work that had been begun in the interior of Abyssinia in 1913, and (2) to establish a central normal school in Addis-Ababa, the capital of Abyssinia, where the ablest of the Falashas could be taught for future leadership among their people.<sup>69</sup>

#### George Zepin and the delayed start of the American Pro-Falasha Committee

Relief and education, not rescue, were the focus of the American Pro-Falasha Committee. Moreover, it took the American Jewish community nearly ten years after Faitlovitch's initial efforts in the interior of Ethiopia in 1913, to recognize and support educational programs in Abyssinia. In January 1912, Rabbi George Zepin, Secretary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Director of Synagogue and School Extension in Cincinnati, detailed in a report his ambivalence as well as the ambivalence of the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> "The Work of the American Pro-Falasha Committee in Abyssinia: 1923-1927," p. 1, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus of the Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion, Manuscript Collection, Box 61, 1/1.

American Jewish community toward the Beta Yisrael, Faitlovitch and his work.<sup>70</sup> After presenting background material on the Ethiopian Jews, Zepin critiques a plan Faitlovitch proposed upon his return from Ethiopia in 1908 to the president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations to open a school in Eritrea.<sup>71</sup> "There is a serious question of pedagogy involved in the recommendations of Drs. Halevy and Faitlovitch. It is advisable to consider just what such a school would undertake to accomplish among the Falashas."<sup>72</sup>

Zepin proceeds to detail "the status of civilization in Abyssinia," characterizing Ethiopia as "unsafe," filled with "internal wars," "swamps give[ing] rise to malarial conditions" and "pestilential diseases," improper dress, made up of "rude huts of straw," and a "remunerative" slave trade.<sup>73</sup> Zepin further emphasizes that "the intellectual status of the Abyssinian Christian, as well as Falasha, is said by M. Haim Nahum and other writers to be very primitive."<sup>74</sup> Zepin concludes with a query based on the characterization of the Beta Yisrael as "primitive" people. "We are here confronted by a nice question of judgement. When the representatives of an advanced civilization undertake to bring education and uplift to a primitive people, what shall be their policy?"<sup>75</sup>

Answering his own question, Zepin draws a parallel between the Beta Yisrael and African-Americans. He stated that while old-fashioned education

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<sup>70</sup> "The Falashas: A Report concerning the advisability of establishing a school for Hebrew among the Falashas of Abyssinia; Submitted to Committee on Falasha Question," prepared by Rabbi George Zepin, Secretary of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Director of Synagogue and School Extension, Cincinnati, January, 1912, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus of the Hebrew Union College- Jewish Institute of Religion, Nearprint File-Special Collection, "Falashas."

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, pp. 14-15.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

is totally demoralizing and improper for the "average Negro," industrial education should be used as the "sane form of schooling adapted to a people of primitive mental attainments."<sup>76</sup> He felt education should be tailored to the circumstances and [perceived] capabilities of a people. Thus, he contended that whereas "over-education" is a problem in a country like Germany, where "the status of mentality is high," and the workingman has become "so learned that no one is content any longer to be a workingman," the curriculum proposed by Faitlovitch presents a problem of "wrong education."<sup>77</sup>

It is this same wrong education, this "book-learning," that is contemplated in Dr. Faitlovitch's plan to start a school for Hebrew literature and language in a semi-civilized country. Education should be the process of fitting a man for the life he must lead... education is purely and simply a preparation for fulfilling the duties of his station... Education for people of primitive intelligence must not be a regimen of Hebrew...<sup>78</sup>

Like The Alliance, Zepin adhered to the view that "a regimen of book-learning is ruinous to the character of a primitive people."<sup>79</sup> Zepin rejected the idea of Drs. Halevy and Faitlovitch to establish a Talmud-Torah type school for the Beta Yisrael. He did, however, question why the Alliance had not opened any school for the Beta Yisrael, even one utilizing its own pedagogy, in the forty-four years that it had dealt with the issue. Despite recognizing this short-coming, Zepin defends the Alliance's decision not to open a school in Ethiopia, citing a number of reasons. First, the hostility of the Abyssinian government and church toward foreign and non-coptic religious movements was tremendous. Second, there was danger for the Beta Yisrael to travel to a

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

centrally located school. Third, the "Falashas" maintained "queer superstitions" concerning people who live in other lands. Fourth, the construction of the school might have increased Christian missionary activity among the Ethiopian Jews.<sup>80</sup> Finally:

Abyssinia is a land of very primitive civilization... What end would it serve to make the Falashas, whose successful efforts at handicraft are already attributed to magic still more deft in their work, if the rest of their Abyssinian surroundings do not make progress with them?... The rest of Abyssinia is not making progress, and better work is not demanded nor appreciated. Education in Abyssinia must prepare a man to live in Abyssinia...<sup>81</sup>

In the conclusion of his January 1912 report concerning the "Falashas" and the activities of Dr. Faitlovitch and the Alliance, Zepin states:

We are asked to organize a branch of a new international society -- The Pro-Falasha Committee. If this new society is called into existence to conduct a work which no other existing society is organized to undertake, it would be proper to lend our assistance, if the aims meet our approval. If this Pro-Falasha Committee is intended to duplicate the work of The Alliance Israelite Universelle, it may be wise to delay our assistance until we communicate with the Alliance. We owe it to the older organization to ask why it has not seen fit to pursue the work suggested. Besides, it is not the part of wisdom to multiply international organizations.<sup>82</sup>

In part, the indifference, if not the negative outlook of Zepin toward Faitlovitch and the work of the Pro-Falasha Committees in Europe, thwarted the committee's arrival to America by ten years. The mission of Rabbi Nahum and the stance of the Alliance, coupled with exacerbated views of the "primitive" nature of the Beta Yisrael and Ethiopia and the "blackness" of their co-religionists delayed action. Therefore, it was not until August of 1922 that Faitlovitch and his supporters in the United States organized the American

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, pp. 19-20.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

Pro-Falasha Committee, and not through the auspices of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

The modest beginnings of the school in Addis Ababa and the work in the interior of Ethiopia, which were the two major goals of the American Pro-Falasha Committee, produced some results. Tamrat Emanuel became one of the outstanding men of Addis Ababa. He was respected by community and government circles alike for his educational background and endeavors with the Beta Yisrael.<sup>83</sup> The American Pro-Falasha Committee also pointed to the amelioration of the social and political conditions affecting the Beta Yisrael. As a result of the schools, "their self consciousness as a group has been elevated and a great measure of pride and self respect has been inculcated."<sup>84</sup> Additionally, the committee notes that "the previous rapid tendency of conversion to Christianity has been practically checked," and that "Hebrew has been made increasingly known to the Falashas, thus placing them in more direct touch with the sources of Judaism."<sup>85</sup> In future years, the American Pro-Falasha Committee brought a number of students to study in Europe and Palestine. They also purchased a permanent home for the school in Addis Ababa, which included a section for girls to live and study. Additionally, they published and translated books in Amharic, Ge'ez and Hebrew.<sup>86</sup>

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and 1936 greatly curtailed the activities of the American Pro-Falasha Committee. "Under the Italian rule no

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<sup>83</sup> Tamrat Emanuel later became a government official in the Department of Education, as well as a diplomat and advisor to emperor Haile Selassie.

<sup>84</sup> "The Work of the American Pro-Falasha Committee in Abyssinia: 1923-1927," p. 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Based on various reports of the activities of the American Pro-Falasha Committee.



foreign organization can carry on any program of education independently and our activities therefore are to some extent curtailed."<sup>87</sup>

Although the American Pro-Falasha Committee stayed in existence into the 1950s, and for a brief time reorganized during the late 1960s, world events kept the Committee out of Ethiopia after 1936. After the Italian invasion halted activities, the Second World War virtually precluded any actions on behalf of the Beta Yisrael. The aftermath of the Holocaust, as well as the birth of the Jewish State, pre-occupied American and European Jewry. Israel's initial absorption efforts focused on European Jewry, and Jews from Yemen and North Africa. Moreover, after Faitlovitch's death in 1955, pressure on the Israeli government diminished, and the American Pro-Falasha Committee lost its guiding light. "In retrospect it appears that Faitlovitch was far more successful in drawing attention to the Beta Israel than in saving or reforming them. Although his visits gave the Beta Israel new hope and strengthened their resolve to resist the missions, World Jewry remained largely unmoved by his pleas."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> "Conference of the American Pro-Falasha Committee, New York City, Feb. 1, 1938, Report of the chairman Dr. Elias L. Solomon," American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Manuscript Collection, Box 61, 2/2.

<sup>88</sup> Steve Kaplan et al., The Jews of Ethiopia: A People in Transition (Tel Aviv: Beth Hatefutsoth, The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, 1986), p. 21.

# THE ACTIVITY/INACTIVITY OF WORLD, PALESTINIAN AND ISRAELI JEWS AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

After the end of the Second World War, recovery from the Holocaust and the struggle for Jewish independence in Palestine initially consumed most of the energy of Western Jewry. These issues preoccupied individual and organizational time and efforts-- leaving barely a moment to contemplate the Jews in distant Ethiopia. But, in 1948, when word reached the Horn of Africa of the creation of Israel, the Beta Yisrael's hopes arose that they would join their fellow Jews in their newly regained homeland. Although Faitlovitch, while living from 1945 until his death in 1955 in the newly established Jewish State, pressed for an Ethiopian aliyah, "Jews from other areas of the world were given a higher priority for immigration to Israel."<sup>89</sup> Faitlovitch felt that Israel should now assume responsibility for redeeming the exiled tribes, and he looked to the new government and the Jewish Agency, which was responsible for the absorption and education of new immigrants, to undertake this task.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, the policy of Emperor Haile Selassie, whose friendship the Israeli government sought, was hostile to emigration of Ethiopian citizens. Thus, the hopes for aliyah soon vanished, "and the long historic romance of the Ten Tribes and the more recent Western Jewish encounter with [the] Beta Yisrael appeared for a time to pass into oblivion, ironically at a time when the Jewish people found their long-lost independence."<sup>91</sup> Moreover, efforts were hampered when speaker of the Knesset Yisrael Yeshayahu, who had visited the Beta Yisrael in 1952, suggested upon his return, that the Ethiopian Jews convert to Christianity in order to

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<sup>89</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Jews of Ethiopia, p. 14.

<sup>90</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 149.

<sup>91</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Jews of Ethiopia, p. 15.

solve their problems.<sup>92</sup> "The government and the Christian community would be very happy and the Falashas would only stand to benefit from such a move; they would receive their own region."<sup>93</sup>

In January of 1954, perhaps to appease the assertive Faitlovitch, the Jewish Agency decided to set up the aforementioned teacher-training boarding-school in Asmara, Eritrea, and to restart some of the village classes in the Gondar region. As previously discussed, the school in Asmara opened with fifty-seven students, and in 1955-56, twenty-seven of those students were sent to Israel to study in the Youth Aliyah village of Kfar Batya. The Kfar Batya program was short-lived. With the death of Faitlovitch in 1955, even the weak support for the Beta Yisrael in the Jewish Agency waned. No more children were sent to Kfar Batya, and two years after Faitlovitch's death, the school in Asmara was closed. "Ethiopian Jewish education was shrinking rather than growing."<sup>94</sup> Publicly, the closures were said to be fiscally, and not politically related, as "[t]he Jewish Agency pleaded shortage of funds."<sup>95</sup> In general, Kfar Batya was a disappointment for everyone concerned. "The student group was never intended, as some Ethiopians thought, to spearhead aliyah to Israel. Moreover, the program lacked any definable objective. If it was intended to be a training program for service in Ethiopia, it was a poor one."<sup>96</sup> Dr. Ephraim Isaac asserts that which the Kfar Batya education stood for is more difficult to assess than that for which it did not stand:

It was not preparatory for higher education. It was not a vocational training program. It was simply not a formal or planned educational

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<sup>92</sup> Redemption Song, p. 48.

<sup>93</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 196.

<sup>94</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Jews of Ethiopia, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 150.

<sup>96</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Jews of Ethiopia, p. 16.

curriculum. It was not even an experimental program to see how Ethiopians would adapt to Israel. Those who had the aptitude for college education were discouraged from seeking it, according to a first-hand report that I received from one of the participants. One of the students, the son of a prominent Ethiopian Jew, sought and received Ethiopian government assistance to pursue a college degree in Israel and a doctorate in France, after being flatly denied any assistance by the Israeli Ministry of Education.<sup>97</sup>

Upon their return to Ethiopia, the Kfar Batya students had difficulty utilizing the skills they learned in Israel. Although a few of them found jobs as village teachers, they were eventually forced, because of poor economic conditions, to find modest jobs in Israeli companies in Ethiopia. In particular, they found employment in the Incode meat-packing plant and the Solel Boneh building firm. Additionally, a few continued to work as school teachers in the Ambover School, to which the Jewish Agency continued to offer modest support.<sup>98</sup>

In February of 1960, following a plea to emperor Haile Selassie to ameliorate their situation and stamp out discrimination, prejudice and violence, the Beta Yisrael addressed an open letter to Jewish organizations abroad. In the letter, the Ethiopian Jews detailed the difficult situation of the Beta Yisrael vis-a-vis their indigenous neighbors, and addressed the attitude of the monarch towards their community. They were offended because the emperor refused them an audience when he visited Gondar in 1959, and because the government failed to fulfill numerous promises to the Beta Yisrael. "They [the Beta Yisrael] had reached the conclusion that the emperor favoured the missionaries and wished to encourage assimilation and, therefore, the merging of the Falasha community into the Amhara

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, pp. 16-17.

majority."<sup>99</sup> Perhaps Haile Selassie's policy of "amharization," a set of measures to ensure the Amhara's continuing dominance over other tribes and nations in the Ethiopian empire, was an additional reason why the emperor opposed emigration to Israel. If the Beta Yisrael left Ethiopia, it would reduce the number of Haile Selassie's supporters in relation to the non-Christians, especially the Muslim population.

The open letter to the Jewish world expressed the Beta Yisrael's disappointment over the lack of action on the part of their fellow Jews, requested medical and educational assistance in Ethiopia, and, most fervently and importantly, implored for help to actualize aliyah to Israel. "World Jewry has cast us forth from the fold of Judaism and is far from willing to help us in this last stand against overwhelming factors."<sup>100</sup>

The document ends with an appeal for help and, once again, one cannot fail to be struck by the dignity of the plea. As on many previous occasions this is not a begging letter, a request for alms, although it came from a desperately impoverished community, but a request for help in negotiating with the monarch about emigration, for medical assistance 'in order to render us independent of the Mission,' for improvement in Hebrew education 'by the establishment of a school and boarding-school for thirty young teachers in Addis Ababa, and for technical instruction through the ORT organization.'<sup>101</sup>

The document reached two of the leading Jewish institutions, the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC, which later added 'Jewish' to its title) and the World Jewish Congress (WJC). These organizations sent Norman Bentwich to Ethiopia in 1961 to visit the Beta Yisrael villages. Bentwich was well suited to become an advocate for the Ethiopian Jews. He was a prominent

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<sup>99</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 152.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

British Jew who acted as a consultant on international relations to Haile Selassie during the Second World War. Additionally, he met Tamrat Emanuel, who then was an official in the Ethiopian Ministry of Education, on a visit to Ethiopia in 1943.<sup>102</sup> "But, after nine years of endeavor and three more visits to Ethiopia, in 1963, 1966 and 1970, he was appalled by the continuing Jewish neglect of the community. He was still struggling on their behalf when he died, in London, in April 1971, at the age of eighty-eight."<sup>103</sup>

Bentwich recognized that the great danger to the continued existence of the Ethiopian Jews lay in the activities of the missionaries, now busier than ever, and in the forces of assimilation. If the community was to be saved it needed substantial help from abroad and a reinforcement of the tenuous links connecting it with world Jewry and especially with the State of Israel. The paltry aid supplied by the Jewish Agency, which paid the miserable salaries of half a dozen teachers in one or two village schools, though better than nothing, had to be augmented. Bentwich threw his considerable prestige and authority behind the attempt to stimulate interest in the subject.<sup>104</sup>

Perhaps as a response to the February 1960 letter, the World Jewish Congress in 1962 sent an Israeli doctor, Dan Har-El and his wife, to serve in the Gondar region for a two year mission. Har-El administered free vaccinations, distributed UNICEF supplies and lectured at the Public Health College in Gondar. The Ethiopian government required that his services be rendered to Jew and non-Jew alike and be free of charge. Argentinean born Israeli Dr. Mario Felszer succeeded Har-El, providing similar services.<sup>105</sup>

In short, while world Jewish organizations sent a minimal amount of aid to Ethiopia, the Israeli government did not even consider itself responsible for

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<sup>102</sup> "Return of a Lost Tribe," pp. 484-45.

<sup>103</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 153.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 153-54.

<sup>105</sup> Redemption Song, p. 48 and Jewish Solidarity and the Jews of Ethiopia, p. 17.



sending aid to the Beta Yisrael. "Several Israeli medical teams worked in Ethiopia in those years (1960s),<sup>106</sup> even in Gondar itself, but no aid was designated for the Beta-Israel, who depended on the English missionaries for medical care."<sup>107</sup> These missionaries, who carried on in the tradition of nineteenth century predecessors such as J. M. Flad and Henry Stern, saved many lives with their medical care. However, the Jews charged that they "bought souls" with money, medical treatment and various other inducements.<sup>108</sup> Roger Cowley, who was the chief missionary to the Ethiopian Jews between 1963 and 1978, years in which he and his missionaries converted some five hundred to one thousand of the Beta Yisrael, would say some years later that "it is understandable that Jews regard Christian missionary work as repugnant. As a Christian, I would [now] disapprove of such practices."<sup>109</sup>

Although during the middle 1960s Bentwich enlisted the support of the British OSE Society for Medical Aid, whose function was to bring medical aid to impoverished Jewish communities abroad, and the Jewish Colonisation Association (JCA) which encourages agricultural settlements in various parts of the world, the assistance granted to the Beta Yisrael was modest at best.<sup>110</sup> At the end of May 1967, Bentwich called a conference of these organizations and the individuals who had displayed some interest in the fate of the Beta

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<sup>106</sup> Israel opened a Consulate in Addis Ababa in 1956, and in September 1961, Israel and Ethiopia exchanged ambassadors. Trade, developmental programs, agricultural and technical assistance and student exchanges between Israel and Ethiopia increased during and after these diplomatic milestones. Although relations were officially severed in 1973 after the Yom Kippur War, serious contacts continued until the Marxist Revolution in Ethiopia of 1974. Gradually, over the next fifteen years, the two countries resolidified their old friendship until diplomatic relations were restored in November of 1989. Many of these political intricacies are detailed in subsequent chapters.

<sup>107</sup> Redemption Song, p. 48.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, pp. 48-49.

<sup>110</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, p. 154-55.

Yisrael, under an umbrella organization called the Falasha Welfare Association (FWA). The FWA's directors took the view that "its first priority was to provide aid for the Falashas in Ethiopia while it was also important to encourage whatever legal emigration to Israel could be arranged."<sup>111</sup> He reported on the current situation of the Ethiopian Jews (he had just visited Ethiopia in 1966), and called for an increase in financial support.<sup>112</sup> While the British OSE had set up three health centers in villages in Gondar, and the JCA enabled the number of schools supported by the Jewish Agency to increase to seven, the total annual budget for these operations was well below 10,000 British pounds.<sup>113</sup> All the funds were raised in Great Britain, apart from occasional contributions from individual well-wishers, a promise of \$2,500 for each of the three following years from the American (Jewish) Joint Distribution Committee, and the small Jewish Agency contribution.<sup>114</sup> Sadly, the history of the previous decades had been repeated in the 1960s. "In relation to the size of the problem only the surface had been scratched... No one connected with this minimal programme had any illusions that it would solve the problem but it represented a fresh start and it would help to raise the Falashas' morale."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> David Kessler and Tudor Parfitt, "The Falashas: The Jews of Ethiopia," The Minority Rights Group Report No. 67 (London: Minority Rights Group LTD, 1985), p. 9.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> Ibid

<sup>115</sup> Ibid

## SUMMARY

Despite the vigorous efforts of a few organizations and individuals to draw attention to and aid the Beta Yisrael, only a thin lifeline between Ethiopian Jews and world Jewry had been established and maintained from the late nineteenth century through the 1960s. The Ethiopian Jews themselves, led by Yona Bogala, the Hebrew teachers and the kessim, and a few Western visionaries such as Faitlovitch and the leaders of the American Pro-Falasha Committee, knew that the only real solution for the Beta Yisrael lay in creating a bond with Israel and pushing for aliyah. However, while knowledge of this ancient and exotic community spread to certain circles in the Jewish world, major stumbling blocks impeded their relief and rescue. First, the emperor of Ethiopia would not allow for a massive exodus. Second, the government of Israel was not prepared to admit an Ethiopian aliyah under the Law of Return. Third, world Jewry during the twentieth century was preoccupied with the trauma and aftermath of the First World War, the horror of the Holocaust, the Second World War and the displaced persons (DPs), and the creation and building of Israel. As a result, Israel and world Jewry were basically deaf or indifferent to the plight and needs of the Beta Yisrael.

Yet, despite these impediments to relief and rescue of Ethiopian Jewry, one may query why Israel, before and after statehood, was interested in other Jewish communities of the world but not the Beta Yisrael. The tremendous legal and illegal efforts to bring Holocaust survivors to Eretz Yisrael is understandable given the historical period of the birth of the Jewish State. However, the building of Israel included not only the active rescue and absorption of hundreds of thousands of Jews from Europe, but also from more remote regions of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and Asia.

The most prominent factor impeding the new Jewish State's interest in the immigration of Ethiopian Jewry was probably the rabbinate's lack of official approval of this community. However, other forces must have been at work. Some of these may have been: (1) This Jewish community for the most part practiced Biblical Judaism; (2) A lack of interest in rescuing and absorbing "primitive" Jews; (3) A general ignorance and lack of openness to the existence of the Beta Yisrael; (4) Racism and the disbelief that a person with black skin could be Jewish; and (5) Infrequent contacts between the Beta Yisrael and non-Ethiopian Jews.

In short, the relief and rescue of the Beta Yisrael were delayed. The patterns established by the activities of Faitlovitch and the American Pro-Falasha Committee on the one hand, and the inactivity of Israel and world Jewry on the other hand, would continually repeat themselves well into the 1980s. The next chapter focuses on the cycle of activity and inactivity witnessed in the 1970s up to the election of Menachem Begin in 1977.

CHAPTER THREE:  
THE LATE 1960s  
UP TO MENACHEM BEGIN'S ELECTION IN 1977:  
THE CYCLE OF ACTIVITY AND INACTIVITY CONTINUES

THE ETHIOPIAN ALIYAH UP TO THE MID-1970s: A TRICKLE OF JEWS  
REACHES ERETZ YISRAEL

Until the 1970s, only a few Ethiopian Jews lived in the Jewish Homeland. As presented in the last chapter, the small numbers were a direct result of the inactivity of world Jewry and lack of acceptance of the Beta Yisrael as Jewish by the Israeli rabbinate and government. Aside from the occasional "Falasha" pilgrim, traveler and student over the centuries, the first Ethiopian Jews to arrive to Eretz Yisrael were a handful of Faitlovitch's students during the 1920s and 1930s. Next, the Beta Yisrael wives of a few Yemenite traders, who had lived in Ethiopia before moving to Israel, arrived shortly after 1948. Then, seven Ethiopian Jews managed to stay in Israel after studying in Kfar Batya in the 1950s: three boys who moved to a kibbutz and four girls who became nurses in various parts of the country. These small numbers began to be supplemented in the second half of the decade of the 1960s by young Ethiopian Jews who sneaked into Israel, mostly by working on Red Sea fishing boats and deserting in Eilat. The first one came in 1965, followed by five in 1966, eight in 1967, eight more in 1968 and four in 1969.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite their small numbers in the Holy Land, the Ethiopian-Jewish community in Israel was quickly alerted to their non-Jewish status in the Jewish Homeland. In 1966, the Jerusalem Rabbinical Council refused to allow twenty-seven-year-old Benjamin Gitye, one of the Kfar Batya students who stayed in Israel, to marry a Jewish woman. The rabbinate insisted that

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Ross, "Falashas: 'Is Zionism Only for White Jews?'" in Acts of Faith: A Journey to the Fringes of Jewish Identity (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 161.

Benjamin Gitye undergo a conversion before marrying the Israeli. But he refused, exclaiming: "I'm a Jew just like any other Jew."<sup>2</sup> He sued the rabbinate for approval of his marriage without the need for conversion. Two years later, in 1968, the Israeli Supreme Court finally decided against Benjamin Gitye. The Court did not rule on whether Benjamin Gitye was Jewish, but that the rabbinate has the legal authority to determine who is a Jew for purposes of marriage and divorce.<sup>3</sup> He was forced to undergo the conversion before he could marry.

Slowly during the early 1970s the pace of immigration picked up. However, permanent residence was always achieved illegally, and never with the cooperation or blessing of the Israeli government. Some, like Zachariah Yona in 1971, who is the son of Yona Bogala and secretary of the Association of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, came to the Promised Land as a student and never left. Others continued to come on fishing boats and deserted in the Port of Eilat. A few also managed to arrive in the country as tourists, never to return to Ethiopia.

However, the Israeli government not only refused to recognize the Beta Yisrael as Jewish, but made it nearly impossible for them to obtain tourist visas. A Beta Yisrael tourist had to show a round-trip ticket, costing more than \$560, and \$100 cash, before receiving an Israeli visa. Given the fact that the average income of an Ethiopian Jew was below \$100 at the time, these conditions were never met.<sup>4</sup> Only on rare occasions were these "financial impediments" ignored, if an Israeli citizen agreed to "sponsor" an Ethiopian

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<sup>2</sup> Jerusalem Post, February 23, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> "Falashas: 'Is Zionism Only for White Jews?'" p. 161. See also Louis Rapoport, The Lost Jews: Last of the Ethiopian Falashas (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), pp. 204-07, for a more detailed account of the Supreme Court decision.

<sup>4</sup> "Falashas: 'Is Zionism Only for White Jews?'" p. 161.



Jew.<sup>5</sup> That is how Rachamim Elazar, veteran leader of the Ethiopian Israeli community and Amharic broadcaster on Kol Yisrael Radio, arrived in Israel in 1972. An Israeli journalist who had met Elazar in Ethiopia and written an article about him in an Israeli magazine,<sup>6</sup> sponsored his visit to Israel. Elazar never returned to Ethiopia.

In reaction to a new wave of persecutions in Ethiopia during the early 1970s,<sup>7</sup> the small Beta Yisrael community living in Israel organized themselves. Zachariah Yona and later Rachamim Elazar led the movement to make Israelis and Jews everywhere aware of the dire situation of the Ethiopian Jews. In a press interview, Zachariah Yona asserted that "the world Jewish organizations knew all about the reports of pogroms but that they either refused to believe the Falashas or said that it would make matters worse if they took a strong stand."<sup>8</sup> Zachariah Yona warned that "his people were disappearing, that they were threatened by the landlords, Christian neighbors, poverty, famine, disease, and the missionaries who were converting growing numbers."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Arnold Sherman, "Today's Falashas and the Dream of Rachamim," Israel Magazine, September 1972, pp. 45-53.

<sup>7</sup> The persecution of the Beta Yisrael in the early 1970s will be detailed in the next section.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Rapoport, Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), pp. 52-53.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

## ETHIOPIAN INSTABILITY DURING THE 1970s

The Ethiopia Zachariah Yona and Rachamim Elazar escaped was changing. During the early 1970s, the country was in the grip of social, political and economic upheaval. Specifically for the Beta Yisrael, increased strife and tensions within Ethiopia resulted in a magnification of the persecution of Ethiopian Jews. In May of 1973, a Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia wrote to an official in the World Jewish Congress that:

the Christians have started to kill us. They have told us to move from their lands and some of us left the place. The Christians are saying we are sucking their blood. Many of our people were killed a few weeks ago. Please help us as you do the other Jews. If you will not help us quickly, it is evident for everybody we will not be anymore in this world.<sup>10</sup>

Although verification of this report would have been difficult given the mountainous terrain and lack of communication in the area, no attempt was made by the World Jewish Congress. At a minimum, over thirty Jews were massacred in a village in the Lasta region, and hundreds of the Beta Yisrael in the Wollo, Semien and Woggera areas were evicted from their lands and their houses burned in 1972.<sup>11</sup> Israeli officials were skeptical about the reports and said that "the Falashas were probably exaggerating their plight because of their desperation to get to Israel."<sup>12</sup> But wasn't that precisely the point? Even if the magnitude of the suffering was inflated, which evidence tends to suggest it was not, it is clear that the Ethiopian Jews wanted to be in Israel. These Israeli officials ignored the logic and ramifications of their statement –

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 51-52.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

that the Beta Yisrael, like Jews throughout the world, wanted to be in Israel and should be assisted in making aliyah.

Conditions worsened in 1973 and 1974. A terrible famine, killing hundreds of thousands in Ethiopia, fueled political instability and the overthrow of Haile Selassie on September 12, 1974. The long reign of the Lion of Judah was followed by a succession of Marxist military regimes. The weakened central government was challenged by revolution in the northeast (Eritrea), invasion in the southeast (from Somalia), and counterrevolutionaries in the northwest, where the Beta Yisrael lived.<sup>13</sup>

For the Ethiopian Jewish community, which remained loyal to Haile Selassie throughout his reign from 1916-1974, his overthrow brought terror and false hope. The community feared that a new ruler or government would not have any interest in the Beta Yisrael like Haile Selassie. The emperor had developed a minimal attachment to the Ethiopian Jews because of his ties with Israel and personal attachment to legends in the Hebrew Bible and Ethiopia's connection with ancient Israel.

At the same time, the Beta Yisrael hoped the new communist oriented regime would be more equitable and less discriminating against the Ethiopian Jews. When the new government announced land reforms shortly after coming to power in 1974, the Beta Yisrael were hopeful that they could own their land for the first time in centuries. On March 3, 1975, the Land Reform Declaration of the Provisional Military Government was issued, nationalizing the land and instituting cooperative farms, although farmers were allowed to own land up to 25 acres.<sup>14</sup> But the central government was too weak to impose

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<sup>13</sup> "Falashas: 'Is Zionism Only for White Jews,'" pp. 157-58.

<sup>14</sup> Ephraim Isaac, Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews (Beersheva, Israel: Ben Gurion University in the Negev, 1988), p. 19.

the reforms in the rural areas, and the landlord class led a counterrevolution. Some Beta Yisrael were expelled from land they had tenant-farmed for generations.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the rebellious landlords forming bandit gangs and harassing, kidnapping and even killing the farmers, the areas inhabited by the Jews became veritable battlefields between the government and its enemies.<sup>16</sup>

There was little difference between the revolutionary government's view of emigration and that of its imperial predecessor. Tight control was exercised over the rights of citizens to cross the frontiers. With the severing of relations following the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the State of Israel had little leverage over the new Ethiopian government. On the other hand, the Ethiopians had little incentive to let their people go, especially if they represented an economically valuable, though small, element in the population like the Beta Yisrael. At the same time, the regime was cautious not to offend the Soviets and Cubans who played a vital role in the defense and financial assistance of the country. Neither of these partners would view with favor any arrangement they thought would benefit Israel. In addition, Ethiopia was perpetually concerned about its relations with the Muslim states which surround Abyssinia and who would oppose any encouragement of aliyah.<sup>17</sup>

The revolution soon degenerated into chaos, peaking in the catastrophic years of 1977 through 1979.

A wave of terror gripped the country. Even the slave trade flared anew, one of the last places on earth where it survives. Murder, rape,

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<sup>15</sup> "Falashas: 'Is Zionism Only for White Jews,'" p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, pp. 19-20.

<sup>17</sup> David Kessler, The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia (New York: Africana Publishing Company, a division of Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982), p. 168.

and physical mutilations became commonplace; children were often sold into slavery. Old tribal animosities were revived, and Falashas were caught in the crossfire. Those in the far north were trapped by the rebellion of Moslem Eritreans. Thousands of Falashas fled to refugee camps in Sudan and other countries. Others were not so fortunate. The most widely quoted casualty figures (which can be neither confirmed nor refuted) are that two thousand Falashas were killed and seven thousand driven off their land -- one-third of the total Falasha population.<sup>18</sup>

Equally as important, the modest efforts by the Jewish Agency to sponsor education in Ethiopia were halted. The Marxist government barred all foreign directed educational programs in Ethiopia. The only group they allowed in was World ORT,<sup>19</sup> a Jewish vocational-training organization. ORT extended equal services to Jewish and non-Jewish Ethiopians alike, "an admirable policy in peaceful times but [a policy] which appear[ed] to have backfired in fractured Ethiopian society."<sup>20</sup> The schools fell victim to ethnic animosity, as feuding between the non-Jewish directors and the Beta Yisrael teachers ended in the arrest of six Ethiopian Jewish teachers in December of 1978, and the deaths of two of them.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Falashas: 'Is Zionism Only for White Jews,'" p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> ORT's programs and the controversy surrounding its presence in Ethiopia will be detailed in the next chapter.

<sup>20</sup> "Falashas: 'Is Zionism Only for White Jews,'" p. 159.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

## ISRAELI ATTITUDES TOWARD THE BETA YISRAEL

In spite of these problems, Ethiopian Jewish immigration to Israel was not put on any official Jewish agenda. In fact, the Israelis not only failed to facilitate, but altogether ignored the possibility of a Beta Yisrael aliyah. David Zohar, the first secretary of the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C., stated in a 1973 letter, that "Israel does not regard the Law of Return as being applicable to the Falasha" and "is not enthusiastic about the prospect of Falasha immigration."<sup>22</sup> Israel developed a system of priorities in immigration over the years, placing greater value on olim with advanced education and technical training. Yet, the Israeli attitude was motivated by social, racial, political and religious reasons as well.

Skin color and a perception of the Beta Yisrael as "primitive" influenced the Israeli attitude. The Beta Yisrael were viewed as lacking basic agricultural and technical skills, and had little to offer the growing Israeli economy and society. Israeli politician and cabinet minister Shulamit Aloni, head of the Citizens' Rights Party, told the Knesset in early 1977 that there had been a "conspiracy of silence" about the Ethiopian Jews.<sup>23</sup> She blamed the "racist attitudes" among the National Religious Party and Labor officials, who had missed a golden opportunity to save the Ethiopian Jews in the months after the fall of Haile Selassie, the key figure in Israel's African policy.

One source quotes former Prime Minister Golda Meir as having said: "Don't we have enough problems? What do we need these blacks for?"<sup>24</sup> National Religious Party leader and Religious Affairs Minister Yitzhak Raphael

<sup>22</sup> Marc Shapiro, "Return of a Lost Tribe," The World & I, April 1988, p. 485; and in a letter published in Sh'ma, 3/47 (February 2, 1973), pp. 54-55.

<sup>23</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 188.

<sup>24</sup> "Return of a Lost Tribe," pp. 485-86; and The Lost Jews, p. 195.



offered this assessment of the Beta Yisrael: "Israel doesn't need the schvartzes."<sup>25</sup> Interior Minister and National Religious Party powerhouse Yosef Burg made no effort to hide his contempt for the Ethiopian Jews. "You could just as well write a book about the Martians,"<sup>26</sup> Burg remarked about the Beta Yisrael. Israeli statesman and historian Abba Ebban called the situation of the Ethiopian Jews "a very marginal problem,"<sup>27</sup> and that "it [an Ethiopian aliyah] was never considered to be an important issue."<sup>28</sup> At the same time when strenuous efforts were being made to bring Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel, "one may sympathize with Yona Bogala's despairing cry: 'If our skin would be only a little lighter, I am sure World Jewry would take a greater interest.'"<sup>29</sup>

Politically speaking, the issue of "Falasha immigration" became a matter of government policy. The policy was not to pursue an Ethiopian aliyah. Until the aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Ethiopia under strong Arab pressure broke off diplomatic relations with Israel, the Jewish State had established very close ties with Haile Selassie's kingdom. Along with a number of other countries in black Africa, a strong diplomatic mission had been created in Addis Ababa. Trade relations developed and considerable agricultural, educational and technical assistance was provided.

Moreover, Israel appreciated that Ethiopia occupied a key strategic position, with good harbor facilities on the Red Sea, and represented a non-Muslim state almost surrounded by countries belonging to the Arab League.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 207.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 212.

<sup>27</sup> "Return of a Lost Tribe," p. 486; and for a more detailed account, see The Lost Jews, pp. 188-190.

<sup>28</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 189.

<sup>29</sup> From a letter dated May 10, 1973, as rendered in The Falashas, p. 157.

<sup>30</sup> The Falashas, pp. 155-56.

Ethiopia was a cornerstone of Israel's "periphery theory," which advocated developing strong ties with non-Arab nations which bordered her Arab enemies. Ethiopia, which borders Somalia, the Sudan, and the Red Sea and faces the Arabian Peninsula, was a key link on the periphery along with Cyprus, Turkey and Iran.

Additionally, "[p]ersonal relations between the emperor and Israel were excellent and needed to be safeguarded."<sup>31</sup> The emperor thought the Beta Yisrael was like a finger in Ethiopia's dike, "if one tribe leaked out, all of the various peoples would clamor for independence, and the fragile empire would collapse."<sup>32</sup> Israel went along with this, while making an all-out effort to win friends in East Africa while sacrificing the Beta Yisrael. Before the Yom Kippur War, the Foreign Ministry claimed that "Israel has never conducted diplomatic relations with another nation at the expense of the local Jewish community, especially if it involves the right of aliyah."<sup>33</sup> However, the line changed after Ethiopia cut relations in 1973. Jewish Agency officials said it was now "technically impossible to help the Falashas -- for example, by giving them money to pay their fares to Israel."<sup>34</sup> The statement is made even more ironic by the fact that Israel required Ethiopian Jews to come up with over six years of wages for air fare and travel expenses before even being granted a tourist visa. Jewish Agency executive Yehuda Dominitz in 1974 stated: "It's an administrative problem now -- we have no embassy there now -- it's a vicious cycle."<sup>35</sup> Thus, official Israeli discussion with the emperor and later with

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 156.

<sup>32</sup> *The Lost Jews*, p. 195.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp. 195-96.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 196.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

Marxist leaders about emigration, even of small numbers, was practically taboo.

A confirmation of this policy can be found through the actions of David Kessler, editor of London's Jewish Chronicle and Norman Bentwich. In an audience in May of 1970, David Kessler asked Haile Selassie whether he would support the establishment of a Beta Yisrael village in Israel to act as a link between the two countries. This idea had been discussed for a few years by the small circle of Ethiopian Jewish supporters who were concerned with the plight of the community. The emperor replied:

[T]his may be questionable but there will be no objection. We question the importance of this proposal for there are other ways to help the Falashas. For example, education and farms should be improved within their own community. Nevertheless, the choice lies with the Falashas and there are many ways to help them, for example with financial aid.<sup>36</sup>

Bentwich also recorded that at each audience with Haile Selassie he mentioned the desire of some Beta Yisrael youth to go to Israel. The emperor was noted as having replied each time that he had no objection.<sup>37</sup> In spite of these personal communications, albeit agreements with Haile Selassie by leaders of the British Jewish community, the Israeli government decided to subordinate the plight of the Beta Yisrael to what were regarded as the country's wider interests.

Indeed, the government found allies in both religious and lay leaders. While the religious leaders held up the question of the Beta Yisrael's Jewishness, various academicians scoffed at the authenticity of the community and held that raising the issue of mass immigration might endanger Israeli-Ethiopian relations or harm the Beta Yisrael. Professor S.D. Goitein of the

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<sup>36</sup> The Falashas, p. 157.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 156-57.

Hebrew University, an expert on the Jews of Yemen, spoke of the Beta Yisrael as "those so-called Jews of Ethiopia," whose "beliefs and practices have very little to do with Judaism."<sup>38</sup> Edward Ullendorff, professor of Ethiopian studies at London University and a graduate of the Hebrew University, doubted whether the Beta Yisrael should be 'dubbed' the Jews of Ethiopia:

[T]he Israeli Government... has wisely refrained from all involvement in Falasha affairs. Anyone familiar with the Ethiopian scene will question the wisdom of pro-Falasha activities – however well-meaning and noble the motives may be. The Ethiopian Government is extremely sensitive to the encouragement of any tribal forces which might conceivably disturb the delicate fabric of African nationhood. Any activity by outside bodies on behalf of the Falashas can only weaken their position and lay them open to discriminatory measures. Whether the Israeli Government would cherish, in those circumstances, the ingathering of an artificially Judaized diaspora, I have no means of assessing. Is it either wise or politic (and against all the historical evidence!) to create a Jewish problem where none exists and thus to extend gratuitously the range of those liable, at some time or other, to become subject to repressive measures?<sup>39</sup>

The opinions of Ullendorff and Goitein neatly supported the Israeli government's status quo, do-nothing politics. They questioned the Jewishness of the Beta Yisrael, and made any action on their behalf an unnecessary. "I agree with Ullendorff's views – the Jewishness of the Falashas is exaggerated," one diplomat said.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, many, such as Dr. Ephraim Isaac, note "that the down playing of the Beta Yisrael and their authenticity as truly being Jewish was one significant factor in the delay of the Beta Yisrael aliyah."<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Religion in the Middle East, Ed. A.J. Arberry, Vol. 1, p. 228 (1969).

<sup>39</sup> The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia, pp. 156-57.

<sup>40</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 197.

<sup>41</sup> Personnel interview with Dr. Ephraim Isaac, Director of the Institute for Semitic and Afriasiatic studies at Princeton, New Jersey, May 18, 1992, at his home in Princeton, New Jersey.

In the interest of harmonious Israeli-Ethiopian relations, no attempt was made to open the doors to aliyah. Israel stated that her lack of discussions and efforts to foster an Ethiopian aliyah were based on a desire not to harm the Beta Yisrael community through public disclosures and actions. Later in the decade and throughout the 1980s, this Israeli stance became a battle cry against the vocal Ethiopian-support grass roots organizations who attempted to publicize and even rescue the Ethiopian Jews.

The Ethiopian Jews were utilized as a political pawn to placate Haile Selassie and keep relations smooth between Israel and Ethiopia. Thus, no consideration was given to an Ethiopian aliyah. Yet even with the best intentions, it would have been difficult for the government to put out for people whom the rabbinate did not regard as Jewish. Increasingly for the Labor Party, which controlled the Knesset from the birth of the Jewish State in 1948 until 1977, the support of the religious parties was vital to maintaining power. The Labor Party allowed the religious parties and the Rabbinate to take the lead on matters of religion and "who is a Jew." Thus, for effective changes in governmental attitudes toward the Beta Yisrael, the rabbinate first needed to recognize "the Falashas" as Jewish.

### THE BREAKTHROUGH OF 1973: OVADIA YOSEF DECLARES THE BETA YISRAEL TO BE JEWISH

While government officials shunned the Ethiopian Jews for political reasons for at least thirty years after statehood, the religious establishment consistently neglected the Beta Yisrael community well into the decade of the 1970s. Despite previous halakhic acknowledgement of the Beta Yisrael as Jewish by rabbis Kook, Herzog and forty-four other rabbinic authorities in the twentieth century,<sup>42</sup> and rabbis Radbaz, Castro, and Hildesheimer in previous centuries,<sup>43</sup> the rabbinate of the State of Israel failed to consider this ancient community. It was not until 1973 that Israeli Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef thoroughly investigated and commented on the Beta Yisrael. His time and activism in large part resulted from the efforts of a newly formed committee in Israel and one of its members.

In Israel, a committee was formed in the early 1970s to assist Ethiopian Jews. The organization was chaired by Professor Arie Tartakower, Israeli representative of the World Jewish Congress. Its members included Ruth Dayan, political activist and wife of Moshe Dayan, and Ovadia Hazzi, a retired career officer with a distinguished history of service in the Israeli army. Hazzi, born in Ethiopia to Yemenite parents, grew up in Asmara where his father had been employed by the local Jewish community. After making aliyah, he visited the Beta Yisrael frequently and publicized the plight of the Ethiopian Jews to the Standing Committee (on Ethiopian Jewry) in England as well as various Israeli officials.<sup>44</sup> "An ardent Zionist, he used his extensive

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<sup>42</sup> See chapter 2 for information on the rulings of rabbis Herzog and Kook.

<sup>43</sup> See chapter 1 for information on the rulings of rabbis Radbaz, Castro and Hildesheimer.

<sup>44</sup> The Falashas, pp. 159-60.



connections in Israeli official circles to do everything in his power to get the recognition of Ethiopian Jews by the authorities."<sup>45</sup>

Ovadia Hazzi, who was a personal friend of Ovadia Yosef, constantly pushed the issue of Ethiopian Jewry with the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel. Hazzi appealed to his spiritual leader to take a stance on this community. It was in a February 9, 1973, letter to Ovadia Hazzi, which took the form of a responsum, that Ovadia Yosef detailed his views on the Beta Yisrael.<sup>46</sup>

He commenced his letter with the following greeting, "Dear Mr. Ovadia Hezzi [sic], precious friend and man of great action, may peace and salvation be yours: I have the following comments to make in response to your letter concerning the Falashas."<sup>47</sup> Rabbi Ovadia Yosef ruled that "the Falashas" were Jews. "It is our duty to redeem them from assimilation and hasten their immigration to Israel,"<sup>48</sup> he wrote. He justified his ruling by categorically stating that the Beta Yisrael are the lost tribe of Dan. Basing himself on the responsa of rabbis Radbaz and Castro, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef also utilized the statements of a number of prominent sages, including rabbis Hildesheimer, Kook and Herzog. He concluded:

that the Falashas are descended from the tribes of Israel who travelled southwards to Ethiopia. There is no doubt that the above sages, who ruled that they (the Falashas) are of the tribe of Dan, investigated and searched and came to this conclusion on the basis of the most trustworthy evidence and testimony. I also, a young man among the tribes of Israel, investigated and searched thoroughly in the matter

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<sup>45</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Redemption Song, p. 49; "Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews," p. 23; and in an interview with Dr. Ephraim Isaac, May 18, 1992, Princeton, New Jersey, who is a personal friend of the Hazzi family.

<sup>47</sup> Menachem Waldman, The Jews of Ethiopia: The Beta Yisrael Community (Jerusalem: Ami-Shav, the Center for Aid to Ethiopian Immigrants, 1985), p. 71.

<sup>48</sup> Howard M. Lenhoff, "Rabbis Embrace Falasha Community," Israel Today, February 16-29, 1979, p. 3.

after their leaders turned to me with a request to be joined to our people, the House of Israel, in the spirit of the Torah and the Halacha, the Written Law and the Oral Law, without any restriction, and to carry out all the precepts of the Holy Torah in accordance with the instructions of our great rabbis of blessed memory, by whose utterances we live. I have decided that, in my humble opinion, they are Jews who must be saved from absorption and assimilation. We are obligated to speed up their immigration into Israel and to educate them in our Holy Torah, making them partners in the building up of our land. And the sons shall return to the Holy Land.

I am certain that Government institutions and the Jewish Agency, as well as organizations in Israel and in the Diaspora, will help us to the best of their ability in this holy task that you have taken upon yourself – the mitzvah of redeeming the souls of our people. For whoever saves a single soul in Israel, it is as though he had saved a whole world.<sup>49</sup>

Yosef ends his letter to Ovadia Hazzai with a reference to Isaiah's plea (Isaiah 11:11-12) that G-d will

bring back our brethren from Assyria, from Egypt, from Ethiopia and from the isles of the seas and that the scattered ones of Israel and the dispersed ones of Judah may all be gathered together from the four corners of the earth. May they all come and bow down before the Lord on the sacred mount in Jerusalem.<sup>50</sup>

This statement was the key that opened up the door for an Ethiopian aliyah. However, it took many years to find the right door. The importance of Ovadia Yosef's responsum is multifold. The Chief Rabbi of the largest religious community in Israel had dissipated the doubts of the Sephardic orthodox as to the Jewishness of the Beta Yisrael. At the same time, he called upon the Jewish community to rescue them from assimilation and to hasten their immigration to Israel. Moreover, Rabbi Yosef specifically calls upon the government of Israel and the Jewish Agency to facilitate the aliyah of the Ethiopian Jews.

Rabbi Yosef's ruling was supported by Israel's great Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. He agreed wholeheartedly with Ovadia Yosef's decision

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<sup>49</sup> The Falashas, p. 161.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

that the Beta Yisrael are Jewish, although he felt "[t]he fact that Hebrew is not their holy tongue by itself creates a very great difference in perception between them and other Jews; and they will have great trouble if they ever come to Israel."<sup>51</sup> Steinsaltz relayed to Louis Rapoport in an interview following the 1973 decision: "The Radbaz, Rabbi David Ben Zimra, was quite clear about this [the Jewishness of the Beta Yisrael], while Rabbi Kook was not as comprehensive. The Radbaz said that the Falashas are basically Jews, with strange customs. This is sufficient, all that is needed. It is a first-class decision."<sup>52</sup> Steinsaltz got involved in the Beta Yisrael question in the 1960s, at the instigation of former Knesset member Haim Ben-Asher, who had tried to force the issue with Israel's religious bureaucracy, the Rabbinate. "But the Rabbinate evidently was pressured by the government not to pursue the subject," Steinsaltz said, "so they didn't want the question of their Jewishness opened up."<sup>53</sup> Steinsaltz insisted that he tried "to force some halakhic discussion" about the Beta Yisrael, "but all I got were evasions -- they just did not want to deal with it at the time."<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the support of Rabbi Steinsaltz, it took over two years before the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, Ovadia Yosef's constant rival, to express a similar opinion. Rabbi Goren and his National Religious Party supporters kept the question of the tribe's Jewishness from resolution for months in both the religious and political arenas.

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<sup>51</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 202.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 201.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*

# THE REACTION IN ISRAEL TO OVADIA YOSEF'S 1973 DECREE: MORE DELAYS, INACTIVITY AND INDIFFERENCE

In early 1975, as a result of lobbying pressure by groups in Israel, Europe and America on the rabbinate, the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren agreed to Ovadia Yosef's position on the Beta Yisrael. What took Goren so long? One reason was that the "other" chief rabbi was the main religious patron of "the Falashas." "In most instances, anything favored by Sephardi Rabbi Ovadia Yosef is opposed by Ashkenazi Rabbi Goren, who has much more influence with the religious politicians."<sup>55</sup> The mutual aversion between the two rabbis was "sometimes the overriding factor in Israeli religious affairs."<sup>56</sup> On many occasions, Rabbi Goren stated publicly that "the Beta Yisrael are not Jews." According to the National Religious Party Newspaper, Goren cited the 1968 Supreme Court decision, and not any religious source, for his opinion.<sup>57</sup>

The question of the Jewishness of the Beta Yisrael was also complicated by the presence of the "Black Hebrews" in Israel. This cult of former American Black Muslims who settled in the Negev Desert during the late 1960s and early 1970s led to confusion of identity in the Israeli public whenever the issue of "the Falashas" arose:

The unfortunate presence of the Black Hebrews may have further prejudiced the leadership of Israel against admitting Ethiopian Jews, and it might have influenced Israelis, who did not know each group intimately, from accepting either of them. Action by the Israeli government in 1968 and 1969, when the Black Hebrews first appeared on the scene, to force them to return to the U.S. might have hurried

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<sup>55</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 210.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

the influx of thousands of Ethiopian Jews, if the government really wanted these Jews [the Beta Yisrael] to migrate.<sup>58</sup>

The Black Hebrews came to Israel from Detroit, Chicago and New York and settled in Negev development towns, especially Dimona, despite the fact that they had no residence permits. Hundreds of Black Hebrews have settled in Israel, many of whom have criminal records in the United States.<sup>59</sup> Their leaders use threats and blackmail to control their followers, as some of the Black Hebrews live thirty to a tiny two-room apartment provided by the government.<sup>60</sup>

The Israeli government has balked at taking action against the Black Hebrews. They have feared "embarrassment" and charges of "racism" in the international arena if the Black Hebrews were to be thrown out. But more tragic than the explosive disruptions in the Negev development towns has been the impact on the Beta Yisrael. During the 1970s, the average Israeli made no differentiation between the various groups of blacks in Israel: the one hundred or so American blacks who had legitimately converted to Judaism and made aliyah to study in yeshivot in Israel; the few hundred Ethiopian Jews; and the Black Hebrews, whose number had grown to fourteen hundred by 1979.<sup>61</sup> Also, "[m]any American Jews confuse the problem of the Falashas with the cult group.<sup>62</sup> They don't know the difference."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Graenum Berger, Graenum (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1987), p. 304.

<sup>59</sup> The Lost Jews, pp. 213-14.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 214.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 215.

<sup>62</sup> The problem of confusion between the Black Hebrews and the Beta Yisrael gradually decreased in Israel and America during the 1980s as information on the Ethiopian Jews became more widely disseminated.

<sup>63</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 215.

The Beta Yisrael themselves campaigned to have the cult expelled from Israel. In a 1977 letter to the Jerusalem Post, Beta Yisrael Yitzhak Levy wrote:

The fate of those Negroes who came from America and call themselves Black Hebrews is being discussed again. They have caused many problems, and they are making it hard on us Falashas in Israel and abroad. Not only are people confused about who is who, but it seems that no less than four times a month, I run into a new group of these Black Hebrews, and when I let them know where I stand, I'm given the treatment: I'm told that I'm a traitor, an Uncle Tom, a follower of the white man's religion, etc. If the Israeli government is strong, it would take decisive action. And it would also do more to help Falasha Jewry. We are Jews just like any Jew from any part of the world. We are no different.<sup>64</sup>

In spite of the difficulties posed by the Black Hebrews and the intransigence of the religious establishment, the Beta Yisrael appealed to the government for immigration privileges under the Law of Return. In March of 1975, an interministerial commission composed of the Religious Affairs, Social Welfare, Interior, Foreign, and Absorption Ministries, as well as the Jewish Agency, was formed to discuss the issue. The commission declared that "the Falashas" are Jews under the Law of Return, entitling the Beta Yisrael to immediate Israeli citizenship. Additionally, "the committee urged their immigration be facilitated."<sup>65</sup> At last, the religious statements of the past four hundred and fifty years since the time of the Radbaz had been translated into a legal measure. Now, at least in theory, the government of Israel was officially behind an Ethiopian aliyah. A poll conducted by the Hebrew University

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. Even as late as 1992, the issue of the Black Hebrews was not completely resolved, although in September of that year, the Israeli Government "decided to grant temporary residence status to the community of Black Hebrews, in a move that may resolve the long standing dispute." For more, see "Israel Gives Residency to Black Hebrew Sect," Northern California Jewish Bulletin, October 2, 1992, p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 208.



shortly after the interministerial committee decision showed that most Israelis favored immigration of the Beta Yisrael.<sup>66</sup>

As a result of the March 11, 1975, interministerial committee decision and the March 4, 1975, declaration of the nationalization of land in Ethiopia, the Beta Yisrael community had renewed hope. Not only might they own land for the first time in over three-hundred and fifty years, but they finally were viewed as compatriots by the Jewish State. When the news of the Jerusalem government decision regarding the Law of Return reached Ethiopia, hundreds of the Beta Yisrael sold their meager belongings and came down from the mountain villages to await rescue to the Promised Land.<sup>67</sup> But no Israeli personnel or rescue vehicles came, and after waiting for a few days, the people went back to their huts in Gondar and Tigrey. "Some of the religious leaders, after consulting with Yona Bogala, told their people that they would have to wait longer for their redemption, that it was like 1948, a false start."<sup>68</sup>

The first attempt to bring a small group of Ethiopian Jews to Israel was a fiasco. Koor, the Jewish State's largest industrial complex, sent a representative to Ethiopia with contracts to recruit seventy "Ethiopians" to work in Israel. The contracts were intended as a means to legally get the Beta Yisrael to Israel, and seven of these Ethiopian Jews were coaxed through the Byzantine Ethiopian bureaucracy to "work in Israel." However, the Israeli government simultaneously announced to the press that the Jewish Agency would pay for some seventy Ethiopian Jews to come to Israel. When the press conference informed the Ethiopian government that the Israelis were

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<sup>66</sup> Redemption Song, p. 54.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

recruiting only Jews, the Ethiopians immediately put the clamps on the whole operation.<sup>69</sup>

One Absorption Ministry official in Jerusalem expressed shock that the operation had not been kept secret. "[T]he public announcement was stupid, wrong and dangerous to the Falashas during a period of uncertainty in Ethiopia."<sup>70</sup> Others hinted that there might have been a conscious attempt by some government officials to sabotage the whole plan. "The government's decision may have come too late to really help the Falashas anyway, but the public announcement of it served to totally undermine the original intention - it made it impossible for the Falashas to get to Israel, and it may have sealed their fate."<sup>71</sup>

One such proof may be found in the words of Jewish Agency executive Yehuda Dominitz shortly before the interministerial committee decision in 1975. "Take a Falasha out of his village, it's like taking a fish out of water... We are told that the aliyah potential is tiny- the number that would leave is minute. Most of the ones that came to Israel felt lost and they went home.<sup>72</sup> I'm not in favor of bringing them."<sup>73</sup>

The next year, the Jewish Agency tried another route. Daily, thousands of Ethiopian Christians and Moslems were escaping the revolution and famine

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<sup>69</sup> Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews (New York: Atheneum, 1987), p. 127. See also The Lost Jews, pp. 197-98 and Redemption Song, p. 54.

<sup>70</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 198.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> To whom Yehuda Dominitz is referring, neither I, nor a number of people to whom I showed this quote, have any idea. There are virtually no accounts of Ethiopian Jews going back to Ethiopia once they have reached Israel, except the Kfar Batya group who was forced back to East Africa. Although a number of Beta Yisrael returned to Ethiopia during the 1980s and early 1990s for a time, it was with the sole purpose of returning to the Jewish State with the rest of their family. These Ethiopian Jews traveled back to their birth land to rescue their loved ones to Israel.

<sup>73</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 198.

by crossing into bordering Kenya, Djibouti and the Sudan. The Jewish Agency would try to rescue Jews through Kenya. Twenty-eight young Jewish men traveled across the country. "They reached the border only to be caught by the Ethiopian border patrols, arrested, and tortured."<sup>74</sup> No more attempts were made.

In the wake of the 1975 aborted Koor-rescue debacle, the subject of Ethiopian Jews was put under the supervision of the military censor, as is the case with other threatened Jewish communities.<sup>75</sup> At first, the supporters of the Beta Yisrael "generally welcomed this move," but others said that "the censorship would simply make it easier for Israel to delay taking any substantive action and to suppress critical press reactions."<sup>76</sup> The supporters of an Ethiopian aliyah believed that it had taken a "scandalously long time for the issue to come to the attention of government leaders," and with the whole matter "kept secret there would be no way to check up on the government's efforts."<sup>77</sup> The most vocal opponent inside and outside of Israel to military censorship and Israeli indifference and inactivity was the American Association for Ethiopian Jews (the AAEJ). According to the AAEJ's founder Graenum Berger expressed the following:

All news about Ethiopia and Ethiopian Jews was under strict military censorship. I had become convinced that censorship was not for the benefit of the Ethiopian Jews, nor with the purpose of keeping Ethiopia, the Arabs, and Soviet Russia in the dark, but rather, to keep the Israeli public from knowing more about them or that the government was even thinking of promoting their migration. I was

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<sup>74</sup> Rescue, p. 127.

<sup>75</sup> An interesting side note to the effectiveness of the military censorship was that even a one-line item was removed from a feature article about an Israeli-made film – the fact that Ethiopian Israelis played the role of some Ugandan soldiers in a movie about Entebbe.

<sup>76</sup> Redemption Song, p. 55.

<sup>77</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 200.

beginning to think of ways by which I might break through this blockade.<sup>78</sup>

Frustrations with Israeli indifference and inactivity characterized the mood of the AAEJ from its inception. Additionally, while the seeds for actualizing a Beta Yisrael aliyah were planted under the new Likud regime of 1977 led by Menachem Begin, the pace and thoroughness of Israeli actions were still far too slow and insignificant in the eyes of the AAEJ. The AAEJ was also appalled by the ignorance and insensitivity of the American Jewish community and its leadership. In fact, this organization seemed for a long time to be the only beacon warning the Jewish world to the plight of their brethren in Ethiopia and pushing for a Beta Yisrael aliyah. Therefore, before turning to the evolving Israeli awareness and activities on behalf of the Beta Yisrael under Begin, it is important to detail the efforts of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews and its founder Graenum Berger.

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<sup>78</sup> Graenum, pp. 621-22.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
GRAENUM BERGER AND  
THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWS

HOW GRAENUM BERGER BECAME INVOLVED WITH  
THE BETA YISRAEL

Born on April 21, 1908, Graenum Berger was nurtured in an immigrant Jewish family in Gloversville, a small upper New York State community. A world traveler and Jewish professional who devoted his life to Jewish communal service in camps, federations, and Jewish Community Centers, the tenacious and driven Berger first encountered the Beta Yisrael in 1955. The first group of Ethiopian Jewish students had just been brought to Israel. Berger and his wife Emma visited the Mizrachi school at Kfar Batya<sup>1</sup> and the thirteen Beta Yisrael youth who were studying Hebrew, contemporary Judaism, modern farming and medical care. "Emma and I had read about the Ethiopian Jews, but this was our first face-to-face meeting."<sup>2</sup> From that point on, Graenum and Emma Berger attempted to find out more about the Ethiopian Jews and have dedicated the rest of their lives to rescuing the Beta Yisrael to Israel.

One Shabbat during his 1955 stay in Israel, Graenum Berger visited with the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Isaac Herzog. Berger mentioned to Rabbi Herzog that he saw Ethiopian Jews at Kfar Batya. Herzog told him that "they were authentic Jews."<sup>3</sup> In a letter to the Department of Religious Education and

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter two for a discussion of the Kfar Batya program for Ethiopian Jewish youth, most of whom were sent back to Ethiopia to help ameliorate their kin's suffering from poverty, illiteracy, disease and discrimination.

<sup>2</sup> Graenum Berger, Graenum (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1987), p. 317.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

Culture of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem in March, of 1954, Herzog stated that the Ethiopian Jews were "descendants of proselytes" and urged the State of Israel to take action:

Bring them all under the wings of genuine Judaism and in contact with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and Zion. Have faith in the G-d of Israel... Arm yourself for the difficult struggle against instigators. Let G-d preserve us from them, who like vultures fall upon the remnants of our brethren, the Falashas. May the Lord preserve and keep them alive in Ethiopia. It is a holy duty to help in this pious task. We have only to purify<sup>4</sup> them now, as we accept them and "permit" them to the daughters of Israel without difficulty.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, after the Jewish State established formal diplomatic relations with Ethiopia in 1955, Chief Rabbi Herzog's letter did not influence the Israeli government to permit the Beta Yisrael to migrate to The Promised Land.<sup>6</sup>

Following their encounter with the Ethiopian Jews at Kfar Batya and their interaction with Rabbi Herzog, the Bergers gathered information on the Beta Yisrael community of America. At the same time, between 1955 and 1965, they never heard a word about the Beta Yisrael from the established Jewish community, nor were they ever "approached to give money to an Ethiopian Jewish organization."<sup>7</sup> Then, in August of 1965, ten years after their initial contact with the black Jews of Abyssinia, the Bergers ventured to Ethiopia to see the community first hand. No Jewish organization, including the Joint

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<sup>4</sup> It is not clear what "purify" means in this context – perhaps a reference to some type of "token" conversion?

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> As discussed in the previous section, it was not until 1973 with Ovadia Yosef's responsum and 1975 with Goren's decision, as well as the interministerial committee statement relating the Law of Return to the Ethiopian Jews that the Beta Yisrael were encouraged to make aliyah.

<sup>7</sup> Graenum, p. 557.



Distribution Committee (JDC), would sponsor Graenum Berger and his wife on an exploratory mission.<sup>8</sup>

A hundred Israelis were working in Ethiopia at the time, mostly with the embassy in Addis Ababa. The European born and Yemenite Jewish communities in Addis Ababa, along with the Israelis, had nothing to do with the Beta Yisrael, "and they sought to avoid the subject. Not only were none of the Ethiopian Jews permitted to worship in their synagogue, but no one had ever bothered to visit their villages in the north. None appeared to be concerned with their welfare."<sup>9</sup>

The Bergers, unable to elicit help from the non-Ethiopian Jewish community, visited Gondar and a number of smaller Beta Yisrael villages. "Evaluating the scene at first hand, we saw only misery. We came back to Israel and the United States with a different version of the condition of the Ethiopian Jews and a vow to help them in Ethiopia, but we were already of a mind that the only salvation for them was in aliyah to Israel."<sup>10</sup> Berger further states:

It was obvious that the Jewish world had no right to allow Jews to live in such horrible political, social, economic, medical and even Jewishly religious and educational squalor... All the years that Faitlovitch tried to improve their lot were for nought, because world Jewry had not responded, was not interested in investing any substantial sums in the welfare of a black Jewish tribe that was remote from their daily presence... Bringing them to Israel might present difficulties of which I was not yet aware, but it would mean a vast improvement in the lives and chances for survival of a small ancient Jewish group... They were physically attractive, apparently intelligent, and if they could be transported en masse would make a contribution to the new and growing state, in need of loyal immigrants. We left Gondar with the resolve to foster their migration to Israel.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 396.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 398-99.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 400-01.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 407-08.

They also met with Yona Bogala, who was then fifty-seven and responsible for recruiting and training Jewish teachers and opening up schools in the Beta Yisrael villages. Yona showed the Bergers around Ambober and Tedda, discussed his educational endeavors and related his dream of bringing the community to Israel.

Upon their return to New York, the Bergers started to raise money for the clinics and Jewish schools in Ethiopia, reversing the trend of previous Jewish travelers to Ethiopia:

Most visitors were overwhelmed with the enormity of the problem, and after discussing it with officials in the Jewish world, [the Jewish visitors] were discouraged and abandoned any thought of providing continuing aid as individuals or through their local organizations. A few sent money in small amounts from time to time, but this was never for long. Hence the Jews of Ethiopia realized that any promises made by visitors were ephemeral.<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after his return to the United States, Graenum Berger received a letter dated October 24, 1965, from Gondar, Ethiopia, which was written in Hebrew:

"Dear Mr. Berger,

First of all we ask about your health and the health of your family. We prayerfully remember your visit with us, despite all the obstacles in making your journey. We were joyous in our innermost being, not only that you came to see us, but that you also gave us some hope about our future.

Despite the good counsel of the late Dr. Faitlovitch and the rebirth of the State of Israel, our worries have not ceased. Again, we repeat to you, as the elders of the community, whose forefathers came to Ethiopia, that this day we have not forsaken the religion of our fathers, no matter what difficulties we had encountered. Slowly these unhappy conditions are influencing our children, and in the course of time, they are likely to become goyim. We are distressed and shed bitter tears that after this generation has passed there will be no new Jewish generation to follow. As it is said, "If you do not sow seeds, you will reap no crop."

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 401.

We are therefore requesting you, our honored friend, to extend your help to show us the way to return to Eretz Yisrael. We long for Her [Israel] day and night and trust that in our names you will request World Jewry to take all of us. If that is not immediately feasible, save at least a small number of our people as a remnant. Don't ever forget what we spoke to you about in the synagogue, when you were with us. We hope you will fulfill our pleas with a full heart. G-d willing, it will be our good fortune to meet together in Israel. Amen, Amen, Selah.

We will be waiting with great longing for your quick response. With our fervent prayers.

(Signed) The Outcasts of Israel  
(Three Kohanim)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 405. The letter was translated for Graenum Berger by Jed Abraham. For more on Abraham, see the next section.

### THE ORIGINS OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWS

But how was Berger to help the Beta Yisrael? The organized Jewish community in the United States had absolutely no involvement or interest in the Ethiopian Jewish issue. Moreover, the American Pro-Falasha Committee, founded in 1922 by Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch, had ceased to exist in the 1950s, and no other grass roots group took its place. Thus, upon his return in 1965, the money raised by the Bergers for educational and medical programs, took an indirect route to reach Ethiopia. Monies were collected and sent to Dr. Aryeh Tartakower in Jerusalem, who assumed responsibility for transmitting these funds to appropriate Ethiopian Jewish sources, primarily Yona Bogala. Tartakower subsequently formed the Relief Committee for the Falasha Population in Ethiopia, which became the formal instrument for the receipt and transmission of such monies as were sent from the United States through the Berger's efforts.<sup>14</sup>

Then, in 1969, Jed Abraham, an Orthodox Jew who served as a lawyer in the U.S. Peace Corps in Ethiopia during the 1960s who had become concerned with the plight of the Beta Yisrael, formed the "American Friends of the Beta Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia."<sup>15</sup> After meeting Abraham, Graenum Berger began using the "American Friends of the Beta Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia" as the instrument to disperse monies raised for Ethiopian Jewry. Simultaneously, Berger and Abraham appeared at a number of meetings and fundraisers together.

Meanwhile, the American Pro-Falasha Committee had been reactivated. Mrs. A. H. Kavey, who had been an ardent member of the original committee in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 557.

<sup>15</sup> Ephraim Isaac, Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews (Ben Gurion University in the Negev, 1988), pp. 21-22.

the 1920s, and Martin J. Warmbrand, along with a small group of interested people restarted the group to obtain money for the Setit-Humera Jewish settlement along the Sudanese boarder.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Gabriel Cohen of the Jewish Post and Opinion of Indianapolis solicited money for the development project, as did Jack Fishbein, editor of the Chicago Jewish Sentinel, who had visited Ethiopia.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as other American Jews traveled to Ethiopia, they would immediately contact Berger upon their return to lend their support, financial backing and activism.

In 1972, Berger traveled to England and met with David Kessler, publisher of the oldest Jewish newspaper in the world, the Jewish Chronicle. Following the death of Norman Bentwich,<sup>18</sup> Kessler became chair of the Falasha Welfare Association (FWA). The FWA was a consortium of several British organizations, which collectively raised or gave money to work with Jews in Ethiopia. Kessler wrote sympathetic articles about the Beta Yisrael, and had hopes of creating a world Jewry committee to provide funds for the farming projects like the one at Setit-Humera. However, this idea never came to fruition.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas Bentwich believed that "the only solution for the Ethiopian Jewish problem was immediate aliyah to Israel," Kessler "did not want to consider aliyah to Israel as the only alternative."<sup>20</sup> Kessler wanted to focus on projects in Ethiopia for the Beta Yisrael. He asked Berger in their 1972

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<sup>16</sup> For a detail of the project, see chapter two, section on "Yona Bogala."

<sup>17</sup> Graenum, p. 558. See also J. I. Fishbein, "The Plight of the Ethiopia's Black Jews," Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine, December 1, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on Norman Bentwich and his efforts on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, see chapter two, section on "The Activities/Inactivities of World, Palestinian and Israeli Jews after the Second World War."

<sup>19</sup> Graenum, p. 531.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*

encounter to raise \$100,000 a year to aid the Ethiopian projects. Berger, on the other hand, was committed to aliyah as the only means to help the Beta Yisrael. "I promised to see what I could do, since the Ethiopian Jews were likely to remain in Ethiopia for the foreseeable future, as no Jewish world leadership wanted to contemplate their settlement in Israel."<sup>21</sup> Despite their substantial difference of views concerning the amelioration of the plight of the Beta Yisrael, Berger and Kessler corresponded and cooperated for several years.

The consortium which composed the FWA in Britain proved beneficial for coordinating relief and education efforts. In America, however, no national established Jewish organization was participating in the plight of Ethiopian Jewry. It was only a grass roots effort. Yet, coordination of the different groups and individuals was needed and a pooling of resources essential to create action.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Berger "saw the need to consolidate whatever had to be done on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, and initiated discussions with the American Pro-Falasha Committee and Abraham's organization [the American Friends of the Beta Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia], out of which emerged a new body in 1974, the American Association for Ethiopian Jews."<sup>23</sup> Berger "stressed the need to use the words 'Ethiopian Jews' rather than 'Falashas,' because 'Falasha' was a pejorative term. It was equally important and essential to emphasize the Ethiopian[']s historic connection with world Jewry."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 532.

<sup>22</sup> Sadly, coordination and a pooling of human and financial resources did not always characterize the Ethiopian rescue effort in America. As future chapters will demonstrate, the rescue movement in the U.S. became very fragmented, territorial, competitive and uncooperative for a number of years.

<sup>23</sup> Graenum, p. 558.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid



**MEMBERSHIP AND LEADERSHIP OF THE AAEJ:  
A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE GROWTH OF THE ORGANIZATION  
AND THE DIFFERING STYLES OF THE THREE PRESIDENTS OF THE AAEJ**

Graenum Berger notes the initial formation and growth of the organization:

While some preliminary meetings took place at Federation [in New York City] before I retired in June 1973, the first formal meeting occurred in Chicago in November 1974, where a board of directors was elected, based on invitations which I had extended to supporters of previous solicitations, the entire board of the American Pro-Falasha Committee, and new members of Abraham's small group who chose to identify with the new association. Apart from Abraham, Jeffrey B. Stone, a young attorney, became secretary of the new organization, and helped arrange the merger of the several societies and to obtain IRS tax exemption. I was elected president. Dr. Theodore Norman, head of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, was chosen treasure.

For several years, the annual meetings were held in our home in Pelham [New York], until the change in the presidency and the enlargement of the board membership necessitated finding larger quarters. We then met at the Brotherhood Synagogue, where Rabbi Irving J. Block, member of the board, officiated. As of the last election, in November 1985,<sup>25</sup> fifteen of the thirty original board members continued to serve on the board, which has been increased to fifty individuals. The board now meets in hotels in New York, Chicago, and Washington, as its constituency has become national.<sup>26</sup>

Membership of the AAEJ during the middle 1970s ranged in the hundreds, and by the end of the decade, numbered in the thousands. By the middle of the 1980s, membership reached the 30,000-40,000 plateau. By 1990, the AAEJ had around 45,000 supporters, and by the Fall of 1991, over 53,000 adherents. By the end of 1992, nearly 60,000 people supported the organization.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> There have been subsequent elections after this statement was made.

<sup>26</sup> Graenum, p. 558.

<sup>27</sup> Compiled from various issues of Release, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Highland Park, Illinois and Washington, D.C.

The growth of the AAEJ paralleled the leadership styles of its three presidents: Graenum Berger, Professor Howard Lenhoff and Nathan Shapiro. Lenhoff, professor of Biological Sciences at UC Irvine, the first vice president of the AAEJ and the organization's second president, notes: "Graenum Berger kept the AAEJ a small group. I made it a grass roots organization. I got out the information about the Ethiopian Jews in newspapers and contacted rabbis and synagogues. Nate Shapiro is able to work with the establishment, [and] Nate likes using politicians."<sup>28</sup>

The goals of the AAEJ during the Berger presidency form 1974 to 1978 were: "To get the Ethiopian Jews accepted as Jews in Israel; to get Israel to commit to Ethiopian Jewry; and to get the American Jewish community involved,"<sup>29</sup> During Lenhoff's presidency form 1978 to 1982, the AAEJ attempted to keep the issue of the Beta Yisrael on the forefront of American and world Jewry through increased publicity and utilization of articles, editorials and advertisements; lobbying efforts; the raising of funds; and increasing membership.<sup>30</sup> During the Shapiro years, from 1982 to present, the AAEJ focused on increasing membership; fostering relations with the American Jewish establishment; and creating a political force and vehicle in Washington, D.C., to push for a Beta Yisrael aliyah.

Graenum Berger created a powerful, maverick, individualistic, and anti-establishment organization. AAEJ Executive Director, Will Recant notes: "Throughout the 1970s, it was an issue that the AAEJ was out there alone on.

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff, UC Irvine and second president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, April 23 and April 26, 1992.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

There was no other voice."<sup>31</sup> Long time adversary of Graenum Berger, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) Director for International Concerns, Abraham Bayer notes: "I think he [Graenum] is the towering figure in this issue."<sup>32</sup> Lenhoff points to the critical role played by Berger and the AAEJ: "No doubt about it. The key players in the rescue movement of Ethiopian Jewry are the people of the AAEJ... Without the early stuff, there would not be anything in the Ethiopian Jewry rescue movement... The AAEJ created policy and was on the forefront all along."<sup>33</sup>

Graenum Berger notes how his successors helped shape and alter his organization:

Howard [Lenhoff] was a great successor of mine, with his public relation's sense, broadening the whole base of the organization, raising money in a completely different kind of fashion. I was one who still believed that all I had to do was hit the American Jewish leadership over the head and that would transform it. After all they were paying for Israel... and could exercise influence. Howard didn't go along with it. He said we had to have a broad mass base... [Then] Nate [Shapiro] came along and implemented what I started -- namely, organizing the Caucus<sup>34</sup> in Washington, D.C.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, while Lenhoff turned the AAEJ into a grass roots organization and remained at odds with the organized Jewish community, Shapiro focused on political connections and fostering relations with the Jewish leadership.

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<sup>31</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant, Executive Director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, May 19, 1992, at the national headquarters of the AAEJ in Washington, D.C.

<sup>32</sup> Personal interview with Abraham Bayer, Director for International Concerns for the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, June 18, 1992, New York, New York.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff.

<sup>34</sup> The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. More on the Caucus is discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

<sup>35</sup> Personal interview with Graenum Berger, founder and first president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, June 17, 1992, New Rochelle, New York.

Former Executive Director of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ), Jane Fellman, remarks: "Nate Shapiro is a powerful and wealthy man. He identified people for the Caucus and had many political connections. He was not a grass roots person."<sup>36</sup> Glenn Stein, former staff person with the AAEJ and the Religious Action Center (RAC) of the UAHC in charge of Ethiopian Jewry notes that Shapiro also moved the direction of the AAEJ into a more harmonious position with the established American Jewish community: "The AAEJ, Nate and Will [Rerant], are really dynamic, and they went directly to the UJA [United Jewish Appeal] and CJE [Council of Jewish Federations] leadership in this country, and made their case..."<sup>37</sup>

Under the leadership of Shapiro, Lenhoff and/or Berger, many have viewed the AAEJ in a skeptical and negative light. Claire Safran, author of a number of works on the Beta Yisrael, characterizes the organization as "an activist group, zealous and impatient over the Falashas' fate."<sup>38</sup> She also remarks "that the AAEJ pressed legislators in Washington and Jerusalem with such single-mindedness that its members were known as 'The Crazies,' or in kinder moments, 'The lone Rangers.' They saw themselves as gadflies; whenever they felt Israel wasn't doing enough, they would prod it into action."<sup>39</sup>

Lenhoff acknowledges that the AAEJ were mavericks and outcasts:

We wanted to keep them [the Israelis and the American Jewish leadership] on the alert. We were gadflys. We did purposely annoy and provoke others to take action. We made every Jew in America

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman, former Director of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ), May 4 and May 10, 1992.

<sup>37</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein, former staff person of the AAEJ and RAC assistant in charge of Ethiopian Jewry, June 18, 1992, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>38</sup> Claire Safran, "Secret Exodus, The Story of Operation Moses," Reader's Digest, January 1987, p. 179.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

know about Ethiopian Jewry. We lectured, raised money, lobbied. We did the first rescues to show that the amateurs could do it. The AAEJ got all of the governments to act and think it was in their [each government's] best interest. We played all of the governments off of each other – the Sudan, Ethiopia, Israel and the U.S.<sup>40</sup>

He also states: "The AAEJ is [was?] anti-establishment. We are [were?] pariahs with the other American Jewish organizations. We did just fine without all the multi-million dollar organizations. And this makes them look bad and it made them mad that we were able to do things without their help or money."<sup>41</sup> At least for the first decade of its existence, the AAEJ remained a maverick, prodding, "on the cutting edge," and controversial organization.

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

## BERGER'S EFFORTS ON BEHALF OF THE BETA YISRAEL IN 1974

In the name of Ethiopian Jewry, Berger exerted influence on national Jewish organizations. Berger was asked to be one of the delegates to the World Zionist Conference in Jerusalem in 1974, as a representative of the Labor Zionist Organization. He was prepared to accept the assignment if the American delegation would present a strong resolution demanding that the government of Israel undertake an immediate and massive rescue program designed to bring the Ethiopian Jews to Israel. His demands were refused. Realizing that a critical and proactive resolution "would not be welcome," Berger "took this occasion to resign from the Labor Zionist Organization."<sup>42</sup>

As a result, he wrote an article in the Jewish Frontier, entitled: "An Open Letter to the Labor Zionist Movement About the Ethiopian Jews (Falashas)." In the article, Berger gives a historical account of the Ethiopian Jews, details a need for their expeditious rescue, and criticizes the failure of the Labor Zionist Movement to act on its published principles.<sup>43</sup> This biting attack on Labor, Israeli and American Jewish leadership bemoans the neglect and inadequate support of world Jewish organizations.<sup>44</sup> He chastised that Israel could have taken out thousands, "on the wings of Eagles," because El Al landed in Ethiopia until the Yom Kippur War.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, he prompts the American Labor Zionists to influence their "chaverim" who occupy seats in the Knesset and hold cabinet positions, to "advocate a hospitable admissions

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<sup>42</sup> Graenum, p. 481.

<sup>43</sup> Graenum Berger, "An Open Letter to the Labor Zionist Movement About the Ethiopian Jews (Falashas)," Jewish Frontier, September 1974, 49:14-19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 17.



and absorption policy."<sup>46</sup> "Only a nod is required from either the still influential Golda Meir and the newly emerging Yizhak Rabin to set the machinery of transportation and resettlement in motion, instructing their foreign legations how to handle the traffic in Ethiopia and the Jewish Agency to settle them in Israel."<sup>47</sup> Thus, in his eloquent diatribe against American, Israeli and in particular Labor Party leadership, Berger formalized and politicized his resignation from the party. He later would state:

I can state categorically that the Labor Zionist movement and party in Israel, in control of the government from 1948 to 1977, never had the slightest interest in the plight of the Ethiopian Jews at a time when it could have saved all of them... So I terminated my formal relationship of fifty years. I knew of no better way to show my disapproval of what I considered an immoral position than by severing ties with an organization that had the power and should have been in the forefront- on its own initiative, not needing any promptings from me, to save a beleaguered remnant of an ancient Jewish tribe.<sup>48</sup>

Ironically, Berger returned to Israel in 1974, but not as a delegate for the World Zionist Congress in Jerusalem. He met with Ethiopian Israelis, members of the Israeli Ethiopian Jewish Committee, headed by Aryeh Tartakower, and Israeli government and Jewish Agency officials.<sup>49</sup> With each group, Berger pushed for an immediate and massive immigration of the Beta

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Graenum, p. 481.

<sup>49</sup> Graenum Berger notes in his autobiography, p. 565, that he had contact with Ovadia Hazzi. Berger goes on to state that in addition to prompting Chief Sephardic Rabbi Ovadia Yosef to write a statement concerning the Beta Yisrael, the "actual document was incorporated in a letter to Bernard and Frances Alpert, founding members of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, who were in Israel on business and had met Hezzi Ovadia [sic]." When I interviewed Mr. Berger, he reiterated this story. However, I have found no confirmation in any other document or source attesting to the Alperets being the recipient of the letter responsum. It appears that Ovadia Hazzi was the recipient of the responsum.

Yisrael. He noted, that although there seemed to be some prospect for aliyah, "in the end it once again proved illusory."<sup>50</sup>

While in Israel, Berger met with noted authors Meyer and Tereska Levin.<sup>51</sup> The Levins had been involved with the Ethiopian Jewish issue since 1969, and carried on activities for the next two decades.<sup>52</sup> That year they traveled to Ethiopia and filmed and produced a half-hour color documentary called "The Falashas." The piece was shown on television in France, Israel and the United States, as well as on educational circuits.<sup>53</sup> "All this exposure, however, was not enough to bring an immediate breakthrough for immigration," Meyer Levin lamented in his 1975 article, "The Last of the Falashas?"<sup>54</sup> The Levins and the Bergers, after forging their friendship the summer of 1974, utilized the film to raise funds and promote awareness about the Beta Yisrael.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Graenum, p. 574.

<sup>51</sup> My parents in 1989 lived in the apartment of Tereska Levin in Jerusalem while visiting Rhonda and me for a month after the birth of our son Ilan. Her Jerusalem flat is decorated with Ethiopian Jewish artifacts, tapestries, figurines and pictures, as well as photographs of her late husband Meyer and herself with Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia.

<sup>52</sup> In his late seventies, Meyer Levin died in Israel of a heart attack in 1982 when covering the war in Lebanon.

<sup>53</sup> Meyer Levin, "The Last of the Falashas?" Midstream, June/July 1975, p. 48.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

<sup>55</sup> Graenum, p. 578.

## 1975 AND BEYOND

During 1975, the Bergers returned to Israel several times. Of note, Graenum Berger met with Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren. Goren, as mentioned, refused to go along with the 1973 decree of Ovadia Yosef regarding the Beta Yisrael. Berger stated that his interactions with the rabbi "personally persuaded [him] to co-affirm their Jewishness and welcome their immigration and absorption."<sup>56</sup> Berger says that in a discussion with one of Rabbi Goren's assistants, the aide stated that the Beta Yisrael would be accepted in Israel only if they convert.<sup>57</sup> Berger threatened the aide that he would picket Goren whenever he visits the United States and wherever he speaks. Furthermore, Berger stated that he would go to the IRS and say that Goren heads up "a racist, discriminatory organization in Israel, and therefore, no orthodox institution would be eligible to receive tax exempt donations in the future."<sup>58</sup> As a result of his posturing, Berger was able to meet with Goren. In the subsequent meeting, Goren, with his hands raised up heavenward, expressed: "All of my life I have had a vision of the return of the Falasha to Israel, and do you know, that three years ago [he wanted to put it a year before Ovadia Yosef's decree], I wrote a memorandum on the Falashas..."<sup>59</sup>

During the Summer of 1975, the Bergers, along with Henry and Mildred Rosenberg, who later directed field rescue operations in the Sudan during the early 1980s, arranged for two Ethiopians to come to Israel with money provided by the AAEJ.<sup>60</sup> During the fall, Graenum Berger was at the King David Hotel

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 566.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Mr. Graenum Berger.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Graenum, p. 602-03.

when he was tipped off that the top leadership of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) was holding a meeting at the hotel. He "crashed" the meeting, leaving with an agreement to increase financial assistance and set up an office in Addis Ababa.<sup>61</sup>

Later in 1975, Berger traveled from Israel to Ethiopia via Kenya. He met with Gershon Levy, director of the Falasha Welfare Association's operation in Ethiopia, and with Yona Bogala. They relayed how the revolution had not improved the conditions for the Ethiopian Jews. Land was taken from the Beta Yisrael, chaos reigned and counterrevolutionaries and "shiftas"<sup>62</sup> roamed the countryside.<sup>63</sup> Berger pushed Levy and Yona that "only a wholesale aliyah to Israel would save the Ethiopian Jews, that during the current political turbulence, it might be possible to get many of them out."<sup>64</sup> While Yona Bogala agreed with Berger, "such a proposal fell on deaf ears, as far as Levy was concerned."<sup>65</sup> By 1975, Berger was frustrated by Kessler's and the FWA's stance of relief assistance instead of aliyah as the means to ameliorate the condition of the Beta Yisrael.

Berger also met with the new U.S. ambassador, Arthur W. Hummel Jr.: "I had learned more about the area from Levy and Bogala than he and his staff knew, because the embassy was fearful of sending anyone into the interior, as some foreigners had been taken hostage in recent weeks."<sup>66</sup> The U.S. government erred in assessing that the revolution was going to be short-lived. The failure in judgement in part would lead to the loss of the electronic

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 604.

<sup>62</sup> "shiftas" are Ethiopian bandits who roam, ransack, pillage and terrorize the mountainous regions of Ethiopia.

<sup>63</sup> Graenum, p. 610.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 611.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 610.

surveillance bases and a cooling of diplomatic relations.<sup>67</sup> Berger, like other foreigners, was unable to get into the interior of Ethiopia to Gondar because of the political instability and government restrictions.

Graenum Berger on his return trip to the states went back to Nairobi, Kenya. He established contacts with the local foreign-born Jewish population and other individuals in Nairobi. Berger envisioned, that if any Ethiopian Jews escaped to Kenya, he needed a network of local supporters in Kenya who would facilitate their final immigration to Israel.<sup>68</sup>

In America, Graenum Berger continued to build the American Association for Ethiopian Jews into a national organization. Although membership remained in the hundreds, local chapters sprang up in New York, Illinois, Louisiana and Southern California. The organization's first official publication, Falasha Update, was issued on December 18, 1975.<sup>69</sup>

Throughout the early years of the AAEJ, publicity was an essential component of the organization's activism. Numerous articles and editorials were written, in particular by Professor Howard Lenhoff. His works appeared in college newspapers, the pages of national and international journals and newspapers and in the Jewish press. While detailing the presumed origins and a brief history of the Beta Yisrael, Professor Lenhoff would focus on their current plight and need for an immediate and massive aliyah to Israel.<sup>70</sup> The publicity promoted awareness and increased membership in the AAEJ. Yet,

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<sup>67</sup> For a brief account of U.S.-Ethiopian relations, see chapter five, section on "Menachem Begin, Moshe Dayan and the Aborted Rescue Efforts of 1977."

<sup>68</sup> Graenum, pp. 612-13.

<sup>69</sup> Falasha Update, the first publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, No. 1, December 18, 1975. The current AAEJ publication, Release, was first published in January of 1983.

<sup>70</sup> Beginning in 1975, articles appeared in such publications as the New York Times, Los Angeles Times and International Herald Tribune.

despite the clamoring of this maverick organization, little movement in the established Jewish community or by the Israeli government ensued.

