

# Report From Ashdod: Falashas in Israel

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If you spend enough time in Israel and talk with enough people from enough different communities, you become aware that each “new immigrant” group feels it is being discriminated against in favor of another. Oriental Jews complain about bias in favor of Western Jews, and both groups complain that much more is being done for the universally disliked Georgians. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the smallest and most controversial group of new immigrants—the Falashas, the Ethiopian Jews who now number about 28,000, of whom 300 are in Israel—is their lack of complaint, indeed their joy of having finally arrived in Zion.

Sitting in Ashdod with a group of their leaders and activists, I am struck by the fact that these desperate people—desperate about and anxious for their loved ones in Ethiopia—praise Israel as passionately as any government official I have ever heard. I have asked whether the small number of Falashas living in Israel, in spite of the community’s long-standing desire to be there, has anything to do with racism, with the fact of their being black.

Ben Baruch Ishayahu, who seems the oldest in the group, insists that color prejudice had no role either in their difficult *aliyah* or in their absorption. (“*Aliyah*,” the Hebrew word meaning, literally, “to go up,” is used for the process of Jewish migration to Israel.) He maintains that “On the individual level there is no problem, we are accepted. Racism is not a factor in the government’s inaction; it wasn’t in Golda’s government, or in Rabin’s, and Begin couldn’t have received us more warmly.” One woman, our hostess, holding a well-behaved toddler in her arms, points around the small but immaculate living room and adds softly: “Look at this apartment, look at the jobs we hold. Our children are happy in school, and our men serve in the army. [As religious Jews, Falasha women do not do army service.] We love Israel and Israel has been wonderful to us.”

Then why have so few come? The first person I raised this with was Jeff Halper, a young American professor in Jerusalem, who was directly responsible for bringing one member of the Falasha group to Israel. He related the following tale and answered my questions as we shared a taxi to Ashdod to

meet with his “adopted brother,” Avraham Eshayahu, and others in the Falasha community. The two men became friends while Jeff was on a field trip to Ethiopia. Avi, as Jeff calls him, had already attended a Peace Corps school and been in the Ethiopian Navy. It was not generally known that he was a Falasha, a Jew, but when he won first place in a sharpshooting contest and the officer in charge found out about his religion, he turned his back on Avi and refused to shake his hand.

Like all Falashas, Avi’s dream was to make *aliyah*. On Jeff’s return to the States, he sent Avi a one-way air ticket to Israel. The Israeli official in Addis would not accept a one-way ticket, however, and Avi knew that if he returned home, he would be in danger. Since the price for a round trip boat ticket is the same as a one-way air ticket, he made the necessary change and, on arrival in Eilat, found his way to a religious kibbutz.

I asked Jeff why Israel, which spends a small fortune to encourage *aliyah* among Jews all over the world, would turn down a bright, handsome, well-spoken young Jew like Avi. He suggested I ask a government spokesman about it. Later, when I did, it was blamed on “the difficulty of Israel operating in Africa.”

But Jeff also thinks “the racism charge is too simple, although it is an element, plus culture, plus religion.” (The strongest religious spokesman for Falashas is the Sephardic [Oriental], chief rabbi of Israel, Ovadya Yoseph.) As secretary of the Israel Anthropological Society, Jeff recently proposed a motion calling on the government to begin a strong *aliyah* program for Falashas immediately. The motion was passed over the objection of one religious Ashkenazi (European-born Jew), who called the Falashas “a Hebrew sect, not Jews.” Although they have to undergo “ritual conversion” if they wish to marry another Jew in Israel, the rabbinate is generally helpful. Inter-marriage, however, is still rare.

As Jeff and I arrived in Ashdod and began walking to our destination, Jeff added: “If the Israeli Government only realized what a positive addition to the country the Falashas could be, we wouldn’t just be saving the community from extinction, we’d be adding new immigrants that are go-getters, eager for education, without a welfare mentality, and willing to work hard with very little assistance from the state. These people are used to taking their life into their hands—as they literally had to do to get here.”

Speaking as an anthropologist, he asserted: “They should be easier to absorb than other immigrant groups

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from underdeveloped countries, because the more 'primitive' the culture left behind, the easier the absorption into the new culture."

Avi meets us at the appointed place, and a close friend and neighbor of his—an American black who converted to Judaism and married a Jewish woman—drives us to the *shikun* that is typical of the unimaginative sprawling new immigrant housing in Israel. The Falasha group is gathered to meet with me.

