

**Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Israel:  
Living well and “becoming deaf”  
in the homeland**

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## Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the Ethiopian Jews, or Beta Israel, a few years after their migration from rural Ethiopian to urban Israel.

For the Beta Israel, the most significant issue is not, as is commonly assumed, adaptation to modern society, which to a large extent they have successfully achieved. But rather, their primary concerns revolve around the notion of “belonging” in their new homeland, and the loss of control they are experiencing over their lives and those of their children.

The thesis analyses the experience of immigration from the Beta Israel’s own perspective and focuses on: first, the factors which contribute to the Beta Israel’s sense of well-being in Israel, second, the problems and difficulties they experience, and finally, the strategies they are developing to overcome these difficulties.

This study elucidates the meanings of two apparently contradictory ascriptions which the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants make about themselves: “being well” and “becoming deaf”. Their sense of well-being is a result of their successful recreation of communal life, their expression of ethnic pride, and their appreciation of their new country. The expression “becoming deaf”, which also means in Amharic “becoming ignorant”, denotes the older generation’s frustration at their inability to understand Hebrew, their feeling of being excluded by dominant society, and the loss of control they experience over most aspects of their lives. For the younger generation, the sense of exclusion revolves around issues of racial discrimination.

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants resist those aspects of dominant society which they dislike: they reject normative Jewish practices and uphold Beta Israel religious and cultural ones, ideologically counteract disparaging Israeli attitudes, develop strong ethnic bonds and engage in overt forms of resistance. The difficulties of the present are also overcome by creating a perfect past and an ideal future: in what I have called ‘the homeland postponed’, all Jews will be united in a colour-blind world of material plenty and purity.



## Acknowledgements

I thank the Economic and Social Research Council for a Postgraduate Research Award and generous fieldwork allowance that enabled me to pursue this research. My last months of writing-up were kindly supported by the Royal Anthropological Institute (Radcliffe-Brown / Sutasoma Award) and by the London School of Economics (Malinowski Memorial Fund). In addition, I thank Emma Rothschild at the Centre for History and Economics, King's College, Cambridge for funding a preliminary year of post-graduate study.

In Israel, my Ethiopian adoptive family and neighbours and the Ethiopian Jewish community as a whole received me with boundless courtesy and hospitality. They rarely tired of my questions and allowed me to share their joys and sorrows for close to two years. My adoptive father became a veritable parent, cherishing me and guiding me, and I formed close friendships with many of his relatives and neighbours. I learned much from Ethiopian Jews on a personal level; their grace, hospitality, and remarkable ability to adapt to a totally new lifestyle, remain a source of inspiration. It is impossible to adequately thank them.

Several non-Ethiopians helped to make fieldwork enjoyable. Shmulick Porat, a tireless community worker, shared much of his insights and knowledge of Ethiopian Jews. Jonathan Miran and researchers Dr Chaim Rosen, Dr Steven Kaplan and Dr Lisa Anteby, foremost experts on Ethiopian Jewry, offered me friendship, guidance and encouragement. My relatives in Israel provided welcome breaks.

In Ethiopia, I was received regally by my Ethiopian Israeli adoptive family's former neighbours in the village of Cheera, Gondar. I travelled in Ethiopian villages for over two months, and I thank all my hosts there, and Dr Alula Pankhurst and Dr Rick Hodes for welcoming me in Adis Abeba.

Without the inspiration and encouragement of my supervisor, Professor Maurice Bloch, this thesis would not have been started, and never completed. He has greatly enhanced the quality of my work and I owe him an enormous debt.

Dr David Lan provided initial guidance on fieldwork, read the manuscript at various stages, and generously contributed his enthusiasm and anthropological perceptions. Dr Michael Stewart's approach to anthropology has influenced my own, and his critical insight and encouragement over the years have been invaluable.

I thank all the staff and postgraduate students of the LSE anthropology department for a stimulating environment in which to conduct research. The enthusiastic welcome they gave the Departmental Seminar paper I presented and their insightful comments were extremely useful. Tadesse Wolde, Amina Abu Sehab, Ceri Willmott, Santiago Alvarez, Stokes Jones, Dena Freeman, Oliver Woolley and Dr Mark Jamieson have been valued companions. Thanks also to Margaret Bothwell for providing friendliness and stability in the department. At SOAS, I thank Professor David Appleyard and Dr. Tudor Parfitt for stimulating discussions about Beta Israel.

I wrote-up in idyllic conditions thanks to my aunt Tanya Morgan who let me live rent-free in her gorgeous home in Primrose Hill and to friends and family who periodically hosted me and my computer in their beautiful homes in the French and English countryside.

My family and friends, and my parents and elder sister in particular, have been invaluable throughout this project, and have put up with the strange psychological states of a Ph.D. student. Special thanks to my elder brother for computer assistance and to my army of proof-readers: Dorothy, Walter, Habie, Zoe, Miranda, Tom, Tom II, Matthew, Lucy, Kenny, Daniel and Maya. Tom III edited the final draft with extreme care.

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Before the Israeli-style wedding in a hired hall. Jaffa, 1996.



Celebrating afterwards Ethiopian-style in an empty parking-lot. Afula Tse'era, 1996.





Relaxing. Afula Tse'era, 1996



Relaxing. Gomange Mariam, Gondar, 1995.





House exterior. Comange Mariam, Gondar, 1995.



House interior. Afula Tse'era, 1996.





Grinding coffee. Che'era, Gondar, 1995.



Serving coffee. Ashkelon, 1996.

Preparing for a  
neighbourhood  
celebration:

*Injera* (Ethiopian  
sour pancakes),  
and meat.

Afula Tse'era. 1995.







Before the Israeli-style wedding in a hired hall. Jaffa, 1996.



Celebrating afterwards Ethiopian-style in an empty parking-lot. Afula Tse'era, 1996.



A blessing over *dabbo* (Beta Israel Holy bread) at a *crisenna*, the purification ritual to mark the end of eighty days of impurity after the birth of a baby girl. Afula Tse'era 1996.



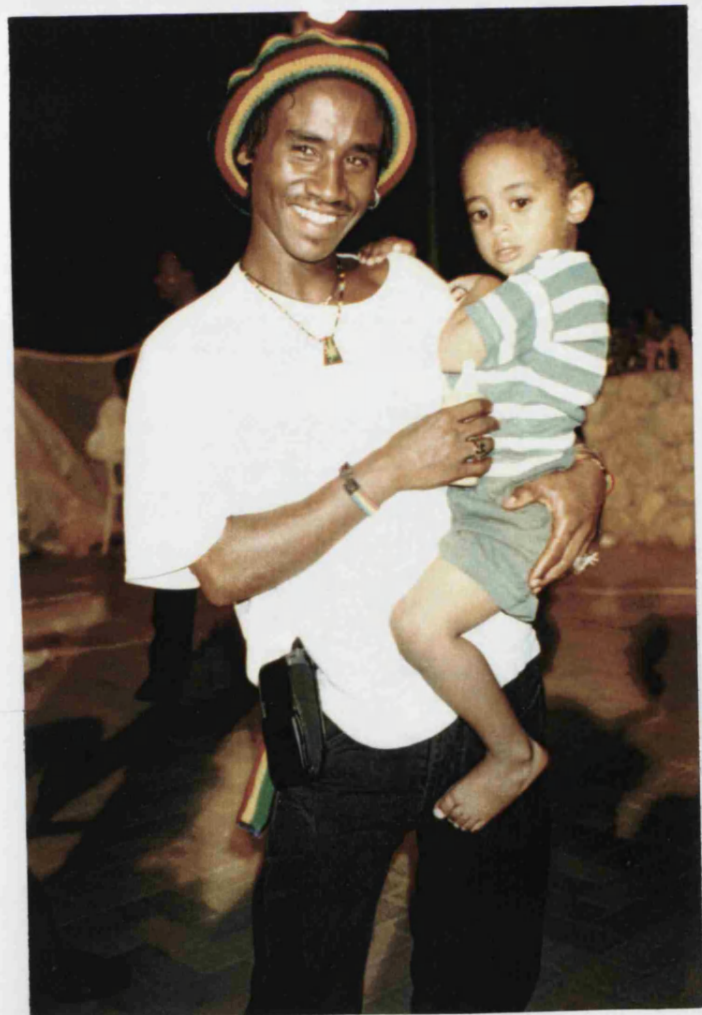
Copying Beta Israel prayers. Afula Tse'era 1996.



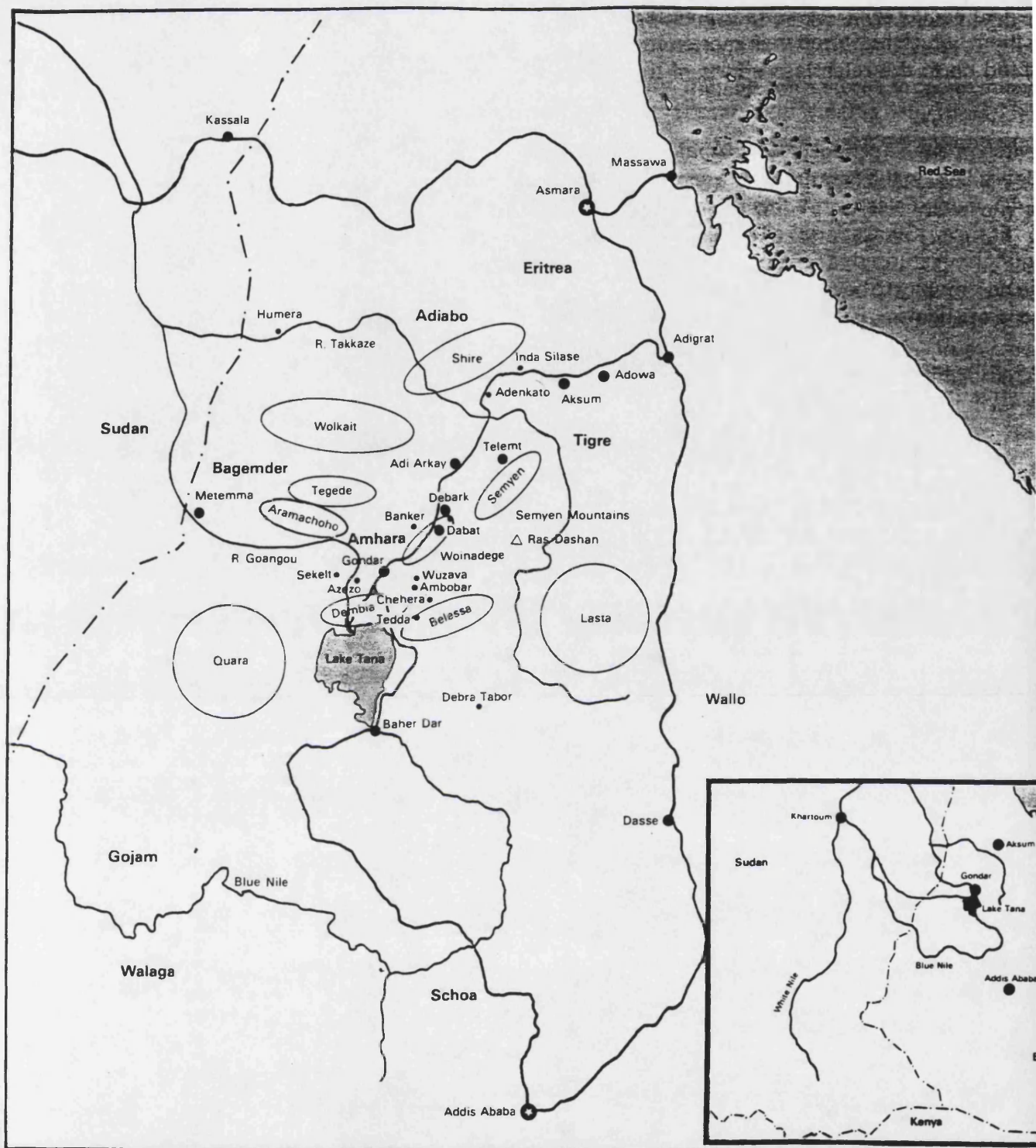


Ethiopian Jews demonstrating against the policy of the Blood Bank to discard their blood donations. Jerusalem, January 1996.

(Front Cover Picture,  
Maariv Daily Paper,  
29.1.96)



Adopting a  
counter-culture:  
Youth in Rasta  
colours.  
Afula Tse'era, 1996.

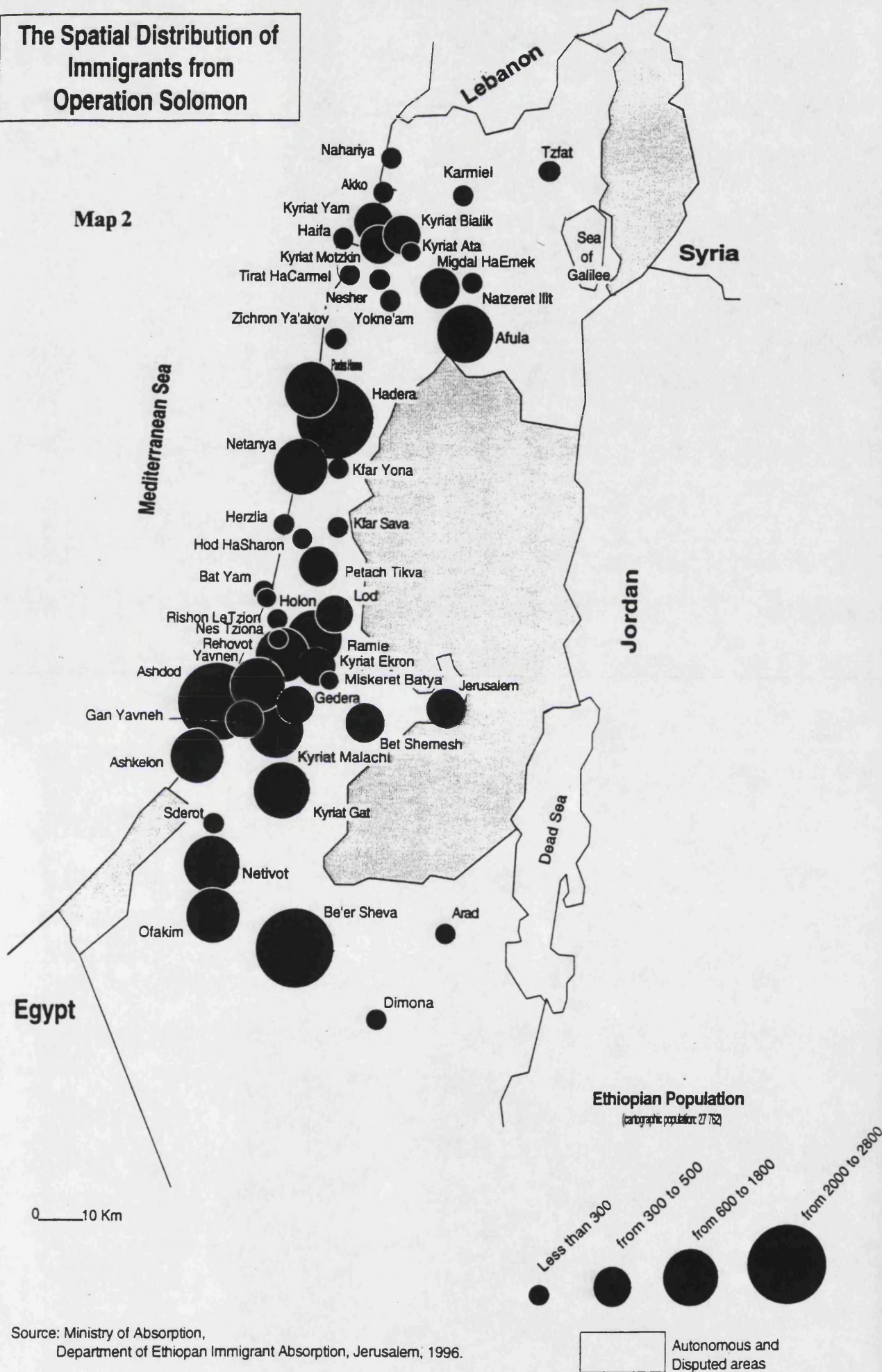


Map showing places of settlement of Ethiopian Jews around Lake Tana in northwest Ethiopia



# The Spatial Distribution of Immigrants from Operation Solomon

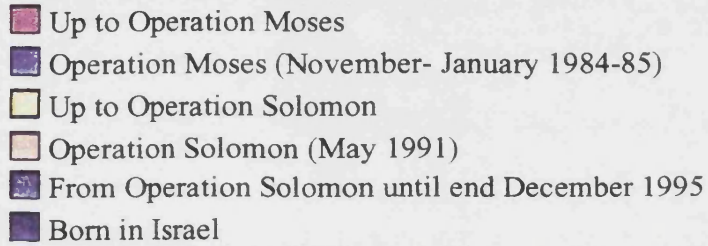
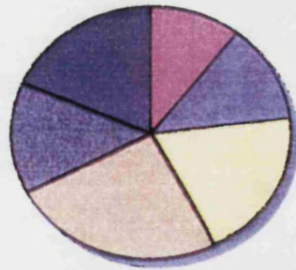
Map 2



## Demographic Data for the Ethiopian Jews of Israel

Fig 1

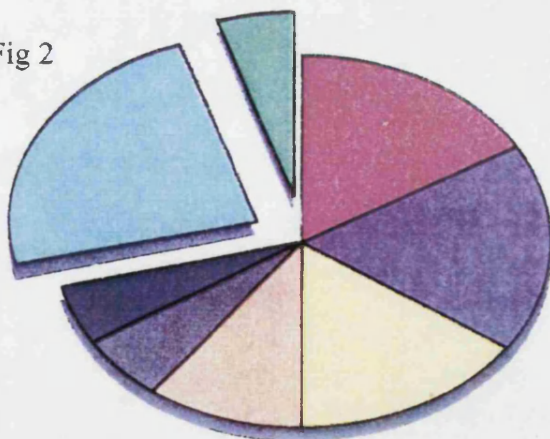
The Ethiopian Immigration



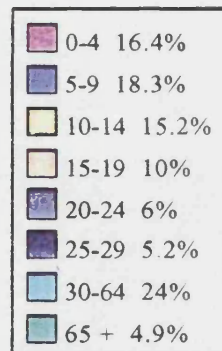
Up to Operation Moses	6000
Operation Moses (November- January 1984-85)	7000
Up to Operation Solomon	11000
Operation Solomon (May 1991)	14300
From Operation Solomon until end December 1995	8200
Born in Israel	10500
<b>Total Ethiopian Population:</b>	<b>57000</b>

Age Breakdown of Olim

Fig 2



Proportion of total



The highest two classes have been exploded to clearly show that over 70% of the Olim were under the age of 30

source: (1993) based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics, Jerusalem

Graphics reproduced, with kind permission, from David Goulden (1998).



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## One: Introduction

This is an ethnographic study of the Ethiopian Jews, or Beta Israel, a few years after their migration from rural Ethiopia to urban Israel. It analyses the experience of immigration from the Beta Israel's own perspective. In particular, I focus on three aspects: first, the factors which contribute to the Beta Israel's sense of well-being in Israel, second, the problems and difficulties they experience, and finally, the strategies they are developing to overcome these difficulties.

The Beta Israel, also known as Falashas, have long captured the Western imagination - ever since Jewish envoys, travelling in Ethiopia in the 1880s, brought back reports of "Black Jews", apparently direct descendants of ancient Israelites, who retained a strict form of Biblical Judaism in the midst of "primitive" Africans. In recent years, the Beta Israel made the headlines when the Israeli government conducted two airlifts into Israel, bringing six thousand seven hundred from Sudanese refugee camps in 1984, and another fourteen thousand from Addis Abeba in May 1991, in just thirty-six hours. Following such a dramatic transition from Ethiopian villages to modern urban Israel, the popular opinion is that Ethiopian Jews must be suffering from acute culture shock. Just one example from the extensive press coverage on the subject: "The Israelis have found that it was easier to stage a complex, covert airlift to bring the Ethiopians to Israel than it is to transport them from a rural African life style to a modern western society" (*The Scotsman*, 30/1/96).

It is my contention, however, that for the Beta Israel, the most significant issue is not adaptation to modern society, which to a large extent they have successfully achieved. But rather, their primary concerns revolve around the notion of "belonging" in their new homeland, and the loss of control they are experiencing over their lives and those of their children.

In this introductory chapter, I present my fieldwork and methodology, introduce the sociological and anthropological literature on new immigrants, and then summarise the history of the Beta Israel and review the literature about their absorption in Israel. Finally, I provide a thematic outline of the thesis.

## A. Fieldwork

In December 1993, I made a short visit to Israel to see if I would be able to work with Ethiopian Jewish immigrants. I met relevant academics<sup>1</sup>, a number of Israelis working with Ethiopians<sup>2</sup>, and Ethiopian Jewish community leaders<sup>3</sup>. The latter introduced me to Ethiopian families, one of whom hosted me for ten days in Beer Sheva. I returned to Israel in November 1994 to begin fieldwork and eventually chose to base myself in Afula Tse'era, a newly built development in the small town of Afula in the North of the country. The neighbourhood has one of the highest concentrations of Ethiopians in the country<sup>4</sup> and was described to me as an "Ethiopian village".

Thanks to an Ethiopian community worker who took me to the local Ethiopian after-school and elders clubs, I gained immediate access to the local Ethiopian Jewish population. Two weeks after my arrival in Afula, Aba Negusse, a tall old man, with an open bright face, a missing tooth, and sharp eyes, invited me for coffee. As I walked into his door, despite the stern expression of his elderly wife, I knew that I had found my home. I lived for twenty months with Aba Negusse and his wife Mama Alefash as a daughter of the house. I ate with the family, helped with household chores and to entertain guests, and shared a room with their twenty-five year-old daughter Aveva. Telahun, one of Aba Negusse's many grandchildren, who was a seventeen year-old boarding school student, often stayed at our home. This was because he felt close to his grandfather with whom he lived as a child in Ethiopia. Aba Negusse became a veritable father to me, guiding me in my studies, caring for me, and taking me proudly with him whenever I wanted to join him. Mama Alefash and I never gained such closeness, but we grew to respect each other and to live together in peace. Aveva and I were good friends, sharing our joys, tribulations and secrets, until she left home to get married. A number of Aba Negusse's nieces, nephews and grandchildren became my companions, friends, and invaluable informants.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the encouragement and advice of Drs Steven Kaplan, Shalva Weil, Alex Weingrod, Malka Shabtay, Michael Ashkenazi, Chaim Rosen, and Gadi Ben Ezer.

<sup>2</sup> Dani Budowski was particularly friendly and helpful.

<sup>3</sup> Adissu Messele and Addis Aklum were particularly helpful and welcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Of the five hundred houses in my immediate vicinity, ninety-six were Ethiopian. For the town of Afula as a whole (population of approx. 21,300), in September 1993, out of 9,456 housing units in total, 447 were identified as Ethiopian, forming a total of 2,385 Ethiopian immigrants (Benita et al 1994). Ethiopians comprised approximately 10% of the Afula population compared to approximately 1% nationally.

Fantanesh, who lived opposite, a middle-aged mother of four, became my “mother” (*imaye*): she cared for emotionally, took me to neighbourhood activities, fed me daily, and patiently answered all my questions<sup>5</sup>.

Fantanesh loved to tell new-comers how I settled in the neighbourhood, as they marvelled at the presence of an Amharic-speaking White foreigner who ate *injera* (Ethiopian pancake): “Tanya arrived here and went to the classes. She spoke just a little Amharic, learned in England from an Ethiopian there called Yalew Kebede. I saw her sitting on the bench below and invited her in to drink tea. She came to see where the house was but she had to do something and returned half an hour later. She brought *bamba* (a type of crisps) for the children. People said that I should not let her in my house like this because maybe she was a *savaki* [Fantanesh explained this term as someone who wants to change people into a different religion, like the Pentecostals]. But I said ‘no, she has come to study, to learn about our culture and our religion.’ Tanya said to me one day: ‘I am looking for a place to live, here in your house would be so good but you have so many children and *imita* [grandmother], so you have no room. There at Aba Negusse’s they only have one daughter at home. Are they good people?’ ‘Yes’ I said. She asked me to ask them if she could live there because she was too afraid to ask herself....After a while, her parents came, and they too stayed in Aba Negusse’s house and they came here for coffee. Her parents gave Aba Negusse a bed cover from England. Tanya gave me earrings and a head-scarf.. She also went to Ethiopia and gave Mama Itaktu [a former neighbour] fifty Birr [Ethiopian currency] and some coffee. She took a photo of her while she was grinding coffee!”

I spent my days in neighbourhood activities: drinking coffee, chatting, visiting the sick, shopping, playing, attending funerals and celebrations. My neighbours welcomed me into their lives and homes. Within a year, they grew used to me, and I could be wherever I wanted and hardly be noticed<sup>6</sup>. I spent more time with women than men, particularly as I increasingly imbibed cultural norms. I hardly left my neighbourhood during my first year of fieldwork: daily life was so absorbing that I feared that I would miss too much if I left even for the week-end. Later however, once intrigues became more familiar, and I formed social relations with relatives of my adoptive family and close neighbours that I met at celebrations, I travelled further afield to gain a wider perspective on the Ethiopian Jewish population.

In the middle of fieldwork I visited Ethiopia for two months. I lived for three weeks in the village of Gomange Mariam, a few hours bus and foot journey from the town of Gondar, amongst the former Christian friends, neighbours and co-Godparents of my Beta Israel

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<sup>5</sup> Even though Fantanesh spoke no English, from my first day in the field, she was always able to understand what I was trying to say Amharic, which was very basic at first, and conversely was able to make me understand anything she wanted. I used to sit next to her in communal gatherings, and she would explain in simple language what everyone else was saying.

<sup>6</sup> By contrast, when I travelled to other neighbourhoods, I grew exhausted and highly irritated by the attention I got and by the incessant questions I had to answer. Given the number of questions I asked, this was a somewhat unfair reaction on my part!

hosts. I also travelled extensively throughout the region and the Simien mountains and later delighted the Beta Israel with pictures and stories of their former villages.

I conducted fieldwork in Amharic. By the second year, I could understand simple group conversations and more complex one-to-one discussions. Most of the information in this thesis was obtained by participating in Beta Israel life: observing what they did and what they said to me and to each other. Once my Amharic improved, trust was established with my informants, and my research questions were better defined, I also conducted taped semi-structured interviews. I subsequently worked with two English-speaking Ethiopians to transcribe the tapes into English and onto my computer. This exercise proved invaluable not only to confirm many of the “intuitions” I had gained through participant observation but also to provide the quotes which fill the thesis.

## **B. Immigrants in the Literature**

As I concentrate on Ethiopian Jews as immigrants, I introduce the sociological and anthropological study of immigrants, which I will return to in the concluding chapter to compare and contrast my ethnographic findings.

### **1. *General sociological and anthropological approaches***

The sociological literature adopts a macrosocial orientation towards immigrant experience. An early formulation was the “assimilation” view proposed by Park & Burgess (1921) and Thomas & Znaniecki (1918) in their study of migrants to America. “Assimilation” was defined as a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquired the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other persons or groups, and by sharing their experiences and history, were incorporated into a common cultural life. The main problem with such an approach is that it is so general that it becomes a truism and misses out the complexities of immigrant experience. As Price (1969: 215) says “the term accommodation or assimilation is too wide, concealing the fact that there may be complete assimilation in some things (dress, religion and language say), accommodation in other things (economic life and family customs) and conflict in other things (housing or education).” Indeed,, there are different types and levels of accommodation and assimilation - while a migrant may be

“objectively assimilated” (in terms of say education, work, housing, language), his “subjective identity” may be quite different (Anwar 1979: 9).

More recent sociological approaches have attempted to refine such broad categories. In one framework, for example, the immigrants’ task is one of “desocialisation” followed by “resocialisation”, resulting in an exchange of old roles and identities for new ones (Eisenstadt 1954 and Bar-Yosef 1968, Gans 1979, Agocs 1981). While providing useful tools for generalisation and comparisons, such frameworks and studies are not particularly helpful to the anthropologist. The social and psychological categories used are ethnocentric and difficult to apply in a meaningful sense when the immigrants’ subjective experience is the object of study. Moreover, while such evolutionary frameworks may often correctly reflect immigrants’ processes of adaptation in general terms, they fail to provide details on how immigrants themselves experience such “stages”.

Anthropologists start where sociologists and psychologists leave off. Taking many conclusions for granted, such as “the experience of ‘assimilation’ is shaped by the society of origin”, or “a consensus has emerged that immigration has an important impact on an individual’s self and identity processes” (Garcia Coll & Magnuson 1997: 119), they seek to analyse the processes and the experience of immigrants as they adapt to their new environment. Markowitz, explaining her study of Russian Jewish immigrants in New York, provides a good example of anthropologists’ concerns: “Adjustment to cross-cultural migration is here presented as an ongoing, creative, sometimes integrative, sometimes fragmentary process. It is a dialectical relationship between old and new knowledge schemes mediated by people’s practice and social reflection - a process of change, but not an exchange of old for new in a predictable direction (1993:3).”

## ***2. Sociological and anthropological study of immigrants to Israel***

The sociological study of immigrants in Israel is characterised by a “social change” approach, which looks at immigrants as they “assimilate” and “absorb” into the country, and compares the rates between different groups. The first formulates of the “social change” perspective, in which immigrants reject their native traditions to strive to adopt society’s “uniform cultural orientation”, is well illustrated by Frankenstein in 1953:

“In this country... there are no ethnic groups possessing definite cultures, but only one society characterised by a rather uniform cultural orientation... and on the margins an ever increasing number of individuals and groups which have not yet been absorbed in

it. ... the frame of reference we suggest is that of “social change” (Frankenstein 1953: 33)”.

Eisenstadt (1954)’s *The Absorption of Immigrants*, a more sophisticated version of this orientation, became the founding stone for most sociological studies of Israeli immigrant groups. Absorption into Israeli society presupposed a special sort of acculturation, the ability of Oriental Jews to modernise in harmony with Israeli norms. Eisenstadt analysed immigrants in terms of their “predisposition to change”, relating this concept to different family structures found in Diaspora communities (54: 143-168). He identified types of immigrant responses to the new Israeli conditions which ranged from “isolated apathetic” families to “self-transforming cohesive” groups. The focus was not on specific groups of immigrants, but on social processes taking place throughout the entire immigrant population. The central issue was “absorption”. As Weingrod (1985: xiii) explains: “Were the immigrants becoming dispersed within the institutions and primary groups of the society (i.e. absorbed) or did they establish separate institutions and maintain different traditions? The goal, in other words, was to understand the new forms of social differentiation and stratification then emerging in Israeli society.”

Since “absorption” has been far from complete, social scientists have turned to the persisting differences between the “European” and the “Asian-African” segments of the population - systematic differences in income, occupation, and education between these two broad categories, i.e. what has come to be called “the social gap” (Lissak 1969, Weingrod 1971, Heller 1975). These studies (the titles of which reveal their theoretical macro-social / comparative thrust) include Weingrod’s *Israel: Group Relations in a New Society* (1965), Matra’s *Social Change in Israel* (1965), and Lissak’s *Social Mobility in Israeli Society* (1969), and Smoocha’s *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict* (1978).

Compared to their sociologist colleagues, anthropologists of Israeli society have adopted a more “cultural” approach<sup>7</sup>, looking at how immigrants remould their cultural and social institutions in the new country. Following Eisenstadt’s work, a number of anthropological works were published on Oriental immigration, particularly on those who settled in agricultural communities, called *moshavim* (e.g. Weingrod 1966, Goldberg 1972). A more flexible conception of tradition and modernity was developed - in particular it was

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<sup>7</sup> The cultural perspective was first introduced in Patai’s *Israel between East and West* (1953). His concern was the “cultural crisis” resulting from the impact of culturally Western Israel on the Eastern immigrants then arriving in the country, “culture contact”, and “acculturation”. Characteristic of Israeli social science, the book contains an element of advocacy, calling for “cultural synthesis instead of cultural absorption; an in-gathering of cultural contributions from each ethnic element in the country, instead of the assimilation of all to the Western culture of Ashkenazi Jewry (p. 334)”.

demonstrated that cultural continuity with a pre-migration past (i.e. “tradition”) did not hinder successful absorption into Israeli society, but contributed to it (See Dshen & Shokeid 1974). Further, as Eisenstadt himself recognised, “traditional forms” did more than “persist”, they shaped the contours of Israeli society itself (1974: 15-6).

Dshen and Shokeid (1974) have taken studies based on particular ethnic groups further. They looked at ways in which Moroccan and Tunisian Jews refashion their native understandings, interests, and symbols as they accommodated to their new Israeli circumstances. Several anthropological works followed. Goldberg (1985) offers a theoretical approach to the cultural study of immigrants to Israel. He attempts to delineate how “culture” influences the ways in which immigrants respond to their new life in Israel. He asks “How does the immigrants’ native culture screen their perceptions?” His emphasis is on symbols, meanings and codes. Herbert Lewis (1985, 1989) is also strongly cultural. His ethnography attempts to explain how and why Yemenites who reside in an ethnically mixed town maintain their separate identity. He argues that it is their “strong sense of values and attitudes which guides the actions and choices of many members of the group” (315).

Gilad’s ethnography of Yemeni Jewish women is the ethnography I have found closest in nature to my study. She provides rich ethnographic detail to elucidate the nature of the immigrant experience of her informants from their own perspective. At the same time, she tells “a story about contradictions and how people cope with them” (Gilad 1989: 230). I am unable to provide the time-depth of Gilad’s ethnography since she studied immigrant women and their Israeli-born adult daughters, forty years after migration. My study is complementary to hers because it is situated within the first decade post-immigration it charts the origins of the processes Gilad analysed at a later stage of development<sup>8</sup>.

### **3. *Motivations for migrating***

Motivations for migration are central, for they influence immigrants’ expectations of the future, which as we shall see, are fundamental in shaping their experience in their new country. Immigrants have often been divided between economic or political migrants. “Economic migrants” are part of global processes in which emigrants from newly industrialising and less industrialised nations come to industrialised countries, seeking employment (Watson 1977: 6-7). The motives of such “economic migrants” are analysed in terms of “push-pull” factors: the “push” of economic necessities and the “pull” of

opportunities abroad (see Jansen 1970, Wrong 1961). This model has attracted its fair share of criticisms; Jeffery for instance points out that it cannot explain “circulatory migration”, that is, having portrayed the gloom of the country of origin it cannot account for why migrants return there. Furthermore, many migrants, such as Brazilians in New York in the late 1980s, who are from the middle-classes, are not “driven from their homes by poverty and despair”. Instead, factors such as rising expectations brought about through increased education and media exposure account for their migration (Margolis 1994 xv-xvi). “Political migrants” are those which arrive in Western countries seeking asylum from repressive regimes (see Gold 1992, Gilad 1989, Camino & Krulfeld 1994).

Although these categories are helpful as broad generalisations, when the motives of any particular immigrant group, particularly in recent years, are analysed, a more complex picture emerges. For example, Pakistanis migrated to England in search of work, but were also partly drawn by idealised images of the West and the increased status associated with life in England. Conversely, Vietnamese boat-people fled a repressive regime and sought ‘American Freedom’, but they were also attracted by American economic possibilities. The push-pull framework also underplays the relative economic and educational status of individual migrants. Recent studies are correcting this lacuna (see Bhachu 1993). For example, a Vietnamese boatman who was an illiterate farmer has a very different experience of Miami compared to that of a compatriot who was a white-collar worker or a highly educated urban professional.

Migrants to Israel are motivated by an additional factor: an ideological pull to their host country. They are drawn to Israel to live in their ‘homeland’, the land of Jews. American migrants to Israel are a good example of ideological migration because they not neither fleeing harsh political or economic conditions, indeed migration to Israel usually entailed a *decrease* in standard of living (Avruch 1981: 4). Avruch argues that the “investments” these migrants made are purely ideological: in their ethnic identity, their Jewishness (Avruch 1981: 4). He found that he could usefully use the push-pull model, substituting economic factors with ideological ones. Pull factors included: to fulfil religious injunctions, the ease of living religiously as a Jew, a sense of loyalty to the state of “Israel”, and other reasons (e.g. a spouse or children made *aliya*). Push factors included: a sense of hypocrisy stemming from daily prayers about being reunited in the land of Israel while remaining in the USA, a lack of “belonging” in America (90-106).

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<sup>8</sup> I have not found any quality ethnography of immigrants to Israel undertaken during the first few years



While Americans present an extreme of the ideological basis for migrating, most ethnic groups come to Israel with economic and political motivations as well as ideological ones. Yemenis in the 1950s were ideologically drawn to their homeland, but they were also fleeing the Yemen during the Israel-Arab war after the declaration of statehood (Gilad 1989). Similarly, while the first North African Jewish immigrants were drawn to the new state of Israel, more assimilated Jews were forced to emigrate by the increasing nationalism of North African Moslems (Deshen & Shokeid 1974: 34). Some of the current Russian immigrants may well hold Zionist ideologies, but their motivation to come to Israel is above all economic.

#### **4. *Nature of the receiving and sending societies***

The natures of the sending and host countries, are also central in the shaping of immigrant experience. One factor is the relative economic and industrial basis of the two societies, which determines the degree and nature of socio-economic change which migrants must undergo. At one extreme, immigrants such as the Beta Israel, who moved from a rural developing society to an urban developed society have the biggest socio-economic adjustment to make. At the other extreme, those migrating from an industrialised urban environment to another industrialised urban one, have the least adjustment to make. A host of other factors shape the immigrant experience: the respective political natures, religions, bureaucracies, natural environments, and races of the sending and receiving countries (Foner 1987).

#### ***Israel as a receiving country***

The specific characteristics of Israel as a receiving country have been described and analysed at length (e.g. Gilad 1989: 212-216, Abbink 1984: 128-145). Here is the briefest summary of those factors which have a bearing on Ethiopian Jewish immigrants.

Israel is an “immigrants’ country”, with the vast majority of its Jewish population<sup>9</sup> either first or second generation immigrants, as Jewish population and immigration figures (Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991: 27-8) clearly demonstrate:

- In 1880, Jewish population of 25,000;

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of immigration.

<sup>9</sup> On the eve of the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, there were about 1,200,000 Arabs in Palestine, nearly twice the Jewish population. Only 156,000 remained after the first Arab-Israeli war. A high natural growth has gradually increased the population and in the 1990s, Arab citizens constitute

- In 1922, Jewish population of 85,000 (chiefly idealistic pioneers from Russia);
- Between 1924-36, approx. 282,000 immigrants, chiefly from Poland, and Western European countries, nearly tripling the Jewish population;
- Prior to independence, Jewish population stood at 630,000 of which just 10% were from Middle-Eastern origin;
- In first three and a half years of statehood (1948-51), 700,000 immigrants (half from Europe and half from Asia and Africa), doubling the population;
- Immigration continued steadily with mass immigration in the mid-1950s (over 160,000 mostly from Morocco Tunisia and Poland) and mid-1960s (215,000 especially Morocco and Rumania);
- In 1989, population of four million Jews, half of which are from North African or Asian origin;
- From 1989 to 1995, over half a million Russians immigrated.

