

# Longing for Zion



MENACHEM WALDMAN



# LONGING FOR ZION

በጉጉት ወደ ፅዮን  
ለመሄድ በመጠባበቅ ላይ

The Story of Those Waiting for *Aliyah*  
in Addis Ababa and Gondar (1990–2013)

Menachem Waldman

## Longing for Zion

በጉጉት ወደ ፅዮን ለመሄድ በመጠበቅ ላይ

The Story of Those Waiting for *Aliyah*  
in Addis Ababa and Gondar (1990–2013)

© 2017 *The Toby Press* LLC

Original Hebrew Edition *HaMamtinim LeTzion*

© Menachem Waldman 2016

*The Toby Press* LLC

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA

[www.tobypress.com](http://www.tobypress.com)

Cover photograph © Menachem Waldman:

In the community of those waiting  
for *Aliyah* in Gondar, 2010

Inside photograph © Menachem Waldman:

Prayer in Gondar, 2010

Design by Neri Levi

Documents edited by Yehuda Etzion

Translated from the original Hebrew by Shira Finson

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-443-8

Printed and bound in Israel

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b>	<b>3</b>	Nutrition and Aid Programs	149
<b>Words of Approbation</b>	<b>7</b>	Medical Care	157
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>17</b>	Death and Burial	165
<b>Map of the villages of the remnants of the Ethiopian Jewry</b>	<b>25</b>		
<b>Chapter one: From the Villages to the <i>Aliyah</i> Compound</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>Chapter five: Jewish Life</b>	<b>179</b>
From the Villages to Addis Ababa and Gondar	29	Returning to the Jewish Faith	181
Operation Solomon (1991) and Afterward	43	Jewish Studies	193
		Prayer and the Synagogue	201
<b>Chapter two: The Beta Israel Communities in Addis Ababa and Gondar</b>	<b>49</b>	The Jewish Year	217
The North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ)	51	Shabbat, Rosh Hashana and the Ten Days of Repentance, Sukkot, Hanukkah, Purim, Passover, Holocaust Remembrance Day, Remembrance Day for Fallen Soldiers, and Israeli Independence Day, The Ninth of Av, The Sigd Festival	
The Community Compounds in Addis Ababa and Gondar	61	Family Purity	255
Organization and Management of the Communities	71	Kosher Meat	259
		Various <i>Mitzvot</i>	265
<b>Chapter three: Milestones on the Way to Israel</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>Chapter six: Education</b>	<b>271</b>
The Struggle for <i>Aliyah</i>	83	Jewish Schools	273
Landmark Committees and Decisions	97	The School in Addis Ababa	
Notable Visitors	105	The First School in Gondar	
"Returning to Judaism" – Addis Ababa, 1996	115	The Second School in Gondar	
The Census of the Remainder of Ethiopian Jewry, 1999	119	The New School in Gondar	
Launch of Jewish Agency Operations in Ethiopia, 2011	125	Teaching Hebrew	293
		Emissaries and Teachers	297
<b>Chapter four: Life in Waiting</b>	<b>129</b>	Circus Ethiopia	309
Housing and Living Conditions	131	Drama Clubs	313
Crafts	139		
Separation of Families	145	<b>Chapter seven: On the Way to Israel</b>	<b>319</b>
		Yearning for Zion and Jerusalem	321
		Determining Eligibility for <i>Aliyah</i>	331
		On the Way to Israel	335
		<b>Afterword</b>	<b>351</b>

**“Guardian of Israel, guard the remainder of Israel,  
and do not let Israel be lost,  
they who say: Hear, O Israel.”**

(Traditional Jewish prayer)

## Preface

It has been an incredible privilege for me – so I feel with all my heart – to stand beside more than 50,000 of our brothers and sisters, the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry (or “Falashmura”); to lead them in Ethiopia while they survived years of waiting for *aliyah*, as they returned to Judaism; and to accompany them as they settled in Israel.

Their *aliyah* was preceded by a period in which their very fate and future hung in the balance as they waited in Addis Ababa and Gondar. That period, which began in the spring of 1990 and ended, in many respects, with the termination of Jewish Agency activities in Gondar in August 2013, is the focus of this book.

Even before that period I had been actively involved for several years in the absorption of Ethiopian immigrants into Israel, and I served as a representative of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate in this capacity. In May 1992 I came to Ethiopia as head of a delegation sent by the State of Israel, which was tasked with investigating the issue of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry. I stayed there for over a month, together with my friends, the late Yisrael Kimhi of the Interior Ministry and the late Zimna Berhani of the Jewish Agency, in the villages surrounding Lake Tana in northwest Ethiopia and with those waiting for *aliyah* in Addis Ababa. Since then my life has been bound to those of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry.

I have made some fifty trips in an official capacity to visit those waiting for *aliyah* in Addis Ababa and Gondar. I have sent dozens of emissaries through the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), and since April 2011 through the Jewish Agency as well. These emissaries taught Judaism and Hebrew and laid the groundwork for Jewish life in these communities.

Throughout the years I have tried to collect and record as much information as possible about the lives of those waiting for *aliyah* and the efforts on their behalf. I have amassed thousands of documents and tens of thousands of pictures. Those materials are the basis for this book.

The book records the lives of those waiting for *aliyah* through pictures and authentic documents, which reveal important aspects of the events and situations described therein. Many of these documents were written by those waiting for *aliyah* themselves.

I choose to document their lives in this way, rather than via academic writing or prose, in order to give a more genuine sense of the reality there and to allow the pictures and documents to speak for themselves.

The period during which these communities waited for *aliyah* has scarcely been

documented. For years, the lives of those who waited were denied the public awareness and attention they deserved; the disdain and hostility directed at the community further contributed to this situation.

The wealth of material in this book, most of which is being published for the first time, is a rare treasure trove of material for writers and researchers. More importantly, the book serves as a memorial album for tens of thousands of immigrants of Ethiopia, as it records a significant period of their lives and preserves their heritage for later generations.

The book illuminates a unique chapter of modern Jewish history, the time of ingathering of exiles. It tells the story of tens of thousands of Jews, the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry, who left their villages and their Christian past, returned to Jewish life and Jewish law [*halakha*], established flourishing communities and fought for their Jewish identity and their right to make *aliyah*.

This book depicts their living conditions and captures expressions of faith, hope, prayer, longing for Zion and Jerusalem, patience, and stubbornness that lifted their spirits throughout the painful years of waiting. It illustrates how more than 50,000 people managed to return to Judaism, many of whom also immigrated to Israel, despite obstacles and fierce opposition. They swam against the current and reached their goal.

I am overcome with gratitude to God, Who granted me the gift of standing for years at the center of a Jewish drama of historic proportions, filled with struggles and deeply moving experiences.

I was fortunate to connect with truly exceptional people who have become like brothers to me: Dr. Avraham Neguise and Joseph Feit. Our constant companion was Barbara Ribakove Gordon, director-general of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry. We became the voice and representatives of thousands of our distant brothers and sisters who longed to return to Judaism and reconnect with the people of Israel. Together we led the struggle for *aliyah* and the activities in Ethiopia and Israel. We set goals and broke down barriers, and God granted us success.

My deepest thanks to all those who gave me photographs and documents, which complemented the pictures I took and those found in my private archives: Andy Goldman, who managed the programs of the NACOEJ in Ethiopia for many years; the NACOEJ archive in New York; the collection of the Feit family – Joseph, his son Jeremy, and his daughters Alison and Rebecca, who are key activists in the USA for the cause of Ethiopian Jewry; Dr. Avraham Neguise; Yehuda Etzion, who was among the first activists for this cause and who prepared the documentation in this book for publication; Moshe Edri, who worked at the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa and photographed the period prior to and during Operation Solomon; photographer Atalia Katz, who for the past several years has documented the activities of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry in Ethiopia and Israel and with whom I collaborated closely on this book – a significant portion of the pictures from the years 2003–2010 are her work, and for them I am deeply grateful; photographer Ziv Koren; photographer Christine Turnauer; Ageru Kassa, Getenet Awuke, Nega Alene, Rabbi

Michael Meheret, Zaudu Berhan, Moshe Ayelin, Kindhun Werknech, Yehudit Eyal, and Binny Meyer – all of whom were emissaries I sent to Ethiopia; Degu Abunie, head of the community of those waiting for *aliyah* in Addis Ababa; Getu Zemene, head of the community of those waiting for *aliyah* in Gondar; Ravit Cohen, whose anthropological research project focused on the community of those waiting for *aliyah* in Gondar; Irwin Robins, photographer and *aliyah* activist who visited the communities waiting for *aliyah* in Addis Ababa and Gondar; Orly Melese, director of the documentary “Take Us Home,” which presents the story of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry in Gondar and Israel; Eli Shor, who took photographs in Gondar; Fentahun (Natan) Asefa; Yona Hoffman; Prof. Nissim Dana; photographer Eli Atias; Ya’ara Piron, Na’ama De’i, Tzofia Feuchtwanger, Rotem Ziv, Hagar Biton, and Shlomit Gordon, Jewish Agency emissaries in Gondar.