We have asked Joe Carter, the American, to stay, and he listens with interest as I am assured that racism is not a factor in the difficulty Falashas face in trying to make *aliyah*. "I think the word discrimination would be more germane; racism implies black/white, and Falashas don't see it that way."

Ben Baruch tries to explain further why he is reluctant to criticize the government. "We believe that Mr. Begin had worked something out with the Ethiopian Government when Dayan just had to open his mouth to the press about the arms deal," disclosing that Israeli arms were being sold to the Ethiopian Government in its fight against the Eritreans. "Until then, we had visions of saving the entire community. Now we are taking the approach reflected in the new name of our association, 'Union for Saving Ethiopian Jewish Families.'" They, and Western supporters like Dr. Graecum Berger, fear that if nothing is done, in another decade the Falashas will disappear. Their scheme is a family reunification plan. About 120 have been brought out of Ethiopia in the last eight months, all relatives of Falashas already living in Israel.

Another man, like Ben Baruch slightly older than the rest, though his face seems lined more with fatigue and care than with age, tells me: "I have everything I need and I love being here. But when my child comes home from *gan* [kindergarten] and asks, 'Why do other children have their grandfather and their uncles here; where is our family?' I have no answer."

Others, shy at first, begin to tell their stories. Many of them live in Ashdod, but some of them have traveled from Beersheva and Lod for this meeting. Their hope rests on American Jewry; they want me to carry their message to New York. They have an almost mystical belief that what U.S. Jews have done for Soviet Jewry, they can do for them—if they want to.

"American Jews should adopt our prisoners, as they do prisoners of Zion. We can give them a list of all the teachers who have disappeared into jail, some of them our brothers and sisters. No one has any word about them. We don't even know if they're dead or alive." They are referring to the teachers trained in Israel by the Jewish Agency and sent back to Ethiopia by agreement with Emperor Haile Selassie sixteen years before. They were working for ORT, the Jewish vocational training center, when they were arrested.

Shoshana, a beautiful young woman in her late twenties, describes how lonely she is during holidays, of the depression she is constantly fighting, "like darkness descending." When she had a chance to leave Ethiopia, her husband urged her to take it, promising that he and

their little boy would follow shortly. She hasn't heard from them in four months.

Elimelech has been waiting six years for his wife and three children. For several months there was no letter, then a brief note saying his sister had disappeared. The note was from his widowed mother, who is no longer able to support the family. His wife was told to go to Addis with the children, that she was on a list of people who would be transported to Israel. In Addis they found their name had been removed from the list. When they got back to their village, they heard that the sister had been arrested. The wife suffered a nervous breakdown.

These immigrants speak good Hebrew, and a number of them speak English. Their jobs are diverse: Some of the men work as skilled technicians at Ben-Gurion Airport and Avi's sister is studying to be a nurse. There is a bookkeeper, a supermarket cashier, and I'm told that several of their community are studying at institutions of higher learning on government grants. A few have made their home on religious kibbutzim. And again I am struck by how exceptionally well-groomed they appear—no small thing on a muggy August day in Israel—by how attractive a group they are.

As I leave, they again tell me how much they love Israel, how wonderful everything is. If only the government would trust them enough to tell them what is being done, what is planned, they would continue to be patient, they assure me.

In Amharic, the language that most Ethiopians speak, the word Falasha means stranger. There are many theories about the origins of Ethiopian Jews, but most experts, since medieval times, have acknowledged the deep devotion to Judaism of this once flourishing community, cut off from most postbiblical Jewish developments and now numbering fewer than 30,000. Even these activists and writers who have been trying to awaken the Jewish community in America to the desperate plight of their brothers and sisters in Ethiopia have been hesitant about going "outside the family" with this story, partially convinced by Israeli Government officials that nothing but harm can come from publicity and that it is best to continue to work quietly, behind the scenes.

The Jewish tradition teaches not to put our faith in princes—or governments. One of the many interesting facts about the Falasha story in Israel is that it does not fit easily into any right/left, dove/hawk pattern. Among those who have been most sympathetic to the Falashas have been the so-called right-wing Menachem Begin and superhawk Geulah Cohen. Among those who have urged noninvolvement one finds such "liberals" as Abba Eban, Golda Meir, and Yitzak Rabin.

Perhaps it is time to take the Falasha story out of the closet, to state clearly that Ethiopia, no less than the Soviet Union, has no right to hold citizens against their will. Human rights supporters, regardless of their religion or color, may wish to work with the American Association for Ethiopian Jews (340 Corlies Avenue, Pelham, New York 10803; or 304 Robin Hood Lane, Costa Mesa, California 92627) to help the Falashas come home. 