Jewish immigrants are wanted and actively sought out, sometimes at very high financial cost as in the case of the Beta Israel. When they reach Israel, each and every new immigrant is entitled to automatic citizenship and material assistance upon arrival. In Israel, there are two main levels of ethnic group relations. On one level, Israel is a divided country between Jewish Israelis and Arab Israelis, where the latter do not have the same rights as the former (e.g. Arabs cannot serve in the army), and are not part of “moral society”: there are few ties of friendships or marriage and the two groups are residentially segregated. Within these two broad groups, there are numerous sub-ethnic groups. Arabs comprise Muslims, Christians, Bedouins and Druze. Within Jewish society, Israelis are divided in two categories<sup>10</sup>: the ‘Ashkenazim’ who came from Europe and America (with a few exceptions such as South African Jews), and the ‘Mizrachim’, often called ‘Sephardim’ or ‘Orientals’, who came from the Middle East and North Africa<sup>11</sup>. These two categories are further differentiated into Jews from each of their country of origin, which in turn maintain their own internal distinctions (Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991: 24-35).

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about 18% of the population of Israel (this figure does not include non-Israeli citizens, namely Palestinians from the West bank and Gaza) (Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991: 232)

<sup>10</sup> Some analysts have argued that Israeli ethnic identity as Jews versus Arabs is more salient than ethnic identity according to country of origin (e.g. Krausz 1986). However, as Ben Rafael & Sharot (1991: 6-9) point out Israelis may be united at times of conflict against Arab neighbours, but in their interactions amongst themselves, especially at times of peace, their ethnic differences are marked. And I would add further that “fission” is prevalent *within* an ethnic group, and sub-divisions are brought to the fore (cf Evans Pritchard 1940), often on the basis of previous geographical locality (Lewis A. 1985).

<sup>11</sup> Several social scientists have pointed out that the terms “Orientals” has little explanatory value given that so-called Orientals do not think of themselves as such (Loeb 1985: 213, Lewis A. 1985: 151, Gilad 1989: 240-1).

The formation of the State of Israel was based on the assumption of the essential unity of the Jewish nation. The ideology which pervaded early waves of immigration, like the American ideology of the “melting pot”, was *kibbutz hagaluhot* (the in-gathering of the exiles) and the *mizug hagaluhot* (the mixing of the exiles) (Cohen 1972: 95). In real terms, this meant that Oriental immigrants, who generally arrived in Israel with no economic resource and a lower educational background than the resident Ashkenazi elites, were expected to abandon their own customs and traditions, to adapt unidirectionally to the prevalent norms and values, within the framework of “modernisation” as defined by state policy. This model came to be increasingly criticised and rejected by the general public and social scientists because the ‘fusion’ failed to materialise and Ashkenazi-dominated elites retained their political and economic position and their ideas of cultural superiority. Officially, there is no discrimination in State bodies, bureaucracies, the army or the educational system; there is upward social mobility on the part of Orientals; and inter-ethnic marriages, a standard measure of integration in Israel, are increasing between the two broad social categories (from 9% of all marriage in 1957, to 24% in 1985). But the social, economic and political gap between Europeans and Middle Easterners remains large. Israeli towns have “ethnic” neighbourhoods, with high concentrations of particular *edot* (ethnic groups) and this residential segregation results in de facto educational segregation (Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991: 31, Gonen 1985).

Partly as a result of such socio-economic disparities, ethnicity has emerged to social prominence<sup>12</sup>. The recent effervescence of ethnicity is expressed in politics (e.g. creation of ethnic political parties), the rise in ethnic festivals, such as the *mimuna* of the Moroccans, pilgrimages to the tombs of Saints, and public discourse on ethnic lines (Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991: 32). In the Israel of 1980s and 90s, to which the Beta Israel emigrated, the standard rhetoric is that Israel must not repeat the ‘mistakes of the 1950s’, where large waves of Afro-Asian Jewish immigrants were treated as “primitives”, cultural *tabula rasa* capable of being turned into modern-day Israelis. ‘Cultural pluralism is [now] high on the agenda of political correctness’<sup>13</sup> (Kaplan & Rosen 1993: 35).

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<sup>12</sup> Most societies have experienced this rise in ethnicity. Obvious examples include the former Yugoslavia (Banks 19), religious fundamentalism in the Middle East (Jewish and Muslim), immigrant groups in Israel, USA and New Zealand where Leckie (1995: 159) notes an “increased institutionalisation and overt expressions of ethnic and religious identity among South Asians”.

<sup>13</sup> See Halper 1987 for a critique of current policies.

## The Beta Israel as immigrants

After this brief discussion of immigrants and Israeli society, the main points which characterise the Beta Israel as an immigrant group can be listed:

- They underwent a radical transformation in their social, economic, political and natural environment: from a ‘traditional’ rural African background to a ‘modern’ urban Israeli setting
- Their motivations for migration were ideological as well as economic. Like other immigrants to Israel, they had a prior sense of ‘belonging’ to their receiving country, which they thought of as their ‘homeland’ to which they were returning after over two thousand years of exile.

The whole Beta Israel population migrated in a very short space of time, leaving no reference group behind<sup>14</sup>, and with little possibility of return. The Beta Israel therefore have to imagine and re-create their future in the host-country.

## C. The Beta Israel in Ethiopia

A note on the naming of the group is necessary at the outset. The terms ‘Ethiopian Jews’ and ‘Beta Israel’ are now used by most scholars because they are said to be the terms preferred by the people themselves (Quirin 1992: 12). However, I have never heard a non-educated Ethiopian Jew use the term ‘Beta Israel’: they refer to themselves as ‘Israel’ or sometimes in the plural form ‘Israelotch’ (see also Weil 1995 for a similar observation). The main alternatives, ‘Falasha’ and ‘Kayla’, have both acquired derogatory connotations. ‘Falasha’ was the most common term of reference until recently and was said to derive from the Ge’ez word *‘falasa’* which means “to separate” “emigrate” or “exile” or from *‘falasyan’* “foreigner”, both terms taken to imply separation from Ancient Israel and migration to Ethiopia. *Ayhud*, the Ge’ez term for “Jews”, was rarely used to refer to the Beta Israel. It was

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<sup>14</sup> Asians in Britain, for example, maintain strong links and orientation to their home country, even if they are firmly anchored in Britain. Youngsters in particular have a comparison and reference point in India as they develop their Asian British identity (Shaw 1988). Several immigrant groups to Israel, such as Jews from Yemen, Iraq and Libya, were transplanted in their quasi-entirety to Israel (Gilad 1989: 215). They therefore have no “reference group” back home and have to recreate themselves anew in the host country.

known to have been used to refer to heretics or pagans who were clearly neither Jewish nor Christian (Quirin 1992: 14)<sup>15</sup>.

## **1. Theories of origin**

Ethiopian Jews' own origin myths state that they are the direct descendants of ancient Israelites who migrated to Ethiopia, and their dark skin is accounted for by a limited mixing with the local population. The dating of the exodus varies. Some myths suggest that the Beta Israel are the lost tribe of Dan, who reached Ethiopia after the original exodus following the destruction of the First Temple in the sixth century BC. Others suggest that Israelites reached Ethiopia via Egypt after the destruction of the Second Temple in 76 AD (Quirin 1992, Friedmann & Santamaria 1990, Abbink 1990, see also Chapter Three).

Until recently, scholars agreed that the Beta Israel are descendants of Agaw<sup>16</sup> converts to Judaism, but following extensive archival research, this view is now largely discredited. Kaplan argues that while there is evidence of Jewish influences on Ethiopian culture during the first centuries of the Common Era, these were not so much supplanted by Christianity as absorbed into it. An Israelite self-identity, the Saturday Sabbath, circumcision, Biblical dietary laws, and a three-fold division of the houses of worship in imitation of the temple of Jerusalem all became core elements of the dominant Christian culture (Kaplan 1993: 647, see also Kaplan 1992, Ullendorff 1956, Pankhurst 1995). After analysing the religious and cultural similarities between Beta Israel and Orthodox Christians, and other ethnic groups such as the Hebraic Qemant and the craftsmen of Shewa, Pankhurst (1995) forcefully argues that one has to think in terms of a "Ethiopian Judaic-Christian continuum, in which most of the peoples of Northern Ethiopia had their place; i.e., a kind of gradation, in which the Beta Israel were important rather than unique"<sup>17</sup>. Ironically, this recent scholarship which places the Beta Israel firmly in their Ethiopian context has coincided with the group's migration to Israel. This has led to a political conflict between the historians' views and the popular view. Steven Kaplan, the main proponent, has become a "bete noire" amongst the Ethiopian

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<sup>15</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the group's collective designation, see Kaplan (1990) and Weil (1995).

<sup>16</sup> The Agaw are a group which were present before the creation of the Axumite kingdom in the first century AD, the first indigenous population of Ethiopia, and are considered to be the source of the various Cushitic peoples who form the ethnic base of the population of the Horn of Africa (Levine 1974; 37). Until the twentieth century, the Beta Israel still spoke an Agaw language amongst themselves (Friedmann & Santamaria 1990: 57, Appleyard 1995).

<sup>17</sup> Beta Israel are not unique as an African group claiming Judaic ancestry and exhibiting a number of Hebraic practices, note also the Lemba of Zimbabwe for example (Parfitt 1995). In Ethiopia, Pankhurst (1995) writes about the Beta Abraham or Bala-Ejj, a group of craftsmen "almost a separate caste" that have retained customs reminiscent of early Ethiopian Judaic Christianity.

community and there has been at least one attempt to remove Kay Shelemay's book, also proposing the same view, from a Jewish bookstore in the USA (Shelemay 1991: 150-1).

## **2. Historical fragments**

The points raised in this thesis, concerning Ethiopian Jews' strategies of adaptation, are illuminated by a historical perspective. Indeed, the history of the Beta Israel from the fourteenth century, before which there are no historical records, shows a consistent pattern of "cultural persistence, adaptation, and evolution in the face of great hardship" (Quirin 1992: xiii).

### ***The formation of the Beta Israel (14th - 17th century )***

The "Solomonic" Kings - the dynasty which started in 1270 and traced its descent from King Solomon and to the ancient Ethiopian kingdoms of Aksum - set out to impose hegemony on all the independent peoples, including the Judaised populations of the Ethiopian Highlands. The Beta Israel, who were geographically dispersed and politically divided at the time, rebelled and resisted conversion. In response to this external threat, the religious basis of the group was strengthened and a centralised and relatively unified political organisation was established by the sixteenth century. However, by the early seventeenth century, they were totally defeated and lost their independence (Kaplan 1993: 155, Kaplan 1992: 56-96, Quirin 1992: 40-88).

Emperor Yeshaq's (r.1413-1430) reign was a significant period in the history of the Beta Israel because it marked the beginning of their dislocation and loss of land-rights. The emperor is said to have decreed: "He who is baptised in the Christian religion may inherit the land of his father, otherwise let him be a *Falasi* (a landless person, a wanderer)". A later scribe added the comment: "since then, the Beta Israel (House of Israel) have been called *falashoch* (exiles)" (Kaplan 1992: 65). The Beta Israel responded by either converting to Christianity, or migrating to areas of poor quality farmland which were vacant, or by staying on their lands, no longer as independent agriculturalists, but as tenants to recently arrived colonists. They also began to seek ways to supplement their income from agriculture and turned to crafts such as pottery, weaving, building and smithing.

The early fifteenth century also marked major transformations in the religious sphere for the Beta Israel following the influx of renegade Christian monks (Kaplan 1992: 69-77). The latter instituted monasticism, and developed religious and social practices which allowed

the Beta Israel to maintain an ethno-religious identity. The main reforms were: re-adaptation of religious texts and prayers<sup>18</sup>, institution of various new holy days, rules for conversion of outsiders, and reinforcement of a distinct set of purity laws (Abbink 1987: 144-5, Shelemay 1986: 79-80, Quirin 1992).

### ***The Beta Israel as an “infamous group” in Ethiopia<sup>19</sup> (19th century)***

As much of my thesis concerns Ethiopian Jewish immigrants' relations with their new host society, I briefly discuss recent social relations with their former neighbours, the Amhara of Gondar and Tigre regions<sup>20</sup>. Beta Israel lived in separate hamlets within larger villages dominated by the Christian highland population, mostly in highland Gondar and Tigre<sup>21</sup>, where practised a mixed farming system of animal husbandry and grain cultivation (Quirin 1992: 2). Quirin provides the following estimations on population: in mid-19th century, 80,000 - 25,000 Beta Israel; in the early twentieth century, there were said to be about 50,000 (Quirin 1992: 3).

Abbink (1987) describes the Beta Israel as an “infamous group”, regarded as an inferior population “without honour” (*kibur*) because of their association with the blacksmith craft, which was considered polluting and dirty, and their lack of land ownership<sup>22</sup>. This “quasi-caste” status was the result of the politico-military defeat and socio-economic displacement, which led to their loss of autonomous peasant status, and to their emerging dependence as an inferior group adjoined to the feudalist structure of Abyssinia (Abbink 1987: 144).

While the Beta Israel were not the only subjected group in the region<sup>23</sup>, they were unique in claiming the same Israelite descent and religion, as the Amhara. In fact, they went further and claimed to be the “real Israelites”, denying the Amhara claims to this title, as depicted in the *Kibra Nagast* (the Glory of the Kings), the national epic of the Abyssinians (Abbink 1987: 143-5). But in Amhara eyes, they were “dirty” blacksmiths, imbued with a powerful

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<sup>18</sup> Recent scholars who have worked on Beta Israel liturgy all assert that the literature of the Beta Israel is derived and adapted from Ethiopian Christian sources (Kaplan 1992: 73, Shelemay 1986).

<sup>19</sup> I borrow the title from Abbink's (1987) article.

<sup>20</sup> The Beta Israel also had many Muslim neighbours, however, their relation with the latter is rarely talked about in the literature, and my informants chiefly talked about Christian Amharas when they mentioned former neighbours.

<sup>21</sup> Beta Israel lived principally in the most densely populated temperate *wayna daga* zone which is 1,500 m to 2,500 metres. The other two altitude zones in North-West Ethiopia are the *daga*, which is above 2,500 metres, and the *qolla*, below 1,500 m. These different altitude zones have different climates and therefore vegetation, but also somewhat distinct economic and cultural life-styles (Quirin 1992: 2).

<sup>22</sup> For discussion of land ownership in Gondar and Tigre region, see Hoben (1973).

threatening supernatural force: the evil eye or *buda* (see Schoenberger 1975: 238-248). However, while the Beta Israel were viewed as threatening outsiders, they held an essential position in the local social structure, since they produced the tools and pots necessary for daily life (*ibid*).

The Beta Israel, for their part, viewed the Christians as polluting apostates, and enforced a ideology of separation with a number of strict rules relating to communal purity. In particular the practice of *Atenkunye* (“do not touch me”) meant that after a Beta Israel came into physical contact with non-Beta Israel, they had to wash clothes and body and ritually purify themselves from the polluting contact before entering a Beta Israel home. Other than for monks and priests, this rule was hard to enforce given their economic involvement with the Amhara. To this day, however, it has remained ideologically important for the Beta Israel and was a clear symbolic boundary-marker between the two culturally similar groups. *Atenkunye* extended to all the food and drink touched and prepared or by non-Beta Israel, although by the twentieth century, only the prohibition on eating meat continued to be enforced. In addition, Beta Israel developed internal purity rules which required the seclusion and purification of women during menstruation and after child-birth and for persons who had touched a corpse or another impure object - these rules were enforced until emigration to Israel, except by the small minority of urban dwellers and High School students (Abbink 1987: 147, Leslau 1951, Schoenberger 1975: 86-97).

### ***Protestant Missionaries (19th - 20th century)***

A Protestant mission under the auspices of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews was established among the Beta Israel in 1859. Though the missionaries did not succeed in gaining many converts, their impact on the Beta Israel was significant. They undermined the monastic clergy, provided educational opportunities for youngsters, and above all brought the Beta Israel to the attention of World Jewry (Kaplan 1992: 116-135).

Beta Israel resisted the threat presented by the missionaries in a variety of ways. A number of Beta Israel leaders sought political and judiciary means. For example, they challenged through the courts the missionary ban on animal sacrifices and the case was taken to Emperor Tewodros II in October 1862 (Kaplan 1992: 130-2). Other Beta Israel opted for migration. A group of Beta Israel from various regions, under the leadership of Aba Mahari

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<sup>23</sup> Others include the Qemant (see Gamst 1969), Wayto and Berta (Abbink 1987: 145), and the Balla-Ijj (Pankhurst 1995).



set off on foot for Jerusalem. However, as the expected 'miracles' which had occurred during Moses' exodus did not materialise, the expedition failed. Most of the group perished on the journey and the survivors returned home or settled in the Tigre region (Abbink 1984, Leslau 1951: xli, Kaplan 1992: 135). Further migrations occurred in the 1870s to areas beyond Missionary reach<sup>24</sup> (Kaplan 1992: 136).

### ***The Great Famine (1888-1892)***

During the Great Famine of 1888-1892 (Kaplan 1992: 143), a third to half the Beta Israel population perished. In such times of extreme hardship, communal laws of purity and village life were largely abandoned as Beta Israel ate whatever food they could find, irrespective of its provenance, and mixed freely with Christians. A large number converted at this time to both the Protestant Church and to Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Beta Israel monks suffered their final blow as no-one could afford to support a class of clergy, and the monks which had survived the famine felt compelled to raise families to replenish the population (Kaplan 1992: 143-154, Summerfield 1997: 44-94).

### ***The involvement of World Jewry (1867-1970)***

It was, ironically, the activities of Protestant missionaries which brought the Beta Israel to the attention of World Jewry and made them aware of a more universal Jewish identity<sup>25</sup>. A number of European Jews took up the Beta Israel cause. In 1867, the French scholar Joseph Halévy went to Ethiopia as an envoy of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (Kaplan 1992 116-42, Kaplan & Rosen 1994: 60-1). Forty years later, his pupil Jacques Faitlovitch travelled to Ethiopia and dedicated the rest of his life to bringing Ethiopian Jewry closer to world Jewry (Summerfield 1997: 94-232). He wanted to establish a Western-educated elite<sup>26</sup>, to raise education standards in general and to reform Beta Israel religion to bring it

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<sup>24</sup> The missionary Flad wrote in the 1874 issue of *Jewish Intelligence*: "... Beroo and our people told me that when the intelligence of my arrival reached him, Aba Maharee ordered special prayers to be offered up in all their synagogues for our destruction.... Seeing that they were disappointed in their hopes, when they learned that we were in good health.... the Falasha priests took it as a bad omen, and resolved to emigrate to the low countries. The following is the proclamation which was read in the synagogue: "Aba Maharee invites all those who wish to die as Falashas to leave West Abyssinia, and to follow him to a place of refuge. Those who do not care for their father's religion may remain; but let them remember that there is only one true religion - that of Moses." This proclamation caused a great excitement in the Falasha villages" (Quoted in Kaplan 1992: 137).

<sup>25</sup> A few years earlier, direct contact with World Jewry was initiated by the Beta Israel themselves. In 1855, an Ethiopian Jew arrived in Jerusalem with his thirteen-year-old son for the latter to study the Torah with the Rabbis in the Holy City (Kaplan 1992: 139).

<sup>26</sup> To this end, he organised the education in France of a number of Ethiopian youths. I met one of his alumni in an absorption centre in Netanya. A frail old man in a suit and tie who spoke to me in an immaculate old-style French, learned in a provincial town in the 1930s when he was just 16: "qu'est-ce

closer to “normative” Judaism (Kaplan & Rosen 1994: 60-1). He set up a network of village schools and a local health clinic, distributed religious literature, brought several Falasha youths to study in Palestine and Europe<sup>27</sup>, and acted as an envoy for the Falashas with political leaders<sup>28</sup>, (Summerfield 1997: 159-188). After a careful appraisal of sources and interviews with Beta Israel informants, Summerfield concludes that Faitlovitch’s impact on the Falashas was extremely limited. While his political work may have advanced the cause of the Beta Israel, the booklets which were distributed had little impact given high rates of illiteracy and his education programme “can in many respects be considered a failure” (1997: 202). Moreover, the Beta Israel resisted the religious reforms Faitlovitch tried to institute. They did not abandon what Faitlovitch considered “unnecessary traditions”, such as sacrifice, monasticism and isolation huts<sup>29</sup>, and few adopted normative Jewish practices, such as celebrations of Talmudic Jewish holidays (Summerfield 1997; 228-232).

Faitlovitch’s work among the Beta Israel was interrupted by the Italian Fascist occupation of Ethiopia (1935-1941). While the Jewish literature portrays the period as a time of persecution for the Beta Israel, given Fascist anti-Semitic politics (Faitlovitch in various reports to the Pro-Falasha committee, Messing 1982:66, Shelemay 1989:5) Summerfield argues that the impact of the occupation on the Falashas was minimal, come positive. The “time of the Italians” was fondly recalled by many of my older informants because the Italians provided many of them with a market for their agricultural produce and opportunities to become soldiers, and thus earn prestige and a high income<sup>30</sup> (Summerfield 1997: 255-266).

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que vous prendrez, Mademoiselle? ...Je vais vous éclaircir.... Je ne suis pas un homme de faculté, mais j’aime les gens de faculté.”

<sup>27</sup> One of these students was interviewed by Cahana fifty years later (1977:22). “Unknown strangers we were in the eyes of the small Jewish population then living in the country. The Jews rejected us from their midst... and then began the longing (...) for our motherland, our families and the customs of the country which we knew” (Cahana 1977:22, quoted in Abbink 1984: 104).

<sup>28</sup> In 1908, Faitlovitch was granted an audience with Emperor Menilick II, where he pleaded with the Emperor to intervene on behalf of the Falashas, who were sometimes led in chains to work as masons in towns and were accused on supernatural grounds (*buda*). The Emperor issued an order to stop the maltreatment of the Falashas. Faitlovitch also met several times with Ras Tafari in the 1920s, who also issued decrees against false supernatural accusations and forced labour (Summerfield 1997: 182-6).

<sup>29</sup> As we saw above, the Great Famine, prior to Faitlovitch’s arrival, seriously curtailed monasticism and the animal sacrifice (Kaplan 1992: 151-2).

<sup>30</sup> Though Summerfield’s work is a valuable first step, further ethnographic research is required to ascertain the impact of Faitlovitch and the Italian occupation. Whatever their impact, both events have become important significant historical markers for older Ethiopians, and are referred to in the context of changing traditions. Note for example this old woman’s words: “Ah, our religion before the Italians came! You should have seen it! If you touched a woman who was in the menstrual hut you had to go in yourself and stay there till the following evening, and only after washing could you go home. You could not as much as touch an Amhara. But after the Italians, things changed.” Or Aba Negusse: “*Mrmr* (title for teacher) Yaacov [Faitlovitch] said: ‘Do not make the *kurban* (meat sacrifice) because the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed.’ I still remember the time when a goat was slaughtered and the meat was burned and thrown away. That was before the Italians.”

If Faitlovitch's direct impact on the Beta Israel was limited, his advocacy on their behalf to Western Jewish communities paved the way for their eventual emigration to Israel. He portrayed the Beta Israel as a foreign Jewish element out of place in their strange African environment. For instance in his report to Baron Edmond de Rothschild after his first visit to Ethiopia he wrote:

“Lorsque je me suis trouvé en Afrique parmi ces Falachas entourés de peuplades à demi-sauvages, j'ai ressenti une joie indicible en constatant leur énergie, leur intelligence, les hautes qualités morales qui les distinguent. Nous pouvons être fiers de compter parmi les nôtres ces nobles enfants de l'Éthiopie, qui, avec un non moins légitime orgueil, se glorifient de remonter à nos origines, adorent notre Dieu, pratiquent notre culte. L'ardeur avec laquelle ils cherchent à se régénérer, à sortir de cette barbarie africaine qui les enveloppe et les étouffe, prouve qu'en eux persiste le caractère instinctif de la race [...] combien différents en cela des autres Abyssiniens, si réfractaires aux études, au progrès et à la civilisation des Européens auxquels ils se croient naïvement supérieurs! (Faitlovitch 1905: 26-27 in (Kaplan 1993: 649)<sup>31</sup>”

This mythic image of the Falasha as a pre-talmudic lost tribe, out of place in Africa, was accepted with “remarkable readiness” (Kaplan 1993: 649). Jewish religious bodies readily persevered with Faitlovitch's endeavours to “bring [the heritage of the community] into line with the general tradition of Israel” (Rabbi Waldman 1990 quoted in Kaplan & Rosen 1993: 37). From 1953, representatives of the Jewish Agency's Department for Torah Education in the Diaspora and the Jewish aid organisation ORT were active in Ethiopia. A network of clinics and schools was established throughout the Gondar region. Twelve Ethiopian youngsters were also brought to study in an Israeli Youth village in 1955, in order to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to return to Ethiopia as teachers and leaders of the Falashas. In 1961, 1,500 copies of a booklet in Amharic on Jewish holy days and Sabbath observance were distributed to the Beta Israel by the Jewish Agency.

In an appraisal of activities of the Jewish Agency's first representatives in Ethiopia, the authors comment in a chapter entitled ‘Corrections in Religious life according to *halakha*’ that ‘crucial progress was made towards returning them [the Ethiopians] to Judaism’ (quoted in Kaplan & Rosen 1993: 37). While the Jewish Agency's programme in Ethiopia had significant impact on the Falashas<sup>32</sup>, it was not evenly felt throughout the villages, with those

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<sup>31</sup> “When I was in Africa among the Falasha surrounded by tribes of semi-savages, I felt an inexpressible joy in recording their energy, their intelligence, the lofty moral qualities that distinguish them. We can be proud to count among our own these noble children of Ethiopia, who, with a no less legitimate pride, boast of tracing [themselves] back to our origins, worshipping our God, practising our cult.” (Abbreviated translation in Kaplan & Westheimer 1992: 18).

<sup>32</sup> Wolf Leslau, who had first visited Falasha villages in 1946, commented on a return visit sixteen years later: “the situation was not the same when I visited the same village in 1962. Several young Falashas now spoke Hebrew and some elders knew how to read Hebrew. Unlike the practice of former days, the Feast of Hanukkah was celebrated and candles were lit in the synagogue. During the Feast of the

closest to Gondar town gaining much exposure and remoter ones very little (Summerfield 1997: 302-336, Schoenberger 1975: 210-214). Not surprisingly, the influx of resources and externally appointed leaders caused many divisions within the Beta Israel community. Traditional leaders, the priests and elders, disputed the new-found status of the educated young elite. In the words of a leading priest (in the 1970s): “The young teachers want to lead the people, but the priests and elders don’t want to surrender their leadership.... but, because the young teachers have access to the government, Falasha follow them, and only adults and the elderly continue to obey the priests of old” (quoted in Kaplan 1993: 161). The dispute was not between generations, but geographical too, as Falashas from the Tigre region complained that fewer resources were reaching them (Kaplan 1992: 162). The main effect was to transform Jerusalem into a living reality and a goal for which to struggle (Schoenberger 1975, Summerfield 1997; 334).

### ***Modernisation (1960s)***

Changes in Beta Israel society were also brought about by general processes of change and modernisation in Ethiopia. From the 1960s, the economic position of the Beta Israel worsened because both land availability and the profitability of their handicrafts decreased due to Amhara population growth and the increased availability of cheap factory produced tools (Kessler 1982: 11, Schoenberger 1975: 179f). The 1974 Ethiopian revolution led to the establishment of a military Marxist regime. Although some Beta Israel gained land ownership in the land reform programmes, the old landlords often organised raids to evict them or destroy crops. In these turbulent times, Abbink argues that the old discriminatory practices of the Amhara were intensified, and the Beta Israel sometimes fell victims to counter-revolutionary forces<sup>33</sup> (Abbink 1984: 113). Young people became much more exposed to secular education and contacts with non-Beta Israel increased significantly as young people were conscripted into the armed forces or sought opportunities in urban areas (Kaplan & Rosen 1994). This deteriorating socio-economic position, together with the increased presence of Israelis, Jewish tourists and Jewish projects in their village, fermented the idea of wholesale migration to Israel (Schoenberger 1975).

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Tabernacles, a booth was built in the compound of a synagogue, a practice not known previously. As for the two young teachers of the village, they wore the prayer shawl during worship.” (Quoted in Summerfield 1997: 330)

<sup>33</sup> Other views express an opposite evaluation of the period. The head of the huge ORT aid programme: “Discrimination against the Falashas has abated radically in the last five years. (...) The revolution has given the Falashas their freedom” (Winn 1981: 4). Many of my informants spoke of Haile Mariam, the head of the revolutionary government, in ebullient terms, and recalled land reform and literacy campaigns.

### 3. **Migration**

Fantanesh describes her migration to Israel: “We were on our way from our village near Ambover, after my mother who was rich had sold all her animals, when we were stopped by police. The Amhara policeman / judge (*dagna*) said: “Go back! Where are you going? To Jerusalem? That is not your country, that is the country of the *farenge* (White people)! Go back home!” He took our money, leaving us just a little. Tsega and Birtukan [her sisters who had reached Israel in 1984] sent money to my Mum and Tsega some to me. My husband Birre’s brother sent him money. It was hard. Then we heard that people were reaching Israel from Addis Abeba. Fetegu went there and with 100 Birr (Ethiopian currency) he called his brother in Israel:

- This is Birre!

- Birre?!

- Yes, we are coming!

We went to Addis by plane from Gondar, it took just an hour. Then, we went to the airport, and we landed in Rome five hours later. They were nice people in Rome, just like you [and she put her hand to her face, indicating like me in terms of skin colour]. We reached Israel at 11 o’clock. People had masks, they were at war [the Gulf war]! We first went to Ma’alot absorption centre and then thank God we reached here in Afula. [Fantanesh added that they spent one year in Addis Abeba before migrating.]

#### **Migration prior to Operation Moses (before 1984)**

During the first decades of Israeli statehood, the idea of Ethiopian Jewish immigration was rather abstract, on both sides. While Jewish Agency immigration envoys were actively preparing for the emigration of Jews from Iraq, North Africa and Yemen in the 1950s, the first Jewish Israeli missions in Ethiopia were aimed at “reform and rehabilitation” *within* Ethiopia. In the 1960s and early seventies, small groups of Beta Israel, about two hundred and seventy in total, emigrated on their own accord. Most of them were young and had already left their villages for education and work prior to migration and their motives were essentially economic and adventurous, wanting to discover and work in a developed country. They either raised money for the journey themselves or found a “sponsor”, often a visiting American tourist (Abbink 1984: 105-6).

In 1973, The Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel issued a religious ruling recognising the Falashas as Jews. Citing rabbinical opinion from four hundred years earlier, he stated that they were descendants of the lost tribe of Dan. Two years later, the government of Israel accepted the ruling and granted rights to Ethiopian Jews to immigrate to Israel and, like other Jews, receive full Israeli citizenship on arrival, under the Law of Return. In 1977, a group of one hundred and twenty one Ethiopian Jews was the first to reach Israeli legally as Jews. Many more Beta Israel were scheduled to follow, but in February 1978, Ethiopia closed its doors (Abbink 1984: 112).

In 1979, Beta Israel from the Northern regions of Tigre, left their homesteads in large groups (together with many Amhara villagers) to refugee camps in the Sudan. In the Gondar area, where Government forces were in stronger control, mass movements could not emerge, although intrepid youngsters braved the journey. The journey was arduous, given the long walk on foot, and the prevalence of armed bandits (*shiftas*) (Abbink 1984: 115-6). The period in the camps was no better - crowded conditions, little money, the necessity to conceal Jewish identity from authorities, the necessity to forgo purity laws and other religious customs, illness and high death rates (Abbink 1984: 118-120). Israeli agents active in the area succeeded in getting out small groups at a time throughout the early 1980s (Parfitt 1985).

### ***Operation Moses (1984)***

By the end of 1983, over four thousand Beta Israel, virtually the entire Jewish population of Tigre and Walqayit, had reached Israel via the Sudan. As news spread of their successful emigration, Beta Israel from Gondar region made the arduous journey and by the middle of 1984, close to ten thousand had reached the Sudanese refugee camps. As the situation in the refugee camps became worse<sup>34</sup> and the mortality rate rose, and the pressure from pro-Falasha groups, including from Ethiopian Jewish Israeli citizens, increased, the Israeli government decided to mount a large immigration operation. After a complex process of negotiations with Sudanese rebel forces and the Sudanese government, involving millions of dollars<sup>35</sup> and high level US intervention, Operation Moses was staged. In less than two months, starting in mid-November 1984, more than six thousand five hundred Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel<sup>36</sup>. The several hundred Beta Israel which were left in Sudan following the suspension of the airlift<sup>37</sup> were brought in another CIA-sponsored airlift a few months later (Parfitt 1985).

### ***Operation Solomon and beyond (1991 to 1997)***

Between August 1985 and the end of 1989, a further two thousand immigrants arrived from Ethiopia. When diplomatic relations were re-established between Israel and Ethiopia at the end of 1989, the Ethiopian government permitted a slow rate of emigration. By the summer

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<sup>34</sup> For an account of Falasha life in the Sudanese refugee camps, see Parfitt (1985: 76-88).

<sup>35</sup> Raised from Jewish source internationally by the Israeli government and pro-Falasha groups in Israel and North America (Parfitt 1985).

<sup>36</sup> For a full account of Operation Moses, see Parfitt (1985). For a critical account of Israel's motives, see Karadawi (1991).

<sup>37</sup> The Sudanese government had agreed to "turn a blind eye" to the Operation as long as it was kept secret, so that it was not openly seen to be negotiating with the Israelis, "the enemies" in the eyes of most

of 1990, over twenty thousand Ethiopian Jews had travelled to Addis Abeba to emigrate. Despite assistance from international Jewish organisation and the Israeli Embassy, conditions were harsh - malnutrition, inadequate housing, diseases including HIV, and the unfamiliarity of a new urban environment. With the progress of Ethiopian rebels by March 1991, more drastic measure were needed and with the help of the USA, and a thirty-five million dollar grant paid to the Ethiopian government, Operation Solomon was set in motion. In just thirty-six hours, between May 24 and May 25 1991, over fourteen thousand Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Tel Aviv (Kaplan & Westheimer 1992, Wagaw 1993: 241-3).

With few exceptions, Operation Solomon brought to a close Beta Israel emigration. However, the Falash Mura, Christian Ethiopians of Falasha descent, have claimed their rights to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return, which is open to persons who have at least one Jewish grandparent or who have first degree relatives in Israel. Despite fierce debates on the question, Israel has been letting in around 1300 Falash Mura per year since 1994 (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 6)<sup>38</sup>.

#### **4. Contemporary demography and geography**

I present a few background facts and figures on Ethiopian demography and geography in Israel to place the ethnography in context.

##### ***Demographic data***

1. According to the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption (1996), the total number of Ethiopian Jews in Israel in 1995 was 57,000, of which approximately 10,500 were born in Israel (see figure 2).
2. The Ethiopian birth-rate is about thirty per thousand, about 50% higher than that found among the general Israeli population (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 7).
3. Well over half the Ethiopian populations is aged under eighteen (Benita & Noam 1995: 85) (see Figure 2).
4. According to Ministry of Absorption 1997 figures, 30 % of Ethiopian households are single person, 20% are one-parent family, 20% have up to three children, and 20% four of more children (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 7).

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Arab countries. However, media leaks were unavoidable, especially since the Jewish Agency used the operation to stage a large scale international fund-raising operation to pay for it (Parfitt 1985: 103).

<sup>38</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the Falash Mura question and Falash Mura integration into Israel, see Seeman 1997.

## **Geography**

When immigrants from Ethiopia first arrived in Israel, they were housed, alongside Russian new immigrants, in temporary accommodation. This accommodation included: '*karavanim*', large expanses on the edge of towns or in rural areas in which hundreds of mobile homes were erected; absorption centres, usually large empty apartment blocks; and during the Operation Solomon influx, hotels. In these centres, Ethiopian immigrants were under the care of the Ministry of Absorption, which provided them with basic furniture and essentials, an initial lump sum basics, a monthly stipend, Hebrew classes (*ulpanim*), and training courses (see Hertzog 1995).

After a period ranging from a few months to several years, Ethiopian immigrants acquired permanent housing. Immigrants moved to council housing in towns throughout the country - individuals preferred areas in which they already had a number of close relatives living; Ministry of Absorption officials sought to limit a "ghettoisation" effect. In May 1993, The Ministry of Absorption initiated a special mortgage programme for Ethiopian immigrants to help them purchase their own homes in fifty-two authorised locations which did not already have a large concentration of Ethiopian residents. It consisted of a grant equivalent to ninety per cent of the price of the apartment (up to a maximum of \$120,000). By February 1997, only two hundred of the families who arrived in Operation Solomon remained in temporary houses. Israeli towns with over one thousand Ethiopians are spread all over the country: Haifa, Hadera, Netanya, Ashqelon, Rehovot, Ashdod, Ramle, Beer Sheva, Kiryat Malachi, Yavne, Afula, Kiryat Gat and Kiryat Yam (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 13). Within these towns, most Ethiopians have settled in specific neighbourhoods which were already home to Ethiopian families in order to be as close as possible to other Ethiopians, particularly relatives<sup>39</sup> (Holt 1995, Rosen 1995).

## **D. Ethiopian Jews in the Literature**

When I first went to Israel, in December 1993, I was confronted with a joke popular among both educated Ethiopians and Israelis: "There are more anthropologists studying Ethiopian Jews than there are Ethiopian Jews!" However, despite several excellent scholarly histories

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<sup>39</sup> The development of "ethnic" neighbourhoods is common in Israel (see for example Lewis 1995 on a Yemeni ethnic neighbourhood). As in the case of the Ethiopians, ethnic residential proximity are the result of both government policy, housing shortages, and the immigrants' own choices (see Holt 1995, Gonen 1985, Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991).



of the Beta Israel, no thorough ethnography of the group had yet been completed. As Steven Kaplan, a leading scholar on Ethiopian Jewry has remarked: “Of all the gaps that exist in Beta Israel studies, none appears as painful as the absence of a single first-rate ethnography of the group” (1995: 20).

## **1. Ethnographies of Beta Israel in Ethiopia**

While the literature grows on the life of the Beta Israel after their migration to Israel, it is a great misfortune that no thorough ethnography was ever written about them in Ethiopia<sup>40</sup>. Accounts from travellers, Protestant Missionaries (e.g. Flad 1889, Stern 1868), and Jewish Emissaries (Halevy 1869, Faitlovitch 1905) provide some details about daily ritual life (see Kaplan & Ben-Dor for a comprehensive bibliography). Leslau (1951, 1957) wrote about Beta Israel religious beliefs and practices. In the 1970s, three young women conducted fieldwork among the Beta Israel (Krempel 1972, Schoenberger 1975, Kahana 1977). Schoenberger provides a succinct account of daily life in a Falasha village, although much of her data comes from one educated informant with whom she spoke in Hebrew, and she therefore presents a somewhat formal perspective on the Beta Israel, missing out the intricacies and contradictions of daily life. In the 1980s, Kay Shelemay (1986) conducted a study on Beta Israel religion and music. Hagar Salamon’s thesis has reconstructed Beta Israel life in Ethiopia from interviews and secondary accounts (1994).

There is a similar lack of quality ethnography about Amhara society. Levine’s *Wax and Gold* (1965), a general account of Amhara society and culture, remains the seminal work, even though the author never conducted a prolonged period of fieldwork in a rural area. Hoben provides a detailed description and analysis of land tenure systems (Hoben 1973). Messing (1957) details certain aspects of daily life. Gamst (1969) wrote an ethnography on the Qemant, a Hebrao-pagan group, which has converted to Christianity this century. More recently, two ethnographies, conducted by fluent Amharic speakers, consider various aspects of Amhara society: Helen Pankhurst focuses on women’s daily life in a village in Shoa (1992), while Alula Pankhurst describes a displaced Amhara-speaking population (1992).

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<sup>40</sup> Commenting on the few existent ethnographies, Abbink (1984: 402) notes: “one cannot suppress a certain feeling of disappointment with the analytical level”.