This came as a surprise to the Jewish communal leader Berger, who had participated intimately in American Jewish affairs for decades and frequently interacted with Israelis on business and personal matters:

From the start of my interest in 1955, I did not believe that it was necessary to have another organization in order to make Israel and the Jewish world undertake this task. Actually, until 1969, when Jed Abraham personally created the Friends of the Beta Israel (Falasha) community in Ethiopia, and in 1973[4], when the American Association for Ethiopian Jews was incorporated as the union of the above organization and the relatively innocuous American Pro-Falasha Committee, I had no serious thought of creating another organization. I felt that all that was needed was for a few of us to convince the powers that be in Israel, America and England to do what they must do to assist these helpless Jews get out of Ethiopia. With Israel as an independent state and so many powerful international Jewish organizations, Jewish Agency, JDC, ORT, etc., there was no need for another. Also, such did not happen, despite all of our fervent and provocative efforts and eloquent appeals. Even the tiniest beginnings of aliyah did not happen until 1977. Every Ethiopian Jew, who had come to Israel before that came in illegally, but fortunately was not sent back, except for those students who came in officially to study at Kfar Batyah, but were forced to return to Ethiopia, except for four [seven], who somehow avoided the authorities and remained behind.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Personal letter from Graenum Berger to Jeff Kaye, dated June 19, 1992.



THE FWA, THE AJDC, WORLD ORT AND  
THE REACTION OF BERGER AND THE AAEJ

As a result of the Marxist Revolution of 1974, relief efforts to Ethiopia were in a state of flux. The efforts of the British, namely through the Falasha Welfare Organization, which was the successor to the Standing Conference in London, while admirable and the only ones conducting activities in Ethiopia, were meager at best.<sup>72</sup> A few doctors were sent and village schools maintained.<sup>73</sup> The British organization decided to send a non-Ethiopian administrator to help supervise the programs in Ethiopia. After the first representative failed, Julian Kay, an English Jew who had taught for four years in the Wingate School in Addis Ababa, worked in Ethiopia in 1974 and 1975, until he was forced out of the country by the Provisional Revolutionary Government in March.<sup>74</sup>

By 1975, the American Joint Distribution Committee (AJDC) "reversed its previously aloof policy and decided to participate in the task of saving the Falashas."<sup>75</sup> This action in part resulted from Berger's interaction with leaders of the organization at the King David Hotel. The AJDC agreed to work together with the Jewish Colonization Association. Gershon Levy, an Israeli agronomist with previous experience in Ethiopia and other developing countries, filled the position for the AJDC, which was vacated when the FWA's Julian Kay was expelled. Levy expanded the educational and communal projects, and in cooperation with the government, worked on a revolving credit fund for farmers. He also conducted an "incomplete" census of the Beta

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<sup>72</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 21.

<sup>73</sup> David Kessler, The Falashas: The Forgotten Jews of Ethiopia (Africana Publishing company a division of Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982), p. 159.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 160.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 163.

Yisrael, finding a total population of 28,189 consisting of 6,092 families in 490 villages.<sup>76</sup> While the census covered a wide area, it omitted some remote settlements and was conducted while the state of the country was disturbed and communication was even more difficult than usual.<sup>77</sup>

Beginning in July, 1977, World ORT took over the AJDC programs in Ethiopia. According to David Kessler, "The progress which had been made by the Falasha Welfare Association and the recognition of its importance as a means of meeting the threat to the survival of the Falashas had by now drawn the major Jewish body concerned with technical training into the field."<sup>78</sup> The program was to be based in the Gondar region, "designed to benefit all sections of the people while paying special attention to the educational and religious needs of the Jewish population."<sup>79</sup> ORT, which had projects in other African countries, claimed familiarity with the terrain. Additionally, reputation for its programs in many parts of the world would perhaps attract large-scale funds from a variety of governments, including the United States.

By the end of the 1970s, ORT administered nineteen village schools with about 1,660 pupils, and provided Hebrew prayer books to the kessim.<sup>80</sup> Clinics were also restored in Ambober and Tedda, a clean drinking water fountain and a flour mill were provided at Ambober, and roads and factories constructed.

But by the late 1970s, ORT came under criticism by an association of Ethiopian Jews in Israel and by the AAEJ in America. Both of these groups

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<sup>76</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 21. Dr. Ephraim Isaac also notes that "although the census was private and unofficial, and did not take into account the traditional Ethiopian suspicion of counting people, it is surprisingly regarded by non-Ethiopians as the final word."

<sup>77</sup> The Falashas, p. 164.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>80</sup> Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 22-23.

advocated aliyah as the best way of helping the Beta Yisrael. To Berger, the idea of having ORT in Ethiopia instead of the AJDC seemed enticing at first.<sup>81</sup> However,

[a] year later, we [the AAEJ] began to regret supporting this change, because ORT had made the project nonsectarian and not in the exclusive interest of Ethiopian Jewry... Had I anticipated what would befall Ethiopian Jewry under ORT's Ethiopian dominion, I would have counseled a different course. Since I believed in aliyah as the only way to save them, I should not have let another unworthy "loyalty" swerve me from that path.<sup>82</sup>

In short, Berger, among other things, was concerned about the non-sectarian approach of ORT as well as its leadership in Ethiopia and its impact on the future of the Beta Yisrael:

[A] non-Jew whom it had appointed to the top level of its administration was not favorably disposed to the Jews. Even the itinerant executive that ORT sent from Geneva to establish and supervise the project, while efficient, was not looking with favor on the extraordinary needs of Ethiopian Jews. ORT had already been assured of substantial support from non-Jewish sources, on conditions that contractually called for a nonsectarian approach. Because of the source of financial support, Gershon and I felt, that ORT would then not have to be accountable to the Jewish world.<sup>83</sup>

For Berger, anything short of aliyah was deadly. The longer the community languished in Ethiopia, the greater the chance for the community to become extinct through assimilation, persecution and conversions. This view was now also shared by Yona Bogala, "whose long years of frustration

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<sup>81</sup> *Graenum*, pp. 614-15.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p. 615.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 619.

and disappointment had led him to the same conclusion,"<sup>84</sup> ORT also came under Ethiopian government criticism, ironically because some officials thought that it was encouraging aliyah via the Sudan. Eventually, in October of 1981, the government took over ORT's programs except the medical clinics.<sup>85</sup> While the anxiety of the Ethiopian government over a Beta Yisrael emigration to Israel may have been the catalyst for the removal of ORT, its actions should be seen against the background of other international pressures. On the one hand, Ethiopia was bound to her Soviet and Cuban partners. Nearer to home, Ethiopia needed to cultivate good relations with the Sudan and to dissuade her neighbors from assisting the Eritrean and Tigrean rebels. Meanwhile, in September of 1981, Ethiopia signed a treaty of friendship with South Yemen and Libya at a time when the latter was at extreme tension with the Sudan. "In these circumstances Addis Ababa may have concluded that the sacrifice of the Falasha aid program represented a small price to pay in order to placate simultaneously the Russians, the Arabs, Colonel Gaddafi and Sudan."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> The Falashas, p. 165.

<sup>85</sup> Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews, p. 23.

<sup>86</sup> The Falashas, p. 171.

## SUMMARY

Internally, the Beta Yisrael received a modicum of support in Ethiopia during the 1970s through the FWA, the AJDC and ORT. Externally, no efforts were made to facilitate the exodus of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, or to any other country, for that matter. Virtually the only cry for an immediate and expeditious Ethiopian Jewry aliyah outside of the Beta Yisrael community was expressed by the AAEJ. This organization began to set up a network which eventually would catalyze the emigration of the Beta Yisrael.

The *raison d'être* of the AAEJ from its inception has been "pushing for and helping actualize an Ethiopian aliyah." The momentum of Graenum Berger and his organization slowly strengthened during the middle part of the decade. At the same time, the general ignorance and indifference of world Jewry toward the Beta Yisrael was difficult for Berger and the AAEJ to accept. Moreover, too many false promises and false starts by American Jewish organizations and the Israeli government had occurred. Thus, toward the end of the 1970s, the organization became more assertive and vociferous. The attacks on Israel and the American Jewish establishment became public. The AAEJ even ventured into the rescue business in Ethiopia and the Sudan. Berger states:

None of us thought about being pioneers; none of us thought we were heroic; none of us yearned for public plaudits, and certainly no such recognition was even or ever given. Instead all of us were looked upon as kooks, nuisances or as enemies of Israel. Finally, we had to resort to forcing the establishment to take decisive action, actions that they did not want to perform even tokenly, for a variety of reasons, mostly fictitious, others due to sheer official prejudices, but

all harmful to the welfare and even the lives of the Ethiopian Jewish community.<sup>87</sup>

To these issues, as well as the reaction, action and inaction of American and Israeli Jewry we turn in the next chapter.

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<sup>87</sup> Personal letter from Graenum Berger to Jeff Kaye.



CHAPTER FIVE:  
FROM MENACHEM BEGIN'S ELECTION IN 1977 UP TO  
OPERATION MOSES IN 1984:  
RESCUE ATTEMPTS, DISPUTES, AND CHARGES OF COMPLACENCY

MENACHEM BEGIN, MOSHE DAYAN AND  
THE ABORTED RESCUE EFFORTS OF 1977

While in power from 1948 to 1977, the Labor Party proved indifferent to the plight of the Ethiopian Jews. Those concerned with the Beta Yisrael hoped a change in government would bring an expansion of awareness, interest and efforts on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. Thus, it was with high expectations, albeit blind hope in any new party and leadership, that many in the rescue movement looked with encouragement upon Menachem Begin and the Likud when they came to power in May of 1977. Soon after assuming the position of Prime Minister, Begin became the first major government leader to meet with representatives of the Beta Yisrael. These leaders claimed that when Begin listened to the saga and plight of the Ethiopian Jews, he became totally absorbed in their story.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, "[t]hese young Ethiopians struck a chord" with the Prime Minister because of the traumatic loss of his entire family in the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> In his private discussion with Zachariah Yona, Rachamim Elazar and other Ethiopian Israeli leaders, Begin declared that "the Falasha community is one of the most ancient in the Jewish dispersion, and we must bring them home."<sup>3</sup>

Former president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jew's (AAEJ), Professor Howard M. Lenhoff, along with AAEJ rescue coordinator

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Gruber, Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews (New York: Atheneum, 1987), p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Louis Rapoport, Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986), p. 55.

Henry Rosenberg, met privately with Begin during the winter of 1977-78. Lenhoff expressed his admiration for the Prime Minister in the face of previous Israeli intransigence. "After our earlier experiences in countless meetings with other Israeli leaders and lesser bureaucrats, we were impressed with the sincerity and genuine concern that Begin demonstrated for the Jews in Ethiopia."<sup>4</sup> Shortly after Menachem Begin's death in 1992, Professor Lenhoff wrote the following reflections about the former prime minister:

It does not seem strange, to those who knew him, that Begin's pioneering efforts to rescue the Ethiopian Jews are still hardly known. He was a true Zionist interested in bringing to Israel all Jews in distress. He wanted, and got, results. All that counted was pikuach nefesh, the saving of Jewish lives.

The movement that Begin started during his early months as prime minister eventually led to the bringing to Israel from Africa virtually the entire community of nearly 50,000 Jews.<sup>5</sup>

Ethiopian Jews have an equally appreciative vision of Begin. Although the well publicized Operations Moses<sup>6</sup> and Solomon<sup>7</sup> took place after Begin left politics in 1983, his initiative helped place the beleaguered community's immigration on the Israeli agenda. "It was Begin who broke down the walls,"<sup>8</sup> said Rachamim Elazar. "The issue mattered to him. He believed that Ethiopian Jews are Jews and their place is in Israel. He saw it as his destiny to bring the community here."<sup>9</sup> "Before Begin, nobody wanted to hear from us," Elazar states, "[but] Begin was willing. Operation Moses was a continuation of what he

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<sup>4</sup> Professor Howard M. Lenhoff, "Begin Remembered as First to Rescue Ethiopians," The American Israelite, April 16, 1992, pp. A-4 and A-15.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. A-15.

<sup>6</sup> Operation Moses is detailed in chapter seven.

<sup>7</sup> Operation Solomon is discussed in chapter nine.

<sup>8</sup> "Begin was considered savior of Ethiopian community," Northern California Jewish Bulletin, March 13, 1992, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

started."<sup>10</sup> "For us, Menachem Begin was everything," notes Yaacov Babu, speaking for the community's umbrella organization, the United Ethiopian Organization in Israel; "he saved a community."<sup>11</sup> Elazar attributed Begin's interest in the issue to his love of the Jewish people. "He didn't care about skin color. For him all Jews should be in Israel."<sup>12</sup>

AAEJ founder and first president Graenum Berger also had high expectations for the new Prime Minister. "It was my hope that since he was an ardent Zionist and believed Israel should be a haven for all Jews, especially those in jeopardy, he might alter the do-nothing program of the Labor Party, which had been in power since 1948, until his succeeding incumbency."<sup>13</sup> Due to Begin's leadership, the first rescue operation took place in August of 1977.

When Menachem Begin came to power, there were some signs of rapprochement between Israel and Ethiopia. Although emperor Haile Selassie severed diplomatic relations with Israel following the Yom Kippur War of October of 1973, and the Marxist regime failed to reestablish political missions following its coup in September of 1974, the two countries maintained indirect contacts. Trade continued, primarily with the sale of Israeli arms to Ethiopia.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, dramatic events in Ethiopia created a renewed sense of urgency to restore some type of ties with this East African nation.

In February of 1977, the then thirty-four-year-old Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam (Mengistu) became the chairman of the Provisional

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Graenum Berger, Graenum (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1987), p. 621.

<sup>14</sup> Tudor Parfitt, Operation Moses: The Story of the Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), p. 37.

Military Administrative Council (PMAC) after a bloody shoot-out among his rivals in the Dergue.<sup>15</sup> Until this time, Ethiopia played a strategic role in American foreign policy. The United States had sent vast amounts of arms and economic aid, and the U.S. army had built a sophisticated communications center at Kagnew Station on the outskirts of Asmara. Given U.S. desires to contain Soviet influence in the Horn of Africa, and in particular, Somalia, aid was sent to Ethiopia and the communications center was built. This center was the only electronic listening post in all of black Africa, with a military garrison of thirty-five hundred Americans.<sup>16</sup> As a result of the violent shoot-out in the Dergue, President Jimmy Carter announced that further military aid would be drastically reduced because of the human rights violations and the reign of terror.<sup>17</sup>

In retaliation, the Dergue in April of 1977 shut down all U.S. operations except the American Embassy and the Agency for International Development (AID). Four days later, Washington stopped all arms shipments to Ethiopia.<sup>18</sup> A month later, Ethiopian government officials, continuing their reign of terror and furthering their lethal crackdowns on potential opposition, murdered some two thousand high school students, including many Beta Yisrael, in the "May Day 1977 massacre." That same month, Israeli elections brought Menachem Begin to power. Shortly thereafter, Begin met with the leaders of the Beta Yisrael community in Israel.

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<sup>15</sup> In September of 1974, a shadowy committee of one hundred and twenty military men who called themselves the Dergue, overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in a bloody revolution. The new government was strongly Marxist. By 1978, there were only forty men left in the Dergue, and Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam (Mengistu) was their chairman. For more details, see the section on "Ethiopian Instability During the 1970s" near the beginning of chapter three.

<sup>16</sup> *Rescue*, p. 127.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 128.

Behind this backdrop, Begin sent an official communication to Mengistu, asking him "to apply humanitarian considerations to the issue of the Falashas and to let them emigrate to Israel if they so wished."<sup>19</sup> Mengistu did not immediately or directly respond to this request, but instead chose to wait for a politically expedient moment to reply to the Israeli Prime Minister's appeal.

During the Summer of 1977, on his first visit to Washington D.C. as Prime Minister, Begin approached President Carter with an extensive agenda. Foremost, Begin discussed the thawing of relations with Anwar Sadat and future peace prospects with Egypt. He also broached the subject of Ethiopia with Carter. Begin played the role of Ethiopia's friend in Washington, in hopes of striking a deal with Mengistu. He urged Carter not to turn his back on Ethiopia and not to side solely with Somalia in their border wars. "If the free world did not neglect Ethiopia, he argued, she might be lured from the communist fold."<sup>20</sup> While meeting with Carter at the White House, a communique arrived through indirect channels for Begin from Mengistu.<sup>21</sup>

The communication asked Begin to help secure American military aid for Ethiopia in its struggle against Somali forces in the Ogaden. Mengistu also stressed the continued need for Israeli arms and American parts from Israel, so long as this supply would remain secret. Begin promised his help on both requests in exchange for Mengistu's cooperation on the Beta Yisrael issue. However, Jimmy Carter refused to go along with Begin's suggestions: "He [Carter] considered Ethiopia's human rights record appalling and felt that the

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<sup>19</sup> Operation Moses, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Claire Safran, Secret Exodus (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), p. 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69.

United States could not support such a regime, however indirectly."<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the USSR agreed to arm and train the Ethiopian army. Yet, Mengistu still needed military parts from Israel. As a result of the fluid geopolitical and military situation, the Ethiopian authorities turned a blind eye to the emigration of the Beta Yisrael to Israel for a few months.

In August of 1977, an Israeli cargo plane landed at the Addis Ababa airport and unloaded its freight, mostly military spare parts. On the return trip, sixty-two Ethiopian Jews, mostly young people, filled the cargo bay. "Nothing was said, nothing was written on the flight plan, but Ethiopia had agreed to turn a blind eye."<sup>23</sup>

A diverging view of how the operation unfolded is given in the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society's (HIAS) publication, The HIAS Reporter.<sup>24</sup> Haim Halachmi, HIAS's representative in Tel Aviv, received a phone call from Yehuda Dominitz, then director general of the Jewish Agency's immigration and absorption department. Dominitz is said to have enlisted Halachmi's support, and sent the HIAS official to Ethiopia. Halachmi visited the Beta Yisrael in Gondar and Tigrey and delivered letters of reunification, "intended for those 150 Falashas who had relatives in Israel, which he took to the Ministry of Interior [in Ethiopia]."<sup>25</sup> According to Halachmi:

By August, the Interior Ministry had agreed to six departures on humanitarian grounds. But we didn't know whether that referred to six individuals or six families. So we chose the largest family we could find and brought them to Addis Ababa. The Foreign Ministry arranged their documents and prepared laissez-passers for them. We ordered a

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<sup>22</sup> Operation Moses, pp. 37-38.

<sup>23</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> "1977 to the Present: Rescue in Ethiopia," The HIAS Reporter, Summer 1991, pp. 1 and 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.



plane from Israel, which came by night on a Thursday evening. At 5 a.m. the next morning, we left the country with 62 immigrants – the first ever arranged through the Ethiopian government.<sup>26</sup>

This account leaves out any mention of an arms for emigration exchange.<sup>27</sup> In fact, The HIAS Reporter claims that it was Halachmi who "ordered a plane from Israel," seemingly to facilitate the humanitarian gesture of the Ethiopian government, arranged by this HIAS and Jewish Agency official. While sixty-two Ethiopian Jews were rescued in August of 1977, it is clear that these Beta Yisrael were allowed to emigrate based on an exchange of military supplies for human beings hammered out by Begin and Mengistu. However, how these sixty-two individuals were selected does seem to be the work of Halachmi.

Graenum Berger also claims that he had a major role in this first rescue mission. Berger was asked to give an academic lecture on Ethiopian Jewry on August 15, 1977, at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Besides his presentation, he arranged for other leading personalities in the Ethiopian movement to speak. "In back of my mind was to see what would happen by August 15. If no Ethiopian Jew had arrived from Ethiopia by that date, I would change my 'academic, historical' account to an outright accusatory one."<sup>28</sup> Dr. Aryeh Tartakower, chair of the Israeli Beta Yisrael support group, and other members of his committee vehemently opposed such a speech. "I [Berger] indicated that it was a personal statement and that I was not asking for the committee's sanction. It was at this point that my relations with Dr.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> The accounts of the August 1977 rescue, including those found in Operation Moses, The Lost Jews, Rescue, Secret Exodus, and Redemption Song, suggest an arms for people exchange worked out by Begin and Mengistu.

<sup>28</sup> Graenum, p. 623.

Tartakower began to deteriorate and shortly thereafter were permanently broken."<sup>29</sup>

No Ethiopian Jews came by the fifteenth of August, and Berger rewrote the speech. Two hundred and fifty people attended the lecture, despite "efforts made by Israeli officials to sabotage the meeting,"<sup>30</sup> according to Berger. In his speech, Berger charged that no serious efforts had ever been made to bring the Beta Yisrael to Israel, and that until 1977, no Ethiopian Jew had ever come to Israel legally. The text of his speech continued with the following words:

Even if rescue should eventually -- even tomorrow -- produce a few score -- what of the rest of the 28,000? Must they be left behind, sacrificed and disappear from the face of the earth after 3000 years of courageously clinging to the Jewish faith? Is this their final answer?

The restoration of diplomatic relations with Ethiopia is a most desirable policy for Israel.

The furtherance of trade relations are most desirable economically for Israel.

Permitting Israel to fly over their territory is of immense value to Israel.

Continuing to have a toehold on the Red Sea is essential for the security of Israel.

But are all of these valid governmental policies inconsistent with or even more important than saving 28,000 Jewish lives?

Or are there other unspoken reasons why no official bodies in Israel or the rest of the Jewish world are not lifting more than a little finger to bring them to Israel?

I leave the answer to that searching question up to you.<sup>31</sup>

Despite press coverage of his speech, Berger's diatribe on Israeli and world Jewry's indifference was never reported in any newspaper because of censorship laws. Nevertheless, reports of his Hebrew University lecture reached the highest echelons of the Israeli government. Then, ten days after

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 624.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 625.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

the speech, on August 25, the sixty-two Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel. Who gave the order to bring them at this moment? Berger believes that the constant pressure on the Prime Minister and the speech that he had made ten days earlier, pressured the government to move. "There was fear that the real reason for the long delays might be made public [from other speeches and advertisements Berger would make, and thus, the government acted to rescue a token number of Ethiopian Jews]."<sup>32</sup> Berger felt that the test of the government's sincerity would be a continued flow of Ethiopian Jews. No action was taken during the Fall of 1977. In December, in a letter to the Prime Minister, Berger stated that "a token rescue was not enough."<sup>33</sup>

Once again, ten days after Berger's prodding, in December of 1977, a second Israeli plane landed and delivered its military goods. No one will know for sure if it was a mere coincidence or effective pressure and lobbying. The aircraft returned to Israel with its living contraband, another sixty black Jews. Yona Bogala, leader of the Beta Yisrael community in Ethiopia, was exultant. The aliyah was finally coming to fruition. He confided to his wife, "a hundred and twenty-one [122] people have now flown to Israel with no danger to their lives. It's all legal. We'll be able to get thousands out this way. Maybe we can save our whole community."<sup>34</sup>

But, Yona Bogala's dream faded fast. No Jew was rescued from Ethiopia to Eretz Yisrael by the State of Israel in all of 1978. In February, 1978, the secret pact between Israel and Ethiopia was uncovered by a slip of the tongue and leak by a prominent Israeli official. Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan publicly confirmed at a press conference in Switzerland, that Israel had been

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 627.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Rescue, p. 129.

supplying arms to Ethiopia to aid its war against Somalia. Mengistu ordered the clandestine flights of Ethiopian Jews to be stopped. The arms sales came to a halt and the idea of a legal emigration of the Beta Yisrael from Ethiopia had to be abandoned. "Mengistu's Marxist and enthusiastically anti-Zionist regime was put in an awkward position."<sup>35</sup> Mengistu was caught red-handed. He had no choice but to sever the secret agreement, given his dependance on the Arab world and growing ties with the Soviet Union. "In the Arab and Communist worlds, few deeds were considered more heinous than trafficking with the Zionist entity."<sup>36</sup>

Moshe Dayan effectively ended the Beta Yisrael's chances to emigrate from Ethiopia. In a debate in the Knesset about Israeli arms to Ethiopia, Dayan defended his leak and the damaging impact on the Ethiopian aliyah by stating, "I told the truth."<sup>37</sup> Some Israeli sources insisted that Dayan's slip of the tongue was deliberate since he did not desire an Ethiopian aliyah. Other governmental officials insisted that Dayan's leak was deliberate -- not because he was opposed to Beta Yisrael immigration into Israel -- but rather because he was "profoundly uneasy about supplying arms to what he considered to be an 'evil regime.'"<sup>38</sup> According to former Begin aides, the Prime Minister was furious at the "gaffe."<sup>39</sup> At the same time, Begin was said to be surprised by Mengistu's reaction. Israeli arms sales to Ethiopia had previously been reported in a number of African newspapers. Perhaps Mengistu, under Soviet

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<sup>35</sup> Operation Moses, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Rescue, p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>38</sup> Operation Moses, p. 38.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

pressure, used Dayan's statement as a convenient excuse to rid himself of any further obligation he might have felt towards Israel.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid

## 1978 AND BEYOND

Dayan's leak resulted in the slamming shut of a door that had finally been cracked ajar. It would not be the last time that the Beta Yisrael would find themselves trapped because someone spoke out of turn. Later, in March of 1978, two Beta Yisrael came out of Ethiopia through the intervention of the Swedish government and one through the International Red Cross, bringing the total for the year to three Jewish souls.<sup>41</sup> But that was the end of humanitarian exits. The next exit routes that the Israelis tried led to calamity.

In the late 1970s, a few Ethiopian Jews left Israel and slipped back into Gondar province. Their plan was to load the back of a truck with Ethiopian Jewish passengers, then drive south from the Beta Yisrael villages across Ethiopia to the border with Kenya. "They were new at this game, and the operation floundered. A truckload of Falashas were caught and arrested."<sup>42</sup> Then Israeli officials recruited two Frenchman, offering them five hundred dollars a head for every Jew they could deliver to Kenya. "All that happened was more arrests."<sup>43</sup> As a result of these failed attempts, in addition to political instability and the severe famine of 1978 in Ethiopia, many Beta Yisrael walked to the Sudan in hopes of reaching Israel.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, the government of Menachem Begin tried to reestablish the links with Ethiopia which had been broken over the Dayan affair. Contacts with the Marxist regime were maintained through every possible diplomatic channel. According to one source, "Begin asked American industrialist

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<sup>41</sup> "1977 to the Present: Rescue in Ethiopia," pp. 1 and 7.

<sup>42</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 69.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> This exodus to the Sudan would eventually push Israel to take action and rescue thousands of the Beta Yisrael from the desert refugee camps. More in subsequent sections and chapters.



Armand Hammer to solicit help, through his connections with the Soviets and with Mengistu's friend Fidel Castro, in influencing Marxist Ethiopia to ease the plight of Jews."<sup>45</sup> However, nothing came of this, and "the Falasha question" was transferred from the Jewish Agency to the Prime Minister's Office.<sup>46</sup>

There were growing pressures on Begin to formulate a policy. As the plight of the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia became steadily worse,<sup>47</sup> the involvement of the Ethiopian support organizations grew. The AAEJ stepped up its publicity campaign among American Jews to pressure Israel to take action.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, in January of 1979, Ethiopian Israelis demonstrated in front of the Knesset, protesting over the slow rate of immigration. The immigrants contended that the Israeli government was stalling on the issue, hiding behind a concern for secrecy. As a result of the demonstrations, many Israelis learned for the first time that around three hundred and fifty Ethiopian Jews were living amongst them.

A controversy exists until today as to how the demonstration was organized. Professor Howard Lenhoff professes that his organization funded and organized the rally in Jerusalem in January of 1979.<sup>49</sup> Professor Lenhoff remarks that one of his first acts as president of the AAEJ was to get the names and addresses of all Ethiopian Israelis (about 150 families by the end of 1978). Based on this list and networking with the Ethiopian Israeli leadership,

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<sup>45</sup> Redemption Song, p. 56.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> The Marxist Revolution in Ethiopia degenerated into chaos, peaking in the Red Terror of May 1977 and the catastrophic years of 1977 through 1979. The Beta Yisrael were gravely affected. For more details, see chapter three, section on "Ethiopian Instability during the 1970s."

<sup>48</sup> More on the activities of the AAEJ will be detailed in the next section as well as the next chapter.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff, second president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, April 23 and April 26, 1992.

lenhoff said he and other AAEJ officials planned, funded and implemented the demonstration in front of the Knesset.<sup>50</sup>

Conversely, Professor Ephraim Isaac,<sup>51</sup> who was teaching at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem at the time, believes that the demonstration by the Ethiopian Israelis was completely spontaneous, and that the AAEJ had nothing to do with the rally.<sup>52</sup>

Ethiopians by nature know how to organize. Ethiopians are very politically mature. They thought that this was one way of getting attention. I remember when they were talking about it [organizing the demonstration]. What did the AAEJ do? That demonstration was spontaneous. The Ethiopian Israelis were responding to what they were feeling, the brunt of the politics in Ethiopia. There was the Red Terror in Ethiopia. You have to look at what was happening in Ethiopia... They were worried about their families, their relatives, about their people in the Sudan. This [the demonstration] really came out of hopelessness and despair... The Ethiopian Jews in Israel wanted to do something. They wanted to push the situation. So that's how it [the demonstration] happened. That really in many ways awakened the eyes of the world to the plight of the Ethiopian Jews.<sup>53</sup>

Will Recant remarks that the demonstration resulted due to the Beta Israel's initiative and the need for organizational help by the AAEJ:

The Ethiopian Jews who came to Israel... they wanted to protest and they wanted to say their piece. They felt that they were being treated as second class citizens, and that the Israeli government was not doing enough to bring their families to Israel. And how you go about changing that is where the AAEJ came in. [The AAEJ] said to them [the Ethiopian Israelis], now that you are in Israel, the way to do that [make change] is through demonstrations and protests and raising your voice. You can't humbly go to the Israelis and make your request -- you will get nowhere. So it was that combination of their [Ethiopian

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> For a brief biographical sketch of Professor Ephraim Isaac, see chapter two.

<sup>52</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Ephraim Isaac, Princeton, New Jersey, May 18, 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

Israelis'] desire to see the change and us [the AAEJ] giving them the political techniques to do that, that formed the demonstration.<sup>54</sup>

In any event, whether the AAEJ organized the demonstration or it occurred spontaneously by the Ethiopian Israelis, the Prime Minister's office took notice. A week later, Begin met with four representatives of the Beta Yisrael community. In a press conference before the meeting with Begin, one of the Ethiopian Israeli leaders expressed the following:

When the Emperor Haile Selassie was in power, they [the Israeli government] told us not to make noise and to let them handle things quietly to keep relations between the two countries friendly. They also claimed that the emperor refused to let Jews leave, though when the emperor was asked in specific cases he did give permission. Now, with the military government in power there [Ethiopia], they [the Israeli government] still tell us to keep quiet about it. There has been debate here [in Israel] over the past few weeks about whether hundreds or thousands of Falashas have been killed or sold into slavery. Isn't it enough that Jews are being killed and enslaved? Isn't that enough reason for the Jewish people and the Israeli government to act?<sup>55</sup>

In response to the charges leveled at the press conference, a Jewish Agency spokesperson said that "a great deal is being done."<sup>56</sup>

When Begin met with Rachamim Elazar, another son of Yona Bogala, David, and two other leaders, he reaffirmed his commitment to the Beta Yisrael. "You are our brothers, our flesh and blood,"<sup>57</sup> Begin told them. "So the Israeli government has done, is doing and will continue to do its best in searching for ways to bring our brothers here to their homeland,"<sup>58</sup> Begin related to the

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<sup>54</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant, Executive Director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, May 19, 1992, national headquarters of the AAEJ in Washington, D.C.

<sup>55</sup> Redemption Song, p. 61.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>57</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 70.

<sup>58</sup> Redemption Song, p. 62.

four leaders. "We are fully aware of their plight, so we will not let our brothers suffer, but the critical problem is lack of direct connections with the Ethiopian leader. Despite this, we work very hard to save the Falashas."<sup>59</sup>

The Beta Yisrael leaders continued to push government officials and the other Israelis to expedite aliyah. They met with Histadrut chief Yeruham Meshel, then Knesset Speaker Yitzhak Shamir, Knesset member Geula Cohen, Menachem Begin's wife Aliza, and the press. As the months passed, the Ethiopian Israelis became convinced that "the Begin Government was little better than the Labor regime -- both governments relied on the same Jewish Agency bureaucrats and National Religious Party ministers. And the Falashas were convinced that these people were not in the business of answering prayers."<sup>60</sup> As a result, a second demonstration was organized in October of 1979.

This second peaceful demonstration in front of the Knesset resulted in another meeting with Prime Minister Begin. The representatives of the community met with Begin and urged him to take decisive action. Zachariah Yona said: "We have nothing to lose by trying to make a fuss in public. If we keep quiet we may lose the whole community."<sup>61</sup> The Ethiopian Israelis told Begin that Beta Yisrael could be rescued from Ethiopia via the Sudan. But precious time was passing. In 1979, the same year in which Israel gave refuge to four hundred Vietnamese boat people, only three hundred and fifty Beta Yisrael lived in the Jewish State.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 216.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

<sup>61</sup> Operation Moses, p. 40.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*

The pressure continued to mount on Begin and the Israeli government. By the end of 1979, Begin announced the formation of an interministerial committee whose purpose was to coordinate the absorption of the Ethiopian Jews. The committee consisted largely of immigration and absorption officials, and it was not privy to some of "the rescue" decisions that were debated at a higher level.<sup>63</sup> Critics of the committee claimed that it met infrequently, excluded the Beta Yisrael leadership from its most important deliberations, worked sluggishly to rescue the Beta Yisrael because of its bureaucratic composition, and failed to follow up on high level diplomatic initiatives.<sup>64</sup>

A couple of weeks later, Begin pledged his government's cooperation with the recently formed Committee on Ethiopian Jews of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC)<sup>65</sup> in the United States. Begin sent a cable to the new committee, stating: "We have done our utmost to save and bring the Jews of Ethiopia to our historic homeland, Eretz Israel. Every person of good will should support this campaign for this basic human right."<sup>66</sup> Also in November, 1979, the Israeli government, the Jewish Agency, and the World Zionist Organization (WZO) announced the launching of a worldwide campaign to publicize the plight of the Beta Yisrael. Israel had temporarily changed tactics, reversing for a brief time its policy of "quiet diplomacy."<sup>67</sup> Cabinet Minister Moshe Nissim told the Knesset on November 14:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>64</sup> "Chronology of Events in Ethiopian Jewish (Falasha) History," Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ), p. 9. More on CAEJ will be detailed in the next chapter.

<sup>65</sup> More on this committee will be detailed in the next chapter.

<sup>66</sup> Operation Moses, p. 41.

<sup>67</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 233.

There is no escape but to move from the secret to the known. There should be an outcry and action on all levels. We must approach heads of state and international organizations so that they will wake up to the question of basic human rights. We must activate the Jewish organizations in the world, but first of all the Government of Israel and the Jewish Agency to act. They should not keep silent, but should pave the way for the coming to Israel of our Jewish brethren from Ethiopia, brethren who are suffering both mentally and physically.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, on November 16, 1979, Yona Bogala, the preeminent leader of Ethiopian Jewry, captivated North American Jewry. He was able to directly appeal the community through a series of quick and dramatic events. Through the assistance of the AAEJ, Yona and his wife Tourou and daughter Judith were brought to Israel during the fall of 1979. While Christian friends in Ethiopia acted as guarantors for Yona and his family to travel to Israel "for a wedding" and "return within three months," Graenum Berger arranged for the AAEJ to pay for their air fares.<sup>69</sup> Upon their arrival at Ben Gurion Airport, a delegation of Ethiopians, surrounded by journalists, photographers and television cameras cheered the travelers as they stepped off the plane. The reporters asked Yona numerous questions. The leader of the Beta Yisrael community described the murders and torture of thousands of people. The interview was flashed by news services around the world, and it reached the Mengistu government. A friend in Addis Ababa called and warned Yona "never come back... your life is in danger."<sup>70</sup> He immediately inquired about the guarantors. They had already disappeared and were feared dead.<sup>71</sup>

A few weeks after his arrival in Israel, Yona along with one of his sons, Rachamim Elazar, and community leader, activist and rescuer Baruch Tegegne,

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<sup>68</sup> "Chronology of Events in Ethiopian Jewish (Falasha) History," pp. 8-9.

<sup>69</sup> *Rescue*, p. 133.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 133-34.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*



were brought to Montreal to address the Council of Jewish Federation's General Assembly. Through the efforts of the North American Jewish Students' Network and the AAEJ, the sessions included the issue of Ethiopian Jewry. Yona urged the twenty-five hundred delegates to rescue the remnant of Ethiopian Jewry so that they might finally realize their dream of living in Israel.<sup>72</sup> He told the representatives of the Jewish federation groups that the Jewish Agency, ORT and some Israeli officials had obstructed the rescue of the Beta Yisrael. "Our final hour is near," the Ethiopian Jewish elder told the overflow audience, "until when shall we cry?"<sup>73</sup>

At the same time, Kol Yisrael Radio announced that Prime Minister Begin had said: "We shall appeal to the Ethiopian government to let the Falashas go."<sup>74</sup> Begin maintained that the thrust of his Ethiopian Jewish policy would be to influence the Mengistu government to let the Beta Yisrael freely emigrate from Ethiopia to Israel. However, other alternatives were being examined, primarily routes through the Sudan. These routes to the northwest resulted because of the efforts of Ethiopian Israelis informing government officials as to existence of the routes as well as the actions of the AAEJ.

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<sup>72</sup> "Chronology of Events in Ethiopian Jewish (Falasha) History," p. 9.

<sup>73</sup> Redemption Song, p. 62; and The Lost Jews, p. 234.

<sup>74</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 233.

## AAEJ ACTIVITIES DURING THE LATE 1970s AND 1980

In all of 1979, only five Beta Yisrael<sup>75</sup> managed to get to Israel directly, including Yona Bogala and his family. The official gates were closed. Thirty-two Ethiopian Jews, however, reached Israel via the Sudan. The Sudan route opened up in the wake of the insurgencies that were sweeping Ethiopia. Caught in the cross-fire of military and political disturbances, life in Ethiopia continued to deteriorate. The drought and famine that were afflicting wide areas of Africa also contributed to the mass exodus. Many Beta Yisrael, along with Moslem and Christian refugees, journeyed from Ethiopia to the Sudan. As early as the mid-1970s,<sup>76</sup> Ethiopian Jews began crossing regularly into the Sudan, and within three years, there were hundreds of them swelling the growing numbers of refugees from war-torn Ethiopia.<sup>77</sup> In fact, Graenum Berger testifies that he received confirmation of dozens of Beta Yisrael in the Sudan in 1978 through an Israeli consulate member in the U.S. and letters from Ethiopian Jews living in the refugee camps in the Sudan.<sup>78</sup> Berger states that on three occasions he passed the news on to Jewish Agency and Israeli governmental officials that Ethiopian Jews were escaping to the Sudan, but languished in the refugee camps. These authorities are said not to have replied to any contact from Berger.<sup>79</sup> Henry Rosenberg also received letters from Ethiopian Jews in the Sudan. He traveled with Ted Norman, the Everetts and other AAEJ members to meet with Jewish Agency officials. Rosenberg

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<sup>75</sup> Operation Moses, p. 41.

<sup>76</sup> For example, Beta Yisrael leader Baruch Tegegne escaped Ethiopia in 1975 via the Sudan.

<sup>77</sup> Operation Moses, p. 42.

<sup>78</sup> Graenum, pp. 636-37.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

reports that these officials discounted the information, and dismissed the group stating, "we are doing all that we can."<sup>80</sup>

While Jewish Agency officials continued to inform diaspora leaders that the movement of Ethiopian Jews to Israel via the Sudan was impossible, the AAEJ undertook its own rescue operation.<sup>81</sup> "The AAEJ had made a decision to do something about getting those Ethiopian Jews who were now refugees in Sudan out of that miserable country... [S]ince no one could be stirred to rescue them from Ethiopia directly, other options had to be explored."<sup>82</sup> Baruch Tegegne and American William Halpern found their way into the Sudan under-cover. Halpern, a Jew, first met Berger in 1976 when researching the files of the AAEJ founder for his PH.D. from Berkeley. Halpern's interest in the Beta Yisrael spanned a number of years, and he was the first to convince Berger that Ethiopian Jews might be rescued via the Sudan if they first became refugees in that country. "He initiated the rescue of thirty-two Ethiopian Jews, proving first of all that they were there, and demonstrating that they could be taken out and eventually land in Israel."<sup>83</sup> Tragically, after the rescue operation, Halpern was killed in Kenya in a motor accident. His last act there was to arrange for an Ethiopian Jewish woman to leave the country for Israel.

Halpern and Tegegne rounded up a few Ethiopian Jews at a time from Eastern Sudan and placed and fed them in a safe house in the Sudanese capital Khartoum. Berger received the information and names, passing them on to the Jewish Agency via HIAS in New York, "which volunteered to serve as an intermediary, although it would take no direct responsibility for their

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<sup>80</sup> From an interview with Henry Rosenberg, June 18, 1992, New York City.

<sup>81</sup> "Chronology of Events in Ethiopian Jewish (Falasha) History," p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> *Graenum*, p. 650

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 613-14.

rescue."<sup>84</sup> Although the AAEJ proposed indirect airplane routes from the Sudan to Europe, and then from Europe to Israel,<sup>85</sup> weeks passed and nothing happened. Berger related how the Ethiopian Jews finally arrived in Israel from the AAEJ safe house in Khartoum:

On May 15, 1979, Aryeh Dulzin, head of the World Zionist Organization and Jewish Agency, came to New York and wanted to meet me. I agreed to see him, providing I could be accompanied by other members of the AAEJ board, and took along Henry Everett, Dr. Theodore Norman, and Henry Rosenberg, all personal and generous supporters of Israel. Dulzin, with his customary arrogance, asked us why we were so concerned about eight (later he changed it to eleven, indicating that he was not properly briefed) Ethiopian Jews in Sudan, when there were many more important problems in Jewish life. I sternly reminded him that I would be concerned if there was only one Jew involved, but there were not the numbers he cited, but thirty-two, and they had been waiting for months under our care to be taken to Israel. The exchanges became somewhat heated. To placate us, he even offered to reimburse the AAEJ for our expenses if there were more than the eleven. I finally had to threaten him: 'If you don't take them out within thirty days, we will tell the story of your inhuman indifference to these black Jews to the New York Times... In June, within the thirty-day limit, sixteen were taken out of Sudan by Israel, but the price the AAEJ had to pay was to abandon our operation in that country. If I had been in Israel when AAEJ representatives agreed to that condition, I would have strenuously objected. Israel flew out the other sixteen in July. It then claimed that there were no other Ethiopian Jews in Sudan.'<sup>86</sup>

While the AAEJ agreed in the Summer of 1979 not to operate directly in the Sudan, it did not promise to cease all activities that would save the Beta Yisrael. When no more were taken out by early 1980, AAEJ president Professor Howard Lenhoff and vice president Nathan Shapiro initiated another rescue

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 651.

<sup>85</sup> No direct commercial flights to Israel were possible since no diplomatic relations between the Sudan and Israel existed.

<sup>86</sup> Graenum, pp. 651-52. While in Israel in July and August of 1979, Berger was able to find out from the Ethiopians who had just arrived that at least ninety Ethiopian Jews remained in the Sudan, some of whom who had been in that country since the revolution in Ethiopia of 1974.

operation. Before discussing the rescue operation, a brief sketch of Lenhoff and Shapiro will aid the analysis.

In the Fall of 1978, leadership of the AAEJ passed to Lenhoff of Costa Mesa, California, a professor of biology and related sciences at the University of California at Irvine. The AAEJ's first president, Graenum Berger, reflected on the change in leadership and the effectiveness of Lenhoff:

As one who believed in rotation of leadership, I was happy to turn over the reins of office... He wrote well, had a superb public relations sense, saw the need for broadening the base of support and making it a real national organization... In the four years that he occupied the post, the organization advanced tremendously in the number of donors and in its budget. Chapters sprang up, and knowledge of both the Ethiopian Jews and the organization spread... Howard supplied something which I either lacked or did not comprehend. I thought of the Ethiopian Jewish problem as one that could easily be resolved by Israel and the existing world Jewish communities. All it required, as I saw it, was getting the subject on the agendas of those bodies, particularly in the minds of the top leadership. That is where I concentrated my energies. Howard saw the need for having this kind of pressure exerted not by a few upon a few, but as a massive assault from the grass roots on the indifferent and resistant leaders and their organizations. He had learned something of what large groups could do through his association with the Soviet Jewry movement. He thought it could be applied to the Ethiopian Jewish issue as well. He was correct.<sup>87</sup>

Lenhoff reflects that the early years when he headed the AAEJ were crucial. "It pushed the rest to happen."<sup>88</sup> The first numbers of Ethiopian Jews which the AAEJ unilaterally brought to Israel or pushed the Jewish State to bring to Israel established a base of Beta Yisrael who work(ed) as social workers and prepared the absorption centers for the massive influx which came later. "We [the AAEJ] did the basic research, but did not get the credit,"<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Graenum, pp. 631-32.

<sup>88</sup> From an interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

Lenhoff laments. "Like the researchers who discovered the polio virus, they did the basic research, but did not get the credit. Jonas Salk who came up with the vaccine got the credit, just like the rescuers of the large numbers of Ethiopian Jews."<sup>90</sup>

During Lenhoff's presidency, the AAEJ remained critical of Israel and confrontational with major Jewish organizations.<sup>91</sup> Lenhoff himself views the Jewish community of America critically:

The American Jewish community sees themselves as American first and Jewish second. The American Jewish community feels if you criticize Israel, it is tantamount to calling Israel racist. And they feel if Israel is portrayed as being racist, then the goyim will see all Jews as racist. And if Jews are seen as being racist, it would make themselves vulnerable and life unbearable for American Jews. There is a Galut mentality by American Jewry. They do not want to be seen in a bad light, because they are afraid that it will cause them harm. During Lebanon, the American Jewish organizations criticized Israel, since Jews were doing wrong in the public eye; and the American Jewish community wanted to show the world that Israel had nothing to do with them. Criticizing Israel was a distancing and a means to diffusing potential trouble back home. American Jews were afraid of reprisals in their own back yard. A true ghetto mentality. The AAEJ was seen as a pariah organization by the U.S. Jewish community since we attacked Israel. But we were critical of Israel because we loved and cared about Israel and wanted the aliyah of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel. Our goal in criticizing Israel was to push Israel and make it a priority of Israel, not to degrade or hurt Israel. The role of the AAEJ was to keep Ethiopian Jewry on the top burner since Israel has so many problems to deal with.<sup>92</sup>

In 1978, Nathan Shapiro, a businessman from Highland Park, Illinois, became involved with AAEJ. He served as Vice President, and then President from 1982 to present. "As his influence grew from year to year, the results

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> A detailed account of the conflict between the AAEJ and major Jewish organizations will follow in the next chapter.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff.



were phenomenal in pressure, fund-raising and rescue."<sup>93</sup> Along with Lenhoff, he initiated the rescue operation of Ethiopian Jews from the Sudan via Frankfurt to Israel. Thousands of Ethiopian refugees fleeing the political instability and famine were receiving asylum in West Germany; although some were brought to the country by businesspeople to serve as cheap labor.<sup>94</sup> Before the Summer of 1980 when West Germany tightened its immigration policies due to the large influx of foreigners, the AAEJ utilized the fluid movement between the Horn of Africa and Central Europe as an escape route to Israel.

The Israeli Embassy refused to grant the first six Ethiopian Jews brought to West Germany visas to continue their travel to the Jewish Homeland. Another pair were flown from the Sudan to Frankfurt, arranged by the AAEJ. One was flown to Israel, the other, for unexplained reasons, was returned to Khartoum by Israeli officials where he committed suicide.<sup>95</sup>

Undaunted by these recent mishaps, Berger, Lenhoff and Shapiro arranged tickets for fourteen more Ethiopian Jews to leave the Sudan for Germany. Fearing that "efforts might be made to prevent their departure and arrival on any direct flight from Khartoum to Frankfurt,"<sup>96</sup> Berger arranged for transportation via Zurich, where the refugees changed planes for Frankfurt. "This time our agents were told to advise the Israelis that if the refugees were not put on the next plane to Israel, we would tell the unsavory story from the very beginning to the International Herald-Tribune, so that

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<sup>93</sup> Graenum, p. 633. More on Nathan Shapiro will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

<sup>94</sup> "Chronology of Events in Ethiopian Jewish (Falasha) History," p. 10.

<sup>95</sup> Rescue, p. 143. See also Graenum, p. 653-54.

<sup>96</sup> Graenum, p. 653.

the entire world would know how Jews treated fellow Jews in jeopardy. The Israelis sped them off to Israel."<sup>97</sup>

We [the AAEJ] were then persuaded for a second time to agree that we would cease our operation in Europe. We assented on the condition that Israel would start a major and continuous rescue operation out of Sudan, where we believed there were ever-growing numbers of Ethiopian Jewish refugees. I [Berger] questioned our withdrawal until refugees actually began to arrive in Israel. Our rescue demonstrations and our threats of exposure had their effect, and 679 were taken out of Sudan in 1980 [by Israel]. It was still a foot-dragging exodus. We never were able to relax our pressing tactics. Yet we were heartened that the Ethiopian Jews, at great peril, had at last found a way of eventually reaching Israel.<sup>98</sup>

The AAEJ proved that rescue from the Sudan was possible. During the Summer of 1979 and again in early 1980, the AAEJ rescued Ethiopian Jews, much to the dismay of Israel. As a result, in February of 1980, the Israeli government took decisive action to facilitate the rescue of the Beta Yisrael in the Sudan by placing its intelligence agency, the Mosad, in charge of operations.

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<sup>97</sup> Graenum, p. 654. See also Rescue, p. 143. All total, the AAEJ brought twenty-two Jews from the Sudan to Germany. Six settled in Germany, one committed suicide and fifteen were brought to Israel.

<sup>98</sup> Graenum, p. 654.

## ISRAELI RESCUE EFFORTS DURING THE EARLY 1980s

All along, the AAEJ realized that in no way could they rescue to Israel the Beta Yisrael community. Yet, their efforts were not only designed as a humanitarian effort, but also a prod and example to the Jewish State. The AAEJ strategy was designed to force Israel to take action immediately. Moreover, if "amateurs" were able to save Jewish lives, why could not Israel, with her plethora of secret agents and extensive experience in rescue missions, evacuate the community en masse? An escape route via safe houses in Khartoum was already mapped out.

Answerable in turn to Prime Ministers Begin, Shamir and Peres, the Mosad was entrusted by the Israeli government with rescuing the Ethiopian Jews. During late 1979 and early 1980, however, a diplomatic initiative preceded the Mosad operation. Both American diplomats and Begin asked Egyptian president Anwar Sadat<sup>99</sup> to talk with Sudanese president Numeiri about the Beta Yisrael. "Sadat was successful in his approach and for some time Numeiri and the upper echelons of his secret service, the Amn ul Dawla, who were also involved, were prepared to turn a blind eye to discreet and relatively small-scale operations to remove the Falashas"<sup>100</sup> from refugee camps in the Sudan. Numeiri had been the only Arab leader to back Sadat and the Camp David peace process. Nevertheless, while allowing the exodus of the Ethiopian Jews to occur, at the same time, "he feared the inevitable repercussions in the Arab world if the story became known."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> The Camp David Accords and the finalization of peace between Israel and Egypt took place in 1979.

<sup>100</sup> Operation Moses, p. 43.

<sup>101</sup> Redemption Song, p. 68.

Throughout the first half of the 1980s, conditions for Numeiri and his regime worsened. In 1982, he instituted Islamic Law, the Sharia, to placate the Moslem fundamentalists. Still, he was significantly challenged by this fundamentalist religious element, in particular, the Moslem Brotherhood. His drought-ravaged country's economy was sinking faster than the Nile River, whose waters were at the lowest ebb in living memory. The festering war against Animist and Christian tribes in the South of the Sudan drained whatever resources remained. Libya and Ethiopia were interfering in the Sudan's internal affairs. Saudi Arabian bankers were exploiting the country instead of extending aid. And hundreds of thousands of refugees from Ethiopia and Chad were flowing across the Sudan's borders. In other words, Numeiri had many other problems to worry about besides Ethiopian Jews living in Sudanese refugee camps.<sup>102</sup>

The Mosad coordinated the activities within the Sudan. Using its own expertise and agents, as well as cooperative activities with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the Mosad managed to evacuate over six hundred Beta Yisrael to Israel in 1980. Most of these Ethiopian Jews were taken from the Sudanese refugee camps, namely Gedaref, to Nairobi, Kenya, on specially chartered planes. From Kenya, they were flown directly to Israel.<sup>103</sup> However, there were a number of drawbacks to the Kenyan route. By nature, it was a clumsy operation: "Sudan, approximately the same size as India, is the biggest country in Africa. Nairobi is thousands of miles south of the Falasha homelands. The problems of transport and concealment were immense."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Redemption Song, p. 69.

<sup>103</sup> For a more detailed account of these rescue operations, see Redemption Song, pp. 64-94; and Operation Moses, pp. 43-46.

<sup>104</sup> Operation Moses, p. 46.

Thus, the Mosad began to favor alternative routes to rescue the Beta Yisrael from the Sudan. And the Jews of Ethiopia kept coming to the refugee camps.

Famine and persecution were not the only reasons that Beta Yisrael journeyed to the Sudan. Flight to this East African nation increased because the centuries long Zionist dream was finally being fulfilled. News that hundreds of Ethiopian Jews had managed to reach Israel filtered back to Ethiopia. Occasional visitors to the Beta Yisrael villages in the Northwest of Ethiopia, including Ethiopian Israelis and Americans, helped to accelerate the movement.

The decision to journey to the Sudan by no means was an easy one. Family, friends, cultural attachments and one's birthland were all left behind. Moreover, in their grueling trek from the Abyssinian Mountains to the desert of Sudan, the Ethiopian Jews faced many hardships. The journey took weeks and was marked by attacks by wild animals, rugged terrain, a shortage of food and water, shiftas, cruel border guards, and exploitative guides. Hundreds died en route to the Sudan, and thousands perished in the squalor of the refugee camps.<sup>105</sup> Yet, thousands somehow managed to survive.

As the Beta Yisrael, along with Moslem and Christian refugees, continued to stream into the Sudan, the refugee camps turned into virtual "hut cities" with numbers ranging into the tens of thousands.<sup>106</sup> A few thousand Jews languished in the camps by the Spring of 1980, awaiting their rescue to the Promised Land. The Mosad built a network of people who arranged for

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<sup>105</sup> The exact numbers will never be known. But it is said that at least fifteen hundred died en route to the Sudan and at least three thousand five hundred died between the late 1970s and 1984 in the refugee camps.

<sup>106</sup> Virtually no country would take in these beleaguered people. Under stringent quota systems, countries like the United States allowed no more than three thousand Africans into its borders each year; and Canada, which demands professional requirements as well, even fewer.

internal travel permits from the Interior Ministry and the police, and documents from the Red Cross and Sudanese refugee officials. These documents were easily altered – photographs switched to include whole families, and names added above the proper stamps.<sup>107</sup> Small groups of Beta Yisrael, between fifteen and forty people, were taken out of the camps every week or so by bus, truck or Land-Rover. Some groups would spend time in the East Sudanese town Gedaref, the hub of the refugee area, before traveling on to Khartoum. In the capital city of the Sudan, the Ethiopian Jews would stay in a safe house for up to a month until they could be flown out to some European destination. Athens was the preferred European destination, since it was the closest European city to Israel. It was imperative to move the Beta Yisrael as quickly as possible for security reasons and to enable them to get needed medical treatment as soon as possible. These Jewish refugees were flown, in groups of fifteen or thirty and never exceeding sixty, from Khartoum to Athens on Olympic Airways, and then from Athens to Israel by Olympic Airways or El Al. In all, between 1980 and Begin's resignation in 1983, some three thousand Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel.<sup>108</sup>

Many problems hampered these Mosad led rescue operations. The safe houses in Khartoum were constantly discovered by prying neighbors and unknowing government officials. New housing, in homes, hotels and apartments was constantly needed. Lack of money created difficulties. At times, a shortage of money for bribing officials, hiring vehicles and drivers, and purchasing safe houses and supplies delayed activities. Also, the monies dispersed in the camps to the Jewish refugees by the Mosad agents led to problems. Jewish individuals and families argued over the money, and the

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<sup>107</sup> *Redemption Song*, p. 74.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, p. 69, pp. 72-78.



appearance of the money stirred the suspicions of non-Jewish refugees and Sudanese personnel in and around the camps. Furthermore, it took many months to work out a successful transport system. A severe fuel shortage plagued the Sudan, and gas had to be bought on the black market at astronomical prices. But the most difficult task was creating a list of who would go when. The three thousand Jews in the camps and in the town of Gedaref had organized themselves and appointed steering committees of five persons who dispensed monies and generated lists of the Beta Yisrael community in the Sudan. Each Ethiopian Jew in the camps and Gedaref wanted to be taken first, creating a constant conflict between the steering committees and the refugees.<sup>109</sup> However, this difficult task was executed with amazing success. Somehow, the majority of the community pulled together, realizing a wait was necessary. Tenaciously, they clung on to the belief that they would reach Israel, if not next week, then next month.

But each passing week brought suffering and death to the Ethiopian Jews. Persecution from other refugees, starvation and dehydration continued to take its toll on the Beta Yisrael. The Khartoum route could never exceed more than sixty people a week without endangering the whole operation. The exodus was not fast enough. Thus, two new routes were forged to facilitate the rescue.

During 1981 and early 1982, a sea route was opened. Beta Yisrael were gathered to the refugee camp of Tawawa, not far from Gedaref, and then trucked four hundred miles to the Red Sea town of Port Sudan.<sup>110</sup> In the months it took to prepare this route, the Mosad and frogmen from the Israeli Navy charted the entire harbor area of Port Sudan so that there would be no

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid, pp. 75-76.

<sup>110</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 72.

accidents around the dangerous reefs. Every sector of the Israel Defense Forces was involved, and, as one participant put it, "[i]t was the cream of the crop – the elite commando units, communications men, pilots, frogmen."<sup>111</sup> The refugees were brought out on a total of nineteen Israeli naval vessels, including missile boats, landing craft, speedboats and even submarines.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, while these rescues were conducted without the cooperation of Sudanese officials or the secret police, many Sudanese were well paid for their silence during the operations. All in all, a number of groups of Beta Yisrael reached Eilat via Port Sudan, totalling in the hundreds,<sup>113</sup> the largest of which numbered three hundred and fifty.<sup>114</sup>

In early March, 1982, the Red Sea route came to an abrupt and bloody end. Three trucks had brought more than two hundred Beta Yisrael to Port Sudan. Eleven boats waited offshore to collect the passengers. Two Mosad agents and an Ethiopian Israeli were unloading the refugees when a group of Sudanese soldiers suddenly appeared. The Sudanese opened fire, as the Ethiopian Jews raced for the boats. The Israelis returned the fire, but several Beta Yisrael were captured, one was wounded, and the Red Sea operations had to be permanently terminated as a result.<sup>115</sup>

The second alternative route besides passage through Khartoum was implemented in March of 1982. Shortly after the closing of the sea route, in the early evening of March 16, an unmarked Israel Defense Forces C-130 Hercules transport plane landed in the Sudanese desert between two refugee

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<sup>111</sup> Redemption Song, p. 83.

<sup>112</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 72 and Redemption Song, p. 83.

<sup>113</sup> Operation Moses, p. 51.

<sup>114</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 72 and Redemption Song, pp. 83-84.

<sup>115</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 72.

camps which housed most of the Beta Yisrael, Tuwawa and Umm Rekuba.<sup>116</sup> The plane was supposed to rescue about one hundred Ethiopian Jews, but close to a thousand showed up. "The 'list makers' in the camps had gone about their business too far in advance of the flight. Everyone knew about it, and no one wanted to be left behind."<sup>117</sup> The pilot, viewing the panic, decided to take off when the plane was only half full. In the ensuing confusion, an overcrowded truck carrying disappointed refugees back to the camp overturned, injuring many of the passengers.<sup>118</sup>

In addition to the Mosad's problem of reorganizing the refugees to prevent a recurrence of such pandemonium, it was also clear that the desert landings might easily be discovered by the Sudanese army. Thus, it was decided to use the route sparingly, even though the rate of the exodus from Ethiopia to the Sudan continued to mushroom.<sup>119</sup> Over the next two years, six Hercules operations took place involving nine planes. On one occasion, three planes took part in the action, on another, two planes. All nine planes carried medical teams as well as commando units of eighteen men, who fanned out in squads of three to protect the refugees and their rescuers. In the half dozen operations, the Israelis never had to open fire.<sup>120</sup> All together, about thirteen hundred Beta Yisrael were plucked from the Sudanese desert and airlifted to Israel.<sup>121</sup>

In March of 1984, nomadic Sudanese camel herders camping in a dry riverbed near the desert airstrip saw two of the planes take off and reported

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, pp. 76-77.

<sup>117</sup> Redemption Song, pp. 84-85.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 85.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

<sup>120</sup> Ibid

<sup>121</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 77.

the incident to the authorities. "Rumors soon swept diplomatic and intelligence circles in Khartoum. Everyone knew it had something to do with the Ethiopian Jews. But no one got the story exactly straight."<sup>122</sup>

As the number of Beta Yisrael refugees continued to swell, the Mosad planned to bring four Hercules planes twice a week. But as a result of the March, 1984 sighting, these scaled up operations were deemed to be too risky. Sudanese radar in Gedaref and Port Sudan were not the major problem, since "the soldiers who operated the radar were asleep most of the time, according to Mosad agents."<sup>123</sup> But the nomads presented a major threat. If the planes were discovered again, they perhaps would bring the secret police and the army. Hundreds of Ethiopian Jews could be killed or the pipeline cut off entirely. On May 4, 1984, what turned out to be the last of the flights went unnoticed by the nomads, the Sudanese secret police and the diplomats alike. But it was a close call nevertheless:

Mosad agents drove the trucks to the site and the refugees climbed down. As soon as the refugees saw the plane land, though, they panicked as before and ran in all directions. It took hours to round the Falashas up, and the organizers of the operation could find no trace of one elderly woman. They left without her. Sudanese soldiers found her a day later wandering around in the middle of nowhere. They wanted to know how she had gotten there. She said she didn't know. They assumed she was suffering from sunstroke and drove her to a clinic in Gedaref. Fortunately, the Sudanese did not question her further. But the risks remained. Later several Falasha refugees were arrested outside Tuwawa. No one could be sure that they wouldn't talk under torture. The Khartoum rumor mill was buzzing. It was too dangerous to continue the flights. When they were canceled for security reasons, the stage was set for the Mosad to turn to the Americans.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> *Redemption Song*, p. 86.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86-87.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87. The U.S. involvement in Operations Moses and Joshua will be detailed in chapter six.

By the end of 1982, twenty-five hundred Beta Yisrael lived in Israel, rescued by land, air and sea routes. In 1983 and early 1984, eighteen hundred "Falasha" refugees were brought from the Sudan to Israel via refuge in Khartoum, European airline flights to the north, and final safe passage to Israel. The desert Hercules operations between 1982 and 1984 brought an additional thirteen hundred Ethiopian Jews to Israel. All told, by the end of Spring 1984, the land, sea and air missions rescued six thousand Beta Yisrael to the Jewish Homeland.<sup>125</sup> In fact, Israeli agents had spirited almost all the Ethiopian Jews out of the Sudanese camps. They had expected more to follow from Ethiopia to the Sudan a few at a time. Instead, by the Summer of 1984, there were more than ten thousand Beta Yisrael in the refugee camps.<sup>126</sup> The conditions in the camps were horrific, but particularly so in Umm Rekuba where most of the Ethiopian Jews lived.<sup>127</sup> The Red Sea route was closed. The Hercules desert operations had to be abandoned. The rate of passage through Khartoum to Israel via Europe was much too slow. Something else drastic needed to be done. This rescue was known as Operation Moses and Joshua. These dramatic events will be documented after reflecting on the activities of the Beta Yisrael support groups in North America as well as the efforts of the major Jewish organizations in the United States during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

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<sup>125</sup> Operation Moses, pp. 61-63.

<sup>126</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 87.

<sup>127</sup> Operation Moses, p. 63.

CHAPTER SIX:  
THE PROLIFERATION OF ETHIOPIAN JEWISH SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS  
IN NORTH AMERICA DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE 1980s

Although the Mosad secretly rescued six thousand Ethiopian Jews to Israel during the first four years of the decade of the 1980s, a veil of secrecy and censorship shrouded the operations. Jews throughout the world, including those in the Jewish Homeland, knew little about the gradual aliyah of the Beta Yisrael. While some "Westerners" spotted "groups of blacks" traveling to Europe and Israel on commercial flights, and many Beta Yisrael appeared literally overnight in absorption centers, the incremental nature and relatively small numbers involved in the aliyah limited curiosity. However, persistence -- and also vocal recriminations against Israel and American Jewish leaders -- continued to characterize the stance of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ). "Unhampered by censorship, the AAEJ bought ads in the New York Times, and [also in] the Anglo-Jewish press asking for contributions and continuing to decry Israel and the American Jewish establishment for doing nothing to rescue the Jews."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Gruber, Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews ( New York: Atheneum, 1987), p. 144.



## ATTACKS ON ISRAEL

Thus, as a direct result of Israel's veil of silence, the Jewish State was beset by charges that they were mishandling the "Falasha question." The complaints closest to home came from the Beta Yisrael community in Israel. The Ethiopian Israeli community was tired of being neglected. Moreover, the insensitive comments of some Israeli politicians embittered the community. For example, Israeli statesman Ezer Weizman stated in December, 1979: "Tell me the truth -- is this [the aliyah of Ethiopian Jewry] the most important issue we have to face now?"<sup>2</sup> as well as "I don't need to bother with Falashas -- Falasha Smalasha."<sup>3</sup> Beginning in 1979, the Council for Ethiopian Jews, a group consisting primarily of the Ethiopian olim from the seventies, protested the slow rate of immigration.<sup>4</sup> "The immigrants held that the Israeli government was stalling on the issue, hiding behind a concern for secrecy."<sup>5</sup> In December, 1981, a few dozen Ethiopian Israelis went on a protest march from Kibbutz Zova to the Knesset to stress their sense of identity with their brethren in the Horn of Africa and to express their frustration with the limited government efforts. They carried with them a petition consisting of thirty-eight thousand signatures.<sup>6</sup> Practically all of the Ethiopian community had relatives in Ethiopia and the Sudan. One of the community leaders,

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<sup>2</sup> Louis Rapoport, The Lost Jews: Last of the Ethiopian Falashas (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1980), p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 234; and a Chronology of Events in Ethiopian Jewish (Falasha) History, Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> See chapter five, section on "1978 and beyond."

<sup>5</sup> Ephraim Isaac, Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews (Beersheva, Israel: Ben Gurion University in the Negev, 1988), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Tudor Parfitt, Operation Moses: The Story of the Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), p. 54.

Yitzhak Etgar, said: "I have an elementary right to see my parents and my brothers."<sup>7</sup> Yehuda Avner, then senior adviser to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, replied: "For a long time the matter has been given high priority... by the authorities under the personal supervision of the Prime Minister himself."<sup>8</sup> Unconvinced, a few months later, six hundred Ethiopian Israelis threatened to go on a hunger strike if nothing was done "to counter the indifference of the Israeli authorities to the genocide of their brothers,"<sup>9</sup> in the words of Simcha Barhani, a community leader in Israel.

But nothing the Israeli authorities indicated to the Ethiopian Israelis or the rest of world Jewry that any practical steps had been taken or that an escape route had already been used. Israeli government leaders and Jewish Agency officials encountered a great deal of criticism. At the annual convention of American Jewish Federations in Detroit in 1980, Begin was heckled by a vociferous group of activists. Charged by the AAEJ with a "conspiracy of indifference, racism and neglect," Begin kept silent, telling his aides that "once something is out, it will all get out. I will not utter a word that could end this rescue operation."<sup>10</sup>

The AAEJ continued its incrimination and criticism of Israel. At the same time, some such as Tudor Parfitt, Professor at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, author of a number of works on the Beta Yisrael and reporter on Ethiopian Jews for the London based Minority Rights Group, claim that the AAEJ when attacking Israel presented an air of self-righteousness and used powerful and sensitive imagery: "By their constant

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 54-55.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Rapoport, Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), p. 71.

and unwarranted use of slogans such as 'black holocaust' or 'Ethiopian genocide,' they invoked and perhaps even exploited the Holocaust in a way that many Jews found offensive."<sup>11</sup> For example, in February, 1980, Nathan Shapiro, then head of the Chicago chapter of the AAEJ, said: "The Falashas are being slaughtered, tortured and sold into slavery in Ethiopia, yet the Israeli government will not do anything to help bring them to Israel."<sup>12</sup> In 1982 at a meeting in New York, Graenum Berger charged that the Ethiopian Jews were facing "a major holocaust" and that Israel was "playing down their plight."<sup>13</sup> Another AAEJ speaker at the meeting said that the Beta Yisrael were "the group of Jews most threatened today by potential genocide and most abandoned by the rest of the world."<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the early 1980s, leaders of the AAEJ asserted that Jewish Agency immigration official Yehuda Dominitz, and the Foreign Ministry's official in charge of Diaspora affairs, Moshe Gilboa, had been "sabotaging" any significant movement of Ethiopian Jews to Israel.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the AAEJ through its president Professor Howard Lenhoff, continued to publish advertisements and articles in the secular and Jewish press, depicting the plight of the Beta Yisrael and Israel's intransigence about alleviating their plight.

Simultaneously, the AAEJ, and in particular Graenum Berger, in addition to actually publishing advertisements, used the threat of future negative advertisement campaigns against Israel to gain leverage. For example, as 1981 was winding to a close, Berger prepared an ad with the aid of

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<sup>11</sup> Operation Moses, p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>15</sup> Redemption Song, p. 88; and Operation Moses, pp. 56-57.

several experts in the advertising field. The AAEJ founder wanted to prod Israel because the number of Beta Yisrael rescued in 1981 was lower than the preceding year, despite the information that there were now thousands of Jewish refugees in the Sudan:

The AAEJ threatened once again to place and run full-page ads in the major newspapers across the land -- the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and Chicago Tribune -- with specific dates for publication listed on the ad itself. The shrieking bold headlines, surrounding a photo of a child with flies all over his face, accused the leaders of Israel, American Jewry, and world Jewry of failing to rescue Ethiopian Jews in large numbers and thus being accessories to their suffering and death.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of the proposed advertisement, the Israeli Consulate called Berger and a few others on January 27, 1982. Berger told the Israelis, "in order to keep us from printing more advertisements, Israel would have to rescue at least three hundred per month."<sup>17</sup> He states that such a demand was a compromise on his part: "I felt that they could rescue more, but if they would take out that number, we would be partly satisfied. I gave them one month to start the operation."<sup>18</sup> Believing that his tactics worked, Berger stated that "[t]he Israelis, when threatened, always came through."<sup>19</sup>

A month later, near the end of February of 1982, three hundred and thirty Ethiopian Jews were rescued to Eilat via Port Sudan. Berger states: "This was another indication that whenever it was forced, Israel performed magnificently... We did not become euphoric, for we had a premonition of

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<sup>16</sup> Graenum Berger, Graenum (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1987), p. 700.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 704.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*

what to expect... As soon as their officials saw that we did not print the advertisements, they lapsed back to their previous foot-dragging tactics."<sup>20</sup>

Berger's tactics may have accelerated the rescue. However, the Israeli government can take credit for having put in place the Port Sudan to Eilat route.<sup>21</sup> Privately, through the printed advertisements and threatened future publications, the AAEJ may have gained leverage. Publicly, the AAEJ efforts damaged, in part, and perhaps unfairly, Israel's image.

Israel's ambassador to the United States during the early 1980s, Meir Rosenne, was besieged with questions and charges: "'Are these ads true? Why is Israel not saving the Jews of Ethiopia?' The ambassador and his aides were close-mouthed. Silence was the imperative."<sup>22</sup> In Jerusalem, Prime Minister Begin told his interministerial committee, "I'm ready to have everybody accuse me of doing nothing if, by saying one thing that might glorify me, I might harm a single Ethiopian Jew."<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Moshe Gilboa was bitter: "While we're trying to save the Ethiopian Jews, we're being viciously attacked. There are two reasons why Ethiopian Jews are coming here now,"<sup>24</sup> stated Gilboa. "First, they dared to remain Jews for all these centuries of suffering. And second, Israel opened its doors and its heart to them. The ingathering of the exiles is the *raison d'être* of our existence. Whoever betrays that betrays the essence of the establishment of our state."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> See chapter five, section on "Israeli Rescue Efforts During the Early 1980s."

<sup>22</sup> *Rescue*, p. 144.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 145.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

**"HENRY'S BOYS":  
HENRY ROSENBERG, SANDY LEEDER, AND AAEJ RESCUE EFFORTS  
DURING THE EARLY 1980s**

In 1974, Henry and Mildred Rosenberg got involved with Ethiopian Jewry. Meyer and Tereska Levin screened their 1969 documentary on the Beta Yisrael at the Rosenberg's home in New York.<sup>26</sup> After viewing the film, Mildred Rosenberg teased her husband, "here is a chance to work with both Blacks and Jews."<sup>27</sup> In the past, Henry Rosenberg had volunteered money and months of his life to work with Native Americans, African Americans, and ex-convicts. AAEJ founder Graenum Berger was also at the screening at the Rosenberg's home, which Berger claims was one of his many parlor information and fund raising evenings.<sup>28</sup> After talks with Berger and his own research on the subject, Rosenberg decided to journey to Ethiopia for a six month visit.

Rosenberg traveled to Ethiopia shortly after the Marxist Revolution of September 1974. By a series of "lucky events and happenings," Rosenberg made it to the home of the Beta Yisrael in Gondar and Tigrey Provinces. Interestingly, the ambassador of the United States went to see Henry Rosenberg before he journeyed to Tigrey Province. The revolution had cut off all conventional sources for gathering information. Rosenberg says: "I found all of them [the Beta Yisrael] wanted to go to Israel, none asked to go to the

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<sup>26</sup> For more on Meyer and Tereska Levin and their documentary film on the Beta Yisrael, see chapter four, section on "The Origins of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews."

<sup>27</sup> Personal interview with Henry Rosenberg, attorney and real estate developer; former Director of Rescue Operations in East Africa for the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, June 16, 1992, New York City.

<sup>28</sup> For more on how Berger utilized the Levins' documentary to raise funds, see chapter four, section on "the Origins of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews."



United States... I felt the only solution was [for the Beta Yisrael] to leave.<sup>29</sup> Graenum was quite right, that aliyah was their only solution; that Israel had to receive them as with the other displaced peoples."<sup>30</sup>

Over the next several years, Rosenberg spoke at synagogues and other groups of people who were interested in exotic Jewish communities. He recalls: "I met people who said, 'If you ever do anything real, let me know.'"<sup>31</sup> Then, in 1978, Rosenberg received letters from Ethiopian Jews who were in the Sudan. Rosenberg went with Berger, Ted Norman, the Everetts and others to the Jewish Agency to tell them that some Ethiopian Jews were in the Sudan. The officials said that "they were doing all that they could."<sup>32</sup> Months later, Rosenberg received another letter from the Sudan. Ethiopian Jew and Beta Yisrael activist and rescuer "Faraday" told Rosenberg that some twenty five hundred Jews had made their way to the Sudan.

At this time in 1979, William Halpern, a young American Jew associated with the AAEJ, tragically lost his life on an African road during an attempt to help rescue some Ethiopian Jews.<sup>33</sup> Berger continued to pressure the Israelis to rescue at least two hundred and fifty Beta Yisrael a month from the Sudan.

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<sup>29</sup> By 1974 and 1975, a candid debate had already erupted between Berger and David Kessler. Kessler, chair of the British Falasha Welfare Association, did not want to consider aliyah as the only solution for the Beta Yisrael. He felt that relief programs in Ethiopia were of equal or greater importance. Berger, on the other hand, was convinced that the only solution to the plight of the Ethiopian Jews was immediate migration to Israel. For more details on the debate between Berger and Kessler, see chapter four, section on "the Origins of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews."

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Henry Rosenberg.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. The intent behind the use of the word "real" is actual rescue attempts, not just educational programs or financial assistance. Many of these people joined Rosenberg years later to run rescue missions in the Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Henry Rosenberg. For more on AAEJ contacts with the Jewish Agency regarding Ethiopian Jews, see chapter five, sections on "1978 and Beyond," and "AAEJ Activities During the Late 1970s and 1980."

<sup>33</sup> Redemption Song, p. 71; Interview with Henry Rosenberg. For more on Halpern, see chapter five, section on "AAEJ activities during the late 1970s and 1980."

Moreover, the Red Terror was in full force in Ethiopia.<sup>34</sup> As a result, Rosenberg was determined to get back to Ethiopia to reestablish his contacts from his stay five years earlier and to establish new rescue routes to follow up on the work of William Halpern.

Rosenberg traveled to Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa during the Fall of 1981. Rosenberg explored options in Djibouti, a small country on the coast, bordering Ethiopia and Somalia. He saw that rescue through the seaports was impossible. All indications pointed to the Sudan as the most feasible rescue route, especially since large numbers of the Beta Yisrael had migrated from the highlands of the Simeon Mountains to the desert refugee camps. He surmised, that perhaps the Jews could get out through the south of the Sudan in the vicinity of Juba.<sup>35</sup>

Upon his return to the United States, Rosenberg recruited people to go into the Sudan to help rescue the Beta Yisrael to Israel. The new AAEJ president, Nathan Shapiro, assured Rosenberg financial backing for his rescue operations. Periodically throughout 1982 and 1983, Rosenberg returned to the Sudan to create more contacts and map out rescue routes. Rosenberg had twenty-five men work with him in East Africa, most of whom ventured from the U.S. to be a part of saving Jewish lives. These individuals, dubbed "Henry's Boys," ran missions in which they brought small groups of Beta Yisrael from the refugee camps to Khartoum, then south nine hundred miles to the border city of Juba, and eventually over the Kenyan border to Nairobi. Using landrovers to travel the route from Juba to Nairobi, the rescuers traversed through dangerous territory in Uganda. On a couple of occasions, members of Rosenberg's rescue teams got arrested in Uganda, mistakenly taken as "white-

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<sup>34</sup> For more on the Red Terror, see chapters four and five.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Henry Rosenberg.

skinned American CIA agents." Large sums of money were used to obtain their freedom. On another occasion, a landrover burned out twenty-five miles within Uganda. The group had to sell all of their belongings in order to repair their vehicle and reach the Kenyan capital. From Nairobi, the Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel utilizing various routes and methods of documentation. All together, Rosenberg spent nearly a year in the Sudan from the middle of 1982 to the middle of 1983, coordinating, funding, and overseeing the various amateur American rescue leaders and their small groups of Beta Yisrael.<sup>36</sup>

Of particular note were the actions of Stuart "Sandy" Leeder of Northern California. Rosenberg, reflecting on the bravery of Leeder, commented how "Sandy did everything. He got a truck. His job was to bring the people to the Nile River [which runs through the Sudan and Uganda and its source, Lake Victoria, is on the Ugandan-Kenyan-Tanzanian border]. He drove 900 miles to the South to Juba without [sufficient amounts of] petrol, and outran the checkpoint." Leeder became interested in the Beta Yisrael after learning about the community while camping in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California. He raised funds for the AAEJ, and upon hearing of the flight of many Ethiopian Jews to the Sudanese refugee camps, he suggested to the AAEJ officials to "break them out."<sup>37</sup> Leeder met with AAEJ officials in September of 1982: "They [said] not to go on but to wait until they call."<sup>38</sup> In January of 1983, Leeder flew to Boston and met with Rosenberg, who had returned to the U.S. to coordinate bringing rescue teams to Ethiopia. A decision was reached in which the Americans would go over to Africa in teams. Two of Leeder's rescue

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Stuart "Sandy" Lawrence Leeder, My Personal Operation Moses [March-April 1983], an unpublished diary account and photographs from his rescue missions in East Africa, April, 1985, obtained from the author.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

mates traveled to East Africa to scout out the territory. Leeder left on March 31, 1983, the third day of Passover.

Leeder flew to Nairobi, Kenya, via London. In the capital city of Kenya, he obtained a visa to the Sudan through a pay off, received undercover training, and met a driver and pilot for a later part of the rescue operation.<sup>39</sup> He flew to Khartoum via Juba on Sudan Air and met with a couple of "Henry's Boys" as well as a few of the Beta Yisrael contacts living in the Sudanese capital city. After buying passports from "street punks" in Khartoum, Leeder scouted out the capital city as well as the surrounding countryside to "get a good lay of the land."<sup>40</sup> He then rented a van, purchased some gasoline and gas cans, obtained more travel papers, and set plans to get Beta Yisrael out of the refugee camps. Two of Leeder's American "teammates" were "uncovered" and left the Sudan under pursuit by security officials.

Leeder, along with Beta Yisrael and Christian Ethiopian "operatives," set out for the refugee camps near Gedaref by van. After dropping off the "operatives" at the camp, Leeder returned to Gedaref to finalize preparations, buy blankets and malaria pills, and divide money into envelopes. After two days, he met the "operatives" and Beta Yisrael refugees at a prearranged rendezvous point, loaded the group in the van, and set out into the Sudanese desert. After four hours, they were stopped by a road block; they managed to pay off the soldiers and continued on their southbound journey. After another couple of hours, they got a flat tire, but managed to drive to a safe house where they lodged for the night. By sunrise, the tire was fixed and the van had to continue on because the townspeople began asking questions about the group. The next two days were spent driving through the Sudanese desert,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

fixing a broken distributor twice as well as another flat tire, obtaining gas through the black market, out-running the police, and bribing guards and soldiers at check points. Eventually, the group reached a safe house in Juba. Leeder then sent a note to Nairobi via a small airplane pilot acquaintance whom he bumped into at the airport, notifying his colleagues that the group of Beta Yisrael had reached Juba. Leeder then left the van in Juba, returned to Khartoum to meet with Rosenberg, and finalized arrangements to bring the group the second half of the journey from Juba to Nairobi. From Nairobi, the Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel. "This [Leeder's successful mission from the refugee camps to Juba] was the breakthrough H.R. had been waiting four months for."<sup>41</sup> In all, Leeder helped rescue eighteen Beta Yisrael, ranging from age two months to seventy-three years of age; eight children and ten adults, eight males and ten females, five families and one individual.<sup>42</sup> The rescue missions of "Henry's Boys" had commenced.

In June of 1983, the Mosad came to Rosenberg and asked what it would take him to stop the amateur rescue missions in the Sudan. Rosenberg states that he never saw the Mosad as his enemy: "One Mosad person even gave the AAEJ encouragement,"<sup>43</sup> he remarks. While the AAEJ managed to bring out over a hundred Beta Yisrael during 1983, three thousand Ethiopian Jews were left in the Sudanese camps. The Mosad official promised Rosenberg that by January of 1984, they would all be out. Rosenberg says that "[t]he Israelis kept their bargain, but we kept bringing people out [from Ethiopia, not the Sudan]."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, The People, chart profiling the people rescued.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Henry Rosenberg.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

After his dialogue with the Mosad, Rosenberg concentrated on rescuing Beta Yisrael from Ethiopia. The Israelis did not mind that "Henry's Boys" were in Ethiopia, so long as they did not operate in the Sudan where the Mosad based its operations. He worked on saving the tortured Hebrew teachers – "prisoners of Zion" – out of Ethiopia. At the same time, Rosenberg encouraged the Beta Yisrael to journey to the Sudan. Once the camps were cleared by January of 1984, eight thousand more Beta Yisrael journeyed from Ethiopia to the Sudan. Between 1982 and 1984, Rosenberg made eighteen trips between the United States and East Africa. He claims: "I kept forcing the Israelis to organize... Each one of us played a major role."<sup>45</sup>

Louis Rapoport in Redemption Song remarks that in May of 1983, the AAEJ, led by Henry Rosenberg and his rescue teams, saved one hundred and twenty Jews and brought them to Israel.<sup>46</sup> Rapoport, in his discussion of the rescue operations, notes that Howard Lenhoff wrote that "Israel hardly rescued anyone until we showed the way."<sup>47</sup> An official of an establishment Jewish organization counters that in the six months from November 1982 to May 1983,<sup>48</sup> the Israelis brought two thousand Ethiopian Jews to the country. The official concludes: "The AAEJ leaders simply misrepresented things and in fact caused operations to be postponed."<sup>49</sup> The Jewish official continued to retort that the Mosad quietly brought out about six thousand Ethiopian Jews in three years, while the AAEJ brought out around two hundred "perhaps at the expense of hundreds of others."<sup>50</sup> However, he acknowledged that the AAEJ

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Redemption Song, p. 93.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> "Henry's Boys," led by Sandy Leeder, brought out the first groups in April/May of 1983.

<sup>49</sup> Redemption Song, p. 93.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid



rescue teams "had often performed courageously."<sup>51</sup> The leader of the AAEJ rescue operations denied that his activities had ever interfered with the Israeli operations: "Any time we were in conflict, we left the area. We made mistakes, but our people did a marvelous job getting people out, and volunteered to go back."<sup>52</sup>

In fact, Rosenberg felt that the only thing that the Mosad understood was a concrete example of how rescue could be undertaken. We needed to "prove that it could be done. They had told me that nobody could come through Juba."<sup>53</sup> At the same time, he felt that the Mosad was doing everything in their power to rescue the Beta Yisrael. Rosenberg notes his contrasting view of the Mosad with Graenum Berger:

I disagree with Graenum. I didn't ever think that there was a conspiracy...There was a great deal of indifference. And after-all, the Mosad is a handful of men, and they are like the knights of the Jewish world -- they have to defend everything. How many men do you think they had involved? It was just a couple of men at most times.... I used my own money. I had a lot of advantages... I could do anything I wanted because I didn't have to answer to anybody.

While parting ways with Berger on Israeli actions and sincerity, Rosenberg holds the highest regard for the AAEJ founder and his work: "I doubt that the Jews would have ever been rescued without Graenum. I think his stick-to-it-ness, and his sense of urgency and his clear-sight that doing social work in Ethiopia for them was not going to be the thing, was 100% on target."<sup>54</sup> However, Rosenberg is highly critical of the role that American Jewry played with regard to the endangered Jews of Abyssinia:

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Henry Rosenberg.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

The American Jewish community -- I thought they were laughable. I would never mention names, but I thought they were the most laughable group of people. I used to say, 'what do we need with the Israelis?' We are six million people [Jews in the United States], we have all of the resources -- the Israelis had a myriad of problems. If they [Israel] had just stopped saying that they were the only ones who could do this [rescue the Ethiopian Jews], we would mobilize the American Jewish community to train people to do this [rescue the Beta Yisrael]. But the American Jewish community lives like on the edge of some terrible disaster. They know every once in a while a tornado blows through, but 'it won't happen in my lifetime'... Absolutely [there was a concerted effort to keep the issue of Ethiopian Jewry off the American Jewish agenda]... The Israelis took all the responsibility away from them [the American Jewish community]. They [the American Jewish leadership] loved what the Israelis said. It took all responsibility away from them... They didn't have to do anything.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid

## AN ANALYSIS OF AAEJ ACTIVITIES

At least until 1980, the only Americans working assiduously on behalf of the Ethiopian Jews were the AAEJ activists. "The establishment Jews had to be goaded constantly; and for years, the AAEJ was all alone in its concern for the Beta-Israel,"<sup>56</sup> Yet, many view the efforts of the AAEJ to be a mixed bag. For example, the late Louis Rapoport, editor of the Jerusalem Post, author of two books on the Beta Yisrael, and a leading advocate for the Ethiopian community through his "breaking" articles and poignant editorials, gave the organization a mixed review:

Its leaders did a great deal of good in stirring interest in the welfare of the Falashas and in pushing for action by the Israelis and by the American government. But there was also cause for censure of their sometimes intemperate propaganda – such as their trumpeting of the fact that thousands of Ethiopian Jews were in Sudan, which was technically in a state of war with Israel. Their own operatives had managed to extract a small number of Falashas out of the Horn of Africa, but Israeli officials said that the amateurs sometimes impeded the big ongoing rescue effort."<sup>57</sup>

Rapoport does credit founder Graenum Berger and the group's successive leaders Professor Howard Lenhoff and Nate Shapiro with devoting their personal fortunes and years of their lives to rallying support for the Beta Yisrael. Equally as important, he notes that dozens of AAEJ supporters risked their lives in the Horn of Africa to rescue Ethiopian Jews.

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<sup>56</sup> Redemption Song, p. 88

<sup>57</sup> Redemption Song, p. 88.

One U.S. State Department official told Louis Rapoport that the AAEJ members were "talking too much" in the days leading up to Operation Moses,<sup>58</sup> and that they "suffered from overzealousness." But he admits that "the airlift would not have happened without them."<sup>59</sup> According to the State Department official, the AAEJ accomplished a great deal, but it did not give sufficient credit to the Israeli government. Additionally, he claims that "its shrill polemics undermine the importance of the group's more affirmative work."<sup>60</sup> "They cried wolf too many times. When the wolf was really at the door and thousands of Falashas were dying, their warnings simply did not have much effect anymore."<sup>61</sup>

The State Department official asserted that the most important contribution of the AAEJ came in the early 1980s: "The American group realized a new approach was needed, and Nate Shapiro led the way. They went after young congressmen and government aides like Tom Lantos, Steve Solarz, and Ted Weiss and soon developed a cadre of people on Capitol Hill who were interested."<sup>62</sup> Other U.S. Congressmen who became involved included Representative Gary Ackerman of New York, Senator Rudy Boschwitz of Minnesota, Senator Charles Percy of Illinois, and Senator Alan Cranston of California.<sup>63</sup>

The mobilizing of U.S. officials is what started the ball rolling. The American congressmen put the pressure on the State Department, and

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<sup>58</sup> Operation Moses, which culminated in the rescue of some eight thousand Ethiopian Jews from the Sudan to Israel between November 1984 and January 1985, will be discussed in chapter seven.

