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The Falashas, Ethiopia and Its Jews, 1984.

The Falashas, Ethiopia and Its Jews
Daniel Jeremy Silver
November 18, 1984

I have a tragic story to put before you this morning. In fact, it is a story of a tragedy within a tragedy. The papers have been full of moving photographs of starving Ethiopian children. The dust-ridden, barren plateau villages of northern Ethiopia are suffering from famine. Ethiopia is a tragedy. One of the country's leading novelists wrote awhile ago: "Ethiopia is God's way of putting an end to all things."

Ethiopia may be the poorest country on earth. The average income is \$140 a year. The average life span is 46 years. Ethiopia is a tragedy which need not have been. God created Ethiopia a fertile land. It was once a rich land of forests and high plateaus. Human life first emerged in these conducive surroundings, but over the millenia farmers abused the land and let their herds crop the roots that held the top soil fast.

Today Ethiopia is a barren place and a politically unsettled place. Ten years ago a Marxist-oriented junta, the Derga, overthrew the autocratic monarchy of Haile Selassie. The revolution brought change and death. Over the past ten years some one hundred thousand Ethiopians have died in revolution-related fighting. A hundred thousand more have died in the struggle between Ethiopia and Eritrea and between the government and ^{Somali-backed} rebels in the north. A million Ethiopians have escaped on foot across the high plateaus and the mountains to the Sudan, Somalia or Kenya where they survive as best they can in refugee camps.

The black Jews of Ethiopia, who the world knows as Falashas, represent a side-rebelled against the Axum kings, the dynasts were defeated by troops of the Coptic majority and the much larger Muslim minority. In a country of little they have less.

The traditions of the Beta Israel derive their settlement from the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, a visit, you will recall, which was de-

signed to test Solomon's famous wisdom and, not incidentally, to promote trade. The Queen brought rich gifts; spices and gold and jewels, and received in turn rich gifts; spices and gold and jewels. The Beta Israel add that she also brought back to Ethiopia a baby, Solomon's son, and that the King had sent along with his son a number of courtiers who became the founding fathers.

Modern research suggests that the Beta Israel community goes back only some 2,000 years, only some 2,000 years. During late Hellenistic times Judean traders were active in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area. They established themselves all along the Arabian coast and also along the coast of the Horn of Africa, in present day Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea. The Beta Israel are held to be descendants of these traders who, in addition to their commercial activities, missionarized and intermarried.

The community grew in the coastal plain until the Coptic Catholic cynasty, the Axun, began to assert control over the area in the fourth century. The Jewish tribes were defeated and dispossessed and they were forced westward, up into the north central highlands where they have survived to this day.

In their new home the Beta Israel established an independent kingdom which grew in size and power until it controlled a quarter of the land mass of Ethiopia which is a country the size of Texas. The Beta Israel maintained their independence for nearly eight hundred years and during this period played a major role in local tribal politics. In so doing they became the longest-lived, independent Jewish community in diaspora history. At one point when the countryside rebelled against the Axun kings, the dynasts were defeated by troops of Beta Israel, led by a queen by the name of Judith.

A period of changing allegiances followed as various groups contested authority. Until late in the twelfth century, another Coptic cynasty gained power. The Beta Israel found themselves caught between the ambitions of this dynasty and the expanding power of Sudanese Muslims who began to move into Ethiopia from the north. They held out for several hundred years as best they

could, but around 1620 the last independent king of the Beta Israel, a certain Gideon, was defeated and the Beta Israel lost their independence. Many were killed or sold into slavery. The survivors were forbidden land ownership and ever since the Beta Israel have survived as tenant farmers who must pay half of their crop's value to Coptic landlords. After this defeat they were consigned to the low status crafts. They survived as potters and blacksmiths but in steadily diminishing numbers. There may have been as many as one half million Beta Israel in the seventeenth century. When this century began their numbers had been reduced to sixty or seventy thousand. Today there are probably no more than twenty-five thousand survivors of this once proud community.

The Beta Israel brought to Ethiopia a Judaism which had not yet been completely reshaped by the rabbinic reforms of the early centuries of this era and were largely cut off from the Jewish mainstream; in their faraway land their Judaism never fully became rabbinic. They have and cherish the Bible and some of the books of the Apocrypha - Maccabees, Tobit, Judith. They do not have the Talmud or any written collection of traditional midrash. Religious activities are organized by non-hereditary priests known as cahen. There is a synagogue in each village, a round wattle and straw hut where services are held. Traditionally, these synagogues are divided in two parts. This division seems not to be based so much on the rabbinically mandated separation between men and women as on the model of the Temple in Jerusalem when a curtain separated the front court and the Holy of Holies. Their synagogues also contain a stone altar, indicating that at some time in the recent past at least some of the Biblically-mandated sacrifices were offered. In recent times the only sacrifice offered is the Paschal sacrifice on Passover.

