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Here They Are: Beta Israel

Abstract

To say that Americans have pre-conceived notions and over-arching generalizations about other nations in this world is a phrase put lightly and is in no way a secret. From a very young age we are bombarded by mass media communications telling us what to buy, what to wear and what makes us American versus what makes us human beings. As children we’re shown romanticized and compartmentalized narratives of the world around us that shape our lives and our growth on this planet. As adults we have the opportunity to learn and to see beyond stereotypes, stigmas, race, and media slant yet few Americans choose to do so especially when it comes to Africa and its countries. With this essay project I will be examining an amazing and passionate population from Ethiopia in the hopes that readers, American and otherwise, learn truthfully about Africa’s people, culture and connectedness with the rest of the world. By reading this essay people will learn more about African diaspora, Ethiopian Judaism as well as the state of Israeli society and its effects on this minority group called Beta Israel.

I. Background and Location

Beta Israel, pronounced Buh-tah Israel or Buh-tah Yisrael, is Hebrew for “House of Israel” and is a name chosen by a population of Ethiopian Jews as a symbol of unification and
strength within a world of ever-changing semblance and separation. Many scholars to this day still debate the origins of this group with the most historical backing leaning towards Ethiopian Jews originating from groups of Ethiopian Christian dissidents or “apostates” (Salamon 1999, pg. 4). It is worth noting though that there are many theories posited by scholars that, even though they do not have as much academic acceptance, are considered anthropologically and geographically possible. One such theory, mentioned by noted African-born scholar Abebe Zegeye, is that Ethiopian Judaism stems from contact between Jewish Red Sea traders and Egyptians Jews circa the third or fourth century (Zegeye 2004, pg. 57). Owing to Ethiopia’s location and its people’s penchant for trade and social civility, a theory such as this one does seem logical.

The actual first mention of Jews in Ethiopia, not counting Biblical sources, dates back to the tenth century when they were referred to as the “Falasha” tribes alongside the Agau tribes when both rebelled against the Axum dynasty and the spread of Christianity through then Abyssinia (Zegeye 2004, pg. 59). Since the tenth century, Ethiopian Jews have occupied the hillside of the Gondar region, remote spots near Lake Tana and isolated areas in the Tigray region. Due to their isolated nature in these places and their strict dedication to their faith, Ethiopian Christians and Muslims placed the term “Falasha” onto them as a means to demean

Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c5/Ethiopie-falasha.jpg
them. This word, “Falasha” or “Falassa” means “stranger, exile or foreigner” in Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, and is considered offensive in today’s society. Ethiopian Jews prefer to be called Beta Israel or Beta Israelites alongside Ethiopian, African, and Human. Those of Beta Israel who still live in Ethiopia or who have traveled back to Ethiopia after the diaspora have to still deal with being called words like the one above and have even been pegged as “The Hyena People” and witches by Orthodox Christian villagers (Salamon 1999, pg. 7).

Beta Israelites in Ethiopia live in tiny villages of their own construction consisting of small, round, wood huts held together by straw and mud yet it is not uncommon to find rectangular “modern-like” structures. Within the villages there are huts and structures for every activity related to spiritual and personal care – ex. sacrificial huts, cleansing huts, feast huts and even a “yamargam gojo” or “hut for the curse” where females go every month to isolate themselves during their menstrual cycle (Salamon 1999, pg. 18). Like many Jews around the world, Ethiopian Jews follow the Jewish calendar consisting of twelve months with special holidays each month besides Yom Kippur, Passover, and Sukkot. Unlike the majority of Jews worldwide, they do not celebrate Hanukkah yet they instead celebrate their own indigenous type of “Thanksgivings” and a special festival
unique to Ethiopian Jews known as Sigd, a Ge’ez word meaning “Prostration” (Afsai). Sigd is a reaffirming of the faith for Beta Israelites and serves to unify the population no matter where they are in the world akin to Islam’s Pilgrimage to Mecca.

Before the majority of Ethiopian Jews were forced to leave their ancestral homeland for their spiritual birthplace in Israel (See Part IV on Pg. 5) all of them, no matter their age or finances, spoke Ge’ez, an Ethiopian liturgical language, and Amharic plus group specific dialects as well as bits of Hebrew and French from trade and missionary work. Today, Ge’ez as a language and not just a script is rare and is only common to religious ceremonies by Beta Israel and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians while Amharic, Hebrew and English are preferred for everyday use over others (Zegeye, 2004, pg. 50).