## **2. The Beta Israel in Israel: The Falasha Phenomenon<sup>41</sup>**

A huge volume of articles and books have been written on the Ethiopian Jews after their migration to Israel<sup>42</sup>: Several journals have dedicated whole issues to the subject (e.g. *Pe'anmim* 22, 33, 58; *Les Temps Modernes*, n. 474, 1986; *Social Science Research* Vol.10, n.2, 1995), a society of researchers on Ethiopian Jewry has held three international conferences (Kaplan et al. 1995; Parfitt, forthcoming), and a bibliography is currently being updated (Kaplan & Ben Dor, 1988; Kaplan & Salamon, forthcoming; see also Weil 1989).

A growing number of books about Ethiopian Jews in Israel are aimed at the general reader (Kaplan & Weistheimer 1992, Wagaw 1993, Friedmann 1994, Waldman 1985). Academic books on the process of integration include Ashkenazi & Weingrod (1987), Soroff (1996), and Schindler & Ribner (1997). Several anthropological theses have been completed. Jan Abbink wrote about life in the absorption centre in the early 1980s, when there were only a few thousand Beta Israel in the country. Marilyn Herman (1993) analysed concepts of 'identity and honour' by studying the lyrics of a music group. Gadi Ben Ezer (1995) studied the narratives of migration of Ethiopian Jews who came to Israel via the Sudan. Malka Shabtay (1996) analysed questions of identity with soldiers in the Israeli army. Don Seeman (1997) focused on the relations between Ethiopian Jews, the Falash Mura and the Israeli state. Jennifer Phillips studied fertility changes (forthcoming). Lisa Anteby (1996)'s thesis is the first comprehensive ethnography of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants. She focused on the transition of a semi-literate population into a literate society and has described in detail many aspects of daily life.

Many articles concentrate on specific aspects of Beta Israel absorption: religion (Ben-Dor 1986, Trevisan-Semi 1985 Alvarez-Peryre & Ben Dor forthcoming), housing (Rosen 1995, Benita and Goam 1995), education (Holt 1995), women (Doleve-Gandelman 1990, Leitman 1995, Leitman forthcoming), the army (Shabtay 1995, Shabtay forthcoming), medical practices (Nudelman 1995, Reiff forthcoming), work (Rosen 1995). Following Kaplan & Rosen's (1993) seminal article "Between preservation of culture and invention of tradition", a number of articles have focused on cultural aspects of Ethiopian Jewish life in Israel: for example, new forms of communication (Anteby 1994), rituals of birth and death in Israel (Anteby 1995), women's changing traditions (Doleve-Gandelman 1990), and representations of leadership (Weil 1995). Rosen (e.g. 1987, 1989, 1995) has written extensively and

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<sup>41</sup> I borrow this term from Parfitt (1995).

<sup>42</sup> Having failed to learn Hebrew, I have been unable to access the literature in Hebrew on the Beta Israel.

perceptively on many aspects of Beta Israel culture, with a special focus on helping Israeli absorption workers deal with cultural misunderstandings.

Altogether this literature gives a varied picture of Ethiopian Jewish life in Israel. However, other than a few exceptions, it is disappointing. Most researchers have undertaken short-term studies, using interviews rather than more in-depth participant observation. These interviews are conducted in Hebrew, for which interpreters are required for the older age group, and is the second language for the younger age group. As a consequence, many of the resulting accounts relate formal descriptions of belief and practice, rather than lived experience; they often give findings which are little more than truisms when not backed with sound ethnography. Note for example the conclusion to a recent article on the changing experience of Ethiopian women:

“In conclusion, throughout the previous discussion, it has become apparent that there is an emerging pattern of generational differences. The younger and middle generation are becoming more self-sufficient, they do not defer to male authority, expect more sharing of roles, and demand participation in decision making processes. In short, Ethiopian/Israeli women’s social role patterns are in the process of metamorphosis” (Leitman 1995: 175-6).

In a later article (Leitman forthcoming), the same author concludes that younger Ethiopian Jewish women are adapting faster than the older generation. Her conclusion is predictable in its general formulation. However, as in her earlier article, she does not address the many contradictions which young women face in their process of adaptation<sup>43</sup>. Characteristic of this literature as whole, the resulting picture is incomplete.

The literature on religion, the most widely researched and written about aspect of Beta Israel life, illustrates the problems in this literature. Kaplan, a foremost scholar of Ethiopian Jewry, concludes that current approaches, which seek to demonstrate the similarities and alleged historical links between the Beta Israel beliefs and rituals and those of other Jewish groups, have reached a “methodological dead-end”. Data is largely collected from texts and religious leaders, and almost totally ignore the daily practice of religion and its social context (Kaplan 1995: 19-20). Moreover, the majority of the literature is partisan - trying to find ways of affirming the Judaism of the group<sup>44</sup> (Kaplan 1995, Shelemay 1991: 37). Note for example Waldman (1985: 25) who has published widely on the Beta Israel:

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<sup>43</sup> For an excellent discussion of these contradictions in the case of Yemeni immigrant women in Israel, see Gilad (1989).

<sup>44</sup> Kaplan notes that by 1992, there were already four books devoted to the subject of Ethiopian Judaism, but that all of them say more about the authors’ religious Zionism than they do about Ethiopian Jews (Kaplan 1995).

“The religious customs of the [Beta Israel] community distinguish them from the other tribes in Ethiopia.... Their special customs, in many ways different from those practised elsewhere in the Jewish world are the result of the community’s total isolation from the rest of world Jewry and centres of learning and the fact that they have had to survive in a hostile and primitive environment... The years of isolation and hardship led to a blurring of the commandments, even though they are explicit in the Tora. Thus *mitzvot* such as *tzitzit*, *tefillin*,... and others have disappeared.... similarly, a number of customs, foreign to the spirit of Judaism, such as tattooing and nazirite seclusion, have penetrated under the influence of time and the Gentile environment.”

### **3. Living Well and “Becoming deaf” in the Homeland**

While most of the existent literature is formal in nature and gives a somewhat external perspective, I aim to provide an intimate picture of Ethiopian Jewish life in Israel from the Beta Israel’s own perspective. My thesis is the first ethnography of the Beta Israel’s life in Israel based on extensive field-work conducted in Amharic amongst an Ethiopian community living in permanent housing. Anteby (1996) has written a detailed ethnography which eloquently describes Beta Israel’s daily life, practices and beliefs, from their arrival with Operation Solomon in 1991 to settling in permanent housing in 1994. While, given word constraints, my thesis lacks the breadth of Anteby’s ethnography, and her time-depth achieved by five years of fieldwork, my thesis compliments hers in a number of ways. For one, her thesis is written in French and is therefore inaccessible to many Anglo-Saxon readers. Second, her period of intensive fieldwork, when she lived with her informants, took place while the latter were still living in mobile homes in a rural absorption centre, rather than in permanent housing in town. Third, her theoretical focus is the transition from a non-literate society to a literate one, and whilst her ethnography is wide-reaching, she does not deal explicitly with the central themes of my work: Beta Israel’s sense of belonging to Israel, their experience of loss of control, and their strategies of resistance.

When I first began fieldwork, full of preconceptions about the “trauma” of migration and cultural chaos experienced by Ethiopian Jewish immigrants, I was struck by how cheerful Ethiopians were, and “normal” their life had become, just a few years after their upheaval from rural Ethiopia to urban Israel. I did not see an aggrieved population, down-trodden and self-effacing, struggling with the trappings of modern life. As they often said themselves “this is a good country” and “we are well in this country”. After a few months however, I realised that under the positive surface, the Beta Israel were troubled. Older Ethiopians lamented: “In this country, we are ‘becoming deaf’ (*dinkoro*, lit. deaf, fig.: ignorant,

stupid)”. The thesis elucidates the meanings of these two apparently contradictory self-ascriptions; ‘being well’ and ‘being deaf’.

Prior to migration, the Beta Israel were a minority group, despised by dominant Amhara society, who sought to assimilate them into their society through religious conversion. But unlike other non-Amhara groups, such as the Qemant (Gamst 1969), the Beta Israel resisted assimilation. Moreover, they were able to ideologically subvert these negative ascriptions by adhering to a rhetoric of communal purity which cast the Amhara as “polluters”, by claiming to be true Israelites, and by upholding a potent image of the future: a return to their Jewish homeland. Their dream finally came true and they reached Jerusalem. But yet again, they have acquired low status because of their “primitive” background, their skin-colour, and their religious practice. The thesis analyses the strategies they employ to overcome their marginality. As in Ethiopia, they resist dominant society’s efforts to “assimilate” them and they ideologically subvert negative ascriptions: they have developed strong group boundaries, enforced by tight intra-ethnic bonds, kin ties and a rhetoric of purity, and the older generation have made little effort to learn Hebrew or to adopt normative Jewish practices. Moreover, as in Ethiopia, they have created a potent image of the future: in what I have called ‘the homeland postponed’, all Jews will be colour-blind and will live in peace and purity.

## ***Thesis Structure***

The following three chapters analyse Ethiopian Jewish immigrants’ sense of well-being in Israel. Chapter Two depicts their successful recreation of communal life, as neighbours, kin and an ethnic group. Chapter Three examines Beta Israel ethnic pride as Ethiopians and as Jews. Chapter Four describes their appreciation of their new country, both as a “developed” country and as their “homeland”, and their efforts at integration into Israeli society. It also discusses young peoples’ successful adaptation to Israel.

Chapters Five and Six turn to Ethiopian Jewish immigrants’ perceptions of the difficulties they face in Israel. Chapter Five elucidates the meaning of the expression “becoming deaf”; the phrase denotes the older generation’s frustration at their inability to understand and speak Hebrew, their ignorance about the ways of their new country, and their feeling of being excluded by dominant society. For young people, the sense of exclusion is somewhat different from that of their parents, and the chapter discusses in particular their perceptions of racism. Chapter Six argues that, ultimately, “becoming deaf” is a metaphor for the loss of

control Beta Israel adults experience over most aspects of their lives - livelihood, work, health, children, religion and the social order.

Chapter Seven suggests that Ethiopian Jewish immigrants develop strategies to regain control over their lives: they engage in forms of resistance against dominant society's hegemony and create ideal images of the past and future. The final chapter summarises the argument of the thesis and discusses my conclusions in the light of the anthropology of immigration.

### ***Additional Notes***

1. Much of the ethnography presented in *Living Well and "Becoming Deaf"* might appear contradictory as I oscillate on the one hand between the examination of positive images of life in Israel and negative ones, and on the other hand between a desire to integrate and the wish to maintain ethnic separateness. While all human societies have contradictory experiences of the present, the rapid changes that immigrants live through makes such contradictions all the more acute. While it was tempting at first to iron out these contradictions for the sake of clarity of exposition, I decided instead to make them the focus of the text in order to be as faithful as possible to the Beta Israel's own perceptions and experiences.
2. Indeed, I must stress at the outset that the thesis concerns Beta Israel perceptions of immigrant life and not my own evaluations. For example, when I discuss well-being, or "becoming deaf" in Israel, I am neither suggesting that Ethiopian *are* well in Israel or that they *are* losing control - merely that this is their understanding of their experience. Similarly, I do not discuss the extent and success of their integration versus their maintenance of ethnicity, but their own evaluations of these matters. Also, when I refer to external factors such as Israeli perceptions of the Beta Israel, it is the Beta Israel's own views on Israeli perceptions, and not mine. However, the discussion of the strategies that Ethiopians develop to overcome their difficulties in Chapter Seven is based on my interpretation of their attitudes.
3. I have written the text in the "ethnographic present" in order to give it more immediacy. Clearly the situation of new immigrants changes rapidly and the reader must bear in mind that the ethnography refers to the period of fieldwork only: 1995 and 1996.
4. Finally, it is important to guard against reifying the experience of immigration, and attributing to it all socio-cultural change and conflicts: we must be wary of opposing an

unchanging and unproblematic past to a difficult present<sup>45</sup>. While Ethiopian immigrants are shedding many of their former customs, this process had already begun in Ethiopia as a consequence of modernisation, urbanisation and education. Conflicts about the nature of this process, and consequent contradictions, were similarly endemic; emigration has merely exacerbated them.

5. **Vocabulary:**

In the text, I refer to non-Ethiopians as “Israelis”, *farenge* (foreigner, Whites), and Whites - the latter two terms follow Ethiopian immigrants’ terms of reference.

I use the terms “Beta Israel”, “Ethiopian Jews”, “Ethiopian Jewish immigrants”, “Ethiopian immigrants” and “Ethiopians” interchangeably throughout the thesis. The term “Ethiopian” is not strictly correct since the Beta Israel are now “Israelis of Ethiopian descent”. However, this appellation appeared to me cumbersome and they themselves use the term “Ethiopians” frequently, particularly when they contrast themselves to other Israelis. They refer to themselves above all as “*Israel*” or in the plural “*Israelotch*”, but I have not used this term to avoid confusion with the country.

Unless otherwise mentioned, the foreign words are translations into Amharic of key terms. I have transliterated these terms phonetically.

6. **Names of informants:** I have given fictive names to all the persons that appear in the text.
7. **Currency:** ‘NIS’ refers to Israeli shekels. At the time of fieldwork, five shekels were approximately equivalent to one pound sterling.

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<sup>45</sup> Gilad’s (1989: 105) otherwise excellent ethnography of Yemeni Jewish immigrants in Israel falls into this trap. For example, she suggests that Yemeni women’s prior to migration was unproblematic - she quotes Fernea (1985: 301), “Middle Eastern women have never had any doubts about their own identities...” - before proceeding to explain immigrant women’s difficulties in identity formation. Clearly, Middle Eastern women have always had their share of identity problems (see for example Abu-Lughod 1986).

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# Two: Being Together

## A. Introduction

“May He enable us to eat and may He not separate us from one another”.

This verse, from an Ethiopian Jewish blessing<sup>46</sup>, illustrates that “being together” is valued as importantly as eating. Ethiopian Jewish immigrants’ ability to “be together” in Israel as neighbours, kin, and Ethiopians amongst the multitude of *farenge* (White people), is the foundation upon which their well-being rests. This chapter explores in turn each of these idioms of togetherness. First, I describe the setting of Ethiopian social relations - daily life on the street and inside the home.

### 1. *An Ethiopian neighbourhood*

I lived in Afula Tse’era, a newly-built suburb of the town of Afula, in Northern Israel, which was home to new Russian immigrants, veteran Israelis and to the highest concentration of Ethiopian immigrants in the country. Of the five hundred households in the immediate vicinity of my adopted home, ninety-six were Ethiopian. A twenty minute walk led to the neighbourhood of Givat Hamore with several hundred more Ethiopian households, and a ten minute walk in the opposite direction led to Afula Tse’era B, home to another Ethiopian neighbourhood<sup>47</sup>. The main street of my neighbourhood, Rehov Ha’Erez, was lined to one side by small two-storey apartment buildings, behind which stretched the older neighbourhood of Afula Elite, with its detached villas and high-rised apartment blocks. Newly built semi-detached red-roofed bungalows lined the other side of the main street and a few side streets. The neighbourhood was bordered by cultivated fields which stretched out to the hills of Nazareth.

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<sup>46</sup> The verse is part of a blessing made by a priest as he cut the holy bread on the occasion of a child’s christening.

<sup>47</sup> The town as a whole (population of 24,000 approx.) had about a 10% Ethiopian population (Benita et al. 1994).



Ethiopians who settled in other Israeli towns do not have such a high concentration of Ethiopian neighbours, though I rarely visited a household which did not have at least a handful of close Ethiopian neighbours within walking distance. In most cases, neighbourhoods have small clusters of Ethiopian families in adjacent apartment blocks.

## **2. Inside and Outside**

“Togetherness” occurs both ‘inside’ (*bewusi*) and ‘outside’ (*bewuch*) the home, and the border between the two is firmly controlled. In the quiet neighbourhood in which I lived, where I never heard of a burglary taking place, Ethiopian houses are locked carefully at all times, irrespective of the number of people inside the house and the volume of too-ing and fro-ing in and out, and windows and blinds are shut most of the time. Houses are closed, people say, for fear of harmful intruders such as ‘Arabs’ and thieves. In fact any person, until proven to the contrary, is potentially harmful.

When a knock at the door is heard, even though non-Ethiopians rarely knock at the door (Israelis ring the door bell), the master of the house or, if absent or busy, someone else, growls in Hebrew: “Who is it?” or “What?”. Once a voice has been recognised, the door is unlocked and the visitor warmly invited in.

When the door is wide-open, it is still treated as ‘closed’, and even a household member first knocks on the open door before making an entry into the house. Nobody, not even a close relative, ever enters a house without first being invited to do so. The stress on the invitation to enter the house accentuates the gesture of opening the door and receiving a guest inside the house.

One day, Aba Negusse began to construct a fence around his front garden. I was perplexed, because he seemed to enjoy his front wall being used as a place to sit and chat, transforming his garden into a social meeting place for elders. The ostensible reason he gave was to prevent “the children coming and spoiling things”. But, since there was nothing to be spoiled in the garden, I pressed further, and pointed out that the fence will prevent neighbours from coming to chat by sitting on the wall. “Well, now they will come in and sit on chairs [in the garden]”. In other words, he wanted his garden to become an extension of his house, where neighbours would be “inside” his garden, rather than merely sitting at the frontier of his house.

Thus, neighbours sitting on the wall and in Aba Negusse’ ‘open’ garden, were transgressing the border between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the house and so the garden had to be fenced ‘in’.

### **‘Outside’: Street Life**

In the winter sunshine or after the heat of the day in the summer, the streets come alive as Ethiopians come out to *tetchawot*. *Tetchawot* is a rich Amharic words which has no

precise translation in English. It means 'to chat', 'to play', 'to converse', or 'to chat playfully'.

Three men stroll down the street, chatting and laughing together. The younger one wears a Panama hat, the others, woolly hats. The older of the three is wrapped in his thick white cotton shawl (*gabi*), and leans on a walking stick he brought with him from his former village. As each Ethiopian home is passed, they interrupt their chatter to call out greetings. Their greetings are returned, sometimes from third floor apartments, and they are invariably invited in, especially by those households who are hosting a coffee session. After brief conversations, promising to return later, they move on. They greet a group of women sitting together in a front garden, on old sofas and on the low garden wall. They are draped in their white Ethiopian shawls and gossip while they embroider their pieces of clothes or dehusk Ethiopian spices. Young mothers constantly watch of their toddlers, and run after them screaming when the children venture out of their reach.

The men eventually settle on the benches under the shade of the trees in the square by the supermarket. They continue there to *tetchawot* amongst themselves and are soon joined by other men. Near them, little Ethiopian children, with few non-Ethiopian play-mates fill the swings and climbing frames. Older children gather in small groups and chat or play ball in the near empty car parks by the side of the road.

On the wide steps leading up to the supermarket, the trendy teenagers, with their Rasta hair-dos and Bob Marley T-shirts, make merry together. They all return the greetings of a group of women, white shawls wrapped around their colourful clothes, who make their way slowly towards the house of a neighbour who has recently given birth, carrying offerings of milk, *muk* (a hot broth which helps convalesce), and *injera* (Ethiopian pancakes) with meat stew.

White neighbours also walk to and fro. But they remain outside the warm communality; in some respects, they are invisible.

I remember once walking down the street with a couple of Ethiopian women. We stopped to greet some Ethiopian women on a bench, and only after a while did I notice two Russian immigrants sitting there: my companions and I had failed to even register their presence, let alone greet them.

### **'Inside' the home**

Ethiopian houses are well-kept and lavishly decorated. The house (*betu*) is usually a two or three bed-room flat or a small semi-detached house<sup>48</sup>. The striking aspect of Ethiopian decoration is its uniformity - few houses deviate from the standard decor. The basic furniture of the living room is a sofa, a matching armchair, additional chairs, a display cabinet, a TV and a radio. Depending on the size of the room and wealth of the family, the living room also comprises additional sofas or armchairs, a spare bed, and a dining table with six matching chairs, and a video. The sofa and armchair is covered in a flowery patterned cotton cloth. The display cabinet exhibits china, unopened sets of glasses and coffee cups, new pans, and a range of brightly coloured decorative objects such as china figurines and plastic

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<sup>48</sup> Several thousand Ethiopians have still not acquired permanent housing, and live in absorption centres and mobile home sites. For a description of accommodation and daily life there, see Anteby 1996.

flower arrangements, as well as unopened bottles of alcohol, preferably with colourful labels. Many cabinets also display a number of religious objects: Hanukkah and Sabbath candles and religious books. Plastic flowers and bright decorations adorn the display cabinet and hang from the ceiling and the walls. Walls are densely covered. One large area boasts a fake tapestry of a medieval scene (there are two or three variations in the same style) and the rest of the walls are covered with brightly coloured framed pictures, family photos, and traditional Ethiopian basket work, as well as an elaborately decorated wall clock. The overall effect is colourful and ornate with the photos and handicrafts on display giving it an Ethiopian flavour (see also Anteby 1996: 379).

In contrast, the kitchen, bathroom and adult bedroom are bare, with no or little decoration. The kitchen has the basic amenities: a cooker, large fridge, coffee grinder and pots and pans. The master bedroom in most homes has a set of furniture, a double bed with matching dressing table, and a clothes cupboard. Younger Ethiopians, on the other hand, decorate their bedrooms with posters of their favourite stars (e.g. Black Americans such as Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson, as well as Ethiopian stars), advertisements for clothes and cars, school photos, photos of themselves (especially in the army), and a number of Ethiopian decorations (e.g. handicrafts, a flag, cloth, and hand-written words).

### ***Receiving a guest***

Once a person has crossed the threshold of the door, she becomes a guest. Both she and her hosts greet each other in the prescribed manner. The nature of the initial greetings depend on the relative seniority of the two parties, as well as the length of time which has elapsed since their last greeting. Seniority depends on both gender and age, with the oldest male ranking highest<sup>49</sup>. Persons senior to an arriving guest generally remain seated, and the guest goes to each in turn, bending right down, making as if to kiss the feet of her senior. The seated person catches her head before it reaches too low and kisses each cheek at least twice. Junior persons rise at the entrance of the guest and the guest kisses their cheeks. When a pair are equal in status, they play-fight as each one offers their cheek to the other to kiss, and each tries to bend lower than the other. The loser, that is the one who has accepted the superior role, tends to make the other one repeat the whole process, forcing him to take the superior position. Both parties laugh, as do the seated persons, especially, when as each tries to bend lower, the two end up bent-double, with their bums sticking out. Warm effusive clicking sounds and verbal greetings, often in a sing-song, accompany the physical gestures: “How

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<sup>49</sup> The system is relatively flexible when gender and age conflict. For example, a forty-year old woman is senior to a twenty-year old man, but the same woman may rank as “equal” to a thirty-year old man.

are you (you, singular)?" (repeated by each at least three times) "How are you (you, plural)?" "How is your health?" "How are your children / husband / parents?", "Oh you, where were you lost to? It has been so long!", "Welcome! Welcome! (Lit: Thank God you arrived well)", "Thank you for your welcome! (Lit: Thank God you remained here / waited well)", "Sit down! Sit down!". The longer the time-lapse since the previous greeting the more elaborate the greetings.

Eventually, the guests sit down. Another ritual now begins over the offering and accepting of food and drink. The guests refuse all offers of food and drink at least twice before reluctantly accepting<sup>50</sup>. Once the host has succeeded in placing food in front of the guests, the former has to encourage the guest to eat, repeatedly, and often resorts to placing food directly in the guests' mouths.

Conversation is often mundane to start with. If the TV is not already on, it is switched on at the arrival of the guests, and remains the focus of attention at first. The atmosphere slowly warms up and conversation becomes more intimate. In depth inquiries are made about the guests' and hosts' kin and neighbours; daily news, especially pertaining to Ethiopians, is discussed, and anecdotes of the past and present are shared and laughed over.

Two former neighbours, meeting in Israel for the first time, amused the company with stories of old times. Once, at the end of their sojourn in the menstrual hut, they went to wash in the river. One was carrying a child on her back, but the other was young and beautiful. An Italian soldier saw them and tried to court the youngest woman, and she clung onto her friend's dress. Luckily, the Italian did not get her or she would have had an Italian baby.

## **B. "Being together" as neighbours**

The designation 'neighbour' (*gworabet*) has a wider meaning in Amharic than it does in English. It is a social category in itself, implying a specific set of obligations between people who live within walking distance of one another. Neighbourly obligations include exchanging greetings and conviviality (no mean task given the density of neighbours in some neighbourhoods), inviting neighbours to celebrations and gatherings, attending neighbours' gatherings and celebrations, visiting neighbours who are in difficulty or joy (e.g. illness, bereavement, child birth), and exchanging labour and money.

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<sup>50</sup> Ethiopians from the Gondar region, Amharas, are well known for accepting offers only on the third offer. Thus in Addis Abeba, when I declined food, and my hosts knew of my acquaintance with Amharas, I was asked "is that a real 'no' or an 'Amhara no'?"

## I. Ethiopian Neighbours

### 1. Circles of Neighbours

Neighbours form relations into ever-widening circles. The next-door neighbour pair forms the core of social relations between neighbours. The next-door neighbour is the everyday coffee partner, and the first call for any assistance required, such as loan of money, child care, and cooking and cleaning in the case of illness or childbirth. Next-door neighbours spend a lot of time together: partaking in coffee ceremonies once or twice a day, shopping, visiting other neighbours, chatting outside in the garden, and attending celebrations and funerals together. Next-door neighbours are often relatives, but when they are not, they acquire kin status, and are referred to in kin terms.

The next circle of neighbours comprises the households in the immediate vicinity. The vicinity is usually bounded by a road, a shop or a stretch of *farenge* (White people) houses. Such a circle of neighbours is sometimes referred to as a 'hamlet' (*mander*). For example, my adoptive mother used to inform me that her husband had gone over to Adissu's *mander* - which I knew referred to the houses near Adissu's house the other side of the supermarket. My household's immediate neighbours comprised some eight households, the next door neighbour to our left, three houses to our right, and the four flats directly opposite. The other houses were inhabited by non-Ethiopians. These immediate neighbours were the people we sat around with outside, the core invitees for a small gathering and a pool of potential coffee partners. This neighbourhood group tended, as far as possible, to go together to funerals and celebrations held in other parts of the neighbourhood. Women arranged to go to the market in twos' and threes' and to purchase together sacs of *teff* flour (imported from Ethiopia) from itinerant traders; men often formed a small party to buy a goat or cow together and shared out the meat (called in this instance *freeda*).

The outer circle of neighbours includes the whole neighbourhood. My neighbourhood comprised ninety-six houses. Whenever a large celebration was held, a cow was killed and all these ninety-six households were systematically invited, together with the hosts' close kin from other towns and selected neighbours from other suburbs of the town. This group of neighbours offer each other mutual assistance, but more haphazardly than the core group of neighbours. Strong social relations within this wider circle are formed on the basis of friendship and kinship, with particularly strong bonds between members of a rotating credit

society. The widest circle comprises all Ethiopians living in a given town. Strong bonds within this circle occur on a voluntary individual basis, usually due to kinship or prior neighbourhood ties. The only morally binding commitment within this circle is to attend funerals.

## **2. *Becoming a neighbour***

Residential proximity is the main criterion for becoming a neighbour. All Ethiopians who lived in the neighbourhood of Afula Tse'era, an areas with clear physical boundaries (the older neighbourhood of Afula Elite on one side, and fields to the other), were automatically part of the community of neighbours, and were bound by its social and moral obligations.

When households are situated on the boundary of two distinct neighbourhoods, each with its own group of Ethiopian neighbours, they choose which neighbourhood to be most closely associated with, usually on the basis of kin ties, and maintain minimal relations with the other. For example, there are four Ethiopian households in the *farenge* neighbourhood which separates Afula Tse'era and Afula Tse'era B. Two of these households are part of the Afula Tse'era community of neighbours; both households are related - the women are first cousins - and one of them has her father in Afula Tse'era and the other her brother. They attend all Afula Tse'era celebrations and mourning rituals, and also maintain relations, albeit less pronounced, with the other neighbourhood of Afula Tse'era B. The other two households in the no-man's land joined the community of Afula Tse'era B (one of them had two children living there), and came to Afula Tse'era only for special occasions.

The community of neighbours is also delimited by less tangible boundary markers, such as years of residence in Israel or former ethnic origin (i.e. Tigre or Gondar region). For example, Afula Tse'era, home to new Ethiopian immigrants, is adjacent to Afula Elite, an older neighbourhood home to many Ethiopian immigrants from an earlier wave of immigration (known in Israel as "veterans"). Most Ethiopian households in Afula Elite are minutes away from Afula Tse'era, separated on the main road only by a stretch of grass. Yet Ethiopians from Afula Elite and Afula Tse'era maintain their own separate communal relations, and only join each other regularly for large celebrations and mourning gatherings.

The Ethiopian cleaner of the centre in which Hebrew classes were held had a baby. She lived in Afula Elite. The Israeli teacher, not the Ethiopian women, suggested visiting her after class with a gift. The Afula Tse'era women agreed, but it took a while to locate the apartment for none of them had ever been to her building, three minutes away from theirs.

Another Ethiopian neighbourhood I knew well, a twenty minute walk from Afula Tse'era, is home to immigrants from both the Gondar region and the Tigre region. Though there was no spatial separation between the two groups, who often share the same apartment blocks, two clearly demarcated community of neighbours were formed.

Once an Ethiopian family moves into an area, it automatically becomes 'neighbour' to other Ethiopians in the neighbourhood (within the visible or invisible boundary markers noted above).

A young family moved into our street. During the first few days, the wife was rather despondent and spoke with regret of her last home because she had such good neighbours there. But she felt confident that she would soon get to know her new neighbours, who were all coming to visit her in small groups, bringing offerings of drinks and *injera*. Within a few weeks, she was going to the shops with her downstairs neighbour, had gained coffee partners, and attended celebrations with her closest neighbours.

Avi became head of his household at twenty-two after his widowed mother died. He had been one of the "trendy" lads and had rarely attended neighbourhood celebrations since he was away at the army in Eilat (eight hours away) and in any case he found such gatherings "primitive". At his mother's death, he left the army and lived full-time at home and became a "neighbour" overnight. He attended all neighbourhood celebrations, often taking on a prominent role such as collecting money offerings. At the anniversary of his mother's death, he himself organised a large funerary gathering at his house, hosting the whole neighbourhood, feeding them six goats. Avi did not stop criticising Ethiopian neighbourhood life, but he nonetheless accepted his new role and appeared to enjoy it more than he admitted.

### 3. *White Neighbours*

Aveva moved in to a new neighbourhood and was shy to visit her new Ethiopian neighbours, even though the latter had all visited her, bearing gifts, to welcome her in her new dwelling. Soon they began to reprimand her: "Why do you not visit Ethiopian houses? Are you a *farenge*?"

Non-Ethiopians, referred to as *farenge* (white, foreigner) or *russit* (Russian, Hebrew) when specifically referring to Russian immigrants, are not considered 'neighbours'. In terms of the social network described above, they are invisible. Indeed, when a family has the misfortune to have no Ethiopian households within a five minutes walk, they complain that they have "no neighbours". Ethiopians and White neighbours rarely exchange greetings, and greetings are the foundation of neighbourly relations. In fact, the lack of basic relations with non-Ethiopian neighbours reinforces the closeness between Ethiopians.

An Ethiopian is shopping in town. A sea of foreign (*farenge*) faces pass him by, until suddenly an Ethiopian neighbour appears in the crowd, and the two greet each other warmly, a moment all the more intimate given the multitude of 'others' all around.

If non-Ethiopian households are invisible in terms of the moral and social world of neighbourhood relations, their presence is felt, not least because of the animosity which sometimes erupts. White neighbours frequently complain about the smell of Ethiopian cooking and coffee and about the levels of noise when a household is receiving guests.

Mulualem's first child's *crisenna* celebration to mark the eightieth day after the birth of his baby-girl was a raging success. The tables outside his house at the end of his street (a cul-de-sac) were full with hundreds of relatives. Youths and adults were dancing to the disco sound-system, alternating popular Western hits and Amharic music. But at 11.30 p.m. the party was brought to an abrupt close by the arrival of the police. I was not surprised, given the Israeli neighbour's comments to me earlier in the day during the party preparations: "You work with Ethiopians, perhaps you can help us. We are getting fed up, every month there is something. That woman died across the road and for seven days, all night, until five a.m., there was noise. Then they had that wedding in the house next-door. For three days, until five am, noise. Now this today for the birth of a child. They are always having children, will this happen each time? We are going to call the police. The street is not just theirs, it is ours too. If they come to Israel, they must learn Israeli ways. Otherwise, they should stay in Ethiopia! They cannot be primitive here. They should hire a hall, like normal people. And the youth smoke hashish and things - I do not want that for my children... It is the government's fault: they should not have so many Ethiopians together in one area<sup>51</sup>."

While most Ethiopians' relations with their *farenge* neighbours are neutral and some are hostile, a minority of *farenge* neighbours are positively valued, at least enough to invite to celebrations at home<sup>52</sup>. As expected, younger couples, who speak Hebrew and are prepared to comply to Israeli norms of social behaviour, entertain better relations with their non-Ethiopian neighbours.

Lea, a bubbly young woman: "The *farenge* like me. I speak Hebrew, I am quiet at home and my garden and house is well-kept. I know how to speak to them, and I dress like them."

## II. Social relations among neighbours

### 1. Visiting Neighbours

A dense network of visiting creates and upholds neighbourly relations on a daily basis. A day rarely passes without each person making at least one visit to a neighbour, and conversely receiving at least one in turn, on top of daily coffee sessions with the next-door neighbour. When the person being visited is ill, grieving, or has given birth, a small offering of food or money is taken. The receiving party offers a drink and, depending on other

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<sup>51</sup> An article in *The Jerusalem Post* (Upper Afula, 15/7/1992) reported that dozens of angry residents of the new neighbourhood in Afula demonstrated against the influx of immigrants from Ethiopia



factors, coffee and food. Such visits are motivated by sociability and by a desire to offer assistance to a neighbour in difficulty.

Gifts and money are bestowed in a casual manner, but the exact nature and value of the gift as well as the precise amount of money given is registered by both parties, and an equivalent return is expected at a later date. Whenever I gave a standard NIS 20 (£4) to a woman who had given birth, she would say something like “but you mustn’t - how can I return it to you when you give birth? You will be in England!” In other words, giving to a neighbour with no expectation of return was anathema.

## **2. Celebrations and mourning**

The idiom of “being together” is most forcefully enacted when neighbours gather to celebrate, mourn and pray<sup>53</sup>. In my neighbourhood, there are approximately three large celebrations (two to six hundred persons) per month during the summer season, and one per month during the winter. Such celebrations mark life events such as weddings, Bar Mitzvah, *cristenna* (the purification ritual after the birth of a child). A week rarely passes without a small celebration (thirty to fifty persons) for a boy’s circumcision or for the send-off to the army of a son. In addition, groups of neighbours gathered to attend a funeral (four hundred to one thousand persons) or a smaller local mourning session (approx. 100 - 500 persons), at least once a month. All gatherings to mourn the deceased are called by the generic terms ‘*ilksaw*’, which is a noun derived from the verb ‘to cry’. These are held for funerals, at various set days after the funeral (such as the seventh, the thirtieth, and annually), and to mourn locally with a neighbour whose close relative was mourned in another town.

Celebrations are a prominent feature of daily life, given their frequency, their financial cost and the labour involved in hosting them. Celebrations and mourning rituals cement bonds between neighbours and kin. The surest way to display animosity towards a neighbour or relative is to fail to attend his celebration without a valid reason. The requirement to attend the funerals (or one of the subsequent mourning sessions, such as the seventh day after the funeral) of relative and neighbours is stronger still, and however vehement a dispute between neighbours or kin, this obligation is fulfilled

A well-known saying goes: better be seen with unwashed feet or bedding an in-law [a great social taboo], than miss a relative’s funeral.

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<sup>52</sup> For a discussion on Ethiopian perceptions of Israelis, see Ojanuga (1993).

<sup>53</sup> For discussion and descriptions of religious activities, please see Chapter Three.

At celebrations and *ilksaw*, neighbours display their commitment to one another in three ways: they celebrate or mourn with the host according to proper custom<sup>54</sup>, they help to organise the event by contributing both cash and labour, and they socialise and eat together.

### **Communal labour**

A man explains why the hosts invite their close neighbours round the day after a week-end celebration: “The relatives who live far away have gone home. We, the close neighbours, we helped, the men with the meat, and the women with the *injera*, so the host says: ‘come and eat and drink!’”.

Each large event requires a phenomenal amount of preparation: food, drink, seating and music (for celebrations) for up to a thousand persons. ‘Hamlet’ women, i.e. the closest neighbours, get together weeks in advance to prepare the spices for the stew and batter for the *injera* pancakes. The day before the event, each close neighbour comes to collect a small bucket of batter and returns in the early morning with between ten and twenty prepared *injera* pancakes. ‘Hamlet’ men set off to slaughter a cow (or a number of goats) and return several hours later with large plastic bags full of meat. Men from the whole neighbourhood come during the day, carrying their own carving knife, to help cut up the meat into small bite-sized portions and cook it in large pots on an outdoor fire. They enjoy chatting together and drinking plenty of beer in the process. Tables and chairs are set up in an empty space (e.g. parking space) near the receiving house. During the celebration, the men seat the guests, serve food, collect money donations, and in the early hours of the morning, they clear up.

### **Communal financing**

As well as providing labour, neighbours provide cash for celebrations and mourning events. Every guest gives a contribution which is marked into a notebook alongside his or her name. When the recipient himself goes to a party, he verifies in his notebook the amount that the present party giver gave him (although he tends to remember the sum in his head anyway), and he gives an equal amount of money, or a little bit more. The total sum obtained at these parties is usually considerably more than the expenses, and profits range from between NIS 1,000 (£200) to NIS 25, 000 (£5,000)<sup>55</sup>. This money is spent on household goods or put

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<sup>54</sup> Please see Chapter Three for a discussion of a number of Beta Israel rituals and customs.

<sup>55</sup> Here are a few examples of donations received (£1 = NIS 5, approx.). A wedding in a hall got a total of NIS 51,360 from 473 donations: NIS 6,000 were given by the bride’s parents, NIS 1,200 by the groom’s father and NIS 1,000 by his mother, NIS 500 by the bride’s grandmother, NIS 500 by her uncle, 10 guests gave between NIS 250 and NIS 300, 19 guests gave NIS 200, 36 guests NIS 150, 232 guests gave NIS 70 to NIS 100, 169 guest gave NIS 50, and two guests gave NIS 20. The profit, once all costs were taken into account, was marginal in this instance. A larger wedding yielded intakes of NIS 25,000 at home,

away in a bank. People are often quite cynical about this money, complaining that they will have to give it back in any case so it is not really theirs. The frequency of parties are also cause for complaint, and people are accused of holding large parties 'just to get money'. The sums given are indeed large, and a significant percentage of monthly income is spent on celebration donations. Repaying a former debt is often given as *the* reason for attending a party.

Alefash, whose husband is a member of one of the largest Beta Israel kin groups, complained that in just one week she and her husband spent NIS 1300 on party donations. Alefash and Moshe got married the previous year and they were now in the business of repaying their debts to over a thousand wedding guests. She explained that she had given a particularly large sum to her elder brother for his house warming (NIS 900) because the latter had given them NIS 700 for their wedding, and he probably would not have any more parties now since all his children were married, but that she and Moshe would have lots coming, God willing. In other words, she was consciously laying out money, in the form of a donation to her elder brother, for her unborn children's celebrations.

