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**Ethiopian Jews still feel as though they don't belong**

*Newsday*, November 16, 2004

By Samson Mulugeta

Ramla, Israel—The occasion was the 20th anniversary of the dramatic airlift that first brought his fellow Ethiopian Jews to Israel, and Kes Berhanu Yeheyi stood before a crowd of hundreds, looking resplendent in a white turban and black cape.

A man of the cloth, Kes Berhanu is used to commanding an audience, but the mood of this one soon turned testy. Some of the young Ethiopians who helped fill this small Israeli town's recreation center listened with as much embarrassment as pride as the caramel-skinned religious leader struggled to speak the language of his adopted land.

"Please, in Amharic!" a few shouted in Amharic, urging him to stop mangling Hebrew and speak in his native Ethiopian tongue. While white Israelis on the panel looked on, some of the Ethiopians slid low in their seats and others hid their faces. Kes Berhanu smoothly shifted to Amharic, accustomed to humiliations. He had arrived in Israel, after all, in the first wave of Ethiopian Jews, when Israeli rabbis told them they had to be symbolically "re-circumcised." (In later days, the rabbis decided it would suffice to draw a symbolic drop of blood from the penis.)

"We held on to our faith for generations," said Kes Berhanu in an interview. He is a slightly built man in his 50s, and addressed the crowd while holding a walking cane in one hand, a fly-whisk in the other. "You can't destroy our religion and our culture."

But the experience of Ethiopian Jews in Israel over the past two decades is testing the limits of that declaration. Kes Berhanu and members of his audience are living symbols of Israel's pledge of aliyah, or return - the promise to accept all Jews in the Promised Land. And since that first airlift on Nov. 19, 1984, Ethiopian Jews have earned a reputation among Palestinians as among the most fervent defenders of Israel.

**A new identity**

At the same time, they occupy the lowest rung on Israel's economic ladder and face discrimination that has spawned a new racial identity - one they had never known before. Many say the community of 100,000 is facing a spiritual crisis, its members at risk of becoming a permanent underclass of Israeli society.

And - as poignantly reflected in the awkward dynamic at the hall where Kes Berhanu spoke - Ethiopian Jews are split between the generation that made the roughly 1,500-mile journey to Israel and the one that grew up in a society that has struggled to assimilate them. "You could summarize what's troubling [Ethiopian Jews] in one word: belonging," said Gadi Ben Ezer, a sociologist who has studied the community for more than a decade. "They don't have a sense of belonging. They arrived in Israel like a river joining the sea, but what they encountered was disappointment and suspicion about their identity."

Twenty years ago, there seemed to be little doubt where they belonged. The Falashas - or the Beta Israel, as they prefer to be called - lived in the mountainous regions of northern Ethiopia. For millennia, they were isolated from the larger stream of Jewish history and from Ethiopia's Christian and Muslim cultures.

Some among the Beta Israel believe they descended from the time of the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba 2,500 years ago, while others believe they descended from the tribe of Dan, one of the 10 lost tribes of Israel. For centuries, Ethiopian Jews had observed the Sabbath on Saturday and followed rituals distinct from their Christian neighbors. Isolated from the Judaic oral laws that created the Talmud,

their belief was based on the Torah - the written body of Jewish law and teachings - and many of their current practices are similar to those of biblical and Talmudic times.

Starting in the 1920s, though, Jews from other parts of the world sought out the Beta Israel in rural Ethiopia, helping a small number immigrate to Palestine. Then, a few decades after Israel was founded as a Jewish state in 1948, the government - with financial support from American Jews - launched the first airlift, Operation Moses, in 1984. For the Falasha, the journey held the promise of a religious quest but also escape from a subsistence existence on drought-prone land in one of the poorest regions of Ethiopia. Very few of them knew about electricity, running water or medical facilities.

