



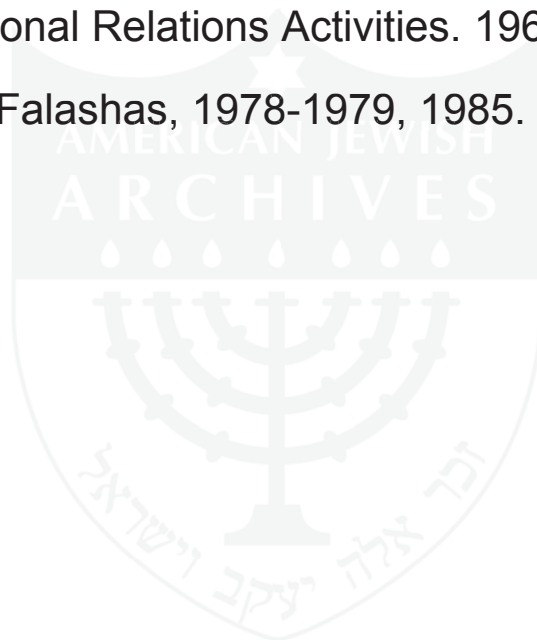
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Box 58, Folder 4, Falashas, 1978-1979, 1985.



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date January 7, 1985 (via FAX January 10)
to ✓ Marc Tanenbaum/George Gruen
from M. Bernard Resnikoff
subject The new olim from Ethiopia

There has been so much news, controversy, misinformation and wrangling with respect to the rescue operation of Ethiopian Jews that it was decided to devote some time to carefully study the matter.

The method chosen was to solicit and receive an invitation to join a group of local and foreign correspondents, who were taken on a day-long tour of installations created for Ethiopian Jews that took place on January 6.

We visited absorption centers, reception centers, we spoke to Jewish Agency officials, to absorption center directors, educators, social workers, psychiatrists and doctors. We were free to speak to any and all Ethiopians, provided, of course, that there was a common language. We visited classrooms, assorted ulpanim for different levels, we observed baby clinics, synagogues, dining room halls, assembly rooms and even stockrooms. There were no apparent obstacles to seeking any and all information --- the only limitation being that of language.

One of the principal findings of this trip is that this is, by far, the most difficult absorption of any group of Jews. The arrivals have an 80% illiteracy rate, which is exacerbated by a lack of knowledge of languages, as well unfamiliarity with Western culture. There needs to be new approaches, new methods, new teaching skills, new books to cope with the problems. Some of these problems are reflected in the fact that people have to be taught how to use electricity, stoves, and refrigerators (even the matter of helping them understand what goes into the refrigerator and what goes into the closet).

In addition, a good number of people have come to this country with illnesses and diseases with which Israeli doctors have no familiarity except through textbooks. The fear of the unknown, the strangeness, the need for major adjustments are compounded by the fact that while most of the immigrants are religious (reflected in the observance of Sabbath and kashrut) they are subjected to rabbinical rulings concerning

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the necessity for reconfirming their Jewishness, which reconfirmation some of them regard as an affront.

As for numbers, there are some 9,000 in absorption centers, with some 1,800 already gone. Adding those who are in Youth Aliya installations and others, estimates at the present are in the neighborhood of 14,000. Different age groups present different problems. Young children, unaccompanied by parents or families, suffer the additional tension of aloneness. Young adults are not accustomed to co-ed education and Western methods. While attempts are made to accommodate to cultural habits (for example, Ethiopian absorption centers have more wide-open spaces than absorption centers normally do) the immigrants nevertheless suffer from alienation. Older people are experiencing difficulty learning a new language. Food is also a problem and the kitchen staff continue to experiment in providing the kind of food most culturally acceptable to Ethiopians.

In the absorption center, one is struck by such positives as cleanliness, a good student-teacher ratio, bright living quarters, well-stocked inventories and wholesome food. In the center we visited, we found Ethiopians who had been there for two days and others who were there for two years. It would seem that because of need for additional training, or for other compelling reasons, the absorption center is generous in deciding when to send the immigrants on to absorbing local communities. Professional training also takes place there, for those who show special capabilities.

Especially difficult to learn are activities in the banks, Kupat Holim, class homework, homemaking and the like. Still, within a month following arrival, Ethiopians start classes with the intention of spending a full year in the absorption center before going on. On the elementary school level, children study in the centers themselves. At the high school level, wherever and as soon as possible, the center sends these youngsters out to regional high schools, where they continue their studies together with young people in the neighborhood.

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University study is not out of the question for those who are qualified.

Loving attention is lavished in the nursery, where infants, plagued with a variety of diseases, are tended by trained nurses. One could not help observe the care with which even diapers are changed, and even nurses aides giving children rides on swings. Even the most hardened journalists could not help but be impressed with this kind of professional care and attention.

At a rest home in a southern community, originally set up as a rest home for soldiers and sailors under the auspices of the Soldiers' Welfare League, arrangements have been completed for the reception of all olim direct from the airport. The intention is for them to be accomodated at this reception locale for the first 48 hours after arrival, during which time they are fed (with special attention being given for the diet of people who were starving or near - starving), bathed, issued new clothing, pocket money, and an identity card. Whenever possible, they are helped in locating family members who arrived before them and are sent directly to rejoin their families. Special attention is given to those children who arrived without their families (around 10%).

Less than 10% are sent directly to hospitals with assorted illnesses, and another 5% are sent to hospitals later on, as various medical conditions are diagnosed.

There was a rather serious flap at a center to which we had to make a rather lengthy detour when it turned out that the newly arrived olim refused to meet with the press. They were not to be seen and many locked themselves up in their rooms. This turned out to be frustrating to many journalists, who responded to their disappointment by converting behavior that is frequently aggressive to behavior that was frequently rude. It was first let out that the olim refused to be interviewed because they were fearful for the lives and safety of family members left behind. But when we spoke to some of the Ethiopian staff members, it turned out that the olim resented the press. As one Ethiopian Jew interpreted it to us, "You are not interested in us, you are only interested in yourselves and your story. Otherwise, how could you do such a thing and print the story which stopped the planes from coming? We can't trust you".

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From a "press happening" point of view, the day was not exactly a success. I happened to be standing right next to the Ethiopian staff members being interviewed, and I could clearly hear whisperings of an official prompting them. But, to be fair, the prompting might have been nothing more than helping the staffers understand the Hebrew questions snapped at them.

The overriding conclusion of the day is that Israelis, of different professions, with different responsibilities, representing different interested institutions, are doing a tremendous job with care, diligence, flair and imagination in an area for which there is little or no precedent.

Simultaneous with the field visit described above, data was collected from responsible sources regarding the political, administrative, religious and publicity issues involved. This is a summary of our findings.

"Operation Moshe" had the misfortune of being one of the best-known secrets. Almost anyone in Israel with an interest in the Ethiopians knew, at one point or another, that a dramatic rescue operation was underway.

Those who shared the secret as a result of their official and professional responsibility were allowed to acknowledge the presence of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. This "policy" included Jewish Agency personnel and the press. Both could talk or write about the "absorption" of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. They could not discuss the "immigration" of those Jews. As such, the Jewish Agency Board of Governors, including UJA leaders, were warned not to speak about the operation to save Ethiopian Jews, but were told that they could acknowledge the absorption of Ethiopians in Israel. For the fundraisers, this was not an ideal situation.

In addition, publicity regarding the Ethiopians changed with the weather. In recent years, Israel's military censor has almost totally prohibited any mention of Ethiopians in the press. More recently, the censor began to relax his regulations and Israeli newspapers started reporting events involving Ethiopians in Israel. Frequently, those stories told of the hardships suffered by the Ethiopians. Occasionally, a story with warm human interest would appear.

Eventually, the censor resumed some of his previous behavior. This led to the deletion of even the so-called "absorption" stories and a total blackout of any news that Ethiopians were being "helped" to immigrate to Israel. The censor did, however, behave erratically. His staff would suddenly allow the publication of a human interest story in which newcomers from Ethiopia figured.

At other times, the censor would not. The newspapers themselves had adopted a universal editorial policy to refrain from publicizing the Ethiopians in Israel. That action was taken by the "Editorial Committee" of Israel's newspapers, which has often agreed to practice self-restraint when national security is at stake.

Last week, a small, almost totally unknown Israeli publication, "Nekudah", quoted Yehuda Dominitz, Director-General of the Jewish Agency's Immigration Department, who allegedly stated that "most of the Ethiopians are in Israel." The statement was surprisingly picked up by Reuters and served to back up a story that Israel had carried out a rescue operation of Ethiopia's Jews. It was then quoted by Israel Radio from Reuters (i.e., foreign sources) on Wednesday evening (January 2) and quoted again by the Israeli "afternoon" newspapers the following morning. The censor had apparently been helpless or was no longer willing to continue the facade.

The wave of publicity caused the almost immediate cancellation of further flights and resulted in the intervention of Israel's enemies, who hastened to criticize and threaten those African countries which had seemingly cooperated with Israel.

Many observers now blame the Israel Government Press Office, which decided Thursday afternoon (January 3) to invite the foreign and local press to a briefing now that the Israeli press had publicized the operation. Foreign newsmen were bewildered by the developments. Many had known the story. Some, like the representatives of Time magazine, had tried to report the story but were "wiped out" by the censor. They came to the briefing,

where they were asked to behave with restraint in reporting to their editors, since the lives of people could be at stake. The result was that the reporters were invited to meet the Ethiopians at Jewish Agency absorption centers as soon as arrangements would allow. The briefing by the Government Press Office was tantamount to government acknowledgement that the stories in the Israeli press were indeed true.

Nowhere in the "Nekudah" interview with Mr. Dominitz was there any reference to any aspect of how the Ethiopians came to Israel. There certainly was no mention of an airlift such as described by the Reuters report which quoted Mr. Dominitz. The latter now insists that his remark regarding the number of Ethiopian Jews in Israel was stated off-the-record, and that the publication was at fault for not having presented the interview to the censor for approval.

The most serious accusation, however, was levelled by Knesset Member Shulamit Aloni, who intends to have the legislature discuss her allegation that "the National Religious Party and the Ashkenazi rabbinate" caused the premature publication of "Operation Moshe" in order to halt the immigration of Ethiopians because they are not really Jewish. Israel's Chief Rabbinate, beginning with the late Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Halevi Herzog, father of Israel's current President, was among the first rabbinic authorities to acknowledge that Ethiopian Jews are authentic members of the Jewish nation, and, in recent years, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, when he was Sephardi Chief Rabbi, reinforced that ruling.

Some see contradiction in the fact that Israel's Chief Rabbinate has been insisting on having the Ethiopian newcomers undergo a conversion-like process called "Renewal of the Covenant." Israel's current Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Avraham Shapira, recently explained that this was not a reflection upon their Jewishness, but a means to overcome some of the problems involved resulting from the lengthy separation of Ethiopian Jewry from other Jews. They have been totally ignorant of the Oral Law and the development of Halacha, and it is suspected that they may have brought converts into the fold without the proper procedure. Neither can their marriage and divorce proceedings merit

rabbinic approval. As such, "Renewal of the Covenant" helps the rabbinate avoid all of these sensitive issues and accepts the Ethiopians as proper Jews with all the benefits thereof. Representatives of the NRP have reacted strongly to Ms Aloni's claim, calling her words "blood libel."

There is now the possibility that a board of inquiry will be set up to investigate who was responsible for the premature publication of the operation and the resulting cessation of the airlift. President Herzog appealed to the public and officials to halt further debate on the subject in order to facilitate the continuing efforts to rescue Ethiopian Jewry. Apparently, the question of who is to blame will not be answered now. Instead, the authorities are expected to seek ways to resume their clandestine operation far from the eyes of inquisitive reporters.



The American Jewish Archives
February 8, 1979

Falashas—The Most Forgotten Jews

By Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum
National Interreligious Affairs
Director
American Jewish Committee

They call themselves "Beta Israel," the House of Israel, and according to ancient legend, their origins trace back some 3,000 years as lineal descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

The Ethiopians call them Falashas, a term generally taken to describe the black Jews of that country. In actual fact, Falasha is a term of contempt meaning "strangers" or "living in exile." That pejorative term for the black Jews of Ethiopia is a description of their actual condition, especially today.