### ***Celebrating together: a local Bar Mitzvah***

Fantanesh and Abuhay held a Bar Mitzvah celebration for Moshe, their second son Moshe. At 8 p.m., on Thursday, all the food was cooked, the tables and chairs set out in long rows in the open car-park closed off on three sides with large green plastic sheets and the Israeli DJ and video-men were ready. Fantanesh, Abuhay, their children and one of Abuhay's elder brothers stood in silence in line at the entrance of the space. The elder brother guarded the home-made donation box. The video camera was switched on, the Israeli DJ began Israeli traditional melodies. Neighbours arrived in small groups. After placing their donations in envelopes distributed by young boys, on which they wrote their name (or got a literate person to do so), they greeted in turn all the standing hosts and placed their envelopes in the box. They wore bright new clothes or clean white Ethiopian dresses, wrapped in white shawls. They were invited to sit by members of the helping group of men and were served beer and soft drinks. Seated guests chatted quietly or remained in silence as they watched the newcomers arrive. Dozens of children ran around, sometimes begging their parents for soft drinks. By the time a few hundred seats were full, young men served plates of *injera* with meat stew. The only non-Ethiopians present were a couple of community workers, the DJ and video-men, and the anthropologist. Curious neighbours came to watch from time to time, or peered from their windows.

At 10 p.m. the candle ceremony, led by the Israeli DJ, was performed without much emotion and a little difficulty, given the novelty of the custom for Beta Israel. But as soon as it was over, the atmosphere livened up. The DJ played a traditional "mazel tof" song, and the Bar Mitzvah boy and his father were hoisted onto willing shoulders and paraded around the assembly. Around them, guests broke into dance and clapping. Amharic music was soon played, the DJ being assisted by an Ethiopian youth, and the

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giving a NIS 10,000 profit and an intake of NIS 75,000 at the hall, and a NIS 25,000 profit (approximate figures, unverified by me). A small celebration at home to mark a son's wedding yielded NIS 9,470 of which NIS 1,000 were profit, at the same home, an engagement party made a NIS 2,000 profit. A larger neighbourhood celebration for a *crisenna* (the birth of a child) received NIS 17,395. The cost was about NIS 9,000 (one cow NIS 3,400, video man NIS 2000, beer NIS 3, 100, flour NIS 140, rented freezer 200), yielding a profit of about NIS 8,000. Funerals donations are much lower and profits minimal. In one relatively small funeral gathering, 600 people donated NIS 7,450. Mostly 10 shekel notes, a good number of 20 shekel notes, and the odd 50 shekel and 100 shekel note from close relatives.

dancing group grew rapidly. Pairs of dancers stood facing one another, gyrating their shoulders energetically in traditional Ethiopian style, eyes interlocked. Others stood around them in a large circle several layers deep, clapping and swaying to the sound of the music. The hosts danced most of the evening. Their neighbours and kin stuck bank notes on their sweaty foreheads (NIS 1,250 on the boy's forehead, NIS 400 on the mother and NIS 350 on the father, i.e. a total of NIS 2,000, approx. £ 400).

At midnight, the police van drove past slowly, and the hosts took the hint. The music was immediately turned off, and the guests left. After clearing up, kin and close neighbours continued the party in the flat until the early hours of the morning.

For the whole week-end, Abuhay and Fantanesh held open house. Kin stayed over and neighbours came and went, drinking, chatting and eating. A little dancing resumed on Saturday evening, after Sabbath. Visiting kin left on Saturday night or Sunday morning.

On Sunday, Abuhay sent his son around to invite the close neighbours to finish the *injera* at 5 p.m. A small cheerful reunion of intimates took place, and the party was much praised.

Beta Israel stress the importance of eating and drinking with kin and neighbours at celebrations. Whenever I asked anybody "how was the party?", they invariably answered: "It was good, there was lots of *injera*, meat, and beer".

As a vegetarian, I could not eat at celebrations, where meat is always served. More than once, I was asked by a neighbour: "What is the point of going, since you cannot eat?"

Celebrations provide hosts with the opportunity to demonstrate their hospitality and commitment to the group. The event in honour of which a celebration was hosted, such as a Bar Mitzvah or a wedding, remains in the background and appears to be little more than an excuse to hold a celebration. After the occasion is marked with the appropriate blessings and other ceremonies, the Bar Mitzvah boy or the wedding couple assume junior roles more or less as they would on any other occasion. It is their parents who are at the centre of attention. It is their chance to affirm themselves as proud Beta Israel by hosting in style their neighbours and kin. In the process, they reaffirm the idiom of "being together".

### **3. Credit Societies**

As well as daily visiting, celebrating, mourning, and praying together, neighbours "drink together" (*abran tatan*) at their rotating credit society (*kuvie*)<sup>56</sup>.

The *kuvie* I joined comprised twenty-two neighbourhood women who met every other Monday morning in alternate members' houses to consume food and drink and to pay the due NIS 100 (approx. £20). Each woman received her turn of the total (NIS 2100, £420) approximately every eleven months (depending on new entries and exits to the group). The sessions were jolly affairs as the group of women chatted, drank Ethiopian coffee, soft drinks and beer, and their children played.

The men's *kuvie* group that I sometimes attended was more gregarious. The sessions, held every three weeks, started late afternoon on Saturday, and continued for

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<sup>56</sup> Rotating credit societies were common among Beta Israel, and their Christian neighbours, in Ethiopia.

a good three hours. The men drank much alcohol and enjoyed joking: “A man ‘did not know how to’, and asked his friend to show him; the latter was delighted and did ‘it’ with the man’s wife!”; “A couple were watching an Ethiopian video. The man said that he wanted to go to Ethiopia to ‘have’ the girl who was dancing; his wife was not amused and threw a bottle into the TV!”

Like celebrations, the *kuvie* rests on commitment and trust, sociability and economic exchange between neighbours. It provides a means of saving so that “you get lots of money and can buy something big”, such as large fridges, household furniture, and, more recently, the air-fare to Ethiopia for a holiday or health cure<sup>57</sup>.

The use of the expression “to drink together” to refer to *kuvie* membership shows the social nature of the gatherings. As Kanubesh put it: “The *kuvie* is to chat (*tetchawot*). I can put money in the bank, where it can earn interest.” The sharing of money is a means to socialise rather than the other way. Educated women, slightly embarrassed by their membership of such an apparently un-modern institution, stressed this point: “The money makes us get together regularly, otherwise, when would we meet?”

The *Kuvie* is a means to socialise and to pool resources; it also cements trust and commitment between neighbours. Each member pays out a significant amount of cash every month, with no guarantee of return.

When I joined the *kuvie*, my standing as a neighbour rose significantly in the eyes of my Ethiopian neighbours, because by giving my NIS 100 every fortnight, I was committing myself to my neighbours for a least a year (after which time I would recoup my savings) and I showed the women that I trusted them to pay me back.

The social cementing function of the *kuvie* was particularly evident in the case of working women members who were unable to attend sessions (therefore missing out on the sociability function) and usually held direct debit saving accounts (and therefore did not need the economic function of the *kuvie*). They joined the *kuvie* to reinforce their social bonds of commitment and trust with their neighbours, particular given the fact that their paid employment often excluded them from daily social interaction. *Kuvie* members enjoy a certain 'group feeling', a special sort of communality, explicit in the following incident.

The son of a *kuvie* member died in the army. The *kuvie* members got together a small sum of money (approx. £2), and altogether went over to the grieving mother to donate the offering. This donation was over and above the women’s previous contribution to the funeral. They wanted to show the woman support as *kuvie* members.

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<sup>57</sup> Carsten, in her study of rotating saving societies, *kut*, in Malaysia, stresses their purpose as a means of socialisation of money: although ethnographers and participants alike tend to stress their value as “saving” societies, in fact, they are more about *consumption*. By pooling resources, kin, affines, and neighbours, more than *saving* together, *consume* together (1989).

Another type of association was created in my neighbourhood towards the end of my stay which illustrated well the neighbours' sense of "being together". They called it the "the Chair Society" (*yewamber mahaver*). It was born at a neighbourhood meeting called by two residents who had realised that they could dramatically cut the cost of neighbourhood events if they could rid themselves of the astronomical fee for chair and table hire. They worked out the cost of buying five hundred chairs and tables, and divided this sum between the neighbourhood's ninety-six households. They invited each household to join by paying their share of the total cost. This one-off payment worked out at about a third of the cost of renting chairs and tables for just one evening. It was therefore advantageous for any household which envisaged holding a celebration in the future: nearly all of them. Ninety-two households agreed to join, and within six months eighty-five had paid up and the chairs and tables were purchased. The members can use the equipment for free, but the Chair Society charges a fee to non-members, the income from which will go towards the purchase of large freezers for the storage of drink and meat.

#### **4. Dissent amongst Neighbours**

The rosy picture of neighbourhood life that I have depicted can on occasion suffer from friction and quarrel. However, these are kept well beneath the smooth surface: quarrelling parties avoid each other to minimise disruption and a reconciliation is fast engineered.

A quarrel erupted between two next-door neighbours. Apparently one of them, for unknown motives, had told the social services that the other was lying about his poor health and consequent inability to work. The two men cut their neighbourly relations and ceased all contact. But this rupture in neighbourhood harmony was contained because their wives remained good neighbours, drinking coffee together and sharing labour, and other neighbours avoided taking sides. After about a year, when well-wishers' surreptitious attempts proved unable to break the dead-lock, elders stepped in, a reconciliation meeting was held, and peace established. From one day to the next the two men became inseparable, drank coffee together, and set off together for social outings and shopping expeditions.

Aba Makwanent wanted to boycott Mama Wuvenesh's celebration of her daughter's wedding because the latter was marrying a relative, which is forbidden by Ethiopian Jewish custom. More lenient elders stepped in and pleaded with him to join the party: better transgress a cherished custom than threaten the unity of the neighbourhood.

As well as such open quarrels, even the most dedicated neighbours sometimes complain about the rigorous demands of neighbourhood sociability and economic exchange.

Fantanesh, one of the most popular women in the neighbourhood, occasionally became weary: "It is good to have a job in this country. Because when you are at home all the time, guests come continuously and you have to serve them coffee and *injera*. It is expensive!" But her words nearly amounted to blasphemy, and she quickly

reiterated the standard rhetoric: “If you provide for a guest, God will give back double in return. You are happy when a guest comes whom you can feed and give drink to.”

The constant requirement of sociability and good humour can also be wearing. A neighbour sometimes takes back streets in order to avoid having to extend greetings to all and sundry, another stays indoors with the express purpose of not seeing anyone, another still complains of the 'blah blah blah' to which he is subjected to all day, wishing people would just stay quiet sometimes.

I found the constant need to be cheerful and repress feelings of anger or depression was one of the most warring aspects of Ethiopian neighbourhood life. Once, an adoptive cousin purposefully made me very angry in front of the family and I stormed out of the room, slamming the door. Later, when peace was made, he told me gently that if I wanted to be “like an Ethiopian”, I should not behave like that. I had to admit that I had never witnessed an Ethiopian expressing his anger so openly and publicly.

For young people, growing up in Israel with notions of personal freedom, the ever watchful eyes of neighbours is resented because any suspicious movement on their part will instantaneously become the talk of the neighbourhood.

Alemwork, a twenty-five-year-old who immigrated age sixteen, wishes her husband and his family would be less “Ethiopian” sometimes. “If I want to study in evening classes, his mother comes by and asks him where I am and he says ‘studying’ and she says ‘oh yes?’. He cares about what people say. He says that he will not walk with me if I wear trousers.”

## C. “Being Together” As Kin

A young 25 year-old man tries to persuade a girl towards whom he is romantically inclined to make a trip with him to Netanya. He thinks of what might tempt her most: “We could visit all my relatives there!”

### I. Defining kin

#### 1. The Term “*zamad*”

*Zamad* can best be translated in English as “kin”. On the one hand, *zamad* includes a finite, albeit huge, group of blood relatives; on the other, *zamad* is used loosely to refer to anyone one wishes to express closeness towards. Being kin, in the latter all-inclusive sense, is essentially about feeling close “like a brother and sister”. Anybody one feels close to

becomes “kin” and calling someone with a kin term is a way of honouring a particular individual.

A close neighbour who is not a relative by blood is referred to as “our kin” and addressed with a kin term such as “sister”, “father” or “aunty”.

Another recalls with affection a former Christian neighbour in Ethiopia: “He was our *zamad!*”

The term *zamad* in this wide sense, is also used as a boundary marker to enforce a sentiment of group identity beyond the circle of blood relatives. For example, Beta Israel assert “we are all kin” when they seek to contrast the Beta Israel to other groups, such as their former Ethiopian Christian neighbours (see Schoenberger 1975: 44). Broader still, the term can be even more inclusive and refer to Jews as a whole, i.e. Ethiopian Jews and other Israelis, in contrast to Arabs. Occasionally, even Arabs are included in the category *zamad* because they are “our cousins, the descendants of Avraham”. In this latter context, most of the world becomes kin.

As well as this inclusive sense, *zamad* has an extremely specific meaning, and includes a finite group of people: blood relatives related to each other within seven generations on both maternal and paternal side.

My neighbour Fantanesh Yalew returns home from a visit to a post-partum woman, Adisye. Her elderly mother Tarikye Melash wants to know who the woman is. “Adisye is Taye Ayelign’s granddaughter, daughter of Belaynesh Taye”. “Ah, I know who she is!”, said Fantanesh’s mother, predictably. Explaining to me: “Ayelign Alemu, who is Taye Ayelign’s father, and Turuwork Alemu were brother and sister. Turuwork [begat] Melash Turuneh, and Melash Turuneh begat Tarikye Melash, and then [Tarikye begat] Fantanesh Yalew. Do you understand?” “Well, I am not sure...” “OK, Turuwork and Ayelign are siblings, so that is one [generation], then Melash is two, then Tarikye - that is me - three, then Fantanesh four [generations]. On her side, Ayelign one, Taye two, Belaynesh three, Adisye four. Fantanesh and Adisye are related four and four. It is close - she is a sister! Understand?” Fantanesh came to my rescue: “My grandfather and Adisye’s grandfather and my grandmother were first cousins”.

Counting kin tends to start as in this example with the joint sibling pair counted as “One”, a short hand term for “one generation”<sup>58</sup>. Counting generations of kin is a frequent activity, particularly enjoyed by elders.

Most visitors to Fantanesh’s house have to sit through the ‘finding the common ancestor’ ritual with Fantanesh’s mother. They are amused if they have already been through the process several times with Mama Tarikye, or show genuine interest if their memory needs refreshing. Fantanesh often smiled at me at such occasions,

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<sup>58</sup> Occasionally, the counting starts from the common ancestor. Alternatively, the counting is reversed, starting instead with ego and going backwards. Ego is “one” and the final number of generations is found when the original joint sibling pair is reached.



knowing that I was taking mental note of the proceedings. My interest in kinship was easily understood by my informants, since it is a chief interest of theirs.

Generally, people love to count generations and when youngsters meet outside of kin circles, such as at school, army or work, they try themselves to work out their exact kin connection, and failing this, ask an elder on their next visit home. When youngsters want to marry, the counting of generations is crucial (see Chapter Three).

Close kin are thought of as descendants, called “children”, of one ancestor a few generations back.

At a house warming party, I ask a middle-aged daughter of late Aba Desta how many children he had. She waves her hand to include all two hundred and fifty guests: “Lots! They are all his children!”

The closest circle of kin comprise first and second degree relatives and more distant relatives who have become friends, often as a result of neighbourhood bonds. The next circle is composed of “close” kin (*kirb zamad*), who are related to about three or four generations. The widest circle comprise all other blood relatives. Few individuals even know the names of their most distant kin and precise kin relations can be ascertained only with the help of kinship specialists, priests and old people who are well versed in Beta Israel lines of descent. Circles of relatives are drawn from both maternal and paternal kin, with much individual variation.

Alefash was having a rant while she cleaned the house. Her children, she decided, do not love her. Recalling the displays of affection between her and her eight children, and the abundance of love between them, I was bemused. She continued defiantly: “They like their father, not me; they only visit his kin!”

## **2. The ‘feel’ of kin**

As I was leaving for Aba Negusse’s home, after visiting kin in another town, Aba Brhan, Aba Negusse’s uncle, said to me: “Say hello to all of them. They are my relatives (*zamad*), my elder brother [Aba Turuneh]’s children!” As he contemplated the image of his brother’s “children” - ranging from eighty years to three weeks old - his voice filled with warmth and pride, and a radiant smile spread across his face.

At the other end of the kin group, twenty-one year-old Solomon, grandson to Aba Turuneh, announced to his twenty-five-year-old cousin Worku the birth of his first child. Worku, himself a father of four, exclaimed: “Ah, Aba Turuneh’s *zer* (seed)!” His tone combined jest, pride and a sense of awe at the fresh realisation of the great size of his close kin group, the ever growing number of his grandfather’s “children”.

As the above examples show, individuals have a strong sense of being part of a group of kin, and they derive pride and satisfaction from this constant awareness. Having kin involves feelings of inclusion, protection, safety and “oneness”.

A young friend was explaining to me the differences between the various terms used to denote “kin”: “*Yigna saw*” (lit: our people) denotes people whom you would protect if someone wanted to do them harm.” In other words, he chose the image of protection to define kinship.

Relatives are those people one feels very close to - that one cannot live without.

Since the Beta Israel migrated to Israel in two waves, most close kin groups were split for several years. Family reunification was invariably listed as one of the best things about Israel. In fact, many Ethiopians, who arrived during the second wave, stated that “to be with kin” was their main motivation for migration.

Kin often exclaim: “We are one!” According to Beta Israel ideology, kin *should* feel close to one another and in practice they are, as the following account of a gathering of kin illustrates.

When the Israeli-style Bar Mitzvah celebrations at a hired hall (*olam*) were over, at around 2 am on Friday, close relatives converged at the local *moadon* (bomb shelter). Young men galvanised to serve *injera* and meat stew, which was much enjoyed by the older guests, who had only picked at the four course Israeli catered meal. After eating and drinking, men sang Amharic folk tunes with improvised verse, using the table as a drum for accompaniment. Relatives danced together. In a small annexe, young teenagers made their own party, dancing to house music and techno. Neither group was apparently perturbed by the other, even though the singers had to sing over the sound of the taped music in the other room.

Workie’s three bedroom flat, the closest home to the party, soon filled as relatives came for coffee and rest. By about four a.m., there were at least three bodies on each mattress and rows of children slept side by side on the floor, with one blanket covering them all. Around seven a.m., elders rose for coffee, leaving their mattresses for the next shift of sleepers.

For forty-eight hours, relatives laughed, chatted, drank and eat, with only the odd hour of stolen sleep here and there, in any Ethiopian house which had some floor space. Saturday morning, after synagogue, close kin congregated at the hosts’ house. All nine siblings of the Bar Mitzvah boy’s father were present together with their partners, most of their children and grandchildren, as well as a few cousins. The Sabbath home-made bread was blessed and cut by the eldest brother and prayers recited in Amharic and Hebrew.

Cousins of both sexes lay on each other’s laps, touching each other affectionately. They teased each other about their looks or personal characteristics. Courtesy towards others was pronounced. Whenever someone got up to get a drink, for example, he or she offered a drink to everyone assembled and elders were bestowed even more respect than usual. There was continuous coming and going, as individuals moved from one house to another or small groups went for short strolls.

As soon as Sabbath ended, at around seven p.m. on Saturday, the party, although reduced in size, resumed in the *moadon* and dancing continued until the early hours.

## II. Social relations

Kin (*zamad*) is “the most important thing” (*wanaw neger naw*) and success at maintaining social relations with kin is the main factor which accounts for Beta Israel well-being in Israel. Conversely, failure to do is said to lead to tragedy.

Daniel, twenty-three years old, explained why an eighteen-year-old soldier committed suicide: “The boy asked for leave to attend his cousin’s funeral. He was not granted permission because for an Israeli, a cousin is not so important. But for us, a cousin is a brother, a father. So the boy killed himself.”

I am sure that the soldier’s motives were more complex, but for Daniel, seeking to understand the suicide, frustration at being unable to fulfil a duty towards kin was reason enough to kill oneself.

### 1. Visiting kin

With the exception of the next door neighbour, the people most often visited and received are kin who live close by. They meet several times a week, or at the very least on Saturdays.

It is Saturday am. The house is full with cousins and siblings who have come to visit for the week-end. A few youngsters still sleep curled up in their white sheets. Worku arrives with his little boy dressed in his Sabbath green suit. We sit outside, Aba Negusse teasing his great-nephew. A party of young men, siblings and cousins, wander off slowly to Aba Negusse’s daughter Dege’s house, chatting and laughing gaily. Later, some of the women go over to Worku’s home to visit his wife who is heavily pregnant, while the others eventually make their way to Dege’s, stopping over at the house of a distant kin on the way. At Dege’s, a group play cards, others sleep in corners. Children play outside. Cousins remember stories of life in Ethiopia.

Leaving the house to visit kin in other towns<sup>59</sup> is usually precipitated by a particular event - a religious holiday, a celebration, a bereavement, a sickness, the birth of a child. Once in the neighbourhood, all kin in that area are visited, even just to say hello if there is no time or appetite left to consume food and drink. Whenever I heard complaints about kin uttered openly, they were complaints that the relative(s) in question had not visited recently enough. Visiting kin is imperative, but as imperatives go, it is on the whole a pleasurable one.

Workie, Aba Negusse’s eldest daughter, comes to visit because he is unwell. She brings home-made bread and raw coffee beans which she presents to her mother-in-law and a small bag of sweets for her nieces and nephews. She spends her first evening chatting over coffee and *injera* at home. The following morning, she cleans the house. After a coffee session and *injera*, about noon, she wraps herself in her white shawl and goes out to start visiting. She starts with her sister and spends most of the day there. Her cousin Asrebav, who lives next-door comes to drink coffee, as does

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<sup>59</sup> Visiting kin who live far away was an integral part of daily life in Ethiopia. When my informants described the seasons, they said that after the sowing of seeds came the “time of visiting” - a whole season whose chief purpose was to visit kin who lived in distant villages (see also Schoenberger 1975).

her husband, but no sooner is the session over that Asrebav insists Workie come to her house for another coffee session. The next day, she goes to her brother, visiting another cousin on the way. They watch together the video of a recent family wedding, giving the latest gossip about people who appear on the screen, and saying out loud their names for the benefit of the children. Next, she does the “rounds”, visiting briefly all other close kin in the neighbourhood, including her deceased mother’s kin.

## **2. *The Telephone***

Ethiopians often say: “Now you do not need to go and visit your relatives: you can just telephone!”

The phone rings frequently in Ethiopian households, and nine times out of ten, it is a relative calling. The caller speaks to the person who answers the phone and then speaks to every member of the household who is present, sending greetings to household members not present. The form of telephone conversations are similar to face-to-face meetings. Most contain little more than standard greetings: “How are you? How is your wife? How is son X? How is son Y? How is that sick neighbour of yours?”. More substantial conversations concern family affairs such as a marriage break-up, the purchase of a house, or wedding plans. Unsurprisingly, youngsters chat on the phone the most, and they often take the phone into their own room to gossip with their cousins.

Many Ethiopians praise the telephone, conceding that it enables them to be in constant touch with close kin. Women commented that after they got married in Ethiopia and moved to their husband’s village, they only saw their parents and former close neighbours only a few times a year at most. Now, they can chat whenever they want, or at least within the limitations of cost.

## **3. *Mutual help***

For the Beta Israel, a loving relationship is expressed by giving and receiving. As with neighbours, kin express their affection and consideration by helping one another. The idiom of reciprocity is fundamental to Ethiopian social interaction: it defines relations between parent and child<sup>60</sup>.

A woman laments that her aged sister Worku is unsupported by her children: “She carried them in her tummy nine months, fed them with milk from her breast, carried them on her back, and now look, she is all alone and they are far away!”

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<sup>60</sup> I thank Dr James Woodburn for alerting me to this dimension of reciprocity.

Mama Zaudie wails when she hears that her husband refuses to buy a goat for his daughter's engagement: "Ah! Just one daughter [living at home], she cleans the house and does this and that, and he cannot even buy her one goat!"

Cash circulates between kin as it does between neighbours. Relatives give large cash donations at celebrations, funerals and when a relative is sick, has given birth or is embarking on a journey to Ethiopia. Like neighbourhood *kuvie* (rotating credit societies), groups of close relatives form small *kuvie* (*yezamad kuvie*) in which all members are close relatives, such as siblings and first cousins. In addition, relatives lend each other money in times of need and parents try to contribute to their children's large purchases, such as a car or a flat. Youngsters help elders in non-monetary ways, namely in dealing with aspects of Israeli society, such as acquiring benefits and housing. The obligation to help kin in this respect can become difficult to fulfil for educated Ethiopians who work in government welfare jobs.

I often heard about a particular cousin who was "not a good person". When I eventually met the man in question, he explained to me that because he works in the department which gives mortgages for Ethiopians to buy houses, all his relatives approached him for help when they were considering house purchase. Given the size of his kin group, it would be impossible to get any work done if he helped them all, and further it would look to others like he was favouring his own kin.

#### **4. Quarrels and reconciliation**

One young woman did not enjoy visiting kin. When she later married against her relatives' wishes, she stopped visiting altogether. Her kin complained: "In Ethiopia, she was nice. Here it seems like she has no relatives!"

Given the intensity of social relations between relatives and the high normative expectations placed on such relations, it is not surprising that feuds and quarrels rage under the surface, which *has* to be kept smooth. Quarrels and animosities do not endanger the ideal image of kin "being together" because of a number of internal mechanisms. First, kin who are not directly involved in a specific quarrel avoid taking sides openly, thus limiting the spread of animosity. Also, given the large numbers of people present for family occasions, it is easy for two individuals who, irrespective of quarrels and reconciliations, simply do not get on, to avoid each other. Moreover, kin exert pressure on both sides until a public reconciliation is achieved and the kin group is brought back to a state of "being together".

Mulugeta and his father and sister quarrelled badly one day, and the physical fighting was terminated by neighbours only after Mulugeta had broken the phone, beat up his sister, hit his father (which is one of the worst things an Ethiopian can do) and received his father's walking stick across his back. For over nine months, Mulugeta refused to enter the house, and put the phone down on his mother when she tried to call him. Although relatives varied in whose version of the story they believed, they unanimously urged Mulugeta to come and apologise to his parents. Eventually, when

all the close kin happened to be in the neighbourhood for the Bar Mitzvah of a close relative, Mulugeta was finally persuaded. About two dozen kin escorted him to his father's house, the group growing as curious neighbours joined in, and after several attempted retreats from both sides (e.g. Mulugeta's father: "How can we reconcile today, it is Sabbath?"), Mulugeta bent down in front of his father and asked forgiveness, which was granted, albeit reluctantly.

## D. Ethiopian Jews Together in Israel

An Ethiopian boy boards a Tel Aviv bus. He discovers that he has not enough money to pay the fare. He looks up and calmly walks to the back of the bus where a few Ethiopians are sitting and he asks if someone can give him the money he needs. The Ethiopian passengers dig into their pockets, and the fastest hands over the required sum. The boy then takes a seat, near the Ethiopians, but not next to any of them, which suggests that he did not know any of them personally. He had approached them, as opposed to any other passenger, because they were Ethiopian.

This little incident is an example of the multitude of instances and situations when Ethiopian Jews feel a sense of "being together" in Israel, irrespective of kin or neighbourhood ties. This sense of togetherness is all the more striking given that at most times, Ethiopians are more aware of the factors *separating* them from other Beta Israel.

### I. Divisions

There are a number of internal divisions between Ethiopian Jews according to years of residence in Israel, Ethiopian region of origin, slave descent, and politics<sup>61</sup>.

#### 1. Years of residence

A man trying to situate another spoken of in conversation: "Melash? Is he new here?". He is using the time of arrival as one of the first defining characteristics.

Immigrants who arrived with Operation Moses or around that time (early to mid-eighties), feel a bond with other immigrants of that period and express, amongst themselves, criticism

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<sup>61</sup> Following advice from a number of educated Ethiopians, I decided to avoid questions of Ethiopian Jewish political organisation in Israel, in order not to risk alienating large segments of the population. Just to give an idea of the magnitude of such divisions: in 1992, there were fifty registered Ethiopian organisations (Weil 1995: 237). In Afula, there were elections in 1994 for a "committee" to run communal affairs and represent Ethiopian immigrants to the local council, but within a few months further elections were held for a rival committee. The dissenters' animosity towards the Committee Chairman was extreme: "Ah, I will not go to that celebration! Those are Moshe's people!" "That

about the newcomers, whom they call “the Solomon people” (*yeSolomon sawotch*). Less criticism is expressed in the other direction, although an awareness of difference is evident, and immigrants who arrived with Operation Moses are called “Moses people” (*yeMoshe sawotch*) by later immigrants.

Moses Operation immigrants, and others before them, were airlifted to Israel after walking from their villages to the Sudan and spending months, or even years, in refugee camps. They consider themselves pioneers who paved the way to immigration and pride themselves in having had a stronger ideology of “return to Jerusalem” than later immigrants who came once it was “easy”. The latter were airlifted to Addis Abeba, where they were supported by Jewish Agencies before being flown to Israel. In addition, the early immigrants claim, settling in Israel was easier for later immigrants because the earlier ones were there to instruct the newcomers and because the Israeli government had formulated better policies towards Ethiopians (such as offering them grants of up to 90% of the price of a house).

Veteran immigrants who arrived as teenagers to Israel in the 1980s, often alone, with their families left behind in Ethiopia, complain that the new immigrant youngsters lack drive and desire for success. This is because, they reason, these youngsters have had it “too easy” and because seeing that the earlier immigrants’ efforts have born no fruit (i.e. that they have low career prospects and suffer from discrimination) they are less keen to make efforts. In addition, veteran youths claim that while they arrived in Israel straight from the village and refugee camp, innocent, humble and reserved, the “Solomon youngsters” were adversely influenced by their prolonged stay in Addis Abeba prior to migration where they acquired a taste for low life, and have now become “*duruye*” (vagabond). They say that the latter smoke cigarettes, are not timid, wear immodest dress, and many of them have become drop-outs from school and roam the street of Tel Aviv around the central bus station.

Muluye, who arrived prior to Operation Moses as a boy, said: “the newcomers are *duruye*. You see them with their dreadlocks at the bus station. They smoke hashish. We came wanting to succeed, they do not. Everything is given to them.”

This division according to waves of migration must not be exaggerated because it is largely over-shadowed by the cohesive bonds of kin and neighbourhood (past and present).

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Committee is nothing! They are all Moshe’s relatives!” For a discussion of political leadership, see Weil (1995).

## 2. *Ethiopian region of origin*

Most Beta Israel came from either Gondar or Tigre. The two groups of Beta Israel spoke different languages (Amharic and Tigrenya), were autonomous with few linkages, and apparently, as with the regions' Christian population, maintained long-standing hostility<sup>62</sup>. Recent evidence for this hostility came in the 1950s when the Jewish agencies injected cash into the communities and leaders accused each other of favouring communities from their own region (Kaplan 1988).

In Israel, Beta Israel from Gondar outnumber those from Tigre by a factor of about 10 to 1. Tigre families tend to live in close proximity and certain neighbourhoods are known as "Tigre" neighbourhoods. In Israel, the segregation between the two groups is apparent; there is little social mixing and intermarriage and older Beta Israel do not eat meat slaughtered by a member of the other ethnic group. The Tigre accuse Beta Israel from Gondar of never speaking openly or honestly and for holding grievances "in their tummy" for ever. Beta Israel from Gondar claim to be more educated<sup>63</sup>. They also express anger because the first immigrants from Tigre, in the late 1970s and early 1980s accepted to undergo the Rabbinate's demands for symbolic conversion (H: *giyul*). They consider that his conversion lowered the image of the Beta Israel because it implied that they were not proper Jews to start with<sup>64</sup> (see also Herman 1994).

My adoptive father's nephew married a woman from Tigre. Even though they live not far away and this nephew visited our house regularly, his wife never once came, in contrast to the spouse of his other nephews and nieces who visit regularly. The nephew occasionally brought his daughters to the house, but they were always teased: 'You little Tigre, you!'

When a group of immodestly dressed young girls walked past the house, Aveva would mutter in disapproval "Tigre!"

A friend I made in another town, who was Tigre, never visited me in my home, because "they would not like me."

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<sup>62</sup> Similar hostilities are prevalent among Ethiopian immigrants in other parts of the world. At the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, for example, Ethiopians from Tigre sit in one corner of the bar and those from Gondar in another. They display animosity towards one another in keeping with their compatriots back home (personal conversations with Ethiopian Asylum seekers and students in London, 1994).

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of differences, and perceived differences, between the personal characteristics of the Amhara and Tigray, see Rosen (mns) and Soroff (1995: 145, 212-3).

<sup>64</sup> See p. REF for a fuller discussion.



### 3. *Slaves and non-slaves*

Early on in fieldwork, I joked to a young couple at a wedding celebration, that I had been ordered around so much by my adoptive mother that I had become a white *barya* (slave). The pair giggled as if I had just mentioned a lurid sexual detail, and told me “You must never make such jokes! It is forbidden to speak about that!” A few minutes later, however, the young man could not resist pointing out a group of dancers, and whispering in my ears: “They are [slaves]!” Later, his wife took me aside and explained to me the gravity of the subject and that I should never ever mention it, or I would be rejected from Ethiopian society.

The strongest line of division between the Beta Israel in Israel is that between “slaves” (*barya*) and non-slaves (*chewa*)<sup>65</sup>. Until recent decades, wealthier Beta Israel families, like their Christian counterparts, owned slaves, and the *barya* of today are the latter's descendants<sup>66</sup>. The *barya* adopted the same religious and purity practices as their masters (Solomon 1994). *Barya* used to be bought and sold in the market “like cattle” and according to non-*barya* have “frizzy hair, white teeth, a flat nose, and are very very black”. After Ethiopia's revolution in 1974, the practice of slavery was officially abolished and former slaves were given land during the land reform campaigns.

It was difficult to get a person of slave descent to speak on the subject, but towards the end of my fieldwork I succeeded a few times.

Efrat is a young “modern” woman who did not celebrate her marriage with a large family wedding. After persistent questioning I learned that his family had rejected her and opposed the marriage. I guessed why. She explained that her brother Daniel had had to leave a girl-friend because of “it” (she never mentioned the word *barya*). “With us, it comes from our grandfather's mother's grandmother, so many generations ago!”. As we were talking, her mother entered the room, and tried harder than I have ever seen an Ethiopian doing to interrupt the conversation. Efrat had come to terms with her *barya* status, especially since her chosen partner did not reject her. I felt however that her brother Daniel holds a chip on his shoulder and that the rejection by the former girlfriend has been very hard to bear. I knew the girl in question. She told me that her present fiancée was not as good as the previous boyfriend, neither in looks nor intelligence (Daniel was a university student and her fiancée a garage mechanic). But her parents would have forbidden her to marry a *barya*. I sensed that irrespective of her parents' wishes, she did not want such stigma or for her children to be *barya*.

Given the apparently wide-spread former practice of masters sleeping with slave girls, many kin groups are “mixed”, with one or more legitimate lines and one or more slave lines. The two groups socialise together, but a difference is felt and I sensed that members of the slave line can be particularly sensitive to slights made to them by the legitimate lines.

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<sup>65</sup> For a detailed discussion of Beta Israel perceptions on *barya*, see Salamon (1994).

Intermarriage remains rare between the two groups. In Israel, a new opportunity has arisen for *barya* to increase their social standing: to marry a *farenge*, who as the Beta Israel love to say, are unaware of the difference.

While intermarriage is rare, *barya* mix socially in the neighbourhood like everyone else. However, jokes and comments were frequently made on the subject, which suggests a lingering unease and constant awareness of the difference.

A young woman: "I am inviting my co-godmother for coffee, my *barya* co-godmother!"

Shalom tries to convince me to miss a neighbourhood party and go instead to a wedding with him: "What do you want to go to a *barya*'s party for?" His wife interrupts him: "Do not speak like that! They [*barya*] are people too! The *farenge* in this country say that we are black!"

Shalom wife's comments reveal the irony of the *barya* issue: while perpetrating their own form of colour consciousness within the group, Ethiopian Jewish immigrants complain incessantly about racism directed at them (see Chapter Five).

## II. "Being Together" as Ethiopians

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants ignore their divisions to "come together" to celebrate and mourn. Moreover, when an external threat is perceived, they affirm their unity as an ethnic group, with a shared identity and common interests.

### 1. Celebrations

Celebrations held in large hired halls (*olam*) for weddings (and smarter Bar Mitzvah) epitomise the "coming together" of Ethiopian Jews in Israel. The events are compered by an Israeli DJ who plays Western disco music, Israeli folk tunes and Ethiopian (Amharic) pop. After greeting the hosts who stand in line at the entrance of the hall, guests sit at tables laden with drink and food. Israeli waiters serve a four course meal, in the middle of which the wedding ceremony conducted by an Israeli rabbi takes place according to Jewish custom under a *chuppa*. The guests (usually between five hundred and one thousand) cut across all the above mentioned divisions - *barya*, non-*barya*, new immigrants and veterans, from different localities and kin lines, traditional elders, educated elite, the trendy youths,

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<sup>66</sup> In accord with Beta Israel kinship theory, a person is *barya* if he had *barya* ancestors within seven

children, students, Tigre and Gondar people all celebrate together. While a number of guests leave around midnight, youngsters and close relatives continue to dance and socialise until five a.m. The Israeli setting reinforces the “Ethiopianess” of the proceedings, evident in the dancing, music, greetings, the presence of a large number of kin, and the near absence of non-Ethiopians<sup>67</sup>. At the same time, *olam* celebrations allow Ethiopian Jewish immigrants to be good Israelis: while they are often in a position of subordination and dependency vis-à-vis Israelis, on this occasion, they pay a lot of money and are masters of the occasion.

## 2. *Ethiopians vis-à-vis Israelis*

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants are the most united when they feel “threatened”: when an individual Ethiopian is affronted, all Ethiopians feel offended.

After the death of Tafra Bahata by police gunfire, Moshe Bahata, 38, the chairman of the Umbrella Organisation for Ethiopian Immigrants, was quoted in *ha'aretz* daily newspaper (13/7/97): “Tafra’s family lost a dear son. But the pain is that of the entire Ethiopian community.”

The unity of Ethiopians was manifest in dazzling strength during the blood crisis in January 1996. Days after finding out that all blood which Ethiopians had donated to the Blood Bank was systematically and secretly thrown out for fear of HIV infection, Ethiopians staged a mass demonstration. Irrespective of internal divisions<sup>68</sup>, over 10,000 Ethiopian Jews gathered in front of the houses of Parliament in Jerusalem and for weeks and months after the event, the sense of unity, of “us” Ethiopians versus “them” Israelis was palpable<sup>69</sup>.

On the bus back from the demonstration, young Samagn was elated and proud that “all the Ethiopians had united”.

The pride Ethiopians derived from staging the mass demonstration suffused them for weeks. Lemlem: “The violence at the demonstration was good! Even wrecking all those cars. Why did the *farenge* leave their cars there anyway? They knew there would be a demonstration that day, but they thought of Ethiopians are like this [she made a gesture of smallness, bringing her thumb and index finger close together]. Now they know: Ethiopians are not small!”

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generations. After seven generations, with intermarriage, the *baryanett* (slavery) is shed.

<sup>67</sup> For a similar account of a wedding celebration in 1981, see Abbink (1984: 225-6).

<sup>68</sup> This said, a prominent Afula resident who publicly condemns Adissu Messele, the organiser of the Blood Demonstration, did not attend, and forbade his wife to. He told me: “why should I go? Adissu just organised the meeting for his own political advancement, so that he can become a Member of Parliament!” Adissu Messele did subsequently become an MP, thanks in large part to the publicity generated by the demonstration.

<sup>69</sup> Abbink (1984: 252) notes: “With this semi-conscious “we” ethos, expressed in mutual interdependence and communal solidarity, the [Beta Israel] compensate for what they find missing in their relations with the other Israelis...”