They keep their Scripture in the Holy of Holies. There is no ark. They do not have Torah scrolls such as ours; rather, their Bibles consist of folio copies written in the Ethiopic language, Geeze. Apparently, the Beta Israel lost the ability to read Hebrew some time past.

They pay great attention to the Biblical laws of ritual purity. Those who carry a corpse to its grave must bathe themselves before they can re-enter the village. A woman during her menstrual period must live in a hut outside the village for that period of time. A woman in childbirth lives in a hut specially constructed for her for almost a month until she is allowed back with her child into the village. A Beta Israel who leaves his village for the city cannot return to the village; he is impure unless he engages in a long and complicated rite of purification. They also have monks, men who devote their lives to religious practices and who live apart from the community.

Despite these differences in practice, there has never been any question that the Beta Israel are Jews. In the sixteenth century we find a rabbi in Egypt, David ben Solomon ibn Zimra, one of the halachic authorities of the time, who was asked whether it is permitted to intermarry with the Beta Israel and whether the child of such a marriage would be fully acceptable in the Jewish community. He answered "yes" to both questions. Intermarriage is permitted and the children of such a marriage would be fully accepted within the community.

The Beta Israel were little known to the larger Jewish community. Ethiopia is cut off by the wilderness of the Soudan from Egypt. Occasionally, a Jewish traveler penetrated into the vastness of central Ethiopia and brought back reports of Jews who were believed to be descendants of one of the Lost Ten Tribes, specifically of the Tribe of Dan. For their part, the Beta Israel believed that a time would come when God would return them to Jerusalem and allow them to enjoy their Messianic Age. The Beta Israel were and are messianically oriented. They believe that when the messiah appears all evil people will be destroyed and they will be led in glory to Jerusalem.

After the loss of independence in 1620 little is heard about the Beta Israel until the nineteenth century. These were difficult times for them. They were cut off from the outside world and aliens in their own. Moreover, during these years western missionaries began to move into the fastness of central

Africa. These seekers of souls discovered the Beta Israel and felt that they had found among them a particularly fertile field for their activities. These people were defeated and looked down on, therefore, likely to respond to new ways. They were also Biblically oriented. The Beta Israel were offered education and the opportunity of a larger and protected life in the city. Many were enticed, but not all. In 1862 a frustrated Portugese missionary organized a pogrom against some Beta Israel villages. As a result, in 1867 a group of perhaps a thousand began the long trek from central Ethiopia to the Holy Land. They were, in a sense, the first Zionist aliyah. They didn't reach Palestine. The trek was over two thousand miles of dangerous terrain. They were attacked by robbers and wild animals. Most died on the way. Finally, the survivors turned back.

Somehow, knowledge of the pogrom and their attempted exodus reached Europe, and the Jewish Community Federation of France, the Alliance Israelite Universale, sent Joseph Halevy, a professor of sociology and anthropology at the Sorbonne, to investigate. Halevy portrayed himself to them as a white Beta Israel. In one village, after he had gone through a rite of purification, the chief, accepting the fact Halevy was a Jew, said to him: "Now I know the world isn't as bad as I thought it was. There are other Jews out there." Halevy researched Beta Israel traditions and on his return wrote a long sympathetic report to the Alliance on their needs: medical care, nutritional help, vocational training. The Alliance tabled his report. Nothing was done.

Why not? One assumes that the bourgeois Board of the Alliance was responding to their own status needs. Black Africans were still considered lesser breeds without the law, and the last thing those upper-class Frenchmen wanted was for the idea to get about that they were somehow identified with dark-skinned tenant farmers in darkest Africa. The only tangible result of this trip was a delayed one. Some years later one of Halevy's students, a Polish Jew named Joseph Faitlovitch, was encouraged by his mentor to make a trip to the Beta Israel. He went in 1905 and was so moved

by what he saw that he not only brought back and published a report of their traditions and needs, but he tried valiantly to convince the Jewish Federation of Germany, the Hilfsverein; the Jewish Federation of France, the Alliance; and the Jewish Federation in England, the Board of Deputies, to send aid. Faitlovich was no more successful than Halevy, but he did create a number of pro-Falashac committees who began to send books, money and medicines. occasionally, a teacher could be induced to go for a year or two to the Beta Israel villages.