The airlift - which left from Sudan - was far from flawless. Mengistu Haile Mariam, the dictator who held power in Ethiopia, was willing to let the Jews go - for a price - but did not want Israeli planes in his country. There also was danger that Sudan, a member of the Arab League, would ban the exodus if it became public before it was completed. About 4,000 of the 20,000 Ethiopian Jews who embarked on the journey reportedly died while trekking from Ethiopia to Sudan, deaths that still sting the survivors.

Despite the deaths, Israel followed up with Operation Solomon in 1991, airlifting thousands more to Israel. A country that had grown strong in large part by welcoming Jews from the United States, Western Europe, the former Soviet Union, South America and elsewhere was undertaking the most far-reaching effort to unite its family. The only task that remained was absorbing them, but that perhaps proved to be the most difficult.

"In the entire history of mankind there wasn't such a thing that a whole tribe - a whole community - moves to a Western country," said Chaim Peri, an Israeli educator who has worked with Ethiopian students. "It's a great challenge for Israel and the Ethiopians themselves."

The Israeli government tried to meet the challenge by taking young Ethiopian Jews from their parents and placing them in boarding schools. The parents went along, partly because they hoped the state would help their children assimilate and partly because they were not in a position to protest. Nearly 95 percent of Ethiopian immigrant children were sent to the state-funded boarding schools, which are based on a combination of kibbutz life and traditional European away-from-home education.

They studied Hebrew (a language most of their parents did not speak), and their native Amharic and Tigrigna began to fade. In some of these schools, a new generation of Ethiopian Jews began to believe they came from a backward, primitive culture that they must forget. They became a confused hybrid, neither Israeli nor Ethiopian, ersatz characters who increasingly copy the style and fashion of Rastafarians or black American hip-hop icons in their search for an identity. Many of the schools have become breeding grounds for dysfunctional Ethiopian Jews, churning out poorly educated graduates at best, or maladjusted youth who are turning increasingly to criminal activity.

"The government has taken the kids away from the parents and said, 'I know what's best for your children,'" said Nega Wondmeneh, an Ethiopian who runs a counseling center at the Tel Aviv bus station for troubled young Ethiopians. "The kids start getting an inferiority complex," Wondmeneh said. "Some of them grow up to become street kids and come [to the bus station] to drink, take drugs and steal."

#### **An eyewitness**

Aster Alemu, 24, who comes from a well-educated Ethiopian family, saw the dynamic firsthand when she was a teacher's aide in a class of 8-year-old Ethiopians as part of the national service that all Israelis are expected to perform. "One child was very smart. He would finish his work and start talking to the other kids," Alemu said. "The teacher hated him and said he had a mental problem and he had to take medicine to calm him down. And there were many cases like this."

Although today Ethiopian parents can choose whether to send their children away to school, many question the decision to send the children to boarding schools in the first place. "Sending these kids to

religious boarding schools had nothing to do with their welfare, but ... everything to do with politics," said Batia Iyob, executive director of the Israeli Association for Ethiopian Jews, a private advocacy and service organization. Iyob said the schools had been falling apart "and now they were getting [government] money because Ethiopian children were coming."

Iyob was born in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, and educated in Canada. Her family was not part of the airlift. "The comparison should not be how we're doing better than we were in Ethiopia, but how well we're doing as part of Israeli society."

On that score, Steven Kaplan is worried. Kaplan, chairman of the Institute of African and Asian Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a specialist on Ethiopian Jewry, said the community is "seriously in crisis" and "beginning to fit this idea of underclass." Indeed, the unemployment rate for Ethiopians is more than 60 percent and the high school dropout rate is double the national average. In addition, a strong majority of Israelis agreed in a poll published by Yedioth Ahronoth last year that Ethiopians face the most discrimination next to Arabs.

Ethiopians, coming from a culture where it is considered rude to look someone in the eyes for too long, seem lost in the vibrantly in-your-face culture of Israeli society. Most Israelis equate avoiding eye contact with lack of confidence and shiftiness. And so an alienated young generation is seeking its identity in global black icons rather than its Jewish heritage. Kaplan calls the phenomenon "rap, reggae and Reeboks."