Several centuries ago, there were about a half-million Falashas, once proud warriors, rulers of their own Ethiopian kingdom. Today, there are less than 28,000 Falashas left in the 490 isolated villages in the central highlands of Ethiopia, mostly around Gondar.

They have been decimated over the decades in Ethiopian inter-tribal warfare and by intense conversion efforts by missionaries. Ethiopia's recent revolution and civil war, the fighting over

Eritrea and the Ogadon, have resulted in general havoc; destruction and refugee flight, only now simmering down.

And it has meant, too, that several hundred Falasha families were driven from their homes, others robbed of land and livestock, dozens murdered and still others sold into slavery in the Sudan.

Their poverty is beyond imagining. Denied the right to own land, they have become tenant farmers and craftsmen, who eke out an average yearly income of \$60 per month. That compares to \$90 for other Ethiopians, and \$250 for other Africans, hardly a living wage for any human being. They have no hospitals or physicians, they suffer from disease and malnutrition, and their present life expectancy is 36 years.

The past year and a half, however, has seen the beginnings of a serious work training, school and medical program launched in Gondar, in which Jewish organizations and the Falashas participate actively.

Despite their tragic, even abominable, conditions, they have remained faithful Jews observing the Biblical way of life under the spiritual guidance of Kohanim, priestly leaders.

Since they have lived away from the mainstream of Jewish life for nearly a thousand years, for centuries many Rabbinic Jews found difficulty in acknowledging them as Jews—even though they observed all the Biblical rites of the Torah, including circumcision, the Jewish festivals and holy days, and the Sabbath.

But their status as Jews has been clarified, and in 1908 44 chief rabbis proclaimed their legitimacy as authentic Jews. The Chief Rabbis of Israel of today have also reaffirmed their status as Jews, tracing their origins to the Tribe of Dan.

In light of this understanding of their Jewish identity, some 300 Falashas have managed in recent years to find their way to Israel, the Promised Land to which they daily pray to return. These are words of their prayers from the Falasha liturgy:

"Hear our prayer, God, King of the Universe, so that the whole world can be happy with your rule. When you help your people Israel, you help all mankind. Have mercy on the city of Jerusalem. Let us enjoy your kingdom with your Chosen People in Israel."

Those prayers have not yet been responded to either by God or by man. The Falashas are today the most forgotten Jews in the world, and the time is long past due for the Jewish community in the United States and in Israel to help rescue them from their suffering, while there are still some Falashas left alive to save.

The bonds of Jewish peoplehood with the forgotten Falashas must now be strengthened; their suffering reduced, and the recent growing attempts to give their prayers for redemption meaning must now occupy a more central place in the consciousness of Jews and of all who cherish human rights and freedom.

WRFM

Jan 8, 1978

FALSASHAS - THE MOST FORGOTTEN JEWS

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

The ~~call~~ themselves ~~Ethiopian~~ Beta Israel, the House of Israel, and according to ancient legend, their origins trace back some 3,000 years as lineal descendants of King Solomon and ^{the} Queen of Sheba. The Ethiopians call them Falshas, a term generally taken to describe the black Jews of that country. In actual fact, Falasha is a term of contempt meaning strangers or Living in exile. That pejorative term for the black Jews of Ethiopian is an ~~exact~~ description of their actual condition, especially today.

Several centuries ago, there were about a half million Falashas, once proud warriors, rulers of their own Ethiopian Kingdom. Today, there are less than 28,000 Falashas left in the 490 isolated villages in the central highlands of Ethiopia. Their numbers have been decimated through slaughter resulting from Ethiopian inter-tribal warfare, intense conversion efforts by missionaries, and more recently by their being sold into slavery. As a result of the recent revolution and civil war in Ethiopia, the Falashas have been caught in the ideological cross-fire of both right-wing and left-wing forces, resulting in thousands of black Jews ~~have~~ being massacred, or driven from their land, their wives and daughters raped, ~~and~~ or sold into slavery in the Sudan.

Their poverty is beyond imagining. Denied the right to own land, they have become tenant farmers and craftsmen, who eke out an average yearly income of \$60 per month. That compares to \$90 for

other Ethiopians, and \$250 for other Africans, hardly a living wage for any human beings. They have no hospitals or physicians, and they suffer from disease and malnutrition, and their present life expectancy is 36 years.

Despite their tragic, even abominable, conditions, they have remained faithful Jews observing the Biblical way of life under the spiritual guidance of Kohanim, the priestly leaders. Since they departed from Rabbinic Judaism as a result of having lived away from the mainstream of Jewish life for nearly a thousand years, for centuries many Rabbinic Jews found difficulty in acknowledging them as Jews - even though they observed all the Biblical rites of the Torah, including circumcision, and the Jewish festivals and holy days, the Sabbath.

But their status as Jews has been clarified, and in 1908 forty four chief rabbis proclaimed their legitimacy as authentic Jews. The Chief Rabbis of Israel today have also reaffirmed their status as Jews, tracing their origins to the Tribe of Dan.

In light of this understanding of their Jewish identity, some 300 Falshas have managed in recent years to find their ways to Israel, the Promised Land to which they daily pray to return. These are words of their prayers from the Falasha liturgy:

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American Association for Ethiopian Jews

(A merger of the American Pro-Falasha Committee and the Friends of Beta-Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia)

Temporary Address:

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Phone: (914) 738-0956

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum
American Jewish Committee
165 East 56th Street
New York, N. Y. 10022

October 26th, 1978

Dear Marc:

My profoundest thanks for the encouragement that you gave me and many others, who have been working on a stubborn problem facing a remnant of our people in Ethiopia. But the real thanks will ultimately come from the Ethiopian Jews, who are in need of immediate rescue, for they face annihilation. I hope that your report from Sternberg will be fruitful and that we will soon meet with him to take appropriate steps. I also trust that your meeting with Bert Gold and Richard Maas will be equally rewarding.

You asked me to send you references to their being enslaved in Ethiopia. One letter from Yona Bogale, who is a disciple of the late Jacques Faitlovitch, and up until his recent retirement at the age of 70 continued to act as supervisor of the schools set up for the Ethiopian Jews and undoubtedly the best informed person on their condition, states: "The conditions of the Falashas in Begemdir (where most of them live) is constantly degenerating. Falasha craftsmen have actually been held and "sold" as slaves, going roped up from one village to another. They work without pay. They are tied up at night in threes and guarded to prevent their escape. Relations between Jews and Christians deteriorated further and the Christians are waiting for an opportunity to annihilate young and old Jews." "Hundreds of students were murdered by the soldiers in Gondar, including 11 Falashas." (Letter dated March 26th, 1978)

Attached is a copy of the article, which MOMENT will print in some edited form in the November issue (1978).

Awaiting an early call from you. Kol Tov.

Shalom,


Graenum Berger

P. S.. I am enclosing copies of two letters that I received today, October 27th, 1978, the day after I typed the above letter, but before I mailed it. Tragedy upon tragedy.

A Copy of the last annual report may be obtained from the New York State Board of Social Welfare,
Office Tower, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12242

Contributions are tax deductible

Received 10/27/78

Excerpts from the August 1, 1978 letter of Asnakew Sendekah to Haim Halachmy via Eli Tourjeman

RE: The plan of the counterrevolutionary groups to liquidate the Jews and steal their property

It is known to us for a number of days that one of the above mentioned groups has a plan to attack the village of Ambober. Their aim is to take the medicines from the infirmary, and to take as prisoners the agents of Zionism, (as they refer to the teachers who learned in Israel), in order to give them the punishment that we deserve. This will break the Zionist center that prevents the young and the people of the area from working with them.

Not only this, but as it is believed that the Falashas are supporters of the present government, they know that if they attack the village and carry out their plan, the government will think that the Falashas are cooperating with the anti-government forces and then the government will be against the Falashas and will wipe out the village and also the people. Thus the Falashas will be in a situation between the hammer and the anvil.

I hope that you have received the information on the Jews that were attacked in Jenehankerah..... In general, the situation of the Jews in is like that of the Jews in Jenehankerah. In short, I cannot find any word which can express and emphasize the extremely terrible situation of the Jews here. This is to say that they are at death's end and do not know how to escape the situation. In any event, there was belief in their heart that with troubles like there is now, the people of Israel (the nation of Israel), and Jews everywhere, (the nation of Jews), will arrive to help them. And they are waiting for this to happen every day. But the situation that they are in now causes them to despair and to lack hope. Against their will they are being turned into slaves for their neighbors. Those who flee their homes in order to save their lives are without food or clothes... Their sons are joining the army and this will be the end. Lost is the nation of Jews who kept the laws of the Torah and the Jewish traditions. And this is very saddening, that it happens precisely now, when the state of Israel exists.

In addition to this, it is already known to you in writing and by word of mouth, that the situation of the teachers is on the path to death. We receive information every day that the above mentioned groups have a plan to liquidate us. And I hereby request in my name and in the name of my friends to take emergency steps in order to save us.

With loyal blessings,

Asnakew Sendekah

(A Teacher in Ethiopia)

Received 10/27/78

Letter from Gedalia Uria, August 2, 1978
To Haim Halachmy, via Eli Tourjeman

..... some time ago I gave you a report on the terrible situation of all Jews in all places in Ethiopia.

In addition to this, in Simien, in a school called Angot, there was a Falasha teacher named Terune Melleshe who taught in a government school. On 6.7.78, according to the Ethiopian calender, he was murdered by his friends who belong to the anti-government underground. Because he knew that he was going to be killed, he looked for an excuse to flee. He told his friends that he as going to visit his parents in the Gondar area. But his friends told him that he had to join them and work with them against the government. As he knew that he was to be "rubbed out", he gave a letter to his servant with his parent's address. After some time he decided to flee. He left in the middle of the night, with the guard of the school where he taught. But his friends waited in the road and caught him and killed him without any cause.

In addition to this, I want to emphasize once again that the situation of the teachers who were in Israel, is the same as was this teacher's. We have received information from different sources that there is a plan to wipe us out or to take us prisoner by force. In any event, all the time we requested and are requesting that a way be found to save us. But until now our request has not been carried out.

An additional note on the students. I gave you a report on the terrible situation of the students, because from one side the anti-government underground forces them to cooperate with them, but as they do not want to cooperate with them, they are being killed. In this matter, many male and female students have been killed. We are saddened by this, all of us. In order to escape from this, many male and female students have gone and joined the army. Also there they are finding their death by the hands of the enemy. For this, find a way to save them.

In the matter of the situation of the Falashas, it is as I wrote to you, there is no change to talk about. The situation even is worse. If the situation will continue like this, it will be the end of them.

In addition to this, I want to say something again. There are young men and women in Israel that write letters to their parents or relatives here in Ethiopia, that they should move to Addis Abeba and from there will make Aliyah to Israel. On this those who received letters and those who heard of letters are selling their houses and all their property and are traveling to Addis without any results. This turns them into itinerant wanderers. They don't even have the means to return to where they came from. Because of this, they are all being lost to the streets. This saddens us greatly. In order to prevent this, they should receive instructions not to write letters like these.

In great respect,

Gedalia Uria

(A TEACHER IN ETHIOPIA)

4.L.
M.K.

THE BLACK OUT ON BLACK ETHIOPIAN JEWRY

by GRAENUM BERGER

Scores of Jews have been killed. Thousands are refugees in their own country, suffering from a revolution, civil war, locusts, famine and brigands. Some have been rotting in refugee camps for months cut off from their kinsmen and Jewish contacts. Some have been enslaved. THESE JEWS ARE ETHIOPIAN. Neither Israel, nor the Jewish Agency nor the rest of the Jewish world - and more particularly American Jewish leadership - have taken more than a glancing note of these tragic events. With a rare exception, the Jewish press, always hasty to print even a pinch of a Jewish behind, has been equally remiss.

Yet when two Jews recently lost their lives in Iran as a result of the upheavals in that country, it was heralded on the front page of an anglo-Jewish newspaper. Iranian Jews are Sephardic, Caucasian - not BLACK.