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants are united with respect to other Israelis. Conversely, they feel that Israelis for their part look on Ethiopians as a group: if one Ethiopian does something good or bad, this reflects on all Ethiopians in the eyes of Israelis.

A young University student: "I want to succeed very well to set younger Ethiopians an example and to show the Israelis what we are capable of!"

A young man: "My boss at work likes me, he likes Ethiopians".

## Conclusion: Being together in Israel

Asras Mulugeta found himself heavily in debt after the social services asked him to reimburse NIS 40,000 (£8,000) he had received on false claims or face a prison sentence. Asras did not despair - he knew that help was at hand, and he knew the form in which it must be solicited. He invited his close kin, all the Ethiopians in his neighbourhood and a good proportion from adjacent neighbourhoods to come drink beer and eat *injera* on a specific day so that everyone could make a small donation towards the sum of money he urgently needed. Neighbours disapproved of Asras' way of life (he was reputed to have two wives) and his dishonesty with the social services. But they came, contributed between £10 and £30 each, and had a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon. Asras raised the required money.

Asras Mulugeta's plea illustrates the idiom of "being together" as neighbours, kin and "Ethiopians" in Israel. The neighbours each contributed because a neighbour / relative was in need. By hosting a party, Asras raised the required money and socialised the process.

Following Beta Israel's own discourse, I have presented an idyllic image of relations between kin and neighbours. But it is not infrequent to hear an Ethiopian complain about these relations in Israel. Women in particular bemoan former times when neighbours "helped each other", when a woman could sojourn in the menstrual hut for seven days because her neighbour cooked all the required *injera* for her household. Now, they say, they can no longer seclude themselves during their times of impurity. "Who would look after the children? In Ethiopia, we had neighbours, here we are alone!" Or: "Who is there to cook *injera* for a woman now? There we lived together, here we are separate." Similarly, with kin: "In Ethiopia, we all lived together, but here in Israel, it is so difficult because one brother lives in Beer Sheva, my sister lives in Haifa, my mother is in Holon..... all over the place!"

How can we understand such statements given that most Ethiopians, and certainly the women who made such claims to me, *do* live surrounded by Ethiopian neighbours, who *do* cook *injera* for them and help in other ways, and they *do* have frequent contact with kin?

First, given the centrality of neighbourhood and kin relations in Beta Israel social life, I suspect that even in Ethiopia, it was the chief focus for complaints<sup>70</sup>. Given that expectations of social relations between kin and neighbours are based on an *ideal* set of norms, it is impossible for them to be met. This is not only because of human frailty but also since marriage partners in Ethiopia were usually chosen from other villages. Therefore, one of the two partners, usually the woman, was forced to live away from close kin. Thanks to the telephone and public transport, the frequency of contact between kin living apart has actually increased in Israel.

Second, for Beta Israel, the quality of neighbourhood relations does appear to have decreased in Israel compared to Ethiopia, even if the above statements are exaggerations. There is a tendency to romanticise the past and to create an image of Ethiopian village life which was idyllic, and therefore by comparison contemporary life appears to fall short. Moreover, many women now go to work, with inflexible working days and hours, and it is hard for them to take care of a neighbour's household as well as their own. Furthermore, although I have stressed the strength the neighbour bond, it remains inferior in terms of expectations and obligations to that of the kin bond. In Ethiopia, this difference was merely theoretical since in most cases a next-door neighbour was also a close kin or in-law, and a strong kin relationship was superimposed onto the neighbour one. Fantanesh once made this point with reference to running out of a kitchen ingredient, explaining that "there" it was easy, since she could pop into her mother's or sister's house to borrow something. I have seen her do the same with her neighbour in Israel, but she *feels* less free to do so. Ditto with kin. Although many Ethiopians do live in close proximity to kin, for many of them, kin neighbours are more scarce than in the Ethiopian village<sup>71</sup>.

Third, given the prominence of social relations between neighbours and kin, they are a good scapegoat for less tangible problems. For example, when a woman complains that she cannot maintain purity laws because of a lack of good neighbours, she might actually be speaking about her difficulties with changing purity customs rather than neighbours. Given that there

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<sup>70</sup> Gow details the way in which for the Piro of the Bajo Urubamba in Peru, the problem of wanting to be with kin while still getting married with non-kin and therefore having to live away from the kin group constitutes the drama of everyday life: "choosing to live with one set of close kin necessarily means abandoning another set" (Gow 1991: 225).

<sup>71</sup> In this respect there are winners and losers. In Ethiopia, the traditional pattern was for women to marry out of the village, and male siblings build their houses around the parental home. Thus women generally did not live with close kin. However, I know of many instances when women returned to the home village after divorce, or when she succeeded in making her husband move to her natal village. In Israel, there are men who live within walking distance of several siblings, while they lived far away in Ethiopia, and similarly women who live close to kin, while her husband's kin are far off.

is so much flux in Israel, and that so many traditions, customs and aspects of daily life are changing, the one discernible issue - relations with kin and neighbours - comes to the fore. It is easier to bemoan lack of living close to kin - when in fact contact with kin is very frequent - than it is to air grievances such as loss of productive activity or loss of a common language with which to talk to one's children (see Chapter Five). Finally, Ethiopian complaints about kin and neighbourly relations actually add weight to their prominence by keeping them at centre stage of daily conversations; if one is not with relatives at a given moment, one can still complain about not being them, and thereby strengthen the cultural expectation of "being together".

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants have succeeded in recreating strong social bonds between neighbours and kin in their new environment. They "come together" through sociability and economic exchange. Given the more problematic aspects of life in Israel explored in later chapters, the importance of these strong social bonds cannot be exaggerated. The 'humanising' function of social relations amongst Ethiopians is clearest among men and women who go to work; as soon as they return home, they resume their cycle of visiting and receiving Ethiopian guests, and their day begins in earnest.

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## Three: Tough Traditions

### 1. Introduction

The previous chapter illustrated the way in which Ethiopian Jewish immigrants “come together” as neighbours, kin and Ethiopians. In this chapter, I argue that the strength of their social bonds rest on the self-conscious maintenance of their “tough traditions”<sup>72</sup> (*kabad agar ba’al*). Even if the practice of many customs has altered significantly in the new setting, adherence to a rhetoric of “tough traditions” is an essential part of Ethiopian well-being. Beta Israel are proud of their traditions as “Ethiopians”, singing the praises of Ethiopia and its customs, as “Jews”, claiming common ancestry with the rest of the Jewish population, and as “Beta Israel”, the true Jews, the last practitioners of biblical Judaism. This chapter describes the key defining features of these idioms.

For most societies, traditions are usually taken for granted and changes occur slowly, and often imperceptibly. For the Beta Israel however, given the Israeli society’s radically different set of cultural norms and the abruptness of their change in environment, “traditions” and their transformations are constantly discussed, quarrelled about and laughed over.

Fanta, an eighteen-year-old boy, was helping me to understand the plethora of names of each of his relatives. He laughed a lot as he recounted the half dozen names by which each was known. His laughter was not embarrassment at a strange custom. He laughed rather at the “quaintness” of the custom, as if, though still adhering to it, he could now see it from a foreigner’s eyes, and found it touching.

Alemu entered Worku’s house carrying his baby girl. Worku, noting his male friend assuming a traditionally female role, laughed and said: “So you have become *farenge* now!”

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<sup>72</sup> By using this term, I am not suggesting that the Beta Israel have an unchanging past characterised by unchanging traditions (see Kaplan & Rosen 1993 for a critique of this approach in the study of the Beta Israel). As Hobsbawn points out, traditions which appear very old to the actors, can in fact be recent in origin (Hobsbawn 1983). In keeping with the approach of the thesis, I define beta Israel according to their “traditions” because that is what they do themselves.

The Beta Israel assert that their traditions are “tough” (*kabad*). When they describe their traditions, particularly in Ethiopia, they often fill their narrative with sighs and short interjections such as: “Ah, our customs are so tough!”

Aba Birre described the prohibition of eating meat which has not been slaughtered by a Beta Israel. He commented: “We would go for a week only eating chick peas - we would never eat meat with the Amhara. Our traditions are tough!”

Avi, a 22-year-old, told me that he had already spent NIS 5000 (approx. £1000) of his savings for the *ametat* ritual to mark the anniversary of his mother’s death, with more costs to come. He commented: “Our customs are hard, and I want to do it right!”

A young woman laments the difficulty of finding a suitable marriage partner given the strictness of Beta Israel marriage rules: “Ah, our traditions are so tough!”

“Tough traditions” are often presented in contrast to the “bad” traditions of the host society.

Fantaneshe: “For Ethiopians, the funeral is very important. Not like for the *farenge*. One day I went into the shop and David (the shop-owner) was looking bad, so I asked him ‘are you OK?’. He said: ‘My mother died and the funeral is today.’ But he was selling! For us if a mother dies, ‘Oh! Oh!’” She mimicked the body gestures of lamenting, hopping and bending to the ground with her hands above her head. “We would never work on such a day!”

Beta Israel’s affirmation of their traditions vis-à-vis a dominant majority is not new for them. In Ethiopia, the Beta Israel survived as a “despised” minority, with distinctive social, economic and religious traditions despite continuous pressure to convert to Christianity. In fact, the vast majority of Beta Israel *did* convert to Christianity, leaving the remaining Beta Israel with a particularly strong sense of cultural identity (see Introduction). Ethiopian Jewish immigrants to Israel are once again cast in an inferior position by the dominant society - as Blacks, “improper Jews”, and uneducated “primitive” people. They could have chosen to deal with such negative preconceptions by abandoning their native traditions and integrating as rapidly as possible. Instead, they have formed a proud self-confident *edah* (ethnic group, Hebrew), almost obsessively asserting the superiority of their traditions compared to those of other Israelis.

To introduce the following account of Ethiopian customs and beliefs, I present the basic tenets of Beta Israel identity as I discovered them, learning to live in an Ethiopian household: learning to “become Ethiopian”.

When I drank Ethiopian coffee, I was told “you are Ethiopian” or “you will become black just like an Ethiopian!”. When I visited a new household and was not offered *injera* (Ethiopian sour pancake), my companions quickly interjected “give her food - she is like us, she eats *injera*!” When I behaved as a good daughter - cleaning the house, running errands, serving drinks to guests - and as a good neighbour - visiting the sick, the bereaved, and women who had given birth - I was told “you are really one of us, you are just like an Ethiopian”. My poor attempts at Ethiopian dancing, eliciting many a laugh, were always praised and appreciated, as was my Amharic



language. When I was able to use Amharic in a “clever” way, playing on words, I evoked such delight that I was kissed and wished the birth of a son. My identity as a Jew was always stressed to new-comers to the household, and right up till my departure it was jokingly questioned because of my vegetarianism: not eating Beta Israel meat suggested to them that I may be Christian or Muslim.

When, on the other hand, I asked a question of someone while he was eating, failed to fulfil a promise, spoke too openly about myself or others, lost my temper, I was reprimanded and asked if I had not yet learned how to be Ethiopian. I was also *constantly* questioned and berated for my failure to get married and bare children.

When, for fun, my adoptive father and I wanted to make out that I *really* was Ethiopian, we would say that my grandmother went to Gondar at “the time of the Italians” and had an affair with him; I was therefore his illegitimate granddaughter. The whiteness of my skin was accounted for by intermarriage and the lack of sun in England.

From these personal anecdotes, the principal elements of Beta Israel identity can be drawn: proper social intercourse, observing a number of traditional practices, maintaining a “Jewish” identity. But to be *really* Ethiopian, Ethiopian parentage, at least on one side, is required, hence the joke about my grandmother’s travels in Ethiopia.

## **B. Proud Ethiopians**

A ten year-old boy asked me: “Is Ethiopia far from Africa?” After I explained that Ethiopia is *in* Africa, his mother says: “Ah! So that is why the *farenge* say that we come from Africa!”

Looking at my photos of Ethiopian tribespeople, Ethiopian Jews were quick to point out that these people were *not* Ethiopian.

The Beta Israel are proud Ethiopians. They distance themselves from black Africans - to the point where, as the above quotes show, they do not even think of Ethiopia as part of Africa. Educated Ethiopians seek to distance Ethiopia from other African countries by pointing to the different physical characteristics of its inhabitants (such as longer pointed noses, narrower faces, and straighter hair) and to the fact that Ethiopia was never colonised. Beta Israel speak proudly about both Ethiopia as a country and the beauty of its cultural heritage.

### **I. Speaking of honey: the land of Ethiopia**

Alequa Birre’s wife was very angry when a group of Ethiopian teenagers returned from an organised trip to Ethiopia, because “they spoke only of poverty and about the large trees which grow over their ancestors’ grave. Ethiopia is not like that! Maybe there is poverty in Ethiopia now, after we left, but not while we were there. The

children [who made those disparaging comments] were brought up here in wealth and so they saw only poverty there. They know nothing of the richness of Ethiopia: the rain which comes on time, the flowers, the seeds... just the smell of the leaves is enough to move your heart." She then proceeded to present a detailed picture of the Beta Israel as the elite group of the village, highly religious, economically vibrant, and so much liked and needed by their Christian neighbours that the latter begged them not to leave for Israel, and even suggested intermarriage as an incentive for them to stay.

Ethiopians love to reminisce about their former country, adopting a soft sing-song tone of voice, interrupting speech with doleful nostalgic clicking sounds, sighs and a chorus of "Ah Ethiopia! Ah our country!". Ethiopia is remembered both for its beautiful landscapes and its way of life.

When my suitability to marry an Ethiopian was discussed, I was warned that I would need to bake *injera*, make *talla* (home-made barley brew) and milk the cows. These activities were positively and affectionately depicted, even if humorously.

"Ethiopia - it is honey! The water in Ethiopia tasted delicious and sweet - even when it was full of mud!"

Mesganow returned from Ethiopia in an ebullient mood. It was all so wonderful: "Here there are just houses and concrete, but there, there is so much to see: grass, cows, donkey, sheep. It is so beautiful! And the air is so good."

"The market there.... so much food, so much choice, you could never be short of anything!"

Youngsters, who lead full Israeli lives, with skilled jobs and mortgages, also indulge in reminiscences.

Aster, often ready to criticise "backward" Ethiopian practices, remembered life in the village she left aged sixteen: "Oh Ethiopia! It was so fertile! ... Everyone was together there! Men came from the fields, me from school... all together, we drank coffee. It was so good!" She spoke with long sighs and clasped her hands. "We left all that for this. Just problems here!"

Ethiopia is presented in glowing terms; so too is the position of Beta Israel relative to their neighbours. The literature portrays Beta Israel as a low status group, a despised caste, subordinate to their Christian neighbours (Kaplan 1992, Quirin 1992, Abbink 1987) but the Beta Israel present themselves as proud farmers and expert artisans. Unless I probed, no-one mentioned that until the last twenty years, few Beta Israel owned land. Nor was I told about the Beta Israel's low status as despised craftsmen in the eyes of their Christian neighbours.

At coffee, an elder recounted that in Addis Abeba, an Amhara said how difficult he thought it would now be for the Amhara villagers without the Beta Israel since the latter were "the decorated fringe of the shawl" [i.e. the most precious and distinctive part of the traditional Ethiopian *gabi*]. The company repeated several times in delight "the decorated fringe of the shawl!"

## ***The Negative Depiction of Ethiopia***

The Beta Israel usually portray an idyllic image of Ethiopia; occasionally though, they mention negative aspects of Ethiopia: hardships of village daily life, the country's material poverty, political instability, and a general lack of education. Women recall the difficulties of everyday village life: carrying water and wood long distances, grinding grain on a stone mortar, washing clothes in the river, sowing seeds.... "Here [in Israel]", women exclaim, "you can find everything in the house and do everything by machine!" They invoke Ethiopia's material poverty as a whole and bemoan the country's lack of economic development, especially its paucity of factories and poor infrastructure. The ultimate problem of Ethiopia, they believe, is the "ignorance" of its population which results from a lack of education.

Negative comments about Ethiopia are usually uttered by young people who are doing well in Israel and who want to distance themselves from Ethiopia, and by people who have just returned from a visit to Ethiopia. Their image of the beautiful homeland is shattered by the poverty they encounter there. Before, the towns and roads of Ethiopia appeared impressive and wealthy to the Beta Israel, then impoverished villagers. But to Israeli urban citizens, they now appear dilapidated and extremely impoverished.

Excluding a tiny minority of ardent critics, negative comments about Ethiopia are usually qualified to lessen their impact. Sometimes they are quickly supplemented by positive comments. Alternatively, the stress is placed on lack of economic resources to exploit the land and pay for education, rather than on negative qualities intrinsic to the country or to the people. In addition, Ethiopia's poverty is situated in the present, beginning at a time *after* the Beta Israel left the country. For example, "the roads are so bad now, there are so many beggars on the streets - it was not like that when we were there!". Another tactic to dispel any image that the Beta Israel were poor in Ethiopia is to claim that Ethiopian poverty is predominantly found in town, rather than in the villages where they used to live. For example, if a youngster comments on beggars he saw on the streets of Ethiopia in a TV documentary, he is soon assured that poverty is only an urban phenomenon: in the villages the grain is plentiful.

This ardent denial of former poverty in Ethiopian villages has strong political motivations. To strengthen their legitimacy in Israel, Ethiopians stress their religious motivations for immigrating and thereby disclaim any economic motivation (see Chapter Four). Former

poverty is also denied because, as I argue in Chapter Seven, one of the ways in which Ethiopian Jewish immigrants deal with the bewildering present is to recall an ideal past.

## II. Ethiopian Traditions

Beta Israel are proud of the Ethiopian cultural traditions and norms of behaviour which they shared with their former Christian and Muslim neighbours.

### 1. *Ethiopian Behaviour (huneta)*

#### ***Respect***

Respect (*kebr*) is a fundamental organising principle for social intercourse, perhaps second only to kinship, and the most frequently stated dislike of Israelis is their lack of respect and rudeness. Visiting others, speech, dress, greetings, and social behaviour are predicated on the notion of respect<sup>73</sup>. An attitude of respect is required in particular for persons senior in status. For example, a junior should always defer to his seniors in matters of judgement, serve them, greet them as a subordinate, listen attentively when they speak, never contradict them, eat after them, and never use the name which the older generation use to address them, substituting instead new names or formal terms of address.

#### ***Strength***

Ethiopians pride themselves on their 'strong' and steadfast nature. They can withstand deprivation and physical hardship:

"We are able to fight for eight days without water."

Referring to Israelis' siestas: "You are like Ethiopians - you do not need to sleep in the day"

They contrast Ethiopian strength with Israeli weakness. A classic example of the latter provides the subject of a favourite Ethiopian anecdote: "During *astasreyoy* (the Day of Atonement, on which it is necessary to fast for one day) you hear ambulances all day coming to fetch the *farenge* who have fainted!"

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<sup>73</sup> Foreign commentators can be critical of Ethiopian respect: "Politeness is (like truth and love and much besides) a commodity to be traded with in Amhara society, and the courtesy that has charmed so many may not always be spontaneous and come from the heart. In many cases it is a mere pose and pretence"

## ***Reserve and suspicion***

Ethiopians do not “speak the content of their stomach”, hiding the truth to keep knowledge away from unwelcome ears. An Ethiopian does not automatically say where he has been, and sometimes gives a false answer when asked, just to avoid a nosy question, even when he has nothing to hide. Lying, or saying “I do not know” when you do know, is acceptable social behaviour. A clever person (*gobaz*) discloses just what is strictly necessary<sup>74</sup>.

I was often reprimanded by my Ethiopian hosts for being “like a baby and saying everything”. “Keep things in your tummy!” I was frequently told. Even a verbal expression of affection is uncomely behaviour for an adult.

Given Ethiopian reserve, suspicion is regarded by them as a necessary and valued quality. A clever person is one who doubts whatever is said to him, even by his own brother, and who can quickly evaluate the verity of a statement. “To trust a man, you have to bury him first”, goes the saying. Ethiopians often assume that a person is guilty until proven innocent. The idea that people, especially the Israelis, are out to “get you” is common<sup>75</sup>.

When an Ethiopian dies in hospital, it is the result of a “killing” by the doctors, rather than their inability to save life.

I asked young Shlomo: “why are you always so quiet?” He replied: “People are bad so I stay quiet!” I doubted the sincerity of the answer, but the point is that Shlomo implies a notion of inherent human “badness”, which he, being ‘clever’, does not want to be fooled by, and so stays quiet.

## ***Gossip***

As much as the qualities of reserve and suspicion are valued, gossip is criticised. This critique is all the more vehement given the fact that gossip is rife in Ethiopian neighbourhoods.

I accompanied a young girl to a secret appointment in hospital. She was terrified when we encountered an Ethiopian member of the hospital staff. I tried to reassure her: “don’t worry, she won’t tell anybody.” To which the response was: “She is Ethiopian!”

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(Molvaer 1995:152). What for Molvaer is “*mere* pose and pretence” is, for an Ethiopian, essential to proper behaviour: form is as important as content.

<sup>74</sup> Molvaer states that the Amhara want to keep life secret “to an almost ridiculous extent”. He notes that they tell blatant lies about quite harmless things, such as where they were the previous evening (and nothing sinister was involved). When he knew the truth and asked why they had said a lie, he was answered: “It is none of your business!” (1995: 63).

<sup>75</sup> Ashkenazi (1995) argues that Ethiopians operate with a concept of ‘malevolent coincidence’ - that personal ills are caused by an external agency, a spirit or a human, so that accusations of specific or vague nebulous intent by specific individuals or institutions accompany almost any adverse incident. He details a number of cases in which Ethiopian immigrants blamed welfare workers (whether Ethiopian or Israeli) for being ‘the cause’ of a rise in rent, or the accident of a child. In Israel, the malevolency is often regarded as emanating from welfare workers who are directly to “blame” for a rise in rent

Aba Negusse spoke in a quiet tone of voice about a neighbour who had claimed to be in financial difficulty: “she has plenty of money in the bank, NIS 8000!”. His nephew put his hands to his ears and said in a harsh tone of voice: “Ah! do not speak about people like that!”

## 2. *Ethiopian Customs (ye'agar baal)*

Ethiopians are proud of their Ethiopian heritage and attempt as far as possible to maintain former customs in Israel. Every house has a proud display of Ethiopian handicrafts, such as colourful baskets and embroidered designs. Ethiopian food and coffee are the most obvious ethnic markers given their centrality to daily life. Mourning the dead is another Ethiopian custom which the Beta Israel maintain proudly in Israel.

### *Food: injera and meat*

Aba Negusse describes the bewilderment of his first days in Israel: “... I did not know what anything was.... then the neighbours gave us *injera* and then we bought a *mugogo* (a large frying pan to make *injera* ) and we made *injera* and thus we lived happily until today.”

At the end of my stay in Aba Negusse’s home, I offered to leave him some furniture I had acquired: “What good will these be to us, now that you will not be here to say ‘how are you?’ and to eat *injera* with?”

A funeral lament about a deceased former neighbour: “Oh my neighbour, people who ate together and drank together, now they cry when the other dies!”

Muluye told me that Worknesh complained that her husband “eats” elsewhere all the time, which meant, Muluye added, that he has another woman.

These examples illustrate the symbolic importance of food, and *injera* in particular: in the first example, it is the symbol of a “normal” life - only when *injera* was prepared and eaten in the home, could life in Israel begin in earnest<sup>76</sup>; in the others, it symbolises pleasant co-habitation and sociability. *Injera*, a flat, sour, porous pancake, is the staple diet of northern Ethiopia and remains that of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Israel. In Ethiopia, high-quality *injera* was made from *teff* flour (*eragrostis vulgare*), in Israel wheat flour is substituted, and the Beta Israel complain about the resulting decrease in nutritional value and taste. Over the last few years however, imported *teff* has become increasingly available, albeit at much higher cost than wheat flour, and most women prepare their batter with a least 10% *teff*<sup>77</sup>. An *injera* pancake is served with a stew called *wot*. *Wot* is made from vegetables, potatoes,

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<sup>76</sup> As mentioned in the last chapter, the coffee ceremony is one of Ethiopians’ most cherished customs and a requirement for proper sociability (see Anteby 1996: 229-233) .

<sup>77</sup> *Injera* with a much higher portion of *teff* is served in affluent households, to convalescents and to people who are possessed by spirits who demand *teff injera*.



pulses or meat and is generally served in a small pile in the centre of an *injera* pancake. The dish is eaten by tearing a small piece of *injera* from the edge with the right hand and making a bite-sized parcel with a little *wot*. Meat *wot* is the preferred accompaniment to *injera*, and is a prerequisite for ceremonial occasions, such as receiving relatives from a distant town and celebrations. Meat *wot* for home use is prepared by women in the kitchen, but meat *wot* for celebrations is prepared out of doors by men in large pots over make-shift fires<sup>78</sup>.

### ***Lamenting the dead***

Ethiopian Jews have maintained almost intact their mourning rituals during and after funerals in Israel, even if the burial itself is no longer in their hands<sup>79</sup>. I attended a funeral in a village in Ethiopia and though the burial itself was markedly different, the funeral lamenting prior to and during the burial was strikingly similar to the gatherings I witnessed in Israel.

On the morning of the funeral, bus loads of Ethiopians and groups of Ethiopians on foot converge outside the house of mourning, usually in the concrete area under the apartment block. Soon, between five hundred to two thousand people are gathered. As a group of mourners approaches, people emit a low humming sound, specific to funerals, and some emit wails and loud cries sporadically. Men cross their hands on their heads. Women also do this or hold up the tip of their *gabi* over their mouth. Faces are constricted with pain, and those that are not crying with real tears, screw up their eyes to make out that they are. The group advances in very slow steps and waits for an appropriate time to make its entry.

The scene at this point could be a stage-set. At the centre of the space, a throng of people, clad in their white *gabi*, lament and wail. They are arranged in concentric circles around chief mourners. The latter are engaged in the most extraordinary movements, a veritable funeral dance. They sway to and fro, hopping from one foot to another, going around in a small circle at the centre of the mass of people. They make abrupt bodily gestures, extending their arms forward, bringing them back, raising them, bending low to the ground and making circular movements with their hands. Feet bob up and down and bodies sway from side to side. Facial expressions are trance-like, eyes gazing in space: chief mourners are possessed by grief. In a corner, sitting in a circle, the priests sing their funeral prayers, their colourful umbrellas adding decorum. Around the fringes of the space, groups of relatives sit in silence or chat quietly.

When a new group of mourners arrive, the chief mourners extricate themselves from the centre of the lamenting mass. Facing the incoming group, the chief mourners continue their wails and gestures with renewed vigour. Across an area of empty space, the new arrivals, humming and crying, watch the chief mourners perform their funeral dance before they advance rapidly to greet them. Each newcomer clasps the shoulder of each chief mourner and the gesture is reciprocated.

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<sup>78</sup> See Anteby (1996: 179-205) for a discussion of the gender basis and symbolism in Beta Israel cooking.

<sup>79</sup> Beta Israel mourning rituals are elaborate. After the funeral, a week's wake is observed by close relatives of the deceased in the latter's home. Days and nights are spent sitting, chatting and wailing in ritualistic manner when visitors arrive. Special ritual commemoration ceremonies and "crying" sessions (*ilksaw*) take place on the third, seventh, and thirtieth day after the funeral. That on the seventh day is the most elaborate, with a large feast of meat and *injera* served to hundreds of mourners throughout the day. On each anniversary of the death, a commemorative gathering is held, either with a feast or just with *dabbo* (holy bread). For a good account of contemporary mourning practices (see Anteby 1996: 436-461).

All the while, the mass of mourners lament: two at a time, mourners take turns to compose verses about the deceased, singing them out aloud, verse by verse, accompanied by the cries and wails of the rest of the group. Two framed photos of the deceased circulate, and a mourner wishing to lament takes hold of one of them. The lamentations recall positive and salient aspects of the deceased's life, highlight specific memories, invoke previously deceased relatives, and describe the pain and longing felt at the death of a loved-one.

A few verses which were sang at the funeral of an old man, Aba Mengistu:  
"Oh Ayiya [affectionate form of father], my tummy, when we ate together and drank together, when we eat *injera*..."  
"My country Ethiopia... Oh my relatives... the ox of mourning... come be ready to plough, because the hero is dead."  
"From now on, Solomon, Tsegaye, Ayelign, do not get into fights with others, because the one who used to arrive quickly to help you... oh Ayiya is dead!"  
At the funeral of a young soldier, Tadesse Telahun:  
"Ah, Tadesse Telahun, you have been harvested while still green!"  
"Oh my village! At my sister Meles's [the mother of the deceased] house, the in-laws came, the relatives were invited, they were received all together like the wedding of before!" [everyone should have gathered for the boy's wedding not his funeral]  
"Are you feeling it? I can feel my stomach. There is no-one to listen to us and we did not say good bye."  
"Oh the mother! She carried him in her tummy for nine months, she carried him on her back for two years, she breast-fed him two years. What kind of son is he? He has returned to her tummy, tying up her intestines!"<sup>80</sup>

## C. The True Jews

The Beta Israel are proud Ethiopians; they are also proud Jews. In Israel, different *edot* (lit.: community, Hebrew, means Jews from same country of origin) maintain their own regional variations, worship in their own synagogues and celebrate a number of ethnic annual holidays (Soroff 1995: 224, see also Goldberg 1987). Even though there is much internal variation in Judaism, Beta Israel practice and belief is markedly different from all other Jewish groups. Unlike all other Diaspora Jewish communities, the Beta Israel did not pray in Hebrew and were unacquainted with post-Biblical Rabbinical writings and teachings. They did not therefore celebrate Bar Mitzvah, an important central Jewish initiation rite, or

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<sup>80</sup> Another type of funeral verses, called *fukera*, is reserved for great men, heroes who have killed people or lions. People do not wail while it is sung, instead an even more elaborate dance, involving all the mourners, is performed. An extract from a *fukera*: "... So many dead bodies, the mother of the killer, why does she not get darker and skinnier, when she held fire in her belly for nine months?... The killer, the organiser of the army with horses, wherever he goes along the valleys, he builds huts of dead bodies...  
Oh Dessie, the head of a tiger, who could go around your village?..  
With a long *alvin* [the name of a gun] he kills..."

significant Jewish holidays such as *Hanukkah*, the *seder* night and *Purim*<sup>81</sup>. Not only do Beta Israel adults uphold these differences, many also claim religious superiority compared to mainstream Judaism, both in the intensity and in the nature of their practice and belief. Witnessing the predominantly secular character of Israel, where, with the exception of the religious minority, Israelis drive cars on the Sabbath, dress immodestly and generally fail to observe religious precepts, Ethiopian Jews assert that their religious practice is more intense and fervent, and lament the negative impact of immigration on their youngsters, who increasingly adopt lax standards of religious observance. They pride themselves on the nature of their religious belief and practice because it rests solely on the Orit<sup>82</sup>, unadulterated by later Rabbinical texts: while all other Jews dropped or substantially modified biblical purity laws and marriage rules, the Beta Israel proudly upheld the faith of their ancestors (Soroff 1995: 178; Trevisan Semi 1985: 104).

Most Ethiopian Jews make few compromises to adopt normative Jewish religious practices. As one priest said to me, after I asked whether he had learned Israeli religious practices: “Why? What for? No, here I just need to learn the language.” It was self-evident to him that his religious knowledge was in no way deficient. Holidays which were unknown to most Ethiopian Jews prior to migration are barely taken into account, and are celebrated only in so far as community workers or children organise parties. When religious difference lead to conflict, most Ethiopian adults are reluctant to make concessions to the Israeli way.

According to Ethiopian Jewish practice, the Sabbath is the holiest of holidays and grave illness and acute danger are the only legitimate excuses to desecrate it. When the proper day for the circumcision of a boy (the eighth day) falls on a Saturday, it is postponed until the day after (see also Leslau 1951: xvi). For other, Jews, however, circumcision on the eighth day is imperative, even if it falls on a Saturday. Rows erupt between young Ethiopian parents who wish to comply with the Israeli way, their parents, and Israeli circumcisers. The elders are usually forced to back down since the circumciser can refuse to carry out the operation on the ninth day.

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<sup>81</sup> Accounts of Beta Israel religious particularities abound (Leslau 1951, 1957, Schoenberger 1975, Aescoly 1943, Ben-Dor 1986, Shelemay 1986).

<sup>82</sup> The Orit comprises the five books of the Old Testament, called *Torah* in Hebrew. For a discussion of Beta Israel literature, see Shelemay (1986).

# I. Religious Belief and practice

## 1. Myths of Origin and Colour

There are two main variants of Beta Israel's myths of origin: the Beta Israel are descendants of the union between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, and they are descendants of original Israelites who migrated via Egypt after the destruction of the First Temple in the sixth century BC or after the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century AD. The Solomon / Sheba myth is shared with Amhara Ethiopians, who trace their royal dynasty to King Solomon<sup>83</sup>. The Beta Israel account for this fact by explaining that the Amharas used to be Israelites but they converted to Christianity, while the Beta Israel remained faithful to “*amlak*” (God). Given the number of stories of origin, some informants remained confused.

I asked an old man about the origin of the Beta Israel. A young man answered in his place. He first said that the Beta Israel are from the ‘seed’ (*zer*) of one of Jacob's twelve children; his wife completed: of Dan's. He also recounted the Queen of Sheba and Solomon story. I asked which of the two he believed in. He was hesitant and his wife answered that she believes in Dan because in the Bible it is written that Israelites went to Havesh (Ethiopia) via Qwara (a region in North West Ethiopia). The other story however is not in the Bible, and Sheba was not Israelite herself. Her husband agreed: the Dan story is religion and the Sheba story is a “people's story”. The old man apologised for his ignorance and suggested I ask a priest.

Origin stories were mixed together, detailing several waves of migration all at once.

A young priest assured me that Jews came to Ethiopia in three stages. He first told me the story of the Queen of Sheba, saying that King Solomon sent back with Menelick one member of each of the twelve tribes, (Reuvel, Joshua, etc.). Afterwards, following the destruction of the First Temple, when Jews went to Babylon, some came down to Ethiopia. Then later, others came from Yemen.

Myths of origin have in common the notion that the Beta Israel are the descendants of the original Israelites who inhabited the land of Israel.

The notion of direct descent is thought of literally. Note this elder: “Our ancestor is Gideon<sup>84</sup>. The last Gideon - there were seven of them - had seven children, who were all rulers. One of them was Shashura, and married Kantiva Herui (the mayor Herui), and they gave birth to Kantiva Gebru and Tesfu. Gebru was mayor of Gondar and his daughter was Wayzero Tsayveva (Mrs Tsayveva). She married Khaled and gave birth to Atarshign. She married Atila and gave birth to Biterf. Biterf had Wuvenesh and

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<sup>83</sup> Abbink (1990) provides a comprehensive survey of Beta Israel origin myths, contrasting them to the dominant Amhara-Tigray origin myths. The origins of the Solomonic empire are recounted in the popular Amhara text, the *Kibra Nagast*.

<sup>84</sup> Several informants stated that the dynasty of the seven King Gideons began after Israelites migrated from Egypt towards Quwara after the destruction of the Second Temple (see also Schoenberger 1975: 11-14, Abbink 1990).

Wuvenesh gave birth to my father. So there are ten generations from the last Gideon to me.”

Two points follow from the idea that the Beta Israel are direct descendants from Israelites: the emigration to Israel is a 'return' to Israel, and Ethiopians and other Jews have the same ancestry. These notions are fundamental to Ethiopian Jewish sense of legitimacy and belonging in Israel. It is therefore unsurprising that educated Ethiopian Jews vociferously reject the current historical theory about their origins, which reject any direct link with ancient Israelites. The Israeli historian Steven Kaplan, the principal proponent of this view, regularly suffered verbal abuse and even the odd death threat from Ethiopian Jews (personal communication 11/94). I soon learned not to mention Steven Kaplan's name in front of educated Ethiopians, since it immediately provoked a vehement tirade denouncing him as a fraud.

After accounting for their common origin with other Jews, a basic problem remains for the Beta Israel: how to explain the darkness of their skin colour compared to other Jews? Originally they were white like the *farenge*. Sometimes, intermarriage with the host population is given as a “reason” for their dark skin, although this is not a popular explanation since it threatens the image of the religious purity of the Beta Israel. More often, they blame the effect of Ethiopia's hot sun. In any case, the Beta Israel do not consider themselves 'black' (*tiquir*) like “Africans”: they are 'red' (*qay*)<sup>85</sup>.

## **2. Religious belief: the Bible**

Aba Wuvie loved to sit and write out verses from the Bible in large letters with coloured pens into large notebooks. He never went to school but learned to read and write from priests. He often read the Bible to himself, his voice just audible above the sound of the TV.

Beta Israel religion is based on a strong belief in the Bible. The Bible is regarded as being the word of God handed to Moses, and its authenticity is never questioned. Religious practices and moral stand-points are legitimised by reference to the Bible. Thus Beta Israel purity laws, marriage rules, and codes of conduct are adopted because it that is what is laid down in the Bible, and no further explanation is required. Whenever I inquired about the

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<sup>85</sup> Non-slave (*chewa*) Beta Israel do consider Beta Israel slaves (*barya*) black, and sometimes relate a separate myth of origin for the “black” *barya*. The *barya* are descendants of Cain, who was cursed by his father Noah that all his children should become black and become slave to his (good) brother Yafet's children. A Beta Israel man whom I knew was *barya* himself, also told me the story of the cursed son of Noah, but he included all Beta Israel in the cursed “black” category.

difference between an Ethiopian and *farenge* practice, the former was always justified on Biblical grounds.

Qes Mulugeta defended the Ethiopian practice of prostration in the prayer house: “The *farenge* do not do prostrate because they think that it is like Islam.” He then recounted the Biblical story of Daniel who continued to prostrate despite the king’s orders and was thrown in the lion’s den, but God protected him.

Ethiopians believe in the Bible *only*<sup>86</sup>. Whites are criticised for their adherence to “books written not by God but by men like you and me”, that is Jewish texts such as rabbinical commentaries and the Talmud. The Beta Israel consider themselves to be the last “true Jews” who follow strictly the scriptures of the Bible and unashamedly know nothing of subsequent Rabbinical writings. Many Ethiopian Jews, and elders in particular, have a detailed knowledge of aspects of the Bible, particularly eventful stories and genealogies, which they love to recount.

Ethiopians believe in a supreme Being, who exists “out there” and watches over people in life and judges the deceased (see Shelemay 1996). God is present in, and to a large extent determines, daily life. Daily speech is full of references to God such as “what do I know? It is God who knows!”, “by the will of God!”, “thank God”. God is also evoked in all daily greetings: ‘Hello’ in Amharic means literally ‘may He grant you health’ (*tehna yistellin*).

Alequa Birre, referring to election outcomes, said: “It is God who votes.” His wife, always more moderate, corrected him: “God provides the rain and we plant.” [I.e. daily life is a joint venture between man and God - men did cast votes, even if God had a role in the outcome].

### **3. Daily Religious Practice: Prayers and Sabbath (qidame)**

Religion is part of everyday life for Ethiopians: elders pray several times a day, religious blessings are uttered whenever coffee is served, the Sabbath is strictly observed by all adults and the vast majority of young people, regular fast days are observed, and God is invoked in daily speech, his wrath guarded against in daily behaviour. In addition to daily practice, the calendar is marked by holidays, some equivalent to normative Jewish ones, others specific to Ethiopians. While an extensive survey of Beta Israel religious practice is beyond the scope

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<sup>86</sup> Proclaiming a strict adherence to the Bible creates problems in justifying beliefs in spirits, which the Beta Israel priests say is “not religion”. A typical interchange:

"- I never go to those medicine men! It is against the Bible!  
- So, where did you get that amulet from?  
- Oh, I just went once!"

of this thesis<sup>87</sup>, I describe a few fragments to give a flavour of the form of Beta Israel religious practice in Israel.