III. Ethiopia’s Judaic and Christian Background

When examining Beta Israel and the history of Ethiopian Judaism, one cannot overlook the overlap of ceremonies, languages, cultural practices and histories between Ethiopia’s Jewish and Christian populations. According to Beta Israel’s oral tradition, it is said that Ethiopia’s Jews are the descendants of the Queen of Sheba’s entourage consisting of King Solomon’s counsellors’ first born sons and Solomon’s son’s bodyguard (Zegeye 2004, pg. 56). It also cannot be ignored that Ethiopia’s last monarch and most famous leader, Haile Selassie, claimed descent from Solomon through his son, Menelik I, who is most famous for supposedly smuggling the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia with the son of a Jewish High Priest where it remains to this day. “Menelik Monarchs” like Haile Selassie even styled themselves the “Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, King of Kings of Ethiopia and Successor to the House of David” (Zegeye 2004, pg. 53). For the longest time Ethiopia’s flag was
characterized by green, yellow and orange-red with the Lion of Judah centered in the middle – green for land, yellow for hope, orange-red for strength, and the Lion of Judah for the unity between faith and country yet in 1974 everything changed.

IV. Mengistu, the Derg, and the Intervention

During the late 1960’s and early 1970’s Ethiopia suffered terrible droughts that affected nearly 1.8 million people in the Tigray and Wollo regions. It is estimated that over 250,000 Ethiopians died of famine and illness due to these drought conditions while the Selassie led monarchy government did nothing (Cardillo 1998). Instead of helping his people and asking for foreign aid to help Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, though most likely not on his own accord, entertained ambassadorial guests in Addis Ababa without one mention of the country’s conditions. This decision angered many people and led to the formation of militias and gangs across the country made up entirely of underpaid soldiers and youth in revolt (Butler 2013). In the summer of 1974, months after Haile Selassie was deposed, close to 120 men from various rebelling factions within Ethiopia met behind closed doors and formed the Derg (Amharic word meaning “committee”), a socialist faction bent on economic and social reform no matter what the cost. These men elected as their leader a brash, young man by the name of Mengistu Haile Mariam.
Better known in history books by his first name alone, Mengistu was born into a life of Ethiopian military service and grew up hating western life and western culture. When Mengistu took power as the leader of the Derg, bloodshed swept through the country at the hands of his Derg countryman. Aristocrats and their entire families were killed and left in the streets as messages of power and control. By 1977, Mengistu had eliminated all government officials who opposed his regime, including Haile Selassie, and enacted himself as Ethiopia’s head of state and chairman. To quell riots from “peasant soldiers”, Mengistu made sure more bloodshed came and it was worse than anyone could have imagined. Hundreds of thousands if not millions of Ethiopians were killed as a step in Mengistu’s “Qey Shibir” better known worldwide as his campaign of “Red Terror” (Lentakis 2005, pg. 365).

During this time, Mengistu outlawed showy religious practices, bullied landowners into tenant farming and forced collectivization, solicited Cuba and the Soviet Union for military aid and met with foreign leaders seeking arms assistance for the Derg. Among these foreign leaders was the then Prime Minister of Israel, Menachem Begin who, through government connections within Ethiopia, had found out about the Derg’s treatment of Ethiopian Jews since before the Red Terror (Page 1995). Back then, most people were not even aware of Ethiopian Jews existing at all let alone Ethiopian Jews being kicked out of their ancestral villages and being forced to live in communes amongst Orthodox Christians who hated them as much as the Derg hated
democracy. Prime Minister Begin knew of all of this and used it as a bargaining chip to do business with Mengistu.

In late 1977, Israel set up an arms deal with the Mengistu regime in exchange for the release and immigration of 200 Ethiopian Jews to Israel (Page 1995). While this deal was being setup and followed through though, groups of Ethiopian Jews were smuggled out of the country by Derg-opposition soldiers and into Eritrea before going to refugee camps set-up in secret by foreign Aliyah supporters and the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) in Sudan. Between 1977 and 1983, more than 8,000 Beta Israelites were airlifted from the Sudan and taken to Israel unbeknownst to the Derg regime. By 1984, Mengistu locked down the country and shut down all aid associated directly or indirectly with Israel – that is until drought once again struck the country. Mengistu and his regime of terror were forced to remove the blockade placed around Ethiopian travel and begged countries like the United States and Israel for aid.