"Israelis say Ethiopians are black but Ethiopians did not consider themselves to be black," Kaplan said. "They became black when they came to Israel. You see young people identifying with reggae music, Afro-Caribbean culture that people tend to view as natural, but it's not natural. It's a choice they made, because it speaks to them."

In a manner that some Israelis find disconcerting, the Ethiopians who willingly came here are asserting a black vs. white identity that mirrors race relations in the United States and other Western nations. Until recently, the most popular Ethiopian nightclub was called "Soweto," after the township in South Africa. Young Ethiopians in baggy pants and dreadlocks rap in Hebrew and Amharic about racism in Israeli society and their longing for "liberation."

### **Smooth transition**

In some cases, Ethiopian Jews are doing exactly as Israel had hoped: joining the landscape of Israeli culture, serving in the army as part of their national service, speaking fluent Hebrew and taking the Israeli side in the struggle against the Palestinians.

"How many Arabs have you killed?" Danny Abebe teased Oren Tsegaye as they drove back from Ramla to Jerusalem after the conference at which Kes Berhanu spoke. The two men, who are in their late 20s, went to the same boarding school, but have taken different paths since graduation. Abebe is a reporter for Yedioth Ahronoth, Israel's largest daily newspaper. He arrived from Ethiopia at the age of 7 and had never seen a car before he undertook the journey to the plane that brought him to Israel. Now, he is a chain-smoking, wild-haired skeptic.

Tsegaye is a father of four, wears a yarmulke, and his is the only Ethiopian family in the West Bank settlement of Shivut Rahel. Like some other Israelis, he never goes anywhere without a handgun tucked into his belt. Tsegaye served as an officer in the Israeli army and goes back every year for brief periods as a volunteer. At Shivut Rahel, he serves guard duty once a month, for 24 hours. An observant Jew who works as a cultural adviser at a Jerusalem school with a sizable Ethiopian population, Tsegaye said he carries the Ruger pistol to protect his own children and his wife. (Asked how he fits in among the 69 families at the settlement, he said, "It's a one-to-one thing. It's how you get along with people as an individual.") Some other young Ethiopians have joined Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza, turning into hard-liners in the struggle against the Palestinians. Almost all young Ethiopians serve in

Israel's national service, as do most Israelis. Many Palestinians have a story about a nasty encounter with an Ethiopian soldier. "[Ethiopian Jews] complain about injustice, but they don't see the injustice done to us," said Amira Moussa, a manager of a Palestinian community center.

#### Unable to adjust

While Tsegaye is a success story by Israeli standards, Molalegne Abeje, 27, wants out. He was once a conscript of the Israel Defense Forces and he felt a part of this fast-paced society. Since leaving the service, he is a lost soul, unable to adjust to his new identity as an Israeli. He is among a group of young Ethiopians who while away their days at Tel Aviv's central bus station. Social workers who counsel them say they are a warning to Israeli society of a silent crisis unfolding in the Ethiopian community.

Abeje grew up in rural northern Ethiopia, listening to his father yearn for the land of Israel. For Abeje, the dream came true when he arrived in Israel 10 years ago at the age of 17. But today, his parents are dead and he is estranged from the rest of his family because they don't understand his alienation from Israeli society. Abeje said his younger brother, Wedefit, was equally disconnected from his family and his Jewish roots until he found salvation - as a born-again Christian.

Abeje said he would love to move to the United States; even returning to poverty-stricken Ethiopia would be preferable to his present life. "When I talk this way, my friends think I am crazy," said Abeje, speaking in his native Amharic. "This is a good country. You can make a living. But I just don't feel I belong here. In Ethiopia, my stomach may not be full, but at least I felt at home."