Little else happened for many years. One would have expected that with the establishment of the State of Israel the fate of the Beta Israel would finally become an issue which would be addressed by world Jewry and the new Jewish State. There was now a Jewish National Home. The idea was to welcome all who need a safe haven. Recall the famous Magic Carpet airlift which brought the Jewish community in Yemen to Israel in the early 1950's.

There would be no Magic Carpet for the Beta Israel. Despite the fact Ben Gurion's Zionism was based on what he called the ingathering of all of the exiles, despite the Law of Return which reflected the determination of world Jewry to bring to Israel all endangered Jews, nothing was done to bring the Beta Israel to Israel. Quite the reverse. Occasionally, during these years Israel and/or the Jewish Agency would send teachers, doctors, agronomists to the villages of the Beta Israel. Help was offered but only if the Beta Israel stayed put.

Some were actively dissatisfied with this approach. An American Association for Ethiopian Jewry came into being whose purpose was to pressure the Israeli government and the U. S. Federation movement to bring out these Jews who were an endangered species in their own land. When approached, the authorities in Israel and some of the leaders of our Jewish community responded: "We're doing all that we can. Quiet negotiations are taking place. It's a complicated issue."

This was not quite the case. Negotiations were not taking place. Some insisted that secret and sensitive negotiations were taking place, but, in fact,

in Israel were not sure the Beta Israel were meant for Israel. Golda Meir is reported to have said: 'They would be uncomfortable here and subject to prejudice.' A minister in the Department of Immigration was quoted: "In Israel they'd be fish out of water."

Jews are not immune to racism. Prejudice certainly played a role in these decisions but not the only role. Unfortunately, the Beta Israel's fate became tangled up in the new state's desire for political and economic relations with black Africa. Israel wanted desperately to break out of the economic blockade the Arab world were putting into effect in the Third World, and Ethiopia was looked on as the key to this political program.

When the Italians had attacked Ethiopia in the mid 1930's the emperor, Haile Selassie, fled into exile. His first stop had been in Jerusalem. A number of his children remained in Jerusalem throughout the war. When Israel was established Ethiopia, despite Muslim pressure, maintained a posture of distant neutrality toward the new state. She did not break all relationships. An Ethiopian interest section remained in Jerusalem. In 1956 Israel was allowed to open an embassy in Addis Ababa. Some trade developed between the countries. Ethiopia was particularly interested in requiring the services of Israel's famous agricultural experts and irrigation engineers for help in her development projects. During those years the University of Haifa helped the University of Addis Ababa establish a school for agronomy.

The Israelis saw Ethiopia as the pivot around which they would ultimately develop relations with other sub-Sahara nations. Jerusalem saw this thrust as a key element of national policy and, unfortunately, the Beta Israel ended up paying the piper. The government of Haile Selassie had all the old prejudices about the Falasha. Israel seems to have been afraid that if they pressed an unpopular issue their political goals might be jeopardized.

So the tragedy of the Beta Israel continued. The need was there but when Menachem Begin came into power he was the first Prime Minister to take an active interest in the Beta Israel. Begin ordered the establishment of secret and sensitive negotiations were taking place, but, in fact,

it has been revealed that no negotiations ever took place.

In Israel the governments hid behind an artificial religious problem. Were the Beta Israel actually Jews? Ibn Zimra had declared them to be Jews. Two of the best known halachic authorities of the nineteenth century, Rabbis Hildesheimer and Reines, had declared them to be Jews. The chief rabbi of Palestine in the 1920's, the revered Rabbi Kook, had declared them to be Jews, but the religious authorities of Israel were not eager to reconfirm these decisions. These Jews were not fully rabbinic in practice. Questions were raised. Frustrations mounted. It was not until 1972 that the Sephardic Chief Rabbi declared the Beta Israel to be Jews. Another three years would pass before the Chief Ashkenazic rabbi added his name to that decision, and even then both men insisted that if the Beta Israel came to Israel they would have to undergo a process tantamount to conversion.

Israel finally began to move on this Beta Israel problem; it was too late to do much in a practical way. Haile Selassie's government was overthrown in 1974. The Derga, a Marxist, pro-Soviet junta came into power. The Israelis were thrown out of Addis Ababa and all hope of normal relationships with black Africa was ended. Israel no longer had any standing which would permit negotiations for the release of the Beta Israel.

These were cruel years for Ethiopia. Ethiopia became a killing ground as various rebel factions crossed and recrossed the country. Whenever an army passed through a Beta Israel vilalge, youths would disappear. The Beta Israel could not defend themselves. They were not allowed to carry arms. A million Ethiopians walked into exile and a number of Beta Israel went with them. Unfortunately, the countries where the displaced persons camps are located are all Muslim countries where Jews are not welcomed and with whom Israel has no relationship. It was not always possible to reach the Beta Israel in these camps.