Relatedly, Jewish organizations operating in Ethiopia under a "non-sectarian" legend were forced to take note of the plight of these impoverished Jews - penniless, homeless, squatting with their equally destitute relatives in improvised sukkahs (tukkels, mud huts) through the torrential summer, rainy season, where the terrain on which they live, over a mile above sea level, becomes shivering cold and a sea of mud.

No one has given them adequate relief as yet. No one has bothered to rescue them from an ever recurring and hopeless condition. Not one has been brought to Israel (or any other country) since August and December 1977. Even that story of the secret arrival of 121 Jewish men, women and children - barefoot, with only the clothes on their back, has rarely been printed, but not in Israel. Nor has the story been related of their amazing integration within Eretz Yisrael, a country a thousand light years removed from their previous life-style. Nor has even one human interest story been printed anywhere. Among the olim in 1977 was a young, black and comely Ethiopian bride, who flew as did the others on an Israeli military aircraft, to marry the first and only black, Ethiopian Jewish ordained Rabbi in history. Any black athlete, who even contemplates becoming a convert to Judaism, enjoys unlimited and repeated space in American Jewish newspapers. Ethiopian Jewry is BLACKED-OUT in print as well as in color.

If the blame for not genuinely assisting them or bringing about their aliya is not Israel's, or the Jewish Agency's or the world Jewish community's, then on whose back should the cudgels be laid? If the fault lies with Ethiopia, who has no responsible government or organized Jewish body raised the cry of discrimination, of persecution, or violation of human rights - as they have done for Jews elsewhere - demanding that they be set free, allowed to migrate to Israel, the one country towards which they have longed and prayed for millenia? Or is there a covert understanding to leave them abandoned until they die, assimilate or otherwise disappear?

The story of the Ethiopian Jews, Beta Israel as they call themselves, Falashas as they are pejoratively dubbed by others, a term meaning "strangers in their own land," strangers, yes, pariahs, because they continued to espouse and practice Judaism in defiance of their neighbors, who finally overwhelmed their independent kingdom by military force in 1632 - has been told over and over again for the last 200 years. An English adventurer by the name of James Bruce wrote about their existence in 1871, describing them as impoverished, heavily-taxed and downtrodden. He also remarked on their moral superiority to other Ethiopians. Eighty years later, their dire status was once more widely exposed to a Jewish world by a meshumed, Henry A. Stern, a German Jew who became a proselyte to Christendom, and who undertook special mission to Ethiopia just to convert the Falashas to Christ.

While a learned European Jewish scholar, Joseph Halevi, who studied them at first hand, and a distinguished Rabbi, Azriel Hildesheimer, in 1864 proclaimed that they were true Jews, well-funded international Jewish philanthropies even then refused to accept their reports and never extended the generous hand of benevolence to protect and succour the 150,000 still living at ^{THAT} time in abject poverty and easy victims for the insidious missionaries. Pitiful efforts were made by individuals to assist them. In the United States, there is a one sentence report in 1870 of some aid being proffered for their relief. Not until Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch made his adventurous visits to the interior of Ethiopia in 1904-5 and 1908-9 did the world learn of their deteriorating condition, how their numbers had shrunken through poverty, discrimination, disease and missionary activity. (It is estimated that they once numbered a half million, when they dominated a good part of the country up to the 17th century.) Since no international Jewish organizations would assist, Faitlovitch created his own Pro-Falasha Committees in Europe and the United States.

But even his tireless efforts over a period of half a century for the creation of schools for teachers and students ever garnered more than a pittance. His prodigious efforts were to bring them into the 20th century, increase their meagre learnings, which had previously centered only on the circumscribed laws and customs of the ancient Hebrew biblical text, introduce them to Hebrew, rabbinic teachings, contemporary Jewry. But as he met with only a parsimonious response, to this day - of the 28,000 still numbered in a Jewish census undertaken in 1976 by the Falasha Welfare Federation of England, most were never reached by any educational, vocational and medical services.

These modest facilities were destroyed by the Italians, when they conquered the country and controlled it from 1935 to 1943. The few schools and synagogues built with the aid of outside Jewish world support, tended with devotion by a few Ethiopian Jews who had been educated in Europe and Palestine, disappeared and were not rebuilt until twenty years after the Fascist armies had retreated.

Praying daily as they still do towards Jerusalem, the announcement of the establishment of the State of Israel was greeted even in the most remote mountain villages with joy and expectation. The 500 scattered villages where they reside are isolated in space and time from any element of modernity, exhibiting no form of contemporary communication and transportation. Living as they did in mud huts, tending their tenant-rented farms, for they were not permitted to own land, eking out a bare existence by supplementing their farm and animal produce with artisan crafting of iron, clay and textile ware, they still could not earn more than the average annual Ethiopian income of \$70 (US).

In the past three years, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and World ORT have finally stepped in to improve schools, resurrect medical clinics and upgrade agricultural production, but the numbers reached are still fractional.

Ethiopia is a country still ravaged by debilitating diseases - venereal, malaria, amoebic dysentery and small pox. It has only a handful of hospitals, and one doctor to serve 80,000 individuals. So a few clinics were established for some of the Ethiopian Jews. These severely limited facilities, understaffed and lacking adequate medical supplies,

to serve the general population. Otherwise they would not have been given permission to open such a life-saving facility. Since most of the wells were contaminated, recently a rebuilding program has been initiated to assure a safer water supply.

Most of the 30 million Ethiopians are illiterate. The score or more of mini-schools that were established for the Falashas in an

effort to preserve and partially modernize their Jewish culture, were in the main one room (often with the sky for a rooftop), rarely going beyond the second grade. Even today only one school attains the sixth grade and during the past year the main school at Ambober finally added classes for the seventh and eighth years. Since the schools by law had to be open to all children, this meant that no more Jewish children have been served, and there is growing danger that their census may decline, particularly since funding for expansion comes principally from non-Jewish sources. Children had to walk as far as 40 kilometers a day to study, because until this year no one had ever bothered to build a rustic hostel to shelter and feed them during their week of study. Except for a small group of Ethiopian Jews trained in Israel, and literally forced to go back to their native country when they completed their studies, few of the teachers were fully prepared. Today the schools have to rely increasingly on non-Falashas, both by law and availability of personnel, for the greater portion of their teaching staff. The Jewish Agency conducted a training program in Jewish subject matter during the summer of 1976, but such in-service supervision had to be done secretly and occurs sporadically. The schools, originally and ostensibly designed to ensure the continuity of Jewish life, will lose that influential role as they become increasingly integrated.

Jewish life over the years was sustained by Kohanim (priests), for the institution of the Rabbi in either the Talmudic or contemporary sense, was never introduced. These men, who up to recent times often led almost a monastic existence, were the true bearers of the Jewish heritage - for they nurtured circumcision on the eighth day, guarded the sacred and solemn observance of the Sabbath, the Holy Days and Festivals legislated in the Hebrew Testament, gave their benediction at marriages and presided over infrequent divorce proceedings, and buried their dead in the traditional Jewish manner. Intermarriage was forbidden on pain of excommunication - as was adultery and prostitution. Thus their firm family life and moral purity has been noted by many an off-beat traveller. Shechita (ritual slaughter of animals) was a rite practiced in accordance with the Biblical version. True, the priests looked upon the newly trained teachers with grave suspicion. They were displacing their traditional role, introducing a new language - for the Kohan still read the Bible in the ancient Ethiopian tongue - Ghez, adding new post-biblical holidays like Hanuka and Purim. The teachers with their

more democratic exposures were bringing a more critical attitude not only to the historic texts, but towards the views and role of their elders. The "foreign" trained teachers wore western dress, an importation from Israel or the Ethiopian cities, displacing the exotic, flimsy cotton shama and turban, the classic garb of both priest and lay person.

But the new State of Israel did not welcome them. This they could not understand. No emissaries (messengers) were dispatched to the Ethiopian hinterland to fly them to Israel. The Ethiopian Jews were aware of the miraculous rescue on "Wings of Eagles" of their kinsmen in Yemen. While Israeli planes (El Al and military) flew regularly to Addis Ababba, no emissaries or travel agents recruited them for migration or even to work in Israel. The few Falasha adolescents who were taken to the Mizrahi school at Kfar Batya in the mid-1950s, were expected to return to their villages to perform the roles for which they were being prepared - chiefly as teachers and medical aids. This adventurous training program was abruptly terminated in a few years, so there were never enough teachers or medical dressers to fill their minimal requirements. Those who went to Israel never forgot their contacts with the ancient homeland and with the broader Jewish world, and some of them have since managed to return.

Some 165 Falashas entered Israel between 1948 and 1977 -- all "illegally," even though every obstacle was put in their way by Israeli authorities. Some even had to pose as Christian pilgrims with crosses around their necks in order reach their own sacred land. (It is worth noting that there are Ethiopian churches in Israel, an Ethiopian Embassy - temporarily out of service - and it is estimated that over 1000 Ethiopians (non-Falashas) reside in the country.)

While the Jewish Agency secretly provided help for their educational programs in Ethiopia, such efforts were designed to have them remain there permanently. It never undertook a mission to promote aliya, although the Jewish world has lavishly supported this Agency on the premiss that this was its major task.

To keep them out of Israel, rumours were circulated that they were not really Jews; or that they suffered from loathsome, contagious diseases; or that they were not capable of dwelling in a western society; or that their exotic, unique culture would be destroyed if they moved en masse out of their native land; or that Haile Selassie did not want to let them go. The late Emperor is said to have "protected" them, since they were the only visible link with his alleged ancient lineal descent from the union of the Queen of Sheba with King Solomon some three thousand years ago. Since he never did anything for his own Coptic Christians

and Moslem populations, it is difficult to believe that Jewish leaders, who visit^{ed} the monarch at his court, were really taken in by such comments, but they nevertheless spread the word around and it too undermined efforts to promote their migration. Falashas had never profited from his autocratic ts. He never removed historic disabilities against them, except for the handful of Falashas, who had managed to get a western education without benefit of his assistance. They were indispensable to his under-manned, untrained administrative apparatus. Such Falashas did not parade their Jewish origins or associations. It is worth noting that no Falashas could enroll in either a high school or college, few as they were in Ethiopia, unless they "passed" as Ethiopian Christians. In the process some never returned to the Jewish fold.

When the emperor was finally deposed by the revolution in September 1974, it is curious that there were some world Jewish leaders, who actually believed that this would be good for the Ethiopian Jews. They would now be given land, a major plank of the revolutionary agrarian program. Perhaps in time they would enjoy other civic freedoms. It was obvious from the outset that this would become a violent, bloody, socialist regime with overtones of nationalism that would preclude the Falashas. While it is questionable whether revolutions were ever good, whether in their early stages and often not even in their later periods (Russia is as good an example as any) for the culture of the Jewish population, all these hopeful evaluations of this one proved equally illusory. The Jews have not only not succeeded in obtaining any land, which has already been widely distributed, but they have^{in 1974} been dispossessed^{sed} of their high rent, highly taxed tenant holdings. They are now more landless than before. With Nationalism rampant, with civil war killing the opposition day and night, with an army hastily martialled to combat both dissidents and the enemy in Somali, Eritrea and Sudan, youth and young husbands have been ruptured from their families, disrupting family life. With the sealing of the borders, they have found no means of clandestine escape. Even the 60 non-Falasha Jewish families living in Ethiopia, all refugees from Aden some 25 years ago, have had their property confiscated and had to ultimately flee the country. But unlike the Falashas, most of them had British passports, were well-to-do, had political connections and could escape with their lives intact.

In the present dictatorial regime's efforts to socialize and nationalize all economic holdings and homogenise the numerous ethnic cultures which dot the terrain, the distinctive Jewish culture is in even more serious jeopardy. Their numbers are to begin with small. They are politically powerless. Their children are being drafted into the national youth forces and the army, where they are brainwashed with militant slogans and inspired to take on radically new loyalties, which are both anti-family and anti-ethnic group. So this ancient culture, preserved with blood for centuries, perhaps for millenia, against every provocation and outright physical attack is now on the verge of extinction.