<sup>59</sup> *Redemption Song*, p. 91.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 92.

<sup>63</sup> The efforts of these congressmen and the formation of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry will be discussed in chapter eight.

this in turn is what put the pressure on the Israelis to meet the challenge. There was no high level approach by Israel to the State Department until August 1984. That was months after people around here had been energized.<sup>64</sup>

However, a second State Department official, who was much more closely involved in initiating Operation Moses, had a different assessment of the AAEJ:

The involvement of the U.S. government had absolutely nothing to do with the AAEJ's efforts. The AAEJ may have done important work years ago in arousing public opinion, but one of their foul-ups -- the Juba incident -- threatened the entire rescue effort. It's true that they saved some people, and that's just great. But they were blind to the harm they were doing to the big operation. The Sudan government was in great difficulty and was very sensitive. Their disruptiveness in Sudan was absolutely horrendous. But Shapiro at least listened to reason and contributed something to this whole effort."<sup>65</sup>

During the middle of the 1980s, an official of an establishment American Jewish organization who followed the activities of the AAEJ stated that despite the sometimes destructive moves by some of the group's members and "an inordinate amount of egotism and overacting," the AAEJ as a whole deserves "a lot" of credit.<sup>66</sup> However, he did not believe that the AAEJ influenced the Israeli government to act: "The AAEJ claimed that only when its ads appeared in the U.S. press did Israel do anything. This is patently untrue."<sup>67</sup>

At the same time, other journalists and "neutral observers," such as Tudor Parfitt, have maintained that the AAEJ "did much more harm than

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<sup>64</sup> Redemption Song, p. 92.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 92-93.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 93.

good."<sup>68</sup> Parfitt underscores the hostile atmosphere generated by the AAEJ and the nuisance of their independently mounted rescue missions.<sup>69</sup> "They developed an obsessive and exclusive interest in the Falashas, which frequently took the form of attacking Israel and which was more often than not accompanied by a measure of self-righteousness."<sup>70</sup> He states:

Any criticisms implying that the AAEJ were [sic] creating difficulties for the Israeli operation fell on deaf ears. AAEJ members continued to argue with some self-satisfaction that if they could get Jews out of Ethiopia with their slender resources and only amateur operatives, why could the State of Israel with unlimited funds and the Mosad at its disposal not get out the whole of the Falasha population? Criticisms that AAEJ members were anti-Israel were sharply rejected.<sup>71</sup>

Dr. Ephraim Isaac notes a different concern with AAEJ tactics. He remarks that he told an AAEJ official in 1980: "The aliyah of Ethiopian Jews should not be tied just to issues of suffering. We should not just make an issue about the suffering of the people; we should make an issue about the entitlement of the Ethiopian Jews to aliyah."<sup>72</sup> Isaac states that "some of the AAEJ people were not happy with the position I took on that."<sup>73</sup>

Yet, even if some of their activities had a negative effect, the AAEJ seemed to serve as a catalyst to Israel's acceleration of its efforts to save the Ethiopian Jews and heightened awareness about the Beta Yisrael in North America. In the tug of war between the AAEJ and Israel -- between publicity versus secrecy -- a number of committees sprung up. These include the

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<sup>68</sup> Operation Moses, p. 59; and Redemption Song, p. 90.

<sup>69</sup> Operation Moses, pp. 56-59.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

<sup>72</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Ephraim Isaac, Director of the Institute for Semitic and Asiatic studies, Princeton New Jersey, may 18, 1992, Princeton, New Jersey.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*



Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ), Ethiopian Jewry divisions of the social action departments of the various religious movements in North America, the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ), and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council's (NJCRAC) committee on Ethiopian Jewry. Following is an analysis of these organizations, beginning chronologically with NJCRAC's committee, organized in late 1978 and 1979, which also represented in microcosm the rift between the AAEJ and Israel, as well as the publicity versus secrecy dilemma.

# NJCRAC'S COMMITTEE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY: THE SIN OR SUPERLATIVE OF SILENCE?<sup>74</sup>

It is not necessarily a crime to be silent. Sometimes to sit and not do -- to be a '*shave v'al ta'aseh*' -- is also an action. No question about it. Accomplishment is not achieved only by noisy action... It has to be done in a way where there is a confluence between public actions and private interventions. It is not either or. It is a healthy mix of the two. The important thing is never not to do anything. If you do nothing... that's bad. That's inaction. You can't sit by with folded hands. That's what you can't do.<sup>75</sup>

The National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) is a voluntary association of Jewish community relations agencies, which work in cooperation for the common cause of improved Jewish community relations in America.<sup>76</sup> National Jewish organizations and Jewish community agencies jointly determine the issues of concern, the positions they should take on them, the most effective methods to carry out those positions, and the priority of issues to be given attention.<sup>77</sup> The groups for which NJCRAC serves as an umbrella organization for specific purposes include autonomous local Jewish agencies such as federations, Jewish Community Relations Councils (JCRCs), and Community Relations Committees or Councils (CRCs); as well as national organizations, including American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, B'nai Brith/Anti-Defamation League, Hadassah, Jewish Labor

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<sup>74</sup> Much of the following is appearing in print for the first time.

<sup>75</sup> Personal interview with Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns for the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC), June 18, 1992, New York City.

<sup>76</sup> Joint Program Plan for Jewish Community Relations: 25 Year Compendium and Cumulative Annotated Index, 1953-1977-78, National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, New York, NY, October, 1977, p. 3.

<sup>77</sup> National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council: Joint Program Plan for Jewish Community Relations, 1991-92: Guide to Program Planning of the Constituent Organizations, NJCRAC, 443 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016-7322, (212) 684-6950, p. 1.

Committee, Jewish War Veterans of the U.S.A., National Council of Jewish Women, Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, United Synagogue of America/Women's League for Conservative Judaism, and Women's American ORT.<sup>78</sup>

NJCRAC serves as a facilitator for joint program planning for all of these local and national Jewish agencies. Each year, NJCRAC, in consultation with its member agencies, pools information, ideas and experience to produce a Joint Program Plan:

The Joint Program Plan seeks to identify and appraise changing conditions and trends that have occurred during the year as a basis for projecting their potential impact on Jewish community relations goals and concerns in the year ahead. It is in light of such assessments that priorities and strategic goals for the next 12 months are determined. These broad judgments allow the field to tailor a collective national response to changing conditions. Thus, the plan that results from this process identifies long-term patterns from which specific events emerge, enabling the field to better anticipate subsequent developments.<sup>79</sup>

The Joint Program Plan is designed to serve as an advisory guide to member agencies in their own program planning. "Each agency may accept or reject, modify or expand any of the Plan's recommendations according to each agency's particular roles, scope, concerns, resources, priorities, and needs."<sup>80</sup> At the same time, while each agency retains its autonomy, these annual Joint Program Plans are the only unified and coordinated policy recommendations and the suggested focus of activism for American Jewry as a whole.

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<sup>78</sup> Joint Program Plan for Jewish Community Relations: 25 Year Compendium and Cumulative Annotated Index, p. 3.; and Joint Program Plan 1991-92, p. ii.

<sup>79</sup> Joint Program Plan 1991-92, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

From its inception in 1944 and through the first twenty-two years of Joint Program Plans from 1953 to 1975, Ethiopian Jewry was never discussed in NJCRAC's annual report.<sup>81</sup> Ethiopian Jewry is mentioned for the first time in the 1975-76 report, receiving a one paragraph update and policy recommendation.<sup>82</sup> The Joint Program Plan for the following two years included similar brief coverage.<sup>83</sup> Interestingly, and in contradistinction to later NJCRAC policy, the policy recommendation of 1976-77 and 1977-78 called for a public awareness campaign:

We recommend that Jewish community relations agencies join in making known the facts about the Falashas, and mobilizing public opinion both within the Jewish community and in the general public in favor of the resettlement in Israel of those who elect to go there and assistance to those who choose to remain in rebuilding Jewish life in Ethiopia.<sup>84</sup>

It is also important to note that when indexed in NJCRAC's 25 Year Compendium and Cumulative Annotated Index, Ethiopian Jewry and its desire for aliyah did not fall under "Israel" or "immigration" or even a separate category like "Soviet Jewry;" but rather, it is located under "Other Areas of Concern."<sup>85</sup>

The statements in the annual NJCRAC Joint Program Plans from 1975-76 onwards were translated into a "Committee on Ethiopian Jews" by 1979. In the words of NJCRAC's Director of International concerns, Abraham Bayer: "The first thing was to find out what the problem was. The second was to find the means by which to assist them... Nobody knew anything about the subject. It

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<sup>81</sup> Joint Program Plan for Jewish Community Relations: 25 Year Compendium and Cumulative Annotated Index.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 1975-76, p. 24.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 1976-77, p. 15; 1977-78, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, contents page and indices.

was a shadowy subject which nobody knew anything about. Like with all important things, the first thing you do is educate yourself. And [education] itself is an important action."<sup>86</sup> Responding to the years it took to form a NJCRAC committee on Ethiopian Jewry, Bayer stated:

It took some doing to find out that Ethiopia was not a country or a government that was easily influenced -- for one, there was revolution going on; for two, after the '73 War, relations with all of Africa and Israel obviously were strained and broken; the location was quite problematic- they were separated and spread out over 2000 miles and 400 different villages and mountains -- how do you get them out? Not so simple; a communist country, there were 30,000 Cuban troops in Ethiopia. The secret police was staffed by the East Germans. There were four thousand Soviet advisors. Just to find that out took some doing as well, it wasn't always published in the Washington Post or the New York Times. Establishing relationships with the appropriate desks in the State Department was a problem.<sup>87</sup>

While Bayer contends that the committee was established to provide a voice urging the aliyah of Ethiopian Jewry, Graenum Berger believes that the group was founded solely to keep the AAEJ in check and to provide Israel with a loyal and tame mouthpiece in the U.S.: "He [Bayer] did everything possible to frustrate us. Whenever I [Berger] was invited to speak somewhere, he [Bayer] would go there the night before to counteract it."<sup>88</sup> In the words of Berger:

In the fall of 1978, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, which had only added the word Jewish to its title a few years before, assembled representatives of various Jewish organizations, which eventually led to the formation of a committee to deal with matters concerning Ethiopian Jewry. It was composed, on the basis of attendance, mostly of professionals from the major Jewish organizations. It did not become formal until the spring of 1979. During its initial stages, I was never invited, but when meetings were held, I appeared, welcome or not. When the committee was formally

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Abraham Bayer.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Graenum Berger

established, the AAEJ was asked to be a member. We preferred, at my instigation, to attend only as observers, as we did not want to be bound by its decisions. It was evident that the committee had been set up to contain the AAEJ and not to advance the rescue of the Ethiopian Jews. A member of the Israeli consulate in New York attended all meetings and sat at the head table. Every other member of the committee, with the exception of the AAEJ observers, deferred to him. Instead of dealing with the crucial issue of how to save Ethiopian Jews massively and expeditiously, the representatives usually attacked the AAEJ for being too activist and public about its positions, and for raising money that properly belonged to the United Jewish Appeal (although UJA had no program to raise funds for the relief, rescue, or resettlement of Ethiopian Jews)...<sup>89</sup> The AAEJ did not attend meetings thereafter. The two organizations became not merely adversaries, but sworn enemies.<sup>90</sup>

Some support for Berger's blistering attack comes from one State Department official who was sharply critical of the Jewish establishment organizations, contending: "NJCRCAC, the national body of U.S. Jewish community councils, was an unabashed tool of the Israeli government, discrediting the AAEJ and insisting -- when it wasn't true -- that Israel was doing everything possible." Professor Howard Lenhoff remarks that Abraham Bayer and NJCRCAC set up their "Committee on Ethiopian Jews" because of the threat posed by the AAEJ: "NJCRCAC did not like us, since the AAEJ was raising competing amounts of money. The major Jewish organizations were scared and angry since the AAEJ was raising funds."<sup>91</sup> Glenn Stein, who has worked with the Religious Action Center of the UAHC on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, the CRC of Phoenix, Arizona, and the AAEJ in Addis Ababa from May of 1990, until Operation Solomon in May of 1991,<sup>92</sup> had this assessment of Abraham Bayer:

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<sup>89</sup> The first UJA fund raising effort specifically designated for Ethiopian Jewry occurred in conjunction with Operation Moses during late 1984 and early 1985.

<sup>90</sup> *Graenum*, p. 652.

<sup>91</sup> Personal interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff.

<sup>92</sup> Operation Solomon will be discussed in chapter eight.



He did a good job for a long time on Soviet Jewry, but his mission as it got interpreted to me on Ethiopian Jewry was to support the Israelis and oppose the AAEJ. In fact, the first office they created... was to fight the AAEJ. That was their Ethiopian program. Why [set up an organization solely to oppose another group]? Because the AAEJ attacked Israel, and there was nothing worse to the establishment than Jews attacking Israel and embarrassing Israel. And UJA felt that this would give people who were donors an excuse not to donate -- and it was bad for the Jewish community and it was bad for world public opinion... It was unthinkable for the establishment for most of them to think that Israel wouldn't do everything that it possibly could to rescue endangered Jews of any color... And when Israel would say to them, 'I can't tell you, its secret, trust me,' most of them [the established Jewish community] went for that... It was also embarrassing to the JDC and the UJA when they are saying to the Jewish world 'we're taking care of everything, the JDC is providing and everything is under control,' and then the AAEJ is coming in and saying 'everything is not under control.'<sup>93</sup>

When Bayer was asked if NJCRAC's Committee on Ethiopian Jews was set up to keep the AAEJ in check, he responded, "Nah, it was designed, I think, to establish contact with the United States government and to exercise our rights as citizens in pushing the United States in doing whatever it could... I don't know, I think that's my line, always was, when Jews were in pain in Ethiopia and anywhere, then it was our obligation to echo that pain with the Jewish community."<sup>94</sup> When asked NJCRAC's policy vis a vis Israel, Bayer responded:

Our policy was to beat the Israelis up from every turn that the Jews were suffering, and they had to be gotten out, and we had to do everything possible to get them out, and they had to do everything possible, and I never spoke to them in any soft version, but I spoke to them privately and clearly. I was forceful, I was energetic, and I was relentless, because I was driven by the sight of those people. But I was not driven to the point of publicly attacking the State of Israel.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein, in charge of Ethiopian Jewry for the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, AAEJ field worker in Addis Ababa between May, 1990 and May 1991, CRC staffer in Phoenix, Arizona; June 18, 1992, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Abraham Bayer

<sup>95</sup> Ibid

Whether or not the Israeli government created and/or pushed for the formation of the Committee on Ethiopian Jewry, officials in the Jewish State were elated to have a group to work with other than the AAEJ. Shortly after the inception of the committee, Prime Minister Begin sent a telegram to NJCRAC, stating:

We have done our utmost to bring them [the Beta Yisrael] to our historic homeland, Eretz Yisrael. . We are happy with the formation of the American committee to act on this great humanitarian issue with which our interdepartmental committee will cooperate.<sup>96</sup>

Publicity seems to have been the primary initial effort of NJCRAC's Committee on Ethiopian Jews. As stated in a NJCRAC memo dated February 7, 1980, "[w]e in the NJCRAC have been moving to meet this urgency [the dire conditions of the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia] by raising Ethiopian Jews to a priority position on the Jewish community relations agenda, and in any way possible assisting the responsible parties in their rescue."<sup>97</sup> The same document lists six guidelines for future programs/policy recommendations to communities: 1) The Ethiopian government should not be condemned or criticized publicly either about Falashas or about limits on their emigration, lest there be tragic results for Ethiopian Jews. This position is subscribed to by all interested parties: Falashas, Israelis, NJCRAC and its member agencies, the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, the Students Network and other activist groups in the U.S.A.; 2) As our first priority, NJCRAC will sponsor an

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<sup>96</sup> The Lost Jews, p. 233.

<sup>97</sup> NJCRAC memo dated February 7, 1980; to NJCRAC and CJF (Council of Jewish Federations) member agencies; from Daniel S. Shapiro, Chairman of NJCRAC's Committee on Ethiopian Jews; regarding Update on the Campaign for Ethiopian Jews, p. 1. From the Archives of the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, Washington, D.C.

accelerated educational campaign within the Jewish community...; 3) CRCs should initiate a local educational campaign to impact on various sectors within the Jewish community...; 4) Communications may be sent by top Jewish community leadership to Prime Minister Menachem Begin which should commend the Israeli government for its new initiative and public effort on behalf of Ethiopian Jews...; 5) Letters from CRC leadership to the Chairmen of the Committees on Africa of the House of Representatives and the Senate are in order. These should express Jewish community concern for Falashas and ask that they explore ways within our government to assist their earliest emigration to Israel. Similar letters to sympathetic local Congressmen are appropriate; 6) Communications along the same vein may be sent to the Secretary of State... and to the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs...<sup>98</sup> These recommendations were based on a background paper on Ethiopian Jews entitled "The Falashas."<sup>99</sup>

Yet, at the same time, the publicity desired by NJCRAC was to be solely internal and limited in scope. In a letter dated February 21, 1979, the Executive Vice President of NJCRAC stated:

What we have been seeking is to increase the awareness of Jewish leadership about the jeopardy facing approximately 28,000 Falashas. We do not intend to launch a public campaign on behalf of the Falashas. We do believe that giving this problem increased attention within the Jewish community has contributed to fostering increased sensitivity to it by both the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, pp. 3-4.

<sup>99</sup> The Falashas: A Background Paper on Ethiopian Jews; prepared at the request of the NJCRAC Committee on Ethiopian Jews by Abraham Karlikov, Director, Foreign Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee in consultation with the Strategy Subcommittee of the NJCRAC Committee on Ethiopian Jews, January, 1980. From the Archives of the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, Washington, D.C.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from Albert D. Chernin, Executive Vice Chairman of NJCRAC to Mr. Stanley B. Horowitz, Executive Director of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, Ohio,

NJCRCAC operated under a dilemma, if not a stated contradiction.

Education was their goal; yet the organization was not advocating a public campaign on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. The word on the plight of the Beta Yisrael had to get out; yet silence was essential. "The idea was to educate the Jewish community, but not to seek publicity,"<sup>101</sup> relayed Bayer. He further states:

There is no way in which you can conduct [such a campaign of education without publicity], that was our dilemma. It was almost an irreconcilable and exquisite dilemma. How do you conduct an educational campaign without using the maximal of public exposure... and that's why it required enormous expansion of my own personal energies... This is our dilemma [it is not necessarily true] that noise or even education leads to something.... That was the whole dilemma. Education towards what? It was not clear that a public stance could change the physical condition of Ethiopian Jews. It was not clear because if these people were spread out over 2000 miles, 400 hundred different villages -- there was no way of physically extracting them without the government. The government was impervious to leverage. The United States had no leverage, as a matter of fact, had no trade with Ethiopia. It was zero... The question was will noise make a difference. So we didn't know who the enemy was. So we thought, well, if you pressure the Israelis, they'll do more in that respect. But they are American allies also, in that respect. And there was still this hard core residual problem in Israel of their recognition, even if the chief rabbis were in favor of it. The biggest problem was the fact that Ethiopia was in the pocket of the Soviets. Getting everything they wanted from the Soviets -- they really didn't need the Americans. They couldn't care less, even in the famine... What did they care if a hundred thousand died... less mouths to feed would be in their favor, so even that was not a leverage point. So we had all these things against us. The Jews were separated, fragmented, isolated. The Soviets were there. There was silence everywhere in the world. There was a problem in recognition still with large segments of Jews... It was not an easy job... If anybody told you that the reason that we weren't able to mobilize [was] because of racism -- that was not true. The deepest allies we had on this issue were people in the Reform Movement, who had a sense of Social Justice.<sup>102</sup>

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February 21, 1979. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY; "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984," p. 1.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Abraham Bayer.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

On numerous occasions, the local Jewish Federations, synagogues, JCRCs and CRCs felt frustrated over the push for education and the demand for secrecy. For example, the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles in July of 1979, came out with a strong resolution urging Israel and American Jewish leadership to immediately actualize an Ethiopian aliyah.<sup>103</sup> The Brotherhood Synagogue of Manhattan in December of 1979 addressed the Jewish leadership of America as follows: "There are many who are rapidly coming to the conclusion that neither Israel, nor the Jewish Agency, nor the world and domestic Jewish organizations have concerned themselves sufficiently with rescuing the Black Ethiopian Jews."<sup>104</sup>

The Jewish Federation of Seattle, Washington, in January of 1980, went so far as to demand special United Jewish Appeal funds (UJA) to be allocated for rescue of the Beta Yisrael. They stated: "The Jewish community of Greater Seattle urges the United Jewish Appeal to expend funds from community allocations to UJA for the rescue and resettlement of Falasha Jews in Israel. We urge the Jewish Agency to immediately take concrete steps to expand the rescue and resettlement efforts to bring Falasha Jews to Israel."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Resolution of the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles Concerning Ethiopian Jewry, July 26, 1979. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

<sup>104</sup> Letter from the Brotherhood Synagogue of Manhattan, Abraham Weinstein, Board of Trustees, Irving J. Block, rabbi; to Mr. Donald Robinson and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, December 10, 1979. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984," p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> Board of Directors of the Seattle, Washington, Jewish Federation statement, found in a letter from Murray Shiff, Seattle Jewish Federation Board member to Ralph I. Goldman, Executive Vice President of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984."



A February, 1981 letter from the Connecticut Jewish Community Relations Council to NJCRAC with an accompanying resolution of the community regarding the Beta Yisrael, provides an even more poignant example of the frustrations felt by local Jewish organizations. The Connecticut JCRC initiated its own nationwide campaign on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. The letter, in part, states:

The Connecticut JCRC passed the enclosed Resolution to indicate our feeling of frustration regarding the rescue of the Ethiopian Jewish community... The recent NJCRAC Plenum workshop indicated little progress and no real plans for action. We have sent copies of our new Resolution to Federations and CRC's across the country with the hope that they will also adopt the Resolution, and a universal "Call for Action" will come forward. There was sentiment by many for [an] even stronger statement.<sup>106</sup>

The endorsed resolution of the Connecticut Jewish Community Relations Council, which was disseminated throughout the country, was even more forceful:

The circumstances of Ethiopian Jewry are terminal. We are standing by as Jews are being decimated. One year ago we spoke of 28,000, then 20,000, now 10,000 Jews.<sup>107</sup> Even at 1980's high immigration of 600 souls, the overwhelming portion of Ethiopian Jewry now living will never get to Israel. There is evidence that some Ethiopian Jews have been in refugee camps for up to six years, and that some of these people have given up and gone back to Ethiopia. Yet there is every indication that these Jewish lives can be bought for the price of \$2,000 a head. We tried working through the system and it has not moved. We must set a task force to mobilize the strengths and allocate the funds of our community and state in new and dramatic ways so that as much as needs to be done, is done. We must help save these beautiful people who quickly became [sic] fine Israelis, and who by their very presence are the best response to the unjustified canard of racism.

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<sup>106</sup> Letter from the Connecticut Jewish Community Relations Council to Dan Shapiro, Chair of NJCRAC's committee on Ethiopian Jewry, and Jacqueline Levine, Chair of NJCRAC's department of International Concerns, February 2, 1981. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

<sup>107</sup> The accuracy of these figures are highly questionable.



We, the 120,000 Jews of Connecticut organized in nine Federations, call for immediate action by the Council of Jewish Federations, United Jewish Appeal, the Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Agency and the Government of Israel to declare and so act that the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry be deemed of highest priority.<sup>108</sup>

The letter which accompanied the resolution challenged its recipient with the charge that "[w]e still argue heatedly about whether World Jewry is or is not answering to its responsibility," and called for "[n]othing less than the traditional Jewish solution... [of] rescue... is sufficient."<sup>109</sup> The letter was sent to over two hundred Federations and their CRC offices, Prime Minister Begin, the Israeli Embassy, the UJA, the Jewish Agency, the AJJDC, the AAEJ and NJCRAC.<sup>110</sup> The letter ended with the following appeal: "We ask that your CRC/Federation endorse this call or write a similar one and send copies to the above list."<sup>111</sup> The nationwide campaign of the Connecticut JCRC had some effect, at least in promoting awareness in other local Jewish communities. For example, less than a month later, the Jewish Community Council of Erie, Pennsylvania, passed the exact same "A Call to Action" resolution on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry.<sup>112</sup>

Even secular political organizations were persuaded to take action to push the American Jewish leadership, Israel and the U.S. government. In

<sup>108</sup> A Call to Action. Resolution of the Connecticut Jewish Community Relations Council, January, 1981. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

<sup>109</sup> Letter from the Connecticut Jewish Community Relations Council, Martin Gant, president, Bernard Levy, chairman of the Ethiopian Jewry Task Force, to U.S. Jewish community leaders, January 29, 1981. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

<sup>110</sup> Ibid

<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> A Call to Action. Resolution of the Jewish Community Council of Erie, Pennsylvania, February 23, 1981. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

January of 1983, the Chicago City Council passed a resolution urging the rescue of the Beta Yisrael.<sup>113</sup>

An April 1980 Perspectives policy study of the National Jewish Resource Center synthesizes the problem. The detailed twenty-four page analysis of the history, customs, religiosity and efforts to help the Beta Yisrael, The Falashas: History and Analysis of Policy Towards a Beleaguered Community concludes with policy recommendations.<sup>114</sup> These include NJCRAC's educational campaign of providing literature and audio-visual materials, as well as creating community level committees for Ethiopian Jewry.<sup>115</sup> But the policy study further states that "these policies [which NJCRAC has undertaken] are important, but whether they go far enough in ameliorating a tragic situation can be questioned. There is a real danger that desperately needed energies will be diffused into exchanges of information that do not result in improving the situation."<sup>116</sup>

Moreover, the policy study recommended that Diaspora communities exercise a more vocal appeal and critique of the role of Israel, "particularly when the matters at issue concern the welfare of a Diaspora Jewish community."<sup>117</sup> Israel employed a "sha-shtil" ("be-quiet") policy. What was needed, perhaps, was pressure on Israel and Ethiopia through media attention to resolve the issue. Therefore, "several of the policy recommendations of the

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<sup>113</sup> "President Reagan and U.S. Congress Urged to Assist Ethiopian Jews in Their Freedom, Rescue and Resettlement," Journal -- City Council -- Chicago, January 18, 1983. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

<sup>114</sup> Diane Winston, "The Falashas: History and Analysis of Policy Towards a Beleaguered Community," a Perspectives policy study of the National Jewish Resource Center, April, 1980, New York, NY.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, pp. 19-20.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

AAEJ are additionally offered."<sup>118</sup> These include involving Ethiopian Israelis in policy decisions in a meaningful way; sending Beta Yisrael shlichim into Ethiopia and other African countries to prepare the Ethiopian Jews for aliyah and to raise the community's morale; appointing an Israeli official, responsible to the Prime Minister, to work solely on this issue; and preparing absorption workers in Israel to receive the Beta Yisrael.<sup>119</sup> The policy study emphasized one final conclusion:

American Jewish leaders should voice their concern directly and unequivocally and press for immediate Israeli action. Americans must know that they do not necessarily want to be privy to Israeli top-secret efforts; they only want to see results. If results are not apparent after a reasonable amount of time (four to six months), American Jews could take several actions. One would be for UJA contributions to be earmarked for subsidizing Falasha rescue (pidyon shvuyim)... American Jews should also explore what types of support they could receive from their elected officials... Lastly, [e]mpowering the American Jewish community to make serious policy suggestions might well help the emergence of a more mature policy discussion between Israel and the Diaspora.<sup>120</sup>

Simultaneously, NJCRAC received numerous pleas and petitions from the Beta Yisrael community in Israel. These included the requests of individuals as well as Ethiopian Israeli organizations such as the Council of Ethiopian Jews and the Ethiopian Jews' Association. The pleas underscored the plight of the Beta Yisrael and the lack of action by Israel and American Jewish leadership.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, pp. 20-21.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>121</sup> Letter from the Council of Ethiopian Jews to NJCRAC, Daniel Shapiro, chairperson of the committee on Ethiopian Jewry, and Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns, March 14, 1981. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984." Also, letter from the Ethiopian Jews' Association to Daniel Shapiro, chairperson of the Committee on Ethiopian Jewry, and Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns, March 29, 1981. Archives of the

As a result of the perceived inactivity and silence of NJCRAC, the AAEJ withdrew its participation in the Committee on Ethiopian Jews. In his August 10, 1981 letter to NJCRAC Committee on Ethiopian Jews' chairperson Daniel Shapiro, then AAEJ president Howard Lenhoff withdrew the participation of the AAEJ: "We find that the committee is not only ineffective, serving no useful purpose in aiding the Jews of Ethiopia, but actually, knowingly or unknowingly, is partaking in the cover-up and foot dragging by world Jewish 'leadership' that will ultimately allow the destruction of Jewry's most ancient community."<sup>122</sup>

Our decision is based upon your committee's: (a) inability to take any decisive action, (b) sole reliance on Israeli government apologists for its information, (c) reluctance to seek out information from the Ethiopian Jews, (d) failure to organize a fact seeking mission to Ethiopia and surrounding countries,<sup>123</sup> (e) publication (in May, 1981) of an inaccurate cover-up for the Jewish Agency on the state of current aliyah and klita of the Ethiopian Jews, (f) reluctance to pressure for the Rishut<sup>124</sup> as requested by the Falasha leadership, and (g) failure to keep American Jews informed about the changing situations of the Ethiopian Jews.

We will never fathom your bureaucratic statements of "monitoring" the situation. Does that mean you are satisfied with 50 Falashas arriving a month, with none arriving during the last two months, with unfulfilled promises of better things to come, with excuses of the difficulties involved, with figures of over 2,400 of our people in refugee camps under deplorable conditions (when 2 years ago numbers as low as 15 were refuted), or what?<sup>125</sup>

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American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

<sup>122</sup> Letter from Howard Lenhoff, then President of the AAEJ to Daniel Shapiro, chairperson of NJCRAC's Committee on Ethiopian Jews, August 10, 1981. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Falashas 1980-81," p. 1.

<sup>123</sup> NJCRAC's first mission to Ethiopia did not occur until 1982.

<sup>124</sup> Perhaps a reference to full "permission" (i.e. religious recognition and rights) as Jews?

<sup>125</sup> Letter from Howard Lenhoff to Daniel Shapiro, p. 1.

The AAEJ pulled out of NJCRAC's Committee on Ethiopian Jews and continued its vocal attacks on the American Jewish establishment and Israel. In large part because of the pressure exerted by the AAEJ and the accusation of failing to monitor the situation adequately, NJCRAC finally sent a fact finding mission to Ethiopia and Israel from March 10-26, 1982. The group of fourteen men and women was comprised of representatives of NJCRAC's national and community member agencies as well as other major national organizations.<sup>126</sup> The "decision to go to Ethiopia grew out of the conflicting reports within the American Jewish community regarding the conditions of Ethiopian Jews."<sup>127</sup>

The conclusions of the mission were favorable to the efforts of Israel and down-played the horrific conditions facing the Jews of Ethiopia. The Commission Report stated: "The Mission is convinced that very substantial efforts are now being made by the Israeli government for the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry."<sup>128</sup> The Report further concluded that "Israel is dedicated to the rescue of Ethiopian Jews. In word and deed it has demonstrated its readiness to use its resources in a vigorous and daring effort to realize this goal."<sup>129</sup>

Also, in contradistinction to other organizations, the NJCRAC Mission Report cited the cooperation of Israel's interministerial committee on

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<sup>126</sup> Report of NJCRAC Mission to Ethiopia, March 10-26, 1982. Based on the Presentation of Bennett Yanowitz, NJCRAC Chairperson, to NJCRAC Consultation on Ethiopian Jews, April 16, 1982. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Ethiopia 1982," p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>129</sup> Report of NJCRAC Mission to Ethiopia March 10-26, 1982: Major Findings and Conclusions, sent with an accompanying letter to all NJCRAC and CJF Agencies, May 27, 1982. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Ethiopia 1982."



Ethiopian Jews to openly exchange views and judgments regarding the effective means of assuring the rescue and relief of Ethiopian Jews.<sup>130</sup> The report also concludes that all efforts on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry must be "fully meshed and coordinated with the interministerial committee on Ethiopian Jews," and that "[a]ny independent operation outside that framework would jeopardize our Ethiopian brethren."<sup>131</sup>

The NJCRAC mission, in contrast to most previous missions and individual trips to Ethiopia during the previous decade, concluded that "Ethiopian Jews are not faced with the danger of physical annihilation... Descriptions of the situation of the Beta Yisrael in terms of 'Holocaust' and 'Genocide' are inaccurate and a disservice."<sup>132</sup> AAEJ activists and others involved in the Ethiopian Jewry movement such as Ephraim Isaac, charged that such optimistic reports like the NJCRAC Mission Report "swept facts under the rug."<sup>133</sup> Isaac also asserts that other independent groups of North American Jews who traveled to Ethiopia supported the claims of the AAEJ, stating that the Beta Yisrael faced "pressure to assimilate, closing of schools and discrimination."<sup>134</sup>

The NJCRAC Report also stressed the existence of the same tension which characterized NJCRAC's stance vis a vis Ethiopian Jewry over the past few years -- education, yet no publicity: "[A] public campaign with all its attendant publicity about aliyah and the rescue effort could undermine that work and thus should be avoided."<sup>135</sup> At the same time, the Report called for

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid

<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> Ibid

<sup>133</sup> Ephraim Isaac, Jewish Solidarity and the Ethiopian Jews (Beersheva, Israel: Ben Gurion University in the Negev, 1988), p. 27.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid

<sup>135</sup> Report of NJCRAC Mission to Ethiopia, p. 8.



immediate education: "The American Jewish community must be educated about Ethiopian Jewry, their history, the discrimination they are facing and the efforts being made to assist them."<sup>136</sup> The commission concluded that "special stress should be put on the unique difficulties attending the current situation and its implications for rescue and relief and the role of the American Jewish community."<sup>137</sup>

The dilemma persisted. Were Israel and the Jewish establishment doing all that they could to aid Ethiopian Jewry? The attacks on Israel and American Jewish leadership continued because information was deemed so sensitive that it could not be disseminated. Yet, there was a strong desire to educate the American Jewish populace about Ethiopian Jewry. However, for the most part, the American Jewish community remained ignorant of the plight of the Beta Yisrael. The withholding of information played right into the hands, concerns and fears of the activists and organizations such as the AAEJ. They wanted to see tangible results, not merely be told that everything possible was being done to help the Ethiopian Jews.

In March of 1983, Rachamim Elazar, leader of the Beta Yisrael community in Israel and then secretary of the Public Committee for Ethiopian Jews in Israel, summarized the situation best in a letter to Abraham Bayer: "I support all efforts that will bring the attention of the plight of our people to world Jews, that will put pressure on those responsible for rescuing our people and helping them absorb, and that will rescue even one single Jew from their suffering in Africa."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid

<sup>137</sup> Major Findings and Conclusions

<sup>138</sup> Letter from Rachamim Elazar, leader of the Beta Yisrael community in Israel and then secretary of the Public Committee for Ethiopian Jews in Israel, to Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns for NJCRAC, March 10, 1983. Archives of the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, Washington, D.C.

## THE REFORM MOVEMENT AND OTHER RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS TAKE ACTION

Beginning in 1979, Reform Judaism in the United States pushed the issue of Ethiopian Jewry. In June of 1979, the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism began distributing information on the plight of the Beta Yisrael via its CHAI/IMPACT newsletter.<sup>139</sup> The newspaper detailed background information, discussed the essential issues, and suggested actions. Whereas NJCRAC refrained from pressure and criticism of Israel and American Jewish organizations, the Reform Movement was more openly critical. The letter stated the Reform Movement's position: "It is imperative that American Jews demand that Israel and Jewish relief organizations (such as ORT) and American Jewish leaders act more forcefully to save the remnants, and that we publicize their worsening plight."<sup>140</sup>

More aggressive measures of the Reform Movement are evidenced by the Resolution of the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis (PARR) as adopted in the resolutions at the 34th Annual Convention from January 6-10, 1980. The adopted resolution on "Falasha Jewry" called for its members:

- 1) To use all possible means to inform our congregants and other constituents of the existence and plight of the Falashas; 2) To call upon our Temple and Auxiliary Boards to draw up petitions on behalf of the Falashas and send them to Prime Minister Begin, Chairman Aryeh Dulzin of the Jewish Agency and the National UJA office; 3) To call upon our congregants to mail their own personal letters to Prime Minister Begin, Mr. Dulzin and to the UJA; 4) To encourage the formation of a pro-Falasha action committee in every synagogue; 5) To urge the CCAR [Central Conference of American Rabbis] to adopt and publicize a similar resolution; 6) To ask the UAHC - CCAR Social

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<sup>139</sup> "Action Alert: The Jews of Ethiopia Face Extinction." CHAI/IMPACT, June 4, 1979, A service of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism.

<sup>140</sup> Falashas, letter of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, June 15, 1979, to Social Action Chairmen; Commission on Social Action; Rabbis; Congregational Presidents; UAHC Board of Trustees; Sisterhood Board; Youth leaders. Archives of the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, Washington D.C.

Action Committee to keep all Reform rabbis and congregations regularly informed as to the current status of the Falashas; and 7) To cooperate with the American Association for Ethiopian Jews in sponsoring a lecture tour of a Falasha spokesperson within our region.<sup>141</sup>

Simultaneously, the Conservative Movement took action. Then president of the Rabbinical Assembly, Saul I. Teplitz, encouraged his colleagues to act on behalf of the Beta Yisrael: "I hope that you will use your influence and that of your congregation to exert whatever pressure possible on the government of Israel and upon the American Jewish organizations to spare no effort to free Falasha Jews from Ethiopia as we did in encouraging the rising wave of emigration of Soviet Jews."<sup>142</sup>

The New York Board of rabbis, composed of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis, appealed to its colleagues in October of 1979 on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. They publicized the plight of the Beta Yisrael with rabbis in New York state and called for a "Solidarity Shabbat with Ethiopian Jewry."<sup>143</sup> The New York Board's efforts continued for the next number of years.

The involvement of the Reform Movement continued to escalate. In 1982 and 1983, the UAHC and the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) set up programs whereby synagogues and youth groups could adopt villages in Ethiopia and raise funds to provide material and financial aid for the Beta

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<sup>141</sup> Resolution on Falashan Jewry, Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis, Resolutions Adopted at 34th Annual Convention, January 6-10, 1979, p. 1. Archives of the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, Washington, D.C.

<sup>142</sup> Letter from the President of the Rabbinical Assembly, Saul I. Teplitz, to his colleagues regarding the plight of Ethiopian Jewry, June, 1979. Archives of the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, Washington, D.C.

<sup>143</sup> Letter from the New York Board of Rabbis to their colleagues, October 22, 1979. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY; "Appeals for Help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

Yisrael of Ethiopia.<sup>144</sup> In early 1984, the UAHC sponsored its first mission to Ethiopia. Glenn Stein, who worked with the Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C., and Rusty Frank, Regional Director of the California Federation of Temple Youth, traveled to Ethiopia "to meet with as many Ethiopian Jews as possible in order to give them moral support, some much needed educational materials, religious objects and financial assistance."<sup>145</sup>

Before traveling to Ethiopia, Stein and Frank made a stop in Israel to meet with Haim Halachmi, the Jewish Agency point person at the time. In the words of Stein, "[Halachmi told us] that if we got up to the villages, we should give the message to the Ethiopian Jews, that if they wanted to go to the Sudan and take the risk, they would be rescued within three months."<sup>146</sup> At the beginning of 1984, only a few hundred Ethiopian Jews were left in the Sudan since the Israelis had already cleared the refugee camps.

Stein recalls, "They [the Israelis] thought that if more people didn't come, the program [to save Ethiopian Jews] would be over, so they wanted to encourage people [Ethiopian Jews] to come, and they in fact had sent Mosad agents in through the Sudan to the villages [in Ethiopia] themselves to pass on the word, and they asked travelers who were going [to Ethiopia] whom they felt would be trustworthy, to pass on the word."<sup>147</sup> Stein and Frank went into the villages of Gondar and looked for young, strong, responsible people and gave them money and told them that they could put together a group and go to the Sudan. During their nine day visit to Ethiopia, they visited seven villages.

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<sup>144</sup> Ethiopian Jewry Update: A Report on the Recent UAHC Trip to Ethiopia January 24-February 2, 1984, authored by Glenn Stein, then working for the Religious Action Center of the UAHC. Archives of the Religious Action Center, Washington, D.C. p. 1.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Glenn Stein.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid

Stein says, "We would go into a village and give this message quietly, and those people in the village would tell other people -- and they felt if some white person was going to shlep all this way to tell us -- this really must be the time to go -- and the next day half the village would get up and leave."<sup>148</sup> Stein and Frank never realized the full effect of their interaction in the villages of Gondar on the final rescue of Operation Moses. However, their message and that of other travelers and the Mosad agents in large part caused the flood of thousands into the refugee camps., possibly creating the favorable conditions for the rescue operation.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid

<sup>149</sup> It is important to note that Stein's trip also resulted in the creation of the UAHC's medical aid program to Ethiopia, called Project REAP. In a personal interview in Brooklyn, New York, on June 18, 1992, Stein reviewed the events leading up to the creation of REAP. Upon his return in February, 1984, Stein reported to the UAHC Commission on Social Action that the Ethiopian Jews were sick and needed immediate medical treatment. At this point, Stein says that the AJJDC had talked about setting up a clinic, but had yet to undertake such action. The Religious Action Center of the UAHC decided to move ahead without the AJJDC, and sent a couple of doctors on tourist visas to travel to the Gondar region and administer medical treatment to the Ethiopian Jews (the RAC received the blessings of the AJJDC). The UAHC also sent a number of doctors on NACOEJ missions during the middle and late 1980s. Eventually, the medical school in Gondar wanted to establish a relationship, according to Stein. Officials in the UAHC hoped a presence there would allow access to the villages. The RAC decided to establish a program with the medical school in Gondar under the name, "Surgical Aid to Children of the World (SACOW)." It was headed by two New York Jews and its board was 90% Jewish. While the UAHC raised all the money to fund the program, the doctors and nurses and physical/occupational therapists sent to Ethiopia did some teaching at the school. But all along, the goal of the program, according to Glenn Stein, was to get into the Jewish villages, although Stein laments their goal was rarely accomplished and even then visits were brief. He says, "And in the end after spending considerable money, the truth was that we didn't help many Jews. We did create a presence there, we did create a base... but it was a very negligible benefit." Shortly after the UAHC established its medical presence in Ethiopia, the AJJDC set up a medical presence in Ethiopia. In a personal interview with Dr. Ted Myers in New York City on June 18, 1992, Myers discussed the events and circumstances surrounding the JDC medical involvement. According to Dr. Myers, head of the AJJDC medical program in East Africa during the 1980s, they got permission in 1984 from Mengistu to come into Ethiopia, and by 1986, they set up offices in the country. The programs were to be non-sectarian in nature. Myers says, "We did not do anything which violated the sovereignty of the Ethiopian government.... to get into Ethiopia was a great accomplishment, they [the AJJDC] did not want to do anything that would risk their position and access in the country." When asked if the AJJDC was involved with rescue, Dr. Meyers responded that the AJJDC's concern was to have access to the villages and provide medical treatment. He says, the "JDC's position is that it is our responsibility to



These and other factors leading up to Operation Moses will be analyzed in the next chapter. It is important to note the intricate politics of rescue, before moving on to other North American activity on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry during the early 1980s. The UAHC Commission on Social Action worked with, and often through, the AAEJ. The two organizations often coordinated educational and fund raising programs, relief activities, and medical services. However, such an alliance was not publicized to minimize criticism and increase funding. Glenn Stein says, "The reason up to very recently that I was so successful was that I was able to operate under the UAHC cloak which was a trusted organization and wasn't a part of 'that enemy, the AAEJ.' We intentionally kept the relationship between the UAHC and the AAEJ as quiet as possible."<sup>150</sup>

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take care of Jews wherever they are... whatever the needs may be. And emigration and aliyah is really the responsibility of the Jewish Agency. Our rescue, if you want to call it that, was more one of keeping people alive – we rescued them in that sense." Glenn Stein contends that the UAHC cooperated with the JDC in medical relief programs, but "with hostility." He added that the JDC is "very conservative" and takes "the long view" and does not want to do anything to mix up the long plan. Stein concluded that Project REAP was "a lot of effort, not a whole lot accomplished... The JDC during this period also didn't accomplish much."

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Glenn Stein.



## THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWS (CAEJ)

Modeled after the AAEJ, the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ) was established in 1980. CAEJ's vocal stance vis a vis Israel and the established community of North America was similar to the AAEJ, as was the Canadian organization's tactics and vocal attacks on these groups. CAEJ, like the AAEJ, focused its efforts on rescue of the Beta Yisrael, and on a couple of occasions even made their own attempts to rescue Ethiopian Jews in the Horn of Africa. CAEJ's Board of Directors consisted of business people, Jewish student activists, professionals and members of the Canadian Jewish Congress.<sup>151</sup> Starting in 1982, CAEJ issued a quarterly and sometimes semi-annual newsletter entitled Ethiopian Jewry Report, which continued into the early 1990s.

CAEJ was the only organization in Canada devoted exclusively to aiding Ethiopian Jews. Activities of CAEJ included educational campaigns, relief work including clothing drives for new immigrants to Israel and medical missions to Ethiopia, fund raising through the sale of Ethiopian Jewry note cards and parlour meetings, lobbying of Canadian governmental officials, and rescue operations in Ethiopia. Funding came from large and small donors, synagogues, foundations and corporations. In 1982, CAEJ had three thousand members. By 1984, CAEJ had fifteen members on its Board of Directors and a constituency of twelve thousand Canadians. The national office was located in Toronto, with chapters in Calgary, Montreal and Ottawa, an affiliate office in Ramat Gan, Israel, and a coordinator in Ethiopia. Their staff consisted of both

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<sup>151</sup> "New CAEJ Board," Ethiopian Jewry Report, published by the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Spring, 1982, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 2.

full-time and part-time workers, as well as over one hundred and fifty volunteers.<sup>152</sup> The organization describes itself as follows:

CAEJ is a small, publicly-funded charity<sup>153</sup> struggling to achieve a big aim: to save Ethiopian Jewry from extinction. Our objectives are to make the saving of Ethiopian Jewry a number one priority of the Government of Israel and World Jewish leadership; to directly rescue Jews in Ethiopia and take them to Israel; to provide relief assistance for Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia, Sudan and Israel; and to educate the Canadian public about the desperate plight of Ethiopian Jewry.<sup>154</sup>

CAEJ's policy statement from 1982 set out the following goals, functions and commitment of purpose:

(1) The sole function of CAEJ is to promote the welfare of Ethiopian Jews. The physical condition of Ethiopian Jewry makes it the most threatened Jewish community in the world. Alleviation of its plight must be a top priority of the Jewish people; (2) In order for those who enjoy freedom as Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora to be of help to Ethiopian Jewry there must be community education on the nature of the problem, and coordinated efforts by all those concerned.; (3) CAEJ views its role as (a) an advocacy group within the Jewish and general community on behalf of Ethiopian Jews; (b) a vehicle for educational programs; (c) a catalyst for promoting increased efforts to provide assistance to Ethiopian Jews; and (d) an instrument for aid to Ethiopian Jews; (4) CAEJ endorses the "Jerusalem Program." Heeding the tenet that "There is no Zionism but for the saving of Jews." CAEJ is committed to aliyah for Ethiopian Jewry; (5) Although all Jews are responsible for one another, the State of Israel has the mandate of both history and contemporary organized Jewry to assume the lead in aiding an oppressed Jewish community. CAEJ therefore strives to conduct a dialogue and to coordinate its efforts with Israel on the matter of Ethiopian Jewry; (6) CAEJ acknowledges not only the existing interest of, but the need for further involvement by, major Jewish community organizations in educational and programmatic efforts on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. CAEJ strives to maintain a dialogue and coordinate activities with such groups; (7) The plight of the Jewish community within Ethiopia, and particularly in Gondar

<sup>152</sup> "What is CAEJ," Ethiopian Jewry Report, published by the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Nov./Dec. 1984, Jan. 1985, Vol 4, No. 4, p. 3.

<sup>153</sup> I assume the use of "public" here is to convey the sense of popular as opposed to governmental support. Funding primarily came from private sources, and the group was a non-profit organization.

<sup>154</sup> "What is CAEJ."

province, is a human rights issue and should be accorded publicity in the international arena, in accordance with the view of Ethiopian Jews themselves; and (8) Activities on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry must be carried out in close consultation with Ethiopian Jews themselves.<sup>155</sup>

It appears, at least in this 1982 policy statement, that the CAEJ officials went to great lengths to talk about dialogue and coordination and cooperation with Israel and world Jewish leaders and organizations. Perhaps this position is a reaction to the often ballistic confrontation of the AAEJ with these parties, through the printed media, speeches and policy statements. Additionally, this policy statement also broadens the role of CAEJ to the general welfare of Ethiopian Jewry, including educational programs and relief work. But the policy differences between CAEJ and the AAEJ are more subtle than this diplomatic wording might lead one to think. Moreover, the elements of confrontation are contained within the document. Point one underscores that Ethiopian Jewry must be the top priority of the Jewish people. Point four calls for an immediate rescue of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel. Point five dramatizes the need for Israel to take more assertive and decisive action. Point six calls upon the established Jewish community to get more involved. Point seven pushes for a public campaign on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. Most assuredly, these were also the major goals of the AAEJ.

Susan Pollack Shechtman, long time Executive Director of CAEJ, and later, rescue coordinator for the AAEJ, poignantly summarized the role of CAEJ while indicting Israel and world Jewry in the following statement in 1984: "The Jewish world watches in silence while hundreds die each month. We take

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<sup>155</sup> "Policy Statement [of CAEJ]," Ethiopian Jewry Report, published by the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Spring, 1982, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 5.

the words 'never again' very seriously. We will not betray Israel's ideals by taking orders from Israeli bureaucrats. We will save whomever we can."<sup>156</sup>

Others involved with Ethiopian Jewry viewed CAEJ as militant and ineffective. Claire Safran, author of Secret Exodus, characterized CAEJ as "militant."<sup>157</sup> She adds, however, that "[l]ong before the main-line Jewish organizations took up the cause, these people led it. In the years when Israel and America<sup>158</sup> both were struggling with so many other crises, they [CAEJ and the other Ethiopian support organizations] would not allow the lost Jews to be forgotten once again."<sup>159</sup> The actions of the AAEJ's counterpart organization, the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, were criticized as "reckless and incompetent," in the words of one Canadian newsperson who accompanied a group of CAEJ members to Ethiopia.<sup>160</sup> The efforts of the CAEJ members failed, and they were thrown out of Ethiopia by government authorities.<sup>161</sup>

Tudor Parfitt, author of Operation Moses: The Story of the Exodus of the Falasha Jews From Ethiopia, describes CAEJ as "extremely vocal and outspoken" and a "potential danger" to the Mosad's rescue operations in East Africa.<sup>162</sup> Parfitt notes that "[a] number of unofficial emissaries were sent to the North American groups [CAEJ and AAEJ] to persuade them that Israel was taking action on behalf of the Falashas and that independent rescue missions were both unnecessary and harmful to the overall operations."<sup>163</sup> Further,

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<sup>156</sup> Simcha Jacobovici, "Ethiopian Jews Die, Israel Fiddles," an opinion/editorial piece in the New York Times, Saturday, September 15, 1984.

<sup>157</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 49.

<sup>158</sup> America here is referring to North America, both the United States as well as Canada.

<sup>159</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 49.

<sup>160</sup> Redemption Song, p. 91.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>162</sup> Operation Moses, p. 46.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*

he claims that "[c]ompletely unconvinced, they [CAEJ and AAEJ] said that they had heard the same argument from a number of Israeli officials and that the discretion being urged upon them was no more than a ruse to conceal Israeli inaction."<sup>164</sup>

Another parallel to the AAEJ experience was the reaction by the established Jewish community of Canada to CAEJ's active involvement on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. In early 1982, the Canadian Jewish Congress formed a National Committee on Ethiopian Jews. This group's leadership included a number of CAEJ members.<sup>165</sup> All in all, it appears that the National Committee on Ethiopian Jews was not formed so much to contain CAEJ as it was to provide a vehicle and central agency to disseminate information on the Beta Yisrael.

Of particular importance was a documentary film made by CAEJ Board of Directors member Simcha Jacobovici. Jacobovici was born in Rumania, educated in Israel and later migrated to Canada, where he completed his doctoral studies in International Relations at the University of Toronto. A leader in the North American Jewish student movement who was deeply touched by the plight of the Beta Yisrael, Jacobovici wrote numerous articles and editorials for the Globe and Mail and the New York Times concerning Ethiopian Jewry. In his documentary, he filmed and interviewed Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia, the Sudan, and Israel, as well as various players in the rescue movement on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. During 1983, the film, entitled

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid

<sup>165</sup> "CJC Committee [on Ethiopian Jews]," Ethiopian Jewry Report, published by the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Spring, 1982, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 4.



Falasha: Exile of the Black Jews, was shown on television in Canada and the U.S., and appeared in commercial theaters across the continent.<sup>166</sup>

The film was highly critical of the lack of efforts and indifference of Israel and world Jewish leadership. According to Graenum Berger, "Officials in Jewish organizations and Israel considered it anathema, tried to keep it from being shown anywhere, and boycotted it before audiences over which they had control."<sup>167</sup> However, Berger also notes that despite the efforts to prevent its showing, the film received considerable and favorable coverage in the press. Critics in the Toronto Star, Variety and the Los Angeles Times described it as "passionate," "heart rending," "remarkable," "moving," "searing," and "incisive."<sup>168</sup>

Others, such as Louis Rapoport and Tudor Parfitt, viewed the film in a negative light. Parfitt states that Jacobovici was "one of the most outspoken of the American-based activists."<sup>169</sup> Parfitt further notes that Jacobovici claimed "that the only impediment to Falasha emigration was Israeli 'racism.'"<sup>170</sup> A Sudanese minister was interviewed in the film and stressed that, as far as he was aware, there were no difficulties preventing the Beta Yisrael from leaving the Sudan; the only problem was Israel's reluctance to take them.<sup>171</sup> The hostile atmosphere generated by the publicity surrounding the film goaded the Israeli authorities into a reaction. "One spokesman said:

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<sup>166</sup> Compiled from various sources including CAEJ's Ethiopian Jewry Reports, Graenum by Graenum Berger, Operation Moses, by Tudor Parfitt and Redemption Song, by Louis Rapoport.

<sup>167</sup> Graenum, p. 728.

<sup>168</sup> Graenum, p. 728; and "Falasha film premiers in Toronto," Ethiopian Jewry Report, published by the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Winter, 1984, Vol. 3, no. 1, p. 2.

<sup>169</sup> Operation Moses, p. 58.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid

<sup>171</sup> Ibid



"Thousands are on the way -- the process is on. But it gets blocked up by these self-righteous people who don't care if a thousand are lost, just as long as they can say that they saved a hundred people while Israel did nothing."<sup>172</sup>

Rapoport also cites the same interview clip with the Sudanese official as being highly damaging to Israel and world Jewish leadership. He claims: "This created a completely false impression of the reality in Sudan but gave credence to claims by American and Canadian activists that Israel and world Jewry were simply letting the Falashas die when they could have gotten them out."<sup>173</sup> Rapoport also questions Jacobovici's credibility. Rapoport tags him as an extremist, and cites Jacobovici's writings and sensationalism in the secular press as cause for scrutiny of his works. He notes that "questions arose about Jacobovici's credibility because of the fantastic conspiracy charges he made in... [an] article against some Israeli officials, who in fact had nothing to do with rescue policy."<sup>174</sup>

Of Simcha Jacobovici's articles, probably the most controversial is his September, 1984, opinion/editorial in the New York Times, entitled "Ethiopian Jews Die, Israel Fiddles."<sup>175</sup> The editorial commences: "At least 1,300 black Ethiopian Jews, mostly children, have died in the past five months in refugee camps outside Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa. In Israel, the Action Committee for Ethiopian Jews, representing about 7,000 of them living there, charges that the Government and world Jewish community could have saved them. They are right. The inertia is a scandal."<sup>176</sup> Jacobovici continues to indict the

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid

<sup>173</sup> Redemption Song, p. 139.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, p. 112.

<sup>175</sup> "Ethiopian Jews Die, Israel Fiddles," editorial in the New York Times, Saturday, September 15, 1984.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid

Israeli government for its indifference and lack of activity, citing that the political climate has been ripe for a rapprochement with Ethiopia. He blames the religious establishment in Israel for causing delays by insisting on "ritual recircumcision," and blames all major Jewish organizations, including the World Jewish Congress and Joint Distribution Committee, for causing the death of the Ethiopian refugees in the Sudan by "choos[ing] not to provide any financial, medical or food aid."<sup>177</sup> The editorial concludes with the following:

Throughout the world, mainstream Jewish apathy may be attributable to an unwillingness to go against Israeli policy and to lingering doubts about the Jewishness of the Ethiopians. But that is beside the point. What is needed, without further delay, along with medical and food relief is a mass rescue airlift from the camps and from Ethiopia. This will occur only if it is demanded in Israel and abroad. Jewish leaders must be held accountable for their inaction.<sup>178</sup>

On November 15, 1984, six days before Operation Moses commenced, the opening session of three thousand members of the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Toronto<sup>179</sup> was broken up by a group of Beta Yisrael activists led by Simcha Jacobovici.<sup>180</sup> "Jacobovici, holding an Ethiopian child in his arms, reiterated his view that Israel could have saved the two thousand Jews who had died in the camps that summer. His group carried signs saying 'Action Now' and 'More Can Be Done.'"<sup>181</sup> Rapoport relates that "[a] Jewish State Department official who was intimately involved in Operation Moses and who was at the meeting tried to persuade Jacobovici

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid

<sup>178</sup> Ibid

<sup>179</sup> "The General Assembly of Jewish Federations," Ethiopian Jewry Report, published by the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Nov./Dec. 1984, Jan. 1985, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 7.

<sup>180</sup> Redemption Song, pp. 139-40.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, p. 140.

that something important was in the works and that he should leave, but it was to no avail. The plenary session was called off when it became impossible to appease the demonstrators."<sup>182</sup> At a subsequent session of the Toronto assembly, the head of the Jewish Agency, Aryeh Dulzin, who found himself under attack for not doing enough at a time when he knew the airlift was about to be launched, felt that he had to at least allude to the secret. In a speech to the assembled Canadian and American Jewish leaders, he "revealed that a secret operation was about to be launched."<sup>183</sup> Dulzin said, ironically, "that any publicity would be ruinous and swore everyone to secrecy."<sup>184</sup>

In 1983, CAEJ rescued twelve people from East Africa to Israel, and in 1984, nearly forty were brought to the Jewish State by the Canadian organization. CAEJ raised most of its funds with the AAEJ program of raising \$3000 to save a life. After Operation Moses and Joshua, CAEJ continued its rescue programs, generally through legal exit means. Advocacy campaigns continued, directed at the Canadian government. Additionally, the organization arranged for relief efforts with medical missions, food and clothing supplies, and religious items to be brought into Ethiopia. A B'nai Mitzvah twinning program was also launched.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid

<sup>183</sup> Ibid

<sup>184</sup> Ibid

<sup>185</sup> Compiled from various CAEJ Ethiopian Jewry Reports.

BARBARA RIBAKOVE GORDON AND THE NORTH AMERICAN  
CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY (NACOEJ)

In October, 1981, Barbara Ribakove Gordon, medical writer and senior editor of Health Magazine, and eleven other American Jews<sup>186</sup> ventured to Ethiopia on a fact finding mission, sponsored by the Jewish Federation Council of Los Angeles.<sup>187</sup> Gordon lacked any knowledge of the organizational politics plaguing the Ethiopian Jewry issue; nor did she have a specific function on the trip like other members in her group.<sup>188</sup> She chose to go to Ethiopia out of a sense of adventure, a concern for endangered Jewish communities, and because her previously scheduled trip to Israel was cancelled.<sup>189</sup> The group traveled to Addis Ababa, Gondar City and the Jewish village of Shewada:

At first, the villagers did not believe we were Jews, and they did not let us into the village which had a barricade around it. Then Bret... who spoke Amharic convinced them that we were [Jewish]... and they let us into the village and they took us into their synagogue which was a stone hut... they went to the home of the kess and brought the Torah to the synagogue... We asked what parasha they were reading, and they were reading parashat Noach that week, and we were reading parashat Noach that week. It was an extraordinary moment, even for those who never set foot in a synagogue. It was a remarkable moment, and all of the barriers fell away. There we were at this little village at

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<sup>186</sup> These included Peachy Levy, Dick Geisberg, and Middie Geisberg, all of whom have been very active on the West Coast with NACOEJ activities; AAEJ activists Rabbi Steven Kaplan and Henry Rosenberg; Steve Bowman, director of CAEJ; and Berry Weiss of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation who subsequently took an active role in Ethiopian Jewry and became a head of NJCRAC's committee on Ethiopian Jews; and Bret Goldberg, a PHD candidate in Semitic languages.

<sup>187</sup> "First North American Group in 5 Years Visits Ethiopia," Ethiopian Jewry Report, published by the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ), Toronto, Canada, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring, 1982, p. 1.

<sup>188</sup> Like Henry Rosenberg, who traveled to Djibouti and the Sudan to investigate rescue routes. For more details, see the section "Henry's Boys" earlier in this chapter.

<sup>189</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon, Executive Director of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) and former Senior Editor of Health Magazine, June 17, 1992, at the NACOEJ office in New York, NY.

the back of beyond... we were in this other end of the world in a synagogue that did not look like a synagogue, with a Torah that didn't look anything like a Torah, with Jews who didn't look like any Jews we had seen before, and here we were reading the same parasha. That was a powerful moment... The sanctity of time transcended the sanctity of place... It was a life changing experience.<sup>190</sup>

The group went on to Israel from Ethiopia and met with "all of the key players" except Menachem Begin:

There were those who did not put one moment of faith in what the Israelis were saying, and there were those of us who did. My feeling at the end of the trip to Israel is [was] that the Israelis had made a serious commitment to the rescue of Ethiopian Jews; and that their 'sha-shtil' attitude which they held very strongly was not, as the AAEJ felt, a cover-up for total inaction or actual prevention of the arrival of Ethiopian Jews, but was a possibly exaggerated but legitimate belief that any kind of talk would endanger what rescue they were doing.<sup>191</sup>

When asked what made her trust the Israeli officials and believe the sincerity of their statements, Gordon responded:

They talked to us about the situation in the Sudan in which they were already bringing Ethiopians [from the Sudan to Israel]... Ethiopia was an extremely hard nut to crack. The Jews in Ethiopia were very largely powerless against any serious action that could be taken against them. As time went on, I came to realize how good they were at manipulating the scene and surviving. But, they were helpless against any kind of formal attack, and helpless in the hands of the local authorities. I had been quite convinced that Sudan was a very dangerous place, and was the only exit route we knew of at the time; and that the Israelis were making an effort to bring out those who were in the Sudan — but that it was very difficult, very risky and that you couldn't hold their feet to the fire and expect them to do it faster, if the Mosad felt that things were too shaky. And I believed in the

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid

<sup>191</sup> Ibid

sincerity of some of the people that we met, many of whom I got to know better over the course of years.<sup>192</sup>

Upon her return from Ethiopia and Israel, Barbara Ribakove Gordon began to talk to various groups, mostly Jewish woman's organizations like AMIT, EMUNAH, NAAMAT and Hadassah, about her experiences and the plight of Ethiopian Jews. She was surprised that people kept trying to give her money after the talks. "This was my first experience of organized Jewish life... I had no idea that the response of committed Jews when they heard about a problem affecting Jews was to get out their checkbooks."<sup>193</sup> Gordon did not want the money, since she did not know what to do with it; she could not send or take it into an Ethiopian Jewish village, a request made by many of the donors. Gradually, several friends including Cyrus Abby, a Jewish professional in New York, Danny Mars, the founder of Lincoln Square Synagogue, and Fredi Seidel from the Network of Children of Holocaust Survivors began to tell Gordon that she needed to form an organization.

And the only thing I knew about Jewish organizations was that there were too many of them; and there already was an organization, the AAEJ. However, I was by then very uncomfortable with the AAEJ. I could not cope with the idea of being involved in raising money and finding that ads were being taken out accusing Israel of racism, which was happening at that time [early 1980s]. I met with a number of people in the AAEJ speakers group. They would come and rehearse their speeches for me, and the speeches they were giving...were nothing but long diatribes against Israel. A number of women in my synagogue, when they heard I was involved with Ethiopian Jewry, commented to me that they had a speaker on the subject, and all the speaker did was rant and rave about Israel, and that if you had to choose between Israel and Ethiopian Jews, they would pick Israel, and so they were not interested in the issue. Gradually, people began to tell me there is a need for another organization which will present a different point of view and that will be designed to work in cooperation with Israel and the American Jewish establishment,

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid

<sup>193</sup> Ibid



which had been accused of being in a conspiracy with Israel to prevent Ethiopian Jews from reaching Israel.<sup>194</sup>

A high ranking and long term member of NACOEJ, who asked to remain anonymous, added the following: "Because of the AAEJ's attitude toward the establishment and toward Israel -- they were at the time the only spokespeople for this issue -- there was an extremely negative feeling in many establishment organizations, that if you came on behalf of Ethiopian Jews, you were coming with a hatchet to attack. And in addition to that, there was very much the Israeli 'sha-shtil' policy."<sup>195</sup> As a result, Gordon notes, she and NACOEJ had no difficulty getting the support of the established American Jewish community. While Gordon ran NACOEJ out of her apartment for the first few years, the organization moved into permanent quarters on the floor of the New York office of the American Jewish Committee in 1985. NACOEJ has its major centers of activity in New York and Los Angeles. NACOEJ's membership blossomed from a few thousand pre-Operation Moses in 1984 to over 45,000 by 1990, 53,000 by the Fall of 1991, and over 68,000 by the end of 1992.<sup>196</sup> NACOEJ has a slightly larger membership base than the AAEJ.

The North American Conference on Ethiopian Jews (NACOEJ) was founded during the late Winter of 1982, with Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, then of Lincoln Square Synagogue, as honorary chair of the organization. Lincoln Square Synagogue allowed NACOEJ to hold monthly open meetings in its

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid. Although NJCRAC, who supported Israel and refrained from any criticism of the Jewish State, formed an Ethiopian Jewry committee in 1979, people felt the need for another lay led, grass roots pro-Beta Yisrael group.

<sup>195</sup> Anonymous interview at the NACOEJ office in New York, June 17, 1992.

<sup>196</sup> Compiled from various issues of Lifeline, a publication of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York; "Operation Solomon Was a Beginning, Not an End," an advertisement by NACOEJ in Moment, Vol. 17, No. 6, December, 1992, pp. 20-21; and a flier from R.C. Direct, Inc., entitled "NACOEJ Chooses RC Direct For List Management & Brokerage," November 5, 1992.

facilities and use it as their mailing address. Until the organization obtained a tax exempt status, the synagogue funnelled all of NACOEJ's funds through its auspices. Gordon states:

Like every other organization that takes an unpopular cause, we attracted some fringe, difficult, unstable people. But on the whole, we attracted wonderful people, wonderful people... One of the other differences between the AAEJ and us is that our board, which was then a steering committee and met every week and ran the organization, was not made up of rich, powerful, famous, well-connected people. It was made up of ordinary people with a passion for this issue, and a willingness to work incredibly hard on it. We were entirely volunteer.<sup>197</sup>

Ruth Gruber, author of Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews, characterizes NACOEJ as "less adversarial than the AAEJ and working quietly, was able to cooperate with the Jewish Agency and the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem."<sup>198</sup> Claire Safran dubbed NACOEJ as "calmer" and "more cooperative" than CAEJ or the AAEJ.<sup>199</sup> Tudor Parfitt states that Israel favored NACOEJ because it presented a less vocal alternative to the AAEJ: "For a time Israeli officials tried to bypass the AAEJ by recognizing a less aggressive pro-Falasha group as the 'official organization in the United States representing the Ethiopian Jews.'"<sup>200</sup> Thus, NACOEJ was favored, because it "had already demonstrated a less critical and aggressive stance."<sup>201</sup> However, Parfitt adds, Israel's ploy of recognizing and supporting the work of NACOEJ "had no noticeable success."<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.

<sup>198</sup> Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews, p. 145.

<sup>199</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 49.

<sup>200</sup> Operation Moses, p. 58.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid

<sup>202</sup> Ibid

On the other hand, Graenum Berger contends that NACOEJ was created, just like the NJCRAC Committee on Ethiopian Jews, to placate Israel and serve as a tool of the American Jewish establishment to counter the AAEJ.<sup>203</sup> Barbara Ribakove Gordon flatly denies Berger's accusation: "No, we were not formed by the organized Jewish community and Israel to counter the AAEJ. Most of the organized community and Israel thought for ages that we were the AAEJ -- we had to keep explaining that we were not!"<sup>204</sup> "We created NACOEJ in my living room," continues Gordon, "and the only people involved were Danny Mars (founder of Lincoln Square Synagogue), Fredi Seidel (from the Network of Children of Holocaust Survivors), June Muller (a close friend of mine, not Jewish), and me."<sup>205</sup> "Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Lincoln Square agreed to be our Honorary Chairman, and his name opened a few establishment doors to us. We had zero money, no credentials except Rabbi Riskin's name, and no help from anyone rich, powerful or 'established'."<sup>206</sup>

Since its inception, NACOEJ has sent eighteen formal missions to Ethiopia, all with the "strong approval of the Israeli foreign Ministry and the Jewish Agency."<sup>207</sup> NACOEJ's founding charter had four goals: 1) To help the community survive in Ethiopia; 2) To help the Ethiopian Jews get to Israel; 3) To assist in absorption in Israel; 4) Cultural preservation in Israel. Gordon adds:

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<sup>203</sup> Interview with Graenum Berger.

<sup>204</sup> Letter from Barbara Ribakove Gordon to Jeffrey Kaye, dated June 25, 1992, responding to follow-up questions to the interview of June 17, 1992; including a rearticulation of Graenum Berger's statement concerning the formation of NACOEJ.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid

<sup>206</sup> Ibid

<sup>207</sup> Interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.

After a while, as rescue became not just a fantasy, but something we were actively involved in, we stopped entirely talking about it [some time in 1983]. We felt it should be secret. And we never mentioned it after that. Whereas the AAEJ talked about it a great deal, raised their funds on the basis of it we raised ours entirely on relief, and we recognized that we were giving up the sexiest fund raiser of them all. But we felt, certainly the Israelis felt, that if it was a clandestine operation, it should not be talked about. Now, the AAEJ has maintained, and possibly correctly, that their publicizing never did any harm. This may be something absolutely true, but it is something we will never know. But we made our choice, and they made theirs, and that was that.<sup>208</sup>

Although NACOEJ was involved in rescue, its thrust, unlike the AAEJ, emphasized aid and relief work in Ethiopia and Israel. NACOEJ in its various missions to Ethiopia brought food, clothing, Jewish ritual objects and medical supplies to the Beta Yisrael. In Israel, the organization has established numerous cultural preservation programs, educational and vocational projects, an adopt-a-student program, and medical, optical and dental care for olim from Ethiopia. NACOEJ has also implemented a B'nai Mitzvah twinning program and a classroom adoption/exchange between classes in the United States and Israeli schools with a large Beta Yisrael population.

In February of 1983, Gordon and June Muller made the first trip to Israel as NACOEJ representatives. The Foreign Ministry set up meetings with the Ethiopian Jewish leadership, anthropologists, Jewish Agency officials, Foreign Ministry members, as well as absorption center visitations. Gordon recounts: "They couldn't have been more gracious or more decent about it. As the guy who set up the meetings said to me after the meeting with the leadership, 'you see, I didn't invite only the people who would say that Israel is doing everything and is wonderful. I invited all the leaders including those who criticize us very harshly.' And indeed, he had."<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid

<sup>209</sup> Ibid

They also met with Ethiopian Israeli Solomon Ezra, who was then in the Israeli air force, at the President Hotel in Jerusalem. Gordon says: "He told us that it was possible to rescue people. He pulled out... documents to show that he was doing it, and that he could do it again, but that he needed funding...

Everything had been worked through a particular office, a particular person in Israel... June and I were stunned to learn that this young kid, this skinny kid was doing this, and that what he needed was simply small amounts of money."<sup>210</sup> When they returned to New York, Ezra called and told Gordon how much money he needed for rescue. Michael Sabin, in charge of rescue for NACOEJ, worked with Solomon Ezra on his small scale operations. Additionally, as a result of the February, 1983 trip to Israel, and NACOEJ's mission to Ethiopia in January of 1984, the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry set up a permanent presence in Israel.

Gordon remarks that a good deal of NACOEJ's funds in the early years were raised by speaking engagements. Although a speaker's fee was never charged, the organizations and individuals who heard Gordon and the other NACOEJ representatives "were deeply touched and gave donations."<sup>211</sup> With the famine of 1984 and the increased publicity of the refugees in the Sudanese camps and the plight of the Beta Yisrael, "money was pouring in."<sup>212</sup> With the onset of Operation Moses and then Operation Joshua, Gordon was used by the United Jewish Appeal to raise funds.<sup>213</sup> She did not mind being utilized by UJA:

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid

<sup>211</sup> Ibid

<sup>212</sup> Ibid

<sup>213</sup> More on these Operations and the dollar amounts raised by UJA will be detailed in the next chapter.

The money for the rescue had to be raised. AAEJ and NACOEJ were not going to finance it... While certainly we [NACOEJ] need money, and I feel we play an extremely important part in this entire issue and will continue to play a very important part in Israel; nonetheless, the fact of the matter is we independent organizations cannot handle all of it, and we need the activities of the major organizations as well... I don't have illusions about it. In a sense, Ethiopian Jewry gets attention when it can raise funds for the major organizations. Then it sinks back into obscurity. But, we need them [the major Jewish organizations].<sup>214</sup>

During the first half of the 1980s, NACOEJ remained firmly entrenched in the established American Jewish community. Its activities were not designed to make waves with the leading Jewish organizations. Its publicity and fund raising efforts were not intended to embarrass or push certain desired actions. At the same time, NACOEJ remained in Israel's sphere of influence and cooperated with the Jewish State whenever possible. Gordon states:

There had been a long period of time when the Israelis were very, very angry at the AAEJ [especially between 1982 and 1984, when the AAEJ was running their own rescue operations in East Africa],<sup>215</sup> and told us [NACOEJ] in no uncertain terms that if we wanted their cooperation with us, that we were to stay away from the AAEJ – don't talk to them, don't have anything to do with them... [W]e followed those orders, because we were designed to work with Israel...<sup>216</sup>

In the tug of war over how best to aid and rescue the Beta Yisrael, NACOEJ, along with NJCRAC, represent the anchors of quiet diplomacy, cooperation with American Jewish leadership, and compliance with Israeli demands, tactics and activities.

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<sup>214</sup> Interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.

<sup>215</sup> The last section in this chapter will present the AAEJ's rescue operations in the Horn of Africa during the early 1980s.

<sup>216</sup> Interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.



# JANE FELLMAN AND THE AMERICAN RABBINIC NETWORK FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWRY (ARNEJ)

In 1955, Rabbi Alfred Wolf of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles showed a slide show about Ethiopian Jews at Camp Hess Kramer in Southern California. Among the campers was an impressionable thirteen-year-old young woman. Jane Fellman did not hear about "the Falashas" again until the 1970s, but she carried with her that first exposure some twenty years earlier. Fellman became involved with advocacy on behalf of the Beta Yisrael as a result of the social action work she did with oppressed peoples during the 1960s and 1970s; as a reaction to the horrors and inactivity surrounding the Holocaust; and in response to an article on Ethiopian Jewry she read in Hadassah Magazine by Professor Howard Lenhoff.<sup>217</sup> A college and adult education teacher, Fellman had no connection with the organized Jewish community until she started the Organization for Ethiopian Jewry (OEJ) at the beginning of the decade of the 1980s. Fellman states her sentiments about the Jewish community as follows:

The organized Jewish world tends to be elitist and does not speak to things of concern to Jews like social change. I am mad that the Jewish community is mad at the world for not saving the Jews during the Holocaust. And now, the world Jewish community is not doing anything to save their own people, the black Jews of Ethiopia.<sup>218</sup>

Fellman, stimulated by the Hadassah Magazine article, wrote Professor Lenhoff, who connected her with a speaker from the Los Angeles Jewish Federation. Fellman gathered twenty-five friends at her home to hear the

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<sup>217</sup> Interview Jane Fellman, Executive Director of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ), May 4 and May 10, 1992.

<sup>218</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

presentation on Ethiopian Jewry. "I was impressed with his presentation and how he portrayed the Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia and Israel not as primitive, but advanced people."<sup>219</sup> Fellman arranged for another presentation with more people in attendance, and at that meeting, the group decided to form the OEJ. The purpose of the group was education and advocacy, not fund raising. There was no philosophical difference with the AAEJ; rather, its inception was a matter of practicality. Throughout its history, the AAEJ has not had local chapters and has not concentrated on regional organization.

According to Fellman, during the early 1980s, the Los Angeles OEJ and the AAEJ presence in Southern California were frustrated by the newly established NACOEJ group in Los Angeles and the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles. She says: "We received no funding or help and were viewed as pariah organizations." At the beginning of 1983, Fellman talked to Rabbi Larry Goldmark. She recalls: "He relayed that past Hess Kramer people would be at the CCAR<sup>220</sup> convention. We decided to have a[n Ethiopian Jewry information] table with a banner. Rabbi Allen Krause of California showed slides. It was clear that the rabbis did not know about the Ethiopian Jews."<sup>221</sup> Also in 1983, Rabbi Krause and Rabbi Steven Kaplan of Northern California conducted a petition campaign, collected ten thousand signatures, and for the first time, helped to network rabbis across the country on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Central Conference of American Rabbis (Conference of Reform Rabbis).

<sup>221</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

<sup>222</sup> Report on the Activities of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry: January 1987 - September 1991, Jane Fellman, Executive Director of ARNEJ, Pasadena, California, p. 3.

In 1983, Rabbi Daniel Zucker of Southern California, who worked independently on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, joined the OEJ. He suggested that Fellman set up an Ethiopian Jewry booth at the Rabbinical Assembly (RA) of Conservative Rabbis. The OEJ did not want to fund Fellman's trip to the RA. Thus, she called Ladena Schnapper, long time AAEJ activist and rescue coordinator, and formally established a relationship in which Fellman would represent the AAEJ at the Rabbinical Assembly. Fellman remarks: "I was becoming more and more concerned and upset at the apathy of American Jews. The rabbis were not the moral voice in World War II, and I was concerned this was happening again regarding Ethiopian Jewry."<sup>223</sup>

In January of 1984, Fellman represented the AAEJ at the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis' (PARR) conference in Palm Springs, California. She also represented the AAEJ at the next RA meeting in 1984. She discussed with Schnapper the idea of providing rabbis and congregations with the name and brief biography of a Beta Yisrael whom they would help rescue with the commitment to raise \$3000. This new technique for fund raising and publicity attracted the interest and involvement of rabbis.

In May/June of 1984, Fellman attended the CCAR national convention and met Rabbi Phil Posner of Southern California. They had numerous discussions, and Fellman told him, "Phil, we need a vehicle to organize the rabbis regarding Ethiopian Jewry."<sup>224</sup> At that CCAR convention, Fellman and Rabbi Posner created a "challah prayer" in solidarity with Ethiopian Jewry for the convention banquet. "At the banquet attended by more than 500 rabbis... Poser [and Fellman]... led a blessing over a special challah baked by Ethiopian Jews and prayed that it be a symbol of the Ethiopian Jews' swift deliverance to

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<sup>223</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid

Israel."<sup>225</sup> This marked the first time Fellman initiated a conference-wide activity, thereby increasing Ethiopian Jewry activism beyond an information booth. In June of 1984, as a reaction to the conference, Fellman and Posner decided to formalize a vehicle for the rabbinate to express its voice on the Ethiopian Jewry issue. The organization was called the Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ). The new group was designed to produce mass mailings, educate rabbis and congregations about the Beta Yisrael, and raise money for rescue. Fellman says: "[W]e were frustrated that there was no attention in the American Jewish community concerning Ethiopian Jews. The Soviet Jewry activist people told us that it took them years to capture the attention of American Jewry."<sup>226</sup> Thus, Fellman sought to saturate Jewish religious professionals and their constituents as a means of educating American Jewry to the plight of the Beta Yisrael.

Of particular interest is the fact that Fellman, a layperson, forged the creation of a network of rabbis:

Rabbis do not start organizations; they start movements. Rabbis choose the rabbinate for other reasons. They do not have the time to create an organization. They might encourage others to start an organization, and people tend to listen better to a rabbi rather than a non-rabbi when dealing with a moral issue. If you want to create attention, you need someone who already demands attention. That's why a group for rabbis needed to be started.<sup>227</sup>

Before ARNEJ hired a professional staff in 1987, the organization represented the cause of rescue at national, lay and rabbinic conferences, produced three major mailings to rabbis, and raised \$60,000 in rescue funds

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<sup>225</sup> "AAEJ Presence at Rabbinical Conferences," Release, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Highland Park, Illinois, Vol. 2, No. 2, Summer, 1984, p. 4.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid

<sup>227</sup> Ibid

with a volunteer staff. In 1987, ARNEJ opened a full time office in Pasadena, California, and hired an Executive Director and part time secretary.<sup>228</sup>

The Board of ARNEJ established five goals in its 1987 mission statement. These goals also reflect the philosophy and activities of the organization between 1984 and its professionalization in 1987. The goals were as follows:

(1) ARNEJ will provide an organizational structure through which the rabbinate of all four movements of Judaism will express the moral voice of the Jewish community on behalf of the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry; (2) Rabbis and congregations will advocate for the reunification of Ethiopian Jews with their Israeli families; (3) An international network of rabbis and activists will be developed to promote ARNEJ goals within activist' geographic and organizational communities; (4) Education about Ethiopian Jewry will be promoted within the rabbinate and congregation community of all four rabbinic and congregational movements. ARNEJ will increase the visibility of the cause of rescue within the rabbinic and congregation community; and (5) Fund raising will provide Ethiopian Jews exits to Israel.<sup>229</sup>

Over one thousand rabbis, student rabbis, and religious school educators have financially contributed to ARNEJ. Most of its membership comes from the Reform and Conservative movements. Through ARNEJ rabbinic and congregant organizing, thousands of petitions and letters have been sent to relevant political bodies on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry's rescue and relief. Rabbinic delegations have lobbied Capitol Hill, and two ARNEJ rabbinic groups have traveled to Ethiopia. More than a quarter of a million dollars has been donated for Jewish exits to Israel. ARNEJ has circulated numerous informational mailings, fund raising requests, and programs adapted for rabbis and congregants. ARNEJ also initiated and nationalized a B'nai Mitzvah twinning program in 1987, which matched an American youth with a young

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<sup>228</sup> Report on the Activities of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry: January 1987 - September 1991, p. 1.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 1-2.



Beta Yisrael counterpart of Bar/Bat Mitzvah age. This enabled the American youth to publicly affirm the Ethiopian youths' status as B'nai Mitzvah because the Ethiopian youth was unable to make such an affirmation in Ethiopia or the Sudan.<sup>230</sup>

William Recant, Executive Director of the AAEJ since 1986, has a different assessment of the origins and effectiveness of ARNEJ:

I have a lot of difficulties with ARNEJ. ARNEJ came directly from the AAEJ. ARNEJ was formed because the AAEJ was viewed as a pariah organization, and we thought it would be easier if there was a rabbinic organization for rabbis to go to their colleagues and talk about the issue. ARNEJ was formed by the AAEJ... We gave them the money to start the organization; and rabbis that sat on our board became the board of ARNEJ and the president of ARNEJ; and Jane, who was on our board became the director of ARNEJ, because she had been the one who had been representing AAEJ at rabbinic conferences on a volunteer basis before that. So it became more formalized. What happened was that we would send Jane to the RA or the CCAR as an AAEJ representative. For years, she would go, and we would pay for her expenses and pay for the booth and everything else. Then, in 1986,<sup>231</sup> we decided that it would be better to make that [the activities of Fellman at the various rabbinic conferences and with congregations] a separate arm... attached to the AAEJ; so that if a rabbi had a problem with the AAEJ, they would still give to ARNEJ. The reason being, rescue was everything at that time. Saving Jewish lives was everything. We thought it would maximize the effort if there was a specific rabbinic group dealing with it. It [ARNEJ] was not a subsidiary because it [ARNEJ] would be seen as a subsidiary of AAEJ.<sup>232</sup>

Recant claims, that "[e]ven with ARNEJ in existence, the AAEJ raised more money in congregations than ARNEJ ever did."<sup>233</sup> "[T]he feeling was that we had created them [ARNEJ] so that we could raise more money for rescue -- that's the reason that they came into existence -- for rabbis to talk to other

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid, pp. 2-6.

<sup>231</sup> ARNEJ was formed in the Summer of 1984 and it was incorporated in January of 1987.

<sup>232</sup> Personal interview with William Recant, Executive Director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, May 19, 1992, in the Washington D.C. National Headquarters of the AAEJ.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid



rabbis."<sup>234</sup> Recant adds that "ARNEJ was not administered properly, was not run properly, and therefore was not as effective as it should have been in raising funds for rescue."<sup>235</sup>

Fellman responds to Recant's accusation about ARNEJ's effectiveness by citing the plethora of Beta Yisrael support organizations which were operating during the 1980s: "There has been organizational confusion caused by the number of Ethiopian Jewish groups. AAEJ and NACOEJ mailed directly to Jews who were congregants of the synagogues and rabbis to which ARNEJ did their mailings. AAEJ and NACOEJ have a relatively small donor base of around 45,000 members each, and ARNEJ's base was relatively non-existent."<sup>236</sup> Fellman also asserts that ARNEJ's "work generated a lot of money for the other organizations. We didn't build in extensive fund raising procedures, because in social action, you want to actualize your goal and move on without institutional constraints."<sup>237</sup>

Fellman, in assessing the role of ARNEJ in relationship to the other Pro-Beta Yisrael organizations, emphasized ARNEJ's push toward education with rabbis and their congregations, advocacy on Capitol Hill, and rescue of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel. These goals dovetailed with the AAEJ -- whether or not ARNEJ was a creation of the AAEJ -- or inspired and supported by the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, but created by Fellman and Rabbi Posner. Many ARNEJ members were involved with the activities of the AAEJ, and a number of AAEJ supporters helped ARNEJ endeavors. However, the connection between ARNEJ and NACOEJ was much less tangible.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid

<sup>235</sup> Ibid

<sup>236</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid

These interactions between the various Pro-Beta Yisrael groups and the activities of each individual organization form an important backdrop to the events concerning the Beta Yisrael during first half of the 1980s. Moreover, these groups, in part, helped push and create the climate for the massive exodus of the Ethiopian Jews from the Sudan known as Operation Moses. It is to these dramatic events we turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN:  
EXODUS, REFUGEE CAMPS AND RESCUE:  
OPERATIONS MOSES AND JOSHUA

Many facets of Operation Moses parallel the character of the biblical exodus of the Hebrews from Egypt nearly thirty three hundred years ago: a wandering through the desert; a massive transfer of a population; and a miraculous intervention. The drama of Operation Moses is unprecedented amongst the numerous rescue operations by the Jewish State, perhaps surpassed only by the thirty-six-hour "Operation Solomon" seven years later.<sup>1</sup> Numerous books have been written on the eventful final months of 1984 and early 1985.<sup>2</sup> In a matter of weeks, Israel airlifted a significant segment of the Beta Yisrael community from the Sudanese desert to the Jewish Homeland. The majority of world Jewry became aware of this ancient community for the first time, as millions of dollars was raised to finance the secret rescue operations and subsequent absorption process in Israel.

Operation Moses could only have happened because thousands of the Beta Yisrael traveled from the mountains of Ethiopia to the desert refugee camps of the Sudan. The horrific famine in the Horn of Africa in 1984 heightened this massive flight. Yet, while climatic conditions hastened the

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<sup>1</sup> Operation Solomon will be discussed in Chapter nine.

<sup>2</sup> Many of these books, such as Secret Exodus, The Return, Treacherous Journey: My Escape from Ethiopia, and Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews, take the form of a narrative, following through the story of one individual, family or group of Beta Yisrael as they fled from Ethiopia to the Sudan, languished in the refugee camps, and eventually were rescued by Israel to the Jewish state. Other works on Operation Moses and Joshua, such as Operation Moses: The Story of the Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia and Redemption Song, take an historical and analytical approach to the rescue operations. Additionally, a number of children's books on the rescue and absorption of the Beta Yisrael have been produced, including My Name is Rachamim and Falasha No More: An Ethiopian Jewish Child Comes Home.

creation of an artificial Jewish community of some eight to ten thousand Ethiopian Jews by the middle of 1984, the ultimate impetus and goal of the exodus was the dream of Jerusalem. Additionally, the massive movement was spurred not only by the spreading of messages in the Beta Yisrael villages by travelers,<sup>3</sup> Mosad agents, and Ethiopian Israelis that Ethiopian Jews were being rescued to Israel via the Sudan, but also by the expropriation of Beta Yisrael land and the fear of conscription into the various government and rebel armies. By the Fall of 1984, world media and political attention focused on the region. The American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ) and the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ) continued their attacks on Israel and world Jewish leadership. The small scale rescue operations conducted by Israel the previous four years<sup>4</sup> would not be expedient or sufficient to save the gathered thousands. A much larger and more comprehensive operation was needed.