When Menachem Begin came into power he was the first Prime Minister to take an active interest in the Beta Israel. Begin ordered the establishment of

absorption centers for their particular needs. He sent members of the Shin Bet and of other Israeli agencies into the displaced persons camps to see who could be brought out. One way or another, seven thousand of the Beta have arrived in Israel. There are now twenty-three absorption centers where they are being helped to acclimatize themselves to an entirely new and obviously quite different environment.

But even for those who have reached Israel, tragedy continues. Those who championed the cause of the Beta Israel during the long years of frustration now doubt all that the State says about their activities on behalf of these Jews and sow suspicion among the new immigrants. There are also radical Jews who are not only willing but eager to paint present-day Israel as a racist state and to use the Beta Israel as proof. These groups sometime circulate lists of names of Beta people who they claim are in the displaced persons camps to make the point that the Israelis are doing all that could be done to save these people. These lists have been shown to be only minimally accurate, but their publication and the understandable urgency among the Beta in Israel about their families only compounds the heartache, insecurity and anger which they already feel. Beta Israel who have reached Israel are, for the most part, young people who have left families behind and who bear a tremendous sense of guilt. They come from a close-knit tribal culture and in Israel they are caught between a government which says 'we are doing all that can be done and did not do so in the past' and pressure groups who say 'you can't trust what the government is saying' even when what they put out does not meet strict standards of verifiability and the, unfortunately, more than occasional act of racial prejudice.

Israelis are not immune to color. Most Israelis come from cultures where color made a difference. Israelis have become accustomed to think of blacks in terms of the Black Hebrews of Chicago and Dimona, non-Jews who came to Israel for their own purposes and who steadfastly refuse to abide by Israeli law. Unfortunately, so far the education ministry has made no attempt to educate the

population at large to the history, culture and background of the Beta Israel.

This past year these tensions were highlighted after a visit to Ethiopia by a British Secretary of State in the Foreign Ministry, a Jew by the name of Jeremy Rivkind. When Rivkind was in Addis Ababa he raised up the question of the Beta Israel and Rivkind came out saying that he had been assured that it was now possible to consider mass emigration of the perhaps thirty thousand Beta Israel who remain. The Israelis say that they immediately contacted the Ethiopian Government and found that there had been no change in a policy which does not permit anyone who is not on a government mission to leave the country. The American Association for Ethiopian Jewry has put out statements why, in effect, Jerusalem is lying - again. The Beta Israel in Israel do not know who to believe and find themselves again pawns in a struggle, this time between groups of fellow Jews.

The history of the Beta Israel is about to end. Even if the thousands who remain in Ethiopia are able to come out, their history is behind them. In Israel they will inevitably assimilate to the surrounding culture. Their special way of life will be lost. Indeed, one of the tragedies of their absorption has been the determination of religious groups to see that they are made over in the image of the European orthodox. They are being told what to do and how to dress and how to worship. The idea of letting them come and find their own way, limiting help to basic support, Hebrew and vocational skills has not so far been the distinguishing policy in their absorption.

Attempts are being made to make amends for the past, but those who have come to Israel have come at a time of economic stringency and growing unemployment. It is difficult for them to find work, particularly as they have minimal skills. Inevitably, pay levels are low and so is their standard of living. They must make their way as a new group in an old land where competing groups still try to manipulate them to their own purposes. Perhaps the best sign for their future is that the Beta Israel have begun to draw together to defend their rights.

There is now an Association of Ethiopic Jews in Israel who are determined to fight their own battles and to make their own way.

Perhaps twenty to twenty-five thousand remain in the highlands of Ethiopia. Another five thousand may be in the camps. Some are on the road begging for food. Fourteen hundred made their way to Israel last year.

In Israel the government is now showing active, but not always intelligently-directed, concern for their welfare. The Department of Immigration no longer treats them as fish out of water. Our community relations agencies have begun to add concern for Beta Israel to those which must occupy the Jewish people. Those in Israel are beginning to adjust to a society where everything - diet - language - work - family structures - are different. The absorption centers have discovered that they can't put Beta children and adults in the same Hebrew class. Among the Beta Israel age commands respect. For an elder to sit in class with a child is to destroy his whole sense of honor and dignity.

It's a sad story. It's a story which reminds us that Jews can be as indifferent to Jews as the rest of the world. I don't know if Israel could have brought out the forty or fifty thousand Beta Israel who were there in the late 40's and early 50's, but I know the government did not try. No one knows whether the seven thousand in Israel will be joined by those who have not yet reached the land. The problems remain in this tragedy which must give any sensitive Jew pause.

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