The severance of relations with Israel in 1973, as a result of the Yom Kippur War, when African nations aligned themselves with the Arab states whether they wished to or not, and the further fear of a using the wrath of the Arab nations if Jews were allowed to augment the manpower of Israel by migration, and the recent "invasion" of the country by Soviet Russian and Communist Cuban military forces to repel the Somalis and Eritreans, has produced a coalition of events that defy any promise for the Ethiopian Jews, if they remain in that country. Thousands prayed that somehow the Jewish world would find a means to help them reach Israel. Every rumor caused many of them to abandon their villages and move quietly, often on foot for hundreds of kilometers, to the capital, Addis Ababba. But no welcoming or helping Jewish hand was there to receive them. Eventually they were forced back to their insecure homes, where they now live as virtual refugees, or hostages, or enslaved.

There is a lot of ideal talk, seriously uttered by knowledgeable Jews, that if they really wanted to go to Israel, they would risk their necks and find some subterranean route. They compare them with Jews from other lands, who somehow found a way to escape. Therefore they conclude, that they are not sure that the Ethiopian Jews really want to leave Ethiopia and go to Israel. They forget that most of the Jewish migrations to Israel, or elsewhere, were motivated and financed by relatives, by friends, by landsmanschaften, by international Jewish organisations, by entrepreneurs looking for cheap labor, who dispatched emissaries and money to assist such a movement. But the Ethiopian Jews live far from any ports of embarkation either for ship or air. They live amongst unfriendly neighbors, who would turn them in for ancient revenge or any bounty promised by an over-suspicious political

regime. They are without funds, or means of transportation, or underground connections that would make any exodus possible. They would go, if there was even a single person available to direct them, but such a person does not exist at the present time. Even their final flight to Israel in the 1970s was a last minute improvisation with one individual looking after their final details and welfare. He came temporarily from abroad. They cannot do it on their own. They need the help of responsible, experienced, well financed Jewish world machinery, which has proven expert in similar roles in all other countries of the world. But a surreptitious migration, even if it could save some scores and even hundreds, is not an effective means of saving 28,000 Jewish lives. It must therefore be an open and above board migration with the consent, no matter how grudging, of both parties. They are not needed in Ethiopia, for they cannot augment the wealth of that nation. But their modest artisan skills, their knowledge of midwifery, their intelligence and language adaptability, their religious convictions are collective assets that the Jewish world and especially Israel needs and could exploit for the sake of the continuity not only of the Ethiopian Jews but for all the Jewish people.

If Israel, because of delicate international diplomacy cannot undertake this task on its own, there are other countries, including the United States with its vaunted Human Rights policies and its Congressional Committee for the support and rescue of refugees from other lands, which could be enlisted for this effort both directly with Ethiopia or through other international channels. Israel has contacts, resources and know-how on the best methods of utilizing this extra-national approach.

But the Ethiopian Jews cannot survive, if the Jewish world resorts to their rescue on a one by one basis, through the humanitarian appeal of reuniting families, which seems to have succeeded in other instances. This may save a few hundred lives, but it is not a platform for saving an entire national group from oblivion.

It has been noted by people who know of their presence in Israel, that they have made a remarkable accommodation, largely by dint of their quiet efforts. Some are already completing their university studies. Some have become expert mechanics, although they never saw or handled machine of any kind before they left their inaccessible villages.

Many of the women were rapidly trained and immediately employed as wives and nurses, both in short supply in Israel. They have made excellent soldiers. Several have been killed in action for a country, which had initially questioned their entry. They swing on the same playgrounds and attend the same schools as their white fellow Jews. Recreational leaders and teachers remark about their intelligence, cooperation and favorable relations with their play and class mates. Their neighbors, white or darker hued, receive them with cordial hospitality, and all kinds of colored bodies can be found at their simchas - from a brit milah to a wedding. Some have already married Yemenites, Indian Jews, Sephardi and Ashkenazis.

A public opinion survey in 1975 and several reports of sociologists have revealed that there is little color prejudice amongst the PEOPLE of Israel. Would that the attitudes of the bureaucrats placed in strategic positions in the several departments of immigration and absorption had a matching benevolence.

They are comely, solemn and gracious in manner, reverent towards elders, and if Israel doesn't erase it with its melange of pluralistic ideologies, they will remain loyal to the traditional practices of Judaism. They have demonstrated that they can become part of the western scene as easily and as beneficially for themselves and the country, as any other Israeli. It is their intention to remain in Israel forever and not use it as a jumping off point for some more favorable economic climate.

Both Chief Rabbis have once again declared they are Jews.

The government has officially ruled that they are eligible to come under the Law of return.

Then why the BLACK OUT on BLACK JEWS?

If Israeli wont negotiate their release; if the Jewish Agency will not fulfill its well supported responsibilities; if world Jewish leaders continue to be silent partners to this imminent holocaust; then it will be incumbent for an independent group to come forward, tell the true story to the world press, and send an independent mission to Ethiopia to save Isaiah's "Remnant of Israel."

American Association for Ethiopian Jews

[A merger of the American Pro-Falasha Committee and the Friends of Beta-Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia]

Eastern Regional Office
340 Cortlies Avenue
Pelham, New York 10803
(914) 738-0956

National Materials Center
6505 Wilshire Blvd., Room 802
Los Angeles, California 90048
(213) 852-1049

Western Regional Office
304 Robin Hood Lane
Costa Mesa, California 92627
(714) 642-8613

Dear Engers,

TO: MARC
TAVENBAUM

I get mail from
him also -

I know you guys are very busy, but I'm glad
to see all of 17 records to edit Tavenbaum's
and Mass' Pessam messages to show that they
have the Ethiopian Jews on their mind.

Happy Pessam,

Howard Zuckin

A copy of the last annual report may be obtained from the New York State Board of Social Welfare,
Office Tower, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12242, or from the Association

Contributions are tax deductible

FRIDAY, MAR. 28, 1980

This Passover

BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

At sundown Monday, March 31, the Jewish people throughout the world begin the observance of Pesach, or Passover, the oldest and undoubtedly the most influential of the Jewish festivals. Known in Jewish tradition as Zman Cherutenu, the Season of Freedom, Passover commemorates the Liberation of the Israelites from bondage of Pharaoh in Egypt.

The term Exodus conventionally is understood to stress the physical aspect of liberation. But the Exodus from Egypt was more truly and profoundly an act of liberation from intolerable spiritual bondage. The Exodus involved unalterable opposition to the spiritual values of Egyptian civilization. In Egypt, the king was regarded as a god, a divine mediator; he was the source and master of the law of the land, never its servant. In that worldview, men and women were enslaved to the authority of mortal kings with divine pretensions, and were foredoomed to the whims of capricious and unpredictable cosmic powers.

The rejection of Egypt by Moses and the Israelites was thus a declaration of spiritual independence, an act of self-determination of a people to seek a life of human dignity, personal responsibility and hope. Hence the Biblical story of how a God of justice and freedom espoused the cause of brick-making slaves against a royal oppressor has become a universal parable, and a decisive turning point in the spiritual orientation of mankind.

But Passover celebrates not only the redemption as a past event; it is celebrated as much through the Jewish ceremonies as the Seder family service, as a present-day experience. And that is why this Passover, the plight of the Jews in Iran, the Soviet Union and of Jews in Arab countries will be uppermost in the minds and hearts of Jewish families everywhere.

When the fourth matzo of hope is uncovered at the Seder table, and when the words "Next Year in Jerusalem" are recited, these will not be acts of ceremonial remembrance of the ancient Exodus alone, but a fervent recommitment of resolve to the unending struggle for liberation and justice, until the Exodus of Soviet Jewry and that of all people who seek freedom and self-determination are realized everywhere.

today. The front pages of our newspapers report each day instances of hostages being held against their will, either as individuals, or in groups, or even entire nations.

Our hearts go out at this season to our fellow Jews who are Prisoners of Conscience in Soviet Russia; to the Jews in the ghettos of Syria still subject to persecution and discrimination; and to Jews in other lands still oppressed for no other reason than the fact that they are Jews.

As we breathe the air of freedom in our American democracy, we are also particularly sensitive to events in Iran and in Afghanistan, two recent instances in which hostages have been subject to seizure. After thousands of recorded history, man seemingly still exhibits uncouth displays of inhumanity to his fellow human beings. The hearts of many modern Pharaohs are still unyielding to those whom they hold in bondage. The eternal hope of man to be free still must contend with oppression, hostility and injustice.

ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia



The Black Jews of Ethiopia: an Endangered Species

By RACHAMIM ALAZAR

For more than 2,000 years, in small villages scattered high in the rugged mountains along the Great Rift of northeast Africa, my people have paused from their work every Sabbath and studied the Bible. But, unless a major effort is undertaken to aid them soon, in the next five to ten years they, like most minority groups caught in the crossfire of civil war and a revolution in a poor country, will be but a memory, a footnote on the pages of history.

I am a Jew from Ethiopia now living in Israel. I am black. In Ethiopia they call us *falashas*, Amharic for strangers. We call ourselves *Beta Yisrael*, House of Israel.

Once we were a proud people with a territory—as well as a culture, tradition and literature—of our own. In the 16th Century, when we numbered approximately one-half million, we ruled over a significant part of Ethiopia. And, until the establishment of modern Israel four centuries later, we were the last Jewish state.

At the end of the 16th Century, however, the Ethiopians, reinforced by Portuguese guns, overthrew the Jewish kingdom, enslaved our people, destroyed our books, seized our land and, from that time on, relegated us to the low status of sharecroppers and serfs.

Our number dwindled rapidly—halved to 250,000 in 1850 when we were discovered by missionaries, fell to 100,000 by the turn of the 20th Century, and has plunged to a mere 28,000 today. Like most Ethiopians, we suffered from disease and poverty and, in addition, because we were landless sharecroppers, we had to return 75% of our harvest to the landowners and to the state. In short, we were among the poorest people of one of the world's poorest countries.

Today we are being driven by the thousands from our rented farms. Our oppressors are not members of the new revolutionary government of Ethiopia who want to return the land to all the people, but the former feudal landlords who continue to forcefully oppose the new government policies in the remote areas where the majority of my people live.

These counterrevolutionary coalitions are trying to usurp as much territory as possible now before the government, currently preoccupied with wars in the Eritrean and Oga-den regions, is able to bring stability to the areas where we live.

To accomplish their aims, those landlords are kidnaping our young people to serve in their armies and to be sold as slaves for funds to purchase munitions.

Slaves. Jewish slaves in 1980—incredible as it seems, civilization has not really changed since the time of Moses. What is even more incredible is that many politicians in America and in our spiritual homeland, Israel, are aware of my people's plight. Yet no one in power has lifted a finger to save this most ancient of Jewish communities.

In Israel, I live with 330 of my Ethiopian brothers and sisters. We hear every day about the tragedies befalling our people. Many are at the brink of starvation. For two millennia, our people have prayed facing Jerusalem, like all Jews, to express our longing to return to the Jewish homeland and to practice our religious beliefs in peace. For hundreds of years, we strove to preserve our Jewish traditions under all sorts of hardships, thinking that we were the only Jews left in the world.

And now no one will listen.

The Israeli government appears to be ineffective in dealing with the plight of our people. Prime Minister Menachem Begin says that he favors the immigration of the *falashas*, but there is no evidence that he is doing anything to further it.

We believe that the main roadblock is a handful of bureaucrats in the Israeli Ministry of the Interior and in the Jewish Agency who flout the major tenet on which the Jewish state was established—to provide a homeland for all Jews. We hold no malice toward the Ethiopian government, which wants to bring reform to its people in place of the feudal tyranny of former Emperor Haile Selassie.

I have traveled to your country as a representative of my people to ask the Jews of America to offer their succor to the Jews of Ethiopia, just as in the past they have helped Jews from the Soviet Union, from Syria, from all over the world. And I ask the generous people of America to encourage Washington to send food and medical aid to all the people of Ethiopia. We have always been your friends, and now we have nowhere else to turn. □

Rachamim Alazar, who emigrated to Israel from Ethiopia in 1972, is completing his studies in African and Mideast history at Tel Aviv University. He recently visited Los Angeles while on a nationwide speaking tour sponsored by the American Association for Ethiopian Jews.