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<sup>3</sup> Glenn Stein was one such traveler who spread the message throughout seven Beta Yisrael villages in January and February of 1984. See chapter six, section on "Activities on Behalf of the Beta Yisrael by the Religious Movements."

<sup>4</sup> These rescue operations are discussed in chapter five.

## THE BETA YISRAEL EXODUS TO THE SUDAN

'Did you not come because of the famine?' I [author Tudor Parfitt] asked. He [a Beta Yisrael] smiled: 'In my life I have seen much famine. Some years there is food [in Ethiopia], some years there is none. Also there is no food here [in the Sudanese camps],' he gestured at the camp around us. 'No, we came here because the time has come for us to join our people in Israel.'<sup>5</sup>

More often than not, the Beta Yisrael journeyed to the Sudanese refugee camps because of a desire to reach Israel. "Asress," a twenty-six year-old Ethiopian male living in Israel, who was eighteen at the time of his exodus to the Sudan in May of 1984, relays a characteristic story of why the Beta Yisrael left Ethiopia for the Sudan and how the journey unfolded:

In 1984, I stopped my studies and told my family that we should try to reach Eretz Yisrael. They agreed that the time had come for Ethiopian Jews to try to leave for Israel in order to fulfill the Biblical dream of returning to Zion and Jerusalem. After the group from our village set out, the [Ethiopian] government officials forcibly returned all of the villagers and jailed many of our people. I managed to escape with five others to the mountainside. Our group of eighteen to twenty-eight-year-olds met up with other young Jewish men and women along the way who were fleeing their villages in the hopes of reaching Israel. Although we encountered many problems along the way, like lack of food and water, shiftas [bandits], and wild animals, we had strength in our numbers. With the help of a guide we hired and because we were young and strong, we reached the Sudanese border by foot in less than two weeks. Although there were no Ethiopian soldiers at the border, we had to contend with Sudanese guards patrolling the area.

Once we reached the check point, the Sudanese soldiers asked us, 'Who are you and where do you come from?' Knowing how the Sudanese feel about Ethiopia, we responded, 'We think the Ethiopian government is no good, and we are therefore fleeing the oppressive rule in order to come to the benevolent country of Sudan.' They checked us at the border for two days, and once they saw we were harmless and had no weapons, they let us pass through. Then trucks came and took us to the refugee camp... They placed the Jews in a separate area of the camp. For the first week or two, we were treated

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<sup>5</sup> Tudor Parfitt, *Operation Moses: The Story of the Exodus of the Falasha Jews from Ethiopia* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), p. 64.

well and had enough food and drink. However, more and more refugees from Ethiopia streamed into the Sudan -- Jewish, Christian and Muslim -- and conditions and relations deteriorated rapidly in the refugee camp. During the six months I stayed at the camp, I saw hundreds and hundreds of people die. The Jews were placed in the most squalid location of the camp, received the least amount of food and medical attention, and were subjected to wanton and vicious attacks by the other refugees. After six months, I was rescued from the disease-infested, starvation-plagued, sweltering refugee camp to Israel. I arrived in peace to our Promised Land, just like my grandfather told us every Shabbat in Ethiopia, like Moses and the children of Israel in their exodus from Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

For Asress, Zionism was the sole motivating factor for his journey to the Sudan. For other Beta Yisrael, Zionism remained the chief impetus for their exodus to the Sudan; however, the timing of their departure from Abyssinia resulted from a combination of factors. Although the famine did not hit Gondar as hard as some other areas of Ethiopia, beginning in 1982, the drought became a serious factor in the province. The pastures were all but lost, thousands of head of cattle died and the crops began to fail.<sup>7</sup> Millions of people in Ethiopia faced death by starvation because of drought which caused food shortages and an economy shattered by civil war. According to then United Nations Secretary General Javier Perez de Cueller and the World Food Council, by the beginning of 1984 ten million children were starving in East Africa. They estimated: "Half of them will die this year and the remaining five million will be crippled for life due to malnutrition and hunger."<sup>8</sup> Because of their "inferior status" in Ethiopian society and the "far-flung rural location of their

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<sup>6</sup> Interview and discussions with "Asress," Spring of 1989, Jerusalem, Israel (translated from Hebrew to English by Jeffrey Kaye); as reproduced in Voices of Olim, a paper by Jeffrey Kaye and Andrea Weiss for the HUC-JIR Jerusalem class entitled, "The Land and People of Israel," Paul Liptz, instructor, April 12, 1989, pp. 5-7.

<sup>7</sup> Operation Moses, p. 67.

<sup>8</sup> "150 Million Face Famine in Africa in 1984," Ethiopian Jewry Report, a publication of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Winter, 1984, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 1.



villages," the Beta Yisrael are especially vulnerable to the food shortages. "Sometimes people [Beta Yisrael] have to walk for three days to get to a food distribution center."<sup>9</sup>

Explaining why he left Gondar Province, one Beta Yisrael remarked: "I wanted to go to Jerusalem and, in addition, my crops had failed."<sup>10</sup> Another commented: "The drought came to the mountains and there was no rain. For a whole year there was no rain. Our lands were no good to us."<sup>11</sup> According to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC), by the autumn of 1984, nearly half a million people in Gondar faced starvation as a result of the drought.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Beta Yisrael in the remote Semien villages on the border with Tigrey suffered more from the drought than those closer to Gondar.<sup>13</sup>

Another factor prompting the Ethiopian Jewish exodus to the Sudan was the encroachment by neighboring gentiles on Beta Yisrael land. Often, peasants from the north, who themselves were fleeing the drought, expropriated Beta Yisrael land. "The Falashas were unable to protect themselves and by now the local authorities were in no mood to do anything for them. Their houses and synagogues were burned down or taken over, their cattle and other animals were stolen, their lands expropriated; they were left with no choice but to join the other members of the villages who had made the long trek."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. See also "Drought Conditions in Ethiopia Remain Critical," Release, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Highland Park, Illinois, Summer, 1984, Vol. 2., No. 2, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> Operation Moses, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 67-68.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

The threat of conscription provided an additional incentive for Ethiopian Jews to leave their villages. The deteriorating military situation in the north and the heavy losses experienced by government forces led the Dergue (the ruling Marxist inner circle of the Ethiopian government) to extend conscription even to the most remote villages. Additionally, the various rebel armies operating in Ethiopia, including the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the Ethiopian Democratic Union (EUD), the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF),<sup>15</sup> forcibly conscripted Beta Yisrael youth as young as thirteen and fourteen. A British aid worker in Tigrey Province stated: "Their [Beta Yisrael] desire to go to Israel was genuine enough. But [they also] had a great fear of conscription and the drought looters."<sup>16</sup> In 1984, a Beta Yisrael in a Sudanese refugee camp remarked that conscription was "the government's latest way of solving the Falasha problem."<sup>17</sup>

In response to the drought, the fear of looters and the military draft, the exodus began to take on its own momentum. Many of the younger and stronger members of the villages had already left Gondar and Tigrey and had been successful in getting to the Sudan or even to Israel. As the exodus progressed, the Beta Yisrael emissaries working for the Mosad,<sup>18</sup> Ethiopian Israelis who managed on their own to infiltrate back into their birthland,<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Politics in the Horn of Africa," Ethiopian Jewry Report, a publication of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Spring 1982, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Operation Moses, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp. 66 and 70.

<sup>19</sup> One such individual was Solomon Ezra, a Beta Yisrael and Ethiopian Israeli who worked with NACOEJ for a number of years. In addition to rescuing a number of his people, Ezra undertook his own missions in Ethiopia in the Beta Yisrael villages to spread the word of rescue routes through the Sudan. For more on Ezra, see chapter six, section on "Barbara Ribakove Gordon and the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry."

non-Ethiopian travelers to the region,<sup>20</sup> and letters written by Ethiopian Israelis to their family members in Ethiopia, urging them to undertake the journey to the Sudan, brought back news of the successful journeys across the mountains to the remaining Jewish villagers.

It is important to note, once again, that throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, for virtually all of the Beta Yisrael who journeyed to the Sudan, the underlying cause for exodus to the desert region was a desire to somehow reach Zion. The other factors — drought, expropriation of land and fear of conscription -- served as a catalyst for the exodus and hastened the Beta Yisrael's own actions to actualize their dream of aliyah:

Why did the Falashas leave? The famine, the wars and the years of oppression all played their part. But perhaps the most important factor was the sense that their community had come to the end of the road and that their existence and ultimate 'redemption,' political and religious, could only be assured by going as a community to the promised land. As more and more Falashas were successful in getting to Israel over the years, those that were left behind were spurred on to follow them.<sup>21</sup>

Many of the Beta Yisrael groups were led through Ethiopia to the Sudanese border by Ethiopian Israeli Mosad agents.<sup>22</sup> Occasionally, a Christian guide would be utilized to take them across the mountain passes for a payment of \$100, an amount which nearly matched the average Ethiopian per capita income of \$120.<sup>23</sup> These guides would lead the group of Beta Yisrael to the Sudanese border. However, not all of the guides were reliable. A number of Ethiopian Jews "had been deserted by their guides once they had received

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<sup>20</sup> Two of these individuals were Glenn Stein and Rusty Frank. See chapter six, section on "Activities on Behalf of the Beta Yisrael by the Religious Movements."

<sup>21</sup> Operation Moses, p. 70.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 69-72.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74.

their payment. Other guides 'sold' their charges to shiftas or Ethiopian army units."<sup>24</sup>

The Beta Yisrael encountered numerous difficulties in their exodus from Ethiopia to the Sudan. Some traveled for weeks; others trekked for months. They crossed hundreds of miles of mountainous terrain and arid desert landscape. The Ethiopian Jews ventured through areas of rebel activity and occasionally virtual war zones. The groups traveled at night to avoid army and rebel units and gangs of shiftas, yet were often robbed of their money, imprisoned, raped and conscripted into the various military units. The Beta Yisrael confronted numerous diseases and lacked sufficient food and water. Natural predators further complicated the exit routes. And the non-Jewish guides often robbed the refugees of their meager possessions. "Like the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, the migration of the Falashas from Ethiopia is a mixture of tragedy and heroism which should stand as a monument to their determination to create a new future in the Land of Israel."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 75.

# THOUSANDS OF ETHIOPIAN JEWS LANGUISH IN THE SUDANESE REFUGEE CAMPS

The refugee camp called "Umm Rekuba," "Mother of Shelter" in Arabic, lies about forty miles from the Ethiopian border. The camp was established in the mid-1970s for two thousand Ethiopian refugees, but by mid-1984, about twenty thousand were living either in tukels (grass huts indigenous to the East African region) or tents. "The camp, with a few pan-roofed shops, a clinic, a school, and a church, was de facto divided into two, between Christian and Jewish Ethiopians."<sup>26</sup> Umm Rekuba was administered by the Sudan Commission for Refugees and the country's Council of Churches, in conjunction with the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR was entirely responsible for administering the distribution of food supplies with the help of two Swedish evangelical missionaries. Umm Rekuba was the main habitation of Ethiopian Jewish refugees, who were also housed in Tuwawa and smaller camps in the Gedaref area.<sup>27</sup>

When the Ethiopian Jews arrived at the Sudanese refugee camps after journeying for periods ranging from two weeks to over three months, they were dehydrated, weak from hunger and terrified. The drastic change in climate from the highlands to the desert region had weakened them further. Sadly, "the facilities at Umm Rekuba were thoroughly inadequate, and two thousand Jews would die there."<sup>28</sup>

One official who worked in Umm Rekuba remarked:

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<sup>26</sup> Louis Rapoport, Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), pp. 106-07.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*

The Falashas arrived in a rather bad state. They were generally worse off than the other refugees and, according to the accounts they gave, rather more than ten per cent of them died on the way. Usually it was the older women and children who died on the journey. Some died of malaria, some were bitten by snakes, some were shot by government forces or attacked by other refugees. Some of the women had been raped by shiftas or government troops. Often they had run out of food. However, unlike the other refugees, most of them turned up with yellow plastic water containers which in some cases still had water in them. The clothing of the Falashas was usually in a worse condition than that of the other refugees and the children had very little clothing at all. They all arrived carrying long sticks which they had used to stop themselves [from] stumbling on the mountain tracks. They had only walked at night because they were afraid of being attacked by the Ethiopian air force.<sup>29</sup>

By November of 1984, shortly before the beginning of Operation Moses, nine thousand Beta Yisrael lived in Umm Rekuba.<sup>30</sup> Around twelve thousand Beta Yisrael resided in the camp during the summer of 1984. However, many succumbed to disease, starvation and dehydration. Camp figures state that the Beta Yisrael arrived at Umm Rekuba at the following rates: 1,113 in March; 2,523 in April; 2,125 in May; 1,627 in June; 2,500 in July; and 2,012 in August.<sup>31</sup> They usually arrived in groups of around fifty a day, although during May, 1,000 arrived in just two days.<sup>32</sup>

During the Spring and early Summer of 1984, the Ethiopian Jews were the only refugees to arrive in this part of the Sudan in any numbers, although a substantial Christian refugee population from the 1970s still lived in the camps. The Beta Yisrael began arriving some six months before the greater flow of refugees from famine-struck Tigrey and Eritrea.<sup>33</sup> By August, the

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<sup>29</sup> *Operation Moses*, p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.



Christian and Moslem refugees far outnumbered the Beta Yisrael, which created additional problems for the Ethiopian Jews. Traditional hatred and persecution of the Jews did not stop at the Ethiopian-Sudanese border. Jews in the camps were subject to wanton acts of discrimination, accusations of being "budda (Amharic word for 'evil eye')," physical acts of violence, and charges of being "Christ killers" as well as "Jews who caused the African famine and the pestilence."<sup>34</sup>

Additionally, the Beta Yisrael's own dietary regulations contributed to their plight in Umm Rekuba and the other refugee camps. Throughout 1984, the only cooking oil which was available in the camps was Norwegian whale fat, which the Ethiopian Jews would not use because it is not kosher. "The Falashas refused to compromise their religious laws even when they were starving. They were suspicious of all foods with which they were unfamiliar, perhaps because they were not sure if they were 'permitted' or not."<sup>35</sup> Their will to comply with the laws of kashrut was stronger than their fear of starvation.

For the Beta Yisrael, Umm Rekuba hardly proved to be much of a refuge. "The physical condition of most of the newcomers actually deteriorated while they were in the camp."<sup>36</sup> Many of them died. Until November of 1984, the Western world failed to focus its attention on the decade-long drought in East Africa. "Relief agencies tried desperately for more than two years to awaken the world to the severe food shortages that drought, civil war, and difficult

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<sup>34</sup> Redemption Song, p. 109; and Operation Moses, pp. 81-82.

<sup>35</sup> Operation Moses, p. 83.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.

transport were causing."<sup>37</sup> Finally, in November of 1984, the world responded with an emergency airlift of food. However, for many, the effort was too late. A report from the office of the U.N. Disaster Relief stated: "Despite a massive relief effort by national governments and the international community, there is no end in sight for the silent suffering of what is undeniably the worst human disaster in the recent history of Africa."<sup>38</sup>

A young Beta Yisrael girl in the Umm Rekuba camp wrote:

I thank G-d for being alive so far. Because of this place every day people are dying. That is why I never feel I will leave Sudan alive. Up to now 800 people have died from 10,000 Beta Israel refugees. We are suffering from hunger, thirst, disease. It will be a miracle if I survive.<sup>39</sup>

Robin Townsend, a British Project Trust volunteer who was working with the Beta Yisrael in the Reception Center of Umm Rekuba from March to August of 1984, states that the Ethiopian Jews were dying at an average of eight every day, and on one day in June, over fifty died.<sup>40</sup> He estimates that by the end of August, about fourteen hundred Beta Yisrael had perished. Tudor Parfitt remarks that on a visit to the camp in November of 1984, he counted one thousand six hundred crudely built stone cairns, "which served as the final resting-place for the Falasha dead."<sup>41</sup> A New York Times article noted that a makeshift Beta Yisrael graveyard was built on a hillside on the outskirts of Umm Rekuba: "Hundreds of stones piled on top of mounds of earth, covered

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<sup>37</sup> "Famine Finally Draws World Attention," Ethiopian Jewry Report, a publication of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Nov./Dec. 1984, Jan. 1985, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> "Excerpts of Letters from Ethiopian Jews in Refugee Camps in Sudan (translated from Amharic)," Ethiopian Jewry Report, a publication of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Nov./Dec. 1984, Jan. 1985, Vol. 4, No. 4, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> Operation Moses, p. 77.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp. 77-78.

by a few twigs, marked the spots where Ethiopian Jews were buried."<sup>42</sup> A refugee worker remarked that the Beta Yisrael were often too weak to carry the bodies up the small hill, "[s]o five or six of them would get together to carry one corpse and build the tiny monuments."<sup>43</sup>

According to the camp records, in July alone, four hundred and eighty-one Beta Yisrael died, and in August, three hundred and ninety-seven perished.<sup>44</sup> In all, Umm Rekuba officials state that one thousand nine hundred and thirty nine Ethiopian Jews died between April and November 1984, and that one thousand two hundred and two of these Beta Yisrael were under fifteen.<sup>45</sup> The New York Times provides additional confirmation of the high Beta Yisrael death toll: "At least 2,000 Ethiopian Jews have died in refugee camps in the eastern Sudan since their exodus from Ethiopia began last spring, according to Sudanese officials and relief workers."<sup>46</sup> Moreover, when Congressman Gary Ackerman of New York made his first relief and investigation mission to Ethiopia in November of 1984, he and his aide David Feltman received word from the Beta Yisrael that four thousand Ethiopian Jews had died on the march to the Sudan and in the refugee camps (two thousand died on the way, and two thousand died in the camps).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "2,000 Jews Die in Sudan Camps," New York Times, Sunday, January 20, 1985.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Operation Moses, p. 78.

<sup>45</sup> Claire Safran, Secret Exodus (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), p. 120; and Operation Moses, p. 78.

<sup>46</sup> "2,000 Jews Die in Sudan."

<sup>47</sup> Personal interview with Congressman Gary Ackerman, Democrat from New York, May 20, 1992. Also, Operation Moses, p. 78. More on the activism of Congressman Ackerman and other congressional officials on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry will be discussed in chapter eight.

## THE AMERICAN CONNECTION

By the middle of 1984, the increasing numbers of Beta Yisrael in the Sudanese desert and the rising death toll of Ethiopian Jews in the refugee camps created a grave problem for Israel and the Sudan. The Israeli government was committed to bringing the Beta Yisrael to Israel. Numerous small scale operations had rescued some six thousand during the previous four years. But the Ethiopian Jews were dying in the refugee camps faster than they could be brought out. A discreet and gradual operation was no longer enough.

The Sudanese realized that the large influx of Beta Yisrael changed the scope of the Israeli operations and posed a risk of further attention being focused on their presence in the Sudan and their passage to Israel. The Numeiri regime controlling the Sudan replaced the Sudanese officials who were in charge of the camps, and deported the Canadian Physicians for African Refugees, who were showing "too keen an interest" in the Beta Yisrael.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, the Sudanese tried to stem the flood of Ethiopian Jews crossing the border. The army was given the task of sealing the frontier area.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Numeiri refused to allow the Israelis to undertake any large-scale action to rescue the Beta Yisrael from the camps. "The political risks, it was argued, were simply too great."<sup>50</sup> At this juncture, Israel turned to the American government to apply pressure on the Sudan at the beginning of the Summer of 1984.

The Israelis had been in the Sudan for many years before the beginning of the influx of Ethiopian refugees. According to Louis Rapoport,

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<sup>48</sup> Operation Moses, p. 89.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*

the Beta Yisrael were not Israel's only interest in the Sudan, and the Mosad agents who were based in the country had many other tasks to perform besides the rescue operations:

Sudan -- strategically located between Egypt and radical Libya to the north and Soviet-backed Ethiopia to the southeast, and just across the narrow Red Sea from Saudi Arabia -- has long been considered to be of major importance to the Israeli intelligence community. A spy master's dream, it was a listening post and a crossroads where vital information concerning the Horn of Africa and the Middle East was gathered by various intelligence services... They [also] trained insurgent Christian and animist black tribes in the south in an attempt to weaken Arab domination over Africa's largest country.<sup>51</sup>

Rapoport asserts that Israel "and the Mosad turned to the Americans for help at this crucial moment [because] they hoped to preserve the carefully built-up Israeli intelligence structure in Sudan, which included a secret base of operations, sophisticated communications systems, even a thriving business operation."<sup>52</sup> However, it soon became obvious, that any major action to save the Beta Yisrael, whether sponsored by the United States or not, would probably put an end to the Israeli intelligence operations.<sup>53</sup>

Shortly before Yitzhak Shamir left the office of Prime Minister in the Summer of 1984, he instructed Ambassador Meir Rosenne at the Israeli embassy in Washington to appeal to the White House to intervene with Sudanese president Numeiri and to help the Mosad arrange an airlift of the Beta Yisrael in the camps. "It was a request that was fraught with problems for the U.S. administration, which did not want to see its excellent relations with Sudan damaged. On the other hand, it was a major humanitarian

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<sup>51</sup> Redemption Song, p. 118.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp. 118-19.

question, and several American officials and legislators had been campaigning for some time for a rescue involving the United States."<sup>54</sup>

Shimon Peres formed a new government during the Summer of 1984. But Shamir, who became vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister in the national unity coalition government, continued to be in charge of the Beta Yisrael aliyah. Shamir visited Washington for talks with American Secretary of State George Shultz. Among the various topics on the agenda, Shamir brought up the desperate situation of the Ethiopian Jews in the Sudan. Shamir argued that the huge population movements in the Sudan and Ethiopia caused by the drought and the famine "would enable the Falashas to be extricated from the country without anyone being any the wiser."<sup>55</sup> Movements of refugees through Khartoum Airport were already commonplace, and it would be difficult to distinguish "Falashas" from any other Ethiopian refugees. "The famine provided the perfect cover. Shultz agreed to bring American pressure to bear on Numeiri."<sup>56</sup>

Within the Mosad, a sharp difference of opinion emerged between the group of twenty agents in the field in the Sudan and the Mosad's operations chief in Jerusalem. "The agents pressed for a massive Israeli airlift in the briefest period possible -- several planes every night for a week in the desert outside Gedaref."<sup>57</sup> But this was exactly what the Americans were afraid of, an event which might create an international incident that could destabilize the Numeiri regime or cause a rupture between the United States and the Sudan. The Mosad operations chief vetoed the "Entebbe-type plan" suggested by his

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>55</sup> Operation Moses, p. 91.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> Redemption Song, pp. 119-20.



agents, saying that "it was simply too risky and that if it were interrupted for any reason, it might also derail American efforts to rescue the Falashas 'quietly,'"<sup>58</sup>

Both the U.S. State Department as well as the Israeli government and the Mosad take credit for the concept of a large scale covert operation which would be more comprehensive and expeditious than the previous Israeli rescue effort: "According to State Department officials, the initiative for Operation Moses did not come from the Israelis, but from the department itself. Israeli sources adamantly deny this. They insist that the Mosad took the lead."<sup>59</sup>

In either case, the United States played a crucial role in structuring the rescue operation which was carried out skillfully by the Mosad. Commencing in March and April of 1984, a number of State Department meetings took place to discuss the situation in the Sudan. Among those taking part were Eugene Douglas, U.S. coordinator for Refugee Affairs and ambassador at large; Richard Krieger, then assistant coordinator of Refugee Affairs; Princeton Lyman, then deputy assistant for East Africa; Elliott Abrams, then assistant secretary for Human Rights; and Arthur Dewey and James Purcell of the Agency for International Development (AID).<sup>60</sup> The United States had a stake in the Sudan and a certain amount of leverage over the Numeiri regime. The strategic position of the Sudan created a security concern for the United States. Also the U.S. friendship with Egypt and enmity for Marxist Ethiopia and Khadaffi controlled Libya pushed the Americans for even closer ties with Numeiri. Because of these concerns, the Sudan had been receiving more U.S. aid than

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 120.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 88.

any other African nation except Egypt. The United States was providing thirty-five to forty percent of the UNHCR budget to the Sudan, while sending additional food and medicine through the AID bureau.<sup>61</sup>

The State Department meetings continued through the Spring. Yet, a high level of frustration arose because of the contradictory reports on the conditions of the Beta Yisrael which surfaced. The AAEJ reported starvation, disease, persecution and mass death of the Ethiopian Jews in the refugee camps. Simultaneously, Jerry Weaver, America's refugee officer at the Khartoum embassy, cabled the U.S. with reports that the Beta Yisrael incurred fewer difficulties than the AAEJ reports claimed, and cut back the death toll from thousands to hundreds. The Israeli Mosad reports fell somewhere in between the others.<sup>62</sup> Weaver, a former University of California at Los Angeles professor, known as an "undiplomatic cowboy" in Khartoum, and "erroneous[ly]" thought by many to be the CIA chief in the country,<sup>63</sup> was regarded by many as "bright but frequently undisciplined and of questionable judgment."<sup>64</sup> But Weaver knew the Sudan. According to Eugene Douglas,<sup>65</sup> "he [Weaver] was there [in the Sudan] when we needed him. He had a streak of romantic adventurism that can produce extraordinary achievements, or monumental disaster."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

<sup>63</sup> *Redemption Song*, p. 120.

<sup>64</sup> Ruth Gruber, *Rescue: The Exodus of the Ethiopian Jews* (New York: Atheneum, 1987), p. 150.

<sup>65</sup> Ruth Gruber characterizes Douglas as "a friendly cosmopolitan from Wichita Falls, Texas... a commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve; a linguist fluent in six languages; a conservative Republican close to the inner court around [former] President Reagan; a Protestant determined to rescue Ethiopian Jews." *Rescue*, pp. 148-49.

<sup>66</sup> *Rescue*, p. 150.

Months after the initial Spring reports of Weaver, Richard Krieger, a political appointee who came with a background of Jewish communal service,<sup>67</sup> learned that his best source of information had been the AAEJ.<sup>68</sup> Weaver had down-played the disaster. Weaver sent a "wrong, falsely low death count; he had believed that little, if anything, could be done about the situation, and he didn't want to excite people or encourage further risky free-lance rescues by the AAEJ."<sup>69</sup> Weaver made another trip to the Umm Rekuba refugee camp, where he saw overcrowding, starvation, disease, appalling sanitary conditions, growing violence against the Ethiopian Jews, and the "incredible" numbers of dead Beta Yisrael. "Finally, he [Weaver] reported the grim truth to Washington."<sup>70</sup>

Krieger and others at the State Department desired a Beta Yisrael rescue; but it was clear that the American government could not take part in a selective rescue. They could not favor the Jews over any other group. Because the U.S. relations with the Sudan were sensitive, rescue could only occur with the consent, however tacit, of the Sudanese government. Moreover, it was imperative that the U.S. role take the form of humanitarian aid.

On a morning in mid-June of 1984, Krieger met with a Sudanese official. The official wanted more American aid, listing the Sudan's problems including

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<sup>67</sup> Ruth Gruber notes that Krieger was born in the Bronx, and after working fourteen years as a Jewish Federation executive as well as a six month stint in 1981 with the Republican National Committee, was invited to join Ambassador Douglas and the Reagan administration. "A maverick in the State Department, he could be soft-spoken or strident, courteous or demanding, diplomatic or aggressively firm, and always pragmatic." Rescue, pp. 148-49.

<sup>68</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 88.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p. 89.

economic crisis, the Marxist government on its southern flank, the flood of refugees, "and on top of that, those Jews always making trouble."<sup>71</sup>

Krieger nodded, his expression neutral, but with a flash of hope he saw an opening. Playing on his visitor's prejudices, Krieger, himself Jewish, pretended to sympathize. 'You're right, and we'd like to help you get those Jews out of your country,' he said. 'You don't need them making trouble.'<sup>72</sup>

Krieger and Douglas met again with the Sudanese official that afternoon, after checking with his boss Eugene Douglas, Chester Crocker, head of the African Bureau, and with Hume Horan, the ambassador in Khartoum.<sup>73</sup> Krieger dangled the advantages of removing the Beta Yisrael in front of the Sudanese official. "If the Falashas were gone, the Sudanese would have 10,000 fewer mouths to feed. The disturbance of unmarked planes landing on sporadic rescue missions would end [Israeli Mosad operations] – and the 'Crazies [AAEJ]' would be gone too."<sup>74</sup> Krieger continued to play on the man's prejudices: "You know how Jews stick together... and you know the power of American Jews... You know they control everything... the banks, the media, the Congress... If Sudan wants more American aid, you'll need my Jewish friends on Capitol Hill. Think what they could do for your country if they thought you were helping these people get out."<sup>75</sup>

Eventually, aid to the Sudan grew by \$50 million, for a total of \$250 million for fiscal year 1985. However, the U.S. government insists that the

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<sup>71</sup> Claire Safran, "Secret Exodus: The Story of Operation Moses," Reader's Digest, January, 1987, p. 185.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> Secret Exodus, pp. 90-91.

<sup>74</sup> "Secret Exodus," p. 185.

<sup>75</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 91.

increased aid was not a payoff for Sudanese cooperation in the Beta Yisrael exodus. Yet, Krieger later said, "I wasn't sitting across from Raoul Wallenberg [the brave Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Jews during the Holocaust]. There had to be something in it for Sudan."<sup>76</sup>

The discussions between Krieger, Douglas and the Sudanese official resulted in a workable plan. A memorandum outlining the concept of a Beta Yisrael rescue was sent to and quickly approved by President Reagan and Secretary of State George Shultz. Krieger was then dispatched to Jerusalem to meet with Yehuda Dominitz, head of the Jewish Agency, and Moshe Gilboa of the Foreign Ministry. After briefing the Israeli officials on July 7, Krieger flew to Geneva and met with Douglas and the Sudanese official at the International Conference on African Relief Assistance (ICARA). The Sudanese official relayed the news that his government had agreed to the exodus of the Beta Yisrael with details to be worked out later.<sup>77</sup> He warned, however, that "those involved would have to devise a plan that would not embarrass the Sudan in the Arab world."<sup>78</sup>

A great deal of speculation surrounds the role of third party influence on the Numeiri regime -- in that millions of dollars in cash greased the palms of the Sudanese officials. Rumors abounded: that huge sums of money had been made available by a Sudanese born Jewish tycoon, Nessim Gaon, who lives in Geneva; that Saudi billionaire Adnan Khashoggi, known to be a close friend of Numeiri, acted as an intermediary; and/or that the "paymaster" had been an American Jewish lawyer with interests in the Sudan.<sup>79</sup> The Mosad did spend perhaps three million dollars in the Sudan over a four year period during the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>78</sup> "Secret Exodus," p. 186.

<sup>79</sup> Redemption Song, p. 122.

early 1980s. "But the only cash involved in Operation Moses itself was \$1 million that the Israelis would give to Jerry Weaver to spend on transport, supplies, and communication systems."<sup>80</sup>

Reports in the press... suggested that the Sudanese were persuaded to co-operate by 'hard cash -- about \$60 million raised by Jewish benefactors in the United States.' Other reports suggested that Israel had supplied Sudan with arms in exchange for which Numeiri had agreed to turn a blind eye to the airlift. Neither Jewish money nor Israeli arms were involved. The carrot was increased American aid.<sup>81</sup>

Chester Crocker and Princeton Lyman joined Krieger in formulating the rescue plan. They obtained the agreement of Ambassador Hume Horan in Khartoum. According to one informed source: "Lyman's knowledge of the workings of the department -- he handled the red tape -- and the willingness of men like Crocker and Horan to risk their careers by pushing Krieger's plan is what made it all happen . . . It was a proposition the Israelis couldn't refuse."<sup>82</sup> Arrangements for Operation Moses were made at a relatively low State Department level, although the support of Deputy Under Secretary of State Richard Murphy, who was in overall charge of Middle East diplomacy, and the tacit approval of Secretary of State George Shultz were gained by the end of June.<sup>83</sup> In the field, Jerry Weaver became the U.S. connection on a planning and operations team that included a Sudanese security expert and workers from the National Refugee Organization. He plotted every detail and

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, pp. 122-23.

<sup>81</sup> Operation Moses, p. 95.

<sup>82</sup> Redemption Song, p. 123.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid



planned for every contingency. He orchestrated how people would be moved, how many at a time, when and along what route.<sup>84</sup>

Horan and Weaver began a series of meetings with General Omar el-Tayeb, vice-president and head of state security in the Sudan. "They met again and again. All summer, a workable plan seemed to elude them. Then, in September, the American diplomats in Khartoum were talking once more to their Sudanese counterparts... [and decided to] turn the problem over to someone else."<sup>85</sup> An international refugee organization would be responsible for the destiny and destination of the Beta Yisrael. Technically, the organization's efforts relieved the Sudanese of any further responsibility.

At the same time, while cover for the Sudanese was achieved, a viable rescue route needed to be solidified. "The easiest and cheapest way of moving 10,000 people quickly from eastern Sudan to Israel is by sea via Port Sudan. Numeiri found this suggestion politically unacceptable because it involved a direct journey from Sudan to Israel, and such a movement of people would have been highly visible within the Sudan."<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the idea of a mass airlift was also rejected on political grounds as was the use of Israeli civil or military aircraft.<sup>87</sup>

Weaver, together with the Mosad and the Sudanese secret police, came up with the operation plan in October of 1984.<sup>88</sup> They had decided to move the Beta Yisrael overland from the refugee camps to Khartoum, and by air from the Sudanese capital to Israel. Because a fleet of planes would attract too much attention, one plane load at a time would be flown out of Khartoum. They

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<sup>84</sup> "Secret Exodus," p. 186; and Secret Exodus, p. 95.

<sup>85</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 94.

<sup>86</sup> Operation Moses, p. 94.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>88</sup> Redemption Song, p. 126.

calculated that four bus loads of people would fill a plane. Gedaref, which is a five hour drive from Khartoum, was chosen as the staging area for the buses, even though there is only one good road between Gedaref and Khartoum, and a number of police checkpoints dotted the route. The planes could use an isolated section of the runway at Khartoum airport. However, the Sudanese officials stipulated that the aircraft may not directly fly in from Israel and must be the air carrier of a nation other than Israel. Thus, it was determined that chartered aircraft, not military planes, would fly the refugees to Europe and then on to Israel.<sup>89</sup> Weaver acquired four buses and five other long-range vehicles, black market fuel, food, blankets, and communication gear, as well as a list of safe houses in Gedaref and Khartoum.<sup>90</sup> "The fuel, costing \$175,000, was safely stored in an abandoned bottling plant in Gedaref. They stocked a warehouse in Khartoum with 250 blankets, bottles of water, and 220 pounds of dried biscuits."<sup>91</sup>

The Mosad arranged for the planes. Belgium's Trans European Airways (TEA), owned by Georges Gutelman, an orthodox Belgian Jew, was the perfect choice because Gutelman was a friend of Israel and his airline had close links with the Sudan. For years the charter company TEA had been flying Muslim pilgrims from the Sudan and other North African countries to Mecca, so the sight of TEA planes flying in and out of Khartoum would surprise no one.<sup>92</sup> It should also be noted that many of the Israelis involved in the discussion were observant Jews, "but they agreed that the planes could fly on the Sabbath."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> "Secret Exodus," pp. 186-87; and Redemption Song, p. 126.

<sup>90</sup> Redemption Song, p. 127; and "Secret Exodus," p. 193.

<sup>91</sup> Rescue, p. 163.

<sup>92</sup> Operation Moses, pp. 95-96; and Redemption Song, p. 127. See also Operation Moses, pp. 96-97; and Rescue, p. 164.

<sup>93</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 99.

Simultaneously, in Israel, Yehudah Dominitz, Micha Feldman and other Jewish Agency officials alerted their key immigration specialists. These immigration officials commenced preparations to absorb the huge influx of Ethiopian Jews.<sup>94</sup> "From Dan to Beersheba and on to Eilat, hotels and unused buildings were cleared out, empty apartments and abandoned school buildings were painted and repaired, and social workers, health workers, eighteen-to-twenty-year-old women soldiers, and veteran Ethiopian immigrants were corralled."<sup>95</sup>

More Israeli agents, mostly Ethiopian Israelis, were brought into the Sudan to facilitate the rescue operation. These agents spread the word to the Beta Yisrael in Umm Rekuba, as well as Tuwawa and Wad ei Heluw refugee camps and the squalid suburbs of Gedaref, that rescue was imminent. "According to some reports, at the height of the operation there were eighty 'spotters' in Sudan locating Falashas and getting them ready to be transported to Israel."<sup>96</sup> Additionally, these individuals, as well as other Mosad agents, arranged for Beta Yisrael in the Sudan to create lists of all of the Jewish families and individuals in the refugee camps.<sup>97</sup>

By the third week in November, hundreds of Beta Yisrael had been brought or had made their own way to Tuwawa, on the outskirts of Gedaref, which was only a few minutes drive from the main Gedaref-Khartoum road.<sup>98</sup> This was to be the staging area and starting point for the rescue operation.

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<sup>94</sup> "Secret Exodus," p. 193.

<sup>95</sup> Rescue, p. 164.

<sup>96</sup> Operation Moses, p. 97.

<sup>97</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 102; and Redemption Song, pp. 132-33.

<sup>98</sup> Operation Moses, p. 97.

## OPERATION MOSES

The airlift was set for November 1, then postponed to November 10, and finally to November 20, due to local considerations, such as coordination with the Sudanese secret police and the condition of the roads.<sup>99</sup> On November 20, 1984, as the sun was setting, the four rented buses made their way across an open field and parked at the edge of the Tuwawa refugee camp. Sudanese security officials fanned out to protect the loading zone from the Sudanese police, Beudoins and lower-level government officials. Only the highest ranking Sudanese government officials and the special security forces knew of the operation. An Ethiopian Israeli mingled with the increasing masses of Beta Yisrael who had gathered at the rendezvous point. His task was to select the most vulnerable people for the first transport -- children, the sick, and the elderly. "But everyone wanted to be saved; everyone wanted to be first."<sup>100</sup> Desperate, some of the Beta Yisrael shoved past their brethren as they forced their way onto the bus.<sup>101</sup>

Jerry Weaver recalls the panic and confusion:

By now it is six o'clock and dark. The Sudanese are nervous, I'm nervous, and obviously, the people getting on the buses are very nervous... By about 6:30, we have packed no one knows how many people aboard the buses, and we try to leave. People are running after us. Total pandemonium. In the confusion, we take the wrong road. We are driving on a dirt track parallel to the Gedaref-Khartoum highway, but we can't seem to get to it. So we stop the caravan, turn the whole damn thing around, and go back toward the camp and get on the highway. Now this is our maiden voyage. We've got a five hour drive ahead of us. We had driven about fifteen or twenty minutes, and

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<sup>99</sup> Redemption Song, p. 128.

<sup>100</sup> "Secret Exodus," p. 196.

<sup>101</sup> Secret Exodus, pp. 124-25.

we come up to two policemen. They flash their light, and the convoy commander stops. The two cops come up and start asking who are you and what're these buses and who're these people..."<sup>102</sup>

Through bluff and persistence, they managed to get through the various checkpoints.<sup>103</sup> Complete silence reigned on all four buses in contrast to the near riot at Tuwawa.<sup>104</sup> Around midnight, the convoy arrived at a security checkpoint ten miles from the Khartoum airport. The Sudanese secret police met the group and alerted them that the airplane had yet to arrive. Finally, at 1:20 a.m., it landed. They entered the airport area through a back gate and boarded the Belgian TEA airplane at an unused part of the airport. The Boeing 707 was soon packed with two hundred and eighty-three Ethiopian Jews. The Belgian pilot did not want to take off with so many passengers, since the aircraft normally had a maximum capacity of two hundred and twenty. "But after an angry exchange with Weaver, the pilot relented. Operation Moses got off to a bumpy start as the first flight cleared the runway at 2:40 A. M., November 21, 1984."<sup>105</sup> It is also important to note, that "[o]f the Westerners"<sup>106</sup> co-operating with the airlift, Jerry Weaver was the only one allowed anywhere near the Belgian planes."<sup>107</sup>

The route for the first and all subsequent flights during the next six weeks was the same: Khartoum to Brussels, where the planes refueled, and then on to Tel Aviv. The empty Trans European Airways charter planes flew

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<sup>102</sup> Redemption Song, p. 134.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> "Secret Exodus," p. 197; and Redemption Song, p. 134.

<sup>105</sup> Redemption Song, pp. 134-35.

<sup>106</sup> "Westerner" does not include the Israeli officials, rather, only refers to an American presence. While the Sudanese secret police provided cover for the operation, Israeli Mosad agents also helped out on the ground in the Sudan, and Israeli medical personnel accompanied each flight.

<sup>107</sup> Operation Moses, p. 98.

back to Khartoum via Athens. An Israeli medical team offering assistance to the weathered Beta Yisrael accompanied each flight. Between the last week of November of 1984, and the first week of January of 1985, TEA flew thirty five flights between Khartoum and Tel Aviv.<sup>108</sup> At first, there was one flight from the Sudan every forty-eight hours. However, in late December, the rate was increased to every twenty-four hours.<sup>109</sup> Some seven thousand five hundred Beta Yisrael were brought to Israel via Operation Moses,<sup>110</sup> also known by its Mosad code name "Gur Aryeh Yehuda [the lion cub of Judah – a reference to Genesis 49:9]."<sup>111</sup>

The Israel Defence Forces' radio station described the arrival of one plane load of Beta Yisrael at Ben-Gurion Airport as follows:

First off the plane were two children who were attached to transfusion tubes. They were put into ambulances with their parents. The Ethiopians arrived destitute. At first they were very frightened, but when they realized that they had arrived in the Holy Land, they asked the direction of Jerusalem and knelt on the runway, kissing the ground, praying towards the Holy City. Almost all the children who got off the plane were barefoot. Some were naked except for a T-shirt. The only possessions that some brought with them were yellow water containers.<sup>112</sup>

After the rough start to the airlift, the kinks in the operation were gradually smoothed out. The loading of the buses in Tuwawa was more orderly. The Sudanese state security agents accompanied the buses all along the route from the rendezvous point to the airport to avoid any delays at the

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, pp. 98-99.

<sup>109</sup> Redemption Song, p. 136.

<sup>110</sup> The term "Operation Moses" was coined when the United Jewish Appeal launched a special fund-raising campaign in the United States at the time the airlift began. More on UJA efforts is discussed in the next section.

<sup>111</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 134; and Redemption Song, p. 135.

<sup>112</sup> Operation Moses, p. 99.



checkpoints. The Mosad continued to keep watch over every aspect of the operation.<sup>113</sup>

While the main airlift was going on, small groups of Ethiopian Jews continued to be brought out via the original Mosad route which had been in operation the previous four years. Commercial flights from Khartoum to Athens, and then on to Israel were utilized, rescuing groups of thirty to fifty Beta Yisrael at a time.<sup>114</sup> On the first day of Operation Moses, forty-three Ethiopian Jews were rescued using this route, and four days later, another thirty-six were saved.<sup>115</sup>

All totalled, the dramatic six week operation exceeded the rescue of six thousand Ethiopian Jewish souls in the four years between 1980 and 1984.

Asress, seeing an airplane for the first time, called the aircraft he was rescued on "a miracle from heaven. . . It was just like the prophets said, we were returning home 'on the wings of eagles.'"<sup>116</sup> But not all of the Ethiopian Jews languishing in the Sudan were rescued. International politics and press leaks tragically halted Operation Moses before its completion.

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<sup>113</sup> Redemption Song, p. 136.

<sup>114</sup> For more on the Mosad rescue operations previous to Operation Moses, see chapter five, section on "Israeli Rescue Efforts During the Early 1980s."

<sup>115</sup> Redemption Song, p. 135.

<sup>116</sup> The words of "Asress" as expressed to Jeffrey Kaye in Jerusalem, Israel, Spring, 1986 (translated from Hebrew to English by Jeffrey Kaye).

THE OPERATION IS HALTED:  
PUBLIC CRITICISM, PRESS LEAKS AND  
THE UNITED JEWISH APPEAL CAMPAIGN

While the various exoduses in 1984 were extraordinarily well guarded secrets in the Sudan, the covert rescue operations were not being as well kept elsewhere. By the Summer of 1984, the exodus from Ethiopia was common knowledge, at least among Jewish groups in the United States. In its Summer 1984 issue Reform Judaism reported:

[H]undreds [of Beta Yisrael] are currently leaving via a dangerous and illegal eight-day walk into neighboring countries, where they wait in refugee villages for covert Israeli military rescue. Israel has more than doubled its rescue efforts recently and is now bringing out more than 300 Jews each month.<sup>117</sup>

The Fall 1984 issue of the AAEJ publication Release, noted the American organization's own rescue efforts and how they spurred increased Israeli actions on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry.

In recent months the AAEJ has rescued and brought to Israel over one hundred Ethiopian Jews, most of whom have been in refugee camps for three years. These new immigrants are mostly women, small children and elders... The recent AAEJ successes have stimulated the Israelis to accelerate their Falasha rescue program which for the past year was nearly at a standstill.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Reform Judaism, Summer, 1984.

<sup>118</sup> Release, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Fall, 1984, Vol. 2, No. 3.

Throughout the Summer and Autumn of 1984, the Israeli government maintained its policy of silence. Even at the height of Operation Moses, when hundreds of Ethiopian Jews were secretly arriving in Israel every day, the government refrained from breaking its veil of silence when attacked.<sup>119</sup> The success of Operation Moses depended on and was conditional on secrecy. In no way could the Sudan be portrayed as helping save Jews. This predominantly Muslim nation feared her standing vis-a-vis her Arab neighbors. Internally, any perceived cooperation with Israel by the Muslim Brotherhood and other fundamentalist groups would be dangerous and perhaps even fatal for the Numeiri regime. Thus, the great fear throughout the airlift was that premature publicity would force Numeiri to bring the rescue operation to an abrupt end.

The criticism of the AAEJ and CAEJ continued well into the Fall of 1984. In September of 1984, when the Israeli government and the U.S. State Department were working on the logistics of the rescue, Simcha Jacobovici wrote his biting opinion/editorial in the New York Times, "Ethiopian Jews Die, Israel Fiddles."<sup>120</sup>

Two months later, Jacobovici appeared at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations in Toronto. On November 15, six days before the first flight of Operation Moses, Jacobovici and his group of Canadian Jewish students managed to disrupt and force the cancellation of the opening plenary session.<sup>121</sup> U.S. Ambassador Eugene Douglas, who played a major coordinating and facilitating role in Operation Moses, was scheduled to address a session that

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<sup>119</sup> Operation Moses, pp. 100-01.

<sup>120</sup> For more on the editorial and the reaction it created, see chapter six, section on "The Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews."

<sup>121</sup> Rescue, p. 183; and Operation Moses, p. 101. For more on Jacobovici's disruption of the plenary session, see chapter six, section on "The Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews."

evening devoted entirely to the plight of the Ethiopian Jews. Douglas tried to dissuade Jacobovici from disrupting the meeting, and even "revealed to him in private that important events were about to take place. Jacobovici refused to listen."<sup>122</sup> The pleading of Ambassador Douglas was not enough to dissuade the activists who believed that previous pledges and promises for rescue were only empty words intent on placating the pro-Beta Yisrael groups.

About an hour later, two thousand people packed the forum session on Ethiopian Jewry. During his talk, Douglas turned to Jacobovici: "Simcha, as you know, because I've told you, if you will only hold your water for about six weeks, everything will be resolved in our favor."<sup>123</sup> Few outside of the convention heard about the demonstration and Douglas' presentation. The press honored the request for secrecy.

Later, perhaps riled by Jacobovici's editorial and charges of "Ethiopian Jews Die, Israel Fiddles," Jewish Agency head Aryeh Dulzin, "confided the secret to some five hundred American and Canadian Jewish leaders."<sup>124</sup> He announced: "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 and complex rescue operation."<sup>125</sup> Dulzin's indiscreet remarks were included in a press release sent out from the New York office of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). According to an official of the WZO, Dulzin was given the opportunity to stop the press release, but decided against doing so.<sup>126</sup> The press release

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<sup>122</sup> Rescue, p. 183.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p. 184.

<sup>124</sup> For more on Aryeh Dulzin's speech, see chapter six, section on "The Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews."

<sup>125</sup> Rescue, p. 184.

<sup>126</sup> Operation Moses, pp. 102-03.

occasioned by Dulzin's dramatic words was picked up by the New York Jewish Week on November 23. The headline ran "Reveal Plan for the Rescue of the Falashas," which was followed by the explicit statement: "A dramatic mass rescue of thousands of Ethiopian Jews and their transfer to Israel is scheduled to begin soon after January 1."<sup>127</sup> On December 6, the Washington Jewish Week gave even more details: "The rescue of a substantial number of Ethiopian Jews has begun... an operation far more systematic than previous efforts is under way."<sup>128</sup>

The secular press picked up the rescue story on December 11. The New York Times ran a front page article which revealed that a massive airlift was in progress. The headline trumpeted: "Airlift to Israel is Reported Taking Thousands of Jews From Ethiopia."<sup>129</sup> Ironically, the prominent article states: "The stepped-up movement of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel, which has not been publicized in Israel out of concern that Ethiopia might block it, involves an airlift through third countries."<sup>130</sup> The article also notes the Washington Jewish Week article, and includes quotes from Jewish Agency chair Dulzin.<sup>131</sup> Even more details appeared the following day in the Boston Globe. It reported: "The United States acted as intermediary in getting Sudanese officials and Israeli agents together to set up the complex logistics for the humanitarian mission."<sup>132</sup> Moreover, the article quoted an American official as saying: "We've got to get them out as quickly as possible before it comes to public

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid

<sup>129</sup> "Airlift to Israel Is Reported Taking Thousands of Jews From Ethiopia," New York Times, Tuesday, December 11, 1984, p. 1.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid

<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> Operation Moses, p. 104.

attention and the whole thing collapses."<sup>133</sup> Like the New York Times story, the Boston Globe's article ensured that the operation did come to public attention when it was wired to media outlets throughout the world. The three most delicate aspects of the operation had been mentioned: the numbers involved, the cooperation of the Sudan and the United States with Israel, and the escape route.<sup>134</sup>

However, and for apparently no good reason, the story died:

In Belgium, where newsmen knew what was going on, not a word was written. Israeli diplomats and American State Department officials managed to get Jewish newspapers to leave the story alone. In Israel, the newspapers kept quiet. In Sudan, the revelations in the New York Times had not caused too much of a stir because the impression had been given that the airlift had been conducted out of Ethiopia. The Boston Globe report made no particular impact and was probably missed by the Sudanese authorities. The airlift was not interrupted and the men on the ground in Sudan felt that the crisis had passed. Their attention turned again to the [Senator Edward] Kennedy visit [to the Sudanese refugee camps].<sup>135</sup>

Ruth Gruber in Rescue states that despite the leaks, the Sudan and Ethiopia took no action to stop the airlift. "Newspaper stories, TV reports -- these could be overlooked. So long as nothing official came from the governments of Israel or the United States, Numeiri and Mengistu could pretend they knew nothing."<sup>136</sup>

Another potential danger to the secrecy of Operation Moses came from the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). The UJA initiated a massive campaign to raise the money for the rescue and absorption of the Beta Yisrael while the

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid

<sup>134</sup> For more details on the leaks in the Jewish and secular press, see Redemption Song, pp. 140-47.

<sup>135</sup> Operation Moses, pp. 104-05.

<sup>136</sup> Rescue, p. 185.



operation was still under way. Israel estimated that the exodus and the first year of absorption would cost \$100 million; and the goal for the United States alone was \$60 million, to be raised by the UJA.<sup>137</sup>

On the day the airlift started, a high ranking Israeli official met in secret with the top leaders of the UJA at the Israeli Consulate in Manhattan, and told them to gear up for a massive emergency fund raising campaign.<sup>138</sup> Then, on Wednesday, November 28, a mere week after the first air flight from Khartoum, three UJA officials flew to Israel. Martin Stein, a Milwaukee pharmacist who later became chairman of the UJA, Alan Shulman, a veteran UJA leader from Palm Beach, and Elton Kerness, the UJA senior vice president were called to the Jewish State to plan and coordinate the fund raising. After witnessing the dramatic arrival of Beta Yisrael at Ben Gurion airport and after a briefing by Jewish Agency and Mosad officials, the three Americans returned within a few days to the United States. On December 2, at the La Guardia airport Sheraton Hotel, leaders of all the major communities of America and Canada assembled along with the national officers of the UJA. During this meeting the slogan "Operation Moses" was coined to raise funds for the Mosad's "Gur Aryeh Yehudah (the lion cub of Judah)" and the subsequent absorption process.<sup>139</sup> Each leader pledged a fund raising goal for their community. In the next days and weeks, in parlor meetings and synagogues, "an army of lecturers, swearing their audiences to secrecy, described the world's newest biblical exodus with such passion that the Jewish community, which had been responding generously to the agony of all Ethiopians --

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid

<sup>138</sup> Redemption Song, p. 137.

<sup>139</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 135.

Christians and Moslems as well as Jews – raised not \$60 million but \$65 million."<sup>140</sup>

Yet, "serious questions would be raised about the timing of the fund raising, which by its very nature made news leaks more likely, and with them the likelihood that a politically embarrassed Sudan would halt the operation."<sup>141</sup> In short, the campaign involved speeches, public meetings, and broad distribution of information that inevitably reached the press.<sup>142</sup> Why did the UJA officials feel compelled to raise funds during Operation Moses and risk blowing the secrecy of the entire rescue operation? Two main reasons may be cited. First, the UJA felt that once the Ethiopian Jews got to Israel, the appeal for funds would lose its edge. "This was because it had been decided to run the campaign as an appeal for funds, not to help in absorption, but rather to save lives."<sup>143</sup> Thus, by its nature, such a campaign had to be conducted before the Beta Yisrael were saved. Second, the "fund raisers understood that their best chance to raise funds was in the days and weeks before December 31, when most tax deductible donations are made."<sup>144</sup> Additionally, it might be stated, that many Jewish and Israeli causes compete for American Jewry's money. "Who knew what new crisis might not blow up in Israel or elsewhere and divert funds needed for settling the Falashas?"<sup>145</sup>

The timing of the UJA campaign had an additional negative meaning for AAEJ-founder Graenum Berger. Not only did it jeopardize the entire rescue operation, but it also cased a mistaken notion as to whom was responsible for

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<sup>140</sup> Rescue, pp. 185-87.

<sup>141</sup> Redemption Song, p. 137.

<sup>142</sup> For a detailed analysis of the UJA campaign, see Redemption Song, chapter seven, "Paying for it," pp. 152-170.

<sup>143</sup> Operation Moses, p. 103.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

the rescue effort. For Berger, the timely UJA campaign, which played on the drama of Operation Moses and brought the plight of the Beta Yisrael to the masses of American Jewry for the first time, slighted the efforts and years of involvement of the AAEJ. At the same time, he perceived that the United Jewish Appeal leaders and other American Jewish organizations took credit for saving thousands of Ethiopian Jews:

What I resented more than anything was the unwarranted credit every organization was taking, heaping fulsome praise on themselves because of what they claimed to have done for the Ethiopian Jews, when the objective evidence in my files was to the contrary. Regretfully, history will be rewritten, as it usually has been, to justify virtuous conduct that was never exhibited. I doubt whether the AAEJ and some of us personally will get the proper recognition for our sustained efforts.<sup>146</sup>

Dr. Steven Kaplan and Dr. Ruth Westheimer note the irony of the timing and public nature of the UJA campaign: "The rather dubious decision to conduct a full-scale public fund raising campaign to finance a hazardous and allegedly clandestine operation made many true attempt at concealment a joke."<sup>147</sup>

Conversely, Louis Rapoport has praise for the UJA officials and the special campaign they orchestrated. In fact, he goes so far as to say their role in Operation Moses has been maligned:

In general, one found highly intelligent and well motivated people involved in the UJA efforts. They have been much underrated, dismissed as corny by nonestablishment Jews in the United States; taken for granted or entirely ignored by Israeli Jews. By any

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<sup>146</sup> Graenum Berger, Graenum, (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, 1987), p. 769.

<sup>147</sup> Ruth Westheimer and Steven Kaplan, Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 25.

standards, their participation in Operation Moses was a noble achievement by American Jews.<sup>148</sup>

Despite all of the publicity surrounding the UJA campaign, no major news stories about Operation Moses came out of North America. However, revelations from a seemingly innocuous article on page six of an obscure Hebrew periodical, Nekuda (Point), whose miniscule circulation was among West Bank settlers, halted the operation.<sup>149</sup> Yehuda Dominitz, head of the immigration department in the Jewish Agency, told the newspaper "off the record" that a majority of the Ethiopian Jews in the Sudan were in Israel. "Nekuda wrote up the story, sensationalized it a bit, and, in defiance of regulations, did not submit it to the Israeli military censor."<sup>150</sup> For some reason, the Nekuda article was taken by two Israeli tabloids as marking the end of the embargo on the rescue operation. On January 3, 1985, Maariv and Yediot Achronot, ran front page stories quoting Dominitz and published numerous photographs of Ethiopian Jews living in Israel.<sup>151</sup> A serious oversight had occurred in the censorship office. The Associated Press and Reuters immediately picked up the story, embroidered it with reports from elsewhere in the world, and sent it off with explicit mention of the airlift.<sup>152</sup> On January 4, Prime Minister Shimon Peres held a press conference "in which Israeli officials tried to deflect attention to questions about the integration of Ethiopian Jews into Israeli society."<sup>153</sup> But the calling of the press conference

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<sup>148</sup> Redemption Song, p. 170.

<sup>149</sup> Rescue, pp. 187-88; and Operation Moses, p. 105.

<sup>150</sup> Redemption Song, p. 147.

<sup>151</sup> Operation Moses, p. 105; and Redemption Song, p. 147.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid

<sup>153</sup> Redemption Song, p. 147.

had in fact put an official stamp on the stories about the airlift. On January 5, 1985, the Sudanese government put a halt to the operation.

The press conference became the focus of recrimination between political groups within the Knesset:

The Likud threatened Peres with a commission of enquiry. Few people seemed to be satisfied by the government's argument that the press conference had been a last-ditch attempt to divert public attention from the rescue mission to the problems of absorption. U.S. officials and many others believed that the operation could have continued for another two weeks as long as the Israeli government had held back its confirmation of the story. It has been claimed that Peres' decision to make a public statement originated in the inter-party rivalries of the ruling coalition government and that he wanted to take the credit for the operation before anyone else did. Darker suggestions have been made accusing Israel of deliberately bringing the airlift to a halt to prevent any more blacks from getting into the country.<sup>154</sup> Neither argument is remotely persuasive.

On the other hand, the Prime Minister's attempt to 'focus attention where it should be and divert it from delicate aspects' was certainly not effective. It was also misguided because, as the Jerusalem Post put it, 'the press corps in Israel, or anywhere else, whether foreign or local, can't be channelled in such a manner.'<sup>155</sup>

Aryeh Dulzin, the man who had initiated numerous leaks over the past two months, was asked on Friday, January 4, by BBC Radio if he regarded "the leaking of the information at this point as being any sort of disaster."<sup>156</sup> He replied: "I wouldn't say a disaster. I would say it is a little risky. But I do

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<sup>154</sup> The chief proponent of such a suggestion was AAEJ founder Graenum Berger. He states in his autobiography: "Some blamed the Jewish Agency's leaders for talking too much, and the United Jewish Appeal for permitting a public campaign for funds for the absorption of the newcomers in Israel, which additionally revealed the existence of the rescue operation. Others blamed the Sudanese government, the Arab world, and Ethiopia. The fault lay entirely with the Israeli government. Prime Minister Peres made the decision. If Israel really wanted them, it could have made standby provisions with other airlines, when the Belgian-Jewish owner of the airline bowed out of the contract. It was whispered out loud that Israel had enough Ethiopian Jews. It had been totally unprepared to receive them on their arrival in November. Why, if the plans had been in the offering for months, was there so much initial negligence?..." Graenum, p. 763.

<sup>155</sup> Operation Moses, p. 106.

<sup>156</sup> Redemption Song, p. 149; and Operation Moses, pp. 107-08.

believe that while the news came out in the open, very few will dare to stop it today, because it is such a great humanitarian operation that it would create an enormous scandal in the world if somebody would dare stop it."<sup>157</sup> The following day, January 5, the Sudanese stopped Operation Moses.

One State Department official told Louis Rapoport: "Leaks in the American Jewish press and from the Israeli government are costing Jewish lives... I can't understand the lack of control by the Jewish Agency and the Israeli government."<sup>158</sup> The official, a key man in the planning of Operation Moses, said that he thought Aryeh Dulzin should be fired, and that "the government press conference was by far the worst blunder in the whole affair."<sup>159</sup> He also noted that the UJA fund raising should not have taken place when it did. He states: "We had thought that there would be no fund raising until after the rescue operation was over. The State Department had that distinct impression. I appreciate that the UJA may have needed the drama for the fund raising, but how could they do it? They didn't have to do it. The money was there."<sup>160</sup>

In Israel, the Beta Yisrael community was distressed. Ethiopian Israelis charged the news media: "It is because of you that our families are suffering and may never get here." Another exclaimed: "We just do not understand why the Israelis spoke out as they did about our escape. I have a father and brother still in Ethiopia, and I am afraid that now I will never see them again."<sup>161</sup> No one was certain how many Ethiopian Jews were stranded in the camps.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid

<sup>158</sup> Redemption Song, p. 151.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid

<sup>160</sup> Ibid

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p. 150.



Estimates ranged from one thousand to three thousand.<sup>162</sup> The stranded Beta Yisrael in the Sudan was a humanitarian concern, but also had become a diplomatic problem, and top American officials, including then President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George Bush, put it on their agenda.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, p. 151.

## OPERATION JOSHUA

The media can be a powerful tool. Press reports are said to have caused the cancellation of Operation Moses. Only a few hours later, newspaper reports and radio and television broadcasts alerted the world to the dramatic and heroic rescue operation. Israel was receiving favorable press for the first time since it invaded Lebanon in 1982 in "Operation Peace for Galilee." The New York Times reported: "For the first time in history, thousands of black people are being brought into a country not in chains but as citizens." The English newspaper Guardian stated: "No other country would have had the nerve to grab many thousands of people from the mountains of East Africa and fly them to another continent... As a famine relief operation, nothing could be more convincing than to gather up the victims and take them where there is plenty of food." Even in Africa, a continent where Israel made and then lost so many friends, the Weekly Review of Nairobi, Kenya, said: "[A] major reminder of Israel's commitment to the unity of the Jewish nation and the fact that the Falashas are Africans cannot be ignored, even by anti-Israel critics who have in the past equated Zionism with racism." Similar bravos were uttered in the Jewish press. The Jewish Chronicle declared: "Once again Israel has given Jews cause for pride."<sup>163</sup>

While the Western World cheered the rescue, the Eastern world denounced it. In the Soviet Union, Operation Moses was attacked as a plot "to colonize occupied Arab territory." Ethiopia blamed both the Sudan and Israel. Mengistu stated that "the Falashas" were not really Jews but Ethiopian citizens

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<sup>163</sup> Compiled from Secret Exodus, p. 138; and Operation Moses, pp. 108-11.

who had been "abducted." In an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Company, Mengistu said: "These people were forced from our territory, from parts of Ethiopia where we do not have very tight security. They were almost dragged against their will to go to Israel. This act is illegal and inhuman, and indeed it is an indirect form of slavery." In Khartoum and throughout the Arab world, media reports accused Numeiri of "collaboration with the Zionist enemy."<sup>164</sup>

An interesting note on the psychological motivating factors for Operation Moses, which can be broadened to the entire movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry, comes from a Saudi Arabian daily paper, Sharak al-Awasat, published in London:

What is the source of the Israelis' interest in this community of Falashan [sic] Jews? It emanates from the importance the Jew attaches to his Jewish brother -- ideologically and nationally.

A Jew, even in Eskimoland [sic], is always a Jew, and it is incumbent upon 'the state of his destination' to take an interest in him and to take care of him until he returns to what is called the Land of the Bible, where he will enjoy its protection.

The issue of the intrinsic worth of the human being, or his humanity -- that is the source of their strength... and the source of our weakness.<sup>165</sup>

In the euphoria in the West surrounding the operation, the media for the most part neglected the remaining Beta Yisrael languishing in the Sudanese refugee camps. But the Israeli and United States governments were hard at work planning a follow-up rescue. Tragically, however, in the two and a half months it took to plan, negotiate and orchestrate Operation Joshua,<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Compiled from Secret Exodus, pp. 138-39; and Operation Moses, pp. 110-15.

<sup>165</sup> Secret Exodus, p. 139.

<sup>166</sup> The American - Israeli rescue operation of March, 1985, Operation Joshua, is also known as Operation Sheba (for the Ethiopian Queen of King Solomon fame).

hundreds of Beta Yisrael succumbed to disease, starvation and dehydration. Additionally, during the last few weeks of December, more Beta Yisrael crossed over the Sudanese border from Ethiopia, only to find themselves stranded in the camps. Tragically, the international reverberations of the leak also caused the border between the Sudan and Ethiopia to be tightened, thereby trapping the remaining thousands of Beta Yisrael in their villages in Gondar and Tigrey, or on their exodus to the Sudan.

For those ensnared in the politics, drought, topography and discrimination of Ethiopia, the late Winter of 1985 brought little hope for rescue. But for the Beta Yisrael who somehow managed to survive the squalor of the refugee camps of the Sudan, international publicity and concern offered a modicum of hope. In Washington, one hundred senators, led by Alan Cranston of California and Alfonse D'Amato of New York, signed petitions to President Reagan urging the government to use American influence to rescue the Jews caught in the Sudan.<sup>167</sup> Nathan Shapiro, president of the AAEJ, rallied influential congressional officials to the cause.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, President Reagan and Vice President Bush were persuaded to take action on behalf of the ancient community,<sup>169</sup> "[a]nxious, perhaps, to mollify Jewish

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<sup>167</sup> The next chapter will discuss in detail the involvement of Congress and the U.S. government on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. In particular, the formation of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry in 1986, as well as its leadership and subsequent activities, will be analyzed.

<sup>168</sup> As with Operation Moses, a number of AAEJ leaders, especially Graenum Berger, believe it was their pressure and persistence which pushed the Americans and Israelis to take action in Operation Joshua. Berger notes in his autobiography that AAEJ advertisements in the Jewish and secular press, an AAEJ letter writing campaign to congressional officials, and the AAEJ rescue operations out of the Sudan convinced the U.S. and the Jewish State that thousands of Beta Yisrael were dying in the Sudan and that massive rescue operations were needed immediately. *Graenum*, pp. 744-47.

<sup>169</sup> *Rescue*, p. 189.

voters, who had overwhelmingly voted against him [them] in the November elections."<sup>170</sup>

On March 7, Bush flew to the Sudan and met with Numeiri: "The Sudanese president agreed to the new airlift on condition that it be carried out rapidly, with a total blackout of news. Any press leaks could overthrow his [already tenuous] government."<sup>171</sup> Numeiri also stipulated that the Israelis should have nothing to do with the operation; it should be kept an absolute secret; and the flights should not go directly from the Sudan to Israel.<sup>172</sup> Following the meeting, the United States released \$15 million of suspended aid to the Sudan, which had been delayed until it "could show it was instituting economic reforms."<sup>173</sup>

A number of factors affected Numeiri's decision to go along with the follow-up rescue operation:

In the first place, the international reaction to Operation Moses had been far less fierce than he might reasonably have feared and he had gained considerable credit from the Americans for going along with it; secondly, there was good chance that this operation, which was to be planned and carried out within the space of a couple of weeks,<sup>174</sup> could in fact be done clandestinely; and thirdly, Numeiri had no choice. Without more American aid he was finished.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Operation Moses, p. 117.

<sup>171</sup> Rescue, p. 189.

<sup>172</sup> Operation Moses, p. 118.

<sup>173</sup> Rescue, p. 190.

<sup>174</sup> The operation, in fact, rescued the refugees in a matter of hours.

<sup>175</sup> Operation Moses, pp. 118-19. In fact, Numeiri's days were numbered, and his sixteen-year rule of the Sudan, was overthrown shortly after Operation Joshua. During the previous months and years, Numeiri narrowly escaped numerous assassination and over-throw attempts on the government. In April 1985, Numeiri traveled to Washington for his yearly physical exam and to ask for more financial assistance. His absence from the Sudan may have helped his downfall; but it undoubtedly saved his life. The day he left, bread riots erupted in the streets of Khartoum. The protesters included students, laborers, professionals and religious fundamentalists. Numeiri counted on Major General Omar Mohammed el-Tayeb, his vice president and security chief, to handle the situation.

The rescue of the remaining refugees was nearly a completely American operation. Code named "Operation Sheba" by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the mission became more commonly known by the name "Operation Joshua." The operation was directed by the CIA and coordinated with the U.S. Air Force, the State Department, the Sudanese security police and Israel. Beta Yisrael Mosad agents had the responsibility of ensuring that the Jews in Tuwawa were ready to leave and that they were indeed Beta Yisrael. In Washington, Israel's Ambassador, Meir Rosenne, and in Tel Aviv, American Ambassador Samuel Lewis, were closely involved.<sup>176</sup>

Operation Joshua rescued far fewer Ethiopian Jews than the numbers previously estimated. Many perished due to the elements and horrific conditions. Some Beta Yisrael refugees began to trek back to Ethiopia to find relatives and bring them to the Sudan. Others were stranded at the border. Several Ethiopian Jews were kidnapped by Sudanese.<sup>177</sup> Additionally, regular international flights out of Khartoum were utilized to save several hundred Beta Yisrael between January and March of 1985.<sup>178</sup>

On the night of March 21, 1985, the Ethiopian Jews scattered in the various camps were gathered and brought to an assembly point outside of

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However, on the day Numeiri tried to return, April 6, 1985, his government was overthrown. During a stopover in Cairo on the way home, Numeiri learned that a military committee had seized power from him. He asked for political asylum from the Egyptian government. Meanwhile, in the Sudan, el-Tayeb and four aides were imprisoned and charged with treason and spying, instigating war against the State, and undermining the constitution. Their four-month trial became a puppet show broadcast nightly on Sudanese television. In January, 1986, el-Tayeb was found guilty and given a thirty year prison term and a life sentence, to be served consecutively. Pressure from the West prevented his hanging. On April 11, 1987, a Sudanese court reduced his sentence to ten years (compiled from Secret Exodus, pp. 149-50; and Rescue, pp. 213-14).

<sup>176</sup> Rescue, p. 190; and Operation Moses, p. 119.

<sup>177</sup> Rescue, p. 190.

<sup>178</sup> Operation Moses, p. 120.



Tuwawa. The group was then taken to an airstrip eight miles north of Gedaref. During the early morning hours, nine U.S. turbo-prop C-130 transport planes, crammed with food, water, blankets, medicine supplies, doctors, and Ethiopian Israelis, flew from an American base near Frankfurt to a military base outside of Eilat, and then on to the Sudan. The "harmattan," a dry, dust-laden wind, which had swept across the desert on the night of March 21 and threatened to disrupt the airlift, died down the next morning. Beginning about six o'clock in the morning, the C-130 transport planes filled with the remnant of Operation Moses took off about every half hour. Four hundred and eighty Beta Yisrael were rescued. Six of the airplanes landed in Israel with the human cargo. Three returned to Eilat empty because all indications pointed to a larger number of Beta Yisrael remaining in the Sudan.<sup>179</sup>

Prime Minister Peres and Ambassador Lewis stood in the desert airstrip near Eilat awaiting the arrival of the Beta Yisrael. The two men entered the first plane which arrived. A white-haired old man showed them the precious thing he managed save through the whole trek from Ethiopia to the Sudan, during his stay at the refugee camp, and then on his journey to Israel. It was an ancient holy book, soiled and wrapped, but beautifully handwritten on goatskin in the liturgical language of Ge'ez. "Listen," the old Ethiopian addressed the Prime Minister, "these are the things of Moses. We have arrived."<sup>180</sup>

Over eight thousand Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel thanks to Operations Moses and Joshua, bringing the Ethiopian Israeli population to

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<sup>179</sup> Compiled from Redemption Song, pp. 188-89; Operation Moses, p. 119; and Rescue, pp. 190-91. For a more detailed analysis of Operation Joshua/Sheba, see Secret Exodus, pp. 140-48; Redemption Song, pp. 179-89; and Operation Moses, pp. 116-21.

<sup>180</sup> Redemption Song, p. 189; and Rescue, p. 191.

around sixteen to seventeen thousand. The refugee camps in the Sudan, for the most part, had been cleared of the Ethiopian Jews. The majority of the Jewish and Gentile worlds thought that all of the Ethiopian Jews had now been saved. However, contemporary estimates noted that somewhere between ten and thirty thousand Beta Yisrael remained behind in Ethiopia. Families were separated. Couples were thousands of miles apart from each other. Parents were separated from their children. Siblings were pulled apart. Friends were distanced from one another. The dramatic events of 1984 and 1985 were not the closing chapter of the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry; but rather, one of the many powerful climaxes of the story. In fact, because of the massive family separations they created, the events of the mid-decade of the 1980s heightened the need to bring the remainder back home.

CHAPTER EIGHT:  
THE POST OPERATION MOSES ERA OF 1985 TO 1989:  
FAMILY REUNIFICATION, RESCUE LISTS AND  
THE CONGRESSIONAL CAUCUS FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWRY<sup>1</sup>

Operations Moses and Joshua rescued nearly eight thousand Beta Yisrael to Israel. By the middle of 1985, sixteen to seventeen thousand Ethiopian Israelis resided in the Jewish Homeland. While the country celebrated the massive rescue operations, the sudden influx of Ethiopian Jews created a myriad of problems for Israel and the Beta Yisrael. The first issue was the enormous amount of medical treatment needed for the malnourished, dehydrated and disease-plagued Beta Yisrael. Because of the great numbers of olim, Israel faced a housing shortage, and the Ethiopian immigrants were sent to absorption centers and hotels scattered all over the country. During their first weeks and months in Israel, the new immigrants confronted culinary differences, the Hebraicization of Amharic and Tigrean names,<sup>2</sup> and the learning of the Hebrew language. Lack of religiosity and desecration of the Shabbat by some Israelis shocked the Beta Yisrael. The racism of a small element of Israeli society jolted some of the new immigrants. Also, cultural differences were at times jarring,<sup>3</sup> social patterns and family dynamics had been disrupted,<sup>4</sup> and the technological gap had to be bridged.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this material is appearing in print for the first time.

<sup>2</sup> See Dr. Chaim Rosen, The Ethiopian Jews' Names and How They Get Them, written with the support of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (estimated date: 1985-86), from the files of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, Ethiopian Israelis mention food, the desecration of the Shabbat, bad manners, intolerance, pushiness, and the denigration of Israeli leaders, teachers and parents as the most difficult cultural differences to overcome.

<sup>4</sup> See Dr. Chaim Rosen, Questions About Ethiopian Culture and Behavior, research funding from Hadassah W.Z.O.A., November, 1986, files of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York; Dr. Chaim Rosen, The 'Rist' Ideology: "He Owes Me My Share." Ethnographic Essay III, research funding from Hadassah W.Z.O.A., October,

Additionally, the rabbinical demands on the Beta Yisrael and the Ethiopians' adamant refusal to undergo any ritual ceremony, set the immigrants at loggerheads with the Chief Rabbinate. Until the start of Operation Moses in November 1984, the rabbis required hatafat dam<sup>6</sup> of Ethiopian males to ensure their Jewishness. Shortly afterwards, the Chief Rabbinate decided that an "immersion-in-water" ceremony would be enough for both Ethiopian females and males, although the males would still be checked for proper circumcision. The rabbinate feared that "some intermingling with non-Jews may have occurred in the course of time and that no legal conversion may have taken place." The majority of the Ethiopian community viewed the "renewal of the covenant ceremony" as highly "insulting," "demeaning," "a threat to their dignity," and "unnecessary."<sup>7</sup>

In July of 1985, Prime Minister Shimon Peres held a series of meetings with the chief rabbis and representatives of the Beta Yisrael community, and worked out a formula to get around the impasse over immersion. But the agreement, under which the rabbinical courts would determine the personal status of Ethiopian Jews applying to get married, did not hold because the chief rabbis backed out. In late Summer of 1985, hundreds of Ethiopian Jews intensified their struggle by staging a sit-in across the street from the Chief

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1987, files of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York; Dr. Chaim Rosen, Some Enduring Aspects of Amhara Perspectives on the "Self" and the "Other," Ethnographic Essay II, research funding from Hadassah W.Z.O.A., October, 1987, files of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York.

<sup>5</sup> The Beta Yisrael were often mislabeled as "primitive" or "backward." More correctly, differences between Israel and Ethiopia, between twentieth century industrial practices and rural norms, had to be bridged. For a detailed discussion on the extent of the technological gap (pp. 198-99) as well as the other difficulties facing Ethiopian Jews and Israeli society due to the large influx of Beta Yisrael, see Louis Rapoport, Redemption Song: The Story of Operation Moses (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986), Chapter nine: "Homecoming," pp. 190-221.

<sup>6</sup> A ritual drop of blood drawn from an already circumcised penis.

<sup>7</sup> See Redemption Song, pp. 201-09.

Rabbinate in Jerusalem. For weeks, the Beta Yisrael camped out in front of the Plaza Hotel, attracting growing support from secular Israelis and liberal politicians who saw an opportunity to strike a blow at the rabbinate.<sup>8</sup> The strike finally ended in September after Peres worked out a compromise formula. The plan required members of the Ethiopian Israeli community wishing to be married to apply to their local rabbinical marriage registrar, who would then examine their personal status "according to our holy Torah." Once again, the issue of "renewal of the covenant" had been deferred until marriage. Within weeks, however, the agreement broke down, and the two sides were again embroiled in conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Among the most significant factors impeding a smooth absorption process into Israeli society were the trauma and shock of the family separations. While the drama and successes of Operations Moses and Joshua were heralded across the world, the news accounts neglected to mention that the rescue missions left the Beta Yisrael community divided as some 10,000-30,000 Ethiopian Jews remained in East Africa.<sup>10</sup> While attending ulpanim, receiving vocational training, caring for family members and friends,

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<sup>8</sup> The debate over conversion reflected some of the deep splits amongst Jews in Israel and elsewhere. The secular Citizens' Rights party said Peres should not have bargained with the rabbinate, and by doing so was "relinquishing the government's legal authority" and making the Orthodox rabbis the sole judges of "who's a Jew and who's a half Jew." Other anticlerical groups, such as the leftist Mapam and centrist Shinui parties, claimed "solidarity" with the Ethiopian Jews. Rabbi Alexander Schindler, leader of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, condemned the rabbinical authorities for insisting on ritual conversion. The right wing Tehiya party was split between Knesset member Geula Cohen, who described the Chief Rabbinate as "cruel," and her colleague Rabbi Eliezer Waldman, who defended the chief rabbis (*Redemption Song*, pp. 206-07).

<sup>9</sup> Compiled from *Redemption Song*, pp. 201-09.

<sup>10</sup> See the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews' *Ethiopian Jewry Report*, a publication of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Vol. 5, No. 1 & 2, Spring & Summer, 1985, which notes how both the Jewish and non-Jewish press ignored a large segment of the Beta Yisrael community that was left behind in Africa waiting for rescue. "In the furor of the 'lost tribe returning home,' much of the public received the mistaken impression that all the Ethiopian Jews had been brought to Israel," p. 1.



training for the Israeli Defense Forces, or studying at one of Israel's universities, the Beta Yisrael in Israel were often distracted by the separation from family and friends. The distance was unbearable. Moreover, the lack of communication between Israel and the Horn of Africa, which resulted in the constant fear for the safety, health and well-being of loved ones, greatly magnified the problem. Ethiopian Israelis would go months and even years without knowing if family members were dead or alive.<sup>11</sup> Often news of the death of relatives only came when new groups of Ethiopian Jews managed to reach Israel.

Equally as powerful in impeding absorption were the Israeli community's intense feelings of "survivor guilt."<sup>12</sup> Much like some survivors of the Holocaust, many Ethiopian Jews felt guilty that they were living and, moreover, living in good health and with food in the Jewish Homeland. They questioned why they had been fortunate enough to escape Ethiopia; to outrun the shiftas (bandits), border guards and armies; outlive the refugee camps; and

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<sup>11</sup> Often, my wife Rhonda and I would serve as intermediaries for communication between Ethiopian Jews in Israel and the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia. Until recently, the lack of diplomatic relations between Israel and Ethiopia resulted in poor, infrequent and intermittent postal service between the two countries. In fact, a majority of the letters sent between the Horn of Africa and the Jewish State never reached their final destination. Ethiopian Israelis would send us letters and sometimes money to be forwarded to family and friends stranded in their birth land. Since the envelope bore an American stamp and postmark, the success rate of delivery was greatly enhanced. We would issue an international money order for the cash, thereby increasing the likelihood that the money sent from Israel would be received by the family members and thwarting interception by thieves (American dollars could bring in double their worth on the black market in Ethiopia).

<sup>12</sup> On numerous occasions during my year-long residences in Israel in 1985-86 and 1988-89, as well as a winter visit in 1987-88, my Ethiopian Israeli friends discussed at length their feelings of survivor guilt. Some of these dramatic encounters are captured on my home video footage. Additionally, I have literally dozens of letters dating from 1986 to 1991 from Ethiopian Israeli friends which dramatize their guilt, obsession and questioning of why they are living and have been rescued to Israel while the rest of their families either died enroute to the Sudan or in Ethiopia, or are languishing in Ethiopia. See also "The Pain of Separation," The Jerusalem Post Magazine, Friday, March 10, 1989, pp. 8-10.



to receive safe passage to the Promised Land. They were preoccupied with thoughts of their brethren who died in Ethiopia or while trying to flee to the Sudan. Dr. Ruth Westheimer and Dr. Steven Kaplan note the profound impact this had on the community:

Many of the new arrivals had not only lost loved ones but had also been unable to properly bury and mourn them in the camps. Thus they carried with them a double measure of guilt, both for having survived and for having failed to fulfill their spiritual obligations. In some cases, complete funeral rituals were performed only years later, when conditions in Israel made this possible.<sup>13</sup>

The Ethiopian Israelis rescued by Operations Moses and Joshua and during the preceding years focused on the plight of their family and friends who still languished in Ethiopia. Although they made great strides in absorption into Israeli society and provided significant contributions to the Jewish State, the immigration process would not be completely successful until families were reunited and all Ethiopian Jews were brought to Eretz Yisrael.

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<sup>13</sup> Ruth Westheimer and Steven Kaplan, Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition (New York: New York University Press, 1992), p. 27.

## FAMILY REUNIFICATION

The passage of time was detrimental to the Beta Yisrael. The community in Ethiopia suffered from harsh political, social and climatic conditions. The strain of separation from loved ones hindered absorption in Israel. Those concerned with the plight of Ethiopian Jewry, both in and outside of Israel, recognized the importance of completing the Beta Yisrael aliyah as soon as possible. At the same time, the different parties involved with Ethiopian rescue each took credit for highlighting the difficulties of family separation and coining the term "Family Reunification."

In June of 1985, some two months after Operation Joshua, Dr. Ephraim Isaac ventured to Israel on a trip sponsored by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) to observe and comment on the absorption process of the Beta Yisrael. In "The Absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel: A JDC Consultation Report," Isaac states that the most significant psychological problem afflicting the Beta Yisrael olim is the dispersion of families:

Perhaps the most acute psychological problem existing now is the dispersion of families. It is a cause of depression which negatively affects the stability of the community. It has led to some suicidal cases. It generates agony and anxiety, and if not checked soon it can rock the bottom of the whole ship of the integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. I would say that my discussions about education and economics with my fellow Ethiopians were rational and calm; discussion about missing families, however, were marked and accented with tears and emotion.

JDC should do whatever it can to work with the Israeli government to establish contact with Ethiopian authorities (perhaps through Sweden or another third party) in the name of humanity to make family reunions possible soon, before it becomes too late... Complex as the issues involving it may be, it is one which should be taken most seriously for consideration. According to my fellow Ethiopians, it is the number one issue.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dr. Ephraim Isaac, The Absorption of Ethiopian Jews in Israel: A JDC Consultation Report of June 2-30, 1985, Princeton, New Jersey, July, 1985, pp. 25-26.

Will Recant, Executive Director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, states that it is hard to pin down specifically where the idea of Family Reunification came from:

When we used to talk about rescue, we would talk initially about the need to rescue all of the Ethiopian Jews and bring them to Israel. Then, by 1985, after Operation Moses, when you had families being separated, is when you really came to Family Reunification. That is when AAEJ began to use the term, Kasa Kabede [the Ethiopian government minister] in Ethiopia used the term when he would talk to Americans, and American diplomats would use the term following Operation Moses... So that is when people started to talk about family reunification in 1985 and '86.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Isaac notes that the when the AAEJ heard about his report, they wanted a copy right away: "JDC did not want me to distribute it, but I gave it to a few important people... AAEJ got their idea from the report."<sup>16</sup> Isaac states that he only sent the report to AAEJ founder Graenum Berger, who "sent it to a couple of other people." "So they [the AAEJ] extracted... and ferreted this [the idea of Family Reunification] out of the report."<sup>17</sup> Isaac remarks that he "really didn't complain," since the AAEJ "put it [the idea of Family Reunification] to good use."<sup>18</sup> However, he further commented that the AAEJ activists "sometimes really do not operate in a kosher way, as I see it. They want to get the credit for everything."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Will Recant, Executive Director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, May 19, 1992, AAEJ national headquarters, Washington, D.C.

<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Ephraim Isaac, Director of the Institute for Semitic and Afroasiatic Studies, May 18, 1992, Princeton, New Jersey.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

Recant, who had been an activist for Russian Jews, counters that the term "Family Reunification" had been used in terms of Soviet Jewry since the mid-1970s: "It is not that far a stretch that it was used for Ethiopian Jewry after Operation Moses, because that is what the issue became very clearly."<sup>20</sup> He also notes that since Ethiopia refused to let the remaining Jews out en masse, the appeal to the Ethiopian government and the international community could focus on allowing families to come together. "Part of the reason that the words 'Family Reunification' were used is because of the 'UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights'<sup>21</sup> of which Ethiopia is a signature." "One does not need to be a genius to come up with the term 'Family Reunification' when half of the community is in one place, and half is in another, and use it to apply to words which are known by international human rights groups."<sup>22</sup>

Michael Strum, former Associate Director for Relief and Family Reunification for the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), believes that external pressures and political considerations paved the way for Family Reunification:

When we [NACOEJ, AAEJ and CAEJ] started to meet with the larger Jewish community,<sup>23</sup> we were told that 'we [the activist groups] did not do rescue, rescue could only be done by the Israeli government; and that we should not talk about rescue -- that is an insult to the Ethiopian government to talk about rescue of [Ethiopian Jews].' So we were 'officially' reunifying families, so we changed the name... Family

<sup>20</sup> Personal Interview with Will Recant.

<sup>21</sup> One of the basic elements of the "UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights" is "Family Reunification" and the necessity of all signature countries to allow for and facilitate the reuniting of families who are separated or dispersed because of war, famine, persecution or political difficulties.

<sup>22</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

<sup>23</sup> More on these meetings and the coordinated efforts of the North American Ethiopian Jewry activist groups will be detailed in the next section.

Reunification is also a political term, because it is not considered an attack to a country, whereas talking about rescuing people from a country is an attack. When you talk about reunifying families, you are talking about something that is guaranteed by the UN charter, and Ethiopia was a signatory. Also, by 1987, the AAEJ also stopped using the term rescue.<sup>24</sup>

The first mention of "Family Reunification" in the various publications of the Ethiopian Jewry activists in North America occurs in the late Spring and early Summer of 1985. The Spring and Summer of 1985 issue of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews' (CAEJ) newsletter, Ethiopian Jewry Report, gives several references to the need for 'Family Reunification.' In urging efforts with North American, Israeli and Ethiopian governments to intercede on behalf of Ethiopian Jews, CAEJ officials stated: "Family reunification is a legitimate reason for exit under Ethiopia's strict emigration policies, but advocacy is necessary to put it into motion."<sup>25</sup> Additionally, while noting the success of Beta Yisrael activism in bringing about the recent rescue missions, the publication states: "Family reunification is recognized by the regime as a legitimate reason for immigration, but does not have any motivation for doing so. Advocacy was largely responsible for Operation Moses and the subsequent U.S. airlift."<sup>26</sup>

The AAEJ publication Release mentions "Family Reunification" in its Summer 1985 issue. The cover story states: "As it continues to save individuals and families, the AAEJ is urging the U.S. and other governments to implement a family reunification program, to take the remaining Ethiopian Jews to

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<sup>24</sup> Personal Interview with Michael Strum, former Associate Director for Relief and Family Reunification for the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, currently owner of City Sights Tours in Washington, D.C., May 19, 1992, in Washington, D.C.

<sup>25</sup> "Still 8,000 Left in Ethiopia," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol. 5, No. 1 & 2, Spring & Summer (May), 1985, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> "Update on Rescue," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol. 5, No. 1 & 2, Spring & Summer (May), 1985, p. 6.