**Operation Moses**

During foreign aid talks in 1984, the United States and Israel, instead of bartering with Mengistu, gave the gruesome dictator an ultimatum – no aid to Ethiopia unless Beta Israel is allowed passage out of the country to Israel. Mengistu gave in and under supreme secrecy from all three nations *Operation Moses* began on November 18th, 1984. In preparation for the airlift, all Ethiopian Jews were moved from
refugee camps to the Sudanese town of Gederef and then to the Khartoum airport. For seven weeks airlifts took place covertly in Sudan taking between 200 and 500 people a trip until January 5th, 1985 when a media leak enraged Arab leaders (Omer-Man 2010). The then Sudanese president – a staunch anti-zionist politician – shut down the airport to Israeli flights stranding nearly 1,000 Ethiopian Jews in Sudan with the majority being women, children, elderly and disabled. Intervention by the U.S. Government on behalf of Beta Israel and the state of Israel took place months later and led to Operation Sheba or as it is known in the United States, *Operation Joseph*. While those in the Sudan were able to be airlifted to Israel there was still a large population in Ethiopia under harsh, deadly conditions who were scattered across many regions expected at the time to just wait their turn.

**Operation Solomon**

Four years after Operation Sheba, talks between the Israeli Prime Minister and the Derg regime resumed after a failed meeting between Mengistu and Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev as well as failed meetings in China and North Korea. Mengistu was in dire need of military aid due to Eritrean civil unrest and anti-Derg rebels in Northern Ethiopia yet Russia, China, and North Korea all declined to help him (Spector 2005, 19-20). Due in part to these political
failings and lack of allies, Mengistu once again struck a deal with Israel yet this time it was quite different. Instead of military aid being requested, Mengistu requested millions of dollars because he was getting ready to flee the country to Zimbabwe. At this time, the Derg was in collapse, rebel soldiers were pushing ever closer to Addis Ababa and Mengistu was offered a helping hand by Zimbabwe dictator, Robert Mugabe. On May 23rd, 1991, *Operation Solomon* was approved by Ethiopia’s acting president while Mengistu Haile Mariam fled the country. From 4 a.m May 24th to 3 p.m. May 25th, 1991, 14,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel and were met by throngs of Ethiopian-Israelis looking for family members and plainclothes Israeli medics discreetly checking passengers for disease. It seemed like a very cheery and peaceful end to a harsh situation yet that is just what the Israeli media and the Israeli government wants people to believe. In essence, huge mobs of people were left behind at the airport, not that they were left there for a second Operation immediately – no, not at all. Elderly, sick and injured were left behind due to mobility and it seems due to how it “looked in the media” compared to having the touching scenes of families reuniting in the holy land who look perfect and “not as Ethiopian looking” as other Beta Israelites.

**Falash Mura**

What many do not know or realize is that there is a hefty percentage of Beta Israelites who are/were “Falash Mura” which is Amharic for “forced convert” This means that they were forced to convert to Christianity due to where they lived yet they never truly accepted
Christianity as their faith (Spector 2005, pg. 190-191). During and after Operation Solomon, thousands of Falash Mura showed up at Addis Ababa airport requesting travel to Jerusalem and were turned away due to their religious status (Bard). The Israeli government claims this not to be true and says that they flew thousands of Falash Mura to Jerusalem and had them meet Benjamin Netanyahu (Spector 2005, pg. 190). It was estimated by Cultural activists in the year 2000 that 26,000 Falash Mura still live in Ethiopia yet that estimate is hard to prove due to the secretive nature of Ethiopian Jews and Falash Mura.

Subsequent Operations

Since 1991, Israel has continued airlifts of Beta Israelites out of Ethiopia via small, sporadic operations like Operation Dove’s Wings in 2012 which transported over 800 Jews to Tel Aviv (Jewish Press Staff). In 2010, the Israeli government announced that efforts would also be made to transport larger numbers of Falash Mura to Israel over the course of four years. This seemed to coincide with what was going on in Israel at the time – i.e. Kiryat Malachi Incident and Beta Israel protests (JTA). The announcement seemed more like an act of appeasement rather than an act of kindness toward their fellow Jews.

IV. Beta Israel Today: Post-Aliyah & Beyond

In Ethiopia, the number of Beta Israelites and Beta Israelite Falash Mura is only speculation with data ranging between 500 and 700 for Beta Israel and 2,000 and 8,000 for Falash Mura (Breuilly 1997, pg 41). The majority of these population numbers remain in the Gondar and Tigray region near Lake Tana as isolated and as far away from cities like Addis Ababa as possible. These populations like many others in Ethiopia do not like to be counted due to the injustices in their pasts – forced religious conversion, murder, war, etc. It does not matter
if a census-taker speaks their language or is dressed like them because any government authority is seen as a danger to their way of life.