Contact: Prof. Howard M. Lenhoff
304 Robin Hood Lane
Costa Mesa, California 92627
714/642-8613

TO: Editor

RE: Falasha Prayer for Your Passover Edition

Please save a spot in your Passover edition, the holiday of freedom, for this moving Falasha prayer written in the mountains of Africa centuries and centuries ago.

A FALASHA PRAYER

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,
And let me listen to the words of the just
while they speak about the Law.
To teach fear of thee, O Lord, King forever.
Thou art blessed, O Lord, be merciful to me.
By day be Thou my shepherd, and my guardian at night.
When I walk be my guide, when I sit be my guardian.
When I call Thee keep Thou not silent.
I love Thee, hate me not;
I have confidence in Thee,
ABANDON ME NOT.

From Falasha Anthology by Wolf Leslau, p. 126, Yale University Press,
New Haven (1951).

editorial views of the news

The Falashas—a shameful chapter



By J.I. FISHBEIN

One of the prominent jurists of our Jewish community is making it his business at every meeting he attends, to stand up and ask the question, "What are we doing for the Falashas?"

As is well known, the Sentinel was the first publication to bring the problem to the attention of the Jewish world back in 1968 when we made our initial trip to Ethiopia and had the good fortune to be taken into the mountains where they lived by the "Dr. Schweitzer" of that region, an Israeli named Dr. Felczer. He was on loan to the Ethiopian government, had used his own meager funds to build very primitive clinics in the Falasha villages, and had grown cynical by the refusal of world Jewry to come to the Falashas' aid.

Subsequently, as the record will show — although now there is studied attempt to re-write history — we took our 8mm film that we had brought back, for a year trudged from synagog to synagog collecting nickles and dimes which were forwarded to the capitol of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa. With this money, we rented a large tract of land in the northwest portion of Ethiopia, purchased several modern tractors, established a Falasha settlement and returned a year later to make the hazardous journey in a chartered Cessna plane to Asmara to check on its accomplishments.

We should point out that during this

time we also pleaded with all the Jewish agencies — JDC, ORT, HIAS, even going so far as to send our co-publisher to London where the offices of an organization supposedly supplying the Falashas with assistance was located — in a vain effort to get help. The answer — or rather excuse we got — was "are they authentic Jews?"

Finally, in 1973, the Israeli rabbinate agreed they were Jews and we thought the problem was finally solved.

In the meantime, Emperor Haile Selassie was deposed, internal disruption occurred and now a left-wing government favored by Moscow controls the country.

Within the past year the plight of the Falasha became so desperate that a new effort to save the remnants was undertaken by a merged organization whose headquarters are in Los Angeles called the "American Association for Ethiopian Jews." They have carried on a tireless battle to stir Israel into action. We have stayed out of it partly because we have no desire to embarrass Israel during this difficult time of negotiations and partly because there comes a time when the most stout-hearted find the odds too great.

What made us decide to speak at this time was the publication of a front page article in the Chicago Tribune last Monday in column 1 entitled "Falasha - 'boat people' of the Mideast" by Clarence Page. We can sweep the issue under the rug no longer.

According to the story in the Tribune:

"It is a tragedy that Israel, a country founded to provide a homeland for the world's displaced Jews, has not reached out to help the Falasha," said Nate Shapiro, a Highland Park stockbroker who heads the Chicago chapter of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews.

"They are being slaughtered, tortured, and sold into slavery in Ethiopia, yet the Israeli government won't do anything to help bring them to Israel, where they desperately want to go."

Shapiro, whose family origins are Russian, has been campaigning locally for the Falasha ever since neo-Nazis threatened to march on Skokie and he became aware

of "the holocausts that exist today," he said. So far, his efforts have won the support of the 12 North Shore synagogues and other Jewish leaders, but he is dismayed that most action has gone no further than resolutions.

All sorts of excuses have been given for Israel's failure to take in only 350 Falashas during all this time. Approximately 150 immigrated into Israel during the past five years while nearly 400 Vietnamese boat people were brought into Israel during 1979 alone.

Some say it is a matter of red tape bureaucracy; others say the absorption department prefers to work quietly rather than stir up Ethiopian resentment. All of this is pure bunk.

The real answer was given by Moshe Bar-Yehuda, official of Israel's Labor Federation, as told to a UPI reporter on Feb. 23, 1979, in the Los Angeles Times:

"...The first is prejudice — the color of their skin. The government does not want them here. Secondly, the Israeli government doesn't want to endanger diplomatic contacts with African states."

The Israeli newspaper Davar says: "The Falashas did not come because they were not wanted. This is the naked truth and it must be said."

One of the responsible shlichim of the Jewish Agency who is not concerned with this matter reported on the weekly review of Israeli radio that a highly placed person in the State, a person with a great religious responsibility, said to him: "Mi tzarich et hashchorim ha-ele?" (Who needs those Blacks?) (Bamaaracha, Feb. 1979.)

In all fairness, it should be noted that Prime Minister Begin has recently urged a world-wide public campaign to save the Falasha. It should also be said that Israel is not the only one to blame; the rich and powerful American Jewish community have money for everything under the sun but not enough to save their fellow Jews in Ethiopia.

Whatever happens, history will have to record this whole disgraceful mess as one of the most shameful chapters in Jewish history. All of us are to blame. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves.

Weizman puts off question of Falashas; group shocked

Sentinel

February 21, 1980

Things were not going too well for the pro-Falasha activists attending the annual national meeting of the North American Student Network held in Washington, DC this winter.

The enthusiasm they had expected from our college youth to support the Falasha cause met some of the same kind of opposition encountered with many of our adult community leaders who have been propagandized by the UJA into almost absolute blind faith in the



Jewish Agency and politicians of Israel.

But it took the arrogant, disinterested words of Ezer Weizman, the man being talked about as Begin's successor, to turn around even the most skeptical of the students.

What did Weizman, Israel's chief negotiator with Sadat, do or say to cause this dramatic switch in the college students' attitude? Here are the reconstructed events as told to me by four different students who attended the conference:

Defense Minister Weizman was an unexpected guest at the conference. He was in New York at the time. When he heard he had a chance to speak to 500 leading student activists of the U.S., he traveled to Washington for a special two-hour meeting with them. The discussion was controlled and the students had to submit their names beforehand to be called upon. Weizman's discussion took place one day after the Falasha liberation leader, Baruch Tegegne, had given an emotional speech to the students discussing the plight of his people.

Student A: Mr. Defense Minister, yesterday I saw my first Falasha.

Weizman: (With a twinkle in his eye, he jumped back dramatically from the podium and with feigned amazement): You saw your first WHAT? (Random chuckles)

Student A: I saw my first Falasha. I understand their plight is very serious. What is there that can be done?

Weizman: (Leaning forward with great drama): The less I tell you, the more Falashas will get out.

Student B, out of turn: But wait, I understand that Israel has announced a public campaign to publicize the plight of the Falashas. It should not be necessary to be quiet.

Weizman: Excuse me, I didn't recognize you. However, if there is a public campaign of any sort, I'm not aware of it.

Student C: Mr. Weizman, I would just like to be reassured by you, because if the rescue of the Ethiopian Jews is of high priority to the Israeli government, how is it that you, as defense minister, are not aware that there is now a public campaign to rescue the Falashas that has been endorsed by the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency?

Weizman: I am not aware of such a public campaign. Maybe the Jewish Agency was instigating such a campaign, but I do not remember it being discussed in the government. Besides which, all the people in the cabinet have their own problems to worry about. I myself have my own problems. (Boos and hisses)

Weizman indicated again he was not aware of the public campaign, so a Network student leader leaned over to the podium to tell Weizman of the dates that these pronouncements were made in Israel by Begin and Dulzin of the Jewish Agency.

Weizman, turning to the leader and speaking away from the microphone, said angrily in a low voice and in Hebrew, but still audible to the audience: "Leave me alone, 'Ma chaserli Falashim?' (All I need now is the Falashas?)"

The students in the audience who knew Hebrew threw their heads back in disbelief as the defense minister said these words.

Recognizing his faux pas, later Weizman said to the student audience, "Let me clarify it so it is very clear, so you won't try to misattribute something to me. You'll go around saying I said 'Falasha Shmalasha.'"

At that moment, virtually the whole student group emitted boos and whistles. Embarrassed, at the end of the session the outgoing president of Network got up to respond to Weizman, but Weizman was whisked away by his security people.

Nonetheless, the president of Network got up in front of the whole group and said, "My friends, I think the time has passed when an Israeli government leader can stand in front of Jews and say 'Falasha-Shmalasha.' We would not have tolerated it in the 30s if he said 'Yecka-Shmecka' (referring to German Jews). And the time has passed when anyone can speak flippanantly on the plight of the Falashas. As long as any Falasha is in trouble, 'we are all Falashas.'" (Thunderous applause).

Later, some students learned that when Weizman was told that he had lost friends by his cavalier attitude, he appeared perturbed, but not apologetic. He said, "Well, they are always out to misunderstand me. I want to save the Falashas as much as the next guy."

We hope so. Nonetheless, we question why a man in such a powerful position who is being talked about as the next prime minister of Israel, was so uninformed about the government policy regarding the Falashas. To the students it seemed as if he didn't care to be informed. At least, this is what came across.

To get more information and to help get the Falashas to Israel
SEND YOUR TAX DEDUCTIBLE GIFTS TO:
American Association for Ethiopian Jews
6505 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 802
Los Angeles, Calif. 90048

The Black Jews of Ethiopia: an Endangered Species

By RACHAMIM ALAZAR

For more than 2,000 years, in small villages scattered high in the rugged mountains along the Great Rift of northeast Africa, my people have paused from their work every Sabbath and studied the Bible. But, unless a major effort is undertaken to aid them soon, in the next five to ten years they, like most minority groups caught in the crossfire of civil war and a revolution in a poor country, will be but a memory, a footnote on the pages of history.

I am a Jew from Ethiopia now living in Israel. I am black. In Ethiopia they call us *falashas*, Amharic for strangers. We call ourselves *Beta Yisrael*, House of Israel.

Once we were a proud people with a territory—as well as a culture, tradition and literature—of our own. In the 16th Century, when we numbered approximately one-half million, we ruled over a significant part of Ethiopia. And, until the establishment of modern Israel four centuries later, we were the last Jewish state.

At the end of the 16th Century, however, the Ethiopians, reinforced by Portuguese guns, overthrew the Jewish kingdom, enslaved our people, destroyed our books, seized our land and, from that time on, relegated us to the low status of sharecroppers and serfs.

Our number dwindled rapidly—halved to 250,000 in 1850 when we were discovered by missionaries, fell to 100,000 by the turn of the 20th Century, and has plunged to a mere 28,000 today. Like most Ethiopians, we suffered from disease and poverty and, in addition, because we were landless sharecroppers, we had to return 75% of our harvest to the landowners and to the state. In short, we were among the poorest people of one of the world's poorest countries.

Today we are being driven by the thousands from our rented farms. Our oppressors are not members of the new revolutionary government of Ethiopia who want to return the land to all the people, but the former feudal landlords who continue to forcefully oppose the new government policies in the remote areas where the majority of my people live.

These counterrevolutionary coalitions are trying to usurp as much territory as possible now before the government, currently preoccupied with wars in the Eritrean and Oga-den regions, is able to bring stability to the areas where we live.

To accomplish their aims, those landlords are kidnaping our young people to serve in their armies and to be sold as slaves for funds to purchase munitions.

Slaves. Jewish slaves in 1980—incredible as it seems, civilization has not really changed since the time of Moses. What is even more incredible is that many politicians in America and in our spiritual homeland, Israel, are aware of my people's plight. Yet no one in power has lifted a finger to save this most ancient of Jewish communities.

In Israel, I live with 330 of my Ethiopian brothers and sisters. We hear every day about the tragedies befalling our people. Many are at the brink of starvation. For two millennia, our people have prayed facing Jerusalem, like all Jews, to express our longing to return to the Jewish homeland and to practice our religious beliefs in peace. For hundreds of years, we strove to preserve our Jewish traditions under all sorts of hardships, thinking that we were the only Jews left in the world.