Israel."<sup>27</sup> In summation, the article exclaims: "The Jews left behind in Ethiopia are imperiled unless they are allowed to rejoin their families in the West." Likewise, The American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ), in a June 1985 information sheet called "Update," calls for synagogues to assist "in reunifying a family or individual with loved ones in Israel."<sup>28</sup>

Thus, before the publication of Dr. Ephraim Isaac's JDC sponsored report in July of 1985, the term "Family Reunification" was widely utilized by the North American activist groups for Ethiopian Jewry. While by the beginning of 1986 the organized Jewish community and Israel employed the public awareness campaign and fund raising technique of referring to the needed completion of the Beta Yisrael aliyah as "Family Reunification,"<sup>29</sup> CAEJ, AAEJ and ARNEJ had already been highlighting the need for months. Perhaps this is another instance of how the activists led the call for rescue and hastened rescue operations. While too small in numbers, financial backing and capabilities to mount massive rescue operations, these groups triggered sensitivity to the issue through public awareness campaigns and their own small rescue operations. In turn, the organized Jewish world and Israel were prompted to action.

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<sup>27</sup> "Conditions Worsen in Ethiopia: AAEJ Expands Rescue," Release, Vol. 3, No. 1, Summer 1985, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry, June 1985 "Update" information sheet, files of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry, Pasadena, California.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, on July 27, 1987, over three thousand Ethiopian Jews and native Israelis gathered for a "dramatic show of solidarity for the reunification of Ethiopian Jewish families with their relatives in Israel." The event, called "If Not Now, When? — Popular Assembly for the Reunification of Ethiopian Jewish Families," included participation by Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Natan (Anatoly) Sharansky. See "3000 Participate in Unprecedented Show of Support for Family Reunification of Ethiopian Jews," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol. 7, No. 1 & 2, Fall & Winter 1987/88, pp. 1 & 3.





Getahun Kaleb and son



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Getahun Kaleb



Selamnesh Alemu



Yemataw Mekonen



Wagnew Belay

RESCUE AND RELIEF:  
AAEJ, CAEJ AND NACOEJ ACTIVITIES:  
A COORDINATED EFFORT?

The AAEJ, CAEJ, ARNEJ and NACOEJ called for "Family Reunification" shortly after the successful Israeli Mosad and American CIA operations of late 1984 and early 1985. The groups recognized that the aliyah was not complete because a significant portion of the community remained in East Africa. ARNEJ concentrated its activities in synagogues across America to raise funds for "Family Reunification." AAEJ and CAEJ lobbied North American political officials, created public awareness campaigns, and undertook their own rescue operations, all in the name of "Family Reunification." NACOEJ raised funds for relief work in Ethiopia and absorption in Israel, while helping to facilitate "Family Reunification" for Beta Yisrael from Ethiopia to Israel.

Throughout the second half of the 1980s, AAEJ, CAEJ and NACOEJ rescued Beta Yisrael through "legal means." Generally, these Ethiopian Jews were rescued individually or in small groups. Various documents and permits were obtained for work or schooling overseas. Often, "sponsors" outside of the Horn of Africa were used as guarantors and facilitators for the rescue process.<sup>30</sup> Michael Strum remarks that "we [North American activist groups] were using American documents of all kinds -- adoption documents, high school, summer camp we tried unsuccessfully, college documents -- I was basically in charge of getting those documents from schools and getting the sponsors to sign the affidavits."<sup>31</sup> Sometimes the papers were obtained legally, sometimes they were manufactured or doctored, and sometimes they were purchased. Additionally, in Ethiopia, money pay-offs of local authorities, government

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<sup>30</sup> On a number of occasions, Rhonda and I served in such a capacity.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Michael Strum.

bureaucrats, military and police officials, and agents of various sorts were utilized to ensure the rescue.<sup>32</sup>

Funds were solicited on a "money saves a life" basis. The AAEJ titled its money collection effort for rescue as the "CHAI Campaign."<sup>33</sup> Individuals and groups were urged to give three thousand dollars to rescue a Beta Yisrael. "Three thousand dollars is what it costs the AAEJ to save one Ethiopian Jew. To each one of them, \$3,000 is CHAI, life."<sup>34</sup> The AAEJ also used the slogan "Unfinished Exodus" to collect dollars for rescue.<sup>35</sup> ARNEJ also used specific dollar amounts to raise funds for family reunification in Israel -- \$5,000 for a family, \$3000 for an adult, and \$500 for a child. The organization called their appeals and fund raising ventures by various names including "Operation Miriam,"<sup>36</sup> "Operation Matzah,"<sup>37</sup> and "HINENU."<sup>38</sup> Along with the AAEJ, CAEJ,

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<sup>32</sup> Much of this information is still very sensitive. I am not at liberty to provide any more details on the specifics of how the documents were procured, what types of papers were utilized and who facilitated the "legal" rescue operations. These successful exit methods may be used to save Jews from other countries in the future; thus, total disclosure of the particulars is not advisable.

<sup>33</sup> One such parlor meeting on the 9th of May, 1988, raised over \$60,000. Mrs. Loulette Samuels, wife of the late Howard Samuels, hosted the evening in which Representative Steven Solarz of New York spoke, and letters from Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts and Representative Benjamin Gilman of New York were read. See "New York Benefit for Ethiopian Jews," Release, Vol. 6, No. 2, Spring, 1988, p.3. In the Spring of 1989, Senator Kennedy and Representative Gary Ackerman of New York joined another "Save a Life" benefit at the home of Loulette Samuels in which more than \$90,000 was raised. See "Loulette Samuels Hosts Successful Benefit for Ethiopian Jews," Release, Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer, 1989, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> "AAEJ Resumes CHAI Campaign," Release, Vol. 5, No. 2, Fall, 1987, p. 1. See also "AAEJ CHAI Campaign Continues," Release, Vol. 4, No. 3, Winter, 1986, p. 1; and "When Jews are Suffering and Dying, it is Time to Act!: AAEJ Resumes CHAI Campaign," AAEJ fund raising appeal letter of August, 1986; as well as numerous other issues of Release between 1986 and 1991. The August, 1986 fund raising appeal letter noted when and why the CHAI Campaign was originally organized: "Disappointed with the sporadic nature and slowness of Israel's activities," the AAEJ CHAI Campaign was initiated in 1981 "to increase the number of the Ethiopian Jews being brought out from Sudanese refugee camps."

<sup>35</sup> American Association for Ethiopian Jews' appeal letter of April, 1987, in conjunction with Passover, mailed from the new Washington D.C. office.

<sup>36</sup> "Operation Miriam," American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry's mailing of February 7, 1987, to rabbis across North America, including a cover letter, liturgical

and NACOEJ, ARNEJ raised funds for rescue through an Ethiopian Jewry B'nai Mitzvah Twinning Program.<sup>39</sup> CAEJ raised funds based on a program of "Family Reunification."<sup>40</sup> NACOEJ continued to raise funds based on relief and medical programs and missions in Ethiopia, as well as absorption efforts in Israel, while keeping their rescue efforts and the monies raised to finance them covert.<sup>41</sup>

According to CAEJ, in 1985 more than one hundred and eighty-five Ethiopian Jews were rescued by the efforts of independent North American

materials, synagogue action program, sample appeal letter, congregant commitment card, Ethiopian Jewry information sheet, and a sample press release.

<sup>37</sup> "Operation Matzah," Pesach appeal of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry, mailing of March 10, 1988, to rabbis across North America, including a cover letter, a Manischewitz Matzah box altered to say "This box contains Mitzvahs, not Matzahs," a reading for the 'ransoming of the Afikomen & Ethiopian Jewry,' sermon materials, and an update information sheet.

<sup>38</sup> "HINENU," American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry's September, 1988, mailing to rabbis across North America, including a cover letter, a sermon on Ethiopian Jewry, a sample "Hinenu" announcement, and various petitions to be sent to U.S. government officials.

<sup>39</sup> The following is an example of how this program worked: As student rabbi of Congregation Shir Ami in Castro Valley, California, I obtained a name and biographical sketch of a Beta Yisrael youth in Ethiopia for a Bar Mitzvah student of mine. The student contacted the Ethiopian youth's family in Israel, wrote letters to the youth in Ethiopia, wrote to California congressional officials urging them to work for Family Reunification, and raised money for rescue. The student put his twin's name on his Bar Mitzvah invitation and a brief message explaining the plight of his Ethiopian peer. Also, he displayed a blow up picture of his twin on the bima during the ceremony. Additionally, the student donated a substantial percentage of his Bar Mitzvah gift money to the rescue efforts.

Various publications of the four activist groups note their Ethiopian Jewry Twinning Program. A B'nai Mitzvah is given a name and biographical sketch of a Beta Yisrael peer who is unable to hold a public ceremony because of religious restrictions in Ethiopia. Monies raised through donations of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah and his/her guests were utilized to help rescue that individual and their family. NACOEJ matched North American youth with their Ethiopian counterparts in Israel. In particular, see "Mazel Tov, Mazel Tov! NACOEJ 'Twins' Twins for Bar Mitzvah," Lifeline, a publication of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York, Summer, 1989, p. 1. Also, see "Bar Mitzvah Twins American & Ethiopian Jews," Release, Vol. 4, No. 1, Spring, 1986, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Noted from various CAEJ Ethiopian Jewry Report publications from 1985 to 1990.

<sup>41</sup> See the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry's Newsletter, Lifeline, which began publication in 1986, for details of the relief work of NACOEJ, and an absence of any indication of their rescue operations.

groups.<sup>42</sup> The AAEJ asserts that its organization alone rescued nearly one hundred and sixty Beta Yisrael during the eighteen months following Operations Moses and Joshua.<sup>43</sup> By the end of December, 1986, the AAEJ claimed that they had rescued three hundred Beta Yisrael since the airlifts ended in March, 1985, two hundred of which were saved in 1986 alone.<sup>44</sup> The organization also stated that these numbers represented 80% of all Ethiopian Jews who had succeeded in reaching Israel since Operation Joshua.<sup>45</sup> By the middle of 1987, CAEJ reported that three hundred and twenty Ethiopian Jews were rescued to Israel by North American activist groups via "legal" means since the cessation of Operations Moses and Joshua.<sup>46</sup> By the Spring of 1988, the AAEJ notes that it had rescued four hundred Beta Yisrael since the Spring of 1985, sixty-eight coming in the first few months of 1988.<sup>47</sup> As of June of 1989, the AAEJ claimed that it had rescued to Israel six hundred Beta Yisrael since March, 1985, bringing the total saved by the activist organization since 1977 to eight hundred. Additionally, the group stated that the six hundred Ethiopian Jews represented 90% of those brought directly from Ethiopia to Israel since Operation Joshua ended.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> "Update on Rescue," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol. 6, No. 1 & 2, Spring & Summer 1986, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> "AAEJ Resumes Chai Campaign."

<sup>44</sup> A Report from AAEJ: January 1986 - December 1986, American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Highland Park, Illinois. By the end of 1986, the AAEJ stated that they had rescued five hundred Beta Yisrael since 1977.

<sup>45</sup> American Association for Ethiopian Jews mailing of December 1, 1986. The letter advertised that the AAEJ desperately needed funds since the rescue of the three hundred Beta Yisrael since Operation Joshua has cost the organization \$900,000 (\$3000 to save each of the three hundred souls equals \$900,000).

<sup>46</sup> "Update on Rescue," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol. 7, No. 1 & 2, Fall & Winter, 1987/88, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> "Message from the President [Nathan Shapiro]," Release, Vol. 6, No. 2, Spring, 1988, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Unfinished Exodus: When Jews are Suffering... it's Time to Act!, American Association for Ethiopian Jews information pamphlet, Washington, D.C., Summer, 1989.



Publicly, NACOEJ continued to focus on relief efforts in Ethiopia and absorption in Israel. During the second half of the 1980s, the NACOEJ quarterly newsletter, Lifeline,<sup>49</sup> never mentioned its involvement in saving Beta Yisrael nor did it print articles on the rescue of Ethiopian Jews.<sup>50</sup> Instead, Lifeline pages were filled with articles on the history of the Beta Yisrael, NACOEJ's missions to Ethiopia, its medical missions to Gondar, climatic and political updates of Ethiopia, cultural preservation programs in Israel, adopt an Ethiopian Israeli student program, clothing drives for Ethiopian Israelis, and pictures of Beta Yisrael and NACOEJ representatives in Ethiopia and Israel.<sup>51</sup>

Privately, NACOEJ helped facilitate rescue to Israel. NACOEJ was not solely dedicated to relief and absorption. Michael Strum, whose interest in Ethiopian Jewry was first sparked when he went to Ethiopia in January of 1984 on a NACOEJ sponsored trip led by Barbara Ribakove Gordon, notes that the perception that NACOEJ was not involved with rescue "is a misconception, but

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<sup>49</sup> Even the name of each organization's quarterly/semi-annual publication was indicative of that particular group's emphasis. NACOEJ, which focused on relief, saw its work as sustaining Jewish lives, and thus called its newsletter Lifeline. The AAEJ concentrated on rescue and the freeing of Beta Yisrael from their bondage in Ethiopia, and thus named its publication Release. ARNEJ saw itself as the moral conscience of American Jewry and in particular the rabbinate vis-a-vis Ethiopian Jewry, and pushed for accountability, and thus called its newsletter Heneinu "We Are Here." And CAEJ, which focused both on relief and rescue, gave its publication a more generic name, Ethiopian Jewry Report.

<sup>50</sup> Lifeline, a quarterly publication of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York.

<sup>51</sup> The only mention of "Family Reunification" or rescue in Lifeline from 1986 through the end of 1989, came in the Spring, 1989 issue, p. 7; thanking its members for sending in postcards to U.S. government officials "urging them to see to it that Ethiopian Jewry has a high priority on the agenda when the U.S. and Ethiopia discuss improving relations;" and the Summer, 1989 issue, p. 6, remarking that the postcard campaign is "raising consciousness on this issue..". On the same page, "Family Reunification" appears in small type as an issue President Bush should bring up with the Ethiopian government. A change in the public discussion of rescue came during the Summer of 1990 as thousands of Beta Yisrael journeyed from the Semien Mountains to Addis Ababa. The Lifeline newsletter beginning with the Summer 1990 issue reflects that change.



it was an intentional misconception."<sup>52</sup> Strum, who in May of 1985 took over the rescue portfolio from Michael Sabin<sup>53</sup> and convinced the NACOEJ staff that he should work out of Washington, D.C., states:

Our [NACOEJ] policy was that we would never talk about rescue publicly, only with small groups of people fund raising or whatever, but never in a big speech or never in any of our publications. This made life very difficult for us politically with AAEJ because they were raising much more funds than we were and getting much more credit than we were – politicizing their work here [Washington, D.C.] on the Hill and doing a lot of lobbying work, which I felt was necessary, but not all of NACOEJ favored the work that they were doing... So they [AAEJ] would go around fund raising along with the Canadian Association [CAEJ] and ARNEJ saying '\$3000 buys a life.' And at that point we would not do that. So, we had to collect our money for relief for Israel and more surreptitiously for the rescue. It was difficult not to get any credit... From the first trips [NACOEJ missions to Ethiopia] we were already giving money to people and the documents and attempted adoption process in which we tried to get people through. We even had a modus vivendi with AAEJ, that rather than have them say that we did nothing, which they often did, but when we were on good terms they would say 'that NACOEJ is involved with relief more than we are, and with Israel, but we are involved with advocacy and with rescue.'<sup>54</sup>

Soon after Strum started to work for NACOEJ in Washington, D.C., he began talking with Lisa Freund. Freund, who had been an AAEJ activist since 1984, set up the AAEJ's office in Washington, D.C. in 1985. She also helped recruit Will Recant to be in charge of fund raising for the AAEJ (who later became the Executive Director of the AAEJ), and helped run the AAEJ's

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Michael Strum.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Sabin had to leave his NACOEJ position at the beginning of 1985 because of a family crisis. In 1987, Sabin died at the young age of thirty-two years. See "Michael Sabin," *Lifeline*, Spring, 1987, p. 8. See also "Falasha," a memorial to Michael Sabin and a poem he wrote on the Beta Yisrael, *The Jewish Week, Inc.*, January 2, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid

National Resource Center until 1987.<sup>55</sup> Strum met with Freund in 1985 in an attempt to coordinate rescue efforts.

NACOEJ founder and Executive Director Barbara Ribakove Gordon also saw that the time was right to coordinate efforts on rescue with the other North American activist groups:

As our [NACOEJ's] rescue involvement got greater and greater, and we were going back and forth to Ethiopia, and managing to meet with a number of the people we were working on, and we had begun to send in substantial amounts of money for relief -- it became ridiculous -- it became very clear that in many cases we [NACOEJ, CAEJ, AAEJ] were each working on the same cases, and other people were falling through the cracks. I began to realize as well that the Israelis had begun to talk to the AAEJ, and that was only right... So I went to the Israelis and said 'this was [is] ridiculous, I'm going to ask the AAEJ to meet with us on a regular basis so that we can compare our lists, compare our methods, if we have something that works that they could use, why shouldn't they use it, and the same the opposite direction.'<sup>56</sup>

Strum notes that Gordon and NACOEJ also wanted to coordinate efforts with the Jewish leadership and mainstream Jewish organizations of North America. "We thought, if the national organizations or international organizations got involved, they could get people all over the world involved and coordinate their efforts on 'this paper thing [the facilitation of rescue through various documents].' We tried to call such a meeting in 1985. It was quelled."<sup>57</sup> Instead, what resulted was a smaller group composed of the activist organizations and a few other national groups.

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<sup>55</sup> "Thank you Lisa," Release, Vol. 5, No. 3, Fall, 1987, p. 4; and Personal interview with William Recant.

<sup>56</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon, Executive Director of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, former senior editor of Health Magazine, New York, New York, June 17, 1992.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Michael Strum.

Beginning in January of 1986, representatives from AAEJ, CAEJ, NACOEJ, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) and Israel began meeting every other month to exchange information and coordinate projects for rescue, relief and advocacy. In March, the Jewish Immigrant Aid Society (JIAS) of Canada joined the meetings, and in May, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) of the United States joined the group.<sup>58</sup> The National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Committee (NJCRAC) also joined the group. At first, the meetings were held in Gordon's Manhattan apartment until the location was moved to the HIAS office in New York. By 1989, the meetings dwindled and eventually stopped, since the groups were now functioning in Ethiopia itself with the Beta Yisrael community.<sup>59</sup> From 1986 to 1989, extensive phone contact between the "summit conferences" was utilized to update the other organizations on their rescue lists and Family Reunification efforts.<sup>60</sup>

The meetings became quarterly, and JIAS, under pressure from HIAS, was eventually asked to leave the group. HIAS charged that JIAS had no right bringing Ethiopian Jews to North America. "JIAS continued to do so as the arm of the Canadian Jewish community because the Canadian Jewish Congress decided that if they could rescue a family-- most of which [they rescued] were

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<sup>58</sup> "In Brief," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol. 6, No. 1 & 2, Spring and Summer, 1986, p. 6.

<sup>59</sup> The renewal of relations between Israel and Ethiopia in November, 1989, allowed for the groups to have a presence on the ground in East Africa. The on-again off-again coordination of efforts for rescue between the various groups continued in Ethiopia. For more on the subject, see chapter nine, "Operation Solomon," section on "Lists, Medical Aid, Education and Aliyah: The Beta Yisrael in Addis Ababa from May 1990 to May 1991."

<sup>60</sup> Between 1986 and 1991, dozens of my Ethiopian Israeli friends' families remaining in Ethiopia were on these lists. A number of times a month, I would call the AAEJ (Ladana Schnapper) and NACOEJ (Michael Strum) offices to see where my friends stood in the rescue pipeline and how I could help to facilitate the process. Often, I would update the AAEJ and NACOEJ offices with information I received from Israel and Ethiopia via letters from our Beta Yisrael friends and their family in Abyssinia. I would also send copies of letters I received from Ethiopia to the AAEJ and NACOEJ offices, which provided additional names, ages and information on Ethiopian Jews waiting to be rescued to Israel.

intermarried couples-- they should do so. JIAS was considered as a very anti-Zionist group."<sup>61</sup> CAEJ, AAEJ and NACOEJ were all officially against JIAS's policy of bringing Ethiopian Jews to North America. "The most infamous case was JIAS bringing two brothers who were well educated and spoke Hebrew to Canada. Eventually, JIAS stopped coming to the meetings."<sup>62</sup>

The major players in the meetings to discuss and coordinate case loads included Gordon and Strum from NACOEJ, Susan Pollack Schechtman of CAEJ and Recant and LaDena Schnapper of the AAEJ. Shortly after Chicagoan Nathan Shapiro became president of the AAEJ in the early 1980s, he hired Schnapper, a former Peace Corp worker in Ethiopia who was fluent in Amharic, to be in charge of the rescue operations in Ethiopia.<sup>63</sup> Carol Zuckerman and Haim Halachmi represented HIAS and Israel. Michael Strum remarks:

Carol Zuckerman from HIAS was very easy to work with, [also] because HIAS was in charge of Israel's rescue effort. Haim Halachmi was both a HIAS and Jewish Agency employee, so that made Carol Zuckerman his boss... Haim Halachmi's work was very secret. He worked in a very small office, with two assistants and he had this vast number of cases he was working on from the beginning. Ours, AAEJ's, CAEJ's and a much larger list of his own. From the beginning he was

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Michael Sabin.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Michael Sabin. Virtually all of the Beta Yisrael were brought to Israel. The number of Ethiopian Jews living in North America is miniscule. About one hundred Beta Yisrael live in Canada, most of whom reside in Montreal. A few dozen Ethiopian Jews live in the United States. In the San Francisco Bay Area, I belonged to a group which helped the dozen or so Beta Yisrael who resided in Northern California (next to Washington, D.C., San Jose has the second largest Ethiopian community in the U.S.). "The Ethiopian Jewry Outreach Committee" was formed in 1986 to help identify Ethiopian Jews in the area, to address some of their problems on an individual basis working in conjunction with the Jewish Family and Children's Service and Jewish Vocational Service, and to help incorporate them into the Jewish community of the Bay Area. Additionally, free medical service was provided by physicians in the group (my father, Dr. Ronald Kaye, was one such individual), and the various professionals and business people facilitated educational and career related contacts and opportunities.

<sup>63</sup> For more on LaDena Schnapper, see "National Coordinator Named," Release, Vol. 1, No. 1, January, 1983, p. 2.

our contact person, and the names had to be approved by him. The reason we went to him for approval [was] because we were not supposed to take in anyone who was not technically Jewish. He was to give the approval. I do not know if the final 'hechsher' came from him. This we will never know. When there was trouble, he blamed it on the [Israeli] Interior Ministry, and they do have the ultimate authority. But I'm not sure how much was delegated to him and how much was not... He is the one who met with the Ethiopian leaders...

Recant notes that while friction continued with the Israelis, HIAS and NJCRAC, the North American activist groups suspended previous animosity and worked for the rescue of the Ethiopian Jews. "There was a shared goal, and tremendous cooperation at all times on that level."<sup>64</sup> Recant further states:

Between us, NACOEJ and CAEJ, whatever frictions there were, were all just internal; it never got in the way of what was done in the field. We had different philosophies. The AAEJ didn't like NACOEJ's different missions going over into Ethiopia. We thought that was negative and not helpful. They didn't like some of our political stances. But that never carried over as far as providing relief or the paperwork to get people out...<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

THE ACTIVITIES OF THE  
AMERICAN RABBINIC NETWORK FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

During 1986, ARNEJ managed to increase the participation of Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist rabbis in aiding Ethiopian Jews: "As a result of the Network's activities, both the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly (RA) and the Reform Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR)... passed resolutions at their annual meetings calling upon their leadership and constituencies to assign the highest priority to the rescue of the Jews remaining in Ethiopia."<sup>66</sup> ARNEJ utilized the CCAR convention in July to announce that a "Rabbinic Call to Conscience for Ethiopian Jewry" would be held in Washington, D.C. on September 17th. ARNEJ co-founder Rabbi Phil Posner stated:

As the situation in Ethiopia continues to worsen, we must call attention to the pleas of our fellow Jews to join their families in Israel... That is why the Call to Conscience is being held in Washington D.C. Because the establishment of a reunification process will no doubt depend on government intervention, we the leadership of the religious community must keep the plight of Ethiopian Jews before our elected officials.<sup>67</sup>

Over fifty rabbis from across the country met in Washington, D.C. on September 17 for a day of briefings and lobbying organized by ARNEJ, the AAEJ, and the Religious Action Center of the UAHC. Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis came together to encourage Congress and the State Department to help the Ethiopian Jews immigrate to Israel. During briefing sessions with officials from the State Department and Israeli Embassy, "the rabbis requested that every effort be made to implement a

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<sup>66</sup> "Rabbis Take Action for Ethiopian Jews," Release, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall, 1986, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid



family reunification process. In addition, they encouraged the U.S. and Israeli officials to solicit the support of governments friendly with Ethiopia."<sup>68</sup>

Following the Call to Conscience, a group of ARNEJ and AAEJ people met at the Religious Action Center (RAC) and decided that ARNEJ should become a professionally formalized organization with a hired director. A power play ensued, as RAC officials wanted ARNEJ to be based on the East Coast and staffed by RAC personnel. Jane Fellman and Rabbi Phil Posner, co-founders of ARNEJ, pushed for the organization to continue to be based in Los Angeles "so that the Ethiopian Jewry rescue movement would have a bi-coastal presence, and so the group would be energized and directed by those who conceived of the organization."<sup>69</sup> Three options were available: to base ARNEJ in Washington, D.C. with one full-time director; to run the organization from Los Angeles with one full-time director; or to have two part-time directors on both the East and West coasts. After much discussion, the Los Angeles alternative was selected because "Los Angeles is the second largest Jewish community in the world; the largest Jewish population shift is to the Southwest; to make a Jewish organization successful, you need to go where the leadership energy is -- to take away the organization from the vision and work of the founders is cruel and unwise; and I [Fellman] was saving office expenses by doing work out of my home."<sup>70</sup>

In January of 1987, Fellman stopped teaching and started working full-time as the executive director of ARNEJ. She worked with a core of one hundred and twenty-five rabbis, most of whom were from the Reform and

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<sup>68</sup> "Rabbinic Call to Conscience a Success," Release, Vol. 4, No. 3, Winter, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman, Executive Director of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry, May 4, 1992, and May 10, 1992.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

Conservative movements, and a few from the Reconstructionist and Orthodox streams of Judaism. The first appeal as a professionalized organization was Passover, 1987.<sup>71</sup> This and all subsequent mailings had three external goals: Education about Ethiopian Jewry; Advocacy; and Money for rescue. "The mailings were directly to the rabbis in the hopes that they would bring it to the attention of the congregation for educational and fund raising purposes."<sup>72</sup> The internal goal of the mailings "was to develop a network of rabbis and active congregants across the country, and to have all three movements represented in every major Jewish population center."<sup>73</sup>

On April 12, 1989, a second Rabbinic Call to Conscience was held in Washington, D.C., sponsored by ARNEJ. Entitled "Hinenu (Here We Are)," rabbis from across the country gathered on Capitol Hill for briefing sessions and meetings with their states' representatives and senators.<sup>74</sup> The fifty rabbis brought petitions with twenty-five thousand signatures on behalf of Family Reunification which were collected over a two month period by rabbis and synagogues across the continent.<sup>75</sup> "The HENENU campaign, which brought all of the signatures to D.C., also raised \$60,000. We educated people by

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<sup>71</sup> "Operation Miriam," American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry's mailing of February 7, 1987, to rabbis across North America, including a cover letter, liturgical materials, synagogue action program, sample appeal letter, congregant commitment card, Ethiopian Jewry information sheet, and a sample press release. For more examples of the various ARNEJ mailings, see the notes in this chapter on "Operation Matzah" and "HENENU."

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> "Capitol Hill: 101st Congress," Release, Vol. 7, No. 1, Winter, 1989, p. 2. See also the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jews' mailing regarding the second Call to Conscience, "Henenu," February, 1989, from Pasadena, California; and the schedule & itinerary of "The Second National Call to Conscience for Ethiopian Jewry," Wednesday, April 12, 1989.

<sup>75</sup> Report on the Activities of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry: January 1987- September 1991, ARNEJ, Jane Fellman, Director, Pasadena, California, pp. 2-3.

obtaining the signatures, and increased our donor base from three hundred to seven hundred people in the process."<sup>76</sup>

In addition to the two Calls to Conscience in Washington, D.C., ARNEJ sent two missions to Ethiopia in 1990 and 1991. Through the past years, ARNEJ has also instituted educational campaigns about Ethiopian Jewry within the rabbinate and congregational communities, organized the rabbinic community on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, designed letter campaigns to governmental officials, and raised rescue funds in the synagogue, rabbinic conventions and rabbinical seminary settings.<sup>77</sup> Rabbis across the country were established as coordinators for information programs and fund raising in the synagogue and beyond the congregational setting. In total, seventy-seven rabbis and a few rabbinic students<sup>78</sup> served as coordinators. "Only a few

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<sup>76</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

<sup>77</sup> Report on the Activities of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry: January 1987- September 1991, pp. 2-3.

<sup>78</sup> I was one such ARNEJ rabbinic student coordinator. Upon my return from my first year of rabbinic school in Israel in 1989, I became involved with ARNEJ (my activities with AAEJ and NACOEJ and WUJS' Ethiopian Jewry campaign go back to 1985. The World Union of Jewish Students, based in Arad and Jerusalem, ran a number of projects to promote awareness about the Beta Yisrael and push for the completion of their aliyah. One project in particular, which I helped facilitate while in Israel in 1985 and 1986, was a "Reunify Ethiopian Jewry" bracelet campaign. For a donation, an individual would receive a bracelet engraved in Hebrew, Amharic and English with the words "Beta Yisrael" on the front, and "Reunify Ethiopian Jewry" on the back, as well as a biographical sketch of an Ethiopian Israeli student in Israel and the names, ages and relationship of all family members left behind in Ethiopia). During the Winter of 1989/90, I organized and conducted an information and fund raising campaign on all three state-side HUC-JIR campuses. The appeal letter to raise funds for Family Reunification was distributed to faculty, administration, staff and students. The drive raised \$3325, mostly based on contributions of \$10, \$18, \$25, and \$36. The Cincinnati campus raised \$2133, with the highest single donation of \$500. The Los Angeles campus raised \$754, with the highest single donation of \$100. The New York campus raised \$438, with the highest single donation of \$200.

During the Spring of 1990, my bi-weekly student pulpit congregation, Shir Ami, in Castro Valley, California, raised \$784. The largest donation of the forty-three family unit congregation was \$100. Two children raised \$45 over a three month period specifically for Ethiopian rescue. The religious school raised \$73 through tzedakah collection and various projects.

Also, the same year, I obtained a \$1000 donation from a philanthropic family in the San Francisco Bay Area.

actually did the calling of colleagues. It was asking a lot of the rabbis to be a fund raiser too."<sup>79</sup> Sensing the urgency of the plight of Ethiopian Jews, ARNEJ and the other North American activist groups continued to develop new programs for relief and rescue.<sup>80</sup> Simultaneously, conditions for the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia during the last third of the 1980s continued to worsen.

By 1987, civil war, rebel armies, conscription, expropriation of land, disease, malnutrition, inadequate medical care and the destructive famine which claimed over three hundred thousand Ethiopian lives during the 1980s, were not the only threats to the Beta Yisrael living in Gondar and Tigrey. The Marxist regime of Ethiopia initiated a massive "villagization" program, designed to relocate millions of peasant farmers onto state-run cooperatives. Many Ethiopian and Western analysts believed villagization was "implemented to increase the power of the state by marshalling people in more controllable groups. It is [was] also seen as a means to assimilate Jews and other distinctive ethnic people."<sup>81</sup> Relocations severely disrupted Jewish life. The government placed "ten to fifteen Jewish families in villages made up of four to five hundred non-Jewish families. for the first time in their

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In the Spring of 1987, I conducted a service in solidarity with Ethiopian Jewry at Congregation Beth Am in Los Altos Hills, California. An evening of creative liturgy, the presentation and sale of Ethiopian Jewish artifacts, a video presentation on the plight of the Beta Yisrael, led to the raising of enough money to save two Ethiopian Jewish brothers. \$405 was raised from the sale of the artwork. Most of the eighty-nine donations were between \$25 and \$100. The highest single contribution was \$150.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

<sup>80</sup> The religious movements as well continued their efforts on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. For example, the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement in 1989 issued an "Ethiopian Jewry Resolution" which contained background information, an analysis of changing conditions, and strategic goals for the American Jewish community to aid in Family Reunification. Also, the Winter, 1989 issue of Reform Judaism, Vol. 18, No. 2, devoted three short articles to the Beta Yisrael, "Waiting in Gondar," "Project REAP," and "Letters Across the Abyss."

<sup>81</sup> "Villagization Threatens Ethiopian Jewry," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol. II, No. 1, Spring/Summer, 1990, p. 3.

history, the Ethiopian Jews are [were] segregated from each other."<sup>82</sup> The Jews who were forcibly moved "were not given any resources to reconstruct their new homes; they were forced to leave their Jewish villages to resettle among non-Jews who resented their presence; and their new villages are [were] under greater government scrutiny."<sup>83</sup>

Thus, in response to the increasing peril and to expedite the rescue process, the activist groups, mainly the AAEJ, increasingly turned to a new avenue to facilitate rescue. The political realm became an important tool to actualize Family Reunification and complete the aliyah of the Beta Yisrael.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> "Famine and Villagization Program Threaten Ethiopian Jews," Release, Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer, 1987, p. 1.

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES IN THE UNITED STATES ON BEHALF OF THE  
BETA YISRAEL AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CONGRESSIONAL  
CAUCUS FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

The AAEJ Factor

The American Association for Ethiopian Jews recognized the importance of White House, Congressional and State Department activities in Washington, D.C. In 1985, the organization set up a Washington D.C. office. In time, the nation's capital became the national headquarters of the AAEJ, with rescue coordination still being handled in Highland Park, Illinois, near Chicago, by LaDena Schnapper. Rescue remained primary for the AAEJ, and fund raising continued to be essential. But Capitol Hill politics increasingly became a vehicle to facilitate Family Reunification. Likewise, throughout the second half of the 1980s, CAEJ lobbied Canadian governmental officials.<sup>84</sup>

Building on the contacts established by Lisa Freund in Washington, D.C., and the political clout and connections of AAEJ president Nathan Shapiro, the influence of the AAEJ on Congress, the State Department and the White House continued to increase under the tutelage of its only and current executive director. The son of Holocaust survivors, Will Recant studied at the Ramaz Yeshiva in New York through the eighth grade, attended the University of Louisville on a baseball scholarship, and received his master's degree in Political Science from the same university. In 1982, he received his doctorate in political science from George Washington University in Washington, D.C. During his studies, Recant taught at George Washington, worked for Soviet Jewry organizations, and was an aide for Washington State Senator Henry

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<sup>84</sup> See various issues of CAEJ's Ethiopian Jewry Report between 1985 and 1990. CAEJ's involvement with governmental officials is not within the scope of this thesis, and thus will not be detailed.



Jackson, co-author of the Jackson-Vanik amendment, which impacted the emigration of Soviet Jews.

In 1986, Lisa Freund informed Recant of a job opening for a fund raiser for the AAEJ, and she connected him with AAEJ president Nathan Shapiro. Recant met Shapiro in Texas congressman Mickey Leland's office:<sup>85</sup> "We talked about the [Ethiopian Jewry] issue and the organization, and I saw just a complete commitment to rescue. No holds barred. Whatever it takes we have to help get them out. And what it takes right now, at the time, was money. And without money we can't do anything, and with money we can rescue more people. So fund raising became a passion for rescue."<sup>86</sup> After meeting with the secretary and treasurer of the organization, as well as AAEJ founder Graenum Berger and the original treasurer, Ted Norman, Recant was hired as AAEJ fund raiser. Recant was successful in his fund raising efforts and found ways to cut costs and save the organization money. After Freund left for graduate school in the Summer of 1987, Recant was made executive director. Before she left, a major accomplishment of Freund, Recant and the AAEJ was to help establish the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.

Yet, congressional involvement by individual representatives and senators in the Ethiopian Jewry issue commenced a number of years before the establishment of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry in 1986. This involvement, for the most part, was also elicited by AAEJ members. Veteran legislative aide for Senator Alan Cranston of California, Naomi Baum, notes the lone presence of the AAEJ in Washington D.C. on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry:

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<sup>85</sup> More on Mickey Leland's involvement on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry will be discussed later in this section.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

The AAEJ from the outset was our main link with the Jewish community [on this issue]. We had very minimal other contact with the Jewish community. My contacts with NACOEJ were very limited. Their presence in Washington was just not as great... We had virtually no contact with the established Jewish community. AAEJ was our contact, and we were not lobbied by anyone else on that issue as far as I know.<sup>87</sup>

Veteran legislative aide for Congressman Benjamin Gilman of New York, Debbie Bodlander, remarks how the AAEJ played a key coordinating role between Capitol Hill, the State Department and the White House:

AAEJ has the mobility to caucus with State Department and Congressional officials. People on the Hill and at the State are stuck and it is hard to get out. There is no mobility between the State Department and the Hill. AAEJ had the mobility since they are in the advocacy business. They played a major coordinating role and made things much easier for all parties involved. They helped facilitate the whole rescue process... NACOEJ only one or two times came to our offices in Washington, D.C. They never liaised with the Caucus<sup>88</sup> nor had a Washington presence.<sup>89</sup>

#### Congressional Activities on Behalf of Ethiopian Jewry between 1979 and 1986

Senator Rudolph (Rudy) Boschwitz of Minnesota was the first on Capitol Hill to be involved with Ethiopian Jewry. Boschwitz was a friend of AAEJ

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<sup>87</sup> Personal interview with Naomi Baum and Robyn Lieberman, legislative aides for Senator Alan Cranston of California, May 20, 1992, in Senator Cranston's Washington, D.C. office. Baum held the portfolio in charge of Ethiopian Jewry and helped facilitate the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry for four years. Lieberman currently holds the Beta Yisrael portfolio.

<sup>88</sup> The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. More on the Caucus is presented later in this section.

<sup>89</sup> Personal Interview with Debbie Bodlander, legislative aide for Congressman Benjamin Gilman of New York, May 21, 1992, in Congressman Gilman's office and in the discussion room of the House floor. She held the portfolio in charge of Ethiopian Jewry and helped facilitate the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews since its inception.

activist William Halpern.<sup>90</sup> In 1979, before he journeyed to the Sudan to investigate how he and the AAEJ could rescue Ethiopian Jews, Halpern and Graenum Berger met with Boschwitz in Washington, D.C.<sup>91</sup> After meeting with the two AAEJ representatives, Boschwitz set up a meeting with the new Israeli Ambassador, Ephraim Evron, which proved unproductive. Then, Berger arranged with Boschwitz a meeting of Jewish congressional officials:

Such a meeting finally took place on June 7 [1979]. The NJCRAC and the Israeli Embassy learned about the session and asked to be present. They were invited. The meeting was attended by Senators Boschwitz, Stone, Metzenbaum, Ribicoff, Wolpe. Several other senators sent their aides. Also present was Congressman Stephen Solarz. The meeting turned out to be disastrous for NJCRAC and the Israeli point of view. There was sharp criticism of the Israelis lack of helpfulness over the years. I had informed the legislators about the thirty-two Ethiopian Jews we had assembled in Sudan, who had not yet been flown to Israel. The Israeli representative replied that his government never did anything illegally. Metzenbaum reproached him: 'Then how did you and so many Jewish refugees ever get to Israel? Was it always so legal?' Each of the officials in his own way addressed the Israelis, insisting that something had to be done.<sup>92</sup>

In 1982, the AAEJ announced a "major effort" to generate support among members of Congress.<sup>93</sup> On August 5, 1982, the Congressional Subcommittee on Human Rights held hearings on the plight of Ethiopian Jews. Congressmen Tom Lantos of California, Steven Solarz of New York and Barney Frank of Massachusetts, as well as an Rachamin Yitzhak, an Ethiopian Jew brought over from Israel by the AAEJ who provided an eyewitness report of

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<sup>90</sup> For more on Halpern, his rescue involvement, and his tragic death in Kenya trying to save an Ethiopian Jew, see chapter five, "Menachem Begin's Election in 1977 up to Operation Moses in 1984: Rescue Attempts, Disputes, and Charges of Complacency," section on "AAEJ activities during the late 1970s and 1980."

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

<sup>92</sup> Graenum Berger, Graenum (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1987), pp. 656-57.

<sup>93</sup> "Pro-Falasha Lobby in Congress," Heritage, Friday, May 21, 1982.

Ethiopia and the refugee camps in the Sudan, all testified on the tragedy.<sup>94</sup> Lantos stated: "As one who fought against one of history's most awesome and criminal acts of persecution, the Holocaust, I am determined not to witness as a passive bystander yet another annihilation of a very special and unique branch of the Jewish people."<sup>95</sup> By the Spring of 1983, AAEJ National Legislative Coordinator Marilyn Diamond, and AAEJ Congressional consultant in Washington, D.C., David Feltman, noted that over fifty representatives and twenty senators had "taken an active interest in Ethiopian Jewry."<sup>96</sup>

What prompted congressional interest in the Beta Yisrael? For some, it was a sense of true humanitarianism; for others, pragmatism; for still others, an awareness created by the activist groups or the lessons of one's religious upbringing and the Holocaust. Legislative Assistant and African American, Valerie Mims, notes why her boss, Representative Stephen Solarz, became involved with the Ethiopian Jewry issue:

This informs his feelings as a member of Congress in general... All his life he has studied the Holocaust and how it came about, and that is why he wanted to play such a strong role in the Cambodia situation... because it was again the idea of the Holocaust... This idea also carries through to Ethiopian Jewry... He always quotes the Mishna, the phrase that says 'He who saves one life, it is as if he has saved the whole world.' He really does take it to heart in terms of the Holocaust, that Jewish people have to do whatever they can to save the other Jewish populations around the world, the beleaguered communities... He has been very active in the Syrian Jewry movement as well to get them greater freedom of movement and emigration.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> "Congress Hears Sole Voice," Release, Vol. 1, No. 1, January, 1983, p. 2; and "Two U.S. Government Reports Published: Falashas Discriminated Against," Release, Vol. 1, No. 3, Fall, 1983, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> "Two U.S. Government Reports Published: Falashas Discriminated Against."

<sup>96</sup> "AAEJ Push on Capitol Hill," Release, Vol. 1, No. 2, Spring, 1983, p. 1.

<sup>97</sup> Personal interview with Valerie Mims, Legislative Assistant for Representative Stephen Solarz of New York, May 20, 1992, in Congressman Solarz's office in Washington, D.C. She was in charge of the Ethiopian Jewry portfolio and helped facilitate the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.

On November 17, 1983, the Senate passed Senate Concurrent Resolution 55 which was introduced on July 19, 1983.<sup>98</sup> The Resolution urged President Reagan to express to relevant foreign governments the United States' concern for the welfare of Ethiopian Jews, in particular their right to emigrate freely. Senator Paul Tsongas stressed the importance of the legislation at a time when "the Jews of Ethiopia continue to suffer from extreme privation, isolation, discrimination, and sometimes brutal mistreatment."<sup>99</sup> In April of 1983, Representative Stephen Solarz introduced House Concurrent Resolution 107, a non-binding resolution "expressing the grave concern of the Congress regarding the plight of Ethiopian Jews."<sup>100</sup> Over fifty other representatives co-sponsored the Resolution, and by September 15, 1983, one hundred and thirty-six had signed on as co-sponsors.<sup>101</sup>

On a related front, AAEJ members Rabbi Steven Kaplan and Rabbi Allen Krause, both of California, on October 31, 1983, presented Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill with an Ethiopian Jewry petition. The Ad Hoc Rabbinic Committee to

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<sup>98</sup> "Senate Concurrent Resolution 55 – Relating to the Plight of Ethiopian Jews," Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the 98th Congress, First Session, Vol. 129, No. 102, Washington, D.C., Tuesday, July 19, 1983, Senate, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>99</sup> "AAEJ Success on Capitol Hill," Release, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter/Spring, 1984, p. 6.

<sup>100</sup> "A concurrent resolution expressing the grave concern of the Congress regarding the plight of Ethiopian Jews," Office of the Clerk document, U.S. House of Representatives, detailing the sponsors, dates of introduction into the various committees including the Foreign Affairs, Human Rights, International Organizations and Africa; and names and dates of when the cosponsors signed on; files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.

<sup>101</sup> "A concurrent resolution expressing the grave concern of the Congress regarding the plight of Ethiopian Jews." See also letter from Congressmen Barney Frank and Stephen Solarz to their colleagues in the House, June 24, 1983, urging co-sponsorship of House Concurrent Resolution 107, from the files of the Congressional Caucus on Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.; as well as "AAEJ Active on Capitol Hill" and "AAEJ Successful on Capitol Hill."



Rescue Ethiopian Jewry<sup>102</sup> collected over ten thousand signatures from more than twenty-five states. The text of the petition reads:

We, the undersigned, call on you as a member of the United States Congress to employ every means at your disposal to assist Ethiopian Jews who suffer daily from persecution and neglect. In particular we ask for your support for House (Concurrent) Resolution 107 (Solarz/Frank) and its equivalent in the Senate for any legislation aimed at protecting the human rights and the very survival of this ancient religious minority.<sup>103</sup>

The year of 1983 also saw Senator Charles Percy of Illinois and Senator Tsongas introduce Senate Resolution 55, on July 19 at the request of the AAEJ, which called for disaster relief and supplemental food programs for Ethiopia.<sup>104</sup> Also, encouraged by the AAEJ, on December 16, 1983, one hundred and two members of Congress sent two letters to Peter McPherson, director of the Agency for International Development (AID), recommending that the U.S. increase its rate and level of response to the famine in Africa.<sup>105</sup>

Throughout 1984, the AAEJ informed Capitol Hill about the increasing numbers of Jewish and non-Jewish refugees in the Sudanese camps, as well as the starvation, death, and disease plaguing the area. Nathan Shapiro made several trips to Washington, D.C., to urge Israeli Ambassador Meir Rosenne,

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<sup>102</sup> The Ad Hoc Rabbinic Committee to Rescue Ethiopian Jewry is a prototype and precursor to the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ). For more on the activities of rabbis Kaplan and Krause, see chapter six, "The Proliferation of Ethiopian Jewish Support Organizations in North America During the First Half of the 1980s," section on Jane Fellman and the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ).

<sup>103</sup> "Ethiopian Jewry Petition Presented to U.S. Congress," *Release*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter/Spring, 1984, p. 9.

<sup>104</sup> "Thank you Senator Percy," *Release*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Fall, 1983.

<sup>105</sup> "AAEJ Successful on Capitol Hill." See also letter from Peter McPherson, Director of the Agency for International Development (AID) in Washington, D.C., to Congressman Barney Frank, July, 1983, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.; as well as "Senators and Representatives who signed on to the McPherson letter," from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.



members of Congress and State Department officials to initiate a massive rescue operation. The Washington AAEJ office also arranged for a congressional briefing with a refugee camp relief worker. In August, at the AAEJ's urging, thirty-one congressional representatives sent a letter to Yitzhak Shamir, calling attention to the "arrival of large numbers of Ethiopian Jews in the refugee camps... and the fact that only a small number of Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel since May."<sup>106</sup> In September, the House passed Concurrent Resolution 107, urging the Reagan administration to assist the beleaguered Ethiopian Jewish community.<sup>107</sup>

The Fall months of 1984 and the Winter months of 1985 saw the AAEJ facilitate Congressional, White House and State Department support, funding and planning for Operations Moses and later Operation Joshua. In particular, after the suspension of Operation Moses, Nathan Shapiro contacted Senator Alan Cranston of California and other "key" members of Congress, as well as State Department officials and Israel Today publisher Phil Blazer, in an effort to find another solution. With the assistance of the AAEJ, Senator Cranston obtained the signatures of all one hundred members of the Senate and included them in a letter "requesting the immediate resumption of the airlift" delivered to President Reagan immediately before Vice President Bush's trip to the Sudan on March 3, 1985. These efforts ensured that the airlift was a top priority for the Reagan administration, which along with the CIA and the Mosad, helped design and implement Operation Joshua some two and a half weeks later.<sup>108</sup> Also early in 1985, Senator Dennis DeConcini of Arizona,

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<sup>106</sup> "Capitol Hill Update," Release, Vol. 3, No. 1, Summer, 1985, p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> See also Ephraim Isaac, Jewish Solidarity and the Jews of Ethiopia (Beersheva, Israel: The Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 1988), p. 28.

<sup>108</sup> "Interview with Senator Cranston," Release, Vol. 3, No. 1, Summer, 1985, pp. 1 and 6; and "AAEJ a Catalyst for Airlift," Release, Vol. 3, No. 1, Summer, 1985, p. 2. For more

Senator Paul Trible of Virginia and Representative Gary Ackerman of New York traveled to the Horn of Africa and spent several days in Ethiopia's Gondar Province. After assessing first hand the status of the Beta Yisrael, the congressional delegation upon their return pushed for Family Reunification and famine relief.<sup>109</sup>

### Congressmen Ackerman and Leland

For Ackerman, the 1985 trip was one of many visits to the Horn of Africa. All in all, Congressman Ackerman traveled to Ethiopia six times between 1984 and 1990, and declined a fateful seventh trip in 1989. Ackerman first traveled to Ethiopia in November of 1984, the same day Operation Moses commenced a few hundred miles to the northwest. He traveled with Congressman Mickey Leland of Texas. The duo had two purposes for their trip: hunger and famine relief, and to investigate the Jews of Ethiopia. Ackerman notes: "It hit me automatically when I saw them [the Beta Yisrael] that they are Jewish."<sup>110</sup> He climbed the Simien Mountains and observed Seged ("to bow down" in Ge'ez) with the Ethiopian Jews, a Beta Yisrael celebration marking the renewal of the covenant between G-d and the Jews after the Babylonian Exile.<sup>111</sup> Ackerman became "enamored" with the Ethiopian Jewish community

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details on congressional involvement in Operation Moses and Joshua, see chapter seven, "Exodus, Refugee Camps and Rescue: Operation Moses and Joshua," sections on "Operation Moses" and "Operation Joshua."

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Congressman Gary Ackerman of New York to Henry Taub, President of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, New York, February 7, 1985, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C. See also, "Congressional Visit Confirms Difficulties," *Release*, Vol. 3, No. 1., Summer, 1985, p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> Personal Interview with Representative Gary Ackerman of New York, in Congressman Ackerman's Washington, D.C. office and in the discussion room adjacent to the floor of the House, May 20, 1992.

<sup>111</sup> Seged has special significance for the Ethiopian Jews, especially in a generation which has seen the return of its people to Jerusalem. Seged is observed with a day of

and their plight: "I committed myself to be supportive and helpful of the Beta Yisrael."<sup>112</sup> Ackerman, who perhaps more than any other congressional official has dedicated service for the Beta Yisrael, was not a co-chair of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. Debbie Bodlander states what she feels was the reason: "They wanted to keep the parity between the number of Democrats and Republicans and House and Senate members. Also, since he was not a chairperson, Ackerman was able to work and act more freely without constraints."<sup>113</sup>

On each of his subsequent trips, in February of 1985, April of 1988, the Spring of 1989, August of 1989, and April of 1990, he traveled to Gondar and Addis Ababa. In the capital of Ethiopia, he met with Mengistu on six different occasions and pleaded with the Marxist ruler the case of "free emigration for the Beta Yisrael." Ackerman notes that the response to the plea was always a "loud and vociferous 'No!' The Ethiopian officials would say that Ethiopia is a great mosaic of tribes and peoples and personalities. The fabric will be ruined

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fasting, a sign of mourning over the destruction of the Temple and a remembrance of the exile to Babylon. Seged ends with an evening of feasting, celebrating that the prophecy of returning to Jerusalem has sustained the community through the centuries. Most of the ancient Jews of Babylonia returned from exile to Zion, and one day soon, the Beta Yisrael would return from their exile to Jerusalem.

Seged is the twenty-ninth day of the eighth month (Heshvan), a day of convocation. Before daybreak, the villagers gather together in one place. In the morning, still fasting, they climb a mountaintop led by the kessim, prostrating themselves repeatedly along the way. Once on top, the kessim would read from the Torah, adding sections from Ezra, Nehemiah and other books. The congregation recites prayers and remembers the dead, and the kessim give sermons on preserving the Torah and tradition. In the late afternoon, the entire congregation returns to the village and breaks the fast after sunset with feasting and dancing. Today, Ethiopian Israelis celebrate Seged in the hills of Jerusalem and at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

According to tradition, Seged originated in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah at the time when all Jews were assembled in Jerusalem, and, by fasting and confessing, made a covenant with G-d to uphold the Torah. Seged also has a symbolic significance in recalling the covenant into which the Israelites entered when they received the Torah at Mount Sinai.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Congressman Gary Ackerman.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Debbie Bodlander.

if we let them go. Besides, Ethiopia is a workers paradise."<sup>114</sup> On a number of the trips, he also traveled to the Sudan, Kenya and Israel. When in the Jewish State on one of his many trips to Israel alone, or as a stop-over home from the Horn of Africa, Ackerman spoke to the Prime Minister and Jewish Agency heads about Ethiopian Jewry.<sup>115</sup>

Ackerman's travel partner, Congressman Leland, was a personal friend of Mengistu. Leland, chairman of the Select Committee on Hunger, pushed for and implemented many famine relief programs and airlifts for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Also on his trips to Addis Ababa, Leland tried to bolster support for the Beta Yisrael by relaying to Mengistu that 'the enemy of your enemy is your friend.' Ackerman remarks that he and Leland "played the civil war card with Mengistu, in that we told him that the rebels are armed from the Arabs. There is a common threat and enemy of the Arabs and the Red Sea Coast falling into Arab hands."<sup>116</sup>

But Leland was not only concerned about the security of the Mengistu regime and holding in check Arab expansionism. He was a genuine friend of the Beta Yisrael and a prominent member of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. After the airlifts were halted in 1985, the African American congressman became an outspoken leader on the issue of Family Reunification. "Congressman Leland recognized the unique pain and suffering within this small community. He visited Jewish villages in Gondar; he saw parents cradling the pictures of their children who had gone to Israel. When in Israel, he visited youth villages where he met some of the very

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<sup>114</sup> Interview with Congressman Gary Ackerman.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> Ibid

children whose parents remain in Ethiopia."<sup>117</sup> Mickey Leland served as a bridge between the United States, Israel and Ethiopia, and "on each of his visits, he brought with him the hope that a large-scale program of family reunification would be instituted."<sup>118</sup>

Leland and Ackerman planned another trip to Ethiopia, Kenya, the Sudan and Israel for August of 1989. At the last moment, Ackerman backed out of the trip so he could spend time with his family over the Summer recess. A few days before his trip, on August 3, the four co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Boschwitz, Cranston, Gilman and Solarz, addressed a letter to Congressman Leland regarding his "intended visit to Ethiopia during the August recess."<sup>119</sup> The co-chairs highlighted that the government of Ethiopia was engaged in high-level negotiations with Israel concerning the plight of the remaining Jews before the coup attempt of May of 1990: "We ask that you [Leland] urge the Ethiopian government to take steps to resume these vital and positive negotiations."<sup>120</sup>

The letter also implored Leland to raise the humanitarian issue of Family Reunification with Mengistu, and to "encourage the Ethiopian government to relax travel and communication restrictions to these [Gondar and Tigrey] areas."<sup>121</sup> The four co-chairs concluded the letter by saying:

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<sup>117</sup> William Recant, "Congressman Mickey Leland: Beta Yisrael Loses a Friend," Washington Jewish Week, August 17, 1989, Opinion Section.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>119</sup> Letter from Senators Boschwitz and Cranston, and Congressmen Gilman and Solarz, co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, to Congressman Mickey Leland of Texas, dated August 3, 1989, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid*

We support your active commitment to improved U.S.- Ethiopian relations. The Congressional Caucus on [for] Ethiopian Jewry has made human rights and family reunification its highest priority. We hope that these concerns will receive your most serious consideration as well, and we wish you a most productive trip.<sup>122</sup>

The trip had a tragic and fatal twist. On August 7, 1989, a small plane carrying Congressman Mickey Leland and fifteen other passengers failed to reach its destination. The plane was headed for Fugnido, a refugee camp on the Ethiopian- Sudanese border.<sup>123</sup> On August 10, Congressman Gary Ackerman led a U.S. delegation to find the airplane of his friend and colleague. On August 13, Ackerman spotted the wreckage of the lost plane in mountainous terrain twenty miles from the refugee camp. There were no survivors.<sup>124</sup>

Leland died "while trying to ensure that human beings would be fed and that families torn asunder would be made whole."<sup>125</sup> After finding Leland's plane crash, Mengistu summoned the Congressman from New York to his palace. They exchanged regrets, and then Mengistu said to Ackerman: "We do not have many other friends in the U.S. Congress."<sup>126</sup> Ackerman notes: "As I carefully chose my words to place special emphasis on the Ethiopian people, and not the Ethiopian government, I said: '[Do not worry,] I will continue to be a friend of the Ethiopian people,'"<sup>127</sup> On August 20, Ackerman returned to the United States.

### **The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry**

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid

<sup>123</sup> "Congressman Mickey Leland: Beta Yisrael Loses a Friend."

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Congressman Gary Ackerman.

<sup>125</sup> "Congressman Mickey Leland: Beta Yisrael Loses a Friend."

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Congressman Gary Ackerman.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid



The level of Congressional involvement on behalf of the Beta Yisrael steadily increased during the 1980s. Thus, by the second half of the decade, it was only natural that a formalized group to push for Family Reunification should take shape on Capitol Hill. Moreover, the political contacts and efforts of AAEJ president Nathan Shapiro throughout the late 1970s and first half of the 1980s, and later AAEJ Executive Director Will Recant, had paid off. A plethora of caucuses organized around groups, issues and people already existed in Washington, D.C.<sup>128</sup> One rallying support for the Jews of Ethiopia would not go against the grain of D.C. politics. Moreover, it would provide the needed publicity, legislative awareness and proactive measures. In 1985, the AAEJ discussed the formation of such a group with their political allies. In May of 1986, Senators Boschwitz (Republican) and Cranston (Democrat), together with Representatives Solarz (Democrat) and Gilman (Republican), established a Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry:

The main objective of the Caucus is to help promote the reunification of the Jews left behind in Ethiopia with their families in Israel. Members of the Caucus work with the United States, Israeli and other governments. In addition, the Caucus arranges regular informational briefings with relevant Jewish groups and relief agencies working in Ethiopia.<sup>129</sup>

Shortly after the inception of the organization, Senator Cranston, a co-chair of the Caucus, pledged that:

The Caucus will be raising the issue of Family Reunification with the U.S., Israeli and other governments which might be in a position to be

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<sup>128</sup> Most of the caucuses are set up around ongoing issues such as the "Plumber's Caucus" and the "Police Officer's Caucus," as opposed to specific issues which can have a resolution of some sort.

<sup>129</sup> Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, document detailing the sponsors, objectives and members of the Caucus, March, 1990, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

of assistance... We have already begun to make some of these contacts. Many of them are private, but our strategy is to keep raising the issue and to demonstrate that awareness, concern and a willingness to cooperate exist in Congress.<sup>130</sup>

The Jewish State reacted negatively to the formation of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. Congressman Gilman's aide Debbie Bodlander states, "that the Israeli government said that Ethiopian Jewry is not a legitimate issue of Congress, and there is no need for a caucus."<sup>131</sup>

Bi-partisan and bi-cameral in nature, this organization dedicated to the welfare of Ethiopian Jews had fifty members by July of 1986.<sup>132</sup> By the middle of 1987, sixty-five Congressional officials were members of the Caucus,<sup>133</sup> and by the beginning of 1989, the Caucus was composed of one hundred and twelve members.<sup>134</sup> By March of 1990, forty senators and ninety-five representatives were members of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.<sup>135</sup> By the Summer of 1991, the Caucus had one hundred and fifty-three members – forty-three in the Senate and one hundred and ten in the House.<sup>136</sup>

The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry is the only bi-partisan and bi-cameral caucus in the history of Capitol Hill; never before has there been bi-cameral cooperation on an issue.<sup>137</sup> Co-founder and co-chair Congressman Gilman notes: "Not much was being done in Washington on the

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<sup>130</sup> "Rabbinic Call to Conscience a Success."

<sup>131</sup> Interview with Debbie Bodlander. Perhaps Israel did not want its chief ally to be meddling in the "internal affairs" of the Jewish State.

<sup>132</sup> "Capitol Hill Update," Release, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>133</sup> "Capitol Hill Update," Release, Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer, 1987, p. 1.

<sup>134</sup> "Capitol Hill: 101st Congress," Release, Vol. 7, No. 1, Winter, 1989, pp. 2 & 4.

<sup>135</sup> Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.

<sup>136</sup> Members of the Caucus for Ethiopian Jews, Summer, 1991, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with Debbie Bodlander; and Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.

Ethiopian Jews' behalf. The Caucus did meetings, briefings and pushed the administration and the Israeli officials."<sup>138</sup> Also included on the agenda of the Caucus were more general issues of famine relief and humanitarian issues. Recant, summing up the role of the Caucus, remarks:

Here is a group of congressmen who care and are concerned about this issue, and who are looking out for this issue, and therefore if a message needed to be sent to the Israelis or to the Ethiopians, it was usually through the Caucus that the messages were sent. Whether it was urging the Secretary of State to do more, or urging the Ethiopian government to let people go, or urging the Israelis to bring more or work faster – that's what they would do.<sup>139</sup> They would have meetings with the Israeli ambassadors to talk about their concerns or [had meetings with] the Ethiopian charge d'affaires.<sup>140</sup>

Bodlander, who traveled to Israel in April of 1987 on behalf of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry,<sup>141</sup> suggests that one reason the Caucus was so "viable," was the range of congressional officials who joined the organization:

For the Caucus to be viable, it not only needed to have the interest of the members of Congress who have a large Jewish population in their district, but also members who did not have a large Jewish population.

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<sup>138</sup> Personal Interview with Congressman Benjamin Gilman of New York, co-chair of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, May 21, 1992, in Congressman Gilman's office and in the discussion room next to the House floor.

<sup>139</sup> For example, in February of 1987, leaders of the Caucus met with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir during his visit to Washington D.C. to push for immediate Family Reunification. In May of 1987, the Caucus co-sponsors met privately with Israeli Minister of Immigrant Absorption, Yaacov Tsur, expressing concern for the welfare of the Jews in Ethiopia and the members of the Caucus' willingness to be of service to the Israeli government should it initiate a reunification program. In April of 1987, Debbie Bodlander, legislative aide for Congressman Gilman, visited Israel on behalf of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. See "Capitol Hill Update" from the Summer 1987 issue of Release.

<sup>140</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant. Since the United States and Ethiopia did not have any formal relations, the highest ranking Ethiopian official in Washington was the charge d'affaires.

<sup>141</sup> "Capitol Hill Update" of Summer of 1987.

This occurred through the efforts of the AAEJ urging its members to meet with their members of Congress across the country at the same time the four co-chairs of the Caucus were appealing their fellow representatives and senators. That's why the Caucus was able to attract those [members of Congress] who previously had not known about the Ethiopian Jewish issue, but who had a sense of humanitarianism and/or had Jewish constituents.<sup>142</sup>

The major activities of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry between 1986 and 1989 were to increase the membership in the Caucus, write letters to the White House and State Department officials, and hold briefings for fellow Congressional officials.<sup>143</sup> In particular, in the aftermath of Operation Joshua, the Caucus tried to get the White House involved in Family Reunification. Bodlander recalls that the official line of the Reagan administration was as follows: "We are committed to Ethiopian Jewry. It is a priority. But unless the Ethiopian Jews are in physical danger, we could not expect to see another major airlift situation."<sup>144</sup> She notes that this reaction was in large part due to the White House's concern over Sudanese instability created in the aftermath of Operations Moses and Joshua.<sup>145</sup>

One example of letter writing to the White House and State Department came on February 7, 1989. Senators Cranston and Claiborne Pell, and Representative Ackerman, sent a letter to Secretary of State James Baker, bearing the signatures of seventy members of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. The letter states: "As you formulate your policy on human rights in Ethiopia, we urge you to place the plight of the Jewish community

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<sup>142</sup> Interview with Debbie Bodlander.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>145</sup> For more on the instability of the Sudan and the Numeiri regime in the aftermath of Operations Moses and Joshua, see chapter seven, section on "Operation Joshua" and footnote on Numeiri.

there at the top of your agenda."<sup>146</sup> The Caucus members noted that improved U.S.- Ethiopian relations was predicated on Ethiopia improving its human rights abuses. The Congressmen and Congresswomen implored: "We strongly believe that an essential element of this change must be an improvement in Addis Ababa's treatment of its Jewish population. This is a crucial human rights issue that must be addressed before relations can be normalized."<sup>147</sup> The letter stresses that "the first priority for Ethiopian Jewry is family reunification," and that the Addis Ababa government must be urged to change its policy of refusing emigration, visits and free travel.<sup>148</sup>

Besides the letter writing, lobbying, briefings and increased membership, the number of co-chairs strengthened the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. Bodlander remarks: "The beauty of having four co-chairs is that the staff persons would get together regularly about the issue, combine forces and split up the work and details."<sup>149</sup> She also notes that "a Congressman's time is a hot commodity, so it was to the Caucus' benefit that there were four members and all of the staffers to split up the work."<sup>150</sup>

By the late 1980s, there were so many requests for information about the Beta Yisrael on Capitol Hill, that the Caucus requested the Congressional Research Service (CRS) of the Library of Congress to prepare an issue brief. The thirteen page CRS "Issue Brief" entitled Ethiopian Jews, is continuously updated, and includes sections on 1) "Issue Definition;" 2) "Background and

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<sup>146</sup> Letter from Senators Alan Cranston and Claiborne Pell and Representative Gary Ackerman to Secretary of State James Baker, including the signatures of seventy members of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews, February 7, 1989, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid

<sup>148</sup> Ibid

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Debbie Bodlander.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid



Analysis," detailing the Origins of Ethiopia's Jews: Are they Jewish?, Past Efforts for Migration: Operations Moses and Joshua and The Foreign Policy Dimension; the Current Conditions of the Ethiopian Jews; Current Efforts at Migration; Ethiopian Jews in Israel; U.S. Policy Concerns: Humanitarian Issues, Foreign Policy Concerns, and the Role of Congress; Current Developments; and U.S. Role: Long Term Implications; and 3) "Legislation."<sup>151</sup>

Legislative aide for Senator Cranston, Naomi Baum, remarks that by 1989 the Caucus seemed to be getting burned out and needed a different relationship with the AAEJ. She notes that before 1989, the AAEJ was keeping the list of the members of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry and that during that year the Caucus undertook responsibility for the list. Also, prior to 1989, the AAEJ handed the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry finalized letters to be sent out to all Congressional officials on behalf of the Caucus. After 1989, the AAEJ suggested drafted letters and did not actually say "here is the letter." Additionally, 1989 brought in a new group of legislative aides who were in charge of the Ethiopian Jewry portfolio for two/three of the four co-chairs of

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<sup>151</sup> CRS Issue Brief: Ethiopian Jews, Congressional Research Service (CRS) of the Library of Congress, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, updated at least on June 26, 1990, and August 5, 1991. From the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C. Naomi Baum, legislative aide for Senator Cranston, notes: "There were certain people in the African politics world who resented our focusing on the Ethiopian Jewish issue. You will see in the Issue Brief [on Ethiopian Jews] that the original author wrote to the effect that 'there are those who feel that focus on the Ethiopian Jewish issue detracts from human rights issues in general and progress in Ethiopia in general.' We got a draft of the report and we were asked to give comments on it, and I said 'and there are others who feel that our focus on Ethiopian Jewry is the only focus. Anyway, [the focus on Ethiopian Jewry was] the only way of pushing them [Ethiopia] on human rights. In the end I think that was right, because that was really the only avenue they were being pushed on. No one else really cared. There are lots of human rights violators in the world. Valerie [Mims, legislative aide for Congressman Stephen Solarz in charge of the Ethiopian Jewry portfolio] and I went to a lot of luncheons on Ethiopia which had nothing to do with Ethiopian Jewry to... make an effort to keep up with what was going on."



the Caucus. Baum states: "When I came into the job, there seemed to be the dynamic that AAEJ would say, 'Caucus, you need to do X.' But we [the Caucus] needed to be taking the lead here, and we needed to be deciding what is appropriate to be done. The AAEJ reacted [to the changed dynamic of interaction], 'Oh, OK.' We [the Caucus] were willing to take over a new role, we were new blood, we were ready to go."<sup>152</sup> She also remarks that "once we clarified things, we had a fabulous relationship with the AAEJ."<sup>153</sup>

By the end of the decade of the 1980s, geopolitical changes opened up additional avenues for the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews. Valerie Mims, a Legislative Assistant for Representative Stephen Solarz in charge of the Ethiopian Jewry portfolio notes: "The Caucus would try to work with the administration when there were opportunities like before U.S.- Soviet summits to get the issue put on the agenda. We would ask them to raise this issue in terms of the Cold War winding down... and this was an issue to be dealt with to help further relieve tensions."<sup>154</sup>

Baum underscores an additional focus of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry:

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with Naomi Baum.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid

<sup>154</sup> Personal interview with Valerie Mims. Mims, an African American, reflects after Operations Moses and Solomon, how the Jewish effort to rescue their brethren, regardless of color, impressed her greatly: "I am impressed by the Jewish community in America and in Israel and the people on the ground in Ethiopia, the whole Jewish community, the tremendous efforts they would go through to get this community to Israel... People would tell me that 'oh, the Israelis have cynical motives.' And I would respond to them, 'the Israelis must have such a cynical motive to take tens of thousands of people out of a country, and the way the whole thing was organized. And this idea of ransoming, I think of this song: 'Oh come, Oh come Emanuel,' [where] there is a line about 'ransom captive Israel.' I would talk to Will [Recant] about this on a philosophical level, about the idea of ransoming people... I was so impressed by the way the whole community pulled together to help the Ethiopian Jews who are black. To me it tied in with this whole question of equating Zionism with racism... There was an incredible depth and willingness and feeling about saving Jews around the world regardless of race; and that was very impressive to me." Ibid.

Part of our role was damage control. We didn't want the issue of Ethiopian Jewry to be a vehicle for Ethiopia bashing in the Senate; and there were enough people who didn't like the Mengistu regime, us included, who were going to use that issue for Ethiopia bashing. So we did quite a lot of trying to get people away from the Ethiopian Jewry issue if there sole purpose was to just bash the Ethiopian government... There were often people who would try to do resolutions or initiatives, and we would work with them to either tone down their language, or modify their language... It would be counter productive in terms of working with the Ethiopian government... The Ethiopian government was very precarious and unpredictable as to how it would react to pressures from Congress. Pressure was important, but it had to be very focused, timed appropriately, and we had to think about our language.<sup>155</sup>

Furthermore, Baum notes:

We also saw our role as not only to be active on the issue of Ethiopian Jewry, but to make it clear that we were the address for anyone interested in other issues relating to Ethiopia. So we made it a point to be educated on Ethiopia, to be doing letters on the famine situation, looking at the question of Ethiopian Jewry in the context of human rights overall... And it was very effective and we got a lot of calls... and we requested a CRS report... Part of that [the tremendous response] was also that simultaneously the grass roots lobbying effort was increasing, so offices were getting letters and calls from constituents saying 'we want you to get more active in the issue,' and people [Congressional officials and their staff] were calling us and saying, 'how do we get more active?'<sup>156</sup>

In June of 1989, Senator Pete Wilson of California, along with Senators Boschwitz and Cranston, introduced a Sense of Congress Resolution, conditioning any improvement in U.S.- Ethiopian relations on better treatment of the Beta Yisrael. Representatives Gilman and Solarz introduced a similar House resolution. The Wilson-Boschwitz-Cranston resolution calls for the United States to insist that there be "tangible progress in the human rights

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<sup>155</sup> Personal interview with Naomi Baum.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid

conditions" of Ethiopian Jews including the freedom to emigrate, travel and observe the religious holidays.<sup>157</sup>

The resolution also called for "the cessation of the villagization program and all other activities that divide, impoverish, or quarantine the indigenous Jewish community."<sup>158</sup> It urged U.S. officials in international organizations to help facilitate the reunification of separated Ethiopian families. It specifically called for the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations to petition the U.N. World Food Program, the U.N. Security Council, and the U.N. General Assembly "to exert diplomatic and political pressure on the Ethiopian government to develop and implement a policy for the sustained emigration of Ethiopian Jews."<sup>159</sup>

In the House version of the legislation, brought to the floor of the House of Representatives on June 22, 1989, Gilman and Solarz in their remarks outlined the plight of the Beta Yisrael, efforts to rescue the community, current dangers facing the Jews remaining behind in Ethiopia, and the absorption process in Israel.<sup>160</sup> Solarz petitioned his fellow Congressional Representatives:

This resolution which I introduce today expresses the sense of Congress that these fundamental rights to free emigration and family reunification must not be denied. My friends, there is indeed a place for quiet diplomacy. But behind-the-scenes negotiations cannot be a

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<sup>157</sup> "Senate Resolution Calls for Family Reunification," Release, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C., Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer, 1989, p. 2.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>160</sup> "Plight of the World's Forgotten Jews," Congressional Record - Extension of Remarks, June 22, 1989, remarks of the Honorable Stephen J. Solarz and Benjamin A. Gilman, pp. E 2269- E 2270, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C.

substitute for a public campaign against repression and religious persecution. We must respond courageously and compassionately...<sup>161</sup>

### **President Bush Meets with Ethiopian Jewry Rescue Leaders**

On March 13th, 1989, two months after his inauguration, President George Bush and National Security Advisor General Brent Scowcroft met with three leaders of the the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry. During a private fifteen minute meeting, Rachamim Elazar, chairman of the National Council of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, AAEJ Executive Director Will Recant, and AAEJ Board member John Cohen, presented an update on the current situation facing Ethiopian Jews. President Bush expressed his "concern and interest" for divided Ethiopian Jewish families and pledged his commitment to help reunify them.<sup>162</sup>

The meeting with President Bush was not obtained through normal channels, but "through a letter to the White House saying that an Ethiopian Jewish leader [Rachamim Elazar] was going to be in the United States and he would like to give a gift to the President for his role in Operation Joshua. Based on that, they got back to us and we had the meeting."<sup>163</sup> Recant notes that had the AAEJ "done it through normal Jewish channels, it never would have happened. And I was chastised after that meeting for meeting with the President on Ethiopian Jewry."<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p. E 2270.

<sup>162</sup> "President Bush Meets Ethiopian Leader and Director," Release, Washington, D.C., Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>163</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid

At a meeting with NJCRAC, I [Recant] was told, 'Don't you think the organized Jewish world could have gotten a meeting with [President Bush about] Ethiopian Jews if we had wanted to. We have to use our chips very sparingly with the President.' I said, 'I don't have any other issues. Ethiopian Jewry is the only chip I have on the table. Don't you think it is sinful that you haven't met with him if you have the ability to?' That summed up our whole relationship with the establishment.<sup>165</sup>

Recant states that the outcome of the meeting was to create a "sensitivity of the President on the issue, and to put it on the agenda with an upcoming summit meeting with the Soviets, and to have the Soviets tell Mengistu that everyone is watching this [his human rights abuses, especially against the Beta Yisrael], and that he should do something about the issue."<sup>166</sup> The four co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews even sent a letter of commendation to President Bush for having met with Rachamim Elazar.<sup>167</sup> Operation Solomon, in large part according to Recant, resulted because Bush and Scowcroft and State Department officials like Robert Houdek<sup>168</sup> were sensitized to the plight of the Beta Yisrael and as a result personalized their commitment and involvement:

If we didn't lay the foundations earlier, Scowcroft could not have come to this issue from the clear blue from the time that the Israelis were coming and saying 'airlift [1991].' But because he knew about it three years earlier, there was a lot more understanding and compassion. And that's what the AAEJ was all about. To make sure people knew about it, and when the opportunity arose, to do whatever they could. So the meeting with Bush was in exactly the same vein.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid

<sup>166</sup> Ibid

<sup>167</sup> Letter from Senators Boschwitz and Cranston, and Representatives Gilman and Solarz, co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, to President George Bush, March 31, 1989, thanking the President for meeting with Rachamim Elazar, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>168</sup> More on the efforts of Robert Houdek and the State Department will be detailed in chapter nine, "Operation Solomon."

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

Thus, the year 1989 saw increased activity by the AAEJ and the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. The AAEJ continued to facilitate pro-Beta Yisrael Capitol Hill activism between the White House, Congress and the State Department, as well as its own methods of rescue. North of the border, CAEJ pushed for Family Reunification. During the same period, NACOEJ provided medical aid, ritual items, food and clothing through its missions, and coordinated rescue lists, while ARNEJ coordinated rabbinic and congregational involvement on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry.

These developments serve as a backdrop to the events of late 1989, 1990 and 1991 discussed in the next chapter. Conditions for the Beta Yisrael of Ethiopia continued to deteriorate. At the same time, relations between Israel and Ethiopia were warming up. During 1990, thousands of Beta Yisrael descended from the Semian Mountains of Gondar and Tigrey to Addis Ababa, thereby establishing a Jewish refugee community in the capital of Ethiopia. One year later, Operation Solomon was launched.



CHAPTER NINE:  
NOVEMBER OF 1989 TO MAY OF 1991:  
THE FORCES WHICH CREATED OPERATION SOLOMON:  
EXODUS, REFUGE AND ALIYAH<sup>1</sup>

The year 1989 was another turning point for the Beta Yisrael residing in Ethiopia. The community and the movement to rescue it were impacted by a number of political, demographic and climatic forces. These included both internal and external factors, such as the winding down of the Cold War and a reduction of Soviet aid to Ethiopia, a failed coup attempt against the Mengistu regime,<sup>2</sup> a continuation of the devastating drought and famine in the Horn of Africa, a stepped up program of "villagization" in Gondar and Tigrey,<sup>3</sup> and a warming of relations between Israel and Ethiopia. In Washington, newly inaugurated President George Bush was setting up the agenda for his forthcoming term in office. On March 13th, Bush met with three leaders of the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry. Valerie Mims, Legislative Assistant to Representative Stephen Solarz of New York, remarks:

There are always issues and priorities for the President. The fact [is] that the President took the time to meet with Rachamim Elazar, and that Herman Cohen always seemed to be responsive. I think at that time [1989] it [Family Reunification of the Beta Yisrael] got as much attention as it could have... [given] the geostrategic importance of Ethiopia and the competition between the US and the Soviet Union...<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the information in this chapter is appearing in print for the first time.

<sup>2</sup> See "Coup Attempt: Effect on Jews Uncertain," Release, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C., Vol. 7, No. 2, Summer, 1989, pp. 1 & 2.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Ethiopia's villagization program, see chapter eight, "The Post Operation Moses Era of 1985 to 1989: Family Reunification, Rescue Lists and the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry," section on "Activities of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry."

<sup>4</sup> Personal Interview with Valerie Mims, Legislative Assistant for Representative Stephen Solarz, facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry; May 20, 1992, in Representative Solarz's office in Washington, D.C.

During 1989, Ethiopia was drawing more and more attention. Civil war, famine, and an easing of Cold War politics with all of its ramifications focused attention on the Horn of Africa for U.S. and world leaders, as well as news watchers.

# NOVEMBER 7, 1989: THE RENEWAL OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND ETHIOPIA

A triangular relationship between Israel, Ethiopia and the United States was established by 1989. Due to Perestroika and the "inward constriction" of the U.S.S.R., Ethiopia lost vast amounts of financial and military aid from the former Soviet Union, and therefore turned to Western countries for support.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. Congress continued to introduce legislation decrying the human rights abuses in Ethiopia and calling for Family Reunification. Senate Concurrent Resolution 41, introduced on June 2, 1989, by Pete Wilson of California, called for improved human rights conditions for Jews in Ethiopia. House Concurrent Resolution 160, introduced on July 3, 1989, by Stephen Solarz of New York, pushed for Family Reunification as one measure to improve human rights abuses in Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> In August, Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen met with Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam (Mengistu) to discuss human rights and famine relief efforts. In September, in the wake of the failed coup d'etat attempt in May, former President James Carter organized the first round of talks between the Government of Ethiopia and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in Atlanta. Although no breakthrough was achieved, both sides agreed to a second round of talks.<sup>7</sup>

During the same time, Israel and Ethiopia increased contact and communication. On November 3, 1989, Ethiopia announced the resumption of

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<sup>5</sup> "Recent Events," Ethiopian Jewry Report, a publication of the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews, Toronto, Canada, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring/Summer, 1990, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> "Ethiopian Jews," CRS (Congressional Research Service) Issue Brief, Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, Updated March 22, 1991, "Legislation," p. 13; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.

<sup>7</sup> Chronology of Key Recent Events Concerning Ethiopian Jewry, prepared by Valerie Mims, legislative assistant in charge of the Ethiopian Jewry portfolio for Congressman Stephen Solarz, March 22, 1991; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.

diplomatic relations with Israel, which were severed in the aftermath of the 1973 Middle East War. The decision of the Ethiopian Government to renew relations resulted from a combination of factors: pressure on Ethiopia from the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, the State Department, and the White House; increasing isolation of Ethiopia by African and Arab nations; a need to finance its war against various rebel groups; a need for parts, ammunition and weapons to fight the insurgents; a need for increased drought relief and famine aid by the U.S. Government and various humanitarian groups based in America; and a need for increased support at the U.N. through ameliorating its human rights abuses.

Kassa Kabede,<sup>8</sup> a top Ethiopian political aide when visiting Israel, stated that Family Reunification "is a basic human right that has to be respected."<sup>9</sup> However, Kassa Kabede remarked that "there will not be another airlift similar to Operation Moses."<sup>10</sup> Simcha Dinítz, chair of the Jewish Agency, commenting on the renewal of ties noted: "I hope that this will enable us to reach an agreement [with the Ethiopian Government] that will end the tragic situation that has split families and separated parents from children."<sup>11</sup> Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens said: "The renewal of ties will favorably affect our ability to bring here the remnant of Ethiopian Jewry."<sup>12</sup> In the Jewish State, Ethiopian Israelis were "jubilant at the prospects of the new developments,"<sup>13</sup> but their hopes were tempered with caution. The various

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<sup>8</sup> More on Kassa Kebede is presented later in this chapter.

<sup>9</sup> "Ethiopia and Israel Re-establish Diplomatic Relations," Release, Vol. 7, No. 3, Fall, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> "Israel and Ethiopia Renew Diplomatic Ties," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol. II, No. 1, Spring/Summer, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

Ethiopian Israeli groups held a joint press conference "praising the resumption of ties, [but] they reminded both governments that family reunification must be high on the agenda."<sup>14</sup>

Throughout 1989, a trail of Beta Yisrael moved from the mountains of Gondar and Tigrey to the capital of Ethiopia. Jews traveled to Addis Ababa to seek refuge from Ethiopia's civil war, its villagization program, and the drought and famine. Life necessities are several times more expensive in the capital city than in the rural villages. Many Jews were "wandering desperately from place to place in search of food, shelter and clothing."<sup>15</sup> By the end of the year, the Jewish community in Addis Ababa numbered in the hundreds. The renewal of diplomatic relations between Israel and Ethiopia rejuvenated the hopes of those Beta Yisrael stranded in the Horn of Africa to see Jerusalem in the near future. This further intensified the movement between the two regions. By Spring of 1990, three thousand Ethiopian Jews lived in the capital city.<sup>16</sup> But this was only the beginning of an even greater exodus down from the mountains.

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<sup>14</sup> "Ethiopia and Israel Re-establish Diplomatic Relations."

<sup>15</sup> "CAEJ Supports 100 Jews in Ethiopian Capital," Ethiopian Jewry Report, Vol 2, No. 1, Spring/Summer, 1990, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> "AAEJ Director Visits Ethiopia," Release, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring, 1990, p. 1.

AN EXODUS BEFORE THE EXODUS:  
SUSAN POLLACK AND THE MIGRATION OF THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS TO  
ADDIS ABABA

After a fourteen year hiatus, Israel reopened its embassy in Addis Ababa in January of 1990. By the beginning of the same year, the civil war completely engulfed Gondar Province. At the same time, the Sudan was no longer a country of refuge because the borders had been sealed to prevent the migration of various peoples into its territory. While the desires of the Beta Yisrael for aliyah continued to strengthen, the pressures on the community in Ethiopia intensified. Where were the Jews to flee? Through which route could they find safe passage to Israel?

In part spurred by the renewal of relations between Ethiopia and Israel,<sup>17</sup> and in part prompted by the deteriorating situation in Gondar due to the civil war, villagization, and famine, the American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ) made a decision at its annual board of directors meeting in November of 1989, to send a representative to Ethiopia to survey the situation. Glenn Stein, coordinator between 1984 and 1989 for the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center's (RAC) Ethiopian programing and medical aid missions to Ethiopia, entitled Project REAP,<sup>18</sup> and ground representative for the AAEJ between May 1990 and May 1991, cites another reason for seeking a permanent presence on the ground in Ethiopia. Stein notes that the lack of success by any of the American programs for famine

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<sup>17</sup> Even the AAEJ recognized that the dramatic flow of Jews to Addis Ababa and then on to Israel would not have been possible if it had not been for the renewal of official diplomatic relations between Israel and Ethiopia in late 1989. See "AAEJ Helps Care for Thousands of Jews in Addis Ababa," *Release*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Winter, 1991, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> For more details on Project REAP, see chapter six, "The Proliferation of Ethiopian Jewry Support Organizations in North America During the First Half of the 1980s," section on "The Reform Movement and other Religious Organizations Take Action," including extensive footnotes.



relief and medical aid during the mid-1980s, such as Project REAP and the Joint Distribution Committee's (JDC) efforts, led to the decision to set up an office in Addis Ababa.<sup>19</sup> Susan Pollack (Schechtman)<sup>20</sup> was chosen for the task and became resident director of the AAEJ in Addis Ababa.

Raised in a small village in a remote part of Maine in which hers was the only Jewish family, Pollack "felt an instinctive empathy for the Ethiopian Jews -- poor farmers cut off from Jewish society -- ever since first hearing a lecture about them in 1981,"<sup>21</sup> Two years later, while living in Toronto, she became involved with the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ), and shortly thereafter became executive director of the organization.<sup>22</sup> Over the next several years, she periodically traveled to Ethiopia bringing medicine and teams of doctors to remote Jewish villages in Gondar. Eventually, her trips were made under the auspices of the AAEJ. Pollack notes: "I found myself able to maneuver in Ethiopia, I just had a feel for it."<sup>23</sup>

By 1989, Pollack became resident director of the AAEJ in Addis Ababa. Gondar was an active battleground and life in the Province was untenable:

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<sup>19</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein, former coordinator of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center's (RAC) advocacy on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry, as well as the medical program, Project REAP, aiding Beta Yisrael villages; and coordinator in the field for the AAEJ in Addis Ababa between May of 1990 and May of 1991; June 18, 1992, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Pollack went by Susan Pollack Schechtman when married to Rabbi Schechtman, and subsequent to their divorce goes by Susan Pollack once again. Thus, in early chapters, when she is still married, she is referred to as Susan Pollack Schechtman. In this chapter, she is referred to as Susan Pollack.

<sup>21</sup> "Down From the Hills," by Abraham Rabinovich, The Jerusalem Post Magazine, International Edition, Week ending June 6, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> For more on Susan Pollack (Schechtman's) role with CAEJ, see chapter six, "The Proliferation of Ethiopian Jewish Support Organizations in North America During the First Half of the 1980s," section on "The Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ)."

<sup>23</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 10.

Law and order had disintegrated and on her visits to the area her driver had to check every morning which roads were free of fighting. It seemed apparent to her that abandonment of the area by the Jews was inevitable since they were the most vulnerable element in a situation approaching total chaos. Jews were increasingly the target of bandits and entire Jewish villages were being abandoned. Some of the Jewish villagers were burned by neighboring Christian villagers who wanted their land.

With the fighting going on in the mountains, the escape route to Sudan, which thousands had taken over the past decade, was now too dangerous. In any case, Sudan had begun expelling refugees from its overcrowded border camps. This left Addis Ababa as the most promising refuge for the Jews.<sup>24</sup>

The Ethiopian government barred movement between provinces without special permission. Yet, by this time, three thousand Jews had already reached Addis Ababa on their own, having sold their oxen and other property to pay bribes for travel permits. Another two thousand had gathered in Gondar City, capital of the Province, waiting to follow.

It is at this time that the AAEJ requested from Pollack a report on the current situation of the Ethiopian Jews. She told executive director Will Recant and president Nathan Shapiro: "I think that the people can start to move soon, I don't think it is impossible. I think that it is time we have a full time presence on the ground in Ethiopia to monitor what goes on."<sup>25</sup> The reopening of the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa was essential for Pollack's decision to bring down the remainder of the Beta Yisrael community in Ethiopia: "By placing 20,000 Jews on the doorstep of the embassy, she hoped to prod Jerusalem into taking greater action than that already in progress to get Ethiopian Jews to Israel."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Will Recant, Executive Director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, May 19, 1992, in the national headquarters of the AAEJ in Washington, D.C.

<sup>26</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 10.