In Israel, Ethiopian Jews number close to 120,000 and are the state’s poorest minority group scattered throughout Israel’s lower populated and essentially poorer districts. As citizens of Israel, Ethiopian Jews are treated differently by different people. The government sees Beta Israel as “its people” that they casually use to their advantage in the media while never showing the true nature behind some of their plans for this population. When Ethiopian Jews were first airlifted to Israel the Israeli Rabinnate forced them to go through Hidush Hayihud, a type of Jewish renewal or re-conversion into the faith despite this population not being Falash Mura (Winchester). This action was seen as barbaric and offensive by many Israeli Jews and Ethiopians Jews already in the country yet the government did absolutely nothing until Ethiopian Jews forced their hand with strikes and protests. This practice was stopped in 1985 though not without protest from the other side.

A striking realization in Israel is that an overwhelming number of white Israeli Jews do not consider Beta Israel or any Ethiopian Jew to be Jewish, Israeli or, to be truthful, anything. Because of skin color, geographic locations, supposed cultural practices and media amassed stereotypes Ethiopian Jews are treated horribly contrary to what the Israeli government might say. Even in the 1950’s and 1960’s, Israel was this way and people like Beta Israelite author and activist Baruch Tegegne\(^1\) can attest to this fact. In his book, “Baruch’s Odyssey” he wrote of his travels as a young man in the 1950’s chosen by an Israeli Jewish youth outreach group in

\(^1\) Baruch Tegegne born in Wozaba, Ethiopia in 1944 died in Montreal, Canada December 27th, 2010 from hepatitis C, diabetes, and kidney disease complications.
Ethiopia to attend school in Haifa, Israel. The most memorable quote from his memoir is as follows:

“Our group was split up when we went to high school. Some went to Ayonot, near Rehovot. One other Ethiopian and I were sent to Neve Amiel in the Haifa area. Again we were faced with teasing and ridicule from the students. One day, a teacher asked me to organize the kids for a field trip. When I asked the students to get in line, one of the boys sassed back and said that he wasn’t going to take orders from a Cushi! I snapped and beat him up. When the director called me to his office, I told him that the boy had embarrassed and insulted me. I had never called him Whitey; why should he call me names? In Ethiopia we took people just as they were. We were taught that you mustn’t hurt others because we know how bad it feels to be hurt ourselves. And to top it off, there was a teacher who told me to take a steel brush and use strong soap and warm water to wash off all the black from my skin.”

During Baruch Tegegne’s adult life in the late 80’s and early 90’s he and American activists rescued Ethiopian Jews to Rome, Italy versus Israel despite strained ties between the two countries since World War II.

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2 Cushi was once a Biblical Hebrew word referring to a dark-skinned person. It is now a pejorative term equivalent to “N—ger” or the “N-word.” This word is considered highly offensive and defamatory.
War II (Rosenberg). Tegegne knew from his experiences in Israel that Ethiopian Jews would be better off in Italy on expatriate work visas than as Israeli citizens with no jobs and no homes due to racial prejudice.

According to Israeli social research institute Meyers-JDC-Brookdale in 2005, 60 percent of all Ethiopian Jews in Israel lived in poverty (Fisher-Ilan). The only statement made by the Israeli government and its Immigration ministry was, “We are making an effort to stop this through new programmes.” Really? Are they? Last year, early January of 2012, the city of Kiryat Malachi, Israel made international news because of the amount of extreme ethnocentrism radiating from the majority of its homeowners. It was speculated by one very angry Israeli Jewish man that, “120 other families spanning four residential buildings had signed an agreement with the neighborhood council not to rent or sell their apartments to families of Ethiopian descent” (Shan 2012). That same man was also the same bigoted person who was allowed onto Israeli National Television and was quoted as saying, “The only good Ethiopian is a dead Ethiopian.” Another tenant in the Kiryat Malachi apartment complex that started the incident referred to Ethiopians and Ethiopian Jews as “jukim” which is Hebrew for cockroaches. The incident, which started when an Ethiopian Jewish couple was refused housing, riled up the Beta Israel community resulting in massive protests and public demonstrations calling for action. To this day the Israeli government has not looked into this incident or any incident like it in the country.
There are no laws in Israel saying that Kiryat Malachi homeowners are wrong for what they did even when there is written documentation of the racial injustices mentioned.

Kiryat Malachi is not the only city in Israel to make the news for blatant racial defamation. In Petah Tikva, Israel, Ethiopian Jews protested in September of 2011 after it was revealed that Ethiopian Jewish schoolchildren made up more than 90 percent of one school while white Israeli children were taught elsewhere (Eglash 2012). Such an occurrence is very common and it is why so many so-called “Cushi ghettos” are springing up in low population areas in Israel. Instead of being hounded and discriminated against, Ethiopian Jews are trying to make things work for themselves and their families by opening up their own schools, their own businesses, and even their own housing programs usually funded by money made elsewhere – again, not much help from the government there either. There was even the scandal of Ethiopian Jewish women being given Depo Provera, a long lasting contraceptive, that they were told was an inoculation they were to receive every three months (Dawber 2013). Soon after, the Ethiopian Jewish birthrate slowed – surprise, surprise, this was a government funded and operated “inoculation”. In 2008, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced to the public that he was putting into place a “5 Year Plan” setting aside 870 million shekels (230 million dollars) to help Beta Israel and the Ethiopian community living in the Levant. By 2011 it was revealed through court proceedings that the majority of the plan “had not yet been implemented” and now it is 2013 and still nothing (Pickus 2012).