And now no one will listen.

The Israeli government appears to be ineffective in dealing with the plight of our people. Prime Minister Menachem Begin says that he favors the immigration of the *falashas*, but there is no evidence that he is doing anything to further it.

We believe that the main roadblock is a handful of bureaucrats in the Israeli Ministry of the Interior and in the Jewish Agency who flout the major tenet on which the Jewish state was established—to provide a homeland for all Jews. We hold no malice toward the Ethiopian government, which wants to bring reform to its people in place of the feudal tyranny of former Emperor Haile Selassie.

I have traveled to your country as a representative of my people to ask the Jews of America to offer their succor to the Jews of Ethiopia, just as in the past they have helped Jews from the Soviet Union, from Syria, from all over the world. And I ask the generous people of America to encourage Washington to send food and medical aid to all the people of Ethiopia. We have always been your friends, and now we have nowhere else to turn. □

Rachamim Alazar, who emigrated to Israel from Ethiopia in 1972, is completing his studies in African and Mideast history at Tel Aviv University. He recently visited Los Angeles while on a nationwide speaking tour sponsored by the American Association for Ethiopian Jews.

Contact: Prof. Howard M. Lenhoff
304 Robin Hood Lane
Costa Mesa, California 92627
714/642-8613

TO: Editor

RE: Falasha Prayer for Your Passover Edition

Please save a spot in your Passover edition, the holiday of freedom, for this moving Falasha prayer written in the mountains of Africa centuries and centuries ago.

A. FALASHA PRAYER

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,
And let me listen to the words of the just
while they speak about the Law.
To teach fear of thee, O Lord, King forever.
Thou art blessed, O Lord, be merciful to me.
By day be Thou my shepherd, and my guardian at night.
When I walk be my guide, when I sit be my guardian.
When I call Thee keep Thou not silent.
I love Thee, hate me not;
I have confidence in Thee,
ABANDON ME NOT.

From Falasha Anthology by Wolf Leslau, p. 126, Yale University Press,
New Haven (1951).

American Association for Ethiopian Jews

(A merger of the American Pro-Falasha Committee and the Friends of Beta-Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia)

Temporary Address:
340 Corlies Avenue
Pelham, New York 10803
Phone: (914) 738-0956

October 13, 1978

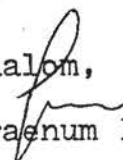
Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum
American Jewish Committee
165 East 56th Street
New York, N. Y. 10022

Dear Marc:

Thanks for arranging to see me on Wednesday, October 25th at 10:30 A. M. Yes, there is an emergency. Some of the Ethiopian Jews have been killed, some held as hostages, some sold as slaves and thousands are living as refugees in their own land. Reports have come that there are scores in refugee camps rotting away in Sudan. Until some weeks ago, even the two Jewish agencies like ORT and JDC working in Ethiopia denied the seriousness of these reports. Now they are beginning to provide assistance to some and merely investigating other conditions. Not a single Ethiopian Jew has been brought to Israel since December 1977, and then only because of the ceaseless pressure of our organization. World Jewry must come to their rescue immediately: by Israel sending some one of Cabinet Level to negotiate for the release of 28,000 Jews, all of whom want to go to Israel; by a high level American Jewish mission going to Ethiopia and Sudan to see for itself under what horrible conditions Jews have been forced to live (if you want to call it living); and if Ethiopia objects to either, then the world must be told in no uncertain terms, that Ethiopia is denying Jews their right to migrate, in an effort to open up the gates for their rescue. Otherwise some of us are left with no other alternative, but to tell this wretched story in full page ads in the New York TIMES.

I'm enclosing a number of articles that our organization circulates to those who are interested in the welfare of the most neglected Jewish group in the world.

Kol tov. Chag Sameach.

Shalom,

Graenum Berger

A Copy of the last annual report may be obtained from the New York State Board of Social Welfare,
Office Tower, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12242

Contributions are tax deductible

American Association for Ethiopian Jews

[A merger of the American Pro-Falasha Committee and the Friends of Beta-Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia]

Eastern Regional Office
340 Corlies Avenue
Pelham, New York 10803
(914) 738-0956

National Materials Center
6505 Wilshire Blvd., Room 802
Los Angeles, California 90048
(213) 852-1049

Western Regional Office
304 Robin Hood Lane
Costa Mesa, California 92627
(714) 642-8613

Dear Rabbi,

As Passover, the holiday of freedom, approaches, our thoughts turn once again to those Jews less fortunate than we are. Although the established American Jewish groups are now circulating their yearly supplementary Seder prayer for the Jews of the Soviet Union, and perhaps of Syria, Iran and Argentina – few, if any, make mention of the Falashas (Beta Yisrael) – The Black Jews of Ethiopia.

The American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ), a small rank and file organization, with no paid staff, for years has been virtually alone in trying to inform American Jews that there are 28,000 Jews living in Northwestern Ethiopia under the worst possible conditions.

Today their conditions are further worsened by the wars and unrest now afflicting Ethiopia. After years of deep involvement in this issue, we are forced to conclude that certain powerful elements in Israel are against the Falashas making aliyah, while the established American Jewish "leadership" blindly accepts "official" explanations. Without going through all the sordid facts (many of which have been published), we still have to ask ourselves:

Why are there less than 400 Falashas in Israel today when Israel, in 1979, was able to bring in 400 boat people? And how was it possible that 1000 Christian pilgrims from Ethiopia were visitors in Israel during the same year?

Why has the UJA in the tons of literature they distribute each year made hardly a mention of the Falashas until only in the last few months public pressure forced them to do so?

The questions can go on and on. But the AAEJ, frustrated "in our love of Zion" after long efforts to secure action from Israeli politicians and American Jewish leaders, have decided to take a more active role in Falasha rescue:

I AM HAPPY TO REPORT TO YOU THAT IN MARCH OF 1980, THE AAEJ IN OUR OWN RESCUE EFFORT BROUGHT FIFTEEN FALASHAS OUT OF AFRICA. THANK G-D THEY ARE NOW SPENDING THIS PASSOVER WITH THEIR FAMILIES IN ISRAEL.

BUT FIFTEEN SOULS IS NOT ENOUGH! THE AAEJ HAS NOW UNDERTAKEN A MASSIVE RELIEF PROGRAM, TO PROVIDE FOOD AND SUSTENANCE TO FALASHAS AWAITING TRANSPORT TO ISRAEL.

*It costs: \$50 a month to sustain one Falasha, and
\$3,000 to bring one Falasha from Africa to Israel.*

Our small organization has proven that it can be done. Established Jewish groups are not helping. We are depending upon you to help us.

Could you dedicate this Passover to the Falasha? Can you stimulate individuals to supply sustenance (\$50) to Falashas awaiting help? Could your synagogue raise funds to pay for the rescue of one Falasha (\$3,000) just as many synagogues have been supplying funds to help the suffering people of Cambodia? To save one life is to save a nation.

To help you educate your congregants I am enclosing three items:

- (1) A moving Falasha prayer written in Africa centuries ago.
- (2) Quotations from letters of Falashas in Ethiopia today.
- (3) Our Information Paper which you may wish to reproduce for your synagogue bulletin.

We look forward to your help. Until the State of Israel and the established Jewish leadership assume their responsibilities in rescuing the Falashas, we have nowhere else to turn except to the rank and file of the Jewish people – and to you – their teachers.

Please help! A happy kosher Passover to you.

Sincerely and Shalom,

Howard M. Lenhoff
Howard M. Lenhoff

President, AAEJ, and Professor, University of California

A copy of the last annual report may be obtained from the New York State Board of Social Welfare,
Office Tower, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12242, or from the Association

Contributions are tax deductible



by Annette Schonhaut

A Cry for Jewish Education

The Falasha Jews of Ethiopia

by Yehuda Shapiro

In 1867, in the Semien Mountains of northwestern Ethiopia, there occurred one of the most unusual—and most moving—encounters in recent Jewish history. A French Jewish scholar-explorer by the name of Joseph Halevy entered the village of a tribe of dark-skinned people whose existence had been fabled for nearly a thousand years.

"My approach was announced beforehand," reported Halevy later, "by some children who were tending flocks of sheep. I hastened my step, and went to an open spot to see the effect produced by my sudden appearance in the midst of the inhabitants. Men and women cried out with astonishment at the sight of my complexion and of my dress. I was politely asked to go back and enter a

hut where several men were sitting together. On my arrival they saluted me, and surrounded me, though at a considerable distance. They appeared uncomfortable, and when I wished to go near them they drew back. Only two persons ventured to grasp my hand in a friendly manner, while the others called out 'Atedresbeny!' (Touch us not!) A man attired in a long tunic, and holding a small dish containing water, examined me from head to foot without uttering a single word. This cold reception was beginning to be unpleasant to me; I could not understand their strange ways, but I was determined to be patient.

"...After hesitating for a few minutes, the Falashas broke silence: 'Gueta' (Sir), said they, 'doubtless you require a knife or sword: you should buy them in a large town, for the instruments we make are of too rough a

workmanship to suit a European.' 'Oh my brethren,' I replied, 'I am not only a European; I am, like you, an Israelite. I come, not to trade in Abyssinia, but to inquire into the state of my co-religionists, in conformity with the desire of a great Jewish association existing in my country. You must know, my dear brethren, that I also am a Falasha! I worship no other G-d than the great Ad-nai, and I acknowledge no other law than the law of Sinai!' These words, uttered slowly, and in distinct tones, that all might understand them, had a striking effect on the Falashas. Whilst some appeared to be satisfied, others shook their heads doubtfully, and looked at each other as if to inquire how I should be answered. At last several voices exclaimed, 'What! You a Falasha! A white Falasha! You are laughing at us! Are there any white Falashas?'

Just as world Jewry had all but forgotten the existence of the Falashas, so too, had the Falashas come to believe that they were the last Jews left on earth.

"I assured them that all the Falashas of Jerusalem, and in other parts of the world, were white; and that they could not be distinguished from the other inhabitants of their respective countries. 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 L-rd of Israel, the Holy Temple? Are you also acquainted with the burying-place of our mother Rachel? With glorious Bethlehem, and the town of Hebron, where our holy patriarchs are buried?' They were never weary of asking me questions of this nature; and they eagerly listened to my replies.

"I must confess I was deeply moved on seeing those black faces light up at the memory of our glorious history. I informed them that, before coming to Abyssinia I had visited Jerusalem, and that the city had sadly fallen from its ancient splendour. I told them that the Jewish inhabitants of the Holy City were plunged into misery; and that a mosque stands on the site of the ancient temple. They were grieved at this news, as they had no correct idea of the actual state of the Holy Land; most of them believed it belonged to Roman Christians. . . ."

Professor Halevy spent some time among the Falashas; and fully satisfied that the centuries-old rumors were true, he returned to Paris to announce to the world that a legendary, long-lost Jewish tribe had been rediscovered. He also hoped to convince the Alliance Israelite Universelle and other "great Jewish associations" to extend material, educational and religious aid to the Falashas, especially since Protestant missionaries were beginning to make inroads among them. Here, however, the bold academic who managed to cross sea, wilderness and mountain to find a hidden people was less successful. His official report to the Alliance went unpublished; his recommendations to Jewish organizations were ignored; and 111 years after Halevy's journey to Ethiopia, the Falashas still remain the forgotten members of the world Jewish com-

munity. Despite a century of scholarship, rabbinic responsa, and sociological investigation, a cloud still shrouds world Jewry's knowledge of the Falashas—a fog of mystery, misconception, and downright ignorance, that can only be dissipated by an informed, public discussion of the Falashas' past history and present plight.

No one is sure when or how Jews first came to Ethiopia, but legends and theories abound. The Falashas themselves often repeat the national legend of Ethiopia, which dates the establishment of the Jewish community and other ancient Ethiopian institutions from the visit of the Queen of Sheba to the court of King Solomon (I Kings 10:1-13; II Chronicles 9:1-12). According to this tale, the Queen returned to her land (which the Ethiopians identify with their own) not only with a son sired by Solomon, but also with a large entourage of Hebrew subjects—the ancestors of the Falashas.