## ***The Prayer House***

The Ethiopian house of prayer in Afula Tse'era is housed in a bomb shelter ("*moadon*", Hebrew)<sup>88</sup>. The Beta Israel refer to it by a variety of names: *tsolet bet* ("house of prayers"), *Mesgid* (Ethiopian Muslim term for prayer house), *bet kneset* (synagogue, Hebrew)<sup>89</sup>. The room is sparse: a small table is used for offerings of food and drink, a few dozen chairs are arranged in rows, some Hebrew prayers books are displayed on a small shelf, and glasses are stored in a cupboard. Sabbath prayers take place at sundown on Friday, and early in the morning and at sundown on Saturdays. Prayers are also held in the prayer-house on religious holidays and for mourning rituals.

When a man entered the prayer house, he prostrated, touching his forehead to the ground, with his hands and knees on the ground. He repeated this gesture several times, ideally ten. The men sat in rows of chairs in the front of the room. The women occupied seats lining the wall, to the side of and behind the men.

Until the last month of my stay, the neighbourhood lacked a resident priest. As a result, prayers were spontaneous and individuals often recited their own prayers separately from each other. A learned man, who had undergone a few years of training as a *ges* (priest) in his youth chanted prayers in Ge'ez, the Ethiopian liturgical language. Others followed him or read slowly from the Bible in Amharic. Young men rarely attended, but when they did, they read from a Hebrew prayer book. Most men stood or sat in silence. Altogether a strange uncoordinated sound was produced. Old women sat or stood, their arms a little forward, with their open palms fluttering up and down gently. Younger women sat in silence or chatted quietly. At specific points during the service, individuals prostrated themselves several times, or made body movements to that effect. When priests visited for the Sabbath and when a priest, after much persistent requests, finally took up residence in the neighbourhood, prayers were more formal. The priest(s) chanted the service loudly in Ge'ez. The congregation remained silent most of the time, but participated by prostrating and saying "amen" and occasionally a few verses at the appropriate moments. The atmosphere was generally pensive and solemn, albeit relaxed. A consensus seemed to emerge to bring the prayers to a close, after about two hours and the most senior man present made a closing blessing in Amharic. Then, with smiles on their faces, everyone stood and greeted each other in both Amharic and Hebrew (*shabbat shalom!*).

After the Saturday morning service, around eight am, the congregation chatted merrily, drinking beer and eating home-made Sabbath bread (*dabbo*) which women donated. Whoever had provided the crates of beer for the occasion went forward and stated the purpose of his offering: in memory of a deceased relative, the birth of a grandchild, a Bar Mitzvah. At this time, formal announcements (e.g. forthcoming meetings and organised trips) and discussions (e.g. strategies to get a resident priest)

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<sup>87</sup> For descriptions of religious belief and practice in Ethiopia, see Leslau (1951, 1957) and Shelemay (1986). According to Kaplan (1995) no good account of religious practice in Israel has so far been published.

<sup>88</sup> *Moadonim* are small concrete buildings which have been built in every residential area of Israel for citizens to take refuge in an emergency. They are open for use by the public, and are home to community groups such as clubs for elders and youth groups.

<sup>89</sup> Shelemay describes services in Beta Israel synagogues in Ethiopia (1986, 1991: 39-41)



were sometimes held. Eventually, congregants went home in pairs and small groups to make blessings over the Sabbath bread at home.

Judging from second-hand accounts and my visits to other neighbourhoods, the above description of Afula Tse'era's prayer house is typical of Ethiopian informal prayer houses throughout the country. In 1995, there were about three more formal Ethiopian synagogues, all of which are housed in purpose-built buildings. These follow normative Jewish practice more closely and combine standard Hebrew prayers and Ge'ez prayers.

### ***Daily Prayers and blessings***

Older Ethiopians pray at regular intervals throughout the day, at dawn, dusk, and prior to consuming coffee, alcohol and food.

Just visible in the first light of dawn, Abeba, a middle-age woman, was standing by the window, draped in her white *gabi*, with her outstretched palms lightly fluttering. She was muttering a prayer in a supplicant sing-song tone. After a little persuasion, on another occasion, she let me tape her evening prayer: "He who gave us a peaceful day, may he also give us a peaceful night. Our creator, our maker, Blessed be you. May you make us healthy. People who go out to work, may they return in peace and health. People who travel to other places, may they return peacefully<sup>90</sup>. Do not bring us any bad, only good."

Alequa Birre blessed *Shavuot* (Harvest Festival), over *dabbo* (Holy Bread) and coffee: "Today it is *mayrar* (Harvest Festival). May you be healthy. May God send the bad away from us and bring the good closer. May God make this a place of wisdom and long age. May he make this a country of peace. May God give us more and bless us more. May God return us to the old days of our forefathers. May God widen the narrow road, return the lost way. May He bring a time when all can live according to the beliefs of their fathers. May God prevent us from eating more than we need and from becoming intoxicated. May God bless this country for our children, even after we have passed away. May God not take away the wealth that we now have... May [archangel] Michael bless this day and give us food... It is said that anybody who has done good things will live longer.... May God accept our offering." Alequa Birre then recited a standard prayer in Ge'ez : "Blessed be He the God of Israel, the God of Everything...".

### ***The Saturday Sabbath***

Aba Samagn: "The main thing for us is *qidame, sanbat* (Saturday, Sabbath). God created the world and rested on the seventh day and said to Avraham, Yizhac, Yaacov and their children: 'I created the world, heaven and the earth and the animals, and on the seventh day I rested and so this is a sign between you and me.' This is an order from God, this is our sign."

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<sup>90</sup> This prayer was said in early March 1995, just after the spate of Hamas suicide bomb attacks on Jerusalem buses.

In common with other Jews, the observance of the Saturday Sabbath is central to religious practice. However, a large portion of Ethiopians, certainly those in my neighbourhood, maintain their own Sabbath customs and make little effort to adopt standard Israeli practice.

Preparations for Sabbath begin on Friday. In the afternoon, food is bought and cooked, houses are cleaned, bodies are washed. In the early evening, older men go to the neighbourhood prayer house. A fundamental precept of Judaism is that the Sabbath, and all its prohibitions, starts approximately around sunset on Friday. In Beta Israel theory, this is also true. However, in practice, the vast majority of households I got to know, did not begin Sabbath prohibitions until Saturday a.m. or late Friday evening<sup>91</sup>. In a household which is extremely strict on Saturday (in which for instance the elders do not drink hot drinks from the hot plate<sup>92</sup> as this in their view goes against the spirit of Sabbath), on Friday evening, no Sabbath prayers are recited at home, the TV is on, food is prepared for the morrow and the hot plate is switched on just before bed-time. I once even saw an Ethiopian priest drive to the prayer house on a Friday evening, a good half hour after the official start of the Sabbath. Households who wished to follow Israeli custom started to observe Sabbath prohibitions on Friday evening, but waited until everyone had finished getting ready and the last cup of coffee had been drunk, often at least two hours after sunset<sup>93</sup>. Young religious Ethiopian Jews, who have learned normative Jewish practice in religious boarding schools, do follow standard Israeli practice and cease all activities by sunset on Friday.

A little confusion often accompanies the enactment of Israeli-style practice for the older generation. An elderly woman in her sixties lit the Sabbath candles according to normative Jewish custom, covering her eyes. She recited a blessing in Amharic and asked her seventeen-year old nephew, the oldest male present, to cut the *dabbo*, but he refused. The two were negotiating cultures: she wanted to attempt Israeli style and therefore asked him, as a man, to cut the Sabbath bread; he, however, was respecting his aunt according to Ethiopian custom, whereby her seniority made her the rightful person to cut the bread.

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<sup>91</sup> To my knowledge, no other ethnographer has noted Beta Israel laxity on Friday evenings. Soroff (1995: 202-6), in her study of Ethiopian Jewish religious practice asserts that the Sabbath began on Friday evening, in common with other Jews. Her study was conducted amongst 1981 immigrants, and it is possible that these have had more time to adjust to the country's norms, although most of the Operation Moses immigrants that I knew were just as lax as the later wave of immigrants on Friday evening.

<sup>92</sup> Religiously observant Israeli households use a hot plate to keep food and water hot throughout the Sabbath without contravening the Sabbath injunction not to light a fire.

<sup>93</sup> Shelemay noted that in Ethiopia, Beta Israel continued to eat well after sun down on the eve of Yom Kippur, in effect starting the fast on Yom Kippur morning (1991: 45). Schoenberger (1975: 222) mentions, albeit without comment, that after the fire burnt out on Friday evening, the Beta Israel lit kerosine lamps. When I questioned one of my informants on this point (a young woman), she said that those families which could afford kerosine lamps could not afford to have them burning more than strictly necessary. This confirms my observations that religious holidays - such as the Sabbath and Yom Kippur - begin in earnest for most Beta Israel on the morning of the holy day, rather than at sundown the evening, which is the case for other Jews.

For Ethiopian Jews, the Sabbath, called “*qidame*” (lit: Saturday), is very much a Saturday affair. On this day, the vast majority of Ethiopian Jews obey the Biblical prohibition on work, which means a ban on most daily activities such as cooking, driving, watching TV, writing, and so on.

Saturday morning at Fantanesh’s. Once Fantanesh’s husband Wuvie had returned from the prayer house, and most of the children, and visiting cousins had risen, everyone assembled around the coffee table. Wuvie cut the home-baked Sabbath bread, reciting standard prayers in Amharic, and we each received a small piece in our cupped hands<sup>94</sup>. The daughters started to prepare breakfast by crumbling the bread into a large bowl, adding home-made milk curd, salad and hot chilly sauce. Fantanesh stirred it all around, and served us in bowls. One of the daughters offered tea and instant coffee, made from with hot water from the Sabbath hot plate.

Saturday is a day to receive guests, visit neighbours and kin, and sleep. On warm days, the streets fill with small groups of Ethiopians, often dressed in their traditional Ethiopian clothes, on their neighbourhood tours. Chairs are brought out to the front garden for neighbours to sit, chat and laugh there. Youngsters climb over the school fence to play football on the school grounds. Towards the end of the afternoon, the older men tend to congregate in the shade by the supermarket before making their way to the prayer house for closing prayers. When they come home, their wives have already got the TV on and the coffee ready. The neighbours are invited and the Sabbath is ended over much needed coffee, often accompanied by popcorn, a favourite coffee *course* (coffee food accompaniment).

The Sabbath is spoken of with pleasure and anticipation during the rest of the week, a day to spend relaxing with kin and neighbours, a day to obey God and demonstrate religious fervour. In Israel, the Sabbath is also a day in which all the hassles and difficulties of everyday life can be forgotten. On Saturday, the Beta Israel are not working in factories like Arabs: they are proud Jews and good Jews, like other observant Israelis.

#### 4. *Annual Holidays*

I once asked old Aba Wuvie about Beta Israel religious traditions. He answered quoting God in direct speech: “The main thing for us is *qidame, sanbat* (Sabbath)... Secondly, ‘I took you out of Egypt, away from Pharaoh, and you shall respect that wherever you live and eat *kitta* (unleavened bread) for seven days’. That is the *kitta ba’al* (Passover, lit: unleavened bread holiday). Thirdly ‘from the time that I took you out of Egypt, in the month of Nissan, seven months after is *brhan sereqa* (Ethiopian New Year, lit: the light appeared), it is a happy holiday and you will celebrate. We came out of the dark into the light, respect this.’ Fourth, after ten days, there will be *astasreyo* (the Day of Atonement), a day on which we ask for forgiveness. It is like dropping the load we carry, we drop the sins we committed. From night till night, fast and praise God and make your body weak. Fifth, five days later it is *baal meselet, das ba’al* (the holiday of the tabernacles). Make a *das* (dwelling) in front of your house from leaves and be happy for eight days.”

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<sup>94</sup> In some households, where teenagers are religious and have attended religious boarding school, some Hebrew prayers are added and grape juice is drunk prior to eating the *dabbo*.

From Aba Wuvie, we learn that the Beta Israel celebrated all the biblical holidays, but not the post-biblical holidays such as Hanukkah or Purim (Leslau 1951: xxix-xxxvi)<sup>95</sup>. Their interpretation and practice of Jewish holidays remains at times quite different to that of their Israeli counterparts, as the following description of the Day of Atonement shows.

The Day of Atonement, traditionally the most sombre day in the Jewish calendar, was the most cheerful day in Afula Tse'era, and brought together in song and dance neighbours of all ages, with greater merriment than the most up-beat wedding<sup>96</sup>.

The Day of Atonement, Wednesday 4th October 1995, Afula Tse'era. In the prayer house, in the morning, the atmosphere and prayers were similar to a normal prayer day, except that the attendance was quadrupled. In the afternoon, the mood changed totally. The entrance to the prayer-house was full of people, young and old and kids chatting joyfully. The number of teenagers was surprising given that they usually stay well clear of the prayer house. Inside, men, women, youngsters and children all together formed a large circle which moved slowly round to the right. They sang a short refrain and danced rhythmically, a sort of hopping-cum-jumping, arms interlinked. The singing was interspersed with bouts of hissing and ululations. Everybody was smiling and laughing as they danced (unlike dancing at a wedding where facial expressions are often stone-rigid).

At about 4.30 p.m., people went home to fetch beer and bread to break the fast. There was some argument as to what time this should be: some said five p.m., some six. In fact the fast was broken in the prayer house at around 5.30 p.m., as the sun was setting, when everyone had reassembled with their offerings.

The Day of Atonement was explained to me as a day when you forgive people with whom you have quarrelled. Most older Beta Israel spoke of a "happy holiday".

An old woman: "On the seventh month, it is *astareyoy* (day of atonement). It is a holiday of joy (*yedessita ba'al*)."

A young woman: *astareyoy* was so wonderful in Ethiopia! My younger brothers, you would not believe it, fasted from the age of six and seven. All day was spent in the prayer house. The *zelen* (special chants for the day) were so beautiful as we danced like this, like that!"

Educated Ethiopians, who knew of the sombre style of the day in non-Ethiopian synagogues, explained the dancing and jumping as a method of fulfilling the alleged biblical commandment of exhausting oneself.

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<sup>95</sup> Older Beta Israel still mark certain traditional non-Jewish Ethiopian holidays, such as Ethiopian New Year and lunar holidays. For example: on the morning of the twelfth September, the Ethiopian New Year, Aba Negusse was up by six am and came into our room to fetch his best white Ethiopian clothes from the cupboard. He told me to get up to drink coffee. I battled with the live chicken in the bathroom before joining the cheerful coffee session, with freshly prepared popcorn. I downed my glass of straight *araki* (an aniseed liquor, similar to ouzo), served on special occasions. Aba Negusse then slaughtered the chicken which his wife proceeded to prepare. I left with him to greet neighbours for the New Year.

<sup>96</sup> Shelemay (1991: 39-41) observed an *astareyo* service in Ambover, near Gondar, in 1973 and commented: "For a Western Jew accustomed to sober observance on the day of repentance, the Beta Israel *astareyo* was an extraordinary contrast."

## 5. Bar Mitzvah

While Beta Israel have made little effort to adopt normative Jewish practice, they have wholeheartedly celebrate Bar Mitzvah - the main Jewish initiation rite, marking the thirteen-year-old boy's entry into adulthood. A parallel initiation for girls, called "*bat mitzvah*", is also now widespread in Israel. In Ethiopia, Bar Mitzvah was not practised<sup>97</sup>. As I was often told, "we did not do Bar Mitzvah. At that age we married our sons!" In Israel, boys' Bar Mitzvot and girls' Bat Mitzvot have become highly significant events for the Beta Israel and much effort and money is spent on the occasions. A Bar Mitzvah celebration is a new practice for Beta Israel, albeit with overtones of an old one. I present here a brief description, postponing till Chapter Six a discussion about why Beta Israel have chosen to adopt this particular *farenge* practice with such fervour.

The religious part of Bar Mitzvah is usually conducted at school, and the family is barely involved and often fail to attend<sup>98</sup>. However, Beta Israel who have been in the country longer and whose sons do not attend boarding school often arrange this aspect themselves.

Parents, siblings and close relatives of the Bar Mitzvah boy filled the Sephardi synagogue in which they had joined Israeli worshippers. They sat quietly, a little nervous, more observers than participants. After the service, the boy's parents laid on customary (Israeli) festive food for all worshippers to share: soft drinks, kosher wine, sweets, biscuits, fruit. Then, the Ethiopians departed back to the hosts' home. A non-Ethiopian Israeli took the boy on his shoulders, as is customary, but he had to be asked to slow down as he walked too fast. Some younger Ethiopians tried to initiate the singing of the appropriate Hebrew songs. Older Ethiopians were willing to join in, and clapped their hands, but a feeling of unease overtook the group. Then some uncles began to sing celebratory Ethiopian songs, prancing and clapping their hands, the women ululated and the mood lifted. At home, in the back garden, tables were set, and a blessing was made in Hebrew by a young man over the *chola* bread, and a *dabbo* blessed in Amharic by an elder. Relatives ate large quantities of *injera* with meat stew and chatted all day. As soon as the Sabbath was over, they sang and danced to traditional Ethiopian tunes played on a *masenko* (Ethiopian stringed instrument) and drums until the early morning.

The celebration of a Bar Mitzvah is a new ritual for the Beta Israel, but they usurp it to replace an abandoned practice: the parents' celebration of their children's wedding. This slippage is so clear-cut that many older Ethiopians speak of the Bar Mitzvah as a wedding (*surg*), and refer to the Bar Mitzvah boy as the bridegroom (*mushera*).

Aba Telahun urged his son to look after himself during the week preceding his Bar Mitzvah celebration: "Do not go into the sun, you are *mushera* (bride-groom)!"

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<sup>97</sup> I was told of a simple ritual, called *memfeq*, performed for boys around the age of ten which allows the meat of wild animals that they kill to be eaten. Money was given to the priest who blessed the boy. I have not seen this practice reported in other literature.

<sup>98</sup> New immigrants remain distinctly uncomfortable during Israeli-style ritual, such as during male circumcision, Bar Mitzvah, and prayers at the grave on day three, and absenteeism is therefore high.

Several parents explained that in Israel the children themselves organise their own weddings, so that the Bar Mitzvah is 'like a wedding'; it is the final celebration a parent lays on for his child, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood and independence. It is also the parents' chance to reaffirm their bonds with neighbours and kin, to display their ability to hold a large celebration, and to recoup debts owed to them from their own donations at earlier celebrations<sup>99</sup>.

## II. Purity laws

My neighbour Fantanesh and I made a deal: in exchange for English lessons for her children, she would give me lessons in Amharic language and Ethiopian customs. She chose the topic for the first lesson: purity practices. She told me vividly about the seven day sojourn in the menstrual hut surrounded by a ring of stones and the forty / eighty day sojourn there for the birth of a boy / girl, and the ensuing purification rituals. I asked about the confinement: "It was nice. You were never alone - always two or three women, or otherwise a child would stay with you. My mother brought me food."

### ***Purity laws in Ethiopia***

Ethiopian Jews' greatest source of pride is those traditions which make them the purest and 'cleanest' (*netsu*) of all Ethiopians and of all Jews: their marriage rules and purity laws.

Alequa Birre often spoke to me about Ethiopian religious superiority over the *farenge*: "There is no connection between the *datiim* (religious Jewish men, Hebrew) religion and ours. According to ours, we take out the animal's *shulda* (biblically impure sciatic nerve); the *farenge*, however, do not slaughter meat properly: we therefore cannot eat their meat, but they can eat ours because we slaughter according to the Bible. All this [he details several purity laws] was the law given to us by Moses. When a baby girl was born the mother stayed in a hut alone for eighty days. Here women who have given birth stay at home! We follow it [the Bible]! Here they call the country 'Israel', but it is just a name, we are the true Israel!"

Beta Israel purity laws follow closely biblical injunctions of Leviticus. In Ethiopia, women were segregated in a specially built "hut of the curse" (*mergem gojo*) for seven days during their menstrual periods and for forty days after the birth of a boy and eighty after the birth of a girl (Messing 1956, Leslau 1951: xiv, Schoenberger 1975: 86-97). Men who touched a corpse were unclean for seven days and those who had a wet dream were unclean for one day, and they had to remain outside of common dwellings during this period. For both men and women, the end of the unclean period was marked by ritual immersion in the river and a

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<sup>99</sup> The celebrations were very much the parents' day, rather than the boy's. People spoke of 'Telahun's Bar Mitzvah', where Telahun was the father of the boy, and parents always receive more attention than their son during the celebration itself.

thorough wash of clothes (Leslau 1951: xix, Trevisan Semi 1985: 105-6). A couple of female informants, including the wife of a priest, also whispered to me another source of male pollution: wet dreams (ejaculating during sleep).

Finally, contact with an impure person caused impurity (Trevisan Semi 1985: 106-7). This led to a number of stringent rules, which in former times, socially segregated the Beta Israel as a group. The practice of *attenkugn* precluded Beta Israel from touching non-Beta Israel. According to my informants, this practice ceased during the twentieth century, although its symbolic value in terms of boundary maintenance remained important (see Kaplan & Rosen 1993). Indirect contact was also avoided, resulting in a prohibition on eating non-Beta Israel food. While the sharing of food other than meat with the Amhara was resumed in modern times, the ban continued on eating meat from an animal which was not slaughtered by a Beta Israel.

Mama Tarikye: “.... at weddings the Christians are invited but they have their own tent set apart from ours and we give them a vat of *talla* and a sheep for them to slaughter and prepare. They are given *injera* but we do not touch them. Whatever left-overs they have, they are told to keep and take home with them. .. if my grandfather touched an Amhara, before entering the house he would first immerse himself into the river with his clothes. The reason for all these things is not that we hate the Amhara but because the Amhara woman does not stay outside during their menstrual periods. For us this is strictly forbidden. That is why we hate to touch them.” Mama Tarikye subsequently explained that ritual prohibitions on contact with Amhara were slackened after the “time of the Italians”, in the 1930s.

## 2. *Menstruation*

In Israel, Beta Israel women continue to consider menstruant women “unclean”. They do not have the option of secluding themselves away from home because of a lack of available housing but they do sleep separately from their husbands during this period. Women pursue daily household chores as normal, including cooking, although they avoid preparing the holy Sabbath bread (*dabbo*) and hosting coffee ceremonies. They avoid large scale celebrations, or, if they do attend, they remain at the peripheries to avoid polluting the communal space. Physical contact with priests and elders and entry into the prayer house is strictly forbidden<sup>100</sup>. Some priests avoid touching all women, in case one of them happens to be menstruating.

An elderly respected priest lives in a difficult situation, his wife Mama Tauvesh explained to me one day, because his three pubescent daughters all live at home. They never say when they have their periods so as not to embarrass him, but when they do,

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<sup>100</sup> It took time and persuasion on the part of my adoptive father and closest neighbours for me to be allowed to enter the local prayer house, given that some members were concerned that I may defile the whole assembly by entering the premise while I was ‘unclean’ (*irkus*).



they avoid him, and refrain from cooking. To be on the safe side Mama Tauvesh always cooks the Sabbath bread herself and as far as possible she cooks the priest's *injera*.

### 3. *Post-partum women*

Most Beta Israel women try to observe part of the prescribed seclusion period after giving birth as far as possible. On returning from hospital, three days after birth, they rapidly cross the living room and install themselves in the second bedroom<sup>101</sup>. For three weeks, they hardly venture out of the room, and their only trips outside the house are to attend post-natal clinic appointments. A close kin or neighbour takes over household chores such as cooking and taking small children to school. After about three weeks, most post-partum women begin to resume household duties, although they continue to sleep separately from their husbands until the end of the prescribed period.

Ethiopian Jews vary in the amount of contact they maintain with post-partum women. In most cases, household members and close kin and neighbours enter the 'polluted' (*irkus*) woman's room to sit and chat with her, some touch her and the baby, while others enter without touching. Stricter men and women remain at the doorway or avoid entering the house altogether. Such differing interpretations of 'proper behaviour' often results in confusion and embarrassment.

A group of women are sitting and merrily chatting in the post-partum woman's room on the day of the baby boy's circumcision. Aba Abebe, a respected elder, keeper of the prayer house keys, comes to the entrance of the room. He pauses and then makes a step inwards. The women watch him, bewildered. He breaks the embarrassed silence in a good-humoured tone of voice: "so, do you not get up when an old man enters the room?! Ah, this country!" He laughed and the women quickly rose, laughing shyly in their turn. They were so stunned by his entry into the room that they had failed to observe basic social custom. He deflected his embarrassment by laughing and by referring to their breaking of the rules - not standing up for an elder - rather than to his own previously abhorrent and incomprehensible position of being in proximity to a polluted woman.

The period of seclusion is concluded with a purification ceremony and celebration called *cristenna*<sup>102</sup>.

My God-daughter Tarikye was eighty days old. Close neighbours and kin were assembled in the living room. A large loaf of *dabbo* was on the table and alcoholic

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<sup>101</sup> Despite seclusion in a bedroom, re-entry into the house causes considerable unease. In Israel, the woman enters after three days, while in Ethiopia she would only have entered her house after eighty days of seclusion, a thorough purification in the river, shaving her head, and a blessing from the priest.

<sup>102</sup> Educated Beta Israel and priests do not like this term because of its Christian connotations - Ethiopian Christians hold a christening, called *cristenna*, on the fortieth day for a boy and eightieth for a girl (Pankhurst 1992: 137-8). They prefer to use the word *qeddesat*, which is derived from the word 'sanctify'. Abbink (1984: 216) also refers to the ritual by the term *arde'et*.

and soft drinks flowed. Aba Tadesse, the most senior elder present, conducted the purification ceremony. He complained that Tarikye's father had failed to obtain a bottle of blessed water from a priest, but he made do with a bottle of tap water. He told Tarikye's mother to sit outside with the baby, and there he stood facing East and made a blessing, blowing on the open bottle of water three or four times. Then he sprinkled water on the mother and instructed her to smear the baby's lips with it. He then entered the house where he sprinkled water all around the house and on the guests. The host joked as he sprinkled the marital bedroom "Yes, here is the most important place!". Aba Tadesse returned to the living room and made a blessing over the bread. The blessing entreated God to make the baby girl become a dutiful daughter and lead a fulfilled life as a married woman. The bread was consumed, and the party resumed. As guests departed, they made in turn short blessings. The mother relished a plate of *injera* after her day of fasting.

The sprinkling of water and blessing and the mother's fast are the main ritual requirements of *cristenma*<sup>103</sup> but the celebration can vary from a small scale offering of beer and bread to a full-scale social even, at which hundreds of guests consume meat and drink, dance all night and make substantial financial contributions.

#### 4. Meat

In Highlands Ethiopia, meat-eating was a prime ethnic marker and Jews, Christians, and Muslims only ate meat from animals slaughtered by co-religionists.

When I asked people to explain the differences between Beta Israel and Amhara, they often started with "we did not eat Amhara meat".

Most adult Ethiopians refuse to eat *farenge* meat - kosher meat, which is on sale in supermarkets and butchers and served in public places such as weddings. Instead, they go to great lengths to secure their own meat. A group of men find transport to go to a local kibbutz or Arab village. After much haggling, they purchase a live animal<sup>104</sup> and slaughter it according to custom. The slaughter, based on my own observations, proceeds as follows. The slaughterer, a respected Beta Israel male, preferably a priest, sprinkles the knife and the animal with water and a blessing is recited. The head of the animal is turned to face East, towards sunrise. The knife is sharpened and the throat slit in one go so that the animal dies instantly. The beast is skinned and the meat cut up into small bits. It is then washed

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<sup>103</sup> In Ethiopia, this ceremony was more elaborate, and was conducted by a priest. In former times, the sacrifice of an animal was made, although this has largely been replaced by holy bread *dabbo*. I attended a traditional style *cristenma* ritual at the prayer house of the holiest Beta Israel, the *melukusse* (monk). He berated the young mother for failing to shave her head, checked whether she had fasted all day, and made her prostrate ten times while he chanted a blessing, then he sprinkled her and the baby. He gave a bottle of blessed water to the woman's father in law to purify the house.

<sup>104</sup> The Beta Israel follow biblical injunctions with respect to their choice of animal. They eat cows, goats, sheep, chicken (Leslau 1957: 55) and do not eat "impure" meat such as pork and other animals proscribed in Leviticus.

thoroughly and salted so that all the “impure” blood comes out. The sciatic nerve, which is considered impure, is removed.

When the meat is for a celebration, the host organises a male work party to cut up and cook the meat in large vats on a make-shift fire out of doors. When the meat is for daily consumption, it is divided between the number of people who have contributed to its purchase, and each household cooks its share separately at home.

Ethiopians explain their refusal to eat *farenge* meat in the following ways:

- “If you ask me why we do not eat *farenge* meat, it is because they do not slaughter it properly. The Rabbi himself does not kill the animal. Whites have a professional slaughterer who was trained, it is just his way of earning a living. They do not take out the *irm* (impure parts) such as the *shulida* (sciatic nerve), so we do not want to eat it.”
- “My tummy cannot receive *farenge* meat. It smells like rubbish. It is like *baden* [an animal which died naturally without being killed, which is forbidden to eat].”
- “If you want to eat meat, you must go to see the cattle with your own eyes, and if you like it you take it to be killed. Then you are impatient to eat the meat! What is this that they bring wrapped up, how can we know what it is? It might even be forbidden meat [e.g. pork]!”
- How can you trust what it says on the packet? Meat labelled “kosher” could be pork in disguise!”

Refusal to eat *farenge* meat on account of its impurity compared to “pure” Ethiopian meat (*yeEtiopiawi saga*) is a strong marker of Ethiopian Jewish pride. Given the primacy of sharing meat as a symbol of commensality and togetherness - as exemplified in the centrality of meat-eating for celebrations, mourning rituals and honouring guests - the refusal to eat *farenge* meat is all the more striking. I return to this point in Chapter Seven and argue that the Beta Israel’s refusal to eat *farenge* meat is one of their “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott 1985: 31).

### **III. Marriage rules**

Marriage rules are one of the first factors Ethiopian Jews mention to differentiate, and elevate, Beta Israel from other Jews, and the infringement of these rules is a great source of concern to elders and youngsters alike.

#### **1. The rules**

Beta Israel marriage rules state that it is forbidden to marry within one’s kin group or the kin group of one’s ex-partner. This means that marriage to blood relatives up to seven

generations is forbidden, as well as blood relatives up to seven generations of one's ex-partner (Schoenberger 1975: 70-74, Anteby 1996: 333-337). Given the large size of the kin group and the small overall number of Beta Israel, the rule effectively excludes the possibility of marrying a large segment of the population, and finding a suitable marriage partner is a tough ordeal.

Aster was a young single mother of two, eager to remarry. She rarely met young men socially since it was improper for her to do so. But by word of mouth, it was known that she was single and men telephoned her. She liked the sound of two of them, but one turned out to be a distant kin and the other a relation of her first husband.

A young neighbour of mine, another single mother of two, explained her problem in finding a husband: "It is hard to find a clean person. There must be no illness in the family, that is no *zar* spirits, no *barya* (slave descent), good behaviour and most importantly, no kin relation. One man came for me recently but his ex-wife is a relative of mine to five degrees. As for the next one, you won't believe it! Listen: My father has a half-brother, called Fantaun, from his mother's side. Fantaun has a half-brother, Melash, from his father's side. Now my suitor's ex-wife was my uncle Fantaun's niece, Melash's daughter. She is no relation of mine but she is my uncle's niece, and I too am his niece, so, for the sake of my uncle, we could not get married."

## 2. *Breaking marriage rules*

Despite the strong rhetoric of marriage rules, marriage to kin does in fact occur frequently, both formerly in Ethiopia and now in Israel - albeit rarely between kin separated by less than four generations. People are reluctant to speak of such illicit marriages within their own kin group because they are a source of shame. Worse still than breaking the kin group is marrying the ex-partner of a relative: "*Kewarsa zemdenna mafras yishalal*" ("breaking the kin bond is better than a brother/sister-in-law [uniting]").

Breaking the marriage rules is said to lead to ostracism from the kin group and the community as a whole<sup>105</sup>. In practice, this certainly occurs to an extent for I noticed, half-way through field-work, that within the kin groups I knew in Israel, I had failed to meet several key individuals, such as siblings of youngsters I knew well. Invariably, after wading through smoke-screens, the story was the same: the "disappeared" had recently married a kin and therefore no longer attended kin celebrations and remained outside of the circles of visiting. Generally speaking, as years went by, such exclusion tended to slacken and the couple were eventually reintegrated into the circle of kin.

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<sup>105</sup> One woman recounted an extreme case which took place in Ethiopia a few years earlier: the bridegroom had boiling water poured over him, and the couple fled to Asmara and were never heard of again, presumed to have emigrated to the USA.

When a couple get married against Beta Israel rules, it is said that their offspring will be handicapped. Ethiopians can be particularly vociferous as they depict the worst malformations in the babies of such unions. Often, when a handicapped child was seen on TV, somebody would say “that is the child of a kin marriage”. The Ethiopians loved to quote the fact that Arab Israelis have more handicapped children than Jewish Israelis. They attribute this difference to the Arab Israeli marriage practice of marrying first cousins. When I referred to children of kin couples who appeared fully healthy, I was told “just wait till these children’s children and grandchildren are born!”

The worst effect of unions against the prescribed rules is that the kin group is said to break. This has two serious consequences: 1) social relations are disrupted; and 2) former relatives can now get married. Yinework explains:

“When the kin bond breaks (*zemdenna farswal*), kinship still exists in the flesh (*saga*), but the families have become in-laws (*gbi*). This means that from now on, people within the former kin group can get married because they are no longer kin. Second, they cannot continue their social relations as relatives. Before the marriage, they felt connected as relatives, but after, they become like strangers (*ba'ad*).” Yinework proceeded to give me a real life example within his own family. He drew a detailed family tree, starting five generations back at his grandfather's grandfather's siblings. He wrote in full the branches which led down to the two faulty individuals, showing how they are related to within five generations. Apparently, the mother of the bride had agreed to the wedding because she claimed that the kin bond had already been broken in a previous generation. However when the father of the groom arrived in Israel (he was still in Ethiopia at the time of the wedding), he was very angry and has not spoken to his son since. The wedding was not celebrated in a wedding hall according to custom, but in private with just the couple, an Israeli rabbi and witnesses.

In a similar vein, Aba Negusse told me about a recent encounter with an ex-kin [the uncle of his niece’s illicit husband]. “He came to greet me, calling me ‘my uncle’ and I said ‘what uncle? Is the kin relation not broken between us?’ He answered: ‘Ah! What can we do? The children did that!’” I asked Aba Negusse whether he would treat this man’s children as his relatives: “No, the kin relation is broken now.”

The rationale behind the rules is straightforward to Ethiopians<sup>106</sup>: “the Bible says so”. In *Leviticus* an injunction forbids sexual relations with a first degree relative or in-law. As to the Beta Israel extension to seven generations, most people said that it was “Ethiopian custom” (Amhara Christians observe the same marriage rules), while one priest pointed out the special religious significance of the number seven: God had created the world in seven days, and Passover has seven days. Marrying out of the kin group is also explained in functional terms, as a means of increasing contacts and in-laws, a potential loss if marriages were to occur within the kin group. Conversely, the prohibition on marrying a direct in-

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<sup>106</sup> See Hoben (1973) for a functional explanation of Amhara marriage rules, which are similar to Beta Israel ones, and Anteby (1996) for a symbolic analysis.

law<sup>107</sup> is explained in terms of border maintenance. An oft repeated saying goes: “taking an in-law is like crossing the border [between two neighbours’ land]” (“*damber yefarasa warsa yewarsa and naw*”).

Ultimately, the stress on marriage rules is an extension of the ideology of “being together” as kin. The sibling relationship is sacrosanct in Beta Israel kinship ideology<sup>108</sup> and incest between siblings is abhorrent. Kin are said to be “like brothers and sisters”<sup>109</sup>: it is therefore equally abhorrent to have sexual relations with a relative, since the latter is considered “like a sister / brother”. A union between two relatives is tantamount to increasing the social distance between the two individuals because it suggests that they are *not* like brother / sisters. By extension it would increase the distance between all the kin of the couple. But it is “impossible” in Beta Israel ideology to have distant kin, since “relatives are like siblings”. Therefore, if two relatives marry, the kin bond must break. In other words, it is preferable to have no kin bond than a weak kin bond. The same logic applies to the ban on relatives of ex-partners - given that it is forbidden (in the Bible) to covet your wife’s sister, the rule extends to all her relatives.

Whatever the ‘function’ of marriage rules in Beta Israel society, their infringement has a definite and necessary purpose. In its ideal formulation, Beta Israel marriage rules are not practicable since there would not be enough marriage partners given the potentially huge size of kin groups<sup>110</sup>. It is, ironically, defaulting couples which keep the whole system going. An illicit marriage not only provides the two individuals in question with marriage partners, but henceforth, all members of their kin group are permitted to marry since their kin bond has been broken. In this way, each defaulting couple opens the way for countless further

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<sup>107</sup> There are no prohibitions on marrying in-laws, such as the brother of one’s sister’s husband, the prohibition is on relatives of an ex-partner.

<sup>108</sup> The importance of the sibling bond is affirmed in numerous daily situations. For example: “My brother” and “my sister” (*wandimye, ihitye*) are affectionate terms of address which denote closeness; I was told about my relationship with Aveva, my adoptive sister “You eat and drink together: you are just like sisters”; and the recounting of kinship genealogies often start from a sibling bond, e.g. “Tauvesh and Melash were sister and brother, etc.”).

<sup>109</sup> This contention is supported by the fact that the marriage prohibition extends itself, albeit less rigidly, to any two people who are ‘like brother and sister’. These include co-godparents and their children; *misie* (the person who accompanies the groom and bride during the marriage ceremony) and their children; and non-kin who grew up together, as close next door-neighbours or in the same household. Fantanesh on the latter situation: “We would be living close, A family who live as neighbours who are ten generations apart but who are very close in their daily lives, so close that the children eat in each other’s houses, they would not marry. They live close, with much love, like brother and sister.”

<sup>110</sup> Ego’s group of kin, in theory at least, is enormous. Taking a conservative estimate of three surviving offspring, ego would have 3<sup>7</sup> (three to the power seven), that is 2,187, kin members just within ego’s generation on one parent’s side. Given that the total population is currently about 60,000, the percentage of kin, in theory, is very high indeed.

illicit marriages. The functioning of the Beta Israel marriage system thus, paradoxically, rests upon its infringement.

## Conclusion

This chapter has described the pride Ethiopian Jewish immigrants have in their “traditions” as Ethiopians and as Beta Israel, which they see as a set of purer and stricter customs than those of all other Jews. The themes discussed in this chapter - the idealisation of the past, ethnic pride, and the centrality of purity - will be taken up again in Chapter Six and Seven. Chapter Six discusses the loss of control experienced over the maintenance of Beta Israel practices. Chapter Seven discusses younger Ethiopian Jews’ desire to maintain Beta Israel custom and the importance for the older generation of upholding a rhetoric of purity even while the practice has been much altered.

This chapter and the previous one have described Ethiopian Jewish adults’ efforts at maintaining their ethnic identity in Israel by creating strong communal bonds and by retaining a number of traditional practices and beliefs. I now turn to their appreciation of their “homeland” and to the efforts of both the older and younger generations to integrate into Israeli society.