An additional factor for bringing the Ethiopian Jews down from the mountains to Addis Ababa resulted from a deliberate misconception of the Ethiopian Government as to whom Family Reunification applied. The U.S. government and the international community continued to press Ethiopia to allow for free emigration and Family Reunification. However, only three thousand Jews resided in the capital city by 1990. The Ethiopian Government said that Family Reunification referred only to the Jews living in Addis Ababa, and not the bulk of the community in Gondar: "The others up in their villages are behind rebel lines, we don't know how many there are, we don't know where they are, so we are not even talking about them."<sup>27</sup>

So, [according to the Ethiopian Government], we [the AAEJ] were talking about allowing for the Family Reunification of only three thousand Jews. We wanted to make Ethiopian Jews into a political football, and let the international community which was in Addis Ababa know that it is not three thousand people, it is a larger community and they all want to be repatriated with families in Israel.<sup>28</sup>

Israel, however, had no intention of becoming involved in an illegal mass transfer of a population. "Foreign Ministry and Jewish Agency officials wanted to limit the flow of Jews to Addis Ababa so that the numbers would correspond with the rate of permits that were obtained from the Ethiopian government for departure."<sup>29</sup> By the end of 1989, a few dozen Beta Yisrael a month were officially granted permission and documents to leave Ethiopia for Family Reunification in Israel. The Israelis were also concerned about removing thousands of rural farmers from the familiarity of their ancestral

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 10.

villages and letting them fester in the crime-ridden slums of the capital. Additionally, there were no medical or social facilities to support such a population in Addis Ababa for an indeterminate period of time.<sup>30</sup>

Pollack, however, felt that the Israelis were not familiar with the conditions on the ground in Gondar and thus did not appreciate the immediate danger to the Ethiopian Jews. She was determined to effect the transfer regardless of the Ethiopian government's edicts and the Israelis' advice. It became too dangerous for her to go north herself, but three Ethiopian members of her staff were sent into the mountains to notify Jewish villages that transportation was being organized to bring them to the capital. The news quickly spread by word of mouth to the two hundred and fifty villages in which Jews resided.<sup>31</sup>

What was the reaction of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to the AAEJ inspired exodus? Valerie Mims, Legislative Assistant for Representative Stephen Solarz of New York, and facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, notes how the Caucus reacted:

In early 1990, certain events were happening in the North [of Ethiopia]... which were fairly ominous... It was clear that the situation in the North was getting worse, and there was a real fear that the Ethiopian Jews were going to get trapped, and that they may be made hostages... At the time it [the exodus from Gondar to Addis Ababa] seemed the thing to do. If you wanted an airlift, everyone needed to be in a central location; and obviously the easiest place to do it from is Addis where the government is still in control, at least until that last moment when Mengistu fled [in May of 1991]... Also, the developing famine was good enough reason to bring them down... You could have very easily had a situation with a large number of Jews in Addis, and a large number stranded in Gondar... [Once the Jews had started coming down] it wasn't really Congress's role to criticize. We had to ask 'what can we do now, what needs to be done, we obviously need to talk and put more pressure on the State Department and talk with the government of Israel about what is going to happen with these

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

people... and make sure that this is becoming an increasing priority.'<sup>32</sup>

Logistics for the operation were handled by a committee of twenty-two Ethiopian Jews working for Pollack. She states: "They made the decisions and did the work... [T]hey hired the trucks to bring the people down from Gondar and they're the ones who found housing for them in Addis Ababa even when it was illegal to do so. I pushed hard for the transport program but I didn't plan it; they planned it."<sup>33</sup> After receiving approval from the AAEJ officials in the United States, transport began early in January of 1990. Trucks and buses hired by the AAEJ team picked up Jews in Gondar City and brought them south, moving mostly at night. Often, the main route was cut off by rebels, so the drivers turned to gravel roads. Difficulties in acquiring gasoline and the frequent necessity of changing vehicles resulted in the refugees waiting for days along the way, and it took about two weeks to complete the journey.

Many of the Ethiopian Jews arrived in Addis Ababa after having been expelled from the Sudan and making a two week journey from the Sudanese desert into the mountains of Gondar before commencing once again, this time to the capital city. In Addis Ababa, the AAEJ compound became a refugee processing center.<sup>34</sup> The Beta Yisrael were brought in at dusk when there were few people on the streets. They were under strict instructions not to light fires or congregate outside. The Ethiopian authorities were nevertheless well aware of what was happening and the interior minister at one point summoned Pollack to his office and threatened to round up all the Jews in

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<sup>32</sup> Personal interview with Valerie Mims.

<sup>33</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> More on the AAEJ compound and the programs it set up in Addis Ababa throughout 1990 and 1991, as well as the relief efforts of NACOEJ in the capital city, is detailed in the next section.

Addis Ababa and send them back to Gondar. "However, the office of dictator Haile Mariam Mengistu and the Ethiopian foreign ministry, anxious not to risk angering the Americans, stayed his hand."<sup>35</sup>

AAEJ Executive Director Will Recant went to Ethiopia for Passover of 1990. Recant intended to visit Gondar, but the region was cut off by rebel forces. Instead, he and Pollack met with Ethiopian Jews who had come down from the mountains to Addis Ababa on their own, a committee of about twenty individuals: "And this committee said that the war is criss crossing through the region, as soon as it moves out of Gondar, we think that we can go up and move people out of the villages, but it's going to cost a lot of money."<sup>36</sup> Recant returned to the United States and talked to AAEJ President Nathan Shapiro about the financial requirements to make such a large population transfer: "Shapiro committed himself; he said he would do 'whatever it takes' to get the Jews out of Ethiopia."<sup>37</sup> The AAEJ arranged for each member of the committee of Ethiopian Jews to receive \$5,000 to \$10,000, and "they went up to different villages, and told the villages 'come down to Addis.' And the people just flocked. We thought a few thousand would come. And within two [a few] months, 20,000 people showed up."<sup>38</sup> Between May and July of 1989, nearly six thousand Beta Yisrael a month journeyed from Gondar Province to Addis Ababa. The Jewish community in the capital city now topped some twenty-two thousand people.<sup>39</sup>

#### **Representative Ackerman's trip to Ethiopia in April of 1990**

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<sup>35</sup> "Down From the Hills," pp. 10-11.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> "Down From the Mountains," and Interview with Will Recant.



Representative Gary Ackerman of New York also played a role in facilitating the exodus from Gondar to Addis Ababa. At the beginning of Passover in 1990, Ackerman received a call from John Duray, leader of the Sudanese Peoples's Liberation Army (SPLA), a rebel group in the Sudan with ties to the Mengistu regime. The Ethiopian government sponsored the rebels since they were black, Christian and/or animist and were against the Arab government which wanted to impose sha'aria on the black Sudanese. Duray said he wanted to speak with Ackerman about the peace talks involving the different groups in the Horn of Africa. The State Department did not want Ackerman to negotiate, but he decided to go despite the opposition. Duray wanted to meet in Kenya or Ethiopia, then narrowed his choice down to Addis Ababa. Ackerman arrived in Abyssinia on April 10th.<sup>40</sup>

Ackerman met with Duray and his Dinka tribesmen in a safe house in the capital city. He asked Ackerman for money to institute educational programs for the children in the refugee camps in the Sudan. Ackerman knew that there must have been another reason for the rebels bringing him "urgently to Addis to meet with the Sudanese rebel leader. So I [Ackerman] cleared the room and the two of us talked in private. John Duray eventually relayed that Mengistu needed something from me."<sup>41</sup> Although Mengistu asked to see Ackerman, the New York Congressman, according to proper Ethiopian diplomacy, had to ask Mengistu's government if he could have an audience with the President.

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<sup>40</sup> Personal Interview with Representative Gary Ackerman, Congressman from New York, in his Washington, D.C., office, and in the discussion room next to the House floor, May 20, 1992.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

The next day, Ackerman met with Mengistu and "pressed the standard line U.S. concerns and issues" with him. Mengistu told Ackerman "that he was going to win the war [with the various rebel forces] and that he was never going to cede the ports in Eritrea." Ackerman once again realized that it must have been something else that prompted his urgent invitation to Ethiopia, so he asked all others present in the room to leave. Mengistu, in private, expressed to Representative Ackerman:

That he wanted additional help from the Israelis, and that he wanted the U.S. to look the other way if he did dealings with the Israelis [i.e. for arms].<sup>42</sup> Mengistu wanted the Jewish community of America to understand the integrity and importance of Eritrea to Ethiopia, and that the American Jews who are powerful should pressure the U.S. government to aid Ethiopia since they have clout."<sup>43</sup>

Ackerman responded to Mengistu that the U.S. government and citizens will not get involved since "Americans do not know anything about Ethiopia accept that they [Ethiopians] fight while their children die. This will be an epitaph if you do not change this." Congressman Ackerman then proceeded to push the issue of free emigration and improved human rights as a means of bettering relations with the U.S. Ackerman tied in these measures with the need of the Mengistu regime for hard currency. Ackerman brought up the fact that two flights a day from Gondar to Addis Ababa return empty after dropping off goods in the Provincial capital. Ackerman told Mengistu: "There are people who would be willing to pay money to get on the flights which

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<sup>42</sup> Virtually all sources point to the fact that Israel at no point in time during 1990 and 1991 gave, sold, or exchanged arms with Ethiopia. However, rumors were rampant during these years that Israel was supplying Ethiopia with cluster bombs that were being used on the Eritrean and Tigrean rebels. For more on the issue of Israeli arms sales to Ethiopia, see the section on "Operation Solomon" later in this chapter.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

would give you hard currency. Also, there are buses from Gondar to Addis [Ababa] that go empty. Then, these people could go from Addis Ababa elsewhere on Ethiopian airlines, which would give you more hard currency." Ackerman notes that "Mengistu seemed to like the idea," and that he flattered the Ethiopian leader by saying, "this would give you a place in history; you would be the one who stood up to the Arab interest."<sup>44</sup>

After meeting with Mengistu, Ackerman briefed the Israeli ambassador to Ethiopia and then traveled from Ethiopia to Israel to brief the Israeli government, the Mosad, and the Jewish Agency. Upon his return to the United States, he met with officials of the AAEJ in Washington, D.C.

Ackerman was "very depressed" that the idea to get the Jews from Gondar to Addis Ababa worked so well that thousands migrated to the capital city, yet, were not able to continue the exodus to Israel and were living in squalid conditions and uprooted from their homes. He recalls: "I felt a tremendous guilt trip that I took people out of their twenty-five-hundred-year-old home where they were able to provide for themselves and had shuls and schools; and now, they were barely surviving in Addis [Ababa] and nothing was happening [to get them to Israel]."<sup>45</sup>

Corroboration for Ackerman's April of 1990 meeting with Mengistu came from the State Department. Robert Houdek, the current Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, was the charge d'affaires in Ethiopia between 1988 and 1991. He noted in both a personal interview and correspondence that his records showed that Ackerman took a trip to Ethiopia in April of 1990. He noted that Robert Frasure, deputy charge d'affaires at the American Embassy, accompanied Ackerman when meeting Mengistu, but was

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

asked to leave the two officials who subsequently talked in private for twenty minutes. The State Department records also showed that Ackerman then went to brief the Israeli Ambassador Meir Yoffe about the meeting. The Israeli Consul General stateside then called Robert Houdek and asked the U.S. charge d'affaires about the deal Ackerman made with Mengistu. Houdek also received a cable from Israel. Houdek had no idea about any deal which Ackerman and Mengistu had made, and the Israelis were skeptical of any such agreement and thought it was an Ethiopian ploy. Houdek also noted that Ethiopian diplomat Kassa Kabede, sympathetic to the Beta Yisrael, was in Washington, D.C., at the time.<sup>46</sup>

Ackerman credits the AAEJ for moving in with great force into Ethiopia and Addis Ababa to assist the Beta Yisrael. Yet, it is hard to determine the extent to which Ackerman's discussions with Mengistu helped facilitate the migration. In addition to vehicles rented by the AAEJ, buses and on at least two occasions airplanes were used to ferry Ethiopian Jews to Addis Ababa.<sup>47</sup> This would have given the Ethiopian Government some needed hard currency. Moreover, it is likely that the conversation with Mengistu helped persuade the Marxist Government to turn a blind eye to the migration and encampment in the capital city in hopes of repairing relations with the West and bettering its human rights slate.

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<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with Robert Houdek, current Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, charge d'affaires in Ethiopia from August 1988 to June 1991. During these years, he was the chief in the field and highest ranking official in Ethiopia since no diplomatic relations or ambassadors were exchanged between the United States and Ethiopia. The interview was conducted on May 21, 1992, at the Department of State, Washington, D.C. Information also derived from a personal letter from Robert Houdek to Jeffrey Kaye, May 22, 1992, which specifically provided information on the Ackerman trip to Ethiopia.

<sup>47</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 10.

**Israel's view of the exodus from Gondar to Addis Ababa:  
Negative at first, positive in hindsight**

As mentioned, the Israeli establishment in Addis Ababa perceived that the migration of the Beta Yisrael into the capital endangered Israel's newly restored relations with Ethiopia. The Israelis also blamed Pollack for exacerbating the problem of the Felas Mora,<sup>48</sup> the Ethiopian Jews who adopted Christianity, by indiscriminately helping them reach Addis Ababa.<sup>49</sup> They also felt that the Ethiopian Jews themselves were endangered by coming en masse into an artificial environment without an adequate infrastructure. During the first few months, there was a high mortality rate among the Jews in Addis Ababa, approximately two hundred and fifty in a three month period, most of them children.<sup>50</sup> Between June and August of 1990, around one hundred Beta Yisrael a month perished. From September through November, about twenty Beta Yisrael a month died due to disease, starvation, dehydration, and malnutrition.<sup>51</sup>

So, we moved them down to Addis [Ababa], and when they moved down to Addis, you had the same crisis and emergency situation similar to that of the famine. You had displaced people, living in an overcrowded city – no housing, no food, no medical care, nothing – some Ethiopian Jews died shortly after having arrived in Addis. The Jewish world heard about this and was incensed. The Israelis, the Jewish Agency and the Joint Distribution Committee immediately sent

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<sup>48</sup> More on the problems surrounding the Felas Mora will be discussed in the next section and in the Epilogue.

<sup>49</sup> The AAEJ made it a policy not to help the Felas Mora in Addis Ababa, while NACOEJ provided medical services, housing, employment, and education to this group. More in the next section.

<sup>50</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> CRS Issue Brief: Ethiopian Jews, Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division, Updated version from March 22, 1991.

doctors and started the programs. But it was bringing them to Addis which was the main thing.<sup>52</sup>

Operation Solomon would never have been possible unless the Beta Yisrael community had migrated from the mountains to the capital city. A senior Israeli Foreign Ministry official intimately involved with Operation Solomon stated: "The operation could have been staged only if the Jews were concentrated in Addis Ababa... To Susan's credit it must be said that she managed it."<sup>53</sup> Recant notes that Jewish Agency official and Operation Solomon coordinator Micha Feldman failed to recognize publicly the key role of the AAEJ bringing down the Beta Yisrael to Addis Ababa, but privately had great praise for the instrumental efforts of the organization:

It is very disheartening for the AAEJ that no acknowledgement about anything ever [occurred]. In private, great stuff. [They heard from Israeli officials and heads of Federations] 'You had the moral high ground for all of those years and you were right and we were wrong.' But in public, nothing. Micha Feldman said, 'you were right in bringing people down [from Gondar to Addis Ababa]. I wish the [Jewish] Agency had done it, I wish the Agency would have let me do it.' But you'll never read this [congratulatory and appreciative statements about the efforts of the AAEJ] anywhere.<sup>54</sup>

Uri Lubrani,<sup>55</sup> coordinator of Operation Solomon, acknowledged that the operation "would not have been logistically feasible had Pollack not taken it upon herself to bring the Jews of Ethiopia down from the mountains, where they had resided for thousands of years, in order to meet their destiny in Addis

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

<sup>53</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

<sup>55</sup> More on Lubrani occurs in the next section and later in this chapter.



Ababa."<sup>56</sup> The exodus before the exodus was vital. The exodus from Gondar to Addis Ababa created the opportunity for the final redemption to Israel. But it also created new problems of providing relief and services to thousands of refugees in an alien environment.

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<sup>56</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 11.

LISTS, MEDICAL AID, EDUCATION AND ALIYAH:  
THE BETA YISRAEL IN ADDIS ABABA FROM  
MAY 1990 TO MAY 1991

AAEJ efforts for relief and rescue in the Ethiopian capital

Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Robert Houdek, notes that Susan Pollack was the "spark plug to bring the Ethiopian Jews down from Gondar to Addis Ababa."<sup>57</sup> The senior U.S. diplomat, a Gentile and one of the unsung heroes of Operation Solomon, remarks that the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) was advancing in from Tigrey, and there was an expansion of fighting in the Gondar region. There was a feeling that the Beta Yisrael could get cut off and their lives would be endangered. There was also a fear of retribution being taken against the community. Although Houdek did not share these two concerns to the same degree as the American activists, he liked the idea that "the AAEJ was forcing and pressing the issue... Don't tell people with the history of the Jews, which includes pogroms, discrimination and the Holocaust, 'no,' and that they should not be concerned with the safety and well being of their people."<sup>58</sup> Houdek adds that once relations were reestablished between Israel and Ethiopia, and after the first people made it successfully from Gondar to Addis Ababa, "there was a spontaneous movement of people from the mountainous region to the capital city, which was facilitated by the AAEJ."<sup>59</sup>

In Ethiopia, the charge d'affaires, Robert Houdek, and the deputy charge d'affaires at the American Embassy, Robert Frasure,<sup>60</sup> made

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<sup>57</sup> Personal interview with Robert Houdek.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Personal Interview with Robert Houdek.

emergency food aid, along with blankets and firewood, available to the Ethiopian Jews arriving at the AAEJ compound. The duo provided tents to the Beta Yisrael seeking refuge in Addis Ababa, tents which were used by the search party for Congressman Mickey Leland's airplane in August of 1989.<sup>61</sup> The AAEJ notes the generosity of the American Embassy when the expected hundreds turned into thousands: "Their response was immediate and generous. They sent personnel over to the AAEJ compound where they erected two large tents to house new arrivals." The tents housed the Ethiopian Jews in the AAEJ compound until housing elsewhere in Addis Ababa was located.<sup>62</sup> Representative Gary Ackerman of New York noted: "The conditions of squalor the Ethiopian Jews face [in Addis Ababa] are among the worst I have seen anywhere on the planet. They are poor and have given up almost everything to get to Addis."<sup>63</sup>

The AAEJ was the first to establish a compound in the capital city. During his Passover 1990 trip to Ethiopia, Will Recant and Susan Pollack rented a compound from the Coptic Church around the corner from the Israeli Embassy. Shortly afterwards, the compound became known as "Susan's Compound" in recognition of the woman who facilitated the exodus, registered the Ethiopian Jews, and arranged for medical aid and relief supplies.

By the end of June, some fifteen thousand Beta Yisrael descended on Addis Ababa,<sup>64</sup> and by the end of the Summer, some twenty-two thousand

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<sup>61</sup> For more on the tragic loss of Representative Leland and the search for the wreckage of his airplane, see chapter eight, "The Post Operation Moses Era of 1985 to 1989: Family Reunification, Rescue Lists and the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry."

<sup>62</sup> From personal interviews with Robert Houdek and Will Recant.

<sup>63</sup> "Confusion Reigns over Ethiopian Cutbacks in Jewish Emigration," Washington Jewish Weekly, July, 1990, pp. 7 and 33.

<sup>64</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews," New York Times, July 14, 1990.

Ethiopian Jews lived on the capital city.<sup>65</sup> A New York Times article of mid-Summer states: "Many of the Jews arriving from Gondar seek out a house [the compound run by the AAEJ] in Addis Ababa run by the association [AAEJ], where two tents in the garden provided by the American Embassy are used for overnight shelter. High-protein biscuits provided by the United States Agency for International Development [AID] are given to the Jews there."<sup>66</sup> While the migration and immigration of the Beta Yisrael raised questions and resentment among all levels of Ethiopian society,<sup>67</sup> the population transfers received support from some governmental officials. Mengistu's half brother, Kassa Kabede,<sup>68</sup> who was educated in Israel and speaks Hebrew, enabled the AAEJ and Beta Yisrael presence in the capital city. "Through Mr. Kassa, the American Association for Ethiopian Jews set up its operations in Addis Ababa without having to go through the normal Government channels of the relief and rehabilitation commission."<sup>69</sup>

Also in 1990, the AAEJ set up what has been deemed "the largest Jewish school ever anywhere."<sup>70</sup> While in Ethiopia during April of 1990, Recant attended a dinner party at the American Embassy, in the Israeli Ambassador

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<sup>65</sup> "AAEJ Helps Care for Thousands of Jews in Addis Ababa."

<sup>66</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews."

<sup>67</sup> See "Attacks Against Ethiopian Jews on the Rise," Washington Jewish Weekly, July, 1990, p. 7.

<sup>68</sup> I met Kassa Kabede at a meeting on May 19, 1992, in the reception room of the Rayburn House office building in Washington, D.C., honoring those who helped facilitate and make Operation Solomon a reality. Kassa Kabede has a tremendous presence – an air of dignity and sophistication. His soft spoken manner and tremendous stature are most impressionable. Following the rebel take-over in Addis Ababa in May of 1991, Kassa Kabede sought political asylum in Israel and the United States.

<sup>69</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews."

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Will Recant. See also Tad Szulc, Secret Alliance: The Extraordinary Story of the Rescue of the Jews Since World War II (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), chapter on "The Black Jews," p. 300. By the end of 1990, four thousand five hundred Beta Yisrael attended the elementary school in Addis Ababa.

Meir Yoffe and his wife Mina also attended. Recant notes how the idea for a Jewish school for the Beta Yisrael youth got started:

We [Mina Yoffe and Recant] were talking in Hebrew... and she had taught at Ramaz Yeshiva in New York [where Recant attended as a youth], and I told her 'that I didn't know that you were a teacher. We now have two thousand Jewish children who have come here from Gondar. Wouldn't it be nice to start a school for them?' She said, 'sure, talk to Meir.'...So, I talked to Meir... and he said if you want to do it, I'll let Mina help... And that is when we rented the compound to start the school.

Susan Pollack notes that despite the tension between her and the Israeli establishment in Addis Ababa, "there was day-to-day cooperation,"<sup>71</sup> including work on the school. Some of her "harshest" critics came to the compound to help process the arrivals and run the school. "They [Israelis living in the capital city] got right down into the mud and helped out."<sup>72</sup> The school was established in August and Mina Yoffe was the first teacher recruited.<sup>73</sup> After the Israeli Embassy took over the school, they operated it on the AAEJ compound. Then a new school was built on the Israeli Embassy compound with showers, a kitchen, and twenty-seven tukels (East African huts), each of which was a classroom.<sup>74</sup>

Simultaneous to the exodus from Gondar to Addis Ababa and the establishment of the Jewish school in the capital city, the AAEJ acquired housing for the Beta Yisrael and provided them with medical care. Houdek notes, that after temporary refuge in the AAEJ and later the NACOEJ

<sup>71</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 11.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

<sup>73</sup> "AAEJ Helps Care for Thousands of Jews in Addis Ababa."

<sup>74</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum, former Associate Director for Relief and Family Reunification for NACOEJ, currently owner of City Sights Tours in Washington, D.C., May 19, 1992, in front of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

compound,<sup>75</sup> the American groups would then lease houses or rooms or stables for the Ethiopian Jews.<sup>76</sup> Recant states: "We started bringing people down and finding them housing and providing them with medicine and medical care... We had an American doctor from Boston... and hired non-Jewish Ethiopian doctors to take care [of the Beta Yisrael] and do the medical treatment as they were coming down. We also started a feeding program."<sup>77</sup> The living conditions of the Ethiopian Jews in Addis Ababa consisted of abject squalor and included cramped unhealthy and unsanitary hovels housing fifteen to twenty Beta Yisrael in one room; lack of employment; and fear of their Jewishness being discovered by hostile Gentile neighbors.<sup>78</sup>

By late Spring of 1990, the AAEJ sent over another full time American employee to assist Pollack. Glenn Stein, who traveled to Ethiopia in early 1984 and coordinated until 1989 the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center's (RAC) Ethiopian Jewry advocacy projects, as well as its medical program in the Beta Yisrael villages, Project REAP, met with Will Recant in Washington, D.C., in March of 1990 about AAEJ job opportunities in Israel.<sup>79</sup> Recant suggested to Stein, who was interested in aliyah, that he first work in Ethiopia on his way to Israel, since Pollack was planning on leaving the Horn of Africa. Relations between Pollack, the Ethiopian Government, and various Israeli officials in

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<sup>75</sup> More on the NACOEJ compound will follow later in this section.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Robert Houdek.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

<sup>78</sup> For more on the living conditions of the Beta Yisrael in Addis Ababa, see Rabbi Jerome Epstein, "Unimaginable Living Conditions of Ethiopian Jews," Release, Vol. 8, No. 1., Winter, 1990, pp. 4-5; and Rabbi Avis Miller, "If Not Now, When," Release, Vol. 8, No. 1., Winter, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> For more on Stein's 1984 trip to Ethiopia and his efforts with the RAC and Project REAP, see chapter six, "The Proliferation of Ethiopian Jewry Support Organizations in North America During the First Half of the 1980s," section on "The Reform Movement and other Religious Organizations Take Action," including extensive footnotes.



Addis Ababa were not always cordial.<sup>80</sup> After meeting with Pollack in New York City and receiving her approval, Stein was offered a position in the Ethiopian capital city. He arrived in Addis Ababa in late May of 1990, the first days when the trickle of Ethiopian Jews turned into hundreds of Beta Yisrael descending on the capital city on a daily basis. Along with his friend Joyce Miller, a journalist and photographer who accompanied him to Ethiopia, he worked in and managed the AAEJ compound for a year through Operation Solomon in May of 1991. Stein returned to the United States via Israel on one of the last flights out of Addis Ababa before the rebels took over. Later, LaDena Schnapper from Chicago joined Stein in the Ethiopian capital city.<sup>81</sup>

Primarily, Stein was involved in running the AAEJ compound, registering new refugees from Gondar, and managing the AAEJ's large caseload of Beta Yisrael living in Addis Ababa. Over the years, and particularly as a result of the exodus to the capital city, the AAEJ had taken responsibility for the care and maintenance of hundreds of Ethiopian Jewish families.<sup>82</sup> Along with Pollack, Stein would meet with these people, see to housing needs, coordinate medical services and provide financial assistance. Each day, the

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<sup>80</sup> Pollack did not leave immediately in May of 1990. In fact, she managed to stay in Ethiopia another five months. By mid-Summer, Pollack was forced to relinquish control to the Israelis the operations and facilities for the Beta Yisrael in Addis Ababa. "Pollack stepped down from the operational center of activities with a sense that she had won her battle. Once the Ethiopian Jews were concentrated in the city, she was confident that the Israelis would do what had to be done to get them out." A few months later, in September, she was flown back to the United States to recuperate from typhoid and a bad bronchial infection. She remained in bed for four months. In January of 1991, she flew to Israel for the AAEJ to assess the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants who had arrived in Operation Moses. Upon her return to the United States in May, she viewed the reports of Operation Solomon with her colleagues at the AAEJ office in Washington, D.C. "The Israelis, she thought, had done just what Israel was founded to do: pluck Jews out of danger. The broadcasts gave the Israelis their due credit but none mentioned Susan Pollack ("Down From the Hills," p. 11)."

<sup>81</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein. Currently, he is working for the Reform Movement in New York as director of the Endowment Fund.

<sup>82</sup> Before the massive influx of May-July 1990, the AAEJ was already supporting eight hundred families.

Beta Yisrael lined-up at the AAEJ compound office, waiting for hours in queues ranging in the hundreds before meeting with the AAEJ officials. Additionally, the casework and lists served as a basis for procuring documents and actualizing Family Reunification.<sup>83</sup>

### **"The Treaty of Jerusalem"**

After the AAEJ had been managing the relief and refugee operations for a couple of months, a summit meeting was called in Israel between the AAEJ and Israeli officials. In July, Susan Pollack traveled from Ethiopia to Israel, and Will Recant journeyed from Washington, D.C, to Jerusalem to meet with Jewish Agency, governmental and JDC officials. In what Robert Houdek deems "the Treaty of Jerusalem," the Israelis agreed to take over the responsibility of the Beta Yisrael who came down from the mountainous Gondar region.<sup>84</sup> It was agreed upon to shift responsibility for care of the burgeoning Jewish community in Addis Ababa from the activist groups to an Israel-based division of the Joint Distribution Committee, Almaya (Aramaic for "the world"),<sup>85</sup> which already had a small operation in place in Ethiopia. The Jewish Agency took over registration and processing of the arrivals from the AAEJ. "Building on the foundations laid down by Pollack's organization, the

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<sup>83</sup> Compiled from Glenn Stein's personal diary and daily/weekly reports to the AAEJ offices in the United States, earmarked for Will Recant and Nathan Shapiro. The diary and reports provide a wonderful account of the day-to-day successes, struggles, and challenges faced by the AAEJ staff in Addis Ababa; case profiles; as well as AAEJ compound activities, coordination with NACOEJ, JDC and Israeli officials, interchanges with Ethiopian officials, housing crisis, funding shortages, rescue activities, medical programs and death rates.

<sup>84</sup> Personal interview with Robert Houdek.

<sup>85</sup> More on Almaya (a special organization set up by Israel in 1990 and based in Addis Ababa to coordinate rescue attempts of the Beta Yisrael from Ethiopia) and the Jewish Agency and their role in Addis Ababa will be discussed later in this section.

Joint and Jewish Agency did prodigious work during the coming year in creating a city-within-a-city serving the 20,000 [plus] Jews then residing in Addis Ababa; they were eventually responsible for implementation of the Addis Ababa end of Operation Solomon."<sup>86</sup>

Glenn Stein remarks, that once the Israelis took control of the AAEJ's operations, the AAEJ set up a monitoring structure. If the American activist group saw a problem or that the Israelis were not holding up to their end of the bargain, "the AAEJ would report it to the Israelis or take action themselves." The Israelis hired the AAEJ staff, and the AAEJ hired a new staff and "used them as the eyes and ears to check programs." In short, "the working relations with the Israelis would go up and down. I [Stein] had a bad relationship with the Israelis. That's why I was not the person to work in Israel for the AAEJ."<sup>87</sup>

Houdek notes that the agreement "helped put an end to the rivalry and bickering."<sup>88</sup> He further states that the AAEJ maintained a monitoring role which was "excessive at times. I tried to calm them down at times. There was no need for things like a doctor's second opinion when the AAEJ officials felt differently about a patient from the physicians recommendation. At the same time, the American Jewish groups pushed the Israelis to devote a sufficient number of personnel, and the JDC did a great job with medical care."<sup>89</sup>

Recant notes how the summit meeting in Jerusalem unfolded:

They [the Jewish Agency and Israeli officials] tell us [Recant and Pollack], 'thanks, you brought everyone down, you did a great job of taking care of them, now you are to go away because we are going to

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<sup>86</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 11.

<sup>87</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein.

<sup>88</sup> Personal interview with Robert Houdek.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

take care of everything.' ... Micha Feldman was sitting on that side of the table next to Haim Halachmi, and I am sitting on the other side. I [Recant] told [them] that 'we will go away, we will close down as soon as you demonstrate the ability to take care of these things. Not just say you are going to do it, but as soon as you are there doing it.' [They asked Recant] 'Will you cooperate with us?' [Recant responded to them] 'We will give you everything. Susan [Pollack], you are to open every book, you are to show them everything. You are to give them every facilitator.' [The Israelis asked Recant] 'How long before you leave?' 'As soon as you are ready to take over,' 'How long before you are ready to take over?' And then they posed it to Micha who is the one who is in charge of everything in Addis. And Haim Halachmi is whispering 'machar [tomorrow], machar, machar' Just as I am reading his lips across the table, Micha says "shevuayim" "two weeks."

A month and a half later [end of August- beginning of September] they are finally there, Almaya is set up and established as another arm of JDC to handle this stuff. Micha is there and they take over the school and the medical program, etc. But again, it is one of those things [implying that the AAEJ started and initiated things]... But we never went away, and we told them that we will turn over all of the operations to you, but we will remain as 'observer status,' quote-unquote, to which Micha said, "ma zeh 'observer,' what are you going to be doing, standing over my shoulder at all times?"... But that is how it stayed until the end. We stayed as observer status. There was [were] a couple of things that they didn't do, that we felt should be done like the medical transport program. Take the Jews from the houses they were living in to the clinic.<sup>90</sup>

#### JDC and Almaya relief and rescue efforts in Addis Ababa

The JDC staffed and operated the clinics in Addis Ababa, headed by Dr. Rick Hodes. Western volunteer doctors and nurses "were appalled at the physical condition of the malnourished Gondar refugees. Yellow fever, malaria, typhus, bronchitis and other diseases were rampant."<sup>91</sup> Medical care was of primary concern to the JDC. The organization had two pieces to their operations in Ethiopia -- an ongoing program of assistance since 1984,

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Will Recant. For more on the AAEJ medical transport program, in which the AAEJ established a medical shuttle-bus service to help transport many of the Jewish refugees who were afraid, too weak, or unfamiliar with Addis Ababa to get to the JDC sponsored clinic; see "AAEJ Transports Jews to Clinic," Release, Vol. 9, No. 1, Winter, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>91</sup> "Down From the Hills," p. 11.

following a hiatus when ORT was ousted from the country; and coordination with Almaya. The JDC saw their efforts very much as rescue -- the sustaining and saving of lives through medical programs and famine relief. Ted Myers, Director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's (AJJDC) medical programs to East Africa during the 1980s and early 1990s remarks: "Our rescue, if you want to call it that, was more of one keeping people alive; we rescued them in that sense."<sup>92</sup>

After ORT was expelled during the late 1970s and early 1980s, "it took a few years [for the JDC] to get in [to Ethiopia]."<sup>93</sup> Gideon Taylor, Director of Special Projects for AJJDC, notes that the non-sectarian programs began in 1984, primarily in villages in Gondar. The ongoing programs of "care and maintenance," including health, medical, blankets, education, crops and agriculture, and economic assistance; was staffed by the AAEJ and NACOEJ, "but JDC financed."<sup>94</sup> The work was primarily in the villages in the Northern

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<sup>92</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Ted Myers, Director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's (AJJDC) Medical Program to East Africa during the 1980s and early 1990s; June 17, 1992, AJJDC headquarters in New York, New York.

<sup>93</sup> Personal interview with Gideon Taylor, Director of Special Projects, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC), June 17, 1992, AJJDC headquarters in New York, New York.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. See also, The Secret Alliance, p. 297. It is with great reservation that The Secret Alliance is used as a source. This work of late 1991 by Tad Szulc details the rescue of Jews from Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East since World War II. Each chapter focuses on the rescue of a different community. In his twenty-three page chapter on Ethiopian rescue, in particular Operation Solomon, he distorts, omits and white-washes numerous facts, figures, organizations and significant historical events vis-a-vis the Beta Yisrael aliyah. This is a prime example of AAEJ founder Graenum Berger's fear of a Revisionist History regarding the movement to rescue the Ethiopian Jews. In a letter dated June 19, 1992, Berger expressed to me: "Now that everybody is on the band wagon, there is already a rewriting of history. There is a total omission of what was done in the past [by the AAEJ, CAEJ etc.]. There is total omission of what was not done in the past [i.e. inaction by the American Jewish leadership and Israel]. There is only a record of tremendous latter day elation and achievement. The past thus is obliterated." It is apparent that Szulc only researched the rescue and conducted interviews with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and Almaya and Jewish Agency officials. He includes only one brief mention of the AAEJ, and fails to consider the complete role played by that organization. Moreover, he does not even mention once the role played by NACOEJ, CAEJ, ARNEJ, the Congressional Caucus for



region of Ethiopia until the exodus to Addis Ababa. Taylor states: "Because of the well established credentials with the government, when the Jews started coming down to Addis Ababa, the JDC after a long negotiating process was able to get permission to look after the Jews in Addis."<sup>95</sup> The JDC set up "care and maintenance" programs in the capital city, including medical care, food distribution, cottage industries, and running the school.

The second piece of JDC activity in Ethiopia, aided by their involvement and contacts in East Africa, was with Almaya. Taylor remarks: "We funded and ran and operated an arm [of the JDC] that was connected with the Israel Embassy [and the Jewish Agency] called 'Almaya,' which was entirely a JDC

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Ethiopian Jewry, and the U.S. State Department. This most recent account on the Jews of Ethiopia refers to the community as "Falasha," a term which for at least the past ten years has been known to be offensive and insulting to the Beta Yisrael. His lack of knowledge about the Ethiopian Jewish community is shown by numerous errors. First, the fabrication that "[f]or more than thirty years the Falashas in Ethiopia – black Jews – were a concern of Israel as well as HIAS and the Joint... the Falashas were the beneficiaries of countless secret operations to bring them to Israel (p. 290). Second, the erroneous statement that: "Today's Falashas speak the Ge'ez language, derived from Amharic, and they say their prayers in Amharic, a Semitic language [Ge'ez is the liturgical language, Amharic is the everyday language of speech, reading and writing], (p. 291)." Third, he remarks that Israel attempted "to win freedom of emigration for the Falashas during the 1950s and 1960s [when? how?] (p. 292)." Fourth, he wrongly states that "13,000 black Jews were rescued through Operation Moses [between seven and eight thousand were saved] (p. 298)." In a personal interview, Will Recant noted: "He [Tad Szulc] didn't do thorough research on this subject. And by not doing proper research in getting the full story, he relied very heavily on what Haim Halachmi and HIAS had to say to him. For the book, Tad didn't interview or talk to the AAEJ. He also implied [in the chapter on the rescue of the Beta Yisrael] that the U.S. government had no role." Recant further speculated: "When he wrote the book, he probably only talked to Haim Halachmi who shared the glory with no one." Conversely, Dr. Ephraim Isaac stated in a personal interview that Szulc is correct in stressing the JDC and the Jewish Agency involvement in the rescue, since their efforts and financial support brought the majority of the Beta Yisrael to Israel, while the AAEJ and NACOEJ only rescued individuals and families. American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) official Gideon Taylor asserted in a personal interview that the substance of what Tad Szulc writes in the book is true, but he did not conduct wide research or extensive interviews. It is in the light of this last comment that I use The Secret Alliance – in that what is contained in its pages about the Jewish Agency, HIAS, JDC and Almaya is true, but that it constitutes only a part of the whole picture of the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry and the historical background to Operation Solomon.

<sup>95</sup> Personal interview with Gideon Taylor.



venture, JDC staff and so on; but for a variety of reasons, we found it useful to have two operating arms, each doing different parts of the puzzle."<sup>96</sup> Taylor also notes, that the JDC through Almaya was involved with "the logistics of Operation Solomon; to inform and manage the people on the day of the airlift, along with the Jewish Agency staff."<sup>97</sup> Perhaps because of the JDC's stance as a "humanitarian, non-sectarian, non-political" organization, it needed a separate entity to be involved with the the politics and logistics of rescue to Israel.

Tad Szulc in The Secret Alliance: The Extraordinary Story of the Rescue of the Jews Since World War II, notes that the JDC's New York headquarters and its Jerusalem office, JDC/Israel "secretly created a separate organization to oversee new attempts to rescue the Falashas."<sup>98</sup> Eli Eliezri, an official of the JDC/Israel office and veteran of earlier secret enterprises, was appointed chairperson of Almaya. The new organization was to operate closely with the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem and the the JDC's office in Israel and headquarters in New York.<sup>99</sup>

In the Fall of 1990, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir selected Uri Lubrani to be in charge of overall operations in Addis Ababa. Lubrani, the Israeli government's coordinator for Lebanon and one of the country's top negotiators and political operatives, flew to Addis Ababa, where he met with President Mengistu in direct secret negotiations that would stretch over eight months.<sup>100</sup> Lubrani also met with Jacob "Kobi" Friedman, the JDC/Almaya

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. More on Almaya's role in facilitating rescue and Operation Solomon will occur later in this chapter in the section on "Operation Solomon."

<sup>98</sup> The Secret Alliance, p. 299.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

representative, who had been dispatched to the capital city in June of 1990 to supervise relief efforts and preparations for rescue. Friedman, a specialist in covert operations, had been given the cover of vice-consul at the Israeli Embassy: "His task, which kept him busy around the clock, was to ready the Falashas for emigration, as soon as Lubrani's negotiations were completed and Mengistu gave the green light for departures. This process, however, would be long, tedious, and nerve-racking, lasting a full year."<sup>101</sup>

Eliezri and Almaya deputy chairperson, Ami Bergman, opened a \$150,000 operational account at the National Bank of Ethiopia in May of 1990. The money came from an initial \$250,000 transfer from the JDC's New York office to the Almaya team in Ethiopia, sent via banking channels in Basel, Switzerland.<sup>102</sup> Initially, the Almaya group acted openly, using JDC funds for housing and medical aid to the Beta Yisrael. "The [Mengistu] regime welcomed their presence, presumably not aware that preparations for a mass flight of Jews were underway."<sup>103</sup> Moreover, the JDC was building on "seven years of goodwill earned with its humanitarian efforts on behalf of the Falashas and non-Jewish Ethiopians. It spent about \$7 million annually in Ethiopia, operated a clinic, and provided food assistance."<sup>104</sup> The medical programs brought down the Beta Yisrael mortality rate from 39 per 1,000 to 7 per 1,000.<sup>105</sup> Whereas one hundred Ethiopian Jews died per month between June and August, 1990, around twenty Beta Yisrael died per month in Addis Ababa between September and November.<sup>106</sup> Stein, who also kept extensive records

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, pp. 299-300.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 300.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

<sup>105</sup> Ibid

<sup>106</sup> CRS Issue Brief: Ethiopian Jews, Updated March 22, 1991, p. 13.

on the mortality rate of the Ethiopian Jews, notes that over half of the deceased were children.<sup>107</sup>

Michael Strum, Assistant Director for Relief and Family Reunification for NACOEJ, notes that no non-Ethiopian was allowed in the JDC clinics: "AAEJ and NACOEJ were kept out. The staff they had were non-Jewish Americans, who had no idea of what our [NACOEJ and AAEJ's] goals and purposes were. They were shocked that all these people [the Beta Yisrael] were in Addis, they felt that they were better off in Gondar, and couldn't understand why these people should leave the country when the other 45 million can't."<sup>108</sup> Strum also remarks that the JDC was not helping the Beta Yisrael to get out of Ethiopia: "This has never been their function in this [Ethiopia] or any other country... We knew from the Ethiopian staff who were all non-Jewish that they were resentful of the Beta Yisrael."<sup>109</sup>

The JDC/Almaya organization took over control of the Jewish elementary school in Addis Ababa from the AAEJ. Additionally, it provided daily cash payments for food for the Beta Yisrael in the capital city and for the additional thousands who were still stranded in the remote villages of Gondar. The JDC/Almaya group helped establish a "veritable Falasha town in the Ethiopian capital, complete with all facilities -- including a synagogue."<sup>110</sup> By

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<sup>107</sup> Graph of Death Totals of Beta Yisrael in Addis Ababa between July 1, 1990, and October 6, 1990, prepared by Glenn Stein, showing a weekly total of the mortality rate of Ethiopian Jews, and a breakdown of the children between ages infant through five years of age, and six through twelve years of age, who perished; from the personal files of Glenn Stein, Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>108</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum. See also "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews," which relates how some Western diplomats and relief workers "question why an entire culture should be uprooted from Ethiopia. They say that the land the Jews cultivated, as well as their houses, have been quickly occupied by others and are now irretrievable to the Jews. There is a strong possibility, several relief workers suggested, that Jews unused to city life will be stranded in Addis Ababa."

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>110</sup> The Secret Alliance, p. 300.

the end of 1990, of the 22,000 Beta Yisrael which lived in Addis Ababa, JDC/Almaya employed some 2,000 on its local payroll as security guards, schoolteachers, health personnel, social workers, and construction crews who built housing for the new arrivals.<sup>111</sup>

The JDC also was involved with political activism in the United States. In December 1990, Lubrani came to the JDC headquarters in New York City and said "that he needed coordination with all of the Jewish organizations in America along with Congress and the State Department." Taylor remarks that Lubrani "asked the JDC to take the coordinating role."<sup>112</sup> The JDC called a meeting with the "Jewish establishment" along with the AAEJ and NACOEJ. The JDC was the contact link with the group, and Lubrani and Taylor talked daily. Taylor also notes, that Michael Schneider, Executive Vice-President of JDC, "was a key party in holding together all of these organizations, harnessing the combined energy of American Jewry toward the goal of working with the administration in order to achieve that [the rescue of the Beta Yisrael]."<sup>113</sup> Taylor also credits the AAEJ efforts in Washington, D.C., with facilitating this process, because of their superb relations with the State Department, the Bush administration and Congress. Furthermore, the JDC opened relations with the Ethiopian and Eritrean rebels, and met in Washington, D.C., with representatives of the various groups on two occasions; and conferred with the State Department about pressuring the rebel groups from holding off coming into Addis Ababa until the Beta Yisrael issue was resolved.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Gideon Taylor.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. In May of 1991, the rebel groups did hold off from entering Addis Ababa, thus allowing for Operation Solomon to take place. This chapter will also detail AAEJ efforts on Capitol Hill and the various discussions with the Ethiopian and Eritrean rebel groups preceding Operation Solomon. For more on JDC efforts in Addis Ababa, see JDC Challenge

### NACOEJ relief and rescue efforts in Addis Ababa

By the Spring of 1990, NACOEJ had a presence in Addis Ababa. During the Summer of that year, the organization set up their own compound in the capital city, largely due to the AAEJ's policy vis-a-vis the Felas Mora. Until that time, NACOEJ officials had been working out of the AAEJ compound, which removed Felas Mora from its environs. Michael Strum remarks why his group opened up their own facilities: "I was terrified what was happening to the Felas Mora. By the Summer, the AAEJ compound was being used by Almaya and the Jewish Agency. The AAEJ staff was divided [on what to do with the Felas Mora]. So we set up our own compound." Will Recant, while glossing over why NACOEJ established their own compound, focused on the timing of the acquisition of their counterpart's facility: "In so many instances, NACOEJ rode our coattails... Three months after we rented a compound, that's when NACOEJ opened their compound."<sup>115</sup> He also states that NACOEJ was not on "the cutting edge," rather, the organization "came about later after it was all done, after the risks had been taken."<sup>116</sup> Glenn Stein notes: "The AAEJ and NACOEJ were coordinating lists. The AAEJ was willing to help NACOEJ so long as the AAEJ maintained control."<sup>117</sup> Robert Houdek remarks that "NACOEJ's compound did complementary things to the AAEJ compound like education and crafts

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<sup>91</sup>: Supporting Jews in Distress in Addis Ababa, The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) newsletter of eight pages devoted to the relief effort in the Ethiopian capital city, May, 1991.

<sup>115</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid

<sup>117</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein.

programs. This was essential since once the Ethiopian Jews were down from Gondar, their social life was disrupted."<sup>118</sup>

Once again, ideological differences caused a rift between the AAEJ and NACOEJ. However, the cooperation of the two activist groups to coordinate rescue and relief lists in their New York summit meetings between 1986 and 1989 continued in 1990 and 1991 in Addis Ababa. After the warming of relations and the resumption of ties between Israel and Ethiopia in 1989, the AAEJ moved rescue coordination from Chicago to Addis Ababa, and NACOEJ moved its efforts from Washington, D.C., to the Ethiopian capital city. Personal contact with the community was essential in helping facilitate the relief and rescue effort. At the same time, to eliminate duplication of efforts on individuals and families, and to expedite the process, the AAEJ and NACOEJ met on a regular and frequent basis. This time in Ethiopia, the groups coordinated the procurement of exit papers and facilitation of the final exodus to Israel, as well as assistance to the Beta Yisrael community in the capital city. Additionally, it is important to note that NACOEJ worked out of the AAEJ compound months before they established their own facilities.

During late Winter of 1990, a "big meeting" was called with the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC), Haim Halachmi, the Federations, and the North American Ethiopian Jewry Activist groups. Strum notes that the AAEJ and NACOEJ were demanding more accountability on the part of the Israelis: "They were always thwarting our efforts. Whenever we worked with Halachmi, or [when we were] trying to process the papers [documents for "legal" emigration out of Ethiopia], they were always saying, 'why don't you get out of the business.' The subterfuge and the Byzantine

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<sup>118</sup> Personal interview with Robert Houdek.



operations of this decade were incredible."<sup>119</sup> The meeting held in Israel included Pollack from Ethiopia; Recant, Strum and Barbara Ribakove Gordon, Executive Director of NACOEJ, all from the United States; two United Israel Appeal (UIA) representatives; Jewish Agency personnel; and a few Ethiopian Israelis, "thanks to Will's [Recant] pressuring."<sup>120</sup> "For the first time, the Israeli officials were telling us that they wanted us [NACOEJ and AAEJ] to continue doing what we were doing, and they had acknowledged that we had been doing something helpful. But that [Israeli stance] didn't last very long."<sup>121</sup>

Strum flew directly from Israel to Ethiopia in March of 1990 "to determine what NACOEJ should do and see if NACOEJ should set up an office [in Addis Ababa]."<sup>122</sup> He assessed that it would be more effective for the organization to process the paperwork and facilitate rescue and relief efforts with an Ethiopian office. Strum met with Micha Feldman from the Jewish Agency, who shared a secretary with the Israeli Ambassador, "had no staff, and was overwhelmed." Strum notes, that while the AAEJ "forced the issue," NACOEJ worked more quietly and with a less concentrated effort than Pollack's operation. "We helped individuals and families and multi-family groups – we did not arrange for trucks and buses and so on [to take the Beta Yisrael from Gondar to Addis Ababa]. We did help them [the Beta Yisrael] with some of the arrangements [to make the migration] once we were there [based in Addis Ababa]."<sup>123</sup>

Feldman allowed Strum to work out of his office in March of 1990:

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<sup>119</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid

<sup>121</sup> Ibid

<sup>122</sup> Ibid

<sup>123</sup> Ibid

He allowed me to have my cases come. The whole separation of my case, your cases, the Israelis never really accepted it -- their philosophy was that all the cases belonged to the Jewish Agency. If we wanted to duplicate the Jewish Agency's effort by making them our cases too, we could do that... We [NACOEJ] maintained as did the AAEJ that for years the Jewish Agency was not doing what they were suppose to be doing, and that is why we got into the business in the first place and that is why we had our own cases. And the only reason that they were yours, mine and ours is because we went through them for approval and we allowed them to give us permission. The AAEJ to some extent, LaDena to some extent, acted a lot more unilaterally than I did. I was under orders to not handle cases that were not approved by Haim Halachmi. She was supposed to do the same, but she would often handle people not approved.<sup>124</sup>

A NACOEJ board member replaced Strum in Ethiopia during the Spring. He assisted Pollack and set up an office in the AAEJ compound, "and listened to the NACOEJ cases and dispensed money as he saw needed."<sup>125</sup> In late May, NACOEJ sent Solomon Ezra,<sup>126</sup> an Ethiopia Israeli who had lived in Israel and the United States, to supervise the NACOEJ caseload. "He had thousands coming to him every day, and he could speak to them in Amharic which was a big help for the cases and also for Susan [Pollack], and Solomon was respected and he knew a lot of the Addis staff."<sup>127</sup> In early Summer, NACOEJ sent another Ethiopian Israeli, Samuel Meheret from Ashdod, son of a kess, to help with relief and rescue. At the same time:

NACOEJ was debating whether or not to have a place of their own, why should we have our own place. [Reasons against establishing a separate compound included the fact that] We [NACOEJ and AAEJ]

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid

<sup>125</sup> Ibid

<sup>126</sup> For more on Solomon Ezra, see chapter six, "The Proliferation of Ethiopian Jewish Support Organizations in North America During the First Half of the 1980s," section on "Barbara Ribakove Gordon and the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry."

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Michael Strum.

officials] are sitting at desks near each other, or in separate rooms, so people can't fool us... which they did once we had a separate office. They would go to Susan [Pollack] in the morning and to me [Strum] in the afternoon and vice versa and to Micha [Feldman] in the evening... We also had discussions about airplanes and buses, and what we should do about transporting people etc. We found when we got there [Ethiopia], Susan had already made contact and was very much on top of things and was even ahead of the Israelis in doing things.<sup>128</sup>

Strum returned to Ethiopia in July, and managed the NACOEJ activities until September. During this time, he set up the NACOEJ compound, a much smaller facility than the AAEJ compound, and assembled a staff of six individuals. Immediately preceding Strum's arrival, the Israelis had agreed to take over the responsibility for the Beta Yisrael in the "Treaty of Jerusalem." However, no NACOEJ representative was present in Israel. Only the AAEJ took part in the discussions and agreement, and not NACOEJ. Micha Feldman met with Strum when he arrived in Ethiopia, and briefed him about the meetings in Jerusalem. Feldman and the other Jewish Agency and Israeli officials wanted NACOEJ to accept the agreement that the AAEJ had made -- that the AAEJ no longer would do case work, and that they would turn over all of their cases to the Jewish Agency. However, NACOEJ still gave out money to their specific case load for people to go back to Gondar to bring their family members back down and also paid some non-Jewish Ethiopians to go back to the mountains to bring other Jews down.<sup>129</sup> Strum states:

It was expected that we would follow since we were the more tacit organization and expected that we would not put up a fuss. Well, we were shocked that the AAEJ had made this agreement, because we did not usually agree with the AAEJ's noisiness, but we also didn't feel that the Jewish Agency had enough staff people there [in Ethiopia], that

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. Some of these Gentiles helped rescue the Beta Yisrael; others ran away with the money.

Micha [Feldman] was capable of taking care of everyone, that people were falling through the cracks; and we weren't about to do it [agree to the "Treaty of Jerusalem"]. So, in essence, we never really made the agreement. After being in Ethiopia a month, I reported back that it was ridiculous since double dipping was going on and it was confusing for the Ethiopian Jewish population that there were two addresses to come to. I pushed my board into giving up our individual cases. But that doesn't mean we all stopped working. It meant that we all had different functions serving the entire community instead of NACOEJ serving their people and AAEJ serving theirs and so on. So we divvied up responsibilities as much as the Israelis would allow, and if they didn't, we took certain responsibilities.<sup>130</sup>

In August, Solomon Ezra rejoined the NACOEJ staff in Ethiopia, and stayed in the country until late Spring of 1991 when all Ethiopian Israelis were advised to leave the country. Also that Summer, Strum's assistant, Andy Goldman came over to Ethiopia. Goldman "put the Ethiopian Jews to work and did projects with them. He took the small NACOEJ compound which was a room, rented the entire house plus the yard plus the compound next door, and set up the arts and crafts program, an after school program, and adult education."<sup>131</sup> The school the AAEJ established and later the Israeli Embassy operated, educated a certain segment of the Beta Yisrael population. Yet, "the problem was that some of the younger kids weren't in the school, and that the older kids only went to school half a day, and had nothing to do in the afternoon. So, NACOEJ set up an after school recreation program with sports, games, Hebrew studies; plus programs for the adults."<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum. For more on the activities of NACOEJ in Addis Ababa, see "With the Jewish Refugees in Addis Ababa," *Lifeline*, a publication of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York, Summer, 1990, pp. 1 and 8; and "From Addis With Tears," *Lifeline*, Fall, 1990, pp. 1 and 7.

<sup>131</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum.

<sup>132</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum. For more on Goldman's achievements, including the establishment of cottage craft industries, see "Do You Recognize This Picture," *Lifeline*, Fall, 1991, pp. 1 and 8.

Goldman also started a circus in Addis Ababa with the Beta Yisrael youth, with juggling and clowning; and he got the leading comedian of Ethiopia to work with the group, as well as a teacher of gymnastics at the American embassy to teach them acrobatics. Strum notes, "any way to keep them sane as they were waiting for rescue." The circus was dubbed: "The NACOEJ Circus - The Humblest Show on Earth":<sup>133</sup>

And the most poignant thing was as they were getting on the plane [during Operation Solomon], the kids said to Andy [Goldman], 'what about the circus?' Because Sunday [the day after the rescue] was to be their debut, the premier of their circus, and they had to leave behind their balls and all of their stuff. And if you go to the absorption centers, even today, you will see kids walking around juggling...<sup>134</sup>

Goldman organized a Chanukkah celebration for four thousand Beta Yisrael children in December of 1990, at the Israeli Embassy. Because he did work for the Embassy as a professional photographer, he had special permission to be at the compound. Amplifiers and speakers for the party were obtained from the U.S. Embassy. Other holiday observances for the Ethiopian Jews were sponsored by NACOEJ. In the Spring of 1991, NACOEJ board members went over to Ethiopia and put together a Passover Seder for six hundred people at the compound.<sup>135</sup>

NACOEJ not only assisted the Beta Yisrael, but also the "Conversos" of Ethiopia. The Felas Mora who traveled down from Gondar to Addis Ababa were not receiving any help; the only aid coming from what their Jewish relatives shared with them from what they received from the various agencies. NACOEJ started to register the Felas Mora names after they were turned down by the

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<sup>133</sup> "Do You Recognize This Picture," p. 8.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with Michael Strum.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid

Israeli Embassy and the AAEJ. Before Strum left Ethiopia in September, 1990, NACOEJ decided unilaterally that it would help the Felas Mora. It was also decided that the JDC would provide medical care and Almaya would provide food. NACOEJ provided the Felas Mora as well as the Beta Yisrael with clothing, which was purchased every morning in the Addis Ababa market.<sup>136</sup> NACOEJ also felt that the Felas Mora needed money for housing. Strum notes: "This wasn't Gondar. Where were they going to live? Eventually, Almaya and JDC took over providing the Felas Mora with money [for housing]."<sup>137</sup>

But the Beta Yisrael remained the focus of NACOEJ. Strum asserts, that "hundreds of the Ethiopian Jews were falling through the cracks, and that the Israeli Embassy was pushing some away. At times, they kept telling the AAEJ and NACOEJ go away."<sup>138</sup> Jewish Agency official Micha Feldman, who worked out of the Israeli Embassy, once told Strum that "there are no Jews that can't get into the Embassy. If so, you bring them to me." Strum the next day marched up sixty-five people to the gate of the Israeli Embassy, virtually all of whom had been denied entry earlier, and later were checked out by Feldman as being Jewish. Strum, frustrated by the sometimes Byzantine-like bureaucracy, remarked: "The Holocaust might be too extreme [an analogy], but it was like living in a communist country, living behind the Iron Curtain, in a total bureaucracy. It was Kafkaesque, totally Kafkaesque... like the opera 'The Consul' by Gian Carlo Menotti, which takes place outside the consulate and people are trying to emigrate."

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<sup>136</sup> Andy Goldman would show up at the muddy Addis Ababa market at 5:00 am every morning to buy sets of clothes to put on the Jewish youngsters. Over twelve thousand sets of clothing were purchased. See "Do You Recognize This Picture."

<sup>137</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum. See the Epilogue for more on the Felas Mora.

<sup>138</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum.



For Strum and others, the Israelis were scrutinizing too strictly when determining who to place on the rescue lists for the Jewish State:

The difference between the Jewish Agency and our group [NACOEJ] was that they were looking for the people who didn't belong, that shouldn't be able to make aliyah. I think the emphasis should be the other way; that everyone should be allowed to make aliyah unless we find some reason that they can't make aliyah or shouldn't make aliyah. Let's assume everybody is Okay and Jewish. Let our personnel look for the shred of evidence that they are Jewish, rather than look for the shred of evidence that they are not Jewish.<sup>139</sup>

At times, questions of "who is a Jew" and "who is entitled safe passage to Israel" became problematic. But relief efforts, housing, food programs, medical attention, educational projects, and extracurricular enrichment activities were always of major concern to NACOEJ as well as the AAEJ, JDC and the Israelis. Moreover, aliyah always remained primary for all of the groups. The pace of aliyah fluctuated greatly throughout 1990. The numbers of Beta Yisrael emigrating from Addis Ababa to Israel under "legal" means ranged from zero to a few hundred a month. Changing political conditions altered the mood and attitude of the Ethiopian Government toward the Ethiopian Jewish exodus. But the burning desire of the Beta Yisrael to return to Zion remained constant.

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid

THE EXODUS OF THE BETA YISRAEL FROM ADDIS ABABA TO ISRAEL  
BETWEEN THE RESUMPTION OF RELATIONS IN NOVEMBER OF 1989 AND  
OPERATION SOLOMON IN MAY OF 1991

By the middle of 1990, nearly twenty-two thousand Ethiopian Jews had found refuge in Addis Ababa. Until the end of 1989, only a few dozen Beta Yisrael found safe passage to Israel from the capital city under "legal" means. However, as the rate of Ethiopian Jews making the exodus from Gondar to Addis Ababa increased, so too did the number of Beta Yisrael making the final exodus to Israel from the capital city. By the beginning of 1990, the number of Ethiopian Jews making their final journey of redemption numbered in the hundreds per month. Yet, by the middle of the year, the number was cut to zero, perhaps as a punishment for Israel refusing to arm the Ethiopian Government. By the Fall of 1990, emigration picked up once again, but it was clear that it would take years to save the Jewish community of Ethiopia at such a rate. The civil war was closing in on the capital city; thus, only a massive rescue operation would save the Beta Yisrael before utter chaos ensued in Addis Ababa and a new regime, likely antagonistic to Israel, took over.

After the resumption of relations between Israel and Ethiopia in November of 1989, the rate of emigration to the Jewish State increased. According to a New York Times article, "[e]migration for Ethiopian Jews was part of the pact between Ethiopia and Israel when the countries resumed ties in November after 16 years."<sup>140</sup> The "Issue Brief" on Ethiopian Jews of the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress cites that between January and March of 1990, a total of four hundred Beta Yisrael were rescued from Addis Ababa to Israel.<sup>141</sup> A conflicting number is reported by the

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<sup>140</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews."

<sup>141</sup> CRS Issue Brief: Ethiopian Jewry, p. 13.

American Association for Ethiopian Jews. The AAEJ reported that in the first quarter of 1990, a total of eight hundred and twenty Ethiopian Jews were reunited with their relatives in Israel, 80% of whom were assisted by the AAEJ.<sup>142</sup> The totals of Beta Yisrael making aliyah for the Spring and early Summer months include approximately five hundred in April, five hundred and fifty in May, and five hundred in June.<sup>143</sup>

However, in July, no Ethiopian Jew was repatriated with family members in Israel. The New York Times reported on July 14th: "[I]n the last several weeks the authorities have stopped issuing the exit permits that allowed 500 Ethiopian Jews to leave for Israel each month."<sup>144</sup> Representative Howard Wolpe, Democrat from Michigan and chairperson of the House Subcommittee on Africa, asserted that the Ethiopian government was holding up the exit permits as a way of pressing the Israeli Government to supply weapons to Addis Ababa, reportedly including cluster bombs.<sup>145</sup> Western diplomats in Addis Ababa said they agreed with the assessment, stating: "Mengistu has upped the price."<sup>146</sup> Pentagon officials stressed that Ethiopia's beleaguered dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, was holding the Ethiopian Jews hostage to demands that Israel supply him with a massive infusion of arms to fight advancing rebel movements.<sup>147</sup> Mengistu expected Israel to replace the inward focusing Perestroika Soviet Union, once the Ethiopian regime's main arms supplier.

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<sup>142</sup> "AAEJ Helps Care for Thousands of Jews in Addis Ababa."

<sup>143</sup> CRS Issue Brief: Ethiopian Jewry, p. 13.

<sup>144</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews."

<sup>145</sup> Ibid

<sup>146</sup> Ibid

<sup>147</sup> "Confusion Reigns over Ethiopian Cutbacks in Jewish Emigration," Washington Jewish Weekly, July, 1990 pp. 7 and 33.

Wolpe and Representative Ackerman stated that Mengistu visited Israel on July 4th and 5th with a long list of military assistance he needed in his battle against two guerrilla groups. However, "[t]he Israeli Government and the Ethiopian Government have strenuously denied that Colonel Mengistu visited Israel."<sup>148</sup> Moreover, charges were made that Israel sold cluster bombs to the Mengistu regime. Some Pentagon and Bush administration officials believed that Israel could have had an indirect role in the sale of cluster bombs manufactured outside of the Jewish State.<sup>149</sup> But most agree that Israel had no direct role in the manufacture and sale of the bombs. Raoul Sohar, a Chilean journalist who has written a book on the Chilean defense industry, asserted that the Chilean weapons manufacturer "Cardoen" had sold cluster bombs to Ethiopia in October of 1989.<sup>150</sup> Additionally, congressional sources maintained that U.S. intelligence experts had retrieved and examined fragments of Ethiopian cluster bombs and found them to be from Chile rather than Israel.<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, "Israelis have also denied that they have provided Ethiopia with military assistance since the resumption of relations."<sup>152</sup> Also, a State Department official expressed his belief that the Ethiopian Government was punishing Israel and the Beta Yisrael because the Jewish State did not provide "arms for hostages."<sup>153</sup> A State Department official asserted: "This cut by the Ethiopian Government [not] to allow Ethiopian Jews to emigrate was a result of Israel NOT giving arms or money to

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<sup>148</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews."

<sup>149</sup> "Confusion Reigns over Ethiopian Cutbacks in Jewish Emigration," p. 33.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>152</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews."

<sup>153</sup> More on the notion of "arms for hostages" will be discussed later in this chapter in the section on "State Department Activities on Behalf of the Beta Yisrael."

Ethiopia."<sup>154</sup> At the same time, Israel had some type of military relationship with Ethiopia: "Informed U.S. officials said that Israeli military experts are training and advising the Ethiopian military. In order to protect Israel, these sources said, the Israeli advisors are acting as civilians."<sup>155</sup>

Meir Yoffe, Israeli Ambassador to Ethiopia at the time, provided a different explanation to the halt in the exodus. He noted that the "recent suspension in issuing exit permits was a joint decision by the Ethiopian Government and the Israeli Government."<sup>156</sup> Israel had reached an agreement with Ethiopia to temporarily suspend the issuance of new exit permits to the Jews, since both countries were concerned that numerous non-Jews were slipping in among the emigres to escape worsening conditions in Ethiopia.<sup>157</sup> Yoffe notes that "[o]nce we realized non-Jews were using the channel to leave Ethiopia we were alarmed... There have been some cases of non-Jews arriving in Israel."<sup>158</sup> Yoffe stated, that since the point of the emigration was Family Reunification, "applicants to emigrate to Israel would be more carefully scrutinized by the Ethiopian and Israeli authorities to make sure the people leaving were Jews and had relatives in Israel."<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Personal interview with a State Department official in May of 1992, who requested to remain anonymous.

<sup>155</sup> "Confusion Reigns over Ethiopian Cutbacks in Jewish Emigration," p. 7.

<sup>156</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews."

<sup>157</sup> "Confusion Reigns over Ethiopian Cutbacks in Jewish Emigration," p. 7.

<sup>158</sup> "Strain on Ethiopian City: Stranded Jews."

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. See also an editorial in the Washington Jewish Weekly in July of 1990, "The Ethiopian Cry," pp. 10 and 27, which criticizes Yoffe's statement as endangering the Beta Yisrael population and "has uncomfortable racist undertones, particularly given Israel's attitude toward the Soviet aliyah." The editorial states: "Israel is worried, he [Ambassador Meir Yoffe] said, about the supposedly large numbers of Christians who are claiming to be Jews in order to leave Ethiopia. Imagine this: tomorrow Israel announces a similar agreement with Soviet authorities and insists on more careful screening of visa applicants to confirm their Jewish identities. After all, an estimated 25 percent of these immigrants [Russian] are non-Jews. The Jewish community would raise a thundering outcry on behalf of a long suffering community whose window of opportunity for emigration could end at any time. The situation is even more grim for Ethiopian Jews."

Another theory as to why the Beta Yisrael emigration was halted during July of 1990 was put forward by AAEJ Executive Director Will Recant. Recant notes that the Mengistu regime sought to avoid arousing Arab diplomats arriving in Addis Ababa for the annual meeting of the Organization for African Unity (OAU).<sup>160</sup> The OAU meeting ended the second week of July. During the end of June, the previous rate of emigration of one hundred and thirty to one hundred and fifty Beta Yisrael a week, was reduced to about thirty Ethiopian Jews per week. This reduction was in anticipation of the OAU meeting the beginning of July. During the meetings, Jewish emigration came to a complete halt. The theory concludes that it then took several weeks after the OAU meeting to resume emigration levels to the pre-OAU meeting figures.<sup>161</sup> That is why in July of 1990, Recant was "assured that the emigration cutback was merely a temporary measure."<sup>162</sup>

Some suggest a link between the timing of the halt in the emigration coinciding with the OAU meeting, and Israeli concerns over non-Jews reaching Israel. Congressman Ackerman notes that Ambassador Yoffe's explanation about the fear of non-Jews mixing in with the emigres might have been a diplomatic way of acknowledging to Mengistu that the exodus needed to stop while Arab diplomats met in Addis Ababa for the OAU meeting.<sup>163</sup>

The OAU meeting might have prompted the halt in emigration. Once the Arab delegates had left the country, the exodus could resume. Israeli and Ethiopian concerns over non-Jews being rescued to the Jewish state might have cut the level of emigration. Once tighter control of who exited the

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<sup>160</sup> "Confusion Reigns over Ethiopian Cutbacks in Jewish Emigration," p. 7.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid

<sup>162</sup> Ibid

<sup>163</sup> Ibid



country was in place, the Ethiopian Jewish aliyah could resume. And anger over Israeli refusal to arm the Mengistu regime might have put a halt to the exodus. Once the Ethiopian leader realized that arms for hostages would not work, he allowed for the Beta Yisrael to resume their journey to Israel. Whichever the case may be, emigration levels did increase by the beginning of the next month. In August, slightly over two hundred Beta Yisrael were rescued to Israel; and in September, nearly two hundred were saved. However, in October, levels dropped dramatically once again to a few dozen. November saw a dramatic increase to over five hundred and fifty individuals, and December's rates also ranged in the hundreds.<sup>164</sup>

Altogether in 1990, about four thousand Beta Yisrael emigrated from Ethiopia to the Jewish State.<sup>165</sup> The AAEJ claims that of this number, three thousand were brought by Israel, and "one thousand by the AAEJ."<sup>166</sup> In January of 1991, the monthly emigration figures ranging in the hundreds jumped to around one thousand. Although at times the flow of Ethiopian Jews out of Addis Ababa was interrupted, between January and Operation Solomon in late May, about one thousand Beta Yisrael a month were "legally" rescued to Israel.<sup>167</sup> The AAEJ takes credit for having rescued three thousand of these

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<sup>164</sup> CRS Issue Brief: Ethiopian Jews, p. 13.

<sup>165</sup> See CRS Issue Brief: Ethiopian Jews, p. 13 and "AAEJ Helps Care for Thousands of Jews in Addis Ababa."

<sup>166</sup> Appeal letter from Nathan Shapiro, President of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews to members of the organization, December, 1990; from the archives of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C.

<sup>167</sup> "Rescue in Ethiopia: 1977 to the Present," The HIAS Reporter, a publication of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, New York, New York, Summer, 1991, p. 7. See also Glenn Stein's reports from Addis Ababa to AAEJ president Nathan Shapiro and Executive Director Will Recant, which detail the number of Beta Yisrael rescued on a daily and weekly basis. For example, 1034 made aliyah in January, 1991, 1008 in April of the same year, and 838 between May 1st and May 15th of 1991, immediately preceding Operation Solomon.

individuals.<sup>168</sup> Thus, over eight thousand Ethiopia Jews were reunited with their family members in the Promised Land between the resumption of relations between Israel and Ethiopia in November of 1989, and Operation Solomon in May of 1991. By Operation Solomon, nearly thirty thousand Beta Yisrael lived in Israel. However, over fourteen thousand five hundred Beta Yisrael remained in Addis Ababa by late Spring of 1991, in addition to a few thousand in the remote mountainous regions of Gondar. Even at the accelerated rate of one thousand per month, the exodus of the Ethiopian Jews would take months, if not years. The rebel armies were closing in on the capital city. A massacre of the Jewish population in Addis Ababa was becoming a distinct possibility. At that point, only a massive evacuation would ensure their safety.

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<sup>168</sup> Appeal letter from Nathan Shapiro, President of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews to the organization's members, April, 1991; from the archives of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C.

SCUD MISSILES, GAS MASKS AND RESCUE:  
THE BETA YISRAEL CONTINUE THEIR EXODUS DESPITE  
THE PERSIAN GULF WAR

Ironically, January of 1991, the month the Persian Gulf War commenced, turned out to be the best month for Ethiopian aliyah since Operation Moses ended six years earlier. More than one thousand exit visas were issued by the Ethiopian Government, and Ethiopian Jews filled every available seat on planes leaving Addis Ababa. Moreover, an amazing highlight to this Beta Yisrael exodus was the high rate of aliyah in the face of SCUD missile attacks on the Jewish State. Despite its numerous military and civil defense needs at a time of crisis, Israel continued to allocate substantial human, financial and material resources to bringing the Jews of Ethiopia, as well as the Jews of the former Soviet Republics, to the Promised Land. While the country donned gas masks and lived in sealed rooms, hundreds of Israeli social workers, construction workers, medical personnel, educators, military personnel, and government officials facilitated the exodus. Defense preparations for and during the Persian Gulf War cost Israel millions of dollars; yet, hundreds of thousands of dollars were pumped into the Jewish emigration from Ethiopia and Russia. While the country was on a state of heightened military alert, aircraft and personnel were sent to the Horn of Africa.

Moreover, despite the war and missile attacks on Israel, not one Jew in the capital city refused to come to Israel. Jewish Agency workers took gas masks to the Israeli Embassy compound in the capital city to show those

waiting to emigrate what to expect in Israel.<sup>169</sup> The NACOEJ staff in Ethiopia remarked: "Not a single Jew in Addis Ababa has turned down the chance to leave for Israel. They would think anyone who suggested such a thing was crazy."<sup>170</sup> Glenn Stein notes that he and his staff notified the Ethiopian Jews of the Persian Gulf War, the missile attacks on Israel, and the need for gas masks. Despite the warnings and suggestions that it might be best for the community to wait a while before departing for the Jewish State, the Beta Yisrael responded: "No way. We are going to Israel. We are going to die if Israel is going to die. We are going to fight if Israel is going to fight."<sup>171</sup>

NACOEJ Executive Director, Barbara Ribakove Gordon states:

During the Gulf War not a single Ethiopian Jew turned down a plane ticket. In our compound, we had a couple hundred [Beta Yisrael] needle workers to whom we gave jobs. Andy [Goldman] and Solomon [Ezra] always brought a cassette to the compound every day to play as background music. The day that they got word that SCUDs were falling on Israel, a delegation of the workers came up to Andy and asked him to turn off the music, because they would not listen to music again until Israel was safe. And they didn't. It was that deep an identification and sense of belonging.<sup>172</sup>

The Ethiopian Jews abstained from music, one of their rare and precious pleasures, as an intense, prayerful vigil for their country, well into early Spring when the Persian Gulf War ceased and Israel was no longer in imminent danger.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Despite Threats of an Iraqi Attack, Ethiopian Jews are Relieved to Finally be in Israel, press release of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, February, 1991, as reported from Israel, Ethiopia and the United States.

<sup>170</sup> "Are Ethiopian Jews Going to Israel Despite the SCUDs?," Lifeline, extra edition of March, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>171</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein.

<sup>172</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon. See also "Are Ethiopian Jews Going to Israel Despite the SCUDs?"

<sup>173</sup> "Are Ethiopian Jews Going to Israel Despite the SCUDs?"

In February of 1991, Kess Menasse Zimru, at age 86, the most senior spiritual leader of Ethiopian Jewry, made aliyah. As he landed in Israel, Iraqi missiles were being launched at the Jewish State. But Kess Zimru did not regret his decision to emigrate: "It is better to die as a free Jew than to continue living in exile in Ethiopia."<sup>174</sup> When asked why he came to Israel during the war, Kess Menasse Zimru responded: "There has always been war in Israel. If I was young, I would fight with a rifle alongside the soldiers to defend Israel. But I have another rifle – my prayer. I will pray. And that's not less than standing alongside the soldiers."<sup>175</sup> The Kess and the other one hundred and nineteen olim were greeted at Ben Gurion Airport with a song, a flower, a sandwich and a gas mask.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Despite Threats of an Iraqi Attack, Ethiopian Jews are Relieved to Finally be in Israel.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid

<sup>176</sup> Kol Yisrael radio was the central information source for the Ethiopian community in Israel during the war. The Amharic broadcasts were expanded from fifteen to forty-five minutes twice a day for those who had not yet learned Hebrew. As soon as the sirens sounded, air raid instructions were broadcasted in Amharic including how to use the gas masks. In the absorption centers, since most of the olim did not own a radio, a relay system between the new immigrants was set up. Ethiopian elders listened to the absorption center radios and called out instructions, often through megaphones. Community members would then go through all of the rooms to ensure all the residents found refuge in a sealed room.

## CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR FAMILY REUNIFICATION

The AAEJ facilitated the movement of the Beta Yisrael within Ethiopia from Gondar Province to Addis Ababa. This organization, in conjunction with NACOEJ, the JDC, Almaya and the Jewish Agency, provided the needed medical, educational, and social services for the community as it waited for aliyah. Israel was angered that Pollack and the AAEJ encouraged the movement of the Ethiopian Jews to the capital city. But by the middle of 1990, it was a given reality that the vast majority of the community based in Ethiopia found refuge in Addis Ababa. On the American front, the North American activist groups tried to convince the United States government that Family Reunification, especially given the large refugee population in the capital city, was a critical issue. The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry facilitated this process.

During early 1990, a five year anniversary of Operations Moses and Joshua observance, sponsored by the AAEJ, was marked in Washington, D.C. Members of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Israeli Embassy officials, national Jewish leaders and Ethiopian Jewry activists gathered at a reception in the Capitol, in which the four co-chairs of the Caucus, Cranston, Boschwitz, Gilman and Solarz were honored.<sup>177</sup> In March of 1990, the Caucus sent a letter to Secretary of State James Baker urging that he put the need for free emigration of Ethiopian Jews on the agenda of the impending U.S.-Soviet talks. The letter included the signatures of eighty-six members of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.<sup>178</sup> In a letter from the Department

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<sup>177</sup> "Congress Remembers Operation Moses," Release, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring, 1990, p. 1.

<sup>178</sup> Letter from the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to Secretary of State James Baker, March 30, 1990, concerning the upcoming U.S.-Soviet talks and the need to place



of State to the Caucus, it was noted that in meetings between Baker and Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze, the various issues concerning Ethiopia were raised.<sup>179</sup> Also in the Spring, on April 25th, members of the Caucus introduced House Resolution 384, "expressing the sense of the Congress regarding the urgent famine situation in Ethiopia."<sup>180</sup> In April, five hundred Ethiopian Jews were permitted to leave for Israel. In May, five hundred and fifty Jews left Addis Ababa.<sup>181</sup>

During the Summer of 1990, the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry kept up the pressure on the State Department and Bush Administration to maintain the Beta Yisrael aliyah as a top priority. In June, when five hundred Ethiopian Jews left for Israel, the U.S.-Soviet talks included discussions about Ethiopia and free emigration for the Ethiopian Jews.<sup>182</sup> In July, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger met with Ethiopian Foreign Minister, Tesfaye Dinka, to discuss numerous issues, including Ethiopian Jewry.<sup>183</sup> While the rate of emigration for Ethiopia slowed to a trickle, the four co-chairs of the Caucus sent an appeal and information letter

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Ethiopia on the agenda; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C.

<sup>179</sup> Letter from Janet G. Mullins, Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs at the Department of State, to Representative Stephen Solarz, received on May 14, 1990, concerning Pentagon efforts on behalf of famine, peace talks and emigration out of Ethiopia; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>180</sup> House Resolution 384, Expressing the sense of the Congress regarding the urgent famine situation in Ethiopia, April 25, 1990, 101st Congress, Second Session, referred jointly to the Committees on Foreign Affairs, Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs, and Ways and Means; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>181</sup> Chronology of Key Recent Events Concerning Ethiopian Jewry, prepared on March 22, 1991, by Valerie Mims, Legislative Aide for Representative Stephen Solarz of New York and facilitator for the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C., p. 2.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid

<sup>183</sup> Ibid

to all of their colleagues in Congress.<sup>184</sup> In August, two hundred and six Beta Yisrael made aliyah from Addis Ababa and the JDC launched its medical outreach program.<sup>185</sup>

During September, a month in which one hundred and eighty-four Jews were allowed to leave Ethiopia, Tesfaye Dinka met with Baker in New York City concerning the internal Ethiopian issues and the looming Persian Gulf crisis.<sup>186</sup> In October, Ethiopian Government officials and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) met in Washington, D.C., under the aegis of the State Department to discuss peace negotiations. In October the emigration level also dropped once again to a few dozen Beta Yisrael. In response, the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry sent a letter with eighty-five Congressional signatures to President Mengistu expressing dissatisfaction over Jewish emigration levels, peace negotiations, and famine relief. In part, the letter states:

We are deeply concerned over the current disappointing level of Ethiopian Jewish immigration. In May and June of this year, we were encouraged when approximately 500 Jews a month were given permission to emigrate for the purpose of reuniting with their families. However, contrary to explicit guarantees that Congress and the Administration received in July from high-ranking representatives of your government, the emigration of Jews has in fact decreased in recent months... This has occurred, we wish to emphasize, at the same time that Ethiopian Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka had the opportunity to meet with Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger in July, and more recently with Secretary of State James Baker III.

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<sup>184</sup> Letter from the four Co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Senators Alan Cranston of California and Rudy Boschwitz of Minnesota, and Representatives Benjamin Gilman of New York and Stephen Solarz of New York, to their colleagues in Congress, regarding the cut in emigration of the Beta Yisrael from Ethiopia in July of 1990, dated July 31, 1990; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>185</sup> Chronology of Key Recent Events Concerning Ethiopian Jewry, p. 2.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*

In recent months, the Ethiopian government has expressed its desire for improved diplomatic relations with this nation, as well as favorable treatment by the United States in various multilateral financial institutions. The lack of substantial progress in peace negotiations and human rights, however, has made it very difficult for those of us in Congress concerned about the plight of the Ethiopian people to support these political and economic initiatives. Therefore, it is our firm consensus that any upgrading of U.S.-Ethiopian relations will depend upon significant improvements in the areas of human rights and family reunification and progress toward a negotiated settlement of Ethiopia's internal wars.<sup>187</sup>

In response to the letter, the Government of Ethiopia, the Government of Israel, the Bush Administration and the State Department entered into a series of negotiations to hammer out an understanding about the Beta Yisrael emigration from Ethiopia. At the same time, in November, the rate of Ethiopian Jewish emigration shot-up to four hundred and thirty-eight. In December, the same number of Beta Yisrael were granted exit permits.<sup>188</sup> But the numbers soon rose even higher, largely due to the efforts of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. On December 17, 1990, Ethiopian Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka responded to the October 29th letter of the Caucus and highlighted a new immigration agreement. The letter states:

You will be pleased to know that recent extensive discussions with Senior Israeli Officials have enabled us to reach an understanding on the implementation of the family reunification mechanism which both governments initially agreed upon. This mechanism now provides for the orderly and smooth reunification of the divided Ethiopian families of Jewish faith on a regular basis. The representatives of the U.S. Government who have been briefed by

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<sup>187</sup> Letter from the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to President Mengistu of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, regarding the lack of Jewish emigration and peace negotiations, October 29th, 1990; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>188</sup> Chronology of Key Recent Events Concerning Ethiopian Jewry, p. 3.

both Ethiopian and Israeli government representatives on these agreed arrangements have expressed satisfaction.<sup>189</sup>

In January, one thousand thirty-four Jews emigrated to Israel, and in February, over a thousand Beta Yisrael continued their exodus to the Jewish State. The Government of Israel and the EPLF held talks on peace negotiations mediated by Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen between February 22-23. At the same time, the EPLF launched an offensive toward Addis Ababa, and the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) launched an offensive toward the Port of Assab.<sup>190</sup> Once again, in March of 1991, the Government of Ethiopia stopped Jewish emigration. Press reports indicated that the Mengistu regime was seeking military assistance from Israel. Also, the Government of Ethiopia accused Israeli officials of "cheating" on immigration forms.<sup>191</sup>

In response, the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry sent a letter to Secretary of State James Baker on March 15th expressing concern over the cessation of flights and the intensification of the military crisis. The letter, in part, states:

...Unfortunately, time is of the essence. There is increasing concern about the fluid military situation created by the rebel offensive which began in February, and the Ethiopian government has temporarily suspended flights for Ethiopian Jews out of the country. We urge you to raise this matter with the Ethiopian government and seek assurance that flights will resume immediately. Our government was active in facilitating the large-scale airlifts of the 1980s. If such an opportunity arises in the coming weeks, we

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<sup>189</sup> Letter from Tesfaye Dinka, Foreign Minister of Ethiopia, to Representatives Stephen Solarz of New York and Benjamin Gilman of New York, co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, December 17, 1990, regarding the Caucus' letter and requests from October 29th, 1990, for increased levels of emigration and peace negotiations; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>190</sup> Chronology of Key Recent Events Concerning Ethiopian Jewry, p. 3.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*

hope you will take an active role in ensuring that such flights can begin again.<sup>192</sup>

Legislative aide for Representative Benjamin Gilman of New York, and long time facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Debbie Bodlander, notes that the personal appeal to Baker and the White House was made to create an airlift: "The idea of the airlift was in the context of a rebel victory since Mengistu would not allow a massive airlift. The Caucus felt that the slow rate of the Ethiopian exodus on regularly scheduled flights out of Ethiopia would take months, if not years."<sup>193</sup>

Following the Caucus' letter, the "U.S. State Department [sent] a blunt demarche demanding Jewish emigration be resumed."<sup>194</sup> Additionally in March, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Irving Hicks raised the issue with Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka and Kassa Kebede. The State Department noted: "Hicks emphasized serious U.S. concern over any interruption in emigration. The [Ethiopian] Foreign Minister assured us that the Government of Ethiopia had not decided to end Jewish emigration."<sup>195</sup> Jewish emigration resumed the week after the Caucus' letter to Baker. Two hundred Beta Yisrael left Ethiopia the week of March 18th, and another five hundred departed the week of March

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<sup>192</sup> Letter from the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to Secretary of State James Baker III, March 15th, 1991, concerning the suspension of exit permits for Ethiopian Jews; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>193</sup> Personal interview with Debbie Bodlander, Legislative Aid to Representative Benjamin Gilman of New York, and long time facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry; May 21, 1992, in Representative Gilman's office and in the conference room next to the Floor of the House, Washington, D.C.

<sup>194</sup> Chronology of Key Recent Events Concerning Ethiopian Jewry, p. 4.

<sup>195</sup> Letter from Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs, Janet Mullins, to Representative Stephen Solarz of New York, Co-chair for the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, April 12, 1991, regarding the Caucus' letter of concern to Secretary of State James Baker over the cessation of Jewish emigration from Ethiopia; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

25th.<sup>196</sup> April and May realized equal rates of emigration as the last two weeks in March.

Continuously throughout 1990 and 1991, the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry was effective in putting pressure on key players in the United States, Ethiopia, and the former Soviet Union regarding Family Reunification. The Caucus continued to inform and brief their colleagues in Congress, and encourage their support on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry. The Bush Administration and the State Department were successfully urged to bring up the issue of the Beta Yisrael with both the Mengistu regime in Addis Ababa and Washington, D.C., and Soviet officials at summit meetings. The Government of Ethiopia was successfully petitioned to loosen-up restrictions on Ethiopian Jewish emigration from the capital city to Israel. Yet, the rate of the exodus, even at a level of five hundred or one thousand per month, would have taken additional months if not years to rescue the remnant of the community. Deliberately, the Mengistu regime protracted the emigration. Insights from the State Department help explain why the Ethiopian ruler did not allow all of the Beta Yisrael out in a short period of time.

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid



STATE DEPARTMENT ASSESSMENT AND ACTIVITIES ON  
BEHALF OF ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

The rate of the exodus of the Beta Yisrael from Addis Ababa greatly fluctuated between November of 1989 and May of 1991, ranging from zero to one thousand per month. However, a massive rescue operation was not a possibility until late Spring of 1991. A number of factors affected the rate of Jewish emigration from Ethiopia for the eighteen month period commencing with the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Ethiopia. Central to the State Department's analysis of Ethiopia during this period was Mengistu's desire to utilize the community as a bartering chip for money and weapons, and later for better relations with the United States. Also, the departure of the Beta Yisrael was proof that Ethiopia's communist endeavor was a failure. Additionally, there was a notion of xenophobia and perhaps a fear that the mosaic of Ethiopian society was being shattered.