The Jews of the Middle Ages—who seem, curiously enough, to have been more keenly aware of the existence of co-religionists in Ethiopia than most modern Jews—knew of a different tradition. Based on the report of a mysterious traveler of the late ninth century who called himself Eldad Ha-Dani—and who may himself have been a Falasha—medieval Jews believed that their brothers and sisters in the land of Cush were descendants of the lost tribe of Dan. Legend had it that the Danites first came to Ethiopia during the troublesome reign of Jeroboam the son of Nebat. There, it was said, they set up an independent Jewish state, defended by their own warriors and governed by their own king.

Modern scholars have recognized that these legends may contain a strong element of historical truth, but they have not hesitated to suggest hypotheses of their own. One theory surmises that the remote ancestors of the Falashas were Hebrew soldier-farmers known to have been garrisoned on the Egyptian-Ethiopian frontier around 600 B.C.E. Another theory maintains that the first Jews in Ethiopia were refugees from Roman persecution in the period following the

destruction of the Second Temple. Yet another conjecture argues that to understand the origin of Judaism in Abyssinia, one must look across the Red Sea to the ancient Jewish community of Yemen. According to this opinion—one widely held among students of Falasha history—some time in the early centuries of the Common Era Jews from southern Arabia came to Ethiopia; there they settled, proselytized among the natives, and eventually married the converts they had made.

Whatever the true origin of the Falashas, the old Abyssinian chronicles make it clear that by the fourth century of the Common Era, Judaism had spread over a large part of Ethiopia. In the course of time an autonomous Falasha kingdom arose—just as Eldad Ha-dani reported to medieval Jewry—with its strategic center located in the rugged terrain of the Semien Mountains. It even appears that in the tenth century the Jews ruled over the entire Ethiopian empire; contemporary records indicate that a Falasha queen named Judith overthrew the old Axumite dynasty and placed her own family upon the imperial throne. (The term "Falasha," incidentally, is a good index of the dominant attitude that has prevailed against the Jews of Ethiopia since earliest times. An Ethiopic word related to the Hebrew "palash," it denotes an immigrant, an alien, an intruder. It should also be noted that the Jews of Ethiopia prefer to call themselves by a different name, that of "Beta Israel.")

Like the Khazars—another group of free, warrior Jews—the Falashas managed to preserve their Torah tradition through the centuries despite their almost complete isolation from outside Jewish communities. The lack of contact between Ethiopian Jewry and the rest of the world Jewry, however, did have its inevitable effect. Probably never in possession of the Talmud, the Falashas' knowledge of the Oral Law dwindled almost to the vanishing point; so, too, did their knowledge of the "Holy Tongue," though it is possible that some Falashas spoke at least a crude form of Hebrew as late as the seventeenth century. Eventually the Judaism of the Falashas became one

A century ago, the Jews of Ethiopia numbered a quarter of a million; a census taken last year reveals that they have been reduced to a mere 28,000.

based largely on a literal interpretation of the Ethiopic translation of the Bible. Torah laws that fell into disuse among other Jews still remained in full force among the Falashas. The rules of ritual purity continued to be observed; the sacrifice of animals was maintained with all its details; and the religious life of the Jews of Ethiopia came to be led, not by the rabbi, but by the priestly "kahen."

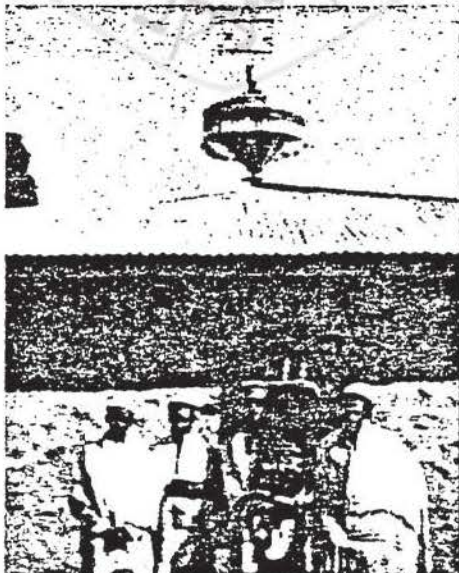
But in spite of these differences, it can be said that a visitor to the Falashas at any period in their history would have found more in common with standard Jewish practice than in contrast. The commandment of circumcision, for example, was scrupulously followed, as were the laws of niddah, the holy days of the Torah were marked by special observances, and the Sabbath—which the Falashas, like the masters of the Midrash, personified in their literature as a heavenly queen—was kept with a strict abstinence from any labor. The Falashas shared yet another uniquely Jewish practice: the eternal longing for Zion. An old Falasha prayer has come down to us which could easily fit into any sidur: "When the world rejoices in Your kingdom, when You deliver Your people Israel and are gracious to Jerusalem, Your city, make me rejoice in Your kingdom together with Your chosen Israel; deliver me, be gracious to me, Your servant."

It is not surprising, then, that when Egyptian Jews in the sixteenth century raised the question of the Falashas' halachic status before their Chief Rabbi, Rabbi David ben Solomon Ibn Avi Zimra—better known to Jewish history as the celebrated "Radbaz"—his answer was unequivocal: not only were the Falashas Jewish, but one could marry them without fear that their lineage was tainted with mamzerut. "For it is well known," wrote the Radbaz, "that there is always war going on between the various kings of Abyssinia because there are three kingdoms in the country. Some of the inhabitants are Mohammedans, some of them are Christians, and some are Israelites of the tribe of Dan." The Radbaz did lament the fact that the Falashas had forgotten the Oral Law, and considered their Judaism to be a kind of Karaism; nevertheless, he concluded, if they

would agree to submit to rabbinic authority, he would welcome them all into the community. (This landmark decision in Halacha can be found in the published responsa of the Radbaz—Volume IV, Number 219—and, in English translation, in Solomon Freehof's *A Treasure of Response*.)

Ironically, it was in the very age in which the Radbaz rendered his decision that the legendary power and independence of the Falashas began to slip away. The constant warfare to which the Radbaz referred had been relentlessly brutal, and often marked by religious hysteria: One Christian emperor of the fifteenth century even styled himself the "Exterminator of the Jews." Moreover, while the hundreds of years of fighting had extracted a heavy price from all the combatants, the Christians and the Moslems of Ethiopia were always able to replenish their strength with the aid of co-religionist allies in other lands; the isolated Falashas, on the other hand, were ever forced by their circumstances to stand alone. The acquisition in the late sixteenth century by the Abyssinian Christians, of Portuguese firearms and cannons sealed the fate of the Falashas, and in 1616 the ancient and glorious legacy of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Cush became a thing of the past.

Much bloodshed and suffering followed the fall of the Falasha state. The practice of Judaism was banned in



New synagogue in Ambober, Ethiopia—1977

many parts of Ethiopia; Falashas who refused to accept baptism—including their last king, Gideon—were cruelly put to death; and many Falasha children were sold into slavery. In time those Falashas who had survived the general massacre were permitted to return to their old religion, but severe new restrictions were placed upon them, the most devastating of these being the prohibition against land-owning. Ultimately, the people that had been one of the country's most important groups was systematically driven to the bottom of the social and economic scale. The descendants of mighty kings and proud warriors were forced into sharecropping and smithing, the two poorest and most despised of Ethiopian occupations.

The decline of the Falashas continued into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The penetration of East Africa by Western "civilization" created a dangerous new problem for the Falashas, for on the heels of the explorers, and soldiers, and the diplomats, came hordes of Christian missionaries. These missionaries had only a limited measure of success among the Jews of Ethiopia; one old Falasha weaver, for example, is reported to have told a Protestant missionary: "We had the Bible before you came. The additions you have made have not bettered it." But for thousands of Falashas struggling with poverty, sickness and hunger, the material temptations of the missions finally proved too strong. In 1862, it is reported, some missionaries even went so far as to incite pogroms by native Ethiopian Christians against Falashas who refused to convert. In desperation, a large number of Falashas set out that year to walk the great distance from the land of Cush to the land of Israel—a brave but unsuccessful attempt at Aliyah that ended in tragedy for nearly the entire party.

The European missionaries did perform one service for the Falashas, however unintentional though it was: by sending home boastful reports of their successes among the Abyssinian Jews, they made world Jewry aware of the real-life existence of this half-forgotten people of legend and moved

cont. on page 18

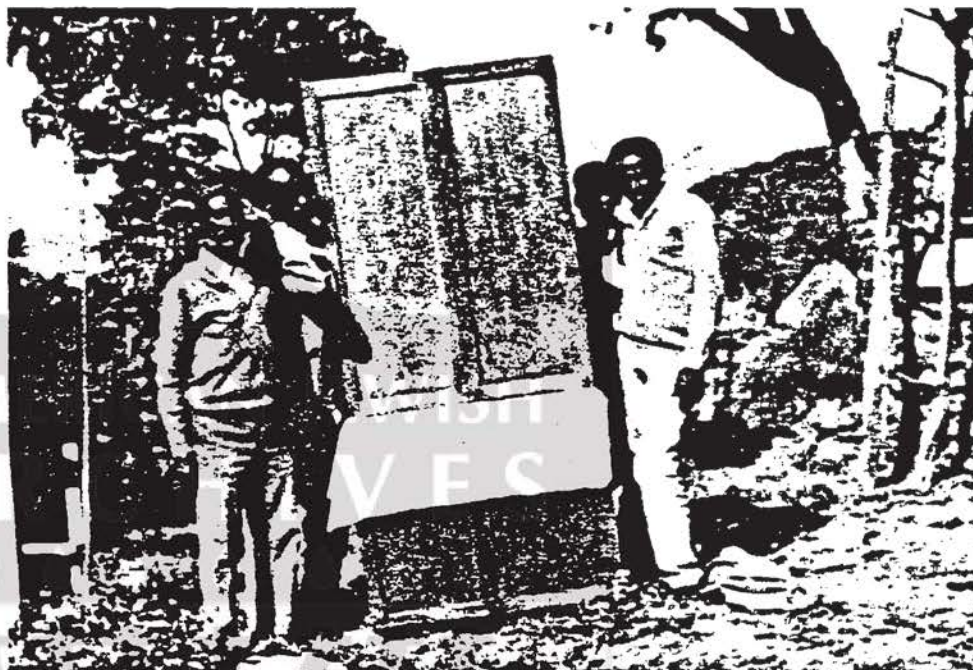
It is still easier for an Ethiopian Jew to receive a New Testament and a crucifix than to obtain—lehavdil—a Tanach and mezuzah.

A Cry for Jewish Education
cont. from page 16

several prominent European Jews to compassion and concern over their plight. Among these sympathetic Jews was Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer, the great sage and leader of German Orthodox Jewry. Based on the psak din of the Radbaz, as well as more recent studies and reports, Rabbi Hildesheimer issued a manifesto in 1864 which called for immediate action to save the Falashas from the missionaries. "We dare not lose courage," he exhorted the Jews of Europe, "It is a heavy burden which weighs upon our mind!" And addressing himself to the Jews of Ethiopia, he assured them: "Do not lose courage, my brethren, but be full of confidence; never yet have the unfortunate knocked at the door of a Jewish house without having found assistance."

But aside from Joseph Halevy's 1867 journey to Ethiopia, the door between the Falashas and the rest of the Jewish world remained closed the last third of the nineteenth century. Because of missionary activity, sporadic violence on the part of hostile neighbors, and such natural catastrophes as famine and disease, the Jewish population of Ethiopia continued to decline sharply: from an estimated half-million in the twilight years of Falasha independence to about a quarter-million in the mid-1800's to roughly a hundred thousand at the dawn of the twentieth century. Perhaps the Falashas did draw some measure of solace from their new consciousness of outside Jewish communities, for just as world Jewry had all but forgotten the existence of the Falashas, so too, had the Falashas come to believe that they were the last Jews left on earth. (Indeed, when an Italian explorer informed a Falasha notable that Jews did exist outside Ethiopia, the notable responded: "Then all is not lost, and the world is not so bad as I would have thought.") But if they did derive comfort from this, it proved to be the only "aid" they received from the generally indifferent Jews of the late nineteenth century.