A special thanks to two extraordinary people who were central figures in the struggle to bring the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel, and who were kind enough to write prefaces to this book: the first is former Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, *Rishon LeTzion* Rabbi Shlomo Moshe Amar, who throughout his term and even beforehand worked tirelessly to bring the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel. His ruling that “they are certainly Jewish” was not only a crucial factor in the Israeli government’s decision to allow these Jews to make *aliyah*, it also greatly heartened our brothers and sisters and guided our efforts. The second is Judge Meir Shamgar, former President of the Israeli Supreme Court, who has lately served as the head of the Public Council for Ethiopian Jews. He is a man of truth and justice, filled with love for Israel, and thousands of people have immigrated to Israel thanks to his efforts and influence.

My particular thanks to Neri Levi, who put great thought and effort into the intricate graphic design of this book.

I would also like to thank Koren Publishers and its CEO Meir (Matthew) Miller, whose heart is with our Jewish brothers and sisters in Ethiopia, who made his publishing house a home for a fine, well-designed book.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my beloved family: my wife Amalia and our children, Yedael, Yifat, Moriah, Ma’ayan and Odeya, from whom I parted numerous times on my way to our brothers and sisters, sometimes in secret. All of them are deeply connected to our brothers and sisters, in heart and in deed.

May it be the will of God, He Who scattered Israel to the four winds and Who gathers in the exiles, that we merit to see our brothers and sisters, the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry, complete their *aliyah* and integration, and may we all be as one heart before Him.

Menachem Waldman

Haifa, Adar 5777 (March 2017)



## Words of Approbation

### **Shlomo Moshe Amar**

*Rishon LeTzion*, Chief Rabbi of Israel

President of the Great Rabbinical Court

With the help of God, on the fourth day to the Sabbath, 17 Kislev 5774

## Times of Redemption

“And the ransomed of God shall return and come to Zion with song, and everlasting joy upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee.” (Isaiah 35:10)

“And the Lord your God will return [*veshav*] your captivity and have compassion upon you, and He will return and gather you from all of the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your dispersed be at the edges of the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will fetch you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your forefathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will bring goodness upon you and multiply you beyond your forefathers.” (Deuteronomy 30:3–5)

Note that in these three verses, the words “the Lord your God” appear four times in quick succession; it is clear that the Torah is emphasizing this point again and again, so that each one of us “know today and lay it upon your heart that the Lord is God” (Deut. 4:39). The routine of our lives is deceptive; the laws of nature set in place by the Holy One, Blessed be He, by which life proceeds on this earth, are a mere façade. They lead man to believe the falsehood that he is the master of his own life and those of other good creatures dependent upon him. This leads to a corrosion of the truth, until “you forget the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 8:14); therefore, an earlier verse warns us: “Beware, lest you forget the Lord your God.”

One who reads these verses closely sees that the Torah warns us against surrendering to routine and complacency in our everyday lives, as these diminish a person until his heart becomes proud and he forgets the Lord his God (may God save us from such a fate). When the Torah speaks of the ingathering of exiles, which is a cornerstone of our lives and a crucial stage of the redemption of our souls, it reminds us again and again: “The Lord, your God.” These words must constantly be laid upon our hearts.

And how pleasing is Rashi’s interpretation, as he cites the Sages’ explanation of the phrase “And the Lord your God will return [*veshav*] your captivity,” using the



intransitive *veshav* instead of the transitive *veheshiv*. Our Sages learn from this that the Divine Presence is exiled, as it were, together with the Jewish people, and it shares in their pain; and when they are redeemed it will be as though God decreed His own redemption, as He will return with them (*Megilla* 29a). And furthermore, Rashi continues, the ingathering of the exiles must be a great and difficult day, as though God Himself must bring each and every person from his place, with His own hands.

Indeed, the day of the ingathering of exiles is a great day, but it is not without difficulty. It is great, as there is nothing that fills us with more joy – true, inner joy – than the ingathering of the exiles; nothing inspires our faith more than seeing this dawn of the redemption.

This is the very reason that it comes with great difficulty. The difficulties involved in this process are apparent and the reason is clear. This is the beginning of the redemption, the birth pangs of the Messiah.

These words describe all of the exiles; we have seen them manifest with our own eyes, felt them upon our flesh and blood – the greatness of the ingathering of exiles, but also its difficulties, the pain and the heartache.

But the ingathering of Ethiopian Jewry is the greatest of all, in every sense – they who endured torment and persecution in manifold ways, upon whose heads malicious waters were poured; for them a handful of people, steadfast and capable, fought valiantly for each and every Jew, from the first to the last.

But no force, no skill, no cunning can prevail against the word of God, for “the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand” (Prov. 19:21), and He has numerous messengers. In His compassion He chose people of noble spirit, who were prepared to sacrifice their own privacy and that of their families in order to bring this plan to fruition, as my friend, Rabbi Menachem Waldman, detailed in the introduction. These individuals mounted a determined struggle, and since the year 5750 (1990) three people have led their activities: Dr. Avraham Neguise, Mr. Joseph Feit, head of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, and Rabbi Menachem Waldman, head of the Shvut Am Institute. As I have come to know Mr. Feit, I have witnessed extraordinary dedication from him, his wife, and all of his children; I have also seen Rabbi Waldman’s devotion, and I have heard about Dr. Neguise, head of the *MiKanaf Darom LeZion* organization. Each of them is dedicated to this holy task in his own way and by his own understanding, but all of them, and certainly many other wonderful people from the Ethiopian community and beyond, truly act for the sake of Heaven, carefully, faithfully, modestly. It is a true merit to the Jewish people that another magnificent tribe joins us here.

Of course, the State of Israel and its prime ministers, the late Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, may he be blessed with good life [note: written shortly before Mr. Sharon’s death], and those who came before and after them, share in this great merit.

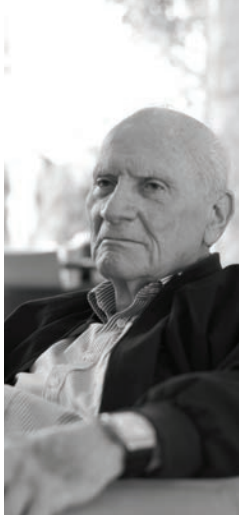
And elevated above them all is the greatest of authorities on Jewish law in recent generations, the *Rishon LeTzion* Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, may his memory be a blessing. Were it not for him and the great courage he displayed in writing a comprehensive

and detailed decision, as was his holy practice, in which he concluded that in principle the *Falashmura* are full-fledged Jews, citing the *Radbaz* in a number of his beautiful and well-founded responsa, refuting the academics who sought to weaken and undermine their status – were it not for our great teacher they would certainly have remained there, in the bitter exile.

Even years later, when the question arose as to the Jewishness of the *Falash Mura*, Rabbi Yosef charged me with the awesome task of clearing their name and ensuring their good standing in strict accordance with the Torah, and with God's kindness I merited to play a part in their *aliyah*, and with His kindness I brought them closer to Judaism in different ways, particularly by encouraging them to appoint young rabbis from their community, in the tradition of Israel and Judah, who had been tested and found suitable, and granting them this duty. I also put in great efforts so that schools and institutions would receive them warmly. I knew their struggles intimately, the hardships of their integration that they endured since coming to Israel, and their hardships even on the way, in their villages, in the compounds – where some of them stayed for years in terrible conditions – through circuitous routes, paths of turmoil laden with countless terrible challenges. Some of them did not manage to fulfill their dream: they perished on the way, were left at the crossroads, never to complete their journey, and even those who came to Zion were not always rewarded with song; still, this could not extinguish the unique joy of their *aliyah* to their ancestral land. With collective effort and true dedication, we will surely receive help from Heaven so that eternal joy be upon our heads, in our land, the place of holiness, where God's eyes always rest. There we will dwell, as one man with one heart, for our God is One, in Him we trust, and we will not fear.

I am truly grateful to the honored Rabbi Menachem Waldman. Beyond the tireless, diligent efforts he has invested throughout the years to bring this holy tribe to Israel, under the eyes of God, and help with their spiritual acclimation, he has also written a most excellent book, which records the chronicle of Ethiopian Jewry, and by doing so has fulfilled the oath of his heart. May he go from strength to strength and be blessed by the Almighty, him and his house and all those with him, and may he and all of Israel merit to see the Temple stand on its foundations at the coming of the Messiah, whom we eagerly await. And from all the nations we will be gathered to Him; blessed is the nation whose lot is thus. And may the Temple be rebuilt quickly in our days, amen.