VI. From the Author

During my research for this cross-course project I sought out a multitude of sources via the internet, books, and journals and even tried to get my university’s Hillel chapter involved as well as the Israeli Consulate in Atlanta. To my dismay, neither Kennesaw State University Hillel nor the Israeli Consulate wanted to talk about Beta Israel as much as they wanted me to either attend a function
and/or register to be a member of organizations I have no interest in whatsoever. With KSU Hillel, I met in Carmichael Student Center after exchanging emails. I stood by the glass windows adjoined to Delancey’s Deli where three female African exchange students were standing talking about their food. The Hillel representative approached me and none of the African exchange students despite her never seeing my face. At the time I did have any social networking sites active and I had no internet presence that would disclose my face to anyone. Despite this, she approached me and introduced herself. We sat by P.J.’s Café and talked for at least fifteen minutes where she asked questions like “When did you become Jewish?” and “What kind of Judaism do you practice?” Who ever said I was Jewish? I never said anything about myself in the emails nor did I ever want to talk about myself in the tone and detail that was being impressed upon me at that time.

When I would not answer her questions about my religion the way that she wanted me too she tried to end the conversation in a rather blithe yet nice manner never once wanting to talk about Ethiopian Jews or their inclusion into Hillel. Before she made her move to jet as far away from me as possible I asked my own question – “How did you know that I am who I am? How exactly did you know that Adrienne Lawson isn’t one of the girls standing a few feet away?” She was utterly baffled by my questioning, giving me a strange look and saying, “I just assumed.” Yes, she just assumed! She assumed that I was white and Jewish versus dark-skinned and African and probably had I been dark-skinned and African she would have probably either ignored me or rescheduled our meeting until I forgot that it ever existed.

The Israeli Consulate was a little different in their communication with me yet they were much the same. I had contacted the Israeli Consulate asking them about current Beta Israel population numbers in Israel and what I received in return was a website full of Israeli nationalism about Beta Israel’s military history in the country with no clear population numbers or locations. Subsequent emails
to the Israeli Consulate were never answered and I sadly gave up on them as any kind of source. The website they so quickly pointed me to reminded me of the plight of Native Americans here in the United States. Even though Native Americans have participated in every American war that has ever taken place they were and they still are discriminated against, ridiculed, and killed for being different. It is essentially the same thing with Beta Israel – “you can fight in our military and do the dirty work no one else will and we’re just going to keep segregating you and discriminating against you because we can.”

As an anthropologist I know what diaspora means and I know that Beta Israel’s decision to leave Ethiopia was based clearly on how the Derg treated them and their land. It was a lesser of two evils type of situation – stay in Ethiopia and most likely die by the hands of the Derg, from disease or malnutrition or leave and live in the holy land away from those things. If I were to put myself in the shoes of an Ethiopian Jew, I too would have chosen the Holy Land over certain death. I would have traveled most likely on my own because I am a female whose aging mother has health problems – she would have stayed behind at a refugee camp. I would have arrived alone in Tel Aviv or Haifa to immersion camps set up at the airports to greet me, check me into the country and then force me to reconvert to my own faith. Because I am female I would have to have bathed in a pool they call a mikveh completely naked in front of mikveh sitters who know nothing and care nothing about my people. I would have been completely alone in a foreign land surrounded by foreign people who I think are there to help me until I realize that my being in the foreign land makes the government entity look good in the media and they in no way actually care about my life. Because of discrimination, I would have been homeless except for the in-take trailer near the airport and I would have to have learned how to use money because back home in Ethiopia money was never a concept to my people.

If I were an Ethiopian Jew what would I have done? Where would I have gone? Would I have survived past the refugee camps in Sudan or Addis Ababa? How would I have handled being in those
situations of discrimination knowing that going back to Ethiopia was no longer an option? These are just some of the questions I have asked myself while writing this paper and I hope that others ask themselves the same questions and more while they read these words. It is imperative that we put ourselves in the place of others and realize how connected we are as human beings lest we be consumed by selfishness and judgment.
Works Cited