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## Four: The Homeland

### Introduction

The previous chapter illustrated the way in which Ethiopian Jewish immigrants maintain their “tough” traditions in Israel. This chapter examines their desire to integrate into Israeli society. Therefore the two chapters together illustrate the tension that the Beta Israel feel between assimilation and ethnic separateness. Whilst this chapter details the Beta Israel’s positive appreciation of their new home, the next one stresses the difficulties that they face in Israel, thus illuminating the central dichotomy of the thesis: living well and “becoming deaf” in the homeland. I discuss separately, in the final part of the chapter, the integration of younger Beta Israel immigrants (sixteen to twenty-five / thirty) because their experience is predictably very different from that of their parents.

### A. The Notion of the Homeland

When the Beta Israel speak of their homeland (*agarachin*, lit.: our country), they are referring to Israel, or Ethiopia or to the specific Ethiopian locality they lived in. In Chapter Three, we saw the contexts in which “our country” refers to Ethiopia: lamenting about life in Israel, speaking about cultural traditions, and engaging in coffee session reminiscences about life before migration. However when Ethiopian Jewish immigrants discuss their motivations for migration and their new found identity, “our country” refers to Israel. Ethiopia is their homeland because it was their country of birth and because they grew up there, acquiring Ethiopian customs and Ethiopian appearance; Israel is their homeland because it is the country of Jews.

#### I. “Our country” Israel

During the general election campaign in May 1995, Ethiopian supporters of the Labour party, however secular, sought voters with comments such as: “It was not Likud [the opposition party] which brought us here, but God who brought us back to our homeland!”

Israel, which the Beta Israel referred to as “Jerusalem” is the land which God promised (*calkidane*) to the Jews, and since the Beta Israel are Jews, it is their country. Ethiopian Jewish immigrants speak not of “coming” to Israel, but of “returning” to Israel after two to five thousand years of exile (*sedet*). They refer to their former prayers for the “return to Jerusalem”, as if the image of the golden city was before their eyes for generations<sup>111</sup>.

An elder: “Jerusalem was promised to us by God, it is our *irist* (land right). We waited for thousands of years to come here. We left our motherland Ethiopia, a country which our ancestors had developed with spear and shield. We came here on God’s command. We did not even eat the food which was ready, and we did not wait for our cattle to come home, we just left everything and came to Israel. God flew us in the skies to the land which he promised us.”

Ethiopians love to use poetic language (see Chapter Five) and often described their former yearn for a return to Jerusalem eloquently. It was clear to me however, that the sentiments behind their embellished speech were deeply felt. At least over the last century, ever since World Jewry fermented the dream of return to Jerusalem, the Beta Israel really did think of Israel, or more accurately Jerusalem, as their “homeland”, a country to which they felt a sense of belonging on account of their religion.

I was sitting on the beach with Avi watching the sun setting over the Mediterranean. I asked him for a memory of village life as a boy. He recalled a song his grandmother used to sing while grinding grain which spoke of the return to Jerusalem. Wistfully, Avi said how much she would have liked to have come here, if only to die. Avi deliberately chose a romantic image to accompany the sun as it disappeared behind the horizon, but I did not doubt the accuracy of his memory nor the sincerity of the accompanying emotion.

## ***Motivations for migration***

A young woman: “This is our country, it says so in the Bible. It says that all Jews must return to their country. We *had* to come. In the Bible, it says that thousands will return in one day [i.e. suggesting a prophecy of the air-lifts]. Before the First Temple was destroyed we were all here. You think we came because we were poor and needy but there was no famine in Ambover!”

If Beta Israel are convincing in claiming religious motivations for migration, they are less convincing when they suggest that these were their sole motivations, and that they left Ethiopia *despite* economic prosperity. For example, I was often told statements such as: “We were wealthy there, [presenting a long enumeration of goods such as livestock and fields], but because it is the will of God that we return here, we came.” However, when

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<sup>111</sup> Ben Ezer (mns) illustrates the power and vividness of the dream of Jerusalem. The youngsters he interviewed in the 1980s were propelled by “a dream” and a sense that it was their destiny “in our blood” to return to Jerusalem.

people were not speaking in a rhetorical mode, they conceded that migration was motivated by a variety of factors.

For Ethiopian villagers, the image of a modern rich country, in which economic resources, health care and education were plentiful, was extremely appealing<sup>112</sup>. In addition, the political situation in Ethiopia in the 1980s and early 90s encouraged migration. The Beta Israel who migrated via the Sudan in the early 1980s were part of large waves of political and economic migrants, fleeing the Marxist regime and deteriorating economic conditions (Abbink 1984). They had received reports from the pioneer migrants of the 1970s that Israel could be reached via the Sudan, and many families and fearless groups of teenagers joined the flow of immigrants to the Sudan in search of a brighter future.

Telahun left his village with a cousin in 1982. “The elders spoke of Jerusalem, saying that it was a beautiful place, with lots of trees. I wanted to come to study and find work so that I could help my family back home.”

For the later wave of immigrants, family reunification was an additional motivation. In fact, several migrants who arrived with Operation Solomon told me that they would not have come had the rest of their extended family and several children not already left for Israel.

Beta Israel’s migration was motivated by religious, economic, political, and personal (i.e. family reunification) considerations. However, it must ultimately be understood as a collective phenomenon<sup>113</sup>. Whatever rational motivations were held, and however much the earlier immigrants debated the pros and cons, the migration rapidly became a collective enterprise, in which individuals took it for granted that they would go to Israel. Once the movement started, migrants did not think of it in terms of a choice, but rather in terms of destiny - the time to regain the mystical land of their forefathers had arrived, and so they departed.

## **II. The Golden Country: Israel**

I was chatting to Turunesh, a young forthright mother of three, telling her that many Ethiopians complain about Israel. Turunesh’s response was adamant: “Hah! They eat and eat and eat and speak only of Ethiopia! They had nothing there - those that tell you that they did are lying! Israel is gold! Without doing any work, you get money. There we worked so hard, old women fetching water on their backs, here everything is

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<sup>112</sup> When I travelled in Northern Ethiopia in 1995, I was struck by the overwhelming desire by both Christian townspeople and villagers for migration. Poverty, lack of education, lack of jobs, political climate were the stated reasons.

<sup>113</sup> Gilad (1989: 216) makes this point with reference to Yemeni Jewish migration to Israel.

in the house - water, food, toilet. Here you sit, go to the bank and eat! It is great (*alem naw*)!”

Given the novelty of their situation, Ethiopian immigrants were often conscious of living in a new country and of having travelled from one country to another. For example, they often identified with my position as a foreigner in Israel, and asked me a lot about practical details of travel to England (e.g. flight times, currencies, weather) and my evaluations of Israel. They also asked about the life of Ethiopian immigrants in London (e.g. housing, school, welfare). Ethiopians like their new land and state say that “it is a good country”.

This section explores different facets of Ethiopians’ appreciation of their new country.

## **1. Israel as a country of knowledge**

### ***Economic Development***

A young man: “This country has a lot of knowledge. That was the problem of Ethiopia, the land had many riches, the air and grain were good, but there was no knowledge on how to use them. Here there are many factories.”

Ethiopians enjoy being citizens of a developed country. Israel’s modernity - roads, infrastructure, TV, material goods, technology - is highly valued. While Beta Israel do reminisce about Ethiopian village life, they rarely mention aspects of daily life such as grinding grain, fetching water, walking over an hour to school in positive terms. In this respect, Israel is a definite improvement.

### ***Education***

Fantanesh: “There our children looked after cattle, here they go to school”.

Children’s education is one of the most highly valued aspects of Israeli life. Several adults stated that while they themselves preferred life in Ethiopia, they had come to Israel for the education of their children.

Solomon, a twenty-five-year-old father of five, never went to school. He taught himself to read, write and do basic arithmetic. He bears a grudge against his parents for sending him to herd cattle and for marrying him off as a teenager rather than sending him to school. He would have been a wealthy man by now had he received an education. I loved to witness the pleasure he took in involving himself in his children’s schooling - trying to help with homework, buying essential equipment, complimenting them on pieces of work. “He”, he said one day pointing to his two-year-old son, “will go to university one day, you will see!”

## **Politics**

Educated Ethiopians appreciate the Israeli political system. They appreciate democratic elections, freedom of speech and movement, and the judicial system.

A middle-aged man: “In this country, there is democracy, that is good. Everybody has rights and they can do as they please. For example, the blood demonstration, if that had been held in Ethiopia, the police would have shot real bullets not plastic ones!”.

Educated Ethiopians also value Israel’s favourable policies towards immigrants from poor socio-economic backgrounds.

Moshe, who lived in Canada for eight years before coming to Israel, says that he and all Ethiopian Jews in Israel feel more connection here than in Canada. There, they are always strangers, even after decades. There, it would be inconceivable to have an Ethiopian Member of Parliament after just twelve years. And there no Ethiopian can own his own house like they all can here.

## **Health care**

Although Beta Israel have imported their own forms of health care, modern Israeli health care is appreciated. Ethiopians go to the doctor for the smallest physical problem (see Chapter Six for a fuller discussion of health care).

Kanubesh values the maternity services in Israel: “In Ethiopia, while you give birth, the women drink coffee, chat and eat *injera*. If a problem arises, how can they help you? In the village the hospital is far away. You just die! Here if you have a problem they give you an operation.”

## **2. An easy life**

As he pointed to his full glass, old Aba Brhan said merrily: “Jerusalem is a good country. There is beer in plenty and lots of food. There, in Ethiopia, you had to seed, plough, harvest, and grind grain for your food. Here you eat, drink and sit!”

Unemployed Ethiopian men and most women enjoy an easier lifestyle in Israel thanks to a reduction of household chores for women, increased leisure time for unemployed men, easier transport, and plenty of food and drink.

## **Household daily chores**

“There it was so hard to receive guests! You had to fetch water and wood on your back, and make a fire. Here you just light a match and you have your coffee and you just light a match and your stew (*wot*) cooks! There you had to grind the grain, here we buy ready-made flour. There you had to pound the coffee beans, here you whiz them in the machine. If you run out of stew, you can pop out to the shop and buy some yoghurt [to accompany *injera*]. There you had to make *talla* (alcoholic beverage made from barley) and lots of *injera* - it was so hot by the fire! Here everything is easy.”

Women enjoy their new-found ease at running the household and adapted extremely quickly to modern household appliances. Water, energy (for cooking and warmth), food, electric gadgets are all readily available. Given that men play a secondary role in household chores, they have been little affected by these changes within the house.

## ***Transport***

Aba Negusse spoke about the regular long journeys on foot under the sun to attend funerals in Ethiopia, with only a snack to eat on the way. “Here though, you go by bus.” I asked him which he prefers: “The bus is better!”

Transport is another wide-reaching innovation in daily life. Buses did operate in the region in which the Beta Israel lived in Ethiopia, but these were rarely used by villagers. Buses operating only on main roads, often a thirty to ninety minute walk from the village, were always full, and usually too expensive to afford. In Ethiopia, therefore, heavy loads were carried to and from the market (unless a donkey was available), and long walks, lasting one or more days, with little food, were frequently undertaken to visit relatives. In Israel, by contrast, the bus is never further than a few minutes walk away, and it is affordable. When neighbours attend funerals and celebrations, they organise the hire of a private bus.

## ***Food***

However much Ethiopians complain about the quality of the food in Israel, the ready availability of food is much appreciated. They rarely admit this, because it goes against the rhetoric of wealthy Beta Israel who emigrated for purely religious reasons. But off-guard, I often heard comments such as “in this country, you never go to bed fasting!”

### ***3. Material goods***

Ethiopians love to spend their new-found wealth on large household goods and gold jewellery and watches. They spend minimal amounts on food, clothes, children’s pocket-money, only to splash out on a new bedroom suite worth NIS 2,500 (well over the household monthly income for welfare recipients).

## ***Buying an object***

One morning, Aba Negusse set off to town to buy a fridge. His first task was to find an interpreter and advisor. He went to his brother’s shop, and found what he wanted: a Hebrew speaking nephew. Adissu delayed his own shopping plans to guide his uncle. They started in a shop where a neighbour had recently bought a good fridge, and toured a few others for the sake of comparison. The shop-keepers did not hide their

dislike of Ethiopian customers, but the two men were not perturbed by the rudeness showed them: they were used to it. Aba Negusse sought a shop which gave credit, even though he had more cash than the total cost of the fridge hidden away in a pillow case in his bedroom. Eventually, Aba Negusse chose the cheapest of the large-size fridges, buying an Israeli make so that, as his nephew told him, spare parts would be readily available.

Ethiopians choose the shops according to word of mouth, and are particularly drawn to places which offer discounts or where they can bargain.

On one shopping trip, Fantanesh paid NIS 410 for a NIS 450 necklace, and Asresie NIS 100 for a NIS 125 watch.

When Ethiopian immigrants first arrived, the Absorption Agency provided them with the basic household goods: beds, a large display cabinet, a sofa and armchair set, a fridge, a TV, cooker, blankets, money for clothes, and so on. Gradually, as savings grew, and immigrants settled into permanent housing, the original donated goods, even when in perfect condition, were replaced by bought items<sup>114</sup>. There was a definite order of acquisition in my neighbourhood: a large fridge first, a new display cabinet, a video, a bedroom set (double bed and dressing table), new cooker, a dining room set (table and six chairs), a new sofa and armchair, and finally children's' bunk beds. Then the cycle began again, as each of the above is replaced. Small items were also acquired regularly, but with a less discernible pattern: clothes, ornaments, wall-hangings, plastic flowers, pots and pans, coffee cups, glasses, cutlery, gold jewellery and watches. Since Ethiopians in my neighbourhood arrived in the country at the same time and have more or less the same income, the rate of acquiring new large objects was more or less identical. Particularly enterprising heads of households and / or those with a higher income were well ahead and other households lagged far behind.

When I first arrived in December 1994, most houses had already bought their replacement fridge and were onto replacement cookers. Then the bedroom suite phase arrived, and in a few months, most houses in my neighbourhood had beautiful new double beds to show off to their neighbours. When I left, in August 1996, the dining room table and chairs was the craze.

### ***Keeping up with the Alemus***

Household goods are valued because they have become important status markers. Buying household goods demonstrates to neighbours and kin, and to oneself, that one is doing well and adapting successfully to modern life. Neighbours love to inspect each others' new items, to compare them with their own (and inwardly chuckle at the better deal they got), or to seek inspiration for their forthcoming purchase.

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<sup>114</sup> Immigrants who have spent several years in absorption centres and mobile homes begin buying new household goods there.



Young Tariku sought to explain why my co-Godfather had insisted on buying everything new for the new-born baby (push-chair, baby mattress, etc.) even though his sister had recently acquired, but no longer required, such items: “Ethiopians want everything new so that the neighbours do not think that they have no money!”

When I asked Fantanesh why she bought a new sofa shortly before the large celebration for her son’s *Bar Mitzvah*, when her old one was in excellent condition, she said: “Why, people would say ‘they have a *Bar Mitzvah* and did not buy a new sofa!’”

Ethiopian consumerism is all the more striking when the cost of purchased items is compared to monthly income and when the frugal lifestyle needed to afford the goods is considered. Fantanesh’s new sofa cost her about NIS 2,000 (£400), roughly equivalent to her household’s monthly income. Yet, she often complained of poverty, of being unable to buy basic necessities for the house at the end of the month. Indeed, I witnessed the decline in quality of food in her house, as in most other households, towards the end of the month.

Fantanesh one day bought herself a NIS 500 necklace when her mother’s welfare money came through, but refused to take a taxi back from the hospital the day after the purchase, which would have cost an extra few shekels, preferring instead the arduous task of getting her frail blind mother on and off the bus.

Buying household goods also reinforces social relations between neighbours. While the acquisition of household goods includes an element of competition between neighbours, given that most proceed at a similar pace and that households are remarkably uniform, communality between Ethiopians is reinforced. Moreover, many goods are purchased with the proceeds of rotating credit society savings, i.e. pooled neighbourhood money. Members of credit societies love to inspect the items bought from their co-members’ savings since they feel involved in the process of acquisition. Thus although the act of purchasing an object is a private individual affair, it is socialised by using pooled funds and by conforming to Ethiopian tastes and priorities.

#### **4. Financial dealings**

Most Ethiopians have adapted rapidly to financial dealings with banks, Israeli money, and household bills, even if many are distrustful of government and financial institutions.

#### **Banks**

Solomon was laughing at his cousin Fantaun because the latter gave money to an individual to safeguard: “Money in this country goes in banks - giving to a person is what we did in Ethiopia!”

Ethiopians all have bank accounts, and couples hold joint accounts, into which wages, benefits and pension are paid. Most younger Ethiopians (including Avi) hold savings accounts and use cheque cards and cheque books. Older Ethiopians go to the bank once a month, on the day that their income arrives, and take out what they want for the month, which is usually the whole amount. They tend to keep savings hidden in their bedroom, rather than in a bank account.

Aba Negusse would always say “the bank is a thief” and explain, in an incomprehensible fashion, how the bank had kept some of his money. He therefore withdraws all the money on the day it arrives and keeps his savings under his bed. When he dies, he added, the children will come to find it.

For Avi too, a young modern Ethiopian worker, banks are thieves. He found that his mother was not receiving the correct amount of monthly income. He took the matter up with the bank, who at first denied any problem. However when he threatened to go to the newspapers, they made an investigation and agreed that there was a fault and his mother was given NIS 7000 in arrears payment. He believes that banks try to rob but if found out quickly, give the money back.

Such statements reveal that Ethiopians, of all ages, feel that they understand the system, even if they decide that it is untrustworthy.

## ***Bills and wages***

On the day a bill arrives (usually the same day for neighbouring houses), Ethiopians sit together on benches, the literate ones reading the bills of their illiterate neighbours, and together they discuss at length the high cost of living in Israel.

Bills are one of the most heated topics of daily conversation and many new immigrants have not quite got used to the idea of having to pay for water and heat and rent. Some people associate bills with former taxes:

“In Ethiopia we paid *asrat*, *mengist-geber* and *anfo* (local and government taxes). Here it is electricity and telephone!”

Ethiopians who work have adapted quickly to wage earning, and they frequently check their monthly salary against their log-in statement which shows the total number of hours worked.

Worku was very pleased with himself when he succeeded in proving to his employer that a mistake was made to his payment one month and that he was NIS 250 short. Even though Worku has never received any formal education, he managed to work out the sums involved, including allowances for over-time.

## 5. *Social security*

### **“Government money”**

A middle-aged woman: “This government is a very good government. It helps the poor people and gives them money - even if they do no work! In Ethiopia, it was the poor who gave money to the government!”

Aba Wandu, a neighbourhood elder, asked me to compare my country with Ethiopia and Israel. When I said that my country was the richest of the three, he was perplexed that a country could possibly be richer than Israel. He enquired whether my country was “good like Israel” and gives money to single mothers and to people who are too old to work.

The government welfare system is regarded as a benevolent benefactor who gives to Ethiopians “who are so poor and who know nothing in this country”, a salary and a house. Sometimes the government is spoken of as a “breast” which feeds the needy.

Mama Fantae is an elder, a single mother of six. In Ethiopia, after her divorce, she went to live with her brother, who supported her and her uncle gave her a cow, so that she “brought up [her] children on milk”. In Israel, “the government gives money, like a breast. You feed the child with a bottle which is bought by the government. We cannot bring up children alone, we just see the hands of the government!”

Mama Fantae’s youngest child was already fifteen when she arrived in Israel, which implies that she is using “breast”, “milk” and “bottle” as symbols to connote the magnanimous nature of the government, and its role as ultimate provider, comparable only to a parent. Her account draws a direct parallel between kin and government as providers. When Rabin was assassinated, he was ardently mourned by Ethiopian Jewish immigrants because “The president dying is like your own father dying!”

Fantanesh speaking about newly orphaned children: “They are OK. The government will bring them up, giving them much money every month. If no relatives take them, then the government will - they have special homes.”

Government financial support is taken for granted; it is a given in the land of Israel. For example, a young woman, who lives in a small flat with her parents, bemoans that she is single because, as she says, “if I had two children now, I would have my own house”. She does not mention that the house would be a council house (i.e. “from the government”), because that is obvious to her. Similarly, on seeing a bulging purse, a man jokingly asked for cash. The response, which might have been “go out and work for money!”, was: “Why, is there no government here?”

A few neighbours discussed their relative social security incomes over coffee one day. I was struck by how rapidly such a source of income had become “normal” for them and I could picture them, only a few years ago, speaking just the same way about relative grain yields.

## ***Knowing the system***

Many Ethiopian immigrants may not have a well-developed conceptual understanding of the welfare state, but they soon learn fast to get the most out of the system.

Worku wants to move house to live closer to his mother so he wants another child (a fourth) because with four children, he can say that his two-bedroom council house is too small and that he therefore needs to move house.

Agarnesh kept her new marriage secret in order not to dash her hopes of obtaining “a house and a fridge and everything”.

One neighbour told me about another neighbour on social security: “He could work, he is pretending not to see well enough, he just likes to sleep and eat the money of the government.”

Ethiopian immigrants also succeed in using the system to their own advantage during personal disputes.

Two neighbours were engaged in a long standing feud (which began in Ethiopia). One day one used the ultimate weapon: on pretext that the other had hit a grand-daughter of his, he called the police. His neighbour received a caution.

While Ethiopians appreciate welfare payments and have rapidly learned to get the most from the social security system, they are also deeply mistrustful of it. They often question the motivations of personnel, arguing that the latter make decisions for their own personal benefit, rather than that of the Ethiopian immigrants. Charges of embezzlement, corruption, lies and dishonesty were frequent (see Wagaw 1993: 104-8).

As a foretaste to Chapter Six, I end this section with the nostalgic words of an elder’s quote, who, though appreciating the generosity of the government, bemoans his loss of control over his livelihood and daily consumption:

“There I had a cow; here, the government gives me money. There I had milk and made *agwot* (curdled milk) and butter; here I have to go to the supermarket and buy it with money. There, I had everything at home myself; here, everything is brought with money, from the government.”

## **B. A Desire to Integrate**

Ethiopian Jews live in Israel, and intend to do so for ever, and their identity is orientated to this unalterable fact. This makes Ethiopian Jews different from most other immigrants because the latter maintain an ideology of return to their country of origin (see Chapter Eight). Ethiopian immigrants’ positive outlook towards their new homeland is reflected in

their desire to integrate into Israeli society. At the same time as maintaining their “tough traditions”, they seek to participate in civil life, relate socially with other Israelis, and to adapt, to an extent, to Israeli cultural patterns.

## I. Rhetoric of Integration

In a Bar Mitzvah blessing, the priest said “let him [the bar mitzvah boy] be an important person for the country”.

The prayer asks for this boy to contribute to ‘the country’, which testifies to a sense of allegiance to Israel. When young Ethiopian leaders or elders speak publicly, they espouse an ethic of integration.

At a hearing of the governmental commission to investigate the blood donation crisis, an elder priest speaks: “The horn and the ear live side by side. We came here wanting to live together.” Likewise, Ethiopians expressing their anger and hurt at the policy to discard Ethiopian blood donations frequently asserted: “Our skin colour is different but we are one people.”

Such statements suggesting a unity between Israelis and Ethiopians are rhetorical in the sense that they are usually said in public when Ethiopians engage in particular mode of discourse. Ethiopians expound well-rehearsed statements which follow a particular rhetoric, in this case that of integration; the very same persons at another moment express themselves with equal vehemence to argue the exact opposite point. Alternatively, they express one view-point, perceived to be the “correct” one, publicly, while adopting an alternative position in private. For example, former government policies which encouraged large groups of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants to live together in one neighbourhood are publicly denounced by young leaders, even though the latter know that most Ethiopians actually *want* to live in close proximity to many Ethiopian neighbours. Unsurprisingly, younger Ethiopian immigrants adopt a stronger rhetoric of integration than their parents’ generation. They argue that Ethiopians must acquire an “Israeli” (*farenge*) way of life: Israeli food, dress, religious customs, and social behaviour, should be adopted, even if some Ethiopian “customs” are simultaneously maintained.

## II. Participation in Civil Life

The rhetoric of integration is complemented by attempts to participate in civil life and relate to other Israelis. Ethiopians pre-date their allegiance, and desire, to participate in Israel before emigration.

A learned old man, speaking of his past in Ethiopia, said that he did not sleep for ten days during the Yom Kippur war, listening to the events on radio. Then he sent his son to Israel to fight for the country, and he was proud that his son fought in the Yom Kippur war (1973).

Joining the army is the clearest manifestation of Ethiopians' desire to participate in their new country. Older Ethiopians express great pride when their youngsters enlist in the army. Photos of the youngsters in uniform adorn living room walls, large communal send-off parties are organised for the soldier-to-be, soldiers remain in uniform for large neighbourhood and kin celebrations, and an air of importance surrounds mention and conversations about soldiers.

Ethiopians' civic feelings were also evident in the high level of participation in the 1995 general elections. Several politically active young men joined their respective parties and canvassed the community for weeks beforehand. They worked non-stop on the day to drive elders to the booths, and instructed them on which candidate to vote for. Ethiopians voted because "this is what you do here", it was a way for them to feel part of the country, to join in an activity which every other citizen took part in.

Ethiopians expressed their political preference - the Likud party and Benjamin Netanyahu - in patriotic terms. Most Ethiopians said that Simon Peres and the Labour Party wanted to divide the country, and Jerusalem in particular, and give half away to the Arabs. "But", they would exclaim, "Israel is the country God promised to the Jews, not the Arabs!" They also resented the Labour party for refusing to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel when it was in power. They often quote Golda Meir, a former Prime Minister, as saying: "Ethiopian Jews do not exist. Better bring Russian dogs than Ethiopians!"

Melissu explained why she voted for Netanyahu. She came here to the land of Israel. She did not lack grain and did not come for a holiday but to live and give birth. "Peres [the Labour leader] wants to give the land away: he has already given Hebron and Jenin and that place by the Dead Sea, now he wants to give Jerusalem and the Golan. Then the Arabs will ask for still more! Also, it was the Likud Party that brought us here."

Ethiopians are saddened when Israeli servicemen die in battle. They partook fully in the national mourning for assassinated Prime Minister Yitsack Rabin, even if they did not support his party: tears flowed, long telephone calls were made to relatives about the tragedy. Many stayed up into the early hours of the tragic night watching the news<sup>115</sup>, and

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<sup>115</sup> Here is a rather amusing tale concerning the fateful night of the assassination. Around 10 p.m., I heard on the BBC world service that Rabin had been wounded. Aba Negusse was about to go to bed, but when I told him, he immediately turned the TV back on and sat there watching it alone. About one hour later, he went to bed and I called out to him from my room to ask the latest news. "Rabin is fine", he said, "I saw him sitting in a chair." The midnight news bulletin, five minutes later, announced Rabin's death - Aba

the funeral was watched on television all day. It was very much *their* Head of State that had died, not just the Head of State of “this country”; they identified fully.

### III. Social Integration

#### 1. Ethiopians on Israelis

For Ethiopians, Israel is a country which belongs to Jews from all over the world and in which they all co-habit. They usually think of Israelis as a whole, referring to them all as *farenge* (Whites). However when specifically asked, they distinguish, as is common in Israel, between Ashkenazi Jews of European and Anglo-Saxon heritage, and the Sephardi population of Middle Eastern and North African extraction. They do not place themselves in either category, although they do feel closer to the latter group. They say that they dislike the Ashkenazi because “they do not like Ethiopians” while the latter do. The Ashkenazi are associated with the *datii* (Orthodox religious Jews) “all dressed in black” who are to blame for the Rabbinate’s rejection of Ethiopian Judaism. The Sephardi are said to be “red” (*quay*) like Ethiopians. After the politicisation of many Ethiopians just after the blood crisis demonstration, groups of Moroccans and Yemenis voiced their support for Ethiopians, taking the “mistreatment” of Ethiopian immigrants as further evidence of the discriminatory dominance of Ashkenazi Jews<sup>116</sup>.

Ethiopians love to mock Israeli behaviour given that typical traits such as loudness, brashness and openness are diametrically opposed to Ethiopian decorum (Rosen 1987).

Moshe, a veteran immigrant (he arrived in Israel in the mid-seventies) spoke about his trip to England and in particular his visit to an East London market where their fellow Israeli travellers thought they were still in Israel and shouted around at everybody!

There is little consistency in any one individual’s remarks about Israelis, let alone in the remarks of Ethiopians as a whole. The same person one moment will say how “good” (*turu*) Israelis are because “they look after Ethiopians”, “they chat”, “White skin is beautiful”, yet

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Negusse must have seen footage of Rabin, and concluded from that that he was alive and well! I called out with the news and both he and his wife got out of bed to watch TV into the early hours, not understanding a word of it, but finding it the best way to relate to this tragedy.

<sup>116</sup> Although I have no references, my impression was that the worst racism towards Ethiopian Jews actually comes from Sephardi populations rather than from the Ashkenazi (other than the Orthodox who are openly hostile on religious grounds). Israelis of European extraction tended to speak positively of Ethiopians, even if somewhat condescendingly “oh aren’t they lovely!” “so beautiful!” “so polite”, “to think of where they came from...”. Many Sephardi I spoke to used overtly hostile words such as “dirty”, “primitive”, “lazy”, and “smelly” to describe Ethiopians.

the next moment that same person will speak vehemently against Israelis, “they brought us here, but now look how they treat us?”, “they have no religion”, “they do not talk to us”. Opposing view-points voiced more or less simultaneously express Ethiopians’ ambivalent feelings towards other Israelis. I think that Ethiopians arrived in the country positively disposed towards their fellow Jews, but then as many began to feel rejected by their new neighbours, these “proud Ethiopians” began to alter their opinion of other Israelis. Put simply, rather than risk being rebuffed, many took the attitude “I do not like you anyway!”<sup>117</sup>

Ethiopians also interact with Israeli Arabs, at work, in hospital, or in the purchase of livestock for meat consumption. They tend to speak extremely badly of Arabs, telling me for instance: “Do not take a shared [Arab] taxi from Haifa , the Arabs will kill you!” and “be careful of the Arabs, they want to kill all Jews!”. However, when Ethiopians actually came into contact with Israeli Arabs, relations were friendly<sup>118</sup>.

Worku, a young manual labourer, speaks positively of his Arab work mates, and sings a couple of Arab songs.

Aba Negusse while sipping strong coffee in a small cup (“just like Ethiopian coffee”) in the backyard of an Arab farm after the purchase, slaughter and carving of two goats, watches the multitude of children and says “they are just like us: strong coffee and lots of children!”

Palestinian Arabs (that is without Israeli citizenship, living in Gaza and the West Bank) are universally hated by the Beta Israel, and are apparently fit only to be killed.

A young woman, member of a far right political party says: “Gaza should be closed - let them starve to death! If they are going to come to kill us, let them die!”

A young man: “the Arabs want to kill the Jews and destroy Israel. I do not want them to have Hebron, they just want to kill Jews there. We came here for Jerusalem, it must be kept, all of it! We were here first, how many thousands of years ago? Three thousand years ago!”

## **2. *Socialising with Israelis***

Social integration with Israelis is sought to a considerable extent<sup>119</sup>. Israeli colleagues, community workers and friendly neighbours are invited for celebrations, such as weddings

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<sup>117</sup> I develop this argument in Chapters Five and Seven.

<sup>118</sup> I noted that in public, Ethiopians referred to Israeli Arabs they share a hospital waiting room with or a drink in the cafe on the square as ‘Qemant’. The Qemant were a Judaic-pagan group, neighbours to the Beta Israel with whom they used to share a common language. The Qemant have all converted to Christianity (Gamst 1969). Ethiopians told me they used this term in public because it would not be nice for the Arabs to know that they were being talked about.

<sup>119</sup> In a Joint-Brookdale Institute and Ministry of Immigrant Absorption study of 5,300 Ethiopian home-owners, 15-27% of respondents said that they do not talk with their neighbour and 77-90% said that they were interested in closer contact (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, April 1996).



and Bar Mitzvah. If a household has developed a friendly relationship with Israeli neighbours (which is quite rare), they are often invited to more intimate celebrations such as a circumcision or child's birthday. Parents approve of their children playing with Israeli children<sup>120</sup>. Hebrew classes are attended so that Ethiopian can "talk with and understand the *farenge*". I sense that many Ethiopians would like more contact with their White neighbours, but with language problems, cultural differences, and mistrust on both sides, a wide gap separates them: in eighteen months, I rarely saw a non-Ethiopian socially visiting an Ethiopian, nor vice versa.

## IV. Cultural Adaptation

### 1. Beta Israel efforts

Many Ethiopians make conscious efforts to adapt culturally to Israel and praise their children for doing so.

When I first met my Ethiopian neighbours during an elders' social club, they introduced themselves Israeli-style by giving their surname first (Ethiopians say their personal name first). Clearly, despite plenty of criticism for this strange naming system, they had accepted it, and used it when faced with a new *farenge*.

Ethiopians are concerned about their image in front of "the Whites".

Samagn comes into the house beaming: he is wearing the new jumper he just bought himself. His wife laughs and chaffs him for wearing what she sees as a woman's jumper because of the V-neck. Him: "So what, if I like it?" She: "But the *farenge* will laugh at you!".

Often, an Ethiopian criticises an Israeli practice but then says that since this is the country's traditions, it must be followed.

Turunesh told me that Israeli women did not know the love of a child, compared to Ethiopians who carry their babies on their back, sleep with them, and breast-feed them for three years. When I pointed out that Ethiopians do not do this anymore in Israel, she said, laughing, that Ethiopians were now becoming *farenge*. She said, in a resigned tone of voice, that this was a positive change because "we have to behave according to the country".

Changes in behaviour are attempted specifically to better suit Israeli norms. For example, although Ethiopians are extremely proud of their soft-spoken manners, they realise that to succeed in Israel, new behaviour is required, and they must learn to become more assertive.

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<sup>120</sup> Whilst 11% of pre-1989 immigrants in Afula say that their children only play with other Ethiopian children, up to 59% of new immigrants assert this (Benita & Noam 1995: 91).

Sometimes, young men go too far and become even more loud, pushy, and rude than those they seek to emulate.

On the religious front, although most Ethiopians reaffirm their own customs (see Chapter Three), some Ethiopians attempt to conform, if only partially, to Israeli norms. A large proportion of immigrants who arrived in the 1970s and 1980s attend non-Ethiopian synagogues, and carry out their sons' Bar Mitzvah and other rites of passage. In one Ethiopian synagogue, home to the only surviving Beta Israel monk, most prayers are recited in Hebrew, previously learned in Ethiopia. During *Succoth* holiday the appropriate hut is constructed according to Jewish custom by the homes of a number of Ethiopians, and parents encourage their children to dress up for the Jewish holiday Purim, buying them expensive Power Rangers costumes. A growing number of young Ethiopian Jewish households made up of young adults who attended religious boarding school, adopt standard Jewish religious practice.

Moreover, former cultural practices which Israelis deem offensive, such as female circumcision<sup>121</sup>, have been abandoned. Indeed, both the practice and discourse have been discontinued: female circumcision has become taboo (Kaplan and Weistheimer 1992). Furthermore, many educated Beta Israel have attempted to eradicate the practice from recent history<sup>122</sup>. When I raised the subject, I was either curtly answered that it is not practised because "it is forbidden here" or the question was turned into a joke: as Aba Negusse aptly put it: "The hole remains the same!"<sup>123</sup>. One woman tried to rationalise the issue: "in our country, we had no underwear, so "it" could protrude and be seen. But here since people wear underwear, it does not matter."

Watching TV is a medium through which Ethiopians try to understand their new society. Ethiopians of all ages love to watch television, and indeed it is rarely switched off, and it has become a backdrop to all other social activities in the home. Adults understand little of the dialogue, but they try to make as much sense of what they see as possible. They enjoy in particular seeing "dreadful" things like a soap opera star divorce her husband and marry his son, thus contravening the fundamental Beta Israel ban on sexual relations with in-laws.

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<sup>121</sup> Beta Israel practised excision and infibulation (Trevisan Semi 1985: 105, Schoenberger 1974: 88).

<sup>122</sup> I was often told that the practice ended generations ago while more reliable informants assured me that it continued until departure to Israel. Some elderly informants have gone as far as disclaiming their own words on the topic, collected by earlier researchers in Ethiopia decades ago, and accusing the researchers of "lies" (Budowsky, personal communication, 12/95).

<sup>123</sup> The times that I did successfully raise the issue was at considerable personal cost. After hearing about the repugnance of uncircumcised women, I had to admit that women were not circumcised in my

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Nature programmes are a favourite, as are films which feature black people. When the news come on - which most households watch daily - a teenager is asked to translate the essential. Usually though, having heard the news on the Amharic radio a couple of hours earlier, they can often guess what the image refers to.

As well as for enjoyment, Telahun, a young educated Ethiopian watches TV to be involved in Israeli society. He recalled a recent conversation with Israelis about TV personalities and they were amazed about how much he knew - a knowledge which served him well in the army too. "We are newcomers and so we have to learn the ways of the country", he concluded

Finally, Ethiopian's positive attitude towards Israeli norms is apparent in the way they self-consciously cloak Ethiopian practices with Israeli notions.

Qes Admass and his family are crumbling the Sabbath bread into a large communal bowl. He looks at me and says, laughing: "You see, we have democracy in this country!". In other words, he was justifying an Ethiopian practice by Israeli standards.

## **2. Beta Israel's experience of cultural change**

Despite obvious embarrassment and displeasure, most women and men accept cultural changes as inevitable, and do not appear to undergo undue stress as a consequence.

Abeba was cooking *injera* during her periods. I asked if this was not forbidden. "Yes, but what can I do?" Her nephew Alemayo added: "It is forbidden to even be in the house or to touch people!" He brought the conversation to a close with a joke: "But as long as she washes her hands, it is OK!".

The changes were necessary in the new context, and "that is that". I often felt that the change in location per se was enough to account for, and accept, cultural change.

I asked Fantanesh about how she felt shaking a post-partum (impure) woman's hand. "Oh here it is not forbidden!", she answered gaily.

Often a question of mine about a contemporary practice was met by a blank expression and a muffled answer such as "in our country, it is forbidden, but here..... I do not know." Many Beta Israel affected a sort of denial of knowledge, and a denial of responsibility, which seemed to pave the way for acceptance of radical changes in tradition and concepts of purity in particular. By changing location, previous hard and fast injunctions were suddenly annulled. Purity laws were a basic tenet of daily life in the Ethiopian village, and now in the Israeli environment they are no longer obligatory. The previous set of rules and beliefs is not brought into question - they are just no longer applicable in the new context. What was appropriate in one context is no longer so in another.

Alemwork, a twenty-five-year-old educated young woman, who arrived in Israel at the age of sixteen, spoke of *astasreyo* (The Day of Atonement) in Ethiopia as the day

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country... As I blushed further, a young man stuck out his index finger, wiggled it about, and asked me whether "it" did not grow and become very long.....

to beat all days. She smiled longingly as I described the traditional style in which it had been celebrated in my neighbourhood, a twenty minute walk from her home. I asked her why if she enjoyed Beta Israel *Astasreyo* observance so much, she did not attend an Ethiopian Prayer House on that day, rather than an Israeli synagogue: "Ah, I would not do it here! I would be like a *farenge*", she responded. In another words, in this context, it would feel false to her, she would feel like a spectator, an outsider, as if she were a *farenge* trying out an indigenous custom. She felt nostalgia, but had also apparently made a candid appraisal of the fact that she is no longer the girl doing *zelen* (the Day of Atonement chanting) in Ambover (her village in Ethiopia). She is now a *datii* (religious, Hebrew) girl in Afula who solemnly observes Yom Kippur in the synagogue in keeping with other Israelis.

This acceptance of change due to a new location is also apparent in the frequent assertion "this is the way here because this is the country's traditions".

During the state elections, Alequa Telahun complained that voting was done by men in Israel, while in Ethiopia, the king was anointed by God. On reflection, he said that he liked this new way because "it is the country's traditions".