In anticipation of God's redemption in mercy,  
Servant of God, Shlomo Moshe Amar



Former President of the Israeli Supreme Court,

**Judge Meir Shamgar**

26 Shevat 5774 / 27 Jan 2014

## Foreword

When the State of Israel was founded and recognized by the other nations of the world, Jews of the Diaspora began to stream from their temporary homes to the land of Israel. Many saw this as the fulfillment of the purpose of a Jewish state – to give every Jew the opportunity to settle there as he wishes. This surge of *aliyah* included Jews from every country in which Jews could be found, including the Jews of Ethiopia – who, despite their relative isolation from the rest of world Jewry for hundreds of years, demonstrated their strong desire to come to Jerusalem and live in a country that recognizes their Jewishness.

From a broader historical perspective, one certainly cannot ignore the fact that some questioned the right of Ethiopia's Jews to return to their homeland, but rigorous investigation on the part of rabbis of the highest authority, headed by the Chief Rabbis of Israel, demonstrated unequivocally that the community of Jews living in Ethiopia are bona fide Jews and are therefore, of course, eligible for all rights granted to those making *aliyah* from other countries.

Ethiopian Jewry was divided then into two groups: those who had been members of the Jewish communities scattered throughout Ethiopia, and those who, due to surrounding circumstances, were forced to convert to Christianity and who now sought to return to Judaism.

*Aliyah* from Ethiopia involved many hardships. Despite Israel's formal acceptance of the individuals who were considered by all to be bona fide Jews seeking to make *aliyah*, there were still parties who, as mentioned above, challenged the Jewishness of those residing in Ethiopia until these doubts would be entirely eliminated. I count myself among those who totally reject that attitude. With regard to those who had been forcibly converted, the only question was whether the change in approach would grant these candidates for *aliyah* an identical status to any other *oleh*, or whether they would be required to undergo a special procedure in order to renounce their conversion and thereafter be viewed as of equal status to all other *olim*. According to the authoritative ruling of the Chief Rabbinate, those who had converted could still be considered Jewish, based on the Talmudic statement that "a Jew, although he has sinned, remains a Jew." This was adopted as the policy of the Israeli authorities throughout the process, especially after the aforementioned

ruling of the Chief Rabbis, who recognized the right to return to Judaism for those who had converted.

I will describe the situation through the lens of the relevant legal principles, and I will not relate to the concrete circumstances to which those wishing to make *aliyah* were subjected. I will note that by “concrete circumstances” I am referring to the continual suffering that these Jews were often forced to endure prior to their *aliyah*, which included threats to their life from their neighbors, illness, and abject poverty.

Still, the gates of *aliyah* were opened to many from the Ethiopian Jewish community and to those who had returned to Judaism, and we can take pride in the knowledge that tens of thousands of people have been allowed to come to Israel. Yet this was not possible in every case, and some continued to live in terrible socioeconomic conditions for years – years of suffering for each person who continued to wait for *aliyah*. One simply cannot ignore the inequities that were created as a result, some of which continue to have repercussions many years later.

In sum, I would say that the State of Israel has been fortunate and intelligent to bring in tens of thousands of imperiled Ethiopian Jews from their various communities, with the requisite efforts that this endeavor has entailed. Today we can take pleasure in this great achievement of *aliyah*, and even if we have not fulfilled the dreams of every individual, we have set the tone for the future, although the work has not yet been completed.

I feel it is important to acknowledge with gratitude those who extended their hand to assist in this endeavor and ease the suffering of those involved, both from Israel and from elsewhere. First and foremost, of course, is the Israeli government, which managed to organize several military operations that hastened the *aliyah* of thousands through various means and lessened the suffering involved in waiting. Here it is vital to remember the thousands of Jews who lost their lives on the arduous journey from Ethiopia to Israel, due to the conditions along the way and the malice of outsiders. Throughout much of this period the process of *aliyah* was greatly aided by the activities of the Jewish Agency for Israel, the Joint Distribution Committee, and other Jewish organizations from the United States – particularly the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry. There is no doubt that were it not for this assistance, the most basic conditions required during the period of waiting, and for the *aliyah* itself, could never have been met. One individual who particularly stands out among those deserving of praise is Rabbi Menachem Waldman, author of this volume, who immortalized this journey for generations to come in the form of the Ethiopian Haggada. This *aliyah* has reached a peak, but it has not yet been completed. I hope with all my heart that, as in the past, a way will be found to right every wrong and allow every individual living outside of Israel to be saved.

In the view of this writer, it should go without saying that one must remember the following: *Aliyah* is open to every Jew, including those who returned to this faith; this land is not only the recognized Jewish homeland, but a place where every Jew may yearn to come and live.

This book chronicles the incredible story of tens of thousands of immigrants, from the moment they left their villages until they arrived in Israel, from the perspective of one who for decades participated in the powerful events surrounding this *aliyah*, and who did his work faithfully. My contribution has been small, but I carry in my heart the joy of our success, and I await the completion of this mission, in which we all invested great effort and take great joy.



**Joseph Feit**

A past president of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry and a former partner in an international law firm, Joseph Feit has been a leader of relief, rescue and advocacy efforts on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry since 1988.

## Seeking Lost Brothers: American Jewry and the Jews Left Behind by Operation Solomon

*"I seek my brethren."* Genesis 37:16

For the English edition of this book, my close friend and colleague, Rabbi Menachem Waldman, has asked me to provide context for the outsized American Jewish relief and rescue efforts on behalf of the Jews left behind in Ethiopia in 1991.

American Jews have historically tried to assist Diaspora Jews in distress. But during World War II, American Jewry was partially paralyzed by fear of rampant anti-Semitism in the U.S., concern that the conflict would be dubbed a Jewish war, and the lack of an effective unified structure. The failure to respond adequately to the Holocaust became a source of communal shame after the war. Consequently, when sensitized to the plight of Ethiopian Jewry, Jewishly engaged Americans were determined not to repeat their predecessors' mistakes. Anti-Semitism had receded and the civil rights and Soviet Jewry movements had shown that determined communal action could influence events.

Activists established "start-up" NGOs who placed the issues of Ethiopian Jewry on the community's agenda even though prospects for success seemed dim. The American Association for Ethiopian Jewry (AAEJ) and the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) advocated vigorously on behalf of Ethiopian Jews in the years preceding Operation Moses (1984) and Operation Solomon (1991). NACOEJ and the Struggle to Save Ethiopian Jewry (SSEJ) actively engaged in advocacy after Operation Solomon.

However, the AAEJ (1969-1993) disbanded two years after Operation Solomon airlifted 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel. It believed that all Ethiopian Jews had been brought to Israel and that the remaining Beta Israel had no claims on the Jewish people or the Jewish state. Their rationale was clear; the Beta Israel left behind in Operation Solomon (1991) were descended from Beta Israel grandparents or great grandparents who had converted – nominally or actually - to Christianity.

Other than NACOEJ (1982-present) and SSEJ (2000 – present), few believed that the converts had a genuine desire to return to the Jewish people. Even the Beta Israel who had abandoned their homes and property to become destitute refugees in Addis were seen as opportunists. Purportedly, all they wanted was to leave an impoverished Ethiopia for the new *goldeneh medina*, the State of Israel. Officials of the Israeli government and mainstream Jewish organizations asserted that the refugees would revert to Christianity if allowed to make *aliyah* and had no greater claim on Jewish communal resources than other Ethiopians and no right to Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

The community has proven that these assertions were false. There is now a large body of incontrovertible evidence accumulated over twenty-five years. Once community members arrived in Addis and Gondar, they underwent a dramatic change. There were few, if any, signs of continued links to Christianity. Community members followed normative Jewish religious practices, e.g. observing Shabbat and the laws of *kashrut*. The great majority of those who succeeded in making *aliyah* send their children to Israeli religious schools; many regularly attend synagogue.

It is unclear whether knowledge of the true situation would have changed the minds of Israeli and American Jewish policy makers. Most believed that conversion irrevocably cut off any connection to the Jewish people unless the conversion had been at the point of a sword; desire to return to the Jewish people was irrelevant. This belief drove policy. But it flatly contradicted *halakha* and 1500 years of Jewish precedent. Apostates and their descendants, who wished to rejoin the Jewish faith even after many generations, have been encouraged to return. Often they were actively assisted by the Jewish community, even when it entailed significant risk.

The risks could be very real indeed. The Decree of Alhambra (1492) stated that Jews were being expelled from Spain because of their persistent efforts to help conversos return to the Jewish faith. More than one hundred years after Jews converted in Iberia, their descendants who fled Spain and Portugal and then returned to Judaism were fully accepted by communities in Amsterdam, Italy, Turkey, and the New World. Contrary to the prevalent belief in the American Jewish community, the initial conversions had often not occurred at the point of a sword. Similarly, repentant Jews were welcomed back by Ashkenazi Jewish communities in Germany in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and France in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Precedents in Spain extend as far back as the brutal conversionary efforts of the sixth-century

Visigoths and the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Almohad Muslims. Precedents exist from many other eras of history including relatively modern times.

