

**EDITORIAL**

**THE ETHIOPIAN JEWS IN ISRAEL:  
A GLIMPSE FROM WHAT I OBSERVED**

Yemataw Wondie

The Beta Israel (i.e. Jewish) community has lived for many centuries in Ethiopia. However, there is lack of reliable accounts in tracing the origins of a Jewish presence in this ancient country of Africa. As a result there are different theories on the origins of the Ethiopian Jews. One explanation is that this community is a descendant of the lost Hebrew Dan tribe. Others believe that the Beta Israel community are the descendants of the entourage that accompanied Menelik I, the son of King Solomon and Queen Sheba. Still others, especially leaders from within the community, contend that Ethiopian Jews are descendants of Jews who left the conquered Kingdom of Judah for Egypt following the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BC.

The main objective of the current editorial is not, however, to account for the genesis and history of this community in Ethiopia. Rather, I want to provoke thoughts among scholars about how members of this community have been absorbed in and tried to adapt to the situation in their dream land, Israel, since three decades ago they started their mass immigration through Operations Moses and Solomon. Recently a colleague of mine and myself had the opportunity to make a short term visit to Israel representing our home institution and took part in a Global Learning Partnership along with universities in the USA and our wonderful host institute, Oranim Academic College in Israel. This gave us the chance to visit several places where there were a number of academic presentations and discussions. Among the venues we attended those dealing with the inclusion, anti-racism, and anti-discrimination efforts being made in Israeli institutions including Oranim today attracted my attention the most.

The Michael Program is a scheme working on the inclusion and support of Ethiopian Jewish students at Oranim Academic college coordinated by Yaron Dasta, which hosts only a few such students. A meeting with these students along with the staff was organized for us which gave us the opportunity to know a little more about the lives of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. The problem this community faced in the struggle to adapt to the Israeli situation actually varies from generation to generation. The older generation faced difficulties due to several barriers such as language and illiteracy as they were immigrated from the rural part of Ethiopia, predominantly from Gondar area. On the other hand, those who immigrated while young coupled with those born and raised in Israel had the advantage of learning Hebrew and get easily assimilated into the larger society.

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Although there are several Ethiopian Jews who have become successful in different areas of Israel, the following problems are worth noting. Domestic violence and divorce are said to be prevalent among older generations that are accounted for loss of status among husbands they used to assume as head of a household in the Ethiopian agrarian context compared to the situation of wives who got absorbed in jobs in Israel at least at the lower strata, thus making a paradigm shift of the gender power balance. In its turn, the younger generation has reportedly become sensitive to color-based discrimination, racism and questions of identity. Consequently, violence, incarceration and frequent quarrels with security bodies are shown to be prevalent. A poem entitled “third language” by Lily Shehady shows the problem of identity in Israel (for the link to the poem: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QeJqAtIKEq8&list=UUCuJl\\_OpjYV2UxN11zFtLg&index=2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QeJqAtIKEq8&list=UUCuJl_OpjYV2UxN11zFtLg&index=2)). Lily is an English major student at Oranim and an Arab Christian who couldn’t hold her tears while she presented her work during the meeting of the anti-racism club. Furthermore, an Ethiopian Jew student at Oranim said that “one’s present identity should be seen against the background of his/her previous origin.” This shows that there is a need for Israel and Ethiopia to work together in order to alleviate the adjustment problems that the Beta Israel have been facing in their new homeland.

Therefore, I would like to invite our esteemed readers of the ERJSSH to make further research and investigations in collaboration with Israeli scholars on the issue and come up with possible solutions.