Externally, the Mengistu regime mentioned to U.S. State Department officials fear of repercussions with neighboring Arab states as the cause for a highly controlled Beta Yisrael emigration policy. As previously noted, the exodus of the Ethiopian Jews was constricted to a trickle in July of 1990 due to the convening of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in Addis Ababa. John Hall, Country Desk Officer for Ethiopia between July of 1989 and July of 1991,<sup>197</sup> notes that Mengistu told the State Department "that the Ethiopian government supported the right of free emigration if it was done legally, but it was difficult to support the right of the Beta Yisrael because of the

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<sup>197</sup> The Country Desk Officers are the work horses on a specific country and its policies for the State Department. They create briefings for higher up officers and are the central contact for various agencies and groups. They are the best informed State Department officials on a given country. The Country Desk Officers are based in Washington, D.C., but frequently make trips into the field, especially to their country and region of specialty. The Country Desk Officers serve two year stints.

ramifications from the Arab states who didn't like Jews emigrating to Israel; and this would make Ethiopia's life difficult."<sup>198</sup> The State Department was skeptical of this point. In fact, the Pentagon felt that the charges that Islamic and Arab nations were supporting the rebels in Ethiopia who were fighting the Mengistu regime were not true. There were no overt actions by the Arab countries against Ethiopia.<sup>199</sup>

For the Department of State, fear of Arab and Muslim ramifications was not a valid reason for constricting the Ethiopian Jewish exodus. Primarily, Mengistu wanted to hold onto the Ethiopian Jewish community as a bartering chip. One State Department official speculated that "he [Mengistu] was holding out for weapons or money. But Mengistu eventually realized he could not barter for these things so he stopped asking for them. Instead, he perhaps was bartering for better relations with the United States."<sup>200</sup> Hall notes that the classic Ethiopian internal argument was not a causal factor: "It [the restriction of emigration] was not out of fear that if the Ethiopian Jews are allowed to leave, then other ethnic groups would want to leave and the mosaic of Ethiopia would be torn apart. Mengistu was already in domestic strife and the country was already being pulled apart with two civil wars and famine."<sup>201</sup> However, Hall asserts that an element similar to the dynamics of the former Soviet Union did come into play. The Ethiopian Government did not want to let the Beta Yisrael leave, because their emigration would be proof that

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<sup>198</sup> Personal interview with John Hall, Country Desk Officer for Ethiopia from July of 1989 to July of 1991, now with the Intelligence and Research Division of the State Department, May 20, 1992, Department of State in Washington, D.C.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>200</sup> Personal interview with a State Department official who asked to remain anonymous, May 20, 1992.

<sup>201</sup> Personal interview with John Hall.

Ethiopia and Mengistu's communist endeavor was a failure.<sup>202</sup> Hall, while also noting that an element of xenophobia contributed to the policy, states:

"Mengistu was not able to cut a deal. He allowed a few out, but kept a sizable Jewish population so he could use them for something if the opportunity arose in the future."<sup>203</sup>

What was the Washington angle on the Ethiopian policy vis-a-vis the Beta Yisrael? Hall remarks: "The goal was to make clear to the Mengistu government that they could not expect serious improvement in relations with the U.S. until they cleared their own road blocks."<sup>204</sup> Hall repeatedly gave the Ethiopian Government a list of how they could improve relations with the United States. These included: 1) peace and political accommodation with the rebels; 2) efforts to relieve the famine and cooperate with International Relief Organizations; and 3) improved human rights performances, chief of which was free emigration of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Concerning the last point, Hall states: "It [free emigration of the Beta Yisrael] was a concern of the administration from the start and from the top. There was no disagreement on it being a key issue. Perhaps there was a disagreement on tactics, in that the best way to push for immigration was the most frustrating -- to not blow up the issue -- but rather, to apply slow and constant pressure."<sup>205</sup> In 1990, John Hall met with his Ethiopian counterpart, an official in charge of North American affairs called "Head of the Americas Organization."<sup>206</sup> That official said that the Ethiopian Government was

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid

<sup>203</sup> Ibid

<sup>204</sup> Ibid

<sup>205</sup> Ibid

<sup>206</sup> The structure of the Ethiopian equivalent to the U.S. State Department is much smaller. Therefore, whereas each country in the U.S. structure has a person in charge (like John Hall serving as the Ethiopian Desk Officer), serving under a Deputy Assistant

frustrated and wanted improved relations with the U.S., "but they didn't know how to do it." Hall responded: "No one single act could do more good will for Ethiopia than to allow for free emigration of Ethiopian Jews."<sup>207</sup> John Hall was not opposed to the Ethiopian Jews coming to Addis Ababa where they could be cared for, and he realized that when the time came, a massive rescue could be launched much more easily from the capital city.<sup>208</sup>

As previously mentioned, in July of 1990, in the United States, Ethiopian Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka met with Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger; and in the Fall, the Ethiopian Foreign Minister met with Secretary of State James Baker III. The September meeting of the two counterparts was conducted as a result of Ethiopia's seat on the Security Council of the United Nations. The primary objective of their meeting was containment of Iraqi aggression, but they also discussed bilateral relations between the two nations. A State Department official was aware that Baker told Tesfaye Dinka that his country needed to improve on the peace process with the rebels, facilitation of the famine relief, and human rights abuses, before U.S.-Ethiopian relations would warm up.<sup>209</sup> Tesfaye Dinka did not dispute these three needed areas of improvement. The Ethiopian Foreign Minister noted: "It was Mengistu and the other ministers who were the ones resisting the improvement. They thought they could trade Ethiopian Jews for better relations with the U.S."<sup>210</sup> The State Department official further stated:

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Secretary of State for a region of a continent (like Robert Houdek for East African Affairs), and an Assistant Secretary of State for an entire continent (like Herman Cohen for African Affairs), and a Secretary of State (James Baker). In Ethiopia, one official was in charge of a continent (like the Head of the Americas Organization for North American affairs) who served under the Foreign Minister (Tesfaye Dinka).

<sup>207</sup> Personal interview with John Hall.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid

<sup>209</sup> Personal interview with a State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 20, 1992.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid

Mengistu thought that close cooperation during the Fall of 1990 with the U.S. in the Security Council of the UN vis-a-vis Iraq would translate into some U.S. give regarding Ethiopia and its policies. He was wrong. The U.S. Government did not give Ethiopia any more give because of these cooperations. However, the cooperation in the UN showed that the U.S. and Ethiopia could cooperate.<sup>211</sup>

Another State Department official informed me of the psychological dynamics of the Ethiopian Jewry issue. He saw it as a hostage situation. "You need to keep pressure on the hostage takers and remind them that their life will become easier if they release the hostages, while at the same time not wanting the Ethiopian Government to think that the release of hostages and the free right of emigration will be the key ticket to riches from the U.S."<sup>212</sup> He noted that the U.S. State Department and Bush Administration did not want Mengistu to think that his regime could extract a high price like weapons systems or money if they let the Beta Yisrael leave. "No one ever suggested trading weapons for Ethiopian Jews including the Israeli Government."<sup>213</sup> He also remarked that the cessation of emigration in July of 1990 "was a result of Israel not giving money or arms to Ethiopia. In a sense, the Ethiopian Government was punishing Israel and the Beta Yisrael for not providing arms for hostages."<sup>214</sup>

During his two year stint as Country Desk Officer for Ethiopia, John Hall saw four major players in the issue concerning the free emigration of the Beta Yisrael: The U.S. Government, the Israeli Government, the Ethiopian

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid

<sup>212</sup> Personal interview with a State Department official who asked to remain anonymous, May 20, 1992.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid

<sup>214</sup> Ibid

Government, and private groups like the AAEJ and NACOEJ. "None of the four groups told all of the other three groups all that they were doing, but that was O.K."<sup>215</sup> He also notes that after the renewal of relations between Israel and Ethiopia in November of 1989, "they [Israel] conducted their own dialogue. This was helpful that they had their own separate channels of communication."<sup>216</sup> A senior State Department official remarked that the American Jewish community is not monolithic, and was "even surprised to find that there existed an inner rivalry." He noted that he "had to talk to all the different groups when he needed to give briefing," and that "working the issue was a four corner play between the U.S. Government, the Ethiopian Government, the Israeli Government, and the American Jewish community, which had its own various participants and groups."<sup>217</sup> He also stressed that "the key importance of the American Jewish groups is that they put the issue [of Ethiopian Jewry] on key people's agenda and made it a priority issue."<sup>218</sup>

A senior State Department official reported to me "an irony when relations were reestablished between Israel and Ethiopia." This official expected that "Israel would pick up the Beta Yisrael issue." Instead, he became the arbiter between the American Jewish groups, the Israelis and the Ethiopian Government.<sup>219</sup> The official remarks: "The American groups thought Israel was not aggressive enough; Israel was suspicious of the workings of the American groups. Israel had other foreign policy objectives in Ethiopia besides the Beta Yisrael, and the American Jewish groups were

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<sup>215</sup> Personal interview with John Hall.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid

<sup>217</sup> Personal interview with a senior State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 21, 1992.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid

<sup>219</sup> Personal interview with a senior State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 21, 1992.



doing private meetings with Ethiopian Government officials on their own."<sup>220</sup> The Israeli Ambassador in Ethiopia at one time told American charge d'affaires in Addis Ababa, Robert Houdek, "They are Americans, try to get them under control." Houdek retorted: "It [the aliyah of the Beta Yisrael] is an important issue. Keep it a top priority."<sup>221</sup>

Houdek, before coming to Ethiopia in 1988, served in Kenya from 1980 to 1984, and Uganda from 1985 to 1988. Houdek's transfer from Uganda to Ethiopia was unique. He flew with former President James Carter on August 16th, 1988, to confer with Mengistu in Addis Ababa. At the meeting, they raised the issue of the Beta Yisrael. During his three year stint, Houdek had more contacts with the Mengistu regime than any other Western charge d'affaires or ambassador, around every three months. Each encounter always included discussion about free emigration for the Ethiopian Jews to Israel.<sup>222</sup>

Throughout the latter half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, Beta Yisrael were rescued from Ethiopia through the procurement of documents, since the Ethiopian Jews were not accorded free emigration. The State Department disagreed with the policy of Israel, the AAEJ and NACOEJ of rescuing Ethiopian Jews through obtaining documents to get them to Israel, "since the State Department felt that people shouldn't need documentation to get out of their own country." A State Department official further notes: "However, we were willing to go along with these procedures and processes."<sup>223</sup>

By the Summer of 1990, the Beta Yisrael were streaming into Addis Ababa. The North American activist groups expressed three areas of concern

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid

<sup>221</sup> Personal interview with Robert Houdek.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid

<sup>223</sup> Personal interview with a State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 20, 1992.

to the State Department. First, if the rebels took over the capital city, the insurgents would attack and massacre the Ethiopian Jews since false rumors had spread that the cluster bombs used by the Mengistu regime were sold to the Ethiopian Government by Israel. A State Department official remarks: "We [the Department of State] did not put much stock in this since we thought that the insurgents were not backed that much by the Muslims, and when we held meetings with the insurgent groups [of Ethiopia], they expressed that they did not hold a grudge against the Ethiopian Jews."<sup>224</sup> Second, the Jewish population of Addis Ababa might have been subject to reprisals by their neighbors who envied their lifestyle and the assistance they were receiving. The same State Department official noted that the State Department "did not put much credence in this concern either, since the Ethiopian Jewish condition was not much better than their non-Jewish neighbors. There was nothing for the non-Jewish neighbors to be jealous of. However, the State Department did not totally dismiss this concern."<sup>225</sup> Third, the AAEJ, NACOEJ and eventually Israel were concerned that in a general upheaval of civil war and domestic strife in and around Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian Jews would get caught in the cross-fire. The State Department official notes: "This was a legitimate and major concern that the State Department shared with the private groups."<sup>226</sup>

By the Spring of 1991, this situation materialized in earnest. The rebel armies were closing in on Addis Ababa. Panic reigned in the Ethiopian capital city. Chaos and anarchy was a distinct possibilities. The Beta Yisrael had only a matter of weeks, if not days, before a new regime was to take control of their environs. U.S. officials were unclear how the situation in Addis Ababa would

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<sup>224</sup> Personal interview with a State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 20, 1992.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid

<sup>226</sup> Ibid

unfold and how it would impact the Ethiopian Jews. The medical, relief and educational efforts of the JDC, AAEJ and NACOEJ were in danger of being silenced. Israel, the Jewish Agency and Almaya were faced with another crisis situation like the Sudanese refugee camps of 1984. Quick and dramatic action needed to take place in order to save the remnant of one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world.

## CHAPTER TEN: OPERATION SOLOMON

The famine of the first half of the 1980s had accelerated the Beta Yisrael exodus to the Sudan and enabled Operations Moses and Joshua to take place. Similarly, the civil war, famine, villagization and the efforts of Susan Pollack and the AAEJ accelerated the exodus of the Ethiopian Jews to Addis Ababa and made possible Operation Solomon. A crisis situation developed. Some twenty-two thousand Beta Yisrael were placed on the door step of the Israeli Embassy. The attention of the Jewish world was drawn to the plight of the rural Jewish farmers and craftspeople living in the squalor of the over-crowded capital city.

Moreover, Israel felt a real sense of urgency because of the civil war and advances made by the rebel armies, especially around the capital. Some type of massive rescue operation needed to be manufactured:

The Israelis saw what was happening in the civil war in Ethiopia, and they had become of the same mind as the rest of us [the AAEJ, NACOEJ, CAEJ and perhaps U.S. officials in the field in Ethiopia] that the Mengistu regime could not hold on much longer, and that when the rebels would come in, no one had any idea what the rebels would do to the Jews. Israel had supplied Ethiopia with some kinds of assistance... And you can just imagine the false rumors that Israel having supplied Ethiopia with cluster bombs when heard by an Eritrean or Tigrean rebel, bombs which were being used on their houses and families -- that when they come into Addis [Ababa] and find this vulnerable community of 15,000 Jews who want to go to Israel -- there was fear of another Kristallnacht -- that there could be another Kristallnacht in Addis Ababa the day after the rebels came in. So fueled by that fear, there was the urgency for what resulted in Operation Solomon.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Will Recant.

Glenn Stein notes that Israel feared severe repercussions for the Beta Yisrael in the capital city by the advancing rebel forces.<sup>2</sup> In fact, "Israel had a military plan the last weeks of May, 1991, if [the disintegrating Mengistu Ethiopian Government, which had approved the rescue operation] 'Operation Solomon' did not work out."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more details, see "Rebels Push Closer to Ethiopian Capital," Washington Post, May 19, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein.

## CREATING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE OPERATION

On March 13, 1991, Uri Lubrani, in charge of overall operations in Ethiopia for Israel, flew to New York for consultations with the JDC's Executive Vice President, Michael Schneider. "There they agreed that a committee of top American Jewish leaders should be formed to press President Bush to appoint a personal emissary to persuade Mengistu to free the Jews."<sup>4</sup> The following week, Lubrani and Eliezer went to Palm Beach, Florida, where they met with Max Fisher, a Detroit industrialist who had been advising the Nixon, Reagan and Bush administrations on Jewish affairs since the early 1970s. Valerie Mims notes: "The big 'machers' began to weigh-in near the end when it became clear that things were going to happen and an extra push needed to be made."<sup>5</sup> Fisher passed on the request to the White House, "but on April 1 the envoys from Israel were informed that President Bush had turned down the proposal to send a personal representative to Addis Ababa."<sup>6</sup>

Thereupon, leaders of the American Jewish community formed a special committee, with Michael Schneider acting as coordinator, to urge the administration to act before it was too late. Herman J. Cohen, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, attempted to negotiate a cease-fire between Mengistu's forces and the rebels to bring about a bloodless transfer of power. "He had visited Addis Ababa during the winter, and finally helped persuade Bush that the White House should become directly involved in saving the Falashas."<sup>7</sup> Bush picked Rudy Boschwitz, a former Republican senator

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<sup>4</sup> The Secret Alliance, p. 303.

<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with Valerie Mims.

<sup>6</sup> The Secret Alliance, p. 303.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*



from Minnesota, co-chair of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, and a Jew,<sup>8</sup> to undertake a secret mission to Ethiopia to convince both Mengistu and the rebel chiefs to allow the Beta Yisrael to emigrate to Israel before the civil war reached its critical moment.

From the evening of Thursday, April 25th, to the evening of Monday, April 29th, 1991, former senator Rudy Boschwitz was engaged in meetings in Ethiopia. Accompanying Boschwitz were Irving Hicks, the Assistant Deputy Secretary for East African Affairs, Robert Frasure, director of African Affairs on the National Security Council, and John Hall, Ethiopia Desk Officer.<sup>9</sup> They met with Mengistu, the foreign minister Tesfaye Dinka, and other governmental officials, as well as various rebel leaders. The U.S. delegation told Mengistu: "From a U.S. perspective, it looks like your government is in a difficult situation. You need to take drastic action and make an agreement with the rebels. You need to share power with them and form a joint government. And, if you hope to save yourselves, you need to better your standing in the international community by allowing for free emigration."<sup>10</sup> Hall notes that Boschwitz then went on to tell Mengistu:

'Let's get the Ethiopian Jewish issue behind us so we can get on with our relationship and other issues.' Mengistu replied, 'this would cost us our relationship with the Islamic countries around us.' We [the State Department and the U.S. delegation visiting Ethiopia in April of 1991] did not accept this statement to be true, but even if it was true, by letting five hundred go a month, Ethiopia was hurting themselves

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<sup>8</sup> Boschwitz first got involved with Ethiopian Jewry in 1979. See chapter five, "From Menachem Begin's Election in 1977 up to Operation Moses in 1984: Rescue Attempts, Disputes, and Charges of Complacency," section on AAEJ Activities in the Late 1970s and 1980."

<sup>9</sup> For more details, see "U.S. Team Seeking Exodus of Ethiopian Jews," The New York Times International, Thursday, May 2, 1991, p. A15; and "Boschwitz Sees Hope for Emigration in Talks with Ethiopian Leaders," Washington Jewish Weekly, May 9, 1991, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Personal interview with John Hall.

more because it prolonged the issue in the eyes of the Arab and Islamic world instead of being hurt only once by letting all of the Jews go at once. The group did not come away with a signed guarantee, but left with the feeling and signals that Mengistu was seeing that his best use of the Ethiopian Jews was to let them go, and that his government wanted to be committed to human rights. The committee then relayed all of this information to the Israeli Government. We told Mengistu that the Israeli Government was ready to open up the gates. We told the Israeli Government to talk directly with the Ethiopian Government, and that they do not need to get people out with documents anymore; and that there might be a wholesale exodus in the very near future. Intense conversations ensued, but not much progress was made.<sup>11</sup>

Hall, a Christian, remarks that "during my April '91 trip, I had a sense of religious purpose. Our trip coincided with Passover and Easter. I felt that we were once again fulfilling the Biblical prophecy of helping the Jews cross the Red Sea to the Promised Land."<sup>12</sup> The sea had not yet parted, but the waters were beginning to stir. Heeding the advice of the U.S. officials and recognizing the advances made by the rebels, Mengistu agreed to resume negotiations with the Israelis. He instructed Kassa Kabede, the former ambassador to Switzerland and former student at the Hebrew University who spoke Hebrew, to conduct the talks.<sup>13</sup>

On Monday, May 20th, Lubrani and a three person JDC/Almaya team arrived in Addis Ababa to try to iron out a deal with Kassa Kabede to authorize the immediate departure of the Beta Yisrael.<sup>14</sup> However, that same day, Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe. John Hall notes: "The Ethiopian Government realized that it was not going to stand much longer."<sup>15</sup> A senior State Department official noted the importance of this event: "A crucial factor

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> The Secret Alliance, pp. 303-04.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview with John Hall.

leading to Operation Solomon was Mengistu's departure. He saw the Beta Yisrael as a commodity, something he could squeeze and extract. Mengistu wanted guns for the Ethiopian Jews. He [Mengistu] wanted the U.S. State Department influence to get the rebels into the peace process."<sup>16</sup> The official further explains, that "a linkage or parallel momentum had to be made with Mengistu, that in order to get U.S. help on the peace process with the rebels, progress had to be made on letting the Ethiopian Jews leave."<sup>17</sup> This did not happen under Mengistu, hastening his demise and need to flee Ethiopia.

Mengistu ruled Marxist Ethiopia for seventeen years. Upon his departure, Tesfaye Kidan became the new acting president.<sup>18</sup> John Hall remarks that the new president "thought it was best for Ethiopia to have the Beta Yisrael question behind them; so that is why he agreed to let the Ethiopian Jews go."<sup>19</sup> The same day he assumed office, Tesfaye Kidan called Robert Houdek into his office and said: "I need your help to end the war."<sup>20</sup> Charge d'affaires Houdek went through the history of U.S. policy vis-a-vis Ethiopia, and talked with him about the importance of "a parallel momentum on the 'Falasha' issue."<sup>21</sup> Houdek also relayed information about the recent end of April Boschwitz mission to Ethiopia to the new acting president. He underscored the need for the Ethiopian Government to make an accommodation with the rebels -- to share power and form a new government -- and to gain standing in the international community by allowing for free

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<sup>16</sup> Personal interview with a senior State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 21, 1992.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> "Ethiopian President Flees Country; New Leader Said to Seek Cease-Fire," Washington Post, May 22, 1991, pp. A1 and A25. See also "Ethiopians Rejoice at Fall of Rulers," New York Times, May 24, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Personal interview with John Hall.

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with Robert Houdek.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

emigration of the Beta Yisrael. Houdek noted to Tesfaye Kidian "that this is something that can be done today or tomorrow [to solve the Ethiopian Jewry issue]."<sup>22</sup> Houdek states: "As a military man, Tesfaye Kidian said that it should be no problem."<sup>23</sup>

John Hall notes: "The State Department and Israel realized that things were in a fluid situation and that things could be done quickly. Talks were held with the insurgents, the Tigreans in particular, who told the State Department that they had no objection to a mass exodus of the Ethiopian Jews."<sup>24</sup>

A senior State Department official noted that after Robert Houdek's meeting with Tesfaye Kidian on May 20th, the American charge d'affaires relayed the agreement to Washington, D.C., and remarked that "he [Tesfaye Kidian] needs an extra nudge. There needs to be a letter from the president [Bush] to Tesfaye Kidian talking about the peace process and firming up the release of the Beta Yisrael."<sup>25</sup> President George Bush sent such a letter immediately, and Robert Houdek took it down to the acting president's office as well as copies to Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka and diplomat Kassa Kebede. Kassa Kebede then called Houdek and said that "the letter of understanding between President Bush and Tesfaye Kidian worked."<sup>26</sup> Simultaneously, Houdek met with Uri Lubrani at least a half a dozen times a day to coordinate details with the Israelis.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Personal interview with John Hall.

<sup>25</sup> Personal interview with a senior State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 21, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

Of importance was the monetary compensation to the Government of Ethiopia. In the past, when the Beta Yisrael left Ethiopia from Addis Ababa, the departures gave the government much needed hard currency through airline fares. Thus, if a massive airlift materialized, this income to the Ethiopian Government would be lost. Therefore, it was imperative that the Israeli Government guarantee this amount of hard currency for the mass exodus which would equal what it would have cost on an individual basis for the flights on the commercial airline flights. State Department official John Hall points out that this deal was "not money for hostages, rather, money which was compensating potential lost income which would have come from seats on the domestic flight."<sup>27</sup> He further interjects that "Israel and the U.S. government agree that you can't trade people for anything. The Ethiopian Jews needed to have the right for free emigration without any conditions attached."<sup>28</sup> Both Israeli, American and Jewish leaders agreed that the monetary transfer was not a ransom, but compensation for lost revenue on commercial flights.

On Tuesday, May 21st, Lubrani opened negotiations with Kassa Kabede, who initially asked for \$100 million for the Beta Yisrael. "Lubrani refused what he called 'bazaar dealings,' and told Kabede the amount was out of the question. Kabede went down to \$85 million, then to \$57.5 million, finally accepting Lubrani's offer of \$35 million."<sup>29</sup> The rebels were now on the outskirts of the capital. That same day, in Addis Ababa, NACOEJ Executive

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<sup>27</sup> Personal interview with John Hall.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> "Dangerous Liaisons: Uri Lubrani: Israel's Trouble Shooter," Israel Scene, distributed as a supplement to the Jerusalem Post International Edition, July, 1991, p. 4; and "The Secret Alliance, p. 304.

Director Barbara Ribakove Gordon notes the impact of Mengistu's departure and the advancing rebels:

At noon, an Ethiopian government car pulled up to the [NACOE] compound and an army major jumped out. In Amharic, he told Solomon [Ezra] that he himself was a Jew and he advised us to pack up and send everyone home.

Andy [Goldman] and Solomon had rehearsed the compound people for evacuation. Quietly, they put down their embroidery and weaving, packed up the materials, threads, volley balls and other equipment, locked it up and left for the slums. There were 800 people in the compound at the time. That night we heard the tanks rumbling under our windows for hours. The next day, the mob had torn down the huge statue of Lenin in the capital while Mengistu's portrait had quietly disappeared from the Hilton's [hotel] wall.<sup>30</sup>

Additional dynamics created the proper climate for Operation Solomon to occur. Valerie Mims notes that "in May right before Operation Solomon, the fear was that the [Ethiopian] Government was going to fall, and the question was who would be the new government and who are they."<sup>31</sup> She remarks that Uri Lubrani, who had been stationed for Israel in other countries where the governments have fallen like Lebanon and Uganda, was particularly concerned about the advancing rebel armies.<sup>32</sup> Mims adds that the congressional officials feared what the attitude of the advancing rebels toward the Jews would be, "so we better take care of this now."<sup>33</sup> Mengistu could no longer hold onto power and the contracting Soviet Union had cut financial and military assistance to the Marxist regime.

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<sup>30</sup> "Fateful Countdown in Addis," The Jerusalem Post Magazine, International Edition, week ending June 6, 1992, p. 8B.

<sup>31</sup> Personal interview with Valerie Mims.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid



Naomi Baum, Legislative Assistant for former Senator Alan Cranston of California and long time facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry notes that "for three years we heard that 'any day now the Mengistu Government is going to fall.'" <sup>34</sup> She states that the Caucus was concerned that the Israelis refused to meet with any of the rebel groups, "which we felt was a very important gap. They had contact only with Mengistu, and if everyone was saying that Mengistu was going to fall, we thought that dealing with Mengistu alone was very dangerous." <sup>35</sup> The Israelis countered, that having just reestablished relations with Ethiopia for the first time in seventeen years, it was very risky meeting with the rebel groups. The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry established contact with all of the rebel groups, including the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), and met with them a number of times each. Baum remarks:

And we let them know that this issue was really important to us. There was a lot of anger that Israel had just reestablished ties with the Mengistu regime, because it was a confidence building measure for the [Mengistu] regime that the Israelis were going to help them out. We had very mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was an improvement that the Israelis had an address to talk to, and they had a presence there; but on the other hand, we were concerned that the Israelis were putting all of their eggs in one basket, and that they were going to jeopardize the future of the [Beta Yisrael] community should the government fall very quickly. So we wanted them [the rebel groups] to know that there were people who cared about Ethiopia, because no one in Congress [at that time seemed to] really care about what was going on in Ethiopia. <sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Personal interview with Naomi Baum, Legislative Assistant for Senator Alan Cranston of California and long time facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, May 20, 1992, in Senator Cranston's Washington, D.C. office.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

The State Department also played a major role with the rebel groups. During the fateful days leading up to Operation Solomon, Robert Houdek discussed with the rebel leaders the plans for the Beta Yisrael exodus, and "got their assurance that they would halt their advance into Addis Ababa until after the evacuation, and got their assurance that they would not shoot at the Israeli [rescue] airplanes."<sup>37</sup> The rebel groups relied heavily on the U.S. brokered agreement between them and the disintegrating Ethiopian Government. The rebels kept their word not to advance into the capital city until after the evacuation was complete "because they did not want to have to march into Addis and take casualties. They wanted a formal peace process and the Government of Ethiopia to surrender without bloodshed."<sup>38</sup> The rebel groups also wanted "to put the Falasha problem behind them."<sup>39</sup> In short, progress on the Beta Yisrael issue was linked to the peace process, and the orderly establishment of a new rebel-led government in Ethiopia was linked to the Ethiopian Jewish aliyah.

The finalized deal for the exchange of money to compensate for the lost revenue of Jewish air travel was struck on Thursday, May 23rd. Lubrani rushed to London the next morning to plead with Herman Cohen to delay the planned U.S. sponsored cease-fire conference with acting president Tesfaye Kidan.<sup>40</sup> "To ensure safe completion of Operation Solomon, Israel convinced Washington to postpone the London conference between the Ethiopian government and the rebels."<sup>41</sup> Lubrani "needed enough time to let the

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<sup>37</sup> Personal interview with a senior State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 21, 1992.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> "Lubrani Says U.S. Delayed London Talks to Save Jews," Jerusalem Post, May 28, 1991.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

Falasha evacuation take place, and Lubrani feared the airport in Addis Ababa might be closed down if the rebels took the city. Cohen obliged Lubrani and effected a postponement over the weekend."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> The Secret Alliance, p. 304.

### THE THIRTY-SIX HOUR RESCUE OPERATION CALLED SOLOMON<sup>43</sup>

At 10:00 a.m. on Friday, May 24, the first Israeli aircraft, two Air Force C-130 Hercules transports and two El Al Boeing 707 airliners, took off from Tel Aviv for Addis Ababa. Tad Szulc in The Secret Alliance notes:

Haim Halachmi was aboard the first plane with a group of Hebrew speaking Ethiopians to help the ground operation. In the capital, however, the new finance minister could not find the number of the Ethiopian account at the Federal Reserve Bank in New York, and therefore Eliezri could not instruct the Joint to make the transfer. He [the finance minister] was erroneously giving the number of the bonds account instead of the cash account. Meanwhile, the airlift planes were denied permission to land, and had to circle over the airport until the confusion in Addis Ababa, of which the pilots knew nothing, was resolved. Finally, the minister produced the account number an hour later, and at 1:00 p.m., Ethiopian time (6 a.m. in New York), a \$35 million payment was transferred to the New York account of the National Bank of Ethiopia by the Federal Reserve Bank. The money, in keeping with the Joint's history, came mainly from American Jewish organizations.<sup>44</sup>

Over a thirty-six hour period between Friday, May 24th, and Saturday, May 25th, thirty-two Israeli and one Ethiopian aircraft flew 14,500 black Jews from Addis Ababa to Israeli airports. A Boeing 747 airliner, built to transport four hundred passengers, brought out a record one thousand one hundred eighty Beta Yisrael. Seven babies were born during the operation, and several were removed from planes in incubators. A Jewish Agency spokesperson, Yehuda Weintraub, said the airlift operation had cost \$7 million, and that the total cost of resettling the Ethiopians over the next year would exceed \$100

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<sup>43</sup> Operation Solomon was an appropriate name for the rescue operation which brought to Israel thousands of Ethiopian Jews who, according to Beta Yisrael legend, are the descendants of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. For more details, see chapter one, section on "The Origins of the Beta Yisrael."

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

million.<sup>45</sup> As the first arrivals reached Israel, Foreign Minister David Levy exclaimed: "The ingathering of the exiles is what we are about... This is the history of Israel, yesterday, today and tomorrow."<sup>46</sup>

Robert Houdek notes: "It was a good faith effort on all parties involved. The U.S. State Department set up details with the Ethiopian Government, Lubrani detailed the Israeli flights, and the American Jewish groups facilitated the processing and boarding of the airplanes."<sup>47</sup> From the AAEJ, Glenn Stein and Joyce Miller, and from NACOEJ. Barbara Ribakove Gordon, Andy Goldman, and Solomon Ezra, participated in Operation Solomon. The group was stationed at the initial gate when the Beta Yisrael first assembled at the Israeli Embassy compound after the word was released early Friday morning that the exodus was imminent. They took the Ethiopian Jews' extra parcels, a stipulation by the Israeli officials to accommodate more refugees on the airplanes, and money, a stipulation by the Ethiopian Government. They also checked for proper identification.<sup>48</sup> Gordon states:

And then came the most poignant moment, the most painful. The Jews, who had just been informed they were leaving, had packed up all their meager possessions in little bundles. They didn't own much, but what they did was very precious. We had to tell them to leave behind these little bundles. So they began putting on extra shamas [Ethiopian dresses] and pants, wearing on their bodies whatever they could. I thought to myself: Our people are leaving like refugees everywhere else in the world. As one Israeli pilot later described it: They came with nothing but their children in their arms.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> "Israel Evacuates Ethiopian Jews: Airlift Begins as Rebels Close in," Washington Post, Saturday, May 25, 1991, pp. 1 and 28; and "Israel Completes Ethiopia Airlift," Washington Post, Sunday, May 26, 1991, pp. 1 and 44.

<sup>46</sup> "Israel Completes Ethiopia Airlift," p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> Personal interview with Robert Houdek.

<sup>48</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum.

<sup>49</sup> "Fateful Countdown in Addis." For a visual account of these dramatic events, see the AAEJ video, "Operation Solomon, the Last 24 Hours."

The Beta Yisrael were bused in groups of one hundred and ninety to the airport, where they were loaded on military and commercial aircraft that had been whitewashed of markings and, in some cases, hastily converted from their usual roles as fuel tankers or freighters.<sup>50</sup> Along with Micha Feldman, the Jewish Agency official who handled the operation on the ground in Addis Ababa, Beta Yisrael and NACOEJ worker Solomon Ezra checked people right before they boarded the aircraft, ensuring their identity as Ethiopian Jews.<sup>51</sup>

The last aircraft to make the three and a half hour flight from Addis Ababa to a military airfield near Tel Aviv arrived at 4:00 p.m. Saturday afternoon. The Israeli Government had obtained special dispensation from the Religious Establishment of the Jewish State to fly on the Sabbath. At the height of the operation, more than one thousand Jews per hour and twenty-eight aircraft were flying simultaneously. A security force of about one hundred and fifty elite Israeli commandos was deployed in Addis Ababa, but did not face any serious challenges.<sup>52</sup> A senior Israeli official said "that in addition to money, Tesfaye [Kidian] demanded that Ethiopian planes participate in the airlift, that Israeli planes be disguised so his government could claim to have carried out the entire operation, and that the airlift be kept secret until it was completed."<sup>53</sup>

On May 24th, just as the operation commenced, Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry co-chair Representative Stephen Solarz hailed the rescue mission: "The interminable wait for the thousands who were separated,

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<sup>50</sup> "Israel Completes Ethiopian Airlift," p. 44.

<sup>51</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum; and "Fateful Countdown in Addis."

<sup>52</sup> "Israel Completes Ethiopian Airlift," p. 44.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1. The Israeli press, in contrast to Operation Moses, used great restraint in reporting the secret exodus until it was complete on Saturday evening.



brother from sister, husband for wife, parent from child, is about to come to an end. After years and years of delay, after countless false hopes and dashed dreams, the Promised Land is finally in sight for Ethiopia's beleaguered Jewish community."<sup>54</sup>

On Sunday, May 26th, the day after the airlift, the rebels entered Addis Ababa, and the airport was closed. Kassa Kabebe fled aboard one of the last Israeli Air Force planes, and then requested and received political asylum in Israel. It is unclear who in Ethiopia obtained the \$35 million in New York.<sup>55</sup>

AAEJ Executive Director Will Recant,<sup>56</sup> notes that during and after Operation Solomon, due to anxiety over the rescue operation, recent personal losses, and the stress of the preceding weeks, he did not share in the joy of the airlift:

Friday night I'm getting ready for Shabbos at home, the airlift had started that morning East Coast time, and (Uri) Lubrani calls and says 'we have a problem. Eight thousand have left, and [well over] four thousand are still at the [Israeli] Embassy and there have been shots fired outside the Embassy. Can you go to Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen, and have him send a cable to the U.S. charge d'affaires and see what's going on.' So at 10:00 at night I had to call Cohen at home to take care of it, and he did; but that night was a sleepless night. The next morning I get calls from Israel that everyone was out... I also didn't feel the sense of accomplishment because the next call I got on Saturday was from our facilitator in Addis, 'what do I do with these one hundred and ninety people [who missed the airlift (actually 350)], while the rebels are preparing to march into the city and everything is boarded up.'<sup>57</sup> So, I didn't have that exhilaration that everybody is

<sup>54</sup> Rep. Solarz Hails Operation Solomon, news press release of Congressman Stephen J. Solarz's office, May 24, 1991, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>55</sup> The Secret Alliance, p. 305. Tad Szulc notes that the \$35 million paid by Israel worked out to \$2,427 per Beta Yisrael, roughly what Ceausescu charged in Romania for an exit permit for a Jew.

<sup>56</sup> For Will Recant's account of Operation Solomon, see Will Recant, "The Journey Home: An Insider's Account of Operation Solomon," The B'nai Brith International Jewish Monthly, June-July, 1991, pp. 12-15.

<sup>57</sup> They were brought out of Addis Ababa the following weeks in the follow-up rescue operations to Operation Solomon.

out, job's done... I didn't feel the intense joy, the intense anything. I had lost my father Purim two months before. Coming out of the thirty days [of intense mourning of shloshim] was right into [the planning and preparations for] Operation Solomon day and night for months... When I went to Israel in August of '91, it was with the intention that I was going to say goodbye to everyone, the Ethiopian and Israelis I had been working with, and that I would be leaving the AAEJ at the board meeting in November. It was kind of like the farewell tour that I was going to say goodbye to everyone. Because my feeling was that our job was done, the rest will come out of Ethiopia in an orderly manner and that will be that, and we won't do absorption work. That is when we [the AAEJ and NACOEJ] were asked to stay around [in Ethiopia]. So I changed my opinion and my recommendation to Nate [Shapiro, president of the AAEJ] based on that trip to Israel... It has been tremendously draining. The AAEJ had the fate of the twenty thousand people who had moved from Gondar to Addis on our shoulders. That was on our head.... And, it is only now [May of 1992], a year later, that I really am starting to feel the sense of accomplishment.<sup>58</sup>

In New York, Michael Schneider of the JDC informed top American Jewish leaders that Operation Solomon "was made possible by a combination of outstanding operations in the field, the leadership of the organized American Jewish community, the support of the U.S. Government, and the efforts of the Israeli Government, and the Jewish Agency in Israel."<sup>59</sup> Ralph Goldman, the former head of the JDC, cabled a friend: "The role of the Joint in the 40s in Europe was repeated in the 90s in Ethiopia."<sup>60</sup>

Many, like the AAEJ's Recant, profess that Operation Solomon directly resulted from his organization's actions of bringing down the Beta Yisrael from Gondar and the "emergency crisis situation Israel operates under best. Emergency prompted Israeli efforts all along, including Operation Solomon."<sup>61</sup>

What was the role of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry with Operation Solomon? Naomi Baum notes:

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<sup>58</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

<sup>59</sup> The Secret Alliance, p. 306.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

By the time the high level interest came into being, there was not much for us [the Caucus] to do. The people were ready to do it finally... The role of the Caucus in Operation Solomon was laying the groundwork for interest. It was keeping the issue alive when a lot of people were not interested. And it was being informed and to be able to inform people on the issue, and also letting the administration know that we were watching on the issue, and making them realize that we were so interested, that they should be interested too. So that by the time that we got everyone interested, they [State Department, Bush Administration, Israel] took care of it. We were not involved with the logistics of Operation Solomon -- organizing planes and the like... They [State Department, Israelis] had access to resources that we didn't have.<sup>62</sup>

A concerted effort by a number of organizations and agencies created Operation Solomon. The North American activist groups, in accord with the JDC/Almaya, the Israeli embassy, and even the American charge d'affaires provided relief, educational and medical services to the Jewish refugee community in Addis Ababa, making life tolerable during the year-long wait for final redemption. The AAEJ, NACOEJ and the Jewish Agency procured documents for hundreds of Beta Yisrael a month, creating "legal" transport of these individuals to Israel. In Washington D.C., the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry pushed the Bush Administration, State Department, Soviet officials and representatives of the Ethiopian Government and various rebel groups to allow for free emigration of the Ethiopian Jews. The U.S. State Department, on both low and high levels, conducted meetings with various players which allowed for the rescue operation to take place. Finally, due to the encircling of the rebels around Addis Ababa, Mengistu's departure, a final push by President Bush, and negotiations by Uri Lubrani with the acting president Tesfaye Kidan, Operation Solomon got the go ahead. Designed and

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<sup>62</sup> Personal interview with Naomi Baum.

executed by the Jewish Agency, Almayya, the Israeli Mosad, and the Israeli Defense Forces, with support from the U.S. Government and the North American activist groups, fourteen thousand five hundred Jews were rescued to Israel.

## FOLLOW-UP OPERATIONS TO MAY OF 1991

The thirty-six hour operation virtually cleared the capital city of its Jewish refugee population. Yet, some three hundred and fifty Jews did not make it to the airport in time for the airlift.<sup>63</sup> Also, Israeli sources noted that between "2,000 to 3,000 Jews remained stranded in rebel-held Gondar Province."<sup>64</sup> However, the initial estimates of Beta Yisrael stranded in the Horn of Africa would be revised upwards as new communities were rediscovered in the remote reaches of the Semien Mountains. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir noted: "There are still Jews in Ethiopia who want to immigrate, and we must make every effort to make this happen."<sup>65</sup>

As soon as Operation Solomon was over, the activist groups, the Israelis and the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews continued their advocacy for a completed Beta Yisrael aliyah. On Wednesday, May 29th, 1991, Representative Benjamin Gilman addressed the House of Representatives regarding the Ethiopian Jews rescued by the airlift and the need to bring the rest of the community to Israel.<sup>66</sup> On June 19th, House Concurrent Resolution 171 was introduced by Solarz, Gilman and Ackerman which commended the Bush Administration, the Government of Israel, and the dedicated private voluntary organizations who played vital roles in the successful execution of Operation Solomon. The bill also recognized that thousands remained in Ethiopia and urged swift reunification of the remainder of the Beta Yisrael, as well as

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63 "Jewish Agency Team Going to Ethiopia to Arrange Transit of Those Left Behind," JTA, June 11, 1991.

64 "Israel Completes Ethiopian Airlift," p. 1.

65 "Shamir Says 'Thank You' for Operation Solomon," Jerusalem Post, May 28, 1991.

66 "Ethiopian Jews Rescued by Airlift," The Congressional Record of the Proceedings and Debates of the 102 Congress, First Session, House of Representatives, Vol. 137, No. 81, Wednesday, May 29, 1991, remarks of Representative Benjamin Gilman of New York, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

famine relief for the millions of starving Ethiopians.<sup>67</sup> On June 26th, the three co-chairs of the Caucus<sup>68</sup> addressed President Bush by letter expressing appreciation for his role in Operation Solomon and urging support to complete the exodus:

Although Operation Solomon was a dramatic success in bringing more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews safely to Israel, many were still left behind. On behalf of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews [sic], we respectfully urge you to ensure that the new government in Ethiopia fulfills its commitment to allow the expedited departure of the remaining Jewish population at the earliest possible opportunity... The exodus brought about by Operation Solomon can only be complete upon the arrival in Israel of all the Beta Yisrael."<sup>69</sup>

Once again, on July 29th, the House of Representatives took up House Concurrent Resolution 171, with supporting remarks offered by Solarz and Gilman.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, on August 2nd, Florida representative Lawrence J. Smith

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<sup>67</sup> House Concurrent Resolution 171, "expressing the sense of the Congress relating to the rescue of approximately 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel, and to the current famine in Ethiopia;" introduced on June 19, 1991, 102 Congress, First Session, by Representatives Stephen Solarz, Benjamin Gilman and Gary Ackerman; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C. See also the appeal letter to the members of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to support House Concurrent Resolution 171 and its counterpart legislation in the Senate, July 19, 1991; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry.

<sup>68</sup> Rudy Boschwitz was not reelected in 1990 and ended his term as Minnesota Senator in 1991. Thus, he was able to travel to Ethiopia in April of 1991 as a civilian negotiator bearing a direct request from the President of the United States. The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry decided not to fill the vacant co-chair spot, and shortly thereafter, Senator Alan Cranston was forced to withdraw from political life due to allegations surrounding the "Keating Five" financial debacle, reducing the leadership of the Caucus to two.

<sup>69</sup> Letter from Senator Alan Cranston of California, Representative Benjamin Gilman of New York and Representative Stephen Solarz of New York, co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, to President George Bush, June 26th, 1991; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>70</sup> See "Rescue of Ethiopian Jews from Ethiopia to Israel," The Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the 102 Congress, First Session, Vol. 137, No. 117, Monday, July 29th, 1991, remarks by Representatives Stephen Solarz and Benjamin Gilman; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.



pushed for the resolution on the floor of the House.<sup>71</sup> Throughout the Summer and Fall of 1991, the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry continued to push for the final redemption of the remaining Beta Yisrael to Israel.

The Beta Yisrael in the remote Ethiopian province of Gondar started to make their way to the capital of Addis Ababa shortly after Operation Solomon. JDC officials helping to care for the Ethiopian Jews in the capital city said that they hoped "that the new Ethiopian leaders who came to power after rebel troops toppled former President Mengistu... will allow the old family reunification program to resume."<sup>72</sup> The airport in Addis Ababa, as well as the JDC clinic in the capital city, reopened by the week of June 10th, giving "hope to expediting" the remainder of the Ethiopian aliyah.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, the question of whether the thousands of Jewish converts to Christianity would be allowed to immigrate to Israel remained an issue the Israeli Government and religious establishment had to decide.<sup>74</sup>

A State Department official noted that the post Operation Solomon process to bring the Beta Yisrael to Israel was a lengthy one. Not only did the Jews have to be brought down from Gondar to Addis Ababa, but emigration was based on an individual and not a group or family basis. The official remarked: "The issue was one of laissez passer, a travel document, which helps speed up the emigration process. The Ethiopian Government didn't want the Ethiopian

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<sup>71</sup> "House Concurrent Resolution 171, to Commend Assistance to Ethiopian Jews," Congressional Record, Extension of Remarks, August 2, 1991, remarks by Representative Lawrence J. Smith of Florida, p. E 2928; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

<sup>72</sup> "Jews Left Behind in Gondar Province Making Their Way to Ethiopian Capital," JTA, June 13, 1991.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. Until today, the issue of the Felas Mora has yet to be resolved. See the Epilogue for more on these Ethiopian Marranos.

Jews to emigrate by groups, but rather individually. This was more acceptable to the Ethiopian Government."<sup>75</sup>

Throughout the Summer months, between one hundred and one hundred and fifty Beta Yisrael a week arrived in Israel from Addis Ababa. At the same time, Jewish Agency emissaries were active in the Gondar region, trying to organize the departure of the remaining Ethiopian Jews to Addis Ababa before the final exodus to Israel.<sup>76</sup> By late August, five hundred Jews remained in Addis Ababa, who arrived in Israel during September, and

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<sup>75</sup> Personal interview with a State Department official who requested to remain anonymous, May 21, 1992.

This official also noted that the talks in London in May of 1991 brought about a care-taker government, and that the Ethiopian army completely disintegrated. A conference was helped in July of 1991 to form a transitional government, which is currently in power. The head of the transitional government is Meles Zenawi. He is the leader of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which is a coalition of parties, the strongest of which is the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPLF). Ethiopia is in the process of writing a new constitution and will be holding new national elections targeted for the end of 1993.

The official noted: "The U.S. currently has excellent relations with the new government. They realize that socialism does not work. Between 1974 and 1991, Ethiopia was held together by force. Now, they are trying to form a democratic government, utilizing negotiations instead of force."

The State Department official also made an assessment of the three major U.S. policies toward Ethiopia as put forth by the State Department in the middle of 1992:

"1) Human Rights: Human rights have improved dramatically in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Jews were allowed to leave in the airlift of May '92 and in smaller groups after that. However, people from the Mengistu regime are still being detained in jail without charge. 2) Famine Relief: In theory, there is now free access of food distribution. However, in practice, problems still exist. Bandits and ethnic groups take advantage of the absence of police (until the regional elections are held during the Summer of 1992, there are no government officials on a regional basis). This causes a security problem for the distribution of food.

3) Civil War and peace process: The civil war has ended, regional elections are to take place, a new constitution is being written, national elections are projected to take place at the end of 1993, and they are heading toward democracy. Until recently, there were legislative restrictions on aid packages to Ethiopia because of their policies. Now, they have been lifted, and a new development fund has been started out of the Development Fund for Africa. Agency for International Development (AID) funds from the U.S. Government will reach \$40 million for economic recovery, democratization, and technology advancements."

See also "Recent Political Developments in Ethiopia and Somalia," CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress.

<sup>76</sup> "Remaining Ethiopian Jews Expected to Arrive in Israel Within 6 Months," JTA, June 22, 1991.

another two thousand Beta Yisrael scattered in villages in Gondar and Quara followed during the Fall months. The exodus of these Jews to the capital city had to be delayed until the end of the rainy season in early October, because the mud-filled roads were nearly impassable.<sup>77</sup>

By the end of October, due to the cessation of the rainy season and recent losses of the rebel armies in Gondar, Jewish Agency emissaries were able to establish contact in the remote regions of the province and discovered new communities of Beta Yisrael. A few days after Jewish Agency head Simcha Dinitz told the Zionist Executive that 2200 Beta Yisrael remained in Ethiopia, Micha Feldman, in charge of Ethiopian Jewry for the Jewish Agency, pushed this number up to four thousand. The difference, Feldman said, "has to do with Jews in the Quara region, a remote part of Gondar that was until very recently under rebel control."<sup>78</sup> Over 2500 Beta Yisrael were rediscovered in Quara. The Jews from Quara, a five to ten day walk from Gondar City, were brought down to Addis Ababa on buses, thirty to forty at a time, on transports arranged by the AAEJ.<sup>79</sup>

The exodus takes an arduous but familiar path:

Entire villages are on the move, uprooting themselves and walking through the hostile climate to remote absorption centers set up by the Jewish Agency and the Joint Distribution Committee. Barefoot, with young children on their backs, the elderly moving more slowly with the aid of walking staffs, they arrive exhausted at these outposts. Food, water and basic medical care are available before the migrants are transported to a larger more central absorption center in the city of

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<sup>77</sup> "Ethiopia's Last Jews Expected Soon," International Jerusalem Post, Week ending August 24, 1991, pp. 1 and 4.

<sup>78</sup> "More Jews Found in Remote Ethiopia," Northern California Jewish Bulletin, November 1, 1991, p. 6; and "2,000 More Jews 'Discovered' in Quara, Ethiopia," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, November 2, 1991, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> "Report from Ethiopia," by AAEJ representative in the field LaDena Schnapper, Release, Vol. 10, No. 1, Winter, 1992, p. 3.

Tedah. From there they are driven to Addis Ababa and then flown to Israel.<sup>80</sup>

At the same time as the discovery of the population in Quara, around one hundred Ethiopian Jews a week arrived in Israel from Addis Ababa.<sup>81</sup> In November of 1991, Rachamim Elazar told the Near East Report that as many as seven thousand Jews still resided in the more remote regions of the country.<sup>82</sup> AAEJ field representative LaDena Schnapper noted in early 1992, that 1795 Beta Yisrael had arrived in Israel from Quara, 1500 remained in the Quara region of Gondar, and 683 were in transit to Addis Ababa and Israel.<sup>83</sup>

One year after Operation Solomon dramatically spirited 14,500 Beta Yisrael out of Addis Ababa to Israel, the effort to rescue the remaining Jews continued. By the end of May of 1992, it was clear that at least five thousand Ethiopian Jews were not in Addis Ababa at the time of the airlift. Arnon Mantver, Director General of the Jewish Agency's Immigration and Absorption Department noted during the late Spring of 1992 that "[t]wo thousand three hundred of them have since been flown to Israel via Rome at a rate of thirty to seventy a week. The rest should be here [Israel] by Summer."<sup>84</sup> These operations were coordinated with an Ethiopian Government which considered the immigration a process of Family Reunification and which was eager to reestablish the good relations with Israel that existed before the Marxist takeover in 1974.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "Rescue of Jews Remaining in Ethiopia Continues," The American Israelite, Vol. 138, No. 44, Thursday, May 21, 1992, p. A-28.

<sup>81</sup> "More Jews Found in Remote Ethiopia," and "2,000 More Jews 'Discovered' in Quara."

<sup>82</sup> "Still More Jews Found in Ethiopia," Near East Report, Vol. 35, No. 47, November 25, 1991, p. 4.

<sup>83</sup> "Report from Ethiopia."

<sup>84</sup> "Rescue of Jews Remaining in Ethiopia Continues," p. A-1.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. A-28.

The current coalition government [in Ethiopia] has placed no obstacles to Jewish emigration, according to representatives of Jewish groups facilitating the departures. In contrast to conditions under Mengistu's military regime, Jewish visitors are now able to travel freely around the country.<sup>86</sup>

A report in June of 1992 stated that one hundred and fifty Jews a week were boarding commercial flights from Ethiopia with the final destination of Israel.<sup>87</sup> During the end of July, Jewish Agency chair Simcha Dinitz said "that the regular flights that have been bringing Jews from Addis Ababa are to end... The last flight is to carry some forty immigrants."<sup>88</sup> Dinitz noted that three hundred Beta Yisrael were still thought to be living in the villages of Northern Ethiopia, and that "they will be located and brought to Israel in small groups starting in September [of 1992], when the rainy season there ends and the roads become passable."<sup>89</sup> Between September of 1991 when special commercial flights were utilized to facilitate the exodus, and July of 1992, 4035 Beta Yisrael were brought to Israel at a rate of about one hundred per week.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, hundreds of Ethiopian Jews immigrated to Israel between Operation Solomon in May of 1991 and September of that same year.

These commercial airlifts, free of the chaos and uncertainty that led up to their designed rescue, signaled the final phase of the saga of the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry. These relatively overt and tranquil operations

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<sup>86</sup> "Jews Quietly Leaving Ethiopia," The Northern California Jewish Bulletin, June 12, 1992, p. 32.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> "Ethiopian Jewish Exodus to End Formally," The Northern California Jewish Bulletin, July 24, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

marked the end of hundreds, if not thousands of years of Jewish presence, glory and degradation in Ethiopia.



### Postscript

As late as December of 1992, reports were filtering out of Ethiopia that hundreds of Beta Yisrael are still lost, stranded and left behind in Gondar, Tigrey, Eritrea and Addis Ababa. Some were stranded behind rebel lines. Others were raised and protected by righteous Gentiles when the Jewish parents were either imprisoned, executed, rescued to Israel, or died from starvation or disease. Many are young men who were conscripted into Mengistu's or the rebel armies and then released or escaped following the collapse of the Ethiopian Government in May of 1991. Some Ethiopian Israelis managed to scrape up the money for a plane ticket from Israel to Ethiopia to search for their lost relatives in the capital city and remote countryside. The North American activist groups provide the needed money, housing and travel documents for the Ethiopian Israelis' stay in the Horn of Africa.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> See "Searching for Lost Jews in Ethiopia," *Lifeline*, Winter, 1992-93, pp. 1-2. By the beginning of 1993, I was still receiving letters from Ethiopia from Beta Yisrael (as well as Felas Mora) trying to flee the country and immigrate to Israel. They request financial assistance and the facilitation of the proper documents to reach Israel; as well as prayers and moral support. NACOEJ and Solomon Ezra, as well as the AAEJ, are assisting in these cases.

## SUMMARY AND EPILOGUE

By the beginning of 1993, virtually the entire Beta Yisrael community lived in Israel. They arrived in the Jewish State from Gondar and Tigrey, via the Sudan, Kenya and the Red Sea, and from staging points in Europe and Addis Ababa. A few dozen are veterans of over twenty-five years, Beta Yisrael who married Yemenite Jews or smuggled their way into Eilat aboard foreign shipping vessels. Like their predecessors who also entered Israel "illegally," some have lived in the Jewish State for over fifteen years, after entering the country on tourist visas or posing as students. A larger segment of the population, some seven thousand individuals, has lived in the Promised Land around ten years, having come to Israel between 1979 and 1984. Operation Moses and Joshua rescued over eight thousand Beta Yisrael to the Jewish State in 1984 and 1985. Family Reunification programs succeeded in bringing a few thousand Ethiopian Jews from Ethiopia to Israel between 1985 and 1990. Between the exodus of the Beta Yisrael to Addis Ababa in May of 1990 and the following Spring, around nine thousand Jews immigrated to the Jewish State. In May of 1991, Operation Solomon saved another fourteen thousand five hundred Ethiopian Jews. Follow-up operations in 1991 and 1992 have rescued an additional five thousand Beta Yisrael. Throughout the years, thousands of Ethiopian Israelis have been born Sabras in the Jewish State, raising the Beta Yisrael population in Israel to over fifty thousand. This figure represents roughly one percent of the Jewish population of Israel.

Many organizations, individuals and countries contributed to the aliyah of Ethiopian Jewry. Most assuredly, the exodus was desired, encouraged and facilitated by the Beta Yisrael themselves. The Israeli Government, the Mosad,

the Jewish Agency, the Israeli Defense Forces and Almaya planned, orchestrated and actualized the various aliyot of the Ethiopian Jews. The North American activist groups, including the AAEJ, NACOEJ, CAEJ and ARNEJ played a major role in sensitizing the Jewish and Gentile communities to the plight of the Beta Yisrael, while spurring and organizing rescue operations. The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Reagan and Bush administrations applied needed pressure and created the proper environment for rescue, as well as participated in some of the rescue operations. American and world Jewish organizations such as the Organization for Rehabilitation through Training (ORT), the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC), the Council of Jewish Federations (CJF), the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) also played a role in relief and rescue. While some interpreted rescue as sustaining the Beta Yisrael medically, educationally and socially in Ethiopia, others, perhaps a majority, interpreted this imperative of rescue as the facilitation of aliyah from the Horn of Africa to Israel.

The roots of the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry can be traced to the pioneering work of Joseph Halevy in the second half of the nineteenth century and Jacques Faitlovitch in the first half of the twentieth century. These two individuals "rediscovered" and "reintroduced" the Beta Yisrael community to world Jewry. In response to their efforts, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, "Pro-Falasha" Committees sprang up in Europe and then the United States. They served primarily as relief and educational organizations, and received the support of the American Jewish establishment, unlike most of the Beta Yisrael activist groups later in the

century. However, a number of decades passed before the cause of Ethiopian Jewry would surface once again.

The remote location of the Jewish communities in Ethiopia was one factor for the delay. Yet, while the intermittent nature of contacts with the Beta Yisrael during the preceding centuries can be attributed to difficulties in exploration and communication, modern technology, modes of travel and avenues of communication can not solely explain the decades-long hiatus in the awareness about and activism on behalf of the Beta Yisrael during the second third of the twentieth century. Therefore, other factors must be considered. The Second World War, the Holocaust, and concern for displaced persons in Europe, as well as the birth of Israel, the ingathering of immigrants from other lands, and the lack of religious recognition by the Israeli rabbinate postponed interest by world Jewry and Israel in the Beta Yisrael.

A movement to rescue the Jews of Ethiopia did not coalesce until the work of Graenum Berger in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Until that time, neither Israel nor any Jewish group had launched an effort to save Ethiopian Jewry. AAEJ founder Graenum Berger notes that his organization was a lone voice for many years:

I was one who once believed that unless Jewish leaders were willing to at least acknowledge or outrightly confess their remissive acts in rescuing a significant historical Jewish group, there will never be a true accounting. Now that everybody is on the band wagon, there is already a rewriting of history. There is total omission of what was not done in the past. There is only a record of tremendous latter day elation and achievement. The past thus is obliterated. A relative small number of us gave of our unending time, our total energy, our modest fortunes and perhaps even possibly risked our lives (certainly those that went into Sudan to save them) to insure the rescue of Ethiopian Jews. It was imperative to put their cause on the front burners with the gas or electricity turned on, rather than await the foot-dragging willingness of leaders in Israel and world-wide to come around when

it pleased their fancy. I've been told by eminent Jewish leaders in the last year that my "timing was wrong." I believed, what is more, I know, that we literally forced them all to do things that they didn't want to do, but finally had to do, because as you said to me, they had a "Jewish conscience," but I believe that they could no longer contain or conceal their guilt for having allowed this historic community to live in poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and persecution for centuries, had to undergo the most extreme kind of suffering and death and broken families by the thousands in our recent life-time, when it could have been completely avoided between 1948-73, [as well as between] 1973-91...<sup>1</sup>

It was only in 1973 that Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef recognized the Beta Yisrael as Jewish. And it was until two years later that Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren validated the community as Jewish and an Israeli interministerial commission declared "the Falashas" Jews under the Law of Return, entitling the Beta Yisrael to immediate Israeli citizenship.

While Israel sputtered and faltered in attempting a few small-scale rescue attempts during the second half of the 1970s, the AAEJ was active in publicizing the plight of the Beta Yisrael and creating its own rescue operations. AAEJ second president, Professor Howard Lenhoff, responds to the criticism of the amateur nature of the rescue operations as follows: "We are amateurs. Do you know what amateurs means? It means to love and to care. We cared what we were doing."<sup>2</sup>

Ethiopian Jewry scholar and chair of the African Studies Department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Steven Kaplan, briefly addressed the role of the AAEJ in a review of various works on the Beta Yisrael. While noting the omission and/or minimization of the efforts of the Ethiopian Jewry activist organizations in numerous books and articles, Kaplan notes:

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<sup>1</sup> From a letter dated June 19, 1992, from Graenum Berger to Jeffrey Kaye.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff, UC Irvine, second president of the AAEJ, April 23 and April 26, 1992.

No history of Operation Moses or the events surrounding it would be complete without the consideration of the role played by the numerous pro-Beta Yisrael pressure groups that were active from 1974 onward. There can be little question that these groups, most notably the American Association for Ethiopian Jewry (AAEJ) and the Falasha Welfare Association (FWA),<sup>3</sup> played a vital role in educating the Jewish and Israeli public and in pressuring successive Israeli governments to act on behalf of the Beta Yisrael. There is perhaps no greater testimony to their tenacity and ultimate success than the fact that, by the early 1980s, the issue was no longer if Ethiopian Jewry should be helped, but how and at what speed.<sup>4</sup>

Even long-time AAEJ adversary and Director for International Concerns for NJCRAC, Abraham Bayer, notes that the AAEJ "probably played a very important stimulus role. More than that, I do not know."<sup>5</sup>

The success of the AAEJ is in large part due to the energy and strong personality of its leadership. Throughout its life as an organization, the AAEJ has had three different presidents, each of whom was well suited to the times and needs of the Ethiopian Jewish rescue movement. Graenum Berger kept the group a small yet vocal organization between 1974 and 1978, a time when few had heard about the beleaguered Jewish community of Ethiopia. Professor Howard Lenhoff, who served from 1978 to 1982, published numerous articles on the subject, disseminated information, and established the AAEJ as a true grass roots organization by attracting new members and local chapter

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<sup>3</sup> The FWA played a major role in promoting awareness about the Beta Yisrael during the 1960s and 1970s. However, after the death of Norman Bentwich in 1972, David Kessler became head of the FWA and focused more on relief efforts and less on efforts for aliyah. For more on the FWA, see chapter two, "Activists and Inactivity: Jacques Faitlovitch, Yona Bogala, the American Pro-Falasha Committee and World Jewry Between 1900-1970," and chapter four, "Graenum Berger and the American Association for Ethiopian Jews."

<sup>4</sup> Steven Kaplan, "The Two Zions and the Exodus from Ethiopia," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 7 (1991), p. 302.

<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns for the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Committee (NJCRAC), June 18, 1992, New York, New York.



organizations at a critical time when the plight of the Beta Yisrael needed wider attention. The third and current president, Nathan Shapiro, a successful businessperson with extensive political contacts, worked more smoothly and ably with the Jewish establishment, created the critical AAEJ presence in Washington D.C. and facilitated the prominence of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry. Additionally, the AAEJ's Executive Director based in Washington, D.C., Will Recant, has guided the organization with expertise and powerful elegance. The organization has been characterized by many rescue heros -- William Halpern, Henry Rosenberg and Sandy Leader in the Horn of Africa -- and LaDena Schnapper, Susan Pollack, Glenn Stein and Arlene Kushner in the United States and Ethiopia.

However, as Kaplan remarks:

The role of these groups [Pro-Beta Yisrael activist organizations], particularly the militant AAEJ, in the 1980s is the subject of considerable controversy. By that time, so much distrust had accumulated between the AAEJ leadership and the Israeli government that little room existed for cooperation. The direct involvement of the AAEJ in rescue attempts further exacerbated these tensions. In [Tudor] Parfitt's opinion [pp. 55-61 of Operation Moses], the AAEJ's contribution in the buildup to Operation Moses was primarily negative -- their bungled rescue attempts and failure to recognize the genuine shift in Israeli policy detracted attention from vital, in some cases life-or-death, matters. Needless to say, the AAEJ and their supporters do not share this view. Scholarly analysis of Operation Moses will in the future have to clarify this issue.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis, in part, has attempted to shed light on this controversy.

Israel dramatically rescued thousands of Beta Yisrael from the Sudan and Ethiopia in Operations Moses and Solomon. Lenhoff remarks: "Israel is the best in the world at dramatic rescue. When push comes to shove, Israel comes through like no other country in the world. A lot of Israelis have given

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<sup>6</sup> "The Two Zions and the Exodus from Ethiopia."

up their lives to save, protect and rescue people. It was the politicians and egos which got in the way, and they needed to be pushed to take action."<sup>7</sup>

However, during the early 1980s, Israel staged rescue operations of the Beta Yisrael from the Sudan under a veil of secrecy. Lack of disclosure resulted in heightened charges of complacency and indifference. Secrecy was a political necessity. Going public, in the eyes of the Jewish State, would have jeopardized the various operations, endangered the Beta Yisrael, and hampered other interests in the Horn of Africa. At the same time, the fact that Israel pursued diplomacy and a fostering of relations with Ethiopia, as well as a desire not to offend governmental and rebel interests in the Horn of Africa, affected the rate, timing and method of rescue operations. Rescue operations were delayed from the mid-1970s onwards, and some type of "quota" system did seem to be in place during the early 1980s.

The Israeli stance of silence and preference for covert operations over public campaigns had its effect. Leaks like the 1975 Koor rescue fiasco, the February of 1978 press conference of Moshe Dayan, and the January of 1985 Nekuda report and subsequent other Israeli press releases on Operation Moses all halted operations. Public revelations had political reverberations, including the toppling of the Numeiri regime in the Sudan in 1985. Yet, the position of Israel, shared by the American Jewish establishment, curtailed awareness of this ancient Jewish community and efforts to rescue it. Moreover, it stymied the pace of aliyah. The Israeli and American Jewish establishment calls for secrecy stalled much needed political pressure and financial backing to actualize the rescue.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff.

In the political realm, the efforts of the United States Government were essential in creating Operations Moses, and moreover, Operation Joshua and Operation Solomon. However, because of the stance of the Government of Israel and organized American Jewry, such efforts did not materialize until the mid-1980s instead of the mid-1970s when the plight of the Beta Yisrael was first publicized by Graenum Berger, Howard Lenhoff and the AAEJ. Perhaps the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry and the State Department in Washington, D.C., were motivated to take such extensive action because of U.S. negligence in the past – the inactivity and neglect of the Jews during the Second World War by the U.S. Government. At the same time, just as the AAEJ pushed Israel to create rescue operations, it also influenced the State Department, the Reagan and Bush Administrations, the CIA and the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to promote awareness about the Beta Yisrael and foster operations to rescue the community. Regarding financial backing, monetary support for the North American activist organizations until late 1984 was on a small scale. Only with the massive publicity campaigns surrounding Operation Moses did the AAEJ, CAEJ and NACOEJ raise larger sums of money, and the United Jewish Appeal (UJA) was able to raise \$35 million for rescue and absorption by early 1985.

In Canada, CAEJ was successful throughout the 1980s in pressuring Canadian Governmental officials to support Family Reunification, attracting funds, and promoting awareness about the Jews of Ethiopia. Additionally, CAEJ had an impact on relief and rescue in the Horn of Africa. Increasingly during the second half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, NACOEJ played a significant role in relief and rescue of the Ethiopian Jews under the leadership of Barbara Ribakove Gordon. Michael Sabin and then Michael Strum coordinated rescue

lists for NACOEJ stateside, and Andy Goldman and Solomon Ezra brought significant healing and hope to the Beta Yisrael community in Ethiopia.

The RAC of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) promoted awareness about the community and designed a special medical aid program to Ethiopia entitled project REAP. Jane Fellman and ARNEJ sensitized rabbis and congregations throughout North America to the plight of the Ethiopian Jews. Also, the American Jewish establishment periodically aided the cause of relief and rescue.

For the American Jewish establishment, just as for Israel, silence was a major issue. But the dilemma played itself out differently on the North American continent. Israel's need for covert operations was based on security interests, political concerns and geostrategic considerations. The major Jewish organizations, spearheaded by NJCRAC, insisted on silence because it was a demand of the Israelis, coupled with a genuine belief that publicity would endanger the lives of the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia. At the same time, the establishment desired to heighten awareness about the community and raise funds for relief, rescue and absorption. However, this was nearly impossible because of the overriding tenet of secrecy. Therefore, until Operation Moses in late 1984, the Beta Yisrael remained a low priority on the American Jewish agenda and an "unknown, totally unknown"<sup>8</sup> subject. Abraham Bayer notes: "The idea was to educate the Jewish community, but not seek publicity. There is no way in which you can conduct [this], that was our dilemma. It was almost an irreconcilable and exquisite dilemma. How do you conduct an educational campaign without using the maximal of public exposure..."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Personal interview with Abraham Bayer.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

By the second half of the 1980s, the various players and organizations in North America cooperated on the relief and rescue of the Beta Yisrael. However, the scars of the previous year's fighting ran deep. Barbara Ribakove Gordon remarks: "One of the things that has been most difficult for me in this whole time... [is] that there has been blood feuds with other Jewish organizations. Those have been pure agony, pure agony. To work together is worth a lot."<sup>10</sup>

It is important to reiterate that from the start, it has been the Beta Yisrael themselves, more than any other group or organization, who have pushed for and worked toward aliyah. The community needed the external help of the North American activist organizations to facilitate the exodus. The Beta Yisrael required the political clout of the U.S. Government. The Ethiopian Jews could only have been rescued en masse with the dramatic efforts of the State of Israel. However, if it were not for Yona Bogala, Rachamim Elazar, the kessim and literally thousands of other unsung Beta Yisrael heroes, the Jews of Ethiopia would not be in Israel today.

Therefore, the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry has been a type of network. Many elements have interacted, been fitted and pieced together to bring about the aliyah of the Beta Yisrael. Although at times unnecessarily and tragically slowed, the network which brought about the presence of fifty thousand Ethiopian Jews living in Israel has functioned at precisely the right junctures in time.

Will the network disintegrate now that the community resides in Israel? What will happen to the North American activist organizations now that the Ethiopian aliyah is complete? At the same time, questions still remain as to

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<sup>10</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.

whether the aliyah is actually complete because of the ambiguous status of the Felas Mora and their desire to reach Zion? Why is it that the Beta Yisrael have come en masse to Israel without any drop out or attrition rate like other Jewish communities, in particular Russian Jews, who have emigrated from their homeland simultaneously with the Ethiopian Jews' exodus? And now that the Beta Yisrael have been rescued to Israel, how long will the absorption process take and to what extent will the integration of the Ethiopian Jews be successful? The summary and epilogue now address these significant questions.



## FELAS MORA

The Felas Mora are the "Marranos" or "Conversos" of Ethiopia. This community of converted Jews relinquished their faith due to discrimination in educational and governmental opportunities, religious hatred and persecution, intense missionary efforts, prejudice in owning land and farms, and sometimes for economic advancement. Over the past decades and centuries, these former members of the Beta Yisrael community converted to Christianity. Estimates of the number of Felas Mora range from twenty thousand to the hundreds of thousands.<sup>11</sup> Haggai Erlich, an expert on modern Ethiopia at the Tel Aviv University claims: "There are hundreds of thousands of Felas Mora in Ethiopia, some three to four thousand of whom have family in Israel and want to be reunited with them and return to Judaism."<sup>12</sup> The large disparity in numbers depends on how many years and generations are calculated into the size and totality of the community.

The Felas Mora practice certain vestiges of Judaism, and the amount of Jewish religious practice depends on the individual and proximity in years to conversion. However, because of the integration of Jewish religious practices in the general Ethiopian society and Ethiopian Coptic Church,<sup>13</sup> it is hard to determine precisely to what extent the Jewish practices of the Felas Mora are

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<sup>11</sup> "Ethiopia's Remaining Jews Expected to Immigrate by June," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, The Week ending May 9, 1992, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> "Rescue of Jews Remaining in Ethiopia Continues," The American Israelite, Vol. 136, No. 44, Thursday, May 21, 1992, p. A-28. The three to four thousand he is referring to are those encamped in Addis Ababa. The numbers of Felas Mora desiring to reach Israel ranges in the tens of thousands.

<sup>13</sup> The Saturday Sabbath, the circumcision of male children on the eighth day after birth and the observance of biblical prohibitions are only a few of the customs that have traditionally linked Ethiopians, whether Christians or Jews, to the cultural world of the Hebrew Bible. See "The Two Zions and the Exodus from Ethiopia."

due to their Jewish roots or submersion in Ethiopian culture.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, each generation of Felas Mora has been stigmatized and set aside as a separate caste and class like their counterparts in Medieval Spain. "[F]ew, if any, appear to have actively practiced Christianity."<sup>15</sup> Most never went to church, even to make a "public statement and showing," and the vast majority married only amongst themselves.

No one knows the history of the term Felas Mora, which derives from the Amharic words for "horse fat."<sup>16</sup> While unknown tens if not hundreds of thousands remain in the Semien Mountains, about three thousand Felas Mora gathered in Addis Ababa prior to Operation Solomon from their villages in Gondar and Gojam Provinces of Northern Ethiopia.<sup>17</sup> They were not permitted to leave during the May 1991 rescue operation because of doubts as to their Jewishness. The Israeli Embassy disavows any responsibility for them, leaving provision for their welfare in the hands of others. They are being provided for by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC) and the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) in an encampment in Addis Ababa, while another one thousand Felas Mora are said to be languishing in poverty in the slum areas of the capital city.<sup>18</sup> Executive

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<sup>14</sup> Christian influences have also affected the Jews of Ethiopia. Beginning in the fifteenth century, monasticism filtered into the religion of the Beta Yisrael. For more on the Ethiopian Jewish monks, see Steven Kaplan, The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century (New York: New York University Press, 1992), pp. 69-73 and afterwards.

<sup>15</sup> "Some Ethiopian Jews Still Praying to Leave," Los Angeles Times, Sunday, April 19, 1992.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> "Jews Quietly Leaving Ethiopia," The Northern California Jewish Bulletin, June 12, 1992, p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> "Minister Denies Rumor that Felas Mora to be Kept Out," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending December 12, 1992, p. 5.

Director of NACOEJ, Barbara Ribakove Gordon, notes why her organization helps the Felas Mora:

We [NACOEJ] are not halakhic decisors. We do not attempt to say who is a Jew. We leave that up to the rabbis. We are not the State of Israel, we are not even Israelis -- we are Americans. And therefore, it is not up to us to tell Israel who is eligible under the Law of Return, which is not a halakhic law. Therefore, we are not in a position to tell Israel whom they should take of the Felas Mora -- some, none, all. It is not up to us, it is up to them. [However," there are two things we decided to take as positive commitments. Number one, to try to get Israel to make a decision on these people. Number two, those that came to Addis [Ababa] with the other Jews during the Summer of 1990 -- we did not want them to starve to death while Israel was deciding whether they were Jews or not. Simple as that... The Felas Mora issue has repeatedly been determined by the board [of NACOEJ] as being a humanitarian one at this point.<sup>19</sup>

Donations from abroad help pay the rent of the Felas Mora living in Addis Ababa in apartments around the NACOEJ compound. Financial assistance from the United States also provides them with food and some clothing. They have access to a donor funded medical clinic, and NACOEJ and the AJJDC employ seven hundred and fifty Felas Mora spinning cotton into cloth used to fashion traditional garments. The community's seven hundred and fifty children are educated in the compound, and enlisted by Andy Goldman in another makeshift circus.<sup>20</sup>

An Israeli Government commission in 1991 declined to give a blanket ruling on their eligibility for immigration, recommending instead that their applications be considered on a case-by-case basis. However, the case-by-case consideration of the Felas Mora never materialized.<sup>21</sup> It took until the late Fall

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<sup>19</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.

<sup>20</sup> "Some Ethiopian Jews Still Praying to Leave."

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

of 1992 for another commission to be dispatched to Ethiopia to consider the Felas Mora community. To complicate matters further, leaders of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church have made it clear to the Israelis that they would view harshly any attempt to convert Ethiopian Christians to Judaism to facilitate their emigration.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Ethiopian interim President Mellis Zenawe made it clear that he does not want the Felas Mora to leave his country for Israel, and that Israeli efforts to allow reconversion of the Felas Mora "threaten" relations between the two countries.<sup>23</sup> Mellis Zenawe states: "Every Ethiopian from Addis Ababa northwards can claim that he is a Jew who converted to Christianity... Do you therefore intend to wander about our country and decide who we are? To remove anyone in search of Western standard of living and deprive him of his Ethiopian identity?"<sup>24</sup> The delays in the various Israeli commissions are a direct result of Mellis Zenawe's warnings. Moreover, the Jewish Agency is not only worried about endangering relations with Ethiopia, but that the issue of the Felas Mora will jeopardize the immigration of the remaining Jews in the country.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, a large segment of the Beta Yisrael, primarily those who have Felas Mora relatives, desire to see this community brought to Israel.

An equally as potent impetus to the delays is concern over the potential opening of the flood gates to tens of thousands of Ethiopians claiming Felas Mora status and willing to undergo conversion in order to flee to Israel. A Los Angeles Times article notes: "Among the obstacles to admitting the Felas Mora

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> "Ethiopian Leader Wants Felas Mora to Stay on," The Jerusalem Report, October 24, 1991, p. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> "Olim Protesters Try to Rush PM's Office," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending October 3, 1992, p. 5.

are Israeli concerns that they represent the thin end of the wedge: that behind this relatively small group of even modestly Christianized people lies a multitude."<sup>26</sup> The article further states:

Because as many as one million Ethiopian Jews converted to Christianity around [by] the turn of the century, hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians today could claim relatively recent Jewish heritage. In fact, given Ethiopia's unique history as a crossroads of Africa-Middle Eastern travel and trade, many historians believe that, traced far enough, almost every northern Ethiopian's ancestry would show Jewish blood.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the Israeli Government and religious establishment is faced with four alternatives. First, it could ignore the Felas Mora completely, thereby removing a potential obstacle to relations with Ethiopia and fear of opening up the flood gates to immigration. Second, it could reconvert the existing Felas Mora community and bring them to Israel en masse. Third, it could try to find a clear criterion by which individuals can be accepted or rejected as Jews. Fourth, the least difficult option, it could treat each case as a question of Family Reunification, meaning that those who can show they have immediate family in Israel -- parents, children, or siblings -- would be permitted to join them.

Periodically since 1991, Ethiopian Israelis have demonstrated and petitioned the Israeli Government and Jewish Agency to deal expeditiously with the Felas Mora issue.<sup>28</sup> According to Yehuda Etzion, head of the South Wing to Zion, an "ingathering and absorption association," 60 to 70 percent of the more than fifty thousand olim have relatives in Ethiopia.<sup>29</sup> In 1991, an

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<sup>26</sup> "Some Ethiopian Jews Still Praying to Leave."

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> "Ethiopian Immigrants Active on Behalf of the Felas Mora," Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending January 11, 1992, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> "Olim Protesters Try to Rush PM's Office."

interministerial and rabbinic commission determined that the Felas Mora are not eligible to immigrate under the Law of Return. At that time, it was decided that the Felas Mora would be judged on a case-by-case basis, and that a "lengthy returning to Judaism" program be administered in Ethiopia by Israeli emissaries over a period of years.<sup>30</sup> In October of 1992, in part due to the pressure of the Ethiopian Israelis, the Israeli Cabinet established a high level committee to deal more comprehensively with the issue of the Felas Mora. "The committee, which included the ministers of justice, interior, religion and foreign affairs, as well as the chair of the Jewish Agency, will examine in depth the origins of the sect, its Jewish status and the possibilities of aliyah."<sup>31</sup>

In January of 1993, the interministerial committee on the Felas Mora recommended that family reunifications on a humanitarian and individual basis be permitted under the "Law of Entry to Israel," which does not entitle persons to immigrant rights.<sup>32</sup> The committee "did not find itself competent to decide on the controversial issue of whether the Felas Mora are Jews under the Law of Return, [committee chairperson Yair] Tsaban said. It therefore decided to deal with the distress of the separated families."<sup>33</sup> Many of the members of the Ethiopian community in Israel were upset and vowed to submit a petition to the High Court of Justice and "would not rest until the last of the... Felas Mora are brought to Israel."<sup>34</sup> One community leader stated, "by coming here under

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<sup>30</sup> "Israel Sets up Panel to Study Status of Felas Mora," Northern California Jewish Bulletin, October 9, 1992, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> "Felas Mora Panel Recommends Family Reunification," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, week ending January 30, 1993, p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ibid



the Law of Entry, Felas Mora 'could not feel that they belong to the Jewish people.'"<sup>35</sup>

Just as the interministerial committee was about to announce its decision, a group of veteran Israeli citizens publicized that they would "bring all the Felas Mora to Israel, regardless of what is decided."<sup>36</sup> Describing its group as non-partisan, its founder and former leader of the Jewish underground, Yehuda Etzion, said that "they will come as Jews. There is no decision in the world that will prevent them."<sup>37</sup> Etzion stated that several left-wing activists and organizations had joined the group.<sup>38</sup>

The work of the Protestant missionaries of the late 1700s, 1800s and 1900s has come full circle. The Christian missionaries brought to the attention of the Jewish world the existence of the ancient and forgotten community of the Beta Yisrael. At the same time, the missionaries converted hundreds of thousands of the Ethiopian Jews. Thus, the missionaries in part and indirectly deserve credit for the rescue of the Ethiopian Jews, but are also responsible for the problems faced by the Felas Mora. The Felas Mora are suspended in limbo. One community member living in Addis Ababa cried: "We can never go back to Gondar. We'll die here, following our ancestors' dreams."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid

<sup>36</sup> "Group Vows to Bring Felas Mora," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending December 19, 1992, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> "Some Ethiopian Jews Still Praying to Leave,"

## THE CHALLENGES OF ABSORPTION

After Operations Moses and Joshua in late 1984 and early 1985, the major challenge to absorbing the Beta Yisrael community in Israel was the strain of family separation and feelings of "survivors' guilt." During the next six and a half years, the absorption process proceeded despite the persistence of these feelings and harsh familial realities. Operation Solomon and the program of Family Reunification which preceded May of 1991 alleviated many of these deep rooted concerns, as many parents and children, husbands and wives, and siblings were reunited. However, the survivors' guilt persisted, especially when news of a deceased relative in the Horn of Africa filtered back to Israel.<sup>40</sup>

The overwhelming majority of Israeli citizens have welcomed the Ethiopian olim with an outpouring of warmth and acceptance. The quasi-governmental Jewish Agency has provided housing, medical care, food and living expenses for the Beta Yisrael community. Yet, the challenges of absorption post Operation Solomon are immense. Fifty thousand Beta Yisrael live in Israel, over half of whom have immigrated since 1990. The primary debate surrounding the absorption of the Ethiopian Jews since Operation Moses is whether to place the community in absorption centers for an extended period to bridge the technological gap and provide a support structure with other Beta Yisrael immigrants, or to integrate them as fast as possible in housing with veteran Israelis. This is in sharp contrast to the olim

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<sup>40</sup> For more on the strain of family separation and the feelings of survivors' guilt, see the beginning of chapter eight, "1985 to 1989: Developments Leading up to Operation Solomon."

from the former Soviet Republics who are immediately integrated into the Israeli social milieu.

### Housing

As of July of 1992, over twenty-four thousand Beta Yisrael were still living in temporary housing. Over eleven thousand are living in caravan sites, similar to the tent cities utilized in the 1950s to absorb new immigrants from North African and Near Eastern countries. Around eight thousand are living in absorption centers, and nearly five thousand reside in hotels. Of the more than fourteen thousand five hundred who arrived in Israel during Operation Solomon, about five hundred had moved into permanent housing.<sup>41</sup>

Carl Alpert notes that the Beta Yisrael have been isolated "[p]resumably... to protect them from too sudden and sharp a change in their way of living -- a change which has bridged a civilization gap of five hundred years, at least for those who have come from the remote villages."<sup>42</sup> In particular, the artificial isolation created in the hotels is problematic. Rabbi Steven Kaplan of Fremont, California, who has devoted over a decade of service to rescue efforts on behalf of the Beta Yisrael, relays what a social worker expressed to him when touring a hotel facility housing Ethiopian olim: "There's nothing for people to do, there's no cooking, families can't be together, there is no control over the children."<sup>43</sup> Kaplan also remarks that

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<sup>41</sup> "Ethiopian Jewish Exodus to End Formally," Northern California Jewish Bulletin, July 24, 1992, p. 6. See also "Agencies Share Blame for Lack of Real Housing for Ethiopian olim," Northern California Jewish Bulletin, August 14, 1992, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> "Ethiopian Students Fully Integrated at Kfar Batya," The American Israelite, Vol. 138, No. 44, Thursday, May 21, 1992, p. A-5.

<sup>43</sup> "Fremont Rabbi is Seeking Aid for Ethiopian Absorption," The Northern California Jewish Bulletin, March 27, 1992, p. 25.

the Housing Ministry has established a timetable for moving the new immigrants out of the hotels. In at least one of the four resettlement regions, a commitment has been made to stop placing the Beta Yisrael in hotels. Kaplan says: "They are sensitive to the problem... They know hotels are not the answer."<sup>44</sup>

Beta Yisrael olim have also been placed in mobile home caravan neighborhoods. Immigrant leaders say that isolating Ethiopians in trailer sites will forestall their integration into society. Avi Bitaw, a leader of the United Ethiopian Jewish Organization, an immigrant group, remarks: "Mobile homes are better than hotel rooms, but they could become transit camps of the year 2000, neighborhoods for blacks."<sup>45</sup> Moshe Batar, Negev coordinator for the United Ethiopian Jewish Organization, states: "If the Ethiopians remain in the caravan parks for long, it will turn into a tragedy for generations."<sup>46</sup>

Both the Housing Ministry and immigration officials agree that the Ethiopian olim need real homes where they can live a normal family life. They note that the communal-style living characteristic of the hotels and absorption centers disrupts the family hierarchy and deprives the new immigrants of privacy. Micha Feldman, head of the Jewish Agency's Department of Immigration for Ethiopians remarks: "Our goal is to move every immigrant into permanent housing by the end of the year. Whether we can do so will depend on how many units the Ministry of Housing makes available to us. So far we've filled every apartment that has come our way."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> "Exodus to Isolation: Ethiopians Endure Hardships," New York Times International, Saturday, July 11, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> "A Year After Airlift, Ethiopians Told its Time to Get to Work," The Northern California Jewish Bulletin, August 14, 1992, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> "Agencies Share Blame for lack of Real Housing for Ethiopian Olim."

In August of 1992, over six hundred Beta Yisrael olim, upset with the lack of permanent housing and the slow process of moving the new immigrants out of the absorption centers, hotels and mobile homes, set out from Ashkelon on the Mediterranean coast to Jerusalem in the Judean Mountains. Many of the group were also fasting as a sign of protest.<sup>48</sup> The march was called off after an appeal from Absorption Minister Yair Tsaban that the group, which had already walked 18 miles, return to their dwellings. Tsaban drove from Jerusalem to meet the demonstrators outside the Or Etzion Yeshiva. He promised to bring the issue up with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and that he would coordinate efforts with Ephraim Cohen, a senior ministry official and representative of the Jewish Agency. Tsaban also added, in contradistinction to Micha Feldman's pledge of permanent housing by the end of 1992, that it would take up to three years to provide permanent housing for the olim who had come in Operation Solomon and the surrounding rescue operations. Tsaban remarked: "It's not something that can be done quickly. We're talking about a solution in stages."<sup>49</sup>

In September of 1992, the Jewish Agency handed responsibility for over 12,200 Ethiopian olim living in trailers over to the Israeli Government. But those remaining in the hotels, as well as the 7600 in the absorption centers, remained under the auspices of the Jewish Agency.<sup>50</sup> The housing issue of the Beta Yisrael remains a social and political "hot-potato."

The same dilemmas surrounding housing and absorption have accompanied the education of the Beta Yisrael youth. Debates persist as to how

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<sup>48</sup> "Ethiopian Jews Protest," Dayton Daily News, Tuesday, August 18, 1992, p. A-2.

<sup>49</sup> "Tsaban Persuades Ethiopian Olim to End Protest March," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending August 29, 1992, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> "Ethiopian Protest Turns Violent," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending September 12, 1992, p. 5.

long the Ethiopian Jews should study Hebrew, Judaica and secular studies in their own classes before integration in the various Israeli school systems. The Ethiopian Israeli community, as well as Education Minister Shulamit Aloni, have called for the admittance of Beta Yisrael children into the regular schools despite their residence in temporary housing in absorption centers, hotels or caravan sites.<sup>51</sup>

### Social Disruption and Culture Shock

Equally as significant a problem for the absorption process is the social stress caused by the journey from remote farming villages in northern Ethiopia to Addis Ababa and then to Israel. In the move, families were divided, village communities broken up, and traditional hierarchies destroyed. "Men who had been masters of their houses -- self-sufficient farmers, blacksmiths and weavers -- were reduced to dependence on outside help. Their wives, subservient back home, were encouraged to study, seek work and open bank accounts, ending the men's monopoly on family finances."<sup>52</sup> Additionally, school-aged children sent to Israeli boarding schools or public education learned Hebrew and adapted quickly, gaining a cultural edge over their parents.<sup>53</sup> Rabbi Steven Kaplan notes: "In Ethiopia, where there was little central authority, the family and the house was the basis of the community, but in Israel that's in tatters."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> For more on this debate and the efforts and antics of Aloni, see "Haifa Mayor Allows Ethiopian Caravan Kids into City Schools," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending September 12, 1992, p. 20.