There are similar historical precedents in the case of Ethiopian Jewry. As late as the 1960s Ethiopian *kessoch* (religious leaders) established committees to bring back Beta Israel who had converted to Christianity. Earlier, in the 1950s, one of the express reasons for the establishment of Ethiopian schools by the Jewish Agency was to provide Jewish education to converts and their children. But despite the return of the Beta Israel to normative halakhic Judaism post-Operation Solomon, the government of Israel continued to deny them the right to make *aliyah*.

The established Jewish relief organizations in large part followed Israel's lead, providing scant assistance to anyone not approved for *aliyah*. They sometimes urged Israel to expedite processing for anyone eligible for *aliyah* under the State's criteria. However, the organizations rarely, if ever, urged the State to expand the criteria for eligibility.

Apparently, now that the State of Israel existed, most major Jewish organizations believed that Diaspora Jewry no longer had primary responsibility for assisting endangered Jewish communities and looked to Israel for instruction. The State shared this perspective. The protection and rescue of endangered Jews was Israel's *raison d'être*. Government officials looked to the Diaspora for funding, not advice. Israel viewed its primacy to include directing relief as well as rescue efforts. One government decision instructs relief organizations to discontinue assistance in Ethiopia.

NACOEJ and SSEJ fully recognized Israel's right as a sovereign government to decide who is eligible for Israeli citizenship. But the organizations did not believe that the State also had the right to determine for Diaspora Jewry who is a Jew in the Diaspora. In this case, there seemed to be a difference between the interests of the State, as interpreted by its changeable cast of political actors, and Jewish interests as viewed from the perspective of *halakha* and historical precedent. And once Diaspora Jewry concludes that a distressed community in the Diaspora is Jewish, it is obligated to provide assistance – as Jews have always assisted fellow Jews – even if the State concludes that community members are not entitled to make *aliyah*.

The standards of the Law of Return and *halakhah* overlap but are not identical. The Law of Return deems many non-Jews eligible for *aliyah* while excluding certain categories of Jews who meet halakhic standards. Under Section 4A of the Law of Return, hundreds of thousands of people, principally Russians, have been allowed to make *aliyah* even though they are not considered Jews by traditional Jewish standards (e.g. a Christian with three Christian grandparents and a paternal Jewish grandfather). Yet, Israel's Interior Ministry holds that the Law of Return did not apply to repentant Ethiopian Jews. Despite the Interior Ministry's views under the Law of Return, the religious authorities of Israel and the United States repeatedly



and uniformly held that the remaining Beta Israel were Jews entitled to assistance from Jewish relief organizations. I remain puzzled why certain established Jewish organizations would provide relief only to those Ethiopians who qualified for *aliyah*; American Jewry provides relief worldwide to impoverished Jews who have no intention to immigrate to Israel.

NACOEJ, under the leadership of Barbara Ribakove and SSEJ, led by Jeremy Feit, followed the guidance of Israel's Chief Rabbinate, and the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform branches of American Jewry rather than adopting the restricted criteria of the Israeli government. Even if Israel did not want them as citizens, NACOEJ and SSEJ felt bound by a Jewish obligation to help the rejected Ethiopian Jews.

Consequently, NACOEJ and SSEJ were often the only organizations willing to help the Jews whose decades-long struggle to make *aliyah* is splendidly detailed in this book. Tens of thousands were helped in compounds opened in Addis from 1990 through 2005 and in Gondar from 1998 until 2011 when the facilities were turned over to the Jewish Agency. Schools for Jewish and secular education were built, and meals were provided to children. Food was distributed monthly, religious facilities were established, and for over a decade, employment was provided to heads of households in Addis and to craftsmen in Gondar. NACOEJ's resources were inadequate to the task. Unlike the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the Jewish Agency, NACOEJ lacked access to the charitable funds of the mainstream Jewish community (although from time to time desperately needed funds were received from certain generous federations.). Nevertheless, at its height, NACOEJ compounds were servicing 23,000 people including schools for 4,800 children and adult education for 5,000. At one point, NACOEJ was serving 10,000 meals per day to Ethiopian Jewish children. Seders in the compound were the largest in the world, dwarfing the well-known seders in Nepal.

Of course, assistance, though far more limited in scope, was also provided by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the Jewish Agency. The JDC provided medical care in Addis and Gondar. In the 1990s, it provided some humanitarian assistance in Addis. The Jewish Agency provided assistance in Gondar from 2011 – 2013.

My colleagues and constant companions in this twenty-five-year struggle are genuine Jewish heroes. Barbara Ribakove, Rav Menachem Waldman and Dr. Avraham Neguise provided consistent, determined leadership. They are the Mordechais and Esthers of our time. It has been an honor to work with them.

But success ultimately came because of the unshakable resolution of the community to return to the Jewish people, no matter how long it took, regardless of personal cost. This book dispels any legitimate doubt as to the bona fides of this return, a revealed miracle which has take place before our astonished eyes.



# Introduction

## Coming Full Circle

The matter of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry became a topic of public debate in Israel and throughout the world beginning in the spring of 1990. At that time approximately 20,000 Ethiopian Jews came to Addis Ababa with the goal of immigrating to Israel. They were joined by some 2,000 people from the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry.

The journey of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry began upon their departure from the villages surrounding Lake Tana in northwestern Ethiopia, and continued in the communities of people waiting for *aliyah* in Addis Ababa and Gondar, where they returned to the Jewish faith and way of life. This journey ended upon immigration to Israel. In this way some 46,000 people made *aliyah*.

This book documents the waiting period (1990-2013) spent in Addis Ababa and Gondar. From a historical perspective, this brings full circle a process that began in the nineteenth century.

In 1864, Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer was enlisted to the cause and published a declaration in support of Ethiopian Jewry. Missionary activity in the midst of the community was the chief impetus for his statement. He called for sending them Jewish emissaries, books, and ritual items in order to strengthen their religious environment (see: Menachem Waldman, *MeEver LeNeharei Kush – Yehudei Ethiopia VeHaAm HaYehudi*, Tel Aviv 5759/1989, pp. 144-148).

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the period known as the *kefu ken* [bad period], a time of severe drought and epidemics that plagued northern Ethiopia between the years of 1888–1892, tens of thousands of Jews died of starvation and disease – about one-third of Ethiopia’s Jewish population, by some estimates. Widespread devastation was caused by war against the Dervish (1889), who invaded from Sudan and moved toward Gondar, which was Ethiopia’s capital city. The Jews, along with the rest of the population, suffered greatly; synagogues were destroyed, spiritual leaders scattered. Thousands tried to survive by any means possible. They also dealt with forced conversion to Christianity during the reign of Yohannes IV (1872–1889). Being a marginalized minority within a dominant Christian population, many Jews converted to Christianity thinking that it would help them survive.

The period from 1890 through the first half of the twentieth century saw the conversion to Christianity of nearly all of the Jews living in the districts surrounding Lake Tana and in lower Quara, near Sudan. They came to be called the *Falashmura*. Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch (1881–1955), a key activist on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry in

the twentieth century, attempted to stem this tide of conversion to Christianity. Many of the students whom he sent to study in Jewish institutions in pre-state Israel, Europe, and Egypt – including, significantly, Tamrat Emanuel, and many others from the Jewish school he founded in Addis Ababa – were among those who had converted to Christianity. Dr. Faitlovitch worked diligently with this group in order to bring them back to Judaism and to their community.

In addition, spiritual leaders of the Ethiopian Jewish community worked to bring others back into the fold. In 1966 an action committee was established, headed by Uri Ben Baruch (Kess Berhan), a priest of the community and one of the great spiritual leaders of Ethiopian Jewry. The committee, which was called “The Assembly of Jews Living in Ethioipa,” defined its goals as follows: “To ensure that the Jews do not leave their religion and to search for Jews who disappeared among the gentiles in the land of Abyssinia,” and further: “To build bridges between the Jews (Falashas) who have been found and the Jews who were lost” (see: Menachem Waldman, *Haggadat Ethiopia*, Jerusalem 5770 / 2010, pp. 86-87).

The Jews who converted to Christianity scarcely assimilated through intermarriage with Amharic Christians. Their relatively large numbers and some uniquely “Jewish” characteristics – crafts associated with the Jewish community and epithets used against them – caused them to remain distinct from the surrounding non-Jews. They were clearly identified as descendants of Jews, both by themselves and by the surrounding population.

This process, which began in the nineteenth century – a process that has rectified religious and historical wrongs – has been coming full circle since 1990. The descendants of those who converted to Christianity, whole families, from grandparents and great-grandparents who still had memories of Judaism to grandchildren and great-grandchildren, felt that the time of their redemption had come. They left their villages, sold their property and left for Addis Ababa and Gondar, with the goal of returning to Judaism and reconnecting to the people of Israel.

## Who Is a Jew

The Jews of Ethiopia had been living in isolation from the rest of the Jewish people. They were unaware of widely practiced rabbinic tradition and fulfilled the mitzvot of the *Orit* [Torah] in their own unique way, with many differences from traditional Jewish practice.