To be sure, very few Ethiopians want to leave Israel. But stories such as Abeje's hint at the trouble the Ethiopian community faces. In response, philanthropic organizations have launched the New Israel Fund for Ethiopians - seen by some as an acknowledgment that the tens of millions of dollars spent so far have not fully addressed deep-rooted problems. "Ethiopian Jews are particularly troubled by stereotyping and discrimination by the rest of Israeli society," the fund reports on its Web site.

Tzipi Livni, Israel's minister of immigrant absorption, said in an interview that the government is adjusting its strategy for the Ethiopian community by learning from past miscues. In recent years, the government has spent more resources on Ethiopians than any other immigrant community, she said. By offering generous housing loans, Livni said, the government has helped 70 percent of Ethiopians own their homes. But, she said, critics focus on the fact that most of these homes are in depressed neighborhoods.

Photographs of Ethiopian students who have died in the line of duty as members of the Israel Defense Forces decorate the office wall of Chaim Peri, the Israeli educator. Peri runs Yemin Orde, one of the rare boarding schools that has consistently graduated successful Ethiopian students.

Some of those graduates from Yemin Orde, which is located near Haifa, returned to Ethiopia in an effort to help alleviate poverty there, and their report on their work lay on Peri's desk. "I once said to [white Israeli] kids: You know how God tests us?" Peri added. "He took 100,000 Jews, dipped them in chocolate, put them in front of us and said, 'See who you are. Are you racists or can you recognize your brothers and sisters?'"

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**Israelis destroy Ethiopian blood donations**

*Jerusalem Post*, February 10, 1996

By Judy Siegel-Itzkovich

Public outcry has greeted the discovery that for years most of the blood donated by Ethiopian Jewish immigrants to Israel's blood collection service has been thrown out unused because of the high risk of HIV in the community.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres officially apologized for the policy and has ordered a government inquiry. President Ezer Weizman also denounced the policy and said that, of the numerous blood transfusions that he had received in his life, he "hoped that some of them had come from Ethiopians."

Israel's health minister, Dr. Ephraim Sneh, claimed that he had been unaware of the policy, which was uncovered by a team of Israeli journalists. Dr. Sneh ordered that all blood donations from Ethiopians be frozen until the inquiry panel presented its recommendations. He also demanded that Magen David Adom (MDA)--Israel's equivalent of the Red Cross and the organization responsible for implementing the controversial policy--suspend its blood services director, Dr. Amnon Ben-David, until the panel has issued its report.

The discovery led to a bloody demonstration by 10,000 people outside the prime minister's office in Jerusalem. Israel's ambassador to Addis Ababa was called in by Ethiopian officials for an explanation, and the story, with charges of Israeli racism, was splashed across front pages of papers around the world, reportedly triggering tension between black people and Jews in New York.

A total of 60,000 Jews have emigrated to Israel from Ethiopia over the past few decades. All were tested for HIV infection, tuberculosis, hepatitis B, malaria, and other diseases on arrival.

According to the health ministry, the prevalence of HIV infection among the Ethiopian immigrants was 50 times that in the Israeli population at large; Ethiopian immigrants constitute one third of the 1,500 known carriers of HIV in Israel.

MDA's Dr. Ben-David admitted that four years ago he re-approved his predecessor's decision in the late 1980s to destroy the Ethiopian immigrants' blood donations. "They are a very sensitive community, and pride is a central factor. Most of the immigrant donors are Israeli soldiers who volunteer to give blood along with their units. We couldn't take their blood because of the high risk, but we thought that telling Ethiopians to go home without donating would single them out and embarrass them."

Dr. Ben-David added: "No racism was involved because we also destroy the blood donated by other high-risk groups such as addicts and homosexuals. Only in cases of rare blood types did we freeze the blood; if the donor returned six months later and retested negative for HIV, we'd use the original donation."

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**Government to create ministerial panel on Ethiopian absorption**

*Haaretz*, November 6, 2006

By Anyanawo Fareda Sanbetu

After meeting with Ethiopian community leaders in Jerusalem on Monday, Absorption Minister Ze'ev Boim announced that he would create a ministerial panel to address the concerns of the Ethiopian sector in Israel.