Then, in 1904, the vague concept of helping the Falashas was transformed into a structured, international movement. In that year, a twenty-four-year-



The new ark to house the Torah in the synagogue of Ambober, Ethiopia—1977

old Orientalist by the name of Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch, an Orthodox Jew from Poland, who had studied with Joseph Halevy in Paris, made the second journey by a European Jew in forty years to his co-religionists in Ethiopia. Like his teacher, Faitlovitch was deeply impressed by the Falashas' Jewishness and deeply moved by their plight; like his teacher, he was determined to aid his brothers and sisters in Abyssinia upon his return to France, and again like his teacher, he was rebuffed by the Jewish establishment of his day. Though Faitlovitch was bitterly disappointed, he did not permit himself to become discouraged. In 1906 he succeeded in persuading forty-four outstanding rabbis from all over the world, including the two Chief Rabbis of England, the Rishon Le-Zion of the Holy Land, and Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines, the founder of Mizrachi, to issue an open letter of support to "our brethren, sons of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who dwell in Abyssinia." The signatories pledged "to do all we can to prepare teachers and books for you, so that your children will learn to fear only G-d all their days, and to keep his Torah, which is changeless." The letter

ended with the hope that in the near future G-d would "gather us from the four corners of the earth and bring us to Zion."

Faitlovitch did not let the matter rest there. Building upon such impressive endorsements, he set about creating "Pro-Falasha Committees" in the United States and throughout Europe. Funds were raised for Falasha material, educational and religious needs, including a boarding school (founded in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa in 1923) and the education abroad of several promising youths. In 1921 Faitlovitch's campaign gained the warm support of the great Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. In an open letter written that year, Rabbi Kook appealed to world Jewry "to save our Falasha brethren from extinction and contamination...and to rescue fifty thousand holy 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."

The accomplishments of Dr. Faitlovitch and his movement were considerable for so small a group; it must be admitted, however, that its disappointments were many. Most large Jewish organizations continued to ignore the plight of Ethiopian Jewry, and on the rare occasion when they did make some financial contribution to the Pro-Falasha movement, the sum involved was usually paltry. Consequently, Faitlovitch's work among the Falashas was severely limited, and the number of Falashas continued to decline drastically. In 1936 all Faitlovitch's efforts in Ethiopia were brought to an abrupt and complete halt by the Fascist Italian invasion of that country, and could not be resumed for the duration of the war.

Despite the many setbacks, Faitlovitch persevered. After World War II, he reopened his boarding school in the Eritrean city of Asmara, and after the establishment of the State of Israel, he induced the Torah Department of the Jewish Agency to send religious and educational aid to the Falashas. In 1956 Dr. Faitlovitch's heroic struggle on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry led to the arrival of twelve Falasha boys and girls at Kfar Batya, a children's village in Israel founded by Mizrahi Women. Sponsored by Youth Aliyah, these youngsters were taught Hebrew, normative Jewish belief and practice, and modern agricultural and industrial skills in a two-year program that proved to be highly successful. In many ways this was the culmination of Jacques Faitlovitch's life-long struggle, and a testament to the hard work of a small group of selfless people; unfortunately, Faitlovitch did not live to see this happen. He passed away in Israel in October 1955.

It would be wonderful to report that the status of the Falashas in Ethiopia is improving, or that many thousands of Ethiopian Jews have made Aliyah in the past few years. The present reality, however, is much harsher and much more complicated. On the positive side, the work of Jacques Faitlovitch is carried on by groups in Israel, England, and the United States; the American group, whose efforts have been particularly effective, is called the American Association for Ethiopian Jews and is headed by the dedicated Dr. Graenum Berger. Several major Jewish organizations have resolved to support the rescue of the Falashas, and a few have even made substantial contributions; ORT, for example is now sponsoring a training program in Ethiopia, while the Joint Distribution Committee last year donated \$150,000 to their cause. Several eminent individuals have come to call for the redemption of the Falashas, including

Meyer Levin, the distinguished author, Rabbi Dr. Emanuel Rackman, the President of Bar-Ilan University, and the great Torah authority Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, who very recently informed the Association for Ethiopian Jews that it is a great mitzvah to save the Falashas from assimilation and to bring them to Torah. The Israeli Chief Rabbinate has fully recognized the Jewishness of the Falashas: Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren described their redemption and return to Israel as being part of the Messianic vision, while Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef wrote in a 1972 psak din: "I have come to the conclusion that the Falashas are Jews who must be saved from absorption and assimilation. We are obliged to speed up their immigration to Israel and to educate them in the spirit of the Holy Torah, making them partners in the building up of our Holy Land." After a generation of Labor Government indifference, the Government of Israel under Menachem Begin has come to adopt a favorable attitude toward a Falasha aliyah. And perhaps most important of all, a small Falasha community of about 280 souls has sprung up in the land of Israel. This community includes a recently ordained Orthodox rabbi, ten university students, and seventy-five Tzahal soldiers. (Tragically, two Falasha soldiers have already given their lives for the Jewish State, killed in action during the Six Day War.)

It must be remembered, however, that the Falashas' plight in Ethiopia is grim, even desperate. A century ago, the Jews of Ethiopia numbered a quarter of a million; a census taken last year reveals that they have been reduced to a mere 28,000. They still live in poor, primitive villages, and they still own no land; most Ethiopians earn no more than \$90.00 a year, one of the lowest per capita incomes in the world, but the average Falasha, incredibly, earns \$30.00 less than that. With the exception of venereal disease, (avoided because of the Falashas' strict observance of the Torah's laws of family purity) the Jews of Ethiopia are susceptible to every sickness prevalent in East Africa; their life expectancy is therefore that of all Ethiopia—36 years. True hospitals and doctors are nonexistent among them, the only real medical facilities are missionary sponsored. Though they thirst for a good education, Falasha schooling is woefully limited; the best schools in their region are again, missionary sponsored. Even in religious instruction and material the Falashas have been shamefully shortchanged, for to the disgrace of world Jewry, it is still easier for an Ethiopian Jew to receive a New Testament and a crucifix than to obtain—lehavdil—a Tanach and mezuzah.



Falasha mother and child in Ethiopia

And then there is the violence of present-day Ethiopia. The wars, rebellion, and internal chaos that put Ethiopia into the headlines almost every day have not left the Falashas unscathed. It is to the credit of the ruling military tribunal in Addis Ababa that there is no official persecution of the Falashas, but that can only be of small comfort to them in the current state of anarchy, in which the stronger Christians and Moslems prey naturally on the weaker Jews. Little wonder, then, that the 28,000 unassimilated survivors of the ancient Jewish community of Ethiopia can see only one avenue of escape for themselves. It is heard in the perplexed comment that an Anglican missionary in Ethiopia recently made to an American Jewish visitor: "What is it with these people? Each man's sole dream is to bring his family to Israel, a place they know little about and have never been to."

Thus, 111 years after Joseph Halevy rediscovered the Falashas for world Jewry, both the Falashas and world Jewry stand at crossroads. What happens in the next five years may well determine the deliverance or the destruction of the last remnants of Ethiopian Jewry. Events of national and international scope will play their roles, but so, too, will the efforts of dedicated individuals—that is, if there are enough individuals who care about the Jews of Ethiopia.

For more information on how you can help Ethiopian Jewry, write:

The American Association for
Ethiopian Jews
340 Corlies Avenue
Pelham, New York 10803

Dr. Howard M. Lenhoff
304 Robin Hood Lane, Costa Mesa
California 92627 (714)642-8613

American Association for Ethiopian Jews

[A merger of the American Pro-Falasha Committee and the Friends of Beta-Israel (Falasha) Community in Ethiopia]

National Headquarters
340 Corties Avenue
Pelham, New York 10803
(914) 738-0956

National Materials Center
6505 Wilshire Blvd., Room 802
Los Angeles, California 90048
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Western Regional Office
304 Robin Hood Lane
Costa Mesa, California 92627
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October, 1978

ANNUAL UPDATE - AND AN URGENT APPEAL FOR FUNDS

A momentous year for the Falashas appeared to be underway as we approached the 1977 High Holy Days, but by Rosh Hashana, 1978, this temporary period of exhilaration had ended in near disaster.

1. After a hiatus of three years during which no Falashas made aliyah, in August, 1977, SIXTY-TWO Falashas managed to get to Israel, and in December, 1977 and January, 1978, another FIFTY-NINE arrived there.
2. Prime Minister Menachem Begin, while meeting a delegation of our officers, was presented with petitions on behalf of the Falashas signed by over 10,000 American Jews. He pledged to support Falasha aliyah.
3. Both Chief Rabbis of Israel met with the new arrivals and vowed their assistance. In addition, Sephardic Rabbi Ovadia Yosef not only gave the *Smicha* to the first Falasha Rabbi in Israel, Rabbi Yosef Adane, but also officiated at his wedding to a recently arrived young Falasha woman. Ashkenazic Rabbi Goren blessed the immigrants and said: "You are our brothers, our blood, our flesh. You are true Jews and have returned to your homeland."

BUT THEN DISASTER STRUCK AND ALL FURTHER ALIYAH STOPPED!

4. Now raging in Ethiopia are a revolution, a counter-revolution and a civil war. A locust invasion is causing another famine. We have reliable reports of Falashas being killed, of their being evicted from their homes and farms, and of their being drafted into the "Peoples Army" to fight in Ethiopia's seemingly never-ending wars.
5. Recently the JDC has confirmed that there are thousands of Falasha refugees - homeless, hungry, and penniless - roaming the streets of Addis Ababa and Gondar waiting for help.
6. AND, INCREDIBLE THOUGH IT IS TO IMAGINE IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY, IT HAS BEEN CONFIRMED BY THE JDC THAT FALASHAS ARE BEING SOLD AS SLAVES BY ONE OF THE FACTIONS IN ETHIOPIA TO OTHER COUNTRIES!
7. The Falasha community in Israel is emotionally beside itself. They receive reports of their families suffering and being killed in Ethiopia. They are frustrated by the apparent hopelessness of the situation in Ethiopia and by the meager support they are getting. "Ayn Tikvah" they told us, "There is no hope."

BUT THERE MUST BE HOPE, AND OUR ASSOCIATION MUST INTENSIFY ITS EFFORTS TO HELP THE FALASHAS IN ETHIOPIA AND IN ISRAEL, AND TO MOBILIZE THE SUPPORT OF WORLD JEWRY.

WE URGE YOU TO:

1. Send the American Association for Ethiopian Jews as large a tax-deductible contribution as you can possibly afford in the enclosed envelope today.
2. Immediately write an air mail letter (31¢) to Prime Minister Begin (Knesset, Jerusalem, Israel) thanking him for his concern and previous efforts, and urging him to expedite the aliyah programs now on the planning boards. Every day we wait we lose more Jewish lives, and Israel loses more dedicated olim.

If there ever was a time for you to act, for G-d's sake do it now. And ask your friends to contribute and to write Prime Minister Begin also.

Shanah Tovah. May this year bring you much health and happiness, Peace to Israel, and Life to the Falashas.

Sincerely and Shalom,

Mrs. A. H. Kavey, Honorary President	Dr. Graenum Berger, Vice President
Dr. Howard M. Lenhoff, President	Mr. Bernard Alpert, Vice President
Dr. Theodore Norman, Treasurer	Mr. Henry Everett, Vice President
Mr. Jeffrey Stone, Secretary	Mr. Lester Gerson, Vice President
	Mr. Henry Rosenberg, Vice President

P.S. We have about 400 copies of the new paperback by Arnold Sherman entitled *In Search of Rachamim* (Jerusalem, 227 pp., 1977). It is a dramatic story of how Sherman, after a long search, finds his identity and the significance of his Jewish roots through his chance encounter in Ethiopia of the remarkable young Falasha, Rachamim. Rachamim is now one of our scholarship recipients at Tel Aviv University. Copies will be sent to donors of \$18.00 (CHAI) or greater as long as our supply lasts.

A copy of the last annual report may be obtained from the New York State Board of Social Welfare, Office Tower, Empire State Plaza, Albany, New York 12242, or from the Association.

Contributions are tax deductible