From the mid-nineteenth century, when interest in Ethiopian Jewry began to develop, it was unclear whether their Jewishness would be recognized; consequently, activity on their behalf did not receive widespread support. This had implications for the issue of their *aliyah* as well: When the State of Israel was founded, the Jews of Ethiopia were not included in the Jewish Diaspora who were welcomed into Israel. The activities of the Jewish Agency in Ethiopia, which took place over a period of five years (1953–1958), were halted because no decision had been made as to the community’s Jewishness.

These doubts were erased following the publication of the opinion of Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef in 1973. Rabbi Yosef called upon the Israeli government to bring the Ethiopian community to Israel as Jews. Subsequently, the Law of Return was applied to the Jews of Ethiopia, and the waves of immigration began.

In 1990, when the question of bringing the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry on *aliyah* arose, the rabbis who were dealing with the issue decided to bring the community closer to Judaism. They continued the line of halakhic reasoning that had recognized the Jewishness of Ethiopian Jewry, and saw those who had converted to Christianity and now wished to return to Judaism as full-fledged Jews – as the maxim of Jewish law states: “A Jew, although he has sinned, remains a Jew” (*Sanhedrin* 44a). There is a path of repentance for those who have not observed *mitzvot*, and even for those who converted to another religion.

Several Chief Rabbis of Israel – Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, and Rabbi Shlomo Amar – were a central force in bringing the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel. They ruled that these people are Jewish and that helping them return to Judaism and come to Israel is a great *mitzva*. Rabbi Amar even visited Ethiopia and had extensive contact with the Israeli government regarding this issue.

At the Rubinstein Committee (August 1991), which first formally discussed the question of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry, a unanimous decision was reached to accept the stance of the Chief Rabbinate. It was decided to begin the process of returning to Judaism with the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry and to bring them to Israel as Jews under the Law of Return.

This halakhic position is not without precedent in Jewish history. Many have been accepted back into the fold after having converted to other religions. Those who left Judaism, including forced converts and their descendants, have returned to the Jewish faith throughout the generations and were accepted without the need for conversion.

In contrast to this halakhic stance adopted by the Chief Rabbinate, and the numerous precedents throughout Jewish history, opposition to the *aliyah* of this community was expressed by members of the Israeli government and some organizations involved in *aliyah*. Many felt that the conversion to Christianity disconnected this community entirely from the Jewish people. Among those who expressed opposition were some *olim* from Ethiopia. Although *kessim* and activists, including the chief rabbi of Ethiopia, Rabbi Yosef Hadana, supported their *aliyah*, this group still faced many opponents from within the Ethiopian community.

Already in 1990, as Jewish Agency emissaries interviewed *aliyah* candidates in Addis Ababa, it was decided that the converts to Christianity would not be eligible for *aliyah*. This decision was based on the Law of Return, which excludes those who “voluntarily changed their religion,” or, as the law states elsewhere, those who are “members of another religion.”

This interpretation of the law has been accepted in practice throughout the years; members of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry are not eligible for *aliyah* under the Law of Return because they are considered to have voluntarily changed their

religion and are defined as members of another religion, even after they have practiced a fully Jewish way of life for years in the communities of those waiting for *aliyah*.

At the Tzaban Committee, which reexamined the issue in 1993, ten experts, including rabbis and researchers, gave their opinions. The three rabbis on the committee, Rabbi Dr. Aharon Lichtenstein, Rabbi Shabtai Sabato, and Rabbi Dr. Ratzon Arusi, expressed the opinion that the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry should be accepted. The other experts rejected their opinion for various reasons.

Although the members of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry were not included among those eligible for *aliyah* under the Law of Return, it was impossible to ignore their unique circumstances. Israel's High Court of Justice issued its first ruling on the topic in August 1995, in which it related to a number of *aliyah* candidates who were waiting in Addis Ababa. The president of the Supreme Court, Meir Shamgar, defined the scope of the term *Falashmura*: "The reference is to those of ethnic Jewish descent who converted to Christianity due to the circumstances of the time, place, and surroundings, but still kept their unique identity, due to, inter alia, distinctions and reservations on the part of the non-Jewish surroundings. They now desire to return to their Jewish roots and immigrate to Israel" (decision 3317 / 93).

The Tzaban Committee was the first to raise the possibility of family reunification on humanitarian and personal grounds, and it even recommended certain activities in Ethiopia that brought members of the local community closer to Jewish tradition. Reunification of families was carried out under the Entry Into Israel Law 5712–1952, according to which the Minister of Interior Affairs may grant visas and permanent residency permits to those who are not eligible for *aliyah* under the Law of Return. In the records of the Interior Ministry they were not registered as Christians and Ethiopians under religion and nationality, respectively; rather, they were initially registered as *Zera Yisrael* [seed of Israel], and later these fields were left blank.

Later on, the Entry Into Israel Law became the means by which the Israeli government chose to bring tens of thousands of people from the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel. This legal path led to a complex and unique situation – a trap, in a sense – in which those waiting for *aliyah* found themselves: on one hand, they were not recognized as eligible for *aliyah* according to the Law of Return. On the other hand, they were recognized as part of Ethiopian Jewry; the title of the governmental decision written in February 2003 uses the term "remainder of Ethiopian **Jewry**." In that decision, their eligibility to enter Israel was defined based on their Jewish heritage and, indeed, on their being Jews according to the parameters of *halakha*. The goal of bringing them into Israel was defined as repentance and return to Judaism, not conversion. It states: "The matrilineal descendants of Ethiopian Jewry who wish to return to Judaism may enter Israel under the Entry Into Israel Law 5712–1952, in order to officially return to Judaism here and reintegrate into the Jewish people."

Those waiting for *aliyah* also found themselves trapped in another way: they had returned to the Jewish faith and were living a Jewish way of life in Ethiopia, but

they were prevented from completing the official process of returning to Judaism and conversion in Ethiopia. It can be assumed that had their process of returning to Judaism, or a similar process, been taking place in a location with a recognized rabbinate, the returning to Judaism and conversion would have been completed there, and they would have been allowed to make *aliyah* under the Law of Return. The question of how the Israeli establishment and other individuals and organizations relate to the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry – both those who support this community and those who express opposition – deserves closer examination, but that cannot be accomplished here.

In this context, it is important to understand the reality faced by tens of thousands of people seeking to make *aliyah*: they met a wall of opposition from parties in the Israeli government and many aid organizations that were active in Ethiopia.

## The Struggle for *Aliyah*

Activists on behalf of Ethiopian Jewry were forced to mount a determined struggle. Beginning in 1990 these activities were led by three people, for whom this task ultimately became their life's work: Dr. Avraham Neguise, a member of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry who made *aliyah* in 1985 and beginning in 1990 founded and headed *MiKanaf Darom LeZion*, an organization dedicated to *aliyah* and integration of Ethiopian Jews; Joseph Feit, a Jewish lawyer from the United States who was the president of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry, directed by Barbara Ribakove Gordon, an organization that was already active in Addis Ababa at the time of Operation Solomon; and I, Menachem Waldman, who have been involved in the spiritual integration of Ethiopian Jewry and at the time (1990) served as the rabbi of the community of Nir Etzion, head of the Shvut Am Institute, and representative of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel on this matter.

In addition to the chief rabbis of Israel, most of whom supported the *aliyah* of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry, throughout the years there have been supporters and activists, prominent among whom are: Rabbi Yosef Hadana; Rabbi Yoel bin Nun; Yehuda Etzion; Yefet Alamo; Tzafir Ronen; ministers Eli Yishai and Benny Begin; Knesset members Hanan Porat, Uri Ariel, Eliezer Zandberg, Zevulun Orlev, David Azulay, Michael Eitan, Shlomo Molla, and Avraham Michaeli; Prof. Michael Corinaldi; Prof. Avshalom Elitzur; Prof. Irwin Cotler; a public committee headed by former Acting President of the Israeli Supreme Court, Judge Chaim Cohen; and a public committee headed by former President of the Israeli Supreme Court, Judge Meir Shamgar, which has been active since 2007.

The activities were coordinated with parties in the Israeli establishment, mainly the prime ministers and ministers of interior affairs and immigration absorption. Often this issue was a topic of discussion in cabinet meetings and the Ministerial Committee on Immigration, Absorption, and the Diaspora.

In this manner landmark governmental decisions came about, including most

importantly: in June 1997, 4,000 members of the community were brought from Addis Ababa to Israel; In February 2003, members of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry of matrilineal Jewish descent were brought to Israel; in November 2010 the group waiting in Gondar was brought to Israel and the Jewish Agency commenced activities in Gondar.

The Knesset, and especially the Committee on Immigration and Absorption, discussed the question of bringing the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel numerous times. There were also several legislative bills proposed on the subject. The State Control Committee was called to discuss the issue, and the State Comptroller, Micha Lindenstrauss, visited Ethiopia himself in order to better understand the situation.