<sup>52</sup> "Exodus to Isolation: Ethiopians Endure Hardships."

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Ibid



Thrust from isolated villages without electricity or running water into the "urban bustle" of modern post-industrial society, Ethiopian Jews have seen their family relationships radically transformed. "The authoritarian, patriarchal, extended family units were blown apart into nuclear and single-parent fragments that gave far greater authority to women and children."<sup>55</sup> A conversion toward an egalitarian society is occurring which tremendously complicates the process of assimilation:

The women, traditionally not allowed to possess wealth separate from their husbands', found that in Israel they can work and have bank accounts of their own. More Ethiopian women than men have jobs in Israel. This causes tremendous friction within the family unit. Ethiopian children learn Hebrew faster than their fathers, further diminishing adult male authority.<sup>56</sup>

The Beta Yisrael also observed a form of religion based on the Hebrew Bible which included customs such as the isolation of women during menstruation, long abandoned by Jewish communities elsewhere in the world.<sup>57</sup> Jewish life in Israel leaves little room for such practices, thereby further creating greater dissonance between the old and new places of residence. These issues and many other socialization and absorption dilemmas are discussed in Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition, by Dr. Ruth Westheimer and Dr. Steven Kaplan.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "Surviving Salvation: The Saga of the Ethiopian Jews," promotional sheet for the video of the same name produced and directed by Dr. Ruth K. Westheimer.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid

<sup>57</sup> "Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition," publicity sheet for the book by the same name by Dr. Ruth Westheimer and Dr. Steven Kaplan.

<sup>58</sup> Ruth Westheimer and Steven Kaplan, Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Transition (New York: New York University Press, 1992). In May of 1992, I attended a special gathering in Washington, D.C., at which Dr. Ruth Westheimer first screened her video Surviving Salvation: The Saga of the Ethiopian Jews, and promoted her book co-

## Religious Ambivalence Toward the Beta Yisrael

Another issue hindering absorption since the days of Operation Moses has been the Israeli religious establishment's failure to accept the Beta Yisrael as fully Jewish. Prior to 1985, the community was required to undergo conversion. In the months following Operation Moses, the new immigrants demonstrated in Jerusalem for full rabbinic recognition. On a practical level, this meant the community desired to marry without first having to undergo a symbolic conversion. Only one rabbi, Netanya Sephardic Chief Rabbi David Shloush, has the authority from the rabbinate to marry Ethiopian immigrants without demanding the conversion to shed any doubt of their ancestry. Seven years later, in 1992, a new generation of Beta Yisrael olim along with veteran

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authored with Hebrew University professor Dr. Steven Kaplan, Surviving Salvation: The Ethiopian Jewish Family in Tradition. "Dr. Ruth" was so moved by Operation Solomon and the saga of the Ethiopian Jews that she spent the next six months during the Summer and Fall of 1991 on location in Ethiopia and Israel, doing research on and filming of the Beta Yisrael community. She notes: "When I saw the images of those Ethiopian people leaving their homeland and following their dream, I decided in two seconds this would be my project for the year." During the course of 1992, she wrote the book with Kaplan and produced the video, which is narrated by Raymond Burr and dedicated to the memory of Congressman Mickey Leland. There is a personal motivation for "Dr. Ruth" as well. Dr. Ruth, whose entire family perished in the Holocaust, was sent to Switzerland from Germany by her parents in 1939 at the age of ten. She moved to Israel at the age of seventeen. Dr. Ruth remarks: "They [the Beta Yisrael] left everything. If some of those German and Austrian Jews, like my parents, had been willing to leave their belongings and get out, they would have been saved." One review of the film states: "The documentary reflects both her deep commitment to the Ethiopian Jewish community and the knowledge of her co-worker, Kaplan. It is a quiet film, mercifully free of the bombastic self-congratulatory air of so much Operation Solomon footage released in Israel and abroad. It also contains many scenes of Ethiopian village life never before seen by Israeli audiences." The evening in May of 1992, co-sponsored by the AAEJ and Representative Gary Ackerman, was attended by many U.S. Congressional officials, State Department officers, Israeli dignitaries and Beta Yisrael activists. The evening also honored some of the major players in Operation Solomon. Dr. Ruth charmed the audience, and admitted that the works "do have a little bit about sex in them." She mingled with those in attendance, embracing and joking with all she encountered. See also "Surviving Salvation: Dr. Ruth Studies the Ethiopian Aliyah," Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending November 7, 1992, p. 15.

Ethiopian Israelis demonstrated once again over the same issue. They protested to demand the same treatment as all other Jews; as well as a new goal – that the kessim be given the same rights as all officially recognized rabbis in the country.<sup>59</sup>

Though the chief rabbis claim to have recognized the Beta Yisrael as full and complete Jews, "the immigrant activists say this is in word, not deed." Even immigrants from the former Soviet Union – up to 35% of whom are non-Jews according to some absorption officials – do not have to undergo this symbolic conversion before marrying.<sup>60</sup> After the long and traumatic protest in 1985, nothing was resolved; the demonstration subsided due to the negotiations surrounding an interim agreement. Both sides interpreted the agreement as a victory: "The immigrants read the agreement to mean that the symbolic conversions would be done away with, while the Chief Rabbinate read it to mean that a committee would look into the matter, a special institute for the kessim would be set up, and that the symbolic conversions would continue."<sup>61</sup> In actuality, symbolic conversion was only delayed until an Ethiopian Jew desired to get married – an institution which is completely controlled by the Rabbinate – as a requirement for a rabbi to perform a marriage of a Beta Yisrael.

Since nothing was resolved and the institute was never established, the issue went to the High Court of Justice, which in 1988 gave Rabbi Shloush of Netanya the authority to marry the immigrants without requiring conversion.<sup>62</sup> But, neither the High Court of Justice nor the religious

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<sup>59</sup> "The Ethiopian Olim: How Jewish are They?," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending October 3, 1992, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

establishment granted any other rabbi permission. Equally as crucial, one rabbi could not service the entire Beta Yisrael community living throughout the Jewish State. Avi Bitow, coordinator of the umbrella United Ethiopian Organization, notes that of the Ethiopian olim, fifteen thousand have undergone symbolic conversion to facilitate permissibility of marriage, and three thousand live in Netanya and can be married by Shloush. But this still leaves the remainder of the community without a rabbi to marry them if they do not undergo the symbolic conversion. Yaacov Babu, Spokesperson for the United Ethiopian Organization remarks: "Why should a couple from Kiryat Shmona have to travel to Netanya to get married. We pay taxes, we are Jews, we want to be able to walk into any office of the rabbinate in the country to get married."<sup>63</sup> In January of 1992, Shloush said that "other duties precluded him from continuing" doing the Beta Yisrael marriages.<sup>64</sup> Thus, at present, all Beta Yisrael couples desiring to get married require symbolic conversion in order to get married. All couples seeking a divorce must come to a special court in Jerusalem.

The protest of 1992 included the surfacing of an additional demand that the kessim be recognized as rabbis with the authority to register marriages. The Chief Rabbinate's position is that the kessim must first study the Oral Law extensively before assuming the position of rabbis with all of the rights and privileges.<sup>65</sup> The kessim counter that the Oral Law was not known in Ethiopia except in recent years, and as such does not have great significance for the Beta Yisrael. The Jewish community in Ethiopia was for the most part

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<sup>63</sup> "Ethiopians May Protest Over Marriage Problem," The Jerusalem Post International Edition, Week ending March 28, 1992, p. 4.

<sup>64</sup> "Ethiopians May Protest Over Marriage Problem."

<sup>65</sup> The exclusivity of the Rabbinate vis-a-vis the Beta Yisrael parallels the religious establishment's stance toward non-Orthodox Judaism such as the Reform ('Progressive' in Israel) Movement and the Conservative ('Traditional' in Israel) Movement.

scrupulous in its adherence to the laws of the Torah, but unaware of the later Oral Tradition. One article in the Jerusalem Post laments: "If the rabbis don't truly tackle the question of whether the immigrants are Jews in deed and not just by proclamation, and if the kessim don't decide whether they want to integrate into the society, in deed and not just by proclamation, then the issue will remain an ugly, festering wound."<sup>66</sup>

After a seventeen day sit-down-strike in front of the Prime Minister's office in September of 1992, the government established an interministerial committee to study the problems of the kessim. In early December, the committee reported that the kessim will be able to perform marriages like all other rabbis in the country after undergoing a study period of yet undetermined length. The committee did not make a decision whether the kessim will also be able to grant divorces, something that will likely lead to future friction between the kessim and the rabbinate.<sup>67</sup>

Despite all of the difficulties facing the Ethiopian Jewish community — in particular, the conflicting theories on absorption, isolated housing arrangements and the absence of permanent facilities, and the lack of rabbinical acceptance of the Jewishness of the Beta Yisrael and the authority of the kessim — the absorption has proceeded well. The outpouring of Israeli warmth, coupled with the determination, dedication, work ethic and personability of the community has resulted in great strides being made by the Ethiopian olim. Members of the community are students at various universities across the country, members of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF),

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<sup>66</sup> "The Ethiopian Olim: How Jewish are They?"

<sup>67</sup> "Ethiopian Leaders Win the Right to Perform Weddings in Israel," Northern California Jewish Bulletin, December 4, 1992, p. 44.

factory workers, lab technicians, health care providers, social workers, teachers, El Al flight attendants and most recently training to become professionals.<sup>68</sup> As of November 1991, more than three hundred Ethiopian students were enrolled in universities and colleges, and more than fifteen hundred Beta Yisrael were serving in the IDF.<sup>69</sup>

Most Beta Yisrael are appreciative of the efforts of Israel on their behalf, and see their residence in the Jewish State as a miracle. Bowket Balmishe, an Ethiopian Jewish farmer living in a hotel remarks: "My forefathers dreamed for hundreds of years to immigrate to this country, and now here I am, in the Holy City."<sup>70</sup> Rachamim Elazar states that the acceptance of the veteran Israelis and the absorption and integration of the Beta Yisrael is an achievement:

Over fourteen thousand people were brought here [during Operation Solomon], they all have food and shelter and there is no homelessness... They're given opportunities. Ethiopians who came several years ago can be found in army combat units, studying in universities and working in industry. They weren't nuclear scientists or engineers [perhaps a reference to the olim from the former Soviet Union], just people, and they were brought here simply because they were Jews... Operation Solomon was a miracle.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> In October of 1992, a twenty-one year old Beta Yisrael become the first Ethiopian to enter medical school at Ben Gurion University in the Negev.

<sup>69</sup> "Still More Jews Found in Ethiopia," Near East Report, Vol. 35, No. 47, November 25, 1991, p. 3 (p. 207); and A Curriculum Guide on Ethiopian Jewry, compiled by Arlene Kushner, the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C., 1992, p. A4.

<sup>70</sup> "Exodus to Isolation: Ethiopians Endure Hardships."

<sup>71</sup> Ibid



THE CURRENT ROLE OF THE  
NORTH AMERICAN PRO-BETA YISRAEL ACTIVIST GROUPS AND  
THE CONGRESSIONAL CAUCUS FOR ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

The AAEJ

On July 29, 1991, Representative Stephen Solarz of New York noted to the House of Representatives the critical role played by the AAEJ in the rescue effort of the Beta Yisrael: "In particular, I want to cite the dedicated and tireless efforts of Nate Shapiro and Will Recant of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, who have worked closely with the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry on this issue since 1986."<sup>72</sup> Less than a week later, Representative Lawrence Smith of Florida remarked in the House of Representatives: "There are many who deserve special praise... The American Association for Ethiopian Jews, which did so much of the field work in Ethiopia, and whose leaders conceived of the program to bring the refugees from Gondar to the capital of Addis Ababa, thus facilitating a speedy exodus."<sup>73</sup> As witnessed by the U.S. Congress, the AAEJ played a significant role in the aliyah of May of 1991 and previous rescue efforts since the late 1970s. Operation Solomon reunited virtually all of the remainder of the Beta Yisrael community of Ethiopia with family in Israel. The rescue of Ethiopian Jewry was now nearly complete. The stated mission and purpose of the first North American activist organization from its very inception with Graenum Berger

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<sup>72</sup> "Rescue of Ethiopian Jews From Ethiopia to Israel," Congressional Record – Extension of Remarks, dated July 30, 1991; remarks of Stephen J. Solarz of New York, in the House of Representatives, Monday, July 29, 1991; from the archives of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C., p. E 2760.

<sup>73</sup> "House Concurrent Resolution 171, to Commend Assistance to Ethiopian Jews," Congressional Record – Extension of Remarks, August 2, 1991; remarks of Representative Lawrence J. Smith of Florida in the House of Representatives, Friday, August 2, 1991; from the archives of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C., p. E 2928.

was nothing but rescue. What now is to become of the organization given the attainment of its goals after nearly twenty years of work?

Immediately following Operation Solomon, the AAEJ had a board meeting in Washington, D.C., "which was partially a celebration for the accomplishment, and partially to say 'what next.'"<sup>74</sup> At that time, it was decided that a presence should be kept in Ethiopia because of the remaining Jews in Addis Ababa who missed Operation Solomon and the potential of other Jews in the remote areas of the country. In particular, an AAEJ presence in Ethiopia was needed because of Jews returning from armies on both sides of the civil war conflict and making their way back to their villages and Addis Ababa, as well as the rediscovery of the Jewish community in Quara and other outlying areas of Gondar and their subsequent exodus to the capital city. AAEJ Executive Director Will Recant notes that in early Summer of 1991 "we [the board of the AAEJ] decided that we will stay in Ethiopia for the immediate future and help the those Jews remaining in the country."<sup>75</sup>

At the annual board meeting of the AAEJ in November of 1991, the future of the AAEJ was discussed once again. Recant states: "At that time there were still several thousand Jews left in the villages, and we decided that so long as they remain there, we will stay in Ethiopia. LaDena [Schnapper] is still there as well as our Ethiopian facilitators."<sup>76</sup> Schnapper works with the AJJDC and the Jewish Agency to help find and transport the remnant of the Jewish community to Israel.<sup>77</sup> At the same meeting, AAEJ founder and first president

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<sup>74</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Will Recant, Executive Director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, May 19, 1992, in the national headquarters of the AAEJ in Washington, D.C.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> "Memories of a Miracle," Release, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Highland Park, Illinois, Vol. 10, No. 2, August, 1992, p. 3.

Graenum Berger strongly expressed his desire for the disbandment of the AAEJ now that the remnant of the Beta Yisrael community resides in Israel. Berger remarks: "I recommended last year [November of 1991] at the board meeting to be one of the Jewish organizations [that actually closes down once it has fulfilled its mission and purpose]."<sup>78</sup> Conversely, Lenhoff remarks why the group should stay in business: "We shouldn't disband. We need to focus on klita [absorption]. The AAEJ should stay in business. We are the great success story of modern Jewish history. We have accomplished more than any other group or organization."<sup>79</sup>

Recant also met with the JDC, the Jewish Agency and Jewish ethnic groups including the Syrians and the Yemenites, and saw "that things were being handled properly, and that there was no need for an 'American Association for Endangered Jews,' so we [the AAEJ] decided that this [Ethiopian Jewry] is our one thing and that is how it would remain."<sup>80</sup> Recant sees the AAEJ disbanding after the initial absorption of those rescued in Operation Solomon, around a three year period, sometime in 1994. The group does not plan to work with the Felas Mora. Recant remarks: "We are constantly reevaluating what the AAEJ should do and when it should disband." He also notes that "over the next two years there should be one Ethiopian Jewish organization in the United States, but I am not sure that we can get together with NACOEJ."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Personal interview with Graenum Berger, founder and first president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, June 17, 1992, at his home in New Rochelle, New York.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Professor Howard Lenhoff.

<sup>80</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant. American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ) founder Jane Fellman altered her organization into an "Endangered Jewry" group. More on Fellman and ARNEJ occurs later in this section.

<sup>81</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

At the same time, during the early 1990s the AAEJ has commenced extensive programming in Israel to aid the absorption process. After a hiatus of around five years, the AAEJ reestablished a full time presence in the Jewish State. Susan Pollack became Director of Israel Programs for the organization. One appeal letter notes: "...[T]he Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Agency, and the Council of Jewish Federations asked us to continue to raise our voice and help with the resettlement process."<sup>82</sup> In particular, the AAEJ activities have targeted housing, education, employment, relief aid and cultural preservation.

For those Beta Yisrael fortunate enough to find permanent housing, the Israeli government provides a generous aid package which covers in loans and grants ninety-eight percent of the cost of a mortgage. Fifty percent of the price is provided in grants and forty-eight percent in low interest loans. "However, many times the Ethiopian cannot afford the remaining two percent, which is all that is needed for them to own their own place."<sup>83</sup> Rental apartments are scarce in Israel. The AAEJ, together with the Israel Free Loan Association (IFLA), has created a loan program to help the Beta Yisrael olim. As with the Chai Family Reunification campaign, the target amount is \$3000, this time to ensure a housing loan for a Beta Yisrael family. By April of 1992, the AAEJ had provided more than \$200,000 in housing loans to one hundred Ethiopian Israeli families, enabling them to leave the absorption centers, hotels and caravans and enter into permanent housing situations.<sup>84</sup> By

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<sup>82</sup> Appeal letter of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews to rabbis across the United States, dated January 15, 1992, from the archives of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C.

<sup>83</sup> William Recant, "Absorption in Israel: A Unique African Experience," The Los Angeles Jewish Journal, Passover, 1992, p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

August of 1992, over \$300,000 in loans had been extended by the AAEJ.<sup>85</sup> By December, over one hundred and fifty families were helped -- a total of six hundred and fifty people.<sup>86</sup> By the end of 1992, the Israeli government was scheduled to cancel its mortgage assistance program.<sup>87</sup>

In the field of education, the AAEJ instituted a program for Beta Yisrael youth to facilitate completion of high school, in conjunction with the Leo Baeck Educational Center in Haifa. The program includes intensive Hebrew, cultural enrichment, religious training, leadership classes, and academic classes geared toward passage of the matriculation test, the "bagrut." During its first year, over twenty students participated in the program.<sup>88</sup>

Additionally, the AAEJ subsidized the studies of fifteen kessim at Machon Meir, a yeshiva in Jerusalem, to help them learn about "modern" Judaism.<sup>89</sup> Also, the AAEJ is assisting the Masorti Movement (Conservative) of Israel in a

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<sup>85</sup> Appeal letter of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews to their members addressing the need for monies for housing loans, dated August 1, 1992, written by Susan Pollack, Director of Israel programs for the AAEJ.

<sup>86</sup> Appeal letter from the American Association for Ethiopian Jews to its members, written by AAEJ president Nathan Shapiro, dated September 8, 1992.

<sup>87</sup> See "Loans on Hold," Release, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Highland Park, Illinois, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 1. The failure of the Bush Administration in 1991 to approve the \$10 billion in loan guarantees to Israel significantly impacted the Israeli housing crisis and the absorption effort in the Jewish State. The aid package was not grants or loans, rather guarantees to ensure the Israeli Government lower interest rates from U.S. and world banks. Although Bush subsequently signed the package, the numerous delays in aiding the absorption of Ethiopian and former Soviet Union Jews following the Persian Gulf War had reverberations throughout the Israeli housing market and economic system. In the Fall of 1991, I traveled to Washington, D.C., along with the Columbus, Ohio delegation, to petition the Bush Administration and the U.S. Congress to approve the loan guarantees. Over one thousand Jews from across the country assembled on Capital Hill that day. In a meeting with one of Bush's aides, the question was raised as to why the President was so helpful in bringing the Beta Yisrael to Israel, yet fell short in truly making them at home. "Now that they are at home, why not help give them a home?" Bush's humanitarian efforts were limited. Politics overrode the concern for proper absorption. The pleas of the mission to Washington, D.C., during early Fall of 1991 fell on deaf ears, and Bush for a second time vetoed the loan guarantee request.

<sup>88</sup> Programs for Ethiopian Jews in Israel, a publication of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Arlene Kushner, director of programs, p. 1.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*



vocational training program.<sup>90</sup> Another program initiated by the AAEJ is the "La'Yeladim Fund," which sends promising Ethiopian youngsters between the ages of eight and thirteen to participate in a science enrichment program run by the Community Center in Lod, with the intent of helping the Beta Yisrael compete in the science fields.<sup>91</sup>

To combat the unemployment and lack of activities for the Ethiopian olim in temporary housing, the AAEJ established an embroidery project for one hundred Beta Yisrael women near Beersheva "so that they can use their traditional skills and adapt them to modern markets."<sup>92</sup> The AAEJ started a job bank providing employment referrals to alleviate the high unemployment rate. The relief efforts of the AAEJ in Israel include the funding of translators of Hebrew and Amharic to work in hospital emergency rooms, the distribution of seven hundred and fifty jackets for winter, costing \$11,000, a dental program, and the donation of \$75,000 worth of eye implants to two hundred Ethiopians who suffer from glaucoma and other diseases.<sup>93</sup>

The cultural preservation programs include the building of tukkels, Ethiopian wood and grass huts, throughout Israel. These structures help meet the needs of the Beta Yisrael community in the mobile home parks -- serving as synagogues, school rooms and sleeping quarters -- and preserve their unique culture.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid

<sup>91</sup> "Creating Future Scientists," Release, Vol. 10, No. 2, August, 1992, p. 1.

<sup>92</sup> "Absorption in Israel: A Unique African Experience."

<sup>93</sup> Programs for Ethiopian Jews in Israel. For more on the eye implant program, see "Seeing Clearly," Release, Vol. 10, No. 2, August, 1992, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> See "Tukkels Bring A Touch of Ethiopia to Israel," Release, Vol. 10, No. 2, August, 1992, p. 2; and "AAEJ Opens More Traditional Tukkels," Release, Vol. 10, No. 4, August, 1992, p. 3.



### The Interplay between the AAEJ and ARNEJ

Starting in January of 1992, the AAEJ began to target rabbis, Jewish educators, and synagogues to promote awareness, encourage participation in projects, and attract funds. Although they were formerly the domain of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ), the AAEJ sent numerous mailings to congregations throughout North America throughout 1992.<sup>95</sup> The AAEJ created a rabbinic cabinet for advice and advocacy. Rabbi Avis Miller became chair of the Rabbinic Advisory Board of the AAEJ, and Arlene Kushner took the position of Director of Congregational Outreach and AAEJ Synagogue Programs for Israel for the organization. By late Summer of 1992, the AAEJ managed to take over the programs and duties of ARNEJ: "In a spirit of cooperation and increased efficiency, we [the AAEJ] have just assumed all of the Ethiopian Jewry projects that operated under the auspices of the organization formally known as the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ), now the Rabbinic Coalition for Jewish Survival."<sup>96</sup>

Since November of 1991, the AAEJ targeted buying out ARNEJ since the Washington, D.C., and Chicago based group was planning to do their own congregational work. ARNEJ was originally created by the AAEJ in the early 1980s as a separate entity to attract congregational support from rabbis, educators and synagogue presidents who might have been apprehensive of supporting the "antagonistic" and "pariah" AAEJ. At the same AAEJ board meeting in November of 1991 which decided that the organization would stay

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<sup>95</sup> Some of the dates of the mailings included January 15, February 20, March 25, and September 8.

<sup>96</sup> Appeal letter of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews to rabbis, written by Rabbi Avis Miller, chair of the Rabbinic Advisory Board of the AAEJ and Arlene Kushner, Director of Congregational Outreach, dated September 8, 1992.

in business to help with absorption in Israel, the leadership of the group decided to bring ARNEJ under its umbrella. Will Recant notes:

We were hoping to go to ARNEJ and say 'come into our umbrella, we will maintain a rabbinic cabinet, you can oversee what it is going to do, what educational programs are given out, what programs the congregation outreach program will be, and we will help administer it, and we will be here to help pay the salaries. And we said to Jane [Fellman, former Executive Director of ARNEJ], we will give you a year's compensation and allow you to transition out and help us work things out and provide your lists to us and we will follow up in ways that you don't... And they balked and they said that they didn't want to do it.<sup>97</sup>

ARNEJ resisted the move to bring its organization "under the AAEJ umbrella." Throughout the early 1990s, ARNEJ increasingly moved its activities toward absorption. By the end of 1991, ARNEJ specifically developed three absorption programs for the Beta Yisrael in Israel under its Executive Director Jane Fellman. At the same time, the rabbinic leadership of the organization during 1991 changed hands on several occasions. Rabbi Barry Tabachnikoff of Miami, Florida, assumed the leadership of ARNEJ from Rabbi Mark Weiner of New York and Rabbi Steven Kaplan of Fremont, California. Tabachnikoff states that the AAEJ umbrella offer was not a merger, but rather, a hostile takeover. "The goal was to freeze ARNEJ and undercut its fund raising."<sup>98</sup> Tabachnikoff also remarks that he helped influence the ARNEJ board to reject the takeover offer during the Fall of 1991, enabling the organization to stay in business. However, the group remained in commission only a short time thereafter. The American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry exited the Beta Yisrael activist movement some ten months later.

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<sup>97</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Rabbi Barry Tabachnikoff of Bet Breira, Miami, Florida, February, 1992.

Nevertheless, the organization did not disband. Rather, it assumed a new identity. The group became the Rabbinic Coalition for Jewish Survival. Jane Fellman felt that her group was "now available to help oppressed Jews in all lands."<sup>99</sup> She notes that the Yemenite and Syrian communities had come to her for help. The Rabbinic Coalition for Jewish Survival, also known as the Rabbinic Coalition for Worldwide Jewry, will also be involved with anti-bias curricula, peace movement activities and human relations material.<sup>100</sup> Rabbi Tabachnikoff also notes that the group might be involved in Eastern Europe: "With the breakdown of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, we want to keep the Network [ARNEJ, now the Coalition] alive and contacts open."<sup>101</sup>

#### NACOEJ

While ARNEJ reorganized and the AAEJ refocused its energies from rescue to absorption relief, NACOEJ remained unchanged in its purpose and activities -- which included rescue, as well as relief and absorption. In the words of NACOEJ Executive Director Barbara Ribakove Gordon, NACOEJ did not have an identity crisis like the AAEJ after the rescue of the Beta Yisrael community:

The consensus was very strong not to attempt to go to another endangered community, and not to go out of business, but to remain for absorption and cultural preservation... The big question here is going to be can we fund our work without the powerful draw of a starving and oppressed Jewish community. That is an unanswered question, and it came to us at a time when American Jews and everyone else are in the middle of a bad recession, and charitable contributions are off all over, so we don't know yet what the answer

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Rabbi Barry Tabachnikoff.

is... Our essential attitude has been [we will stay in business] as long as we are needed.<sup>102</sup>

Michael Strum, former Associate Director for Relief and Family Reunification for NACOEJ, also notes that his organization was not posed the same dilemmas as the AAEJ once the Beta Yisrael aliyah was complete:

We always felt that our job is both in Ethiopia and Israel, and that has been our focus all along. We felt that you can't take these people out of the country [Ethiopia], shove them into Israel and leave them. And just as the Jewish Agency let them fall through the cracks in Ethiopia, as well as the JDC, likewise in a huge country with several thousand Russian immigrants and all its other economic and political problems, it's very likely this group [the Beta Yisrael olim] will have a tough time... Our board members are getting tired, as are the AAEJ board members, but we always felt, unlike the AAEJ and Graenum Berger, that once they are out, the organization's job is not done... We have had an unpaid staff person in Israel since 1984, paid since 1985, and an office since 1989, and they [the AAEJ] just established an office now. And for the first time they are really doing project work; whereas before their staff people were doing aliyah case work and advocacy [alone].<sup>103</sup>

Strum, who in October of 1991 returned to Addis Ababa to help administer the NACOEJ compound and do social work, went up to Gondar and saw the first Jews coming out of Quara. He states that both NACOEJ and the AAEJ are monitoring the Jewish situation, but that "the AAEJ is doing very little in Ethiopia," and LaDena Schnapper is working out of the NACOEJ compound: "AAEJ is there because they do not want to tell their people that they have left the country before all of the Jews are out."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.

<sup>103</sup> Personal interview with Michael Strum, former Associate Director for Relief and Family Reunification for the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry and current owner of City Sights Tours in Washington, D.C., May 19, 1992, in front of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

Currently in Ethiopia, NACOEJ has set up a full time school along with the JDC for the remaining Beta Yisrael and Felas Mora living in Addis Ababa; and adults are employed by these two organizations in the arts -- basket making, weaving, spinning, embroidery and needle point -- as well as farming, teaching, guarding and office work.

In Israel, NACOEJ set up "Project VISION" in 1991, a response to the urgent needs of Ethiopian Jews with eye problems ranging from the need for prescription glasses to surgery to cure total blindness. In Ethiopia, surgery to cure blindness from cataracts and glaucoma is not available.<sup>105</sup> The organization also set up "The NACOEJ Dental Project," which provides dental care to Ethiopian olim. Although Beta Yisrael teeth are in excellent condition upon their arrival in Israel, they deteriorate rapidly due to the high-sugar Israeli diet and the newcomers' unfamiliarity with modern dental hygiene. Dental care is not provided by Israel's socialized medical programs, and is very expensive -- far beyond the Ethiopian immigrants' ability to pay. Dental equipment, financial support and volunteers are sent to Israel, in particular, Youth Aliyah centers.<sup>106</sup>

The Educational and Vocational Training programs of NACOEJ in the Jewish State got a boost when the hair stylist and philanthropist Vidal Sassoon gave a large grant from the Vidal Sassoon Foundation. An "adopt-a-student" program provides moral and financial support for Beta Yisrael students in Israel.<sup>107</sup> Another program, entitled "Beinei'nu," pairs classes and schools in

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<sup>105</sup> "I Can See! I Can See!," Lifeline, Fall, 1991, pp. 4-5. See also "To See! To Learn!," Lifeline, Winter, 1992-93, p. 5.

<sup>106</sup> You Can Make a Difference in Israel, a pamphlet on the "NACOEJ Dental Project in Israel," the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York.

<sup>107</sup> "Vidal Sassoon Adopts 'Adopt-a-Student,'" Lifeline, Fall, 1991, p. 6. See also "Adopt a Student -- Please!," Lifeline, Winter, 1992-93, p. 8.

North America with classes and schools in Israel that have large Ethiopian populations. The twinning program is intended to promote awareness about the new immigrants while providing much needed extra financial assistance to Ethiopian youngsters in Israel's overburdened economy.<sup>108</sup> A B'nai Mitzvah twinning program<sup>109</sup> and cultural preservation endeavors in Israel also characterize NACOEJ activities in the Jewish State.

Barbara Ribakove Gordon notes: "Israel, that is where the great challenge is. That is where the miracle will be fulfilled, or it's not a miracle. Israel is broke, our people need a tremendous amount of help, and we didn't bring them to Israel to see them fail to achieve their right to a place there."<sup>110</sup>

### **The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry**

The future of the other major players in the movement to rescue Ethiopian Jewry is another question of interest. Obviously, the various agencies of the Government of Israel and Government of the United States have a multitude of other concerns and activities to keep them in business. Likewise, the major American Jewish establishment organizations and the JDC have a continued mission. However, the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry is in a state of flux, much like the AAEJ. The organization was designed to promote awareness about the Beta Yisrael and to apply critical political pressure on the White House, State Department, Israeli Government and Ethiopian Government to ensure and actualize Family Reunification of the

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<sup>108</sup> "Beinei'nu!," *Lifeline*, Winter, 1992-93, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> See "Bar/Bat Mitzvah Twinning Growing Tremendously," *Lifeline*, Winter, 1992-93, p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.



Ethiopian Jews. Now that the remnant of the community has been reunited in Israel, of what purpose is the organization?

First of all, the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry is a unique caucus on Capital Hill because it is organized around a specific issue -- something that can actually be resolved -- as opposed to an ongoing issue or group's concern.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, the Caucus is unparalleled in the history of Washington, D.C., because of its bi-cameral and bi-partisan leadership, constituency and support. The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry lost two of its four leaders during the early 1990s. Senator Boschwitz was elected out of office in November of 1990, and Senator Cranston chose not to run for reelection in 1992 due to investigations and allegations of financial improprieties.

Nevertheless, according to Debbie Bodlander, legislative assistant for Representative Benjamin Gilman of New York: "The Caucus will exist so long as an Ethiopian Jew remains in Ethiopia and wants to reach Israel."<sup>112</sup> At the same time, she is a little less sure of the Caucus' viability to deal with the issue of Felas Mora: "It is not appropriate for the Caucus to be involved with this, but rather, individuals."<sup>113</sup> Likewise, other facilitators of the Caucus concur that the issue of Felas Mora is an internal Israeli and Jewish matter linked to the definition of Jewishness. Naomi Baum, former legislative assistant for Alan Cranston, notes: "The Congress and the Caucus is not going to get

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<sup>111</sup> Personal interview with Valerie Mims, legislative assistant for Stephen Solarz of New York and facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, May 20, 1992, in Representative Solarz's Washington, D.C. office.

<sup>112</sup> Personal interview with Debbie Bodlander, legislative assistant for Representative Benjamin Gilman of New York, and long time facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, May 21, 1992, in the discussion room next to the Floor of the House.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

involved with internal Israeli policies and politics."<sup>114</sup> Valerie Mims, legislative aide for Representative Stephen Solarz remarks: "There is still the issue of Felas Mora. It does not seem that it will be resolved in the near future."<sup>115</sup> She further states, much like her counterpart Baum, that the role of the Caucus does not include getting involved in internal Israeli matters, citing the issue of absorption in addition to the question of Felas Mora: "I don't think the intention of the Caucus is to focus on absorption... A major part of the Caucus' job is done, just as a major element of NACOEJ and the AAEJ is done."<sup>116</sup>

While the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry will probably slip into inactivity, a kind of de facto deactivation and disbandment, the AAEJ, NACOEJ and ARNEJ will take another course of action. It is apparent with the North American Pro-Beta Yisrael activist organizations that institutions, groups and agencies do take on a life of their own and perpetuate their organizational structure and interests. The only dissenting voice seems to come from the first Pro-Beta Yisrael activist, AAEJ founder Graenum Berger, who has devoted his life to Jewish communal and social work, and perhaps is cognizant and privy to the ills of needless bureaucratic structures and the appropriate life-span of Jewish institutions.

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<sup>114</sup> Personal interview with Naomi Baum, legislative assistant for Senator Alan Cranston and facilitator of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, May 20, 1992, in Senator Cranston's Washington, D.C. office.

<sup>115</sup> Personal interview with Valerie Mims.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid

THE EXODUS OF THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS:  
A COMMUNITY WHICH HAS IMMIGRATED TO AND  
REMAINED IN ISRAEL

Unlike any other Jewish community, the Beta Yisrael have come to Israel en masse and remained in the Jewish State. Since the aliyah of the Ethiopian Jews began during the late 1970s, at most a few hundred have found their way to "the West," about a hundred of whom live in Canada and a few dozen in the United States and Europe. Therefore, the drop-out rate so prevalent in other Jewish communities rescued by Israel and world Jewry, in particular the "noshrim" from the former Soviet Union,<sup>117</sup> is virtually non-existent in Ethiopian Jewry. Having lived in Israel between seven and twelve years, the Beta Yisrael who came on Operation Moses and the rescue operations which preceded it, are accustomed to the hardships of Israeli life. They have witnessed the continual threat of war, terrorist activities, unrest in the occupied territories and SCUD missile attacks during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. They have endured the difficulties of absorption and integration. They have overcome economic woes, unemployment, discrimination by the rabbinate, housing shortages and civil strife. Yet, the community has remained in Israel. It is even hard for many in the community to understand why Jews living in countries where they have a free choice to move to the Jewish State do not pack-up and move to Israel.

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<sup>117</sup> For more on the problem of the "noshrim," see the rabbinical school thesis of Rabbi Julie Schwartz, A History and Analysis of the Problem of Neshira, Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 1986.

The Beta Yisrael, in the words of Rachamim Elazar, are "idealist Jews, real Zionists, who came to Israel because we wanted to."<sup>118</sup> The Zionism of the Ethiopian Jews by far predates the recent exodus and has been transmitted from generation to generation and from elders to youth. For centuries the community has dreamed of returning to Zion, prayed toward Jerusalem,<sup>119</sup> had special liturgy devoted to Jerusalem and Israel, and it even set out on foot en masse in 1862 from the highlands of Gondar and Tigrey to the Promised Land. In Ethiopia, on Shabbat and throughout the week, the elders of the community would sit with the youth and talk about Israel, Jerusalem and the importance of Zion.<sup>120</sup>

Barbara Ribakove Gordon notes that the Zionist passion of the Beta Yisrael is a religious imperative. The community felt "cut out from the Promised Land," and the passion to return to Jerusalem has never stopped. Gordon remarks that when she was "traveling back and forth to Ethiopia, no Ethiopian Jew ever asked me [Gordon] to try to bring him or her to America -- always Jerusalem, Jerusalem... It is a religious passion and a social passion to want to go to Israel."<sup>121</sup> Jane Fellman remarks that the "Ethiopian Jews have a

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<sup>118</sup> "Still More Jews Found in Ethiopia."

<sup>119</sup> Not only is prayer directed toward Jerusalem, but those who enter the place of worship turn toward Jerusalem and prostrate themselves before entering the structure, and the kessim who officiate the service stand beside the Torah facing Jerusalem. For more on these customs, see Dr. Ephraim Isaac, Jewish Solidarity and the Jews of Ethiopia, (Beersheva, Israel: Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 1988), p. 33.

<sup>120</sup> My Beta Yisrael friends recall how each Shabbat in Ethiopia stories of the riches and uniqueness of Israel as well as the importance of Zion and the need to return someday soon were told by the elders of the community. They would impress on the community how the Promised Land was "a land flowing with milk and honey," a venerable Jewish paradise where Jews could live in freedom and practice their religion without hindrance or consequence.

<sup>121</sup> Personal interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon.

spiritual orientation and are from a rural population. Israel is able to fulfill both the personal and economic needs."<sup>122</sup>

Will Recant underscores the sincerity of the Beta Yisrael's Zionism. He states: "The Ethiopian Jews are true Zionists. They define what Zionism is. They grew up with Yerushalayim (Jerusalem)... Yerushalayim is everything. Yerushalayim is what a kid would hear from two years old on. Yerushalayim, Yerushalayim, B'shanah Habaah B'Yerushalayim. They are true Zionists."<sup>123</sup> Recant notes the beauty of Gondar. Westerners know Ethiopia as being arid and famine plagued and torn with political strife. But Gondar is rolling hills, a vast countryside, with streams, rivers and lakes dotting the landscape. He remarks: "That's their motherland. They either want to be there or in Yerushalayim."<sup>124</sup> The Executive Director of the AAEJ also notes that the Ethiopian Jews did not assimilate like Russian Jews:

Communism came to Ethiopia much later, not until 1974, and they [the Beta Yisrael] maintained their heritage and their culture and their individual beliefs, whereas for Soviet Jews, it has been since Lenin and Stalin -- whereas since Lenin took over in 1911-18, Judaism wasn't taught anymore. So, the Soviet Jews of today have been removed from Jewish culture for seventy years. For Ethiopian Jews there is not that great divide to cross. So they feel Jewish and they want to be Jewish, and that is what drives them.<sup>125</sup>

One Beta Yisrael expressed to American Rabbis Jerome Epstein and Avis Miller while in Addis Ababa on a mission during 1990 his Zionist desires, the fervent love of the Jewish State by his people, and the efforts Israel makes to

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<sup>122</sup> Interview with Jane Fellman.

<sup>123</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. Yerushalayim literally and as a metaphor for all of Israel.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid

attract other groups of Jews who are less interested in coming to the Promised Land:

Israel is a wonderful country. It is the Homeland of the Jews. I hear that they are reaching out to bring Russian Jews to Israel and are spending a great deal of money to do so. They do this even though many Russian Jews would prefer not to go to Israel. But Russian Jews can help Israel. They are chemists. They are engineers. They are scientists. And Israel spends a great deal of money to send schlichim (emissaries) to the United States, Canada, and England to encourage Jews to make aliyah. Even though many of these Jews do not want to make aliyah, Israel still tries to bring them to their homeland.

And I hope Israel will continue. As many as can go to Israel, as many as want to go to Israel, should be encouraged and should be helped.

But, Ethiopian Jews are dying to go to Israel! We are not engineers. We are not scientists. Many of us are poor farmers. Many of us are unemployed. But all of us want to go to Israel! No one has to convince us. We are dying to go to Israel – and if we don't go, we may die.<sup>126</sup>

Glenn Stein, cites an additional reason for the wholesale aliyah of the Beta Yisrael community. Once Operations Moses and Joshua occurred, and the community was evenly divided between Israel and Ethiopia, those Ethiopian Jews remaining in the Horn of Africa desired to be reunited with their family members. The fact that family and friends were all living in one location, the Jewish State, was further impetus to make the exodus to Zion and remain in the Promised Land.<sup>127</sup>

Recant underscores that the Zionist fervor of the Ethiopian Jews has helped those individuals and organizations in the Pro-Beta Yisrael activist movement:

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<sup>126</sup> Rabbi Jerome Epstein, "Unimaginable Living Conditions of Ethiopian Jews," Release, Vol. 8, No. 1., Winter, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>127</sup> Personal interview with Glenn Stein.



I don't know that I could have done what I did [for the Beta Yisrael] for Soviet Jews, because they do not have the same desire.<sup>128</sup> This community [the Beta Yisrael] -- it's a privilege to work for them. They are humble, they are meek, they are thankful, they are gracious. And all that they want to be is Jewish and live in a Jewish Homeland. Nothing more. They are not asking for economic gain. They are not saying, 'now that we got to Israel, we see that it is kinda tough here. Now I want you to help me go to America. You will not see that happening to Ethiopian Jews. I feel they are adding to Israel. To counter the argument of the cost of their absorption, is what they bring to Israel. They bring to Israel a renewed sense of Zionism and a renewed sense of what Israel originally was and should be, and that we have strayed from this a little bit, and maybe they will help bring us back to it. So that is why I do not have to deal with the problem of 'neshira.' These are Jews who want to be in Israel.<sup>129</sup>

Just like the prophets foretold centuries ago, the Jews have come to Eretz Yisrael "on the wings of eagles." It appears, so far, that they will not "fall off" or "drop out." The Jewish State is their home, and they hope to stay and build for future generations.

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<sup>128</sup> For a number of years, Recant was active in the Soviet Jewry movement.

<sup>129</sup> Personal interview with Will Recant.

# CHRONOLOGY OF MAJOR EVENTS IN THE MOVEMENT TO RESCUE ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

- 1770-72            Scottish explorer James Bruce visits Ethiopia and notes contact with the Beta Yisrael
- 1826              European Protestant missionaries begin to proselytize among the Ethiopian Jews
- 1860              German Jewish convert to Protestantism, Henry Stern, leaves Jerusalem for Ethiopia to missionize the Beta Yisrael, sponsored by the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity Amongst the Jews
- 1862              Thousands of Ethiopian Jews set out on foot for Jerusalem; most die enroute to Eretz Yisrael as the remainder return broken and destitute
- 1864              Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer of Germany recognizes the community as Jewish and calls for world Jewish aid to the Beta Yisrael, especially in light of the Christian missionary efforts
- 1867              Alliance Israelite Universelle sends Orientalist Joseph Halevy to investigate the situation of Ethiopian Jewry; his sympathetic report is later ignored by the Alliance
- 1904-05          Halevy's student Jacques Faitlovitch visits Ethiopian Jewry; spurned by major Jewish organizations on his return, Faitlovitch makes the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry his life's work and sets up "Pro-Falasha Committees" in Europe, Palestine and the United States
- 1906              44 prominent rabbis pledge aid to Ethiopian Jewry
- 1921              Chief Rabbinate of Palestine, under the leadership of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, endorses Faitlovitch's programs and calls for world Jewish aid to Ethiopian Jewry
- 1921              Faitlovitch establishes boarding school in Addis Ababa for Beta Yisrael youth; several promising youths sent abroad for further study
- 1922-54          American Pro-Falasha Committee established in the United States and receives funds from the JDC, CCAR, United Synagogue of America, and the Council of Jewish Women until the mid-1930s; Committee ceases functioning in 1954 due to lack of interest and funds
- 1936-41          Italian occupation of Ethiopia; Faitlovitch's work disrupted.

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| 1941-42      | British liberation of Ethiopia from Italian occupation   |
| 1945         | Faitlovitch moves to Eretz Yisrael after the war and devotes the rest of his life to the Beta Yisrael  |
| 1945-48      | Israel is preoccupied with rescuing Holocaust survivors and Jewish displaced persons   |
| 1948         | State of Israel reborn; Ethiopian Jews celebrate in their villages and pray for a return to the Jewish Homeland  |
| 1949-1950's  | Israel preoccupied with aliyot from North African and Near Eastern countries   |
| 1952         | Speaker of the Knesset Yisrael Yeshayahu suggests publicly that the Beta Yisrael solve their problems by converting to Christianity                                |
| Jan 1954     | Jewish school in Asmara, Eritrea, opens with 57 Beta Yisrael students of both sexes, including 7 kessim  |
| Feb 1955     | 27 Ethiopian Jewish children are brought to Israel to study at Kfar Batya in Raanan; most returned to Ethiopia to assume posts as Hebrew teachers                  |
| Oct 1955     | Faitlovitch dies in Israel   |
| Summer 1956  | Israel Consulate officially opens in Addis Ababa   |
| Nov 1956     | Beta Yisrael youth brought to Israel and study at Kibbutz Kfar Blum  |
| 1957         | School in Asmara, Eritrea, closed  |
| Jan 24, 1958 | Christians in Wuzaba, Gondar, burn the Beta Yisrael boarding school which was established after the Jewish Agency closure in Asmara, Eritrea, a few months earlier |
| 1958         | After the burning of the Wuzaba, Gondar, school, the Beta Yisrael set up a main school in Ambober and 27 other regional schools                                    |
| 1958         | Hanan Bar-On, Israel's first Consul General in Ethiopia  |
| End of 1958  | Jewish Agency reduces financial support to the Beta Yisrael and orders all Jewish schools in Ethiopia closed except Ambober  |
| 1958-60      | The Beta Yisrael petition Emperor Hailie Selassie three times for help because of increased persecutions, pogroms and confiscation of land by non-Jewish neighbors |

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| Feb 1960            | Beta Yisrael issue an open letter to Jewish organizations abroad for relief assistance and help in reaching Israel  |
| Early 1960s         | ORT establishes schools in Ethiopia   |
| 1961                | World Jewish Congress sends Professor Norman Bentwich to visit Ethiopia and report to it  |
| Feb 1961            | Israel and Ethiopia exchange ambassadors  |
| 1960s               | British OSE Society (medical aid to impoverished Jewish communities abroad) and the Jewish Colonization Association (JCA) encourage Jewish agricultural settlement help to the Beta Yisrael               |
| 1968                | The Jerusalem Rabbinical Council refuses to register for marriage an Ethiopian Israeli; the Israeli Supreme Court upholds the council's decision, arguing that such matters are the domain of the rabbis. |
| 1969                | Jed Abraham and Graenum Berger found the Friends of Beta Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia   |
| 1972-74             | Severe droughts in Ethiopia   |
| 1973                | British based Falasha Welfare Association (FWA) becomes the umbrella organization for various Jewish charities and the Jewish Agency which provide assistance to the Beta Yisrael                         |
| Feb 9, 1973         | Ovadia Yosef, Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, recognizes the Beta Yisrael as Jewish  |
| Fall 1973           | Ethiopia breaks diplomatic ties with Israel in response to the October Yom Kippur War   |
| 1974                | War between Ethiopia and Somalia over independence movements in Eritrea and Tigrey  |
| 1974                | Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Colonization Association pledge money to Ethiopian Jewry  |
| April 1974          | The American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ) is founded as Graenum Berger combines the rejuvenated Pro-Falasha Committee and the Friends of Beta Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia             |
| Sept 1974<br>Mariam | Emperor Haile Selassie is overthrown by leftist military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile  |

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| 1975          | Two years after the Chief Sephardic Rabbi Ovadia Yosef recognizes the Beta Yisrael as Jewish, Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren recognizes the Beta Yisrael as Jewish   |
| 1975          | Seven Ethiopian Jews brought to Israel as employees of Koor Industries with seventy more expected to follow; publicity given the move by Israeli authorities, however, causes the Ethiopian Government to halt the efforts                                      |
| March 4, 1975 | Nationalization of land by new Marxist Government in Ethiopia   |
| Spring 1975   | Israeli Government interministerial committee declares that the Beta Yisrael are Jewish and entitled to Israeli citizenship under the "Law of Return"   |
| 1975-76       | Failed attempts to rescue Ethiopian Jews through Kenya  |
| 1976          | AAEJ encourages Ethiopian Israelis to take their struggle public in Israel  |
| 1976          | ORT assumes responsibility for non-sectarian relief programs based in Gondar  |
| Late 1976     | Haim Halachmi, head of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) in Israel, works with the Mosad in Ethiopia  |
| Early 1977    | Israeli Cabinet Minister Shulamit Aloni charges a conspiracy of silence regarding the Beta Yisrael since the labor party buckled under pressure from "anti Falasha" members of its coalition, headed by the National Religious Party led by Minister Yosef Burg |
| March 1977    | Israeli Government issues a statement reaffirming the "Law of Return" proclamation of 1975  |
| Summer 1977   | Begin/Likud in power in Israel; Labor party out for the first time since 1948   |
| Summer 1977   | Begin meets with Ethiopian Israeli leaders  |
| Summer 1977   | Begin in Washington, D.C. trip urges President Carter not to turn his back on Ethiopia  |
| July 1977     | ORT establishes programs in Ethiopia  |
| Aug 1977      | Israel makes deal with Mengistu Haile Mariam to airlift small groups of Ethiopian Jews  |
| Aug 25, 1977  | 62 Beta Yisrael airlifted by Israel from Ethiopia (Addis Ababa) to the Jewish State   |

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| Nov 1977   | 60 Beta Yisrael airlifted by Israel from Ethiopia (Addis Ababa) to the Jewish State   |
| 1978       | Ethiopian land reforms; some Ethiopian Jews get small plots of land   |
| 1978       | As a reaction to the land reforms, increased persecution of Ethiopian Jews by non-Jewish neighbors and the expropriation of Beta Yisrael land   |
| 1978       | Widespread famine hits northern provinces of Ethiopia   |
| Feb 1978   | Moshe Dayan leaks the arms for rescue deal with Ethiopia at a press conference in Switzerland; Ethiopia, as a direct result, curtails Israeli presence in its country and ends the deal to airlift small groups of Beta Yisrael |
| 1979       | The National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) forms a committee on Ethiopian Jewry  |
| Jan 1979   | AAEJ encourages Ethiopian Israelis to meet with Begin and make their struggle public  |
| Jan 1979   | Ethiopian Israelis meet with Prime Minister Begin and demand action on the rescue of the Beta Yisrael; the community in Israel demonstrates against the indifference of the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency            |
| Early 1979 | The Sudan route begins to open up for Ethiopian Jews as tens of thousands of war refugees from Tigrey and Eritrea stream into the Sudan   |
| April 1979 | In New York, the AAEJ attacks ORT for mistreating the Beta Yisrael in Ethiopia and misusing funds   |
| Aug 1979   | The AAEJ sponsors the rescue of 32 Ethiopian Jewish refugees and sends them to Israel; rescue serves as a catalyst for Israel to take action at a time when the Jewish Agency says such movement is impossible                  |
| Oct 1979   | Ethiopian Israelis demonstrate against the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency for their lack of efforts to create a Beta Yisrael aliyah   |
| Oct 1979   | Begin constitutes a special government committee to work with the Committee on Ethiopian Jews (part of NJCRAC)  |
| Nov 1979   | Israeli Government, Jewish Agency, and the World Zionist Organization (WZO) announce a world wide campaign publicizing the plight of Ethiopian Jewry  |



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| Nov 1979        | Yona Bogala and three other Ethiopian Jewish leaders in Montreal address 2000 representatives of Jewish Federations   |
| Nov 1979-1983   | Mosad brings out Ethiopian Jews to Israel in small groups, which numbers 1400 by the end of 1981, 3000 by the end of Begin's term in 1983; Mosad opens a route by trucking the Beta Yisrael from the Sudanese refugee camps to a safe house in Khartoum, then fly to Athens or Paris before being flown to Israel; around 60 a week get out                   |
| Dec 1979        | Minister of Defense Ezer Weizman states: "Falashas, smalashas.... Tell me the truth, is this the most important issue we have to cope with today?"  |
| 1980            | The Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jews (CAEJ) is established   |
| March 1980      | AAEJ sponsored rescue brings 15 Beta Yisrael via Germany to Israel  |
| Oct 1981        | Trip to Ethiopia sponsored by the Jewish Federation Council of Los Angeles includes Barbara Ribakove Gordon, Peachy Levy and Dick and Middie Geisberg - future NACOEJ activists, Rabbi Steven Kaplan and Henry Rosenberg from the AAEJ, CAEJ director Steve Bowman, Berry Weiss of the L.A. Federation and NJCRAC and Bret Goldberg, PHD in Semitic languages |
| Dec 1981        | Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel renews its demonstrations  |
| 1981- March '82 | Small groups of Ethiopian Jews rescued via trucks to Port Sudan, then boats to Eilat; around 350 rescued in this fashion  |
| March 1982      | Sea route closed when Sudanese soldiers open fire on Israeli rescue teams at Port Sudan   |
| Winter of 1982  | The North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) is founded  |
| March 16, 1982  | Israel Defense Force (IDF) C-130 Hercules transport plane lands in the Sudanese Desert between refugee camps and rescues Ethiopian Jews; six more missions flown with over 1400 Ethiopian Jews saved by May of 1984   |
| 1983            | Simcha Jacobovici film "Falasha: Exile of the Black Jews" criticizes the lack of efforts and indifference of Israel and world Jewish leadership   |

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| mid-July, 1983 | AAEJ rescue mission via the Sudan to Kenya results in the arrest and subsequent newspaper report of the Ethiopian Jewish "illegal" emigres, their rescuers and the routes taken  |
| July 1983      | AAEJ pushes Congress to petition President Reagan to help Ethiopian Jewry  |
| March 1984     | Israeli Hercules plane spotted by Sudanese officials   |
| May 4, 1984    | Sudanese shepherd spots Israeli Hercules transport planes and subsequently the disclosure puts a halt to desert rescue missions of Ethiopian Jews; by this time, most of the Ethiopian Jewish refugees in the Sudanese camps have been rescued by the Israeli agents |
| Summer 1984    | Terrible famine across Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa; hundreds of thousands of refugees flood into the Sudan   |
| Summer 1984    | 10,000-12,000 Ethiopian Jews make their way to the refugee camps of the Sudan; thousands die along the way or in the squalid camps of the Sudan  |
| June of 1984   | The American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ) is founded   |
| July 1984      | Israeli agents radio Jerusalem from the Sudan about the rising death rates of the Ethiopian Jews in the camps; AAEJ pushes world Jewry to avert the "new Holocaust" befalling the Jewish people  |
| Aug-Nov 1984   | Planning and negotiating stages of Operation Moses   |
| Sept 1984      | Simcha Jacobovici <u>New York Times</u> opinion/editorial "Ethiopian Jews Die, Israel Fiddles" indicts Israel and world Jewry for their lack of efforts on behalf of the Beta Yisrael  |
| Nov. 15, 1984  | Ethiopian Jewry activists break up General Assembly of the 'Council of Jewish Federations in Toronto   |
| Nov 20, 1984   | Abortive attempt to rescue Ethiopian Jews from the Sudan   |
| Nov 22, 1984   | Operation Moses begins; first buses leave Gedaref for airplanes in Khartoum  |
| Late 1984      | Meetings between Israeli officials and the UJA to raise funds to finance ongoing Operation Moses   |
| Jan 3, 1985    | West Bank newspaper "Nekudah" leaks story of Ethiopian Jewish rescue   |

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| Jan 5-6, 1985  | Operation Moses halted; Sudan cancels the program as over seven thousand Ethiopian Jews are rescued, but hundreds still remained in the Sudanese refugee camps                     |
| Feb 1985       | Plans for Operation Joshua commence; U.S. government, State Department and CIA planning with Israeli officials   |
| Feb 21, 1985   | Senator Alan Cranston collects the signatures of 100 Senators pleading with the Reagan/Bush Administration to rescue the remaining Ethiopian Jewish refugees in the Sudanese camps |
| March 4, 1985  | Vice President Bush meets with Sudanese President Numeiri  |
| March 21, 1985 | Operation Joshua commences; U.S. planes fly remaining Ethiopian Jews from the refugee camps to Israel; about 500 rescued   |
| Nov 1985       | Ethiopian Israelis demonstrate in Jerusalem for full religious recognition   |
| 1985-91        | A program of Family Reunification is launched to reunite Beta Yisrael living in Ethiopia with their family members in Israel   |
| 1985-91        | The AAEJ, CAEJ and NACOEJ, and later HIAS, the UAHC, NJCRAC and JIAS coordinate rescue lists and relief efforts.   |
| 1985-91        | UAHC Project REAP medical programs in Ethiopia as well as AJJDC medical efforts in the Horn of Africa  |
| 1986           | The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry is established  |
| July 1986      | Plague of locust strikes Ethiopia  |
| Sept 1986      | ARNEJ sponsored Rabbinic Call to Conscience for Ethiopian Jewry in Washington, D.C.  |
| 1987           | ARNEJ becomes a professional organization  |
| 1987           | Ethiopian Government institutes "villagization" program  |
| March 13, 1989 | Newly inaugurated President Bush meets with Rachamim Elazar, Will Recant and John Cohen  |
| April 1989     | Second ARNEJ sponsored Rabbinic Call to Conscience in Washington, D.C., entitled "Hinenu"  |
| May 1989       | Coup d'etat planned by the Ethiopian Armed Forces of the Mengistu regime fails   |

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| Aug 1989    | Representative Mickey Leland is killed in a plane crash in Ethiopia during a mission of famine relief and Family Reunification for the Beta Yisrael   |
| Sept 1989   | Former President Jimmy Carter organizes the first round of talks between the Government of Ethiopia and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF)   |
| Nov 1989    | Israel and Ethiopia resume diplomatic relations   |
| 1990        | The Joint Distribution Committee office in Israel and New York set up new organization, "Almaya," headed by Eli Eliezri   |
| Early 1990  | Mengistu's Marxist military regime threatened by rebel armies advancing on Gondar region and the capital area of Addis Ababa; Ethiopian Jews begin making their way into Addis Ababa  |
| Spring 1990 | AAEJ sets up a compound in Addis Ababa to provide relief efforts to the Beta Yisrael and be a staging area for rescue coordination  |
| May 1990    | Beta Yisrael, assisted by the AAEJ, begin moving down to Addis Ababa from Gondar and Tigrey by the thousands; first month in which large numbers of Ethiopian Jews leave for Israel   |
| July 1990   | Jewish emigration from Addis Ababa to Israel halted   |
| Summer 1990 | NACOEJ sets up their compound in Addis Ababa; the school established by the AAEJ for the Beta Yisrael youth is moved to the Israeli embassy; NACOEJ institutes cultural enrichment programs and employment opportunities for the Beta Yisrael |
| Fall 1990   | Prime Minister Shamir selects Uri Lubrani to be in charge of Ethiopian rescue operations  |
| Sept 1990   | Secretary of State James Baker meets with Ethiopian Foreign Minister Tesfaye Dinka in New York  |
| Oct 1990    | The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry sends a letter to Mengistu expressing dissatisfaction over Jewish emigration levels, peace negotiations and needed famine relief   |
| Nov 1990    | JDC and Israeli Government turn to the Bush administration for help to persuade Ethiopian Government to reinstitute Jewish emigration   |
| End of 1990 | Over 21,000 Jews still remain in Addis Ababa in and around the Jewish compounds   |

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| Jan 1991                 | Emigration level of Beta Yisrael to Israel reaches over 1000   |
| Jan-Feb 1991             | Beta Yisrael continue to make aliyah despite Persian Gulf War and SCUD missile attacks on Israel   |
| Feb 1991                 | EPLF and the Tigrean People's Liberation Front (TPFL) launch offensives on the Government of Ethiopia  |
| March 1991               | Government of Ethiopia halts Jewish emigration; The Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry sends letter to Baker expressing concern over cessation of flights and intensification of military crisis; Jewish emigration resumes later in the month   |
| March 13, 1991           | Uri Lubrani and Eli Eliezri fly to New York to meet with Michael Schneider, the JDC's executive Vice President; they agree to press Bush to appoint a personal emissary to persuade Mengistu to free the Jews  |
| March 20, 1991           | Lubrani and Eliezri meet with Detroit Industrialist, Max Fisher, in Palm Beach, Florida; Fisher passes on the request to President Bush  |
| April 1, 1991            | Bush refuses to send a personal envoy to Addis Ababa   |
| April, 1991              | Leaders of the American Jewish community form a special committee, with Michael Schneider coordinating, urging the Bush administration to act before it is too late; Herman J. Cohen, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, attempts to negotiate a cease fire between Mengistu's forces and the rebels to bring about a bloodless transition of power; Cohen convinces Bush to become involved. |
| Early May, 1991          | Bush appoints Rudy Boschwitz, former Republican Senator from Minnesota, to undertake a secret mission to Ethiopia to convince Mengistu and the opposing rebel chiefs to allow the Ethiopian Jews to emigrate before the Civil War in Ethiopia further deteriorates   |
| May 1991                 | Mengistu agrees to negotiations with Israel and appoints Kassa Kabede to conduct the talks   |
| May 20, 1991<br>(Monday) | Lubrani and the JDC/Almaya committee arrive in Addis Ababa to finish the deal with Kassa Kabede; Mengistu flees the capital the night before   |
| May 20, 1991             | Bush sends a letter to the acting Ethiopian president Lieutenant General Tesfaye Kidan, urging him to authorize the airlift and promising a "persuasion" payment   |

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| May 21, 1991<br>(Tuesday)  | Lubrani negotiates with Kabede; they set a price of \$35 million dollars to allow the Jews to leave Ethiopia   |
| May 23, 1991<br>(Thursday) | Final details of the exchange of money for the Jews are ironed out   |
| May 23, 1991<br>(Thursday) | Lubrani urges Herman J. Cohen to delay the planned U.S. sponsored cease fire talks since time is needed for the Ethiopian Jews to flee before the rebels take over the capital city and close down the airport; Cohen postpones the cease fire plans until after the weekend |
| May 24, 1991<br>(Friday)   | 10 am: First planes take off from Tel Aviv to Addis Ababa<br>1 pm: Payment is made   |
| May 24-25, 1991            | 14,500 Jews airlifted and rescued to Israel from (Shabbat) Addis Ababa   |
| May 25, 1991               | Kabede flees to Israel and receives political asylum   |
| May 26, 1991<br>(Sunday)   | Rebels enter Addis Ababa and close the airport   |
| Summer 1991                | Jewish community of Quara rediscovered; Beta Yisrael released from the Government and rebel armies make their way to their villages in Gondar and Tigrey, and to Addis Ababa   |
| 1991-92                    | Follow-up operations bring remaining thousands of Beta Yisrael from Ethiopia to Israel   |
| 1991-                      | NACOEJ and the JDC run a compound in Addis Ababa to facilitate the rescue of the remaining Beta Yisrael and provide relief services to the Felas Mora based in the capital city; AAJEJ coordinates their efforts out of the NACOEJ compound                                  |
| 1992-                      | Question of the Felas Mora remains unresolved by the Israeli Government and religious establishment  |



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House Resolution 384, Expressing the sense of the Congress regarding the urgent famine situation in Ethiopia, April 25, 1990, 101st Congress, Second Session, referred jointly to the Committees on Foreign Affairs, Banking, Finance and Urban Affairs, and Ways and Means; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from the four Co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Senators Alan Cranston of California and Rudy Boschwitz of Minnesota, and Representatives Benjamin Gilman of New York and Stephen Solarz of New York, to their colleagues in Congress, regarding the cut in emigration from Ethiopia during July of 1990, July 31, 1990; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from Congressman Gary Ackerman of New York to Henry Taub, President of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, New York, February 7, 1985, from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from the Brotherhood Synagogue of Manhattan, Abraham Weinstein, Board of Trustees, Irving J. Block, rabbi; to Mr. Donald Robinson and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, December 10, 1979; from the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

Letter from Albert D. Chernin, Executive Vice Chairman of NJCRAC to Mr. Stanley B. Horowitz, Executive Director of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland, Ohio, February 21, 1979; from the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY; "Appeals for help to Falashas: 1977- 1984;".

Letter from the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to President Mengistu of the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, regarding the lack of Jewish emigration and peace negotiations, October 29th, 1990; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to Secretary of State James Baker, March 30, 1990, concerning the upcoming U.S.-Soviet talks and the need to place Ethiopia on the agenda; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C.

Letter from the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry to Secretary of State James Baker III, March 15th, 1991, concerning the suspension of exit permits for Ethiopian Jews; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.



Letter from Senator Alan Cranston of California, Representative Benjamin Gilman of New York and Representative Stephen Solarz of New York, co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, to President George Bush, June 26th, 1991; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from Tesfaye Dinka, Foreign Minister of Ethiopia, to Representatives Stephen Solarz of New York and Benjamin Gilman of New York, co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, December 17, 1990, regarding the Caucus' letter and requests from October 29th, 1990, for increased levels of emigration and peace negotiations; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from Congressmen Barney Frank and Stephen Solarz to their colleagues in the House of Representatives, June 24, 1983, urging cosponsorship of House Concurrent Resolution 107; from the files of the Congressional Caucus on Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from the Connecticut Jewish Community Relations Council to Dan Shapiro, Chairperson of NJCRAC's committee on Ethiopian Jewry, and Jacqueline Levine, chairperson of NJCRAC's department of International Concerns, February 2, 1981; from the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

Letter from the Connecticut Jewish Community Relations Council, Martin Gant, president, Bernard Levy, chairman of the Ethiopian Jewry Task Force; to U.S. Jewish community leaders, January 29, 1981; from the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

Letter from the Council of Ethiopian Jews to NJCRAC, Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns, March 14, 1981. Archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

Letter from Rachamim Elezar, leader of the Beta Yisrael community in Israel and then secretary of the Public Committee for Ethiopian Jews in Israel, to Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns for NJCRAC, March 10, 1983; from the archives of the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, Washington, D.C.

Letter from the Ethiopian Jews' Association to Daniel Shapiro, chairperson of the Committee on Ethiopian Jewry, and Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns, March 29, 1981; from the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Appeals for help to Falashas: 1977-1984."

Letter from Howard Lenhoff, then President of the AAEJ to Daniel Shapiro, chairperson of NJCRAC's Committee on Ethiopian Jews, August 10, 1981; from the archives of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, New York, NY. "Falashas 1980-81."

Letter from Peter McPherson, Director of the Agency for International Development (AID) in Washington, D.C., to Congressman Barney Frank, July, 1983; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from Janet G. Mullins, Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs at the Department of State, to Representative Stephen Solarz, received on May 14, 1990, concerning State Department efforts on behalf of famine, peace talks and emigration out of Ethiopia; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Letter from Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs, Janet Mullins, to Representative Stephen Solarz of New York, Co-chair for the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, April 12, 1991, regarding the Caucus' letter of concern to Secretary of State James Baker over the cessation of Jewish emigration for Ethiopia; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

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Letter from Senators Alan Cranston and Claiborne Pell and Representative Gary Ackerman to Secretary of State James Baker, including the signatures of seventy members of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews, February 7, 1989; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

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"Rescue of Ethiopian Jews From Ethiopia to Israel," Congressional Record – Extension of Remarks, dated July 30, 1991; remarks of Stephen J. Solarz of New York, in the House of Representatives, Monday, July 29, 1991; from the files of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, Washington, D.C., p. E 2760.

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"The Romance of the Falashas," p. 13-14, pamphlet produced by the American Pro-Falasha Committee, 1938; American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, Nearprint File - Special Collection, "Falashas."

"Senate Concurrent Resolution 55 – Relating to the Plight of Ethiopian Jews," Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the 98th Congress, First Session, Vol. 129, No. 102, Washington, D.C., Tuesday, July 19, 1983, Senate; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

"Senators and Representatives who signed on to the McPherson letter; from the files of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, Washington, D.C.

Some Enduring Aspects of Amhara Perspectives on the "Self" and the "Other," Dr. Chaim Rosen, Ethnographic Essay II, research funding from Hadassah W.Z.O.A., October, 1987, from the files of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, New York, New York.

"The Work of the American Pro-Falasha Committee in Abyssinia: 1923-1927," p. 1; American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati Campus of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, Manuscript Collection, Box 61, 1/1.

## INTERVIEWS AND LETTERS

Personal interview with Representative Gary Ackerman of New York, in Congressman Ackerman's Washington, D.C., office and in the discussion room adjacent to the floor of the House, May 20, 1992, 5:00-7:00pm.

Personal interview and discussions with "Asress," an immigrant to Israel during Operation Moses in 1984, Spring of 1989, Jerusalem, Israel.

Personal interview with Naomi Baum and Robyn Lieberman, legislative aides for Senator Alan Cranston of California. Baum held the portfolio in charge of Ethiopian Jewry and helped facilitate the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry for four years. Lieberman currently holds the Beta Yisrael portfolio. May 20, 1992, in Senator Cranston's Washington D.C. office, 1:30-2:30pm.

Personal interview with Abraham Bayer, Director of International Concerns for the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRC), in the NJCRC office in New York City, June 18, 1992, late afternoon.

Personal interview with Graenum Berger, first president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, June 17, 1992, in his home in New Rochelle, New York, 3:30-6:15pm.

Personal letter from Graenum Berger to Jeff Kaye, dated June 19, 1992.

Personal interview with Debbie Bodlander, legislative aide for Congressman Benjamin Gilman of New York. She held the portfolio in charge of Ethiopian Jewry and helped facilitate the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jews since its inception. May 21, 1992, 11:30am-1:00pm, in Congressman Gilman's office and in the discussion room of the House floor.

Interview with Jane Fellman, Executive Director of the American Rabbinic Network for Ethiopian Jewry (ARNEJ), phone interviews from Pasadena, CA to West Chester, OH, May 4, 1992, 9:45-11:00pm; and May 10, 1992, 5:30-7:00pm.

Personal Interview with Congressman Benjamin Gilman of New York, co-chair of the Congressional Caucus for Ethiopian Jewry, May 21, 1992, in Congressman Gilman's office and in the discussion room next to the House floor.

Personal interview with Barbara Ribokove Gordon, Executive Director of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) and former Senior Editor of Health Magazine, June 17, 1992, at the NACOEJ office in New York, NY, 9:30am-11:30am.

Letter from Barbara Ribakove Gordon to Jeffrey Kaye, dated June 25, 1992, responding to follow-up questions to our interview of June 17, 1992.

Personal interview with John Hall, Country Desk Officer for Ethiopia from July of 1989 to July of 1991, now with the Intelligence and Research Division of the State Department, May 20, 1992, Department of State in Washington, D.C., 12:00-1:30pm.

Letter from Robert Houdek, currently Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, charge d'affaires in Ethiopia from August 1989 to June 1991, chief in the field and highest ranking official in Ethiopia since no diplomatic relations or ambassadors were exchanged between the two nations, to Jeffrey Kaye, May 22, 1992, responding to the Congressman Ackerman trip to Ethiopia in April of 1990.

Personal interview with Robert Houdek, currently Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, charge d'affaires in Ethiopia from August 1988 to June 1991, chief in the field and highest ranking official in Ethiopia since no diplomatic relations or ambassadors were exchanged between the two nations. May 21, 1992, at the Department of State, Washington, D.C., 9:00-10:00am.

Personal interview with Dr. Ephraim Isaac, former professor at Princeton and Harvard and director of the Institute for Semetic Studies in Princeton, New Jersey; interview May 18, 1992, 3:30-5:45pm.

Personal interview with Howard Lenhoff, Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of California at Irvine, and second president of the AAEJ between 1978 and 1982; phone, April 23, 1992, 8:00-9:00pm EDT and April 26, 1992, 9:00-10:00pm EDT, between West Chester, Ohio and Irvine, California.

Personal interview with Valerie Mims, Legislative Assistant for Representative Stephen Solarz of New York, in charge of the Ethiopian Jewry portfolio. May 20, 1992, 10:00-11:00am, in Congressman Solarz's office in Washington, D.C.

Personal interview with Dr. Ted Myers, Director of AJJDC Medical Program to East Africa during the 1980s, June 17, 1992, AJJDC office in New York, NY.

Personal interview with Jenny Pratt, Country Desk Officer for Ethiopia, July of 1991 to July of 1993; May 21, 1992, Department of State in Washington, D.C., 10:00-10:45am.

Personal interview with William Recant, Executive Director of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews, May 19, 1992, in the Washington D.C. National Headquarters of the AAEJ, 9:00-11:30am.

Personal interview with Henry Rosenberg, attorney and real estate developer and former director of rescue operations in the Sudan for the AAEJ, June 18, 1992, New York City, 5:15-7:00pm.

Personal interview with Glenn Stein, in charge of Ethiopian Jewry for the Religious Action Center of the UAHC, AAEJ field worker in Addis Ababa between May, 1990 and May 1991, CRC staffer in Phoenix, Arizona; June 18, 1992, Brooklyn, New York, 9:30am-11:45am.

Personal Diary of Glenn Stein, AAEJ field worker in Addis Ababa between May, 1990, and May, 1991.

Personnal interview with Michael Strum, former Associate Director for Relief and Family Reunification for the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, currently owner of City Sights Tours in Washington, D.C., May 19, 1992, 7:30-9:30pm, in front of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Interview with Rabbi Barry Tabachnikoff of Bet Breira, Miami, Florida, February, 1992.

Personal interview with Gideon Taylor, Director of Special Projects, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (AJJDC), AJJDC headquarters in New York, New York, June 17, 1992.



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## DATA TABLES ON THE RESCUE OF BETA YISRAEL

TABLE #1  
OVERVIEW OF ALIYAH FROM 1948 TO 1992

|                            |        |
|----------------------------|--------|
| 1948-1978:                 | 150    |
| 1979-1984:                 | 7000   |
| Operations Moses & Joshua: | 8000   |
| 1985-1989:                 | 2000   |
| 1990- May of 1991:         | 9000   |
| Operation Solomon:         | 14,500 |
| June of 1991-1992:         | 5000   |
| Total:                     | 45,650 |

TABLE #2  
ALIYAH DURING THE DECADE OF THE 1980s

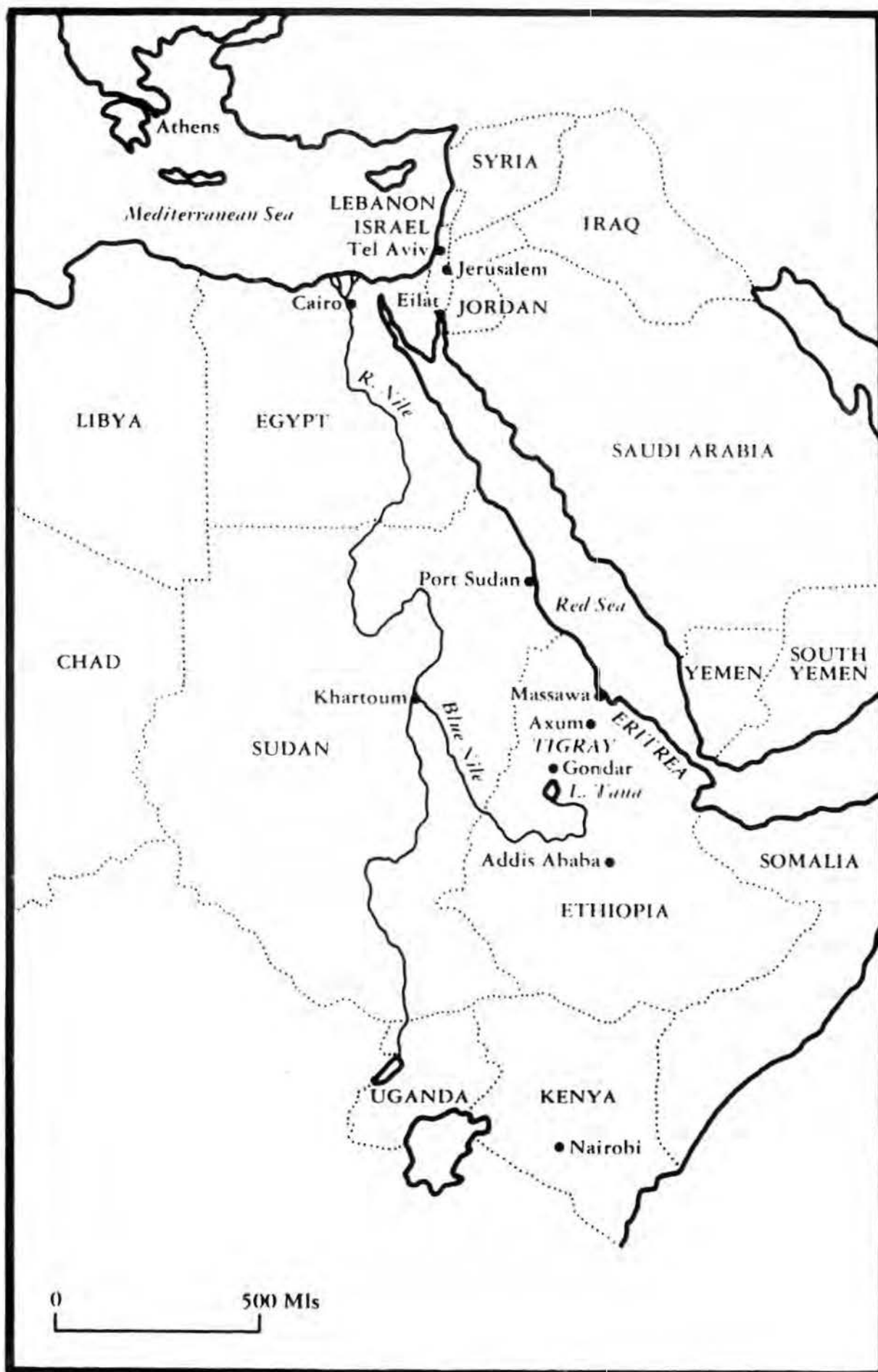
|  |      |
|--|------|
| 1980:                                  | 679  |
| 1981:                                  | 550  |
| 1982:                                  | 650  |
| 1983:                                  | 3000 |
| 1984<br>(up to Op. Moses):             | 1200 |
| Nov. 1984 to Jan.<br>1985 (Op. Moses): | 7500 |
| March 21-22,<br>1985 (Op. Joshua):     | 480  |
| April 1985-1989:                       | 2000 |

TABLE #3  
ALIYAH DURING 1990 AND 1991

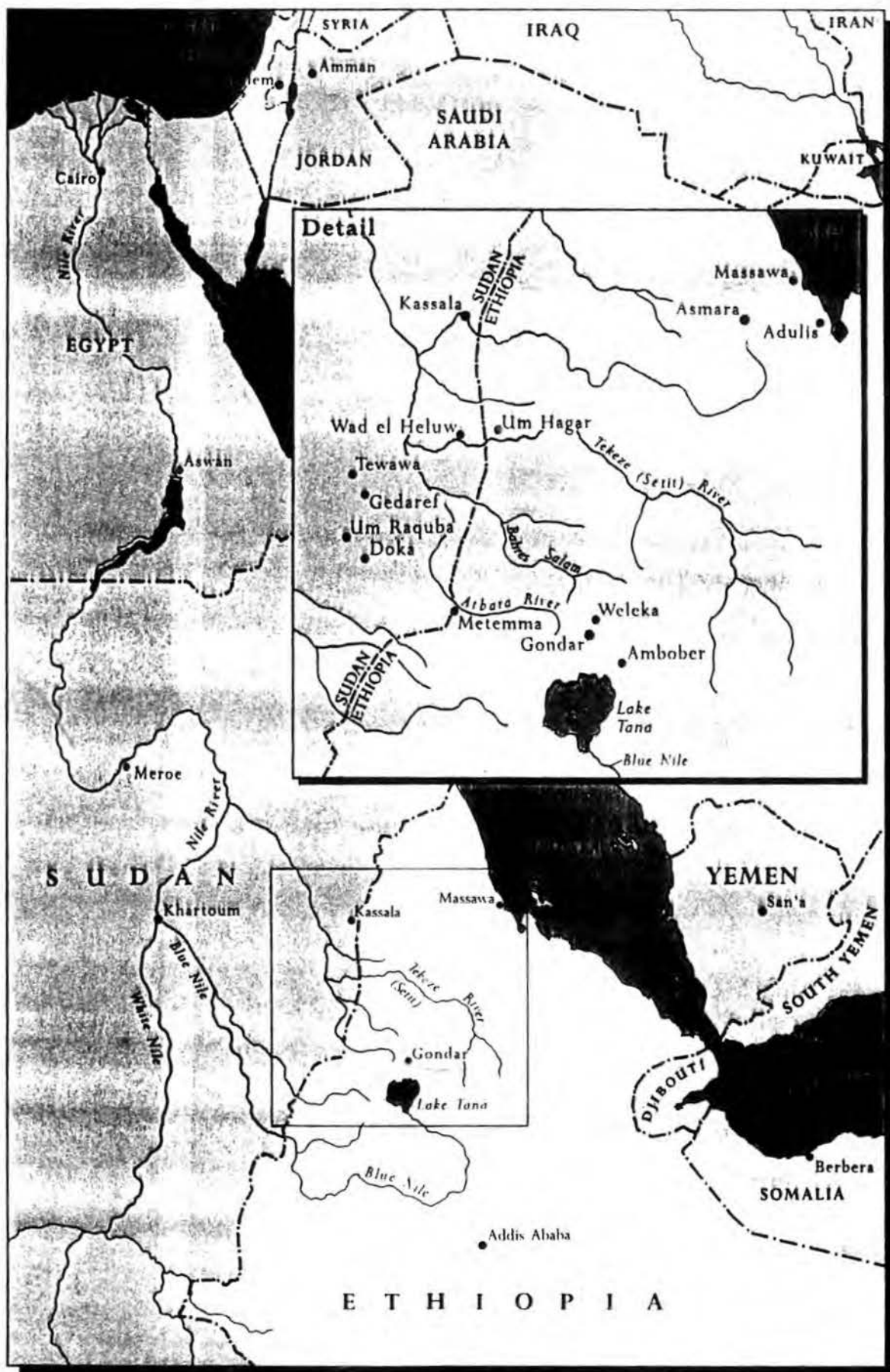
|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Jan-March 1990: | 400 (according to the figures of the Congressional Research Service), 682 (according to the AAEJ) |
| April 1990:     | 500   |
| May 1990:       | 550   |
| June 1990:      | 500   |
| July 1990:      | 0   |
| Aug. 1990:      | 206   |
| Sept. 1990:     | 184   |
| Oct. 1990:      | 24  |
| Nov. 1990:      | 438   |
| Dec. 1990:      | 438   |
| Jan. 1991:      | 1034  |
| Feb. 1991:      | 1000  |
| March 1991:     | 700   |
| April 1991:     | 1008  |
| May 1991:       | 1000  |
| Op. Solomon:    | 14,500  |
| June 1991:      | 500   |



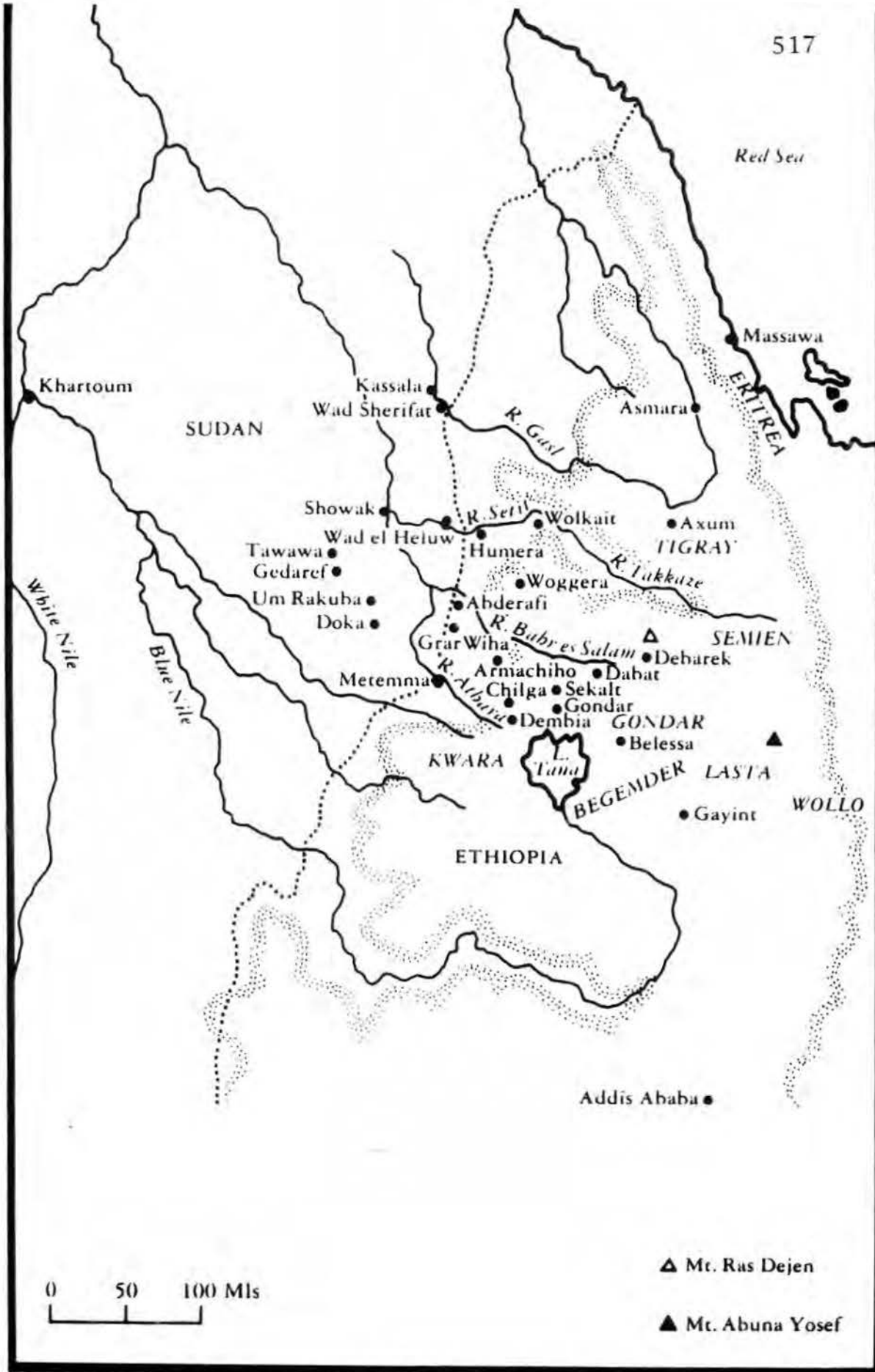
|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| July 1991: | 500 |
| Aug. 1991: | 500 |
| Sep. 1991: | 500 |
| Oct. 1991: | 650 |
| Nov. 1991: | 650 |
| Dec. 1991: | 670 |



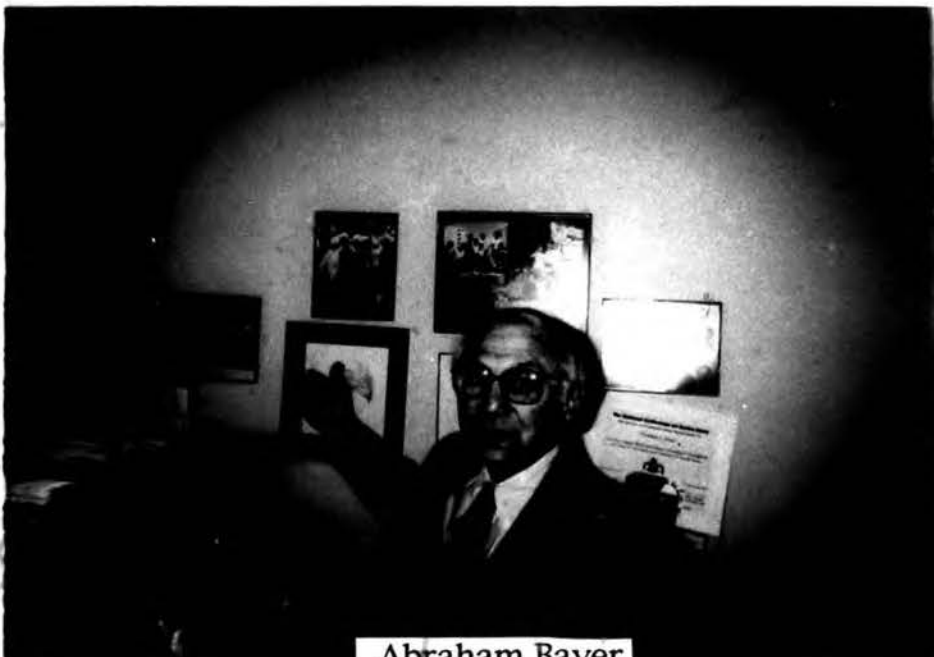
*Courtesy of the author of Secret Exodus, Claire Saffran*



Courtesy of The author of Rescue, Ruth Gruber



Courtesy of the author of Secret Exodus, Claire Safran



Abraham Bayer



Graenum Berger



Will Recant

(l-r) Nathan Shapiro, "Dr. Ruth" Westheimer, Will Recant