Eleven people were injured on Monday in clashes with police at a Jerusalem demonstration protesting systemic discrimination against Ethiopian Jews in Israel. Community leaders met with Boim following the protest, and told him "We want the country to relate to our needs."

Boim decided during the meeting to allow Falashmura children in the midst of conversion to study in state schools - something that up until now was forbidden. He also asked Finance Minister Avraham Hirschson to increase mortgage loans for Ethiopian immigrants by 25 percent.

With regard to the controversial issue of donated Ethiopian blood having been discarded due to fear of diseases, Health Minister Yaacov Ben Izri said he would establish a committee to investigate the issue.

The absorption minister said he would also ask Civil Service Commissioner Shmuel Hollander to help advance Ethiopian involvement in public service and ease the immigration process.

An estimated two hundred people gathered in front of the government compound in Jerusalem to demonstrate against "prejudice policies and racism against Ethiopian Jews." Four police officers were among the injured. Two protesters were taken into custody, and released after community leaders' meeting with Boim.

According to protesters, the government hasn't implemented many of the decisions it has made to advance Ethiopian rights, including absorption of immigrants into Israeli society using affirmative action, raising salaries for Ethiopian religious leaders to match those of other Israeli rabbis, and expanding Falashmura immigration to Israel.

Demonstrators were also protesting the Health Ministry's recent decision to discard donated Ethiopian blood, as reported last week on Channel 2. According to the report, the ministry revived its practice of throwing out blood, for fear it would be contaminated with disease.

Witnesses at the protest said officers without identification tried to forcefully disperse the crowd by spitting and pushing young women their chests to evacuate them from the street.

MK Ran Cohen told protesters, "I feel your pain. A country that discriminates against Ethiopian Jews is a racist country." He promised to raise the issue on the Knesset agenda.

In response to Cohen, demonstrators shouted that they were sick of false promise and "expect a bill that will integrate us into Israeli society."

Most of the protesters were young activists, who marched hand-in-hand from the Jerusalem Convention Center toward the government compound. The protest was led by rabbis and other religious leaders from within the Ethiopian community.

"We are healthy people, like everyone else," said Galit Maarat, 24, who traveled to the demonstration from Ashkelon, with regard to the wholesale discarding of blood. "It's unjust, a terrible affront."

Takelu Yayech, 25, who also traveled from Ashkelon, said demonstrators formed a human chain and sat

down in the road at the entrance to Jerusalem to protest what she called racist policies.

Inbal Jacobs, a spokeswoman for the Health Ministry, said all blood donors must fill out a questionnaire that specifies that certain groups of people cannot donate blood, including those who have been in countries, like Ethiopia, where AIDS is endemic.

Jacobs said Israel followed international criteria that didn't specifically target people from Africa, but rather anyone who had spent a considerable amount of time in countries at risk of blood-borne disease, including those who were in Britain during the Mad Cow disease outbreak.

"There are certain guidelines, and these procedures are not unique to Israel," she said.

The demonstration was initially coordinated with the police force, yet when protesters reached the government compound, they decided to block the road. Police cavalry arrived to the area in order to disperse the blockade.

One protester was injured when a policeman on a horse trampled him, and another was injured when a driver trying to pass the demonstration became angry at the blockade and drove towards head-on into the crowd. The two were taken by Magen David Adom for further medical assistance. The police driver was not detained.

More demonstrators were wounded in clashes when they tried to block the entrance road to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem Police Spokesman Shmulik Ben-Ruby, said that the demonstration, which had a formal license, had turned into a violent protest. Two officers sustained broken bones and two others were badly bruised.

Ben-Ruby said that Monday's demonstration was reminiscent of a similar incident a decade ago, which sparked protests and widespread outrage in a community that feels it is a target of racial discrimination.