Over the years the Supreme Court has seen many petitions to the High Court of Justice, most of which are focused on failures to carry out governmental decisions. Relatives of those waiting for *aliyah* often demonstrated outside the homes of ministers while the ministers discussed the issue.

Activists strove to exhaust all possible means within Israeli law to allow this community to realize their right to make *aliyah*.

## Jewish Life while Waiting for *Aliyah*

A path to *aliyah* was made possible due to the religious transformation undergone by those waiting for *aliyah*, when they reclaimed their Jewish tradition.

When they first began to arrive from the villages to Addis Ababa, they had a clear goal: to return to Judaism in accordance with *halakha* [Jewish law]. Those waiting for *aliyah* began to internalize returning to Judaism as a central theme of their lives. The North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), later joined by the Struggle to Save Ethiopian Jewry (SSEJ), provided communal infrastructure for thousands of people waiting for *aliyah*.

In the community compounds in Addis Ababa and Gondar, an extensive system of Jewish life was put in place: a synagogue with three services each day, a Jewish school, a *mikve* [ritual bath], Jewish studies for adults, observance of Shabbat and Jewish holidays, and activities for children and teenagers. There were also daily nutrition programs for pregnant and nursing women, children under age 6, schoolchildren, and more.

Dozens of prayer books and books on Judaism were translated from English to Amharic and printed in Addis Ababa. They were the basis for Jewish studies and observance of *mitzvot*. Torah scrolls, *mezuzot*, *tallitot* [prayer shawls] and *tzitzit* [ritual fringes] were purchased for the communities.

The heads of the communities and the action committees were chosen from among those waiting for *aliyah*. Members of the community also served as prayer leaders, principals and teachers at the school, Jewish studies and Hebrew teachers, women supervisors at the *mikve*, managers and employees of the feeding centers, and more.

In April 2011 the Jewish Agency took over operations in Gondar from NACOEJ. Jewish Agency activities there ceased at the end of August 2013.

The community compounds were a school of sorts, preparing their residents for Israel. This is how Belai Kassa, one of the elders of the community in Addis Ababa, described it to me. He sought to reassure me that the difficult living conditions and prolonged wait for *aliyah* had not broken their spirits because as they waited, they returned to Judaism and learned how to be Jewish in Israel.

The communities waiting for *aliyah* were a crucible for the souls and lives of thousands of descendants of Jews who recommitted themselves to Judaism. After they made *aliyah*, they completed the process of conversion in Israel; however, the essential transformation and most of the process had taken place during the years of waiting. Those who lived a Jewish way of life in Addis Ababa and Gondar – tens of thousands of people did so over the years – had already returned to Judaism in Ethiopia.

Those who had made *aliyah* after living in these communities had a smooth transition in connecting to their Jewish and Israeli identity. This is the primary reason for their extraordinary success in completing the conversion process in Israel. Some 95% of the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry completed the process of conversion during their initial stages of absorption in Israel. They constitute about 60% of all converts to Judaism in the State of Israel each year, from 1993 to the present.

The communal life, the experiences of suffering during the years of waiting, the shared struggle – all of these have fostered a social cohesiveness that has united tens of thousands of those waiting for *aliyah*. Even those who have already come to Israel feel an obligation toward the people left behind, even if they are not related by blood. The religious and social characteristics developed in these communities continue to find expression even after years of life in Israel.

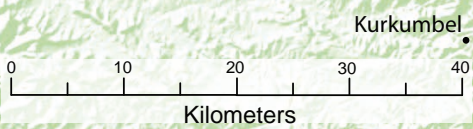
The return to Judaism in this community has also brought about a certain change in its image. It became easier to explain the obligation to bring to Israel those who had, in many respects, already returned to the Jewish faith.

Even after years of integration in Israel, these *olim* continue to live a Jewish life. The vast majority of the children (74%) attend religious schools. The claims of opponents to this community's *aliyah* – that the community would continue to live a Christian way of life in Israel – have been thereby discredited.

As far as I am aware, a movement of return to Judaism on this great of a scale is without precedent in the history of the Jewish people. This phenomenon is even more impressive in light of the difficulties and waves of opposition and hostility faced by those who sought to return.



# VILLAGES OF THE REMNANTS OF ETHIOPIAN JEWRY



**LEGEND**  
 Paved Road ——— (red line)  
 Road ——— (black line)





Village of Atuga, 1992



CHAPTER ONE:

# From the Villages to the *Aliyah* Compounds

ከጠር ወደ እስራኤል  
ለመገምገት የመቆያ ቦታ



Girl arriving from the  
village, Addis Ababa 1991

# From the Villages to Addis Ababa and Gondar

Beginning in the summer of 1990, thousands of Ethiopian Jews flocked to Addis Ababa after a legal route for *aliyah* was opened in cooperation with the Ethiopian government.

In parallel, individuals and families from the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry began their journey toward Addis Ababa, mainly from the Dembia and Chilga districts near Gondar. They felt connected to the greater Ethiopian Jewish community and joined others who were hoping to immigrate to Israel.

Thus approximately 20,000 people waiting for *aliyah* gathered in Addis Ababa. Each month, a group of them immigrated to Israel. In May 1991 Israel carried out Operation Solomon, which brought some 14,200 Ethiopians to Israel over the course of 36 hours.

The remainder of Ethiopian Jewry, who had been identified during the *aliyah* process as converts to Christianity, were not approved for *aliyah* and did not receive any assistance, apart from a few families who were allowed to immigrate to Israel.

In the neighborhoods surrounding the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa, a group began to form of those waiting for *aliyah* who had been rejected by the embassy and by aid organizations.



Zimna Berhani and Rabbi Menachem Waldman with the remaining Jews in the village of Melkenaye in the Dembia district, 1992

## “We were among the first to leave Dembia for Addis Ababa”

Reda Detale



Reda Detale and his wife, Dege Belete, Addis Ababa, 1991

In 1984, our son, Teka Reda, left for Sudan with the intention of going to Israel. We thought he died, but then we received a letter from Israel. He wrote that many had died in Sudan, but that he had merited to reach the Holy Land. We were so happy. He warned us not to go through Sudan, that in Israel they are fighting for our *aliyah*, and that we should wait for the right time.

Jews on their way to Sudan passed through our community. We hosted them gladly. They did not reveal their destination, telling us that they were

going to healing springs. My son, Derso Detale, joined one of the groups, but he returned some time later, after encountering bandits and other difficulties.

After we immigrated to Israel, other family members whom we had hosted in our home in Melkenaye came to visit us in our caravan in Neve Carmel, to thank us. They told us that some of their relatives had died on the way.

We were among the first to leave Dembia for Addis Ababa, with the goal of coming to Israel. We left everything, sold only one ox, and came to Addis Ababa in Säne (July) 1990.

For three years I was part of the community of those waiting for *aliyah* in Addis Ababa, in Andy's Compound, which was established by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry. I was chosen by Andy Goldman, director of the community, as an outstanding weaver, and so I wove clothing for children and adults. I was also responsible for the burial of the dead, whom we buried in the Jewish cemetery of Addis Ababa.

Interview with Reda Detale  
9 Tammuz 5771 / 11 July 2011



Village of Robgebeya, 1992



## “An awakening began throughout Gondar”

Aschalew (Avshalom) Ambau

I’ve known since I was young that I am from the people of Israel. Our grandparents would tell us about the land of Israel and Jerusalem, and that when God wills it – the redemption will come and we will go up to Jerusalem. They told us about Shabbat and Passover, although we did not keep them in practice. We were a group separate from the non-Jews, and we married only within our community. In rare cases, such as when someone moved to the city or went to the army, there was assimilation. The non-Jews called us derogatory names: “*Falasha*,” “*Buda*,” “*Kayla*” – and we tried not to stand out. Some people in our community would travel to the Jewish community in Gondar for Passover and Sigd, in order to celebrate with them.

I completed high school in 1988, and about a year later an awakening began, throughout Gondar and Dembia, of people who wished to immigrate to Israel. My grandparents and uncles suggested that I leave first, to check things out. In June 1990 I left Gorgora on a boat bound for Bahar-Dar (south of Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile river). A few days after I arrived there, we continued to Addis Ababa by bus. We were a group of about 70 people, mainly from the villages of Boa and Buchara.

When we arrived in Addis Ababa we submitted requests for *aliyah* approval at the Israeli embassy, but we were denied. At first the embassy workers called us “*Falashmura*” – a name I had never heard before. I knew, from what my father and grandmother had told me, that the Jews called us “*Maryam woded*” (lovers of Mary), but the non-Jews called us only “*Falasha*,” “*Buda*,” and “*Kayla*.” The people at the embassy told us: “You are not eligible to make *aliyah*, this is a waste of your time. You’d be better off returning to your village.” We were not given humanitarian aid either. The Joint Distribution Committee gave us some assistance with rent, oil, grains and other things, and later the NACOEJ helped us as well. The embassy employees told us: “We’ll buy you oxen – go back to Gondar, and we’ll tell the local government there to give you land. You’d be better off going back there. You have no chance of making *aliyah*.”

On the other hand, the NACOEJ representatives – first Solomon Ezra and then Andy Goldman – encouraged us, saying: “You are part of the people of Israel, you have relatives in Israel who are fighting for you, and your day will come as well. It’s just a matter of time...”

Interview with Aschalew (Avshalom) Ambau  
15 Tammuz 5771 / 17 July 2011



In the first office of the NACOEJ, Addis Ababa 1990

## “When the Jews went to Sudan”

Ageru Kassa

When the Jews went to Sudan in order to immigrate to the land of Israel, my older brother, Alehen, went with them. He came to Sudan – he was in the camps there – but afterward he returned to the village. In the Amra-Kova camp in Sudan he met our relatives from Ambover. I had other relatives who had gone to Israel via Sudan.

When I was discharged from the army I tried to make *aliyah* through the embassy in Addis Ababa. I came to Addis Ababa with my brother Alehen in late 1990. In Susan’s Compound [Susan Pollack, AAEJ activist] two people interviewed me, and when they didn’t find my name or my family’s name on the list, they refused to approve me for *aliyah*.

I was in Andy’s Compound and was receiving help from my Jewish relatives, who were also waiting for *aliyah*. I was on the community committee and worked with the JDC as a liaison with those waiting for *aliyah* in the NACOEJ compound.

Interview with Ageru Kassa  
18 Tammuz 5771 / 20 July 2011



Registration at the NACOEJ offices. Left: Andy Goldman. 1990



Families from the villages at the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa, 1990



## “My parents sold their property – and we left”

Getenet Awuke

I was born in 1967 in the Dembia province, in the village of Gubye, near Ateye. There were 33 families of Jewish descent in the village. They made their living through agriculture, weaving, and blacksmithing. We were a minority among the Christians and lived in a separate neighborhood. The Christians belittled us and even cursed at us. They did not marry us, and our parents did not give their consent to marriages with Christians. On Shabbat we rested and did not work. We drew water on Friday morning and prepared our food before Shabbat. This was a strict custom of my grandmother, my mother’s mother, Nevse Fente, who descended from the Jews of Quara.

Although my grandmother converted to Christianity, she never abandoned her Jewish customs and continued to observe Shabbat. On Saturday the extended family would meet at her house and eat, and she and my grandfather would tell stories about her parents, who kept the mitzvot of Judaism. My grandmother and my mother also kept the laws of family purity and would immerse in the river just before dark, so that the non-Jews would not see them.

I completed high school in Azezu, and afterward I served in the Ethiopian army for three years.

In late 1992 my family came to Addis Ababa in order to immigrate to Israel. My parents sold their property – a house, land, five cows and an ox – and we left. We came to the embassy and asked them for approval to make *aliyah*, but we were denied. Representatives of the Jewish Agency and the JDC were angry at

us for leaving our village. We joined Solomon’s Compound [Solomon Ezra, NACOEJ representative], where approximately 3,000 people were registered. We rented an apartment in the neighborhood of Lamberet, one room for both the parents and the children. My married siblings rented separate apartments.

For about two years I worked in construction and came to the compound for prayers and Jewish Studies classes. My older brothers also worked as day laborers in construction. One of my brothers worked as an embroiderer in the Jewish community. In this way we supported our entire family, since our parents could not work. My younger brothers went to the school in the compound. In 1994 I was given the job of geography teacher in the community school, and later I became a Jewish Studies teacher.

After we had lived in Addis Ababa for three years, the JDC recognized us as part of the community. We received an allowance of 50 kg of *teff* once every three months, and we were eligible for medical services as well.

My aunt and her family immigrated to Israel through Operation Solomon. My mother’s brothers made *aliyah* in 1996 and sent us money from Israel so that we could survive.

In 1998 our family was approved for *aliyah*. We arrived at the Hatzerot Yassaf trailer park, and since I was single at the time, I was sent with other young adults to the Tapuz absorption center in Nahariya.

Interview with Getenet Awuke  
15 Adar 5773 / 25 February 2013



In the AAEJ compound, Addis Ababa 1991



In the NACOEJ office. Left: Solomon Ezra. 1990

## “We will go to Addis Ababa!”

Fikadu Mera

Many people testified that my maternal grandfather, Abba Worku Kidanu Sahalu, never converted to Christianity. He continued to observe Shabbat in his village of Tamergot, in the province of Chilga. He circumcised male babies himself on the eighth day after their birth, and he would tell us about Passover. His mother, Tayech Belete, never left Judaism either.

My grandfather told us that in his later years, when he was around 65, Christian *kessim* came to him – as is customary in Ethiopia – and said to him: “We will be as a spiritual father to you. Confess your sins.” My grandfather rejected them and said: “I am a Jew. I do not follow these customs. If I have sinned, you will not save me. If I kept the *mitzvot* and did good deeds, they will stand in my merit.”

A few months later my grandfather became ill, and we came from the village of Falashzge to visit him. This was in 1986. He told us: “I tried to go to the land of Israel through Sudan, but because I fell ill I returned home. My son, Asmeru [Shimon Sahalu], merited to come to the Holy Land through Sudan. I have a connection to the people of Israel – and if you agree with me, we will go to Addis Ababa.”

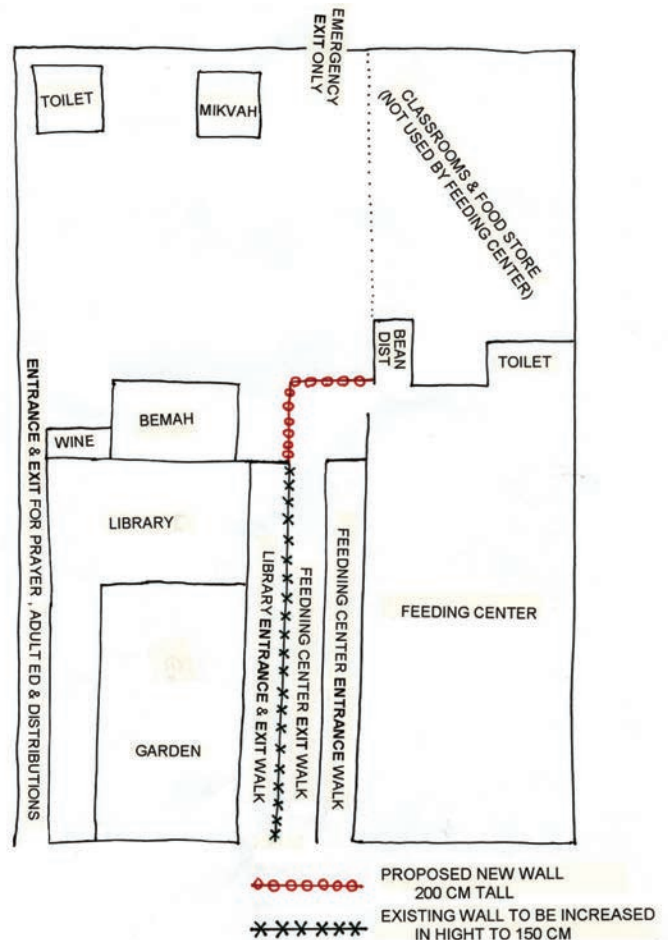
My parents did not agree to go to Addis Ababa. My grandfather summoned me and said: “If you accept what I have said, I will take you to Addis Ababa. There, or in Israel, with God’s help, you will marry. I will cover all of your expenses.”

A number of years later, in August 1990, I went to visit him again. He said to me: “Do you remember what I told you years ago? My sons, Dubale and Kuwye, have already gone to Bahar-Dar and are on their way to Addis Ababa. I will tell you a secret: In one week I will leave for Addis Ababa as well. You should join me.”

My grandfather left a week later to travel on foot from Tamergot to Delgi, and from there he continued by boat to Bahar-Dar (south of Lake Tana) through Kunzila. I followed the same path three weeks later, and we met in Addis Ababa.

A short time afterward my grandfather became sick and died. The day before his death he called me to his room and asked that I try to bring my parents and the rest of my family from the village to Addis Ababa.

Interview with Fikadu Mera  
20 Nisan 5773 / 31 March 2013



Sketch of the community compound in Gondar, 2000



In the AAEJ compound in Addis Ababa, 1991



“The old man lay on the ground, holding on to Andy’s legs, begging for help”

Barbara Ribakove Gordon

In August 1990, when thousands of Jews came from northern Ethiopia to Addis Ababa [nine months before Operation Solomon], a few hundred members of the Falashmura came with them. The Israeli embassy, which granted a stipend to each Jewish family, refused to help the Falashmura. They were told to return to their villages and were even promised bus tickets for the trip back.

The Falashmura responded that they could not go back to their villages even if they wanted to, since non-Jews had seized their homes, and returning could put their very lives in danger. In any case, they did not want to return, as they had decided to throw in their lot with the rest of the Jewish people and make *aliyah*, like everyone else. “If it has been decreed that we will die in Addis Ababa, we will accept it,” they said.

At that time a meeting took place in the office of Asher Naim, Israel’s ambassador to Ethiopia. Present at the meeting were representatives of the JDC, including director-general Michael Schneider, Jewish Agency representatives, and a member of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews (AAEJ). I participated in the meeting on behalf of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), as did Andy Goldman and Solomon Ezra. Michael Schneider said, “I want to help these poor people.” Following a discussion, it was decided that the NACOEJ would be asked to

be in touch with the Falashmura who had come to Addis Ababa and grant them financial assistance – albeit in smaller amounts than those granted to the Jewish families. It was further decided that past a certain date we would not accept any additional members of the Falashmura into the aid programs.

The NACOEJ began giving each Falashmura family a sum of money each month. We recorded their names and details and kept track of those who were in Addis Ababa.

In the Falashmura villages it was known that they would not be well received in Addis Ababa. A few people came anyway, although we did not accept them into our program. I also offered bus tickets back to Gondar for those who came.

Some time afterward, Andy Goldman called me in New York and told me that one of the women who had been registered with the NACOEJ arrived with her father, who had come from his village a short time before. She was unable to support or feed him. Her elderly father lay on the ground, holding on to Andy’s legs and begging for help.

We didn’t know what to do. Our hands were tied, because we were bound by the decision not to accept any more people.

Interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon, director-general of the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry  
4 Adar 5773 / 14 February 2013

## “Forced to leave their villages”

Zaudu Berhan and Nega Alene

The Beta Israel community currently living in Addis Ababa numbers some 8,000 people. They came to Addis at different times, from all over the country: villages in Dembia, Chilga, Quara, Achefer, and others. They all came with one goal – to leave Ethiopia and come to the Holy Land, the land of Israel, and reunite with their families there. Some have mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandparents or other relatives in Israel.

These are a few of the reasons that they were forced to leave their villages:

1. Their homes were torched by residents of their village or surrounding villages, especially in the Deverega region.
2. Their wives and daughters were raped.
3. They did not receive land for farming, as was given to the other Ethiopian residents of these areas.

...The eighteen members of the committee were appointed by the community, who came to Gondar from various villages. Once they were appointed, the members of the committee began, as they had promised, to examine each and every person and ensure that every one of them was truly a member of Beta Israel, based on their family trees and other sources. In this way a list was compiled of those who had undergone this examination.

Zaudu Berhan and Nega Alene, emissaries' report on their visit to Addis Ababa during the High Holidays



In the community compound in Addis Ababa, 1991



Building the community compound in Addis Ababa, 1990



Building the community compound in Gondar, 1998



## The Christians Had Burned Their Homes

Ageru Kassa

Addis Ababa, Nisan 5758 / April 1998

...Even today there are Christians who are anti-Jewish, who harm the people of Beta Israel.

The people of Beta Israel, who are the victims, were forced to leave their villages and came to Addis Ababa to save their own lives. There are currently 2,122 heads of families, which total about 7,125 people.

I asked many of them why they left their villages and came to Addis Ababa. They answered that since the Christians had burned their homes, looted their property and killed their cattle, they were left with no choice but to leave.

The clerks of the agricultural institute even took the rifles from the Beta Israel community and left them without any means of defending themselves when they were shot or beaten by the locals. Therefore, when they could not stand it anymore, they left and came to Addis Ababa in the hope that they would be able to join their relatives in the land of Israel.

Ageru Kassa, "Eyewitness Account"

## Conversion to Christianity among the Remainder of the Ethiopian Jewish Community

In the late nineteenth century, a series of disasters struck Ethiopia. This was the *kefu ken* [bad period] – years of drought and natural disasters that brought about severe famine and countless deaths, as well as the war against the Dervish, who invaded from Sudan in 1889 and waged war against the Ethiopians along the Metema-Gondar road. At the time, Emperor Yohannes IV decreed that anyone who was not Christian must convert.

These disasters caused particular hardship in the Ethiopian Jewish community: villages and synagogues were destroyed, religious leaders were lost, and many perished. According to some estimates, at least one third of Ethiopia's Jews died during this period.

Thousands of Jews whose very existence was threatened viewed converting to Christianity as a means of survival and a path to recognition and equality among the dominant Christian population. Nearly all of the Jewish villages surrounding Lake Tana, in the districts of Dembia, Chilga, Takusa, Alefa, Achefer, and Gojam, as well as lower Quara, became Christian villages over the course of the twentieth century.

It should be noted that Christian missionaries from Europe were operating in Ethiopia's Jewish communities beginning in the mid-nineteenth century; still, most of the Jews who converted to Christianity did so out of fear for their lives.

Those who converted assimilated into the Christian way of life, yet they were still distinguished from the Amharic Christian population in several ways. Christians viewed them as part of the *Beta Israel* ["House of Israel"] due to their Jewish lineage, belittled them with epithets reserved for Jews, and refused to marry them. This community of new converts to Christianity also continued to engage in traditionally Jewish occupations: weaving, blacksmithing, and pottery.

Over the course of the twentieth century, these remainder of Ethiopian Jewry who had converted to Christianity became a distinct group that was not accepted by Amharic society and was careful to preserve its Jewish lineage and the memory of its Jewish roots. Members of this group settled in approximately 160 villages and are estimated to number some 30,000 people.

The name "Falashmura," meaning Ethiopian Jews [*Falashim*] who converted, is not widely used in Ethiopia and entered common usage only recently as a term for this group. The members of the Ethiopian Jewish community view this term as offensive.



Emanesh Ayanaw with pictures of her family members in Israel, Tamerget, 1992



Abba Tegenye Demelau, Gondar 2009

---

## “In my youth there were Jews who kept the laws of the *Orit* [Torah]”

Tegenye Demelau

I was born in 1934 in the village of Gashola in the Achefer region. Around us were many people who were descended from the Jewish people, and nearly all of them had immigrated to Israel. I worked as a farmer and a blacksmith. When I grew older I would also work as a *shemagleh*, bringing peace and solving conflicts between neighbors.

The non-Jews saw us as different, inferior. They called us insulting names: “*Kayla*,” “*Shemaneh*” [weavers], “*Falasha*,” “*Buda*.” We could not own land or be in positions in leadership. We were at the lowest level of society.

In my youth there were Jews who kept the laws of the *Orit* [Torah]. They lived in Kunzila and Givgivit. There were also two *Kessim*, Kess Mula and Kess Birku, who were in Durbete. When many people in the area converted to Christianity, they moved to Ambover, near Gondar.

My mother’s father, Iasu, would tell me: “Ethiopia is not our land; we came from the land of Israel. Our faith was the *Orit* – the Torah – but because of many problems, in order to survive, we converted to Christianity. But Christianity is not our religion.” He would tell me about the land of Israel, the homeland of our forefathers, and said that in time we will return there.

He told me of the Ten Commandments and the Shabbat: one may not light a fire or perform any work, and one must untie his clothes and not leave his place. We observed Shabbat in our home and did not do any work. I did not eat food that was cooked or fruits that were picked on Shabbat. My mother kept the laws of purity, and when she was *niddah* she would live outside our home, in the house of *niddah*. We did not keep the holidays, only Shabbat.

About twenty years ago, many people from Quara immigrated to Israel. I wanted to join them, but I could not. Five years ago I left my home in the village and came to Gondar in order to make *aliyah*. My children and their families came to Gondar about five years before that.

In Gondar I would come to the synagogue every day, I would bless the congregation after the prayers and try to lead the community faithfully, in the ways that we learned from the emissaries and rabbis, in observing the *mitzvot*.

Interview with Tegenye Demelau  
Gondar, 5770 / 2010

---



Aba Libanos, 1992



Fields in the Chilga district, 1992

## From Achefer to Gondar

Ziv Koren

Gondar, 20 Iyyar 5766 / 18 May 2006

Eight years ago Awudau Malede left his village, Achefer, located near Lake Tana, some 300 kilometers from Gondar. Walking distance, in local terms. Joining him, in horse-drawn carts found by chance and mostly on foot, were his extended family: his parents, three brothers, and sister with her children. They were young – most of the children running among the dwellings now had not been born yet. The family sold all of their possessions in the village – their land, cattle, horses, and donkeys, which were their sources of income – packed their few belongings, and settled in Gondar. Their goal was to be close to the Jewish Agency offices, the center for *aliyah* for the Falashmura, in order to increase their chances of immigrating to Israel one day. About a year ago, Awudau's parents and one brother made *aliyah*. Four families – twenty-three people – were left behind, and this week they finally received their longed-for *aliyah* approval.

Ziv Koren, "Impressions from Gondar"

Published in Yediot Aharonot, 13 Sivan 5766 / 9 June 2006





Village of Duadu, 1992



During Operation Solomon, at the gates of the Israeli embassy in Addis Ababa