Sometimes new norms and Beta Israel custom come into conflict:

Young Avi: "The *farenge* say that it is bad to drink beer at funerals and laugh at us saying 'Ethiopians cry but make a party of the funeral by getting drunk on beer!'. At his own mother's funeral, he did not serve beer. However, after complaints from elder relatives, he served beer at the seventh day *teskar* mourning gathering. The Ethiopian viewpoint is expressed by Tsay who did not go to her cousin's wedding because "in this country you have to wait a year after the death of a close kin before attending celebrations... But we Ethiopians, we cry so much at the funeral that we do not need to wait a year! *Farenge*, they do not cry at all! And they say that Ethiopians just drink beer!"

Often, the Beta Israel deal with such conflicts with humour:

Qes Admass amused the coffee drinkers with the following tale: "I was walking down the street with my wife when a *farenge* at the bus stop said that it was not good for my wife to walk behind me like that: a couple should walk arm in arm. So, taking my wife's arm, we set off again. But as soon as we were out of sight..." His wife completed the story: "He said 'Get off me! Get off me! (*Woredge*). And when we returned to the bus stop, he said to me 'Come come! Walk by me!'"

## C. Ethiopian Youth

The drop-in centre for troubled Ethiopian youths in Tel Aviv's new bus station provides a glimpse of Ethiopian youth: side by side, the successful well-adjusted volunteers and staff members, and the street youths. The former are proud of their Ethiopian heritage, ambitious in their career plans, and keen to help less successful Ethiopian youngsters, not least by setting them a good example. They are confident, cheerful, beautifully dressed, and they enjoy life. They have succeeded in accepting themselves as Ethiopians and make their way in Israeli society at the same time - most of them were full time students at University. They claim to experience racism (*zeregnett*), but refuse to be defeated by it. The teenagers, clad in their Rasta colours,

were also cheerful, but their laughter betrayed a sense of feeling lost in the world around them. Many were drop-outs from school or the army, and they couldn't find or stick to a job. A few are said to be homeless after quarrels with families. One of the workers: "They assume that everything is hard for them. There is racism here. If they want to join Israeli society, they think 'Oh but the *farenge* see us as Black! How can we fit in?' So they identify with Blacks from Jamaica and America.

Young Ethiopians require a separate discussion because their experience of Israel is, predictably, much different to that of their elders: younger people adapt faster to changed circumstances, learn Hebrew rapidly<sup>124</sup>, and are enrolled in school, higher education courses and the army. In this section, I am referring to teenagers and young people who arrived in Israel by the age of about twenty, and therefore have either benefited from the Israeli education system or received full-time vocational training. After a few words of introduction, I briefly describe Ethiopian immigrants at school, the army, university and work, before turning to a discussion of youngsters' dual identity. I postpone the more difficult aspect of integration, namely the experience of discrimination, until Chapter Four.

Ethiopian youths are generally cheerful and sociable - they wander in pairs or small groups, chatting and laughing quietly. In a group, they speak almost exclusively Hebrew, although they often switch to Amharic when they speak about Ethiopian matters, such as family. In my neighbourhood, the boys tend to congregate on the steps by the supermarket. One or two have walkmans which are shared amongst the group, so that everyone can listen to Bob Marley or the latest Michael Jackson hit. Sometimes, one or two non-Ethiopian youths join the group. On a Saturday, they climb over the school fence to play football on the court. Girls tend to meet inside their homes, although they too stroll down the streets slowly, arm in arm. Ethiopian youths who live in large urban centres such as Tel Aviv enjoy a more urban social life. They congregate in the corners of the Tel Aviv bus centre, or in the Ethiopian music shops, and dance to Reggae and disco at an Ethiopian night-club.

Most youngsters dress like their non-Ethiopian peers: the latest (affordable) fashion in jeans and trainers, sweatshirts, T-shirts, and mini-skirts. Boys tend to base their hairstyle on Black American crew cuts. Girls plait theirs in a variety of elegant styles. A growing section of teenagers adopt a "Rasta"<sup>125</sup> image. They wear Bob Marley T-shirts, and adorn their clothes

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<sup>124</sup> In a survey carried out by the JDC in 1992 among 2,800 young Ethiopian adults (age 22-35) who came between 1984 and 1985 as part of Operation Moses, the majority of men do not have difficulty carrying on a simple conversation and reading or writing a simple letter in Hebrew. The women have more difficulty - one third have difficulty in carrying out a simple conversation, and 70% difficulty to write a simple letter (Lifshitz & Noam 1993).

<sup>125</sup> Most youths do not have a detailed understanding of Rastafarianism, but they associate it with Black American power and Black pride. They like the fact that its identifying colours are green, red and yellow, the colours of the Ethiopian flag. They are proud of the reverence shown to Ethiopia, thanks to

and jewellery with the emblematic red-yellow-green stripes. The boys also grow dreadlocks. At the other extreme from the trendy Rasta youths, the religious minority dress in conventional style. Religious boys wear a *kippa*<sup>126</sup> and straight trousers and shirt. Religious girls dress modestly with long skirts reaching the ground and baggy tops. Less religious girls still wear modest clothes at home, keeping their mini-skirts and more tight-fitting clothes for evenings out of sight of their Ethiopian elders.

## I. Students

Most Ethiopian children attend state religious primary schools and secondary boarding schools. 'Youth Aliya' boarding schools<sup>127</sup> have become predominantly Ethiopian - in 1993, Ethiopians accounted for 37% of the total student population and 67% of the student population in religious schools (Kaplan & Rosen 1994: 86-91)<sup>128</sup>. I knew many boarders, and with the exception of a few individuals, they loved their schools. Years after their school days, former class-mates remain in touch by phone, and invite each other to their respective weddings and subsequent celebrations. School photos adorn bedroom walls. Day-school children also enjoy their school days, walking home or jumping off the bus cheerfully. These youngsters say that they prefer living at home with their family than going to boarding school and that educational standards are higher than at boarding school<sup>129</sup>.

Most Ethiopian students are streamed into vocational studies at high school<sup>130</sup>. Although some youngsters are happy to leave school with technical knowledge, others resent this streaming and fight against it.

Ronit is a bright Bar Ilan University student: "I know the problems of the young. I was at boarding school. They do not let you study what you want. When I was entering the 10th grade, they told me to study infant care or sewing, but I did not want that. Some class-mates and I staged a protest and we got what we wanted [entry into the academic stream]."

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Rastafarian idolisation of former Emperor Haile Selassie. In fact, the term "Rastafari" is the original name of the emperor, Ras Tafari (for a discussion of Rastafarianism, see Jones (1988).

<sup>126</sup> A *kippa* is a cloth cap worn by religious Jews.

<sup>127</sup> Boarding schools run by the government agency for young persons' absorption which are geared to receive new immigrants and veteran Israelis with social problems at home.

<sup>128</sup> For a discussion of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants' education see Wagaw (1993: 130-190)

<sup>129</sup> For a critical discussion of education policies for Ethiopian school children, see Holt (1995).

<sup>130</sup> Many Ethiopians, backed by an Israeli NGO called the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, are highly critical of this vocational streaming. A recent study asserted that 85% of high school age youths have been sent to vocational track programmes in boarding schools (*Ha'aretz* 10/2/97). The same organisation claimed that 12% of Ethiopian immigrant youth in 1996 received a matriculation certificate as opposed to 45% of the population at large (*Ha'aretz* 19/6/97).

After school, most young people attended vocational training courses. Special courses were also designed for young new immigrants who were too old to attend school<sup>131</sup>. Even if many alumni of these courses failed to gain employment in their area of training, the courses achieved good results in helping those young immigrants who did not benefit from Israeli school education prepare for the Israeli job market (Kaplan & Rosen 1994: 93). A growing minority enrol at University<sup>132</sup> and a handful of graduates have pursued their studies to MA and PhD level<sup>133</sup>.

## II. Soldiers

A young soldier: "Everyone's experience at the army is different, depending on their type of work and their officer. At first, I had a bad officer, but I complained and got transferred, and then it was good. When my mother died for example, my officer gave me two months leave. Tadesse [whose mother also died] however had to go back to work immediately. I learned a lot in the army, especially time keeping - you have to do things exactly on time. Some of the *farenge* were fine, others not. They try to cheat you with guard duty [i.e. try to get you to do more] and if you say nothing they go off blowing a kiss and saying '*etiopit tov!*' (Hebrew: Ethiopians are good). If you stand up for yourself it is OK because in this country, you have to speak up, you cannot stay quiet. After the army I stopped being scared in offices and now I can go there and ask for whatever I want. In the army everyone is equal - all can be killed the same!"

After school, like every other Israeli, Ethiopians are drafted into the army, three years and the annual four-week reserve service for men, and two years for women. Religious girls can obtain exemption and undertake voluntary community service instead, an option chosen by a majority of Ethiopian girls. A number of Ethiopian girls told me that they would have liked to have attended the army, but their parents forbade them on religious grounds, since army service involves co-habiting with members of the opposite sex.

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<sup>131</sup> See Wagaw (1993: 191-214) for detailed discussion of the schemes. In a survey carried out by the JDC in 1992 among 2,800 young Ethiopian adults (age 22-35) who came between 1984 and 1985 as part of Operation Moses, 85% males and 39% females participated in vocational training courses (Lifshitz & Noam 1993).

<sup>132</sup> According to the Student Authority, there were 787 Ethiopian students registered in January 1997. 500 in regular university studies and 287 in pre-academic studies (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 11).

<sup>133</sup> In 1995/6, there were 891 Ethiopian students in higher education, of which 411 were in special one year preparatory courses, and 480 were regular students (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, April 1996). I knew several University students well, and spent several days in Haifa University and the Technion dormitories with Ethiopian undergraduates. The students were happy, boisterous, hard-working, and appeared to be enjoying their student life to the full, chatting and listening to Bob Marley till two a.m.. The dormitory rooms were chiefly for Ethiopians, and social life was almost exclusively with Ethiopians.

Ethiopians are reputed to be keen and excellent soldiers, and a sizeable proportion achieve officer status<sup>134</sup>. Ethiopian youths carry their uniform and gun with great pride. Photos clad in their army gear adorn bedroom and living room walls.

After visiting the parental home of a young University student, the first question he asked me was: "Did you see the photo of me in the army?"

In April 1996, during a period of conflict in Lebanon, young Dodu confides with an air of wonder and excitement: "I cannot leave the house for long because I am on the reserve list to go to Lebanon - they could call me at any moment!"

Etan smiles as he explains in fluent English: "There is this Ethiopian notion of The Gun. In Ethiopia, someone who goes out with a gun is someone with power... Here, you see a lot of young people with guns at weddings. It makes them feel good, powerful and more secure - secure from what I do not know. The desire to serve in the army, besides the desire to serve the country, is the desire to 'look good'. More than anything else, the uniform and the gun say a lot. People who go around in uniform carrying their guns - it is like carrying a mobile phone!"

School leavers generally look forward to their service very much and spend hours thinking and discussing which units to apply for.

Telahun, a twelfth grade student, often spoke to me about his quandaries regarding the army. He wanted to enter a combat unit because that was the best way to serve the country and one of the most prestigious units, but his mother was too frightened, lest he be killed in battle. The trouble, Telahun said, was that she did not understand the importance for later life of being in a prestigious unit. He was also considering parachuting and in third choice driving, because, he chuckled, he could then learn to drive without having to pay for lessons.

The experience in the army varies, depending on both the youngster in question, and the nature of his work. Moshe, an Ethiopian who works at the Absorption Ministry, told me that he had a wonderful time at the army, and became an officer in charge of the initiation of new Ethiopian and Russian immigrants. He suggested that soldiers who were in low positions, working in the kitchen for example, tended to have a negative experience, and did not feel that the army contributed to their integration in the country.

## ***Negative army experiences***

Elan had just completed his army service: "I did not like the army. My officer did not like Ethiopians. We did not like him either because once my friend wanted permission to go to his uncle's funeral and he was not granted it. I was in jail once for a month because my officer insulted me about being Ethiopian and I hit him. I do not get on with my step-father, it is hard, and I received no support about this problem in the army."

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<sup>134</sup> In 1996, there were 1,500 young Ethiopians serving in the army, of which 62 were officers (34 in regular service and 28 in the reserve forces) (Ministry of Immigrant Absorption, April 1996).



Elan's negative experience is not unique and a number of Ethiopian soldiers have committed suicide while in service. The main problems are apparent from Elan's words: "racial" abuse, lack of understanding and tolerance for Ethiopian customs, unfair treatment and lack of compassion for personal problems. Out of the dozen or so Ethiopian soldiers or ex-soldiers that I spoke to, nearly all had stories which depicted discrimination in terms of the "colour of their skin". They suffered from racial jokes which referred to their background, customs, or skin colour.

Samagn, an Ethiopian who runs training programmes for Israeli officers to deal with Ethiopian soldiers, explains the problem: "Ethiopians cannot take insults, even little things like table manners, or being called "nigger" (H: *kushi*). More than once, an enraged Ethiopian soldier threatened at gun point an Israeli soldier after an insult. But such joking is the way that Israelis interact - they do it to themselves too."

Most soldiers soon learn to deal with such "humour". A more difficult problem - which Ethiopian workers also complain of - is the lack of leave of absence to attend weddings and funerals in particular.

I witnessed Turuneh's quandary early one Monday morning. He was expected back at the barracks at 10 am, yet his great-aunt, who lives in his mother's neighbourhood, was holding a *teskar* (the seventh day memorial) for her deceased husband, a four-hour bus journey away. After changing his mind several times, he finally decided to attend the *teskar*, even though he knew that he would be disciplined on return to the army.

Cultural differences also affect Ethiopian soldiers in more subtle ways.

Samagn, the Ethiopian cultural advisor to Israeli officers, explains: "We are used to answering any request by 'yes, OK (*ishi*)'. But this is no good in the army because officers abuse Ethiopian traditions of quietness and good manners. They ask Ethiopian soldiers to do the hardest work and the worst guard duty shifts (i.e. at night) because they know that Ethiopians will not refuse. But [the anger and frustration] builds up inside their tummies."

An Israeli waiter told me about Ethiopians: "Ah the Ethiopians, I love them so much! They are so good to work with. They are so quiet and say "yes" to everything. When I was a border watchman at the army, if there was an extra eight hour shift to do, the Ethiopian would do it, and if I wanted someone to swap a shift with, he would say 'yes!'. Ah the Ethiopians, I love them!"

A further problem is caused by Ethiopians' unrealistic expectations and consequent disappointment.

Samagn explains: "Ethiopians do not have the same basis as the others [i.e. education and cultural background] and so they do not normally succeed as well as the Whites. They want the best jobs and to become officers, but most of them do not achieve this. Then they get depressed."

## ***Positive experiences in the army***

Fortunately, negative accounts of the army are far outweighed by positive experiences and the army is usually spoken of as a positive life changing experience<sup>135</sup>.

“The army makes you stronger”. Physical and mental endurance - walking at night with a 70 kg backpack, facing Arabs in the West Bank - is said to be so intense, that “you feel you could do anything afterwards”.

Ethiopians learn about Israelis - “their customs and behaviour”.

“You learn to be punctual: 6.30 am in the army means 6.30 am, and not 7 am or even 6.35 am!” “You learn to be less quiet and to speak out.”

Rachamin remembers that at first he always ended up doing the worst night duty shifts. “In Ethiopia, it is not good to refuse what your friends or your officer asks of you. That is our tradition.” Once he learned to say “no”, Rachamin told me proudly that the Israeli soldiers praised him, telling him that now he was learning to be truly Israeli!

“In the army, you learn to be with the Israelis - how not to feel insulted at their jokes and how to laugh with them. We learned to chat and play with them.”

The army increased Ethiopians sense of belonging to Israel and of equality with other Israelis (Shabtay 1995).

“Psychologically, when you give to your country, serve your country, give three years of your life, you feel nice, as if you are part of the people. I went and gave the same as the others, there is no black and white there, so I thought afterwards: we are equal.”

“You eat, sleep and joke with them. You are equal to them - the same food, the same exercises, the same clothes, the same guns, the same work.”

Conversely, when Ethiopians’ sense of belonging was threatened their enthusiasm for the army dropped accordingly. As Kaplan & Salamon (1998: 11) note: “While it is generally denied by military sources, some observers claim the Ethiopian community’s general difficulties and particularly the ‘blood scandal’ have resulted in a lessening of motivation among Ethiopian inductees’.

## **III. Workers**

Ethiopian youngsters work in a variety of jobs<sup>136</sup>. University graduates enter White collar professions and often work in government bodies on Ethiopian issues. They tend to be well

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<sup>135</sup> For a rich discussion of the impact the army service has on the identity of Ethiopian soldiers, see Shabtay (1995 and forthcoming).

<sup>136</sup> In the JDC 1992 survey of 2800 young adults, 83% males were absorbed in jobs, army or further courses. 68% men and 41% women were working (most of the women were in the younger age group, since they tend to stop work after marriage). Three quarters of men and just under half the women who

integrated and successful. As Moshe, an Ethiopian who lived in Canada for eight years before recently immigrating to Israel, put it: "They act Israeli but think like Ethiopians. They have their Ethiopian style with an Israeli coating." A large number of youngsters from the earlier wave of immigration worked with the social services and absorption workers to help the integration of the new immigrants, although by 1995, many were losing these jobs as the new immigrants were settling in, and their services were no longer required. They acted as translators, community workers, assistance welfare officers, housing officers, and so on. The act of translation involved more than merely vocabulary since the youngsters had to translate and make intelligible foreign concepts and modes of thought to both sides.

Moshe, who worked for a while at a caravan site to encourage dwellers to buy homes, explained that he had both to explain the terms and conditions as he was told by his Israeli boss, and also to explain in terms by which Ethiopians could understand why it was in their advantage to buy a house - the Israeli discourse would be largely meaningless to them.

Aster told me of her difficulties in the other direction: trying to make the Israeli social workers understand Ethiopian ways of speaking. For example, if a man says "there is no more *injera* (Ethiopian pancake) in the house", she will not translate literally because the social worker will think that financial difficulties are the problem, instead she will say "he is having marital problems".

The majority of Ethiopian youngsters are employed in manual work. The Israeli bosses I spoke to praised their young Ethiopian workers for their diligence, dexterity and respectful attitude towards their work. Bosses and Ethiopian workers alike told me that soon after joining a job, they socialise with their non-Ethiopian colleagues at breaks. Despite apparent success, young manual workers, like their elders, do not tend to speak much about their work. They assert proudly that they have a job, and the story ends there. This silence, I believe, is due to a disdain for manual work, characteristic of Ethiopian highland societies and well expressed in the proverb 'the mouth's wisdom [leads to] leadership; the hand's wisdom [leads to] slavery' (*yeaf bilhat getnet; yeijj bilhat baryenet*) (Rosen 1995). Young Ethiopians who emigrated to Israel dreamed of social advancement in a country in which they could excel themselves and rise above the former Beta Israel status of despised artisan. Working in factories, alongside low-status Arab workers, is a disappointment and humiliation<sup>137</sup>.

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work, do so in a variety of skilled jobs; primarily as skilled labourers in industry and construction or as high-level service workers, women primarily as assistant nurses, dental technicians and assistant nursery school teachers (Lifshitz & Noam 1993).

<sup>137</sup> Rosen (1995) elucidates this problem with his account of the lack of enthusiasm which greeted a course in building for young Ethiopians.

## IV. Identity

The search for identity is a preoccupation for all young people, but for immigrants, the search is all the more difficult as the range of choices is dramatically increased. However Ethiopian youngsters who arrived in Israel after the age of twelve or so are on the whole remarkably successful at combining dual identities<sup>138</sup>.

A young twenty-three-year-old student, highly Westernised speaking fluent Hebrew, Amharic and English: "I am Ethiopian in everything! I hope that I have not changed and that I am Ethiopian like any other even though I have learned the Western way."

### ***Israeli citizenship and Ethiopian identity***

Ethiopian youths seek to integrate into their new society while at the same time they want to preserve aspects of ethnic identity. On the one hand, they want to become fully fledged Israeli citizens and progress socially and economically as equals in their new country. They seek good jobs and an Israeli lifestyle. Many youths learn Israeli religious practice<sup>139</sup>, dress in fashionable styles, learn to cook Israeli dishes, seek the company of non-Ethiopians, watch TV, read newspapers, become keen soldiers, and a few individuals have non-Ethiopian boy/girl friends. Moreover, in this "integrating" mode, they often appear to reject elements of past Ethiopian practice when these appear "primitive", for they are "modern" citizens like other Israelis..

After being shown a picture of women cooking *injera* (bread) in Ethiopia on a large platter on a fire outside, I asked why *injera* is no longer cooked in this way, given that Ethiopian immigrants often complain that *injera* pancakes are too small in Israel. Aba Negusse replied "I do not know". My neighbour Kanu suggested a utilitarian reason: wood cannot easily be found. Her younger sister retorted rather angrily: "We are now in the twentieth century!"

Whenever I was walking barefoot, even around the house, Ethiopians always noticed and told that "in this country you wear shoes".

On the other hand, young people generally state that they are Ethiopian, and they continue to maintain a strong ethnic identity. Their social life is almost exclusively in the company of kin and Ethiopian neighbours and they maintain numerous Ethiopian traditions (e.g. food, social behaviour, and religious practice).

Workie is a young married women who immigrated eleven years ago, aged sixteen: "I am born Ethiopian but my citizenship (*zegenet*) has changed and now I am Israeli. I

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<sup>138</sup> Ethiopians who arrived as infants or who were born in Israel present a different scenario. Few of them had reached their late teens given that few Ethiopians had arrived in Israel more than 11 years prior to fieldwork. Judging from my observations and from conversations with Ethiopians and Israelis who work with Ethiopian youngsters, they have a more difficult time at establishing their identity and many are apparently under-performing at school.

<sup>139</sup> For example, religious youngsters wear *kippa* (skull cap), recite appropriate blessings and prayers, attend the synagogue, and celebrate annual holidays in keeping with standard Sephardi practice.

am Israeli on paper, but not by all things - I do not eat the same as Yemeni Israelis for example. My traditions have not changed: Weddings, funerals, food, receiving guests, boiling coffee..."

Why a desire to maintain Ethiopian identity whilst seeking to integrate? As Chapter Seven discusses in greater detail, creating an ethnic identity is one means of dealing with perceived discrimination. Young Ethiopians feel that they are viewed by Israelis as Blacks before all else, and worse still as "primitive Ethiopians". They think that however much they succeed, they will always be considered "lower" than other Israelis because of the colour of their skin (see Chapter Five). Given that Ethiopian youths remain "Ethiopian" in the eyes of other Israelis, they prefer to be seen, or at least to think of themselves, as "proud" Ethiopians rather than "primitive" shameless ones who are willing to forego their rich heritage for the sake of conformity.

### ***Ethnic pride: Ethiopian friends and spouses***

Ethnic pride is manifest in young people's tendency to socialise and marry amongst themselves. Several young Ethiopians I knew had relationships with non-Ethiopians, but eventually opted for an Ethiopian spouse. Their choice, they told me, was based on the "black / white question", a strong sense of cultural differences, and a desire to reaffirm their Ethiopian heritage. One man said that it is good to be out in the world of Whites by day and to return to an Ethiopian household - and Ethiopian spouse - at night. Men had more incentive to marry Ethiopian since they are privileged in Ethiopian households - whether the wife works outside the home or not, she is solely in charge of housekeeping and child care. Educated Ethiopian women have more incentive to marry out since many Ethiopian husbands find the notion of a high-achieving wife difficult to accept and they are aware of the better deal for women in non-Ethiopian households. Thus, although, motivations for choosing marriage partners are obviously complex and highly individual, many young Ethiopians, especially men, explained their choice in terms of a political statement, a reaffirmation of Ethiopian identity.

Young Ethiopians seek out the company of other young Ethiopians for their social life<sup>140</sup>. Although Ethiopian youths are popular at work, in the army and at college with Israelis, such friendships do not usually extend beyond the work place. It is in the company of other young Ethiopians, that they can relax and "be themselves", without needing to conform to either their elders' expectations or to adopt Israeli social behaviour.

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<sup>140</sup> Only a small percentage of the JDC 1992 survey (see note 22) were found to meet with non-Ethiopians with any frequency (Lifshitz & Noam 1993).

Etan explains that Ethiopians are better for friends, they are easier. Israelis do not know their customs. "With Ethiopians, it is close, we meet at weddings and funerals, we know each others' relatives. Whites can easily insult you, not intentionally but because of their way of speaking. They say for instance, to each other too, "your mother is *tebeda* (a whore)". For us respect is the most important thing. We have patience, and they have none. With Ethiopians it is "tight" (*tbek*)."

Tadesse: " My best friends at school are Ethiopians. I know their life better and I understand what they think of me and they know what I think of them."

## ***Combining Israeli and Ethiopian identities***

The pride young people have in their culture does not immune them from condemning aspects of Ethiopian culture. Marriage rules, codes of dress, and other constraining cultural practices are criticised and openly broken by a large segment of the youth - who continue nonetheless to proudly affirm their Ethiopian identity.

Solomon was telling me about the thousands of people at a funeral he attended in Jerusalem and burst forth: "I hate Ethiopian culture!". Noting the strength of his outburst, he checked himself and explained: He does not hate the fact that there are such large gatherings, although he himself does not enjoy them, but "the culture is not compatible with life here". People cannot hold jobs as they get fired after they keep on taking days off work for funerals. "They spend all their money on funerals and weddings and do not buy books for their children!"

Moshe complained of the high cost and frequency of Ethiopian celebrations: "They have no head! How much does a cow cost [for the feast marking the birth of a daughter]? They could put that money in the bank and when the child is older use it for her education." Me: "But don't they recoup the expenses with the donations, and get a profit?" Moshe: "Maybe, but they have to return it all at future celebrations. I had to put aside the profits of my wedding to pay it back now".

Even when Ethiopian practices are not criticised, as Solomon says, they often come into conflict with newly adopted Israeli ways. The most evocative way to describe this intertwining of two cultures is to give a portrait of two youngsters I knew well, Efrat and Adissu.

Efrat, an animated twenty-six-year-old, has well-formed ideas about what integration means, and does not mean. "I am Israeli by citizenship, but I am Ethiopian by birth. I grew up there and I want to maintain our traditions: The religious holidays, weddings, music, food..." She mixes both Ethiopian and Israeli ways, consciously. She wears Jeans, but covers herself with a white shawl to go to drink coffee or to attend a funeral gathering. When her child was born she said that she would speak both Hebrew and Amharic to him (although the latter lapsed as the months went by). She is temporarily living at her parental home so that her parents and younger siblings can take care of the baby while she works. Her husband joins her at week-ends. She would not leave her child however at her mother's house, as the latter has requested, when she returns to her own home because she wants to bring him up "her way". She will buy him a computer. She works as a receptionist and speaks fluent Hebrew. Her social life revolves around her family and kin and she disapproves of her younger sister's immodest dress. She accords her parents all the traditional forms of respect, but disobeyed them in her marriage because she refused to abide by Ethiopian "bad"

traditions. Her parents did not want her to marry her husband but “we wanted each other and that is what counts”.

Adissu, a twenty-five-year-old student in acting school, epitomised dual identity. Adissu quickly adapted to Israeli way of life and “culture”. His Hebrew is perfect and when he speaks it, he adds all the appropriate mannerisms such as shoulder slapping, short interjections such as “*nu*”, and a raised voice. He is ambitious and doubtlessly will succeed in the Israeli world - he has already starred in a TV drama about the Ethiopian journey to Sudan. At the same time, Adissu is a proud Ethiopian. He has returned to Ethiopia several times in the last few years, and thinks of himself as part of the “Ethiopian Diaspora”. His walls are adorned with Ethiopian artefacts, brought back from his two trips to Ethiopia. He works for the Ethiopian radio station, performs Ethiopian music at weddings and has brought out two CDs. His radio programmes are about “our culture in Israel. To be Israeli, you do not need to forget your culture. If you have a new child, you do not have to forget the old one.” He is courteous and respectful towards his parents and maintains close relations with his siblings. He loves to amuse people by mimicking the way of speaking of the elders, getting their intonation just perfect and mixing in their Hebrew words pronounced incorrectly. He remains acutely aware of his colour and calls himself “a little black man”.

Youngsters delicately weave together strands of two opposing cultures. This mixing is most apparent in social behaviour: Ethiopian young immigrants are developing an Ethiopian-Israeli social manner. It is marked by Ethiopian courtesy, cheerfulness, respect, and contains elements of Israeli individualism and strong will as well as Hebrew language. Another example is the style in which Ethiopian youths organise their weddings; they mix Ethiopian requirements and taste (e.g. all kin are invited, Ethiopian music and dance, money donations) with Israeli practice (e.g. the venue is a rented hall, Israeli food, Western disco music, an Israeli Master of Ceremonies).

Sometimes, they have to choose which of two sets of norms to apply to the given moment, switching from one to another, more or less consciously. They are chameleons, adopting one behaviour pattern in the company of Israelis and young Ethiopians and another in the company of their elders. For example, as Israelis, in the presence of Israelis, they dress Israeli, speak Hebrew, smoke cigarettes, dance disco, eat Israeli food, and some even desecrate the Sabbath. The same individuals in front of their elders dress modestly, speak Amharic, never smoke, dance Ethiopian style, eat Ethiopian food and respect the Sabbath. There is no element of deceit: abiding by Ethiopian ways with elders is a mark of respect, and is on the whole enjoyable, albeit not always:

Telahun hated being summoned by his grandfather to clean his back in the shower, but he never refused him.

Young sixteen-year-old Ester had been looking forward all month to her cousin’s wedding. As the hired mini-bus was about to leave, an elderly relative decided to go, and without a word of complaint, Ester gave him her seat, and watched the mini-bus leave without her.

Aviva pondered her choices of residence after marriage - if she went to live in her fiancé's town, who would look after her aged mother?

Amongst themselves, youngsters' behaviour is eclectic. Ethiopian youths take the best from both sets of norms - mixing languages according to the topic of conversation, smoking, greeting each other in full Ethiopian style, discussing family issues, watching TV, listening to Amharic music alongside Reggae and Israeli and Western disco music.....

Difficulties arise when new Israeli norms are in conflict with Ethiopian ones. Marriage is a chief problem in this respect. Many youngsters were in a state of turmoil because they had fallen in love with someone whom they later found out was a relative, and thus forbidden for them. In my experience, about half the youngsters in this situation went ahead with the marriage and half renounced their love. The former category did not make this decision lightly: they felt no allegiance to the marriage rule, but the marriage went against the wishes of their families and therefore forced them to infringe an Ethiopian norm which they do wish to hold onto, namely respect for elders. For the youngsters who gave up their love, the balance between parental respect and love tipped more towards the former. Sometimes conflict ensues between youngsters over correct behaviour since its boundaries have been pushed to extremes.

Fanta, a young woman positioned on the "traditional" extreme of the spectrum was in conflict with a suitor. She refused to spend time with him until they were officially engaged, with parental approval. He, having developed Israeli standards, thought this a premature step before they had spent time together to see if they got on.

Such conflict is also experienced by individuals, who are unsure which codes to adopt, and they battle with contradictory feelings.

Alemwork, a twenty-five-year old who immigrated aged sixteen, wishes her husband and his family would be less "Ethiopian" sometimes. "If I want to study in evening classes, his mother comes by and asks him where I am and he says 'studying' and she says 'oh yes?'. He cares about what people say. He says that he will not walk with me if I wear trousers." Although Alemwork complains about her husband's traditionality, she herself is just as traditional, if not more so. I remember a trip she made to Tel Aviv to buy hair cream. She had wanted a companion so that she could "wander" a little in town. However, since she went alone, she came straight back, because there were many Ethiopians about, and they would have "thought things". Alemwork feels that such thinking is 'backward' and she wants to break free, but she cannot escape the norms, which are prevalent in her society and, above all, in herself.

### ***Teenagers: towards Black culture?***

Most of the above discussion concerns youngsters in their late teens to mid-twenties. My experience with younger teenagers was limited, chiefly because we did not have a language



in common, since many of them speak only poor Amharic and I have no Hebrew<sup>141</sup>. Many teenagers who arrived in Israel as small children went through a stage of rejection of their heritage, only to “find” it again in their late teens / early twenties, after failing to integrate as Israelis in White Israel and dabbling with Black American culture.

Elan, a twenty-five year student, explained the process: “Most very young Ethiopians speak Hebrew to each other. I speak in Amharic to them but I get responses in Hebrew. At the age of about fourteen, they live an illusion. They are trying to show what they want to be, they want to be included in the accepted part of society. They want to be “White style”. When they fail at this, they tend to look towards Black Americans. They look for role models and feel closer to them than to White superstars. They see themselves as Blacks rather than as “Ethiopians”, because Ethiopia is seen as this backward country by their White friends, whereas all the Whites love Reggae and Black singers. So they do their hair in that way [dreadlocks] and listen to Bob Marley. After high school, they go to the army and have to cut off their dreadlocks. They look then for their real identity. Many begin to get closer to their Ethiopian parents, they visit their relatives, listen to Ethiopian music and speak Amharic once more.”

Elan’s interpretation was born out for me by my own observations and interactions with teenagers. The “Rasta” group of youths who used to hang out by the supermarket near my house spoke of their aspirations to go abroad, to California, Jamaica, and Ethiopia comes in third place. Elan limited the identification with Black Americans to a stage in the developmental process. However, there are signs that the influence is longer term for a growing minority of Ethiopian Jewish youth. Around Tel Aviv bus station area, there are dozens of trendy young Ethiopians (of all ages), with either a ‘Rasta’ look (dreadlocks, green - red - yellow bands, baggy trousers) or Black American ‘slick’ MTV look (“crew cut” hairdo and a brash style of social intercourse). Reggae and Black dancing clubs and Reggae music shops are thriving in Tel Aviv. Young Ethiopian Jewish immigrants share such venues with illegal African workers from Ethiopia and Ghana (Horwitz forthcoming).

These youths are disaffected with life, highly critical of Israelis and of their parents’ traditions. Ethiopians and Israelis are concerned by their swelling numbers. A recent report by the Association for Youth in Distress claimed that “fifteen percent of the fifteen thousand immigrant teenagers (twelve to eighteen years old) in the country are defined as marginal youth; they have dropped out or have been thrown out of boarding schools or local schools, and are exposed to criminal activity and criminal life” (*Ha’aretz*, 10/2/97).

A twenty-seven-year-old Ethiopian is quoted in *The Boston Globe* (14/2/96): “I see the kids around the Tel Aviv bus station as a kind of MTV phenomenon. The only connection they have with the guys they see on TV is the colour of their skin, but that’s more than they feel with people here. They are identifying with black American

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<sup>141</sup> Malkam Shabtay is currently undertaking research among this group, no in-depth anthropological work has to date been published.

culture because it offers them some kind of identity they lack here. They just want to belong. And right now, I fear for where they'll end up."

I witnessed a case of teenage change, growing confusion and increasing orientation towards Black culture in my young friend Telahun, one of Aba Negusse's grandson, whom I knew well over a period of eighteen months.

Early on in fieldwork, Telahun, a seventeen-year old boarding school student, was very pro-Israel and pro-Israeli, always negating any talk of discrimination. He told me then: "I do not think that I am different to other Israelis. When I came, yes, because I did not understand the language or how they behaved... but now, living with them, eating with them, and socialising with them, I know how they feel about us. What Israelis can do, I can do too. I have no less than Israelis [in terms of goods]. People who have less might feel different to Israelis, but I do not."

A year later, after the Blood Crisis which politicised many youths, Telahun, who boasted the number of stones he had thrown at the demonstration, was the first to criticise Israeli negative attitudes towards Ethiopians. For example, having previously denied any discrimination in the army, he now openly said that he doubted that he would achieve his aims there because "they" would keep him down. After shunning Rasta colours, he gradually began to wear them and his conversation started to fill with references to racial issues. For example: "Let us watch that film on TV, I like films with Blacks in them!" or "I prefer having Ethiopian friends, you cannot trust the Whites!"

## Conclusion

Alemwork told me about her first few days in the country: "And then we ate food that had been brought to us in a lorry". She recalled this image because it struck her at the time as very strange to be eating food that had come from a lorry.

Given the large cultural and social jump which Ethiopian immigrants made in coming from their former villages to urban Israel, as exemplified by Alemwork's recollection of her first days, it is remarkable that they have adapted so rapidly to their new lifestyle. The trappings of modern life have proved largely intelligible. Ethiopian immigrants appreciate their new country precisely because it is modern and "developed" and their children can become educated. They make certain efforts to integrate into Israeli society. Younger immigrants have achieved considerable success in their efforts to join the Israeli army and educational system, and in negotiating dual identities, even while suffering from discrimination.

Despite these successes and their appreciation of Israel, older Ethiopians can become overwhelmed by feelings of ignorance in their new country as a result of their inability to speak Hebrew.

Mama Fantae: "We are well in Israel. The young people work and we [elders] get help from the government. If the Christians that we grew up with were to ask me, I would

tell them that I am happy here. But our Amharic and their Hebrew do not meet and we have “become deaf” (*dinkoro*, lit. Ignorant, stupid). This is our problem.”

I now turn to Mama Fantae’s problem.

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## Five: On Becoming Deaf

### Introduction

Aba Negusse, my adoptive father, is an old man, tall and strong, with intelligent eyes which appraise everyone and everything around him. He is usually quiet and dislikes people who go “blah blah blah” all the time - “you should speak only when you have something to say!” He is a cheerful man and his neighbours often congregate in his front garden to chat in the afternoon breeze. Aba Negusse loves to recount the days when he was a wealthy farmer and renowned weaver. “I had land from here, right up to the bank”, his arm stretches out towards the local Bank Hapoalim, some 500 yards away, “I had cows and sheep! And a mule! And I had a gun with so many bullets!” At other times, especially when a dispute is the topic of the day, he loves to speak of the status he acquired in the village: “For five years, I was a judge. People came to me with their problems. I listened and then I said: ‘This is good. This is bad. Do this. Do that’.”

Aba Negusse became accustomed to my questions but whenever I asked him specifically about “this country”, he lost his fluency, and claimed ignorance. “You must ask people who know, who have studied! Now, if we were in my country, I could tell you everything! Here what do I know? I am deaf (*dinkoro*)! I used to know so many things; but now I have forgotten. You study on your computer; my stomach is full, but it no longer works. It has become crazy (*angol*). I have no more energy or strength, just sadness.”

Previous chapters have elucidated the meaning of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants’ frequent assertion that “we are well in this country” (*dahna nan*). I have showed that they adapted rapidly to their novel socio-economic environment and were able to recreate dense social networks of kin and neighbours, greatly appreciate their “return to their homeland”, and that they uphold a strong sense of pride, reaffirming the superiority of their cultural and religious traditions compared to other Israelis. But as Aba Negusse’s words suggest, in parallel to their sense of well-being, Ethiopian adults describe themselves as “becoming deaf” in Israel. This chapter and the next analyses the meaning of this expression for Ethiopian adults.

The literal meaning of *dinkoro* is unambiguous: deaf, the inability to hear. Ethiopians love to speak in riddles and to use words with several layers of meanings (Levine 1965); the word “*dinkoro*” allows just such interplay. Leslau, in his authoritative Amharic-English dictionary defines the verb *deneqwara*: “To be or become deaf; to be unable to think or perceive due to vexation; to be ignorant, to not understand or remember what one has been taught; to be stupid.” In his list of 345 terms of derogation, Molvaer (1995: 265) translates *dinkoro* as “a stupid person”. When Ethiopians complain of deafness, they refer, in the first

instance, to their inability to “hear” or understand the language around them. Second, they refer to their state of ignorance in their new environment.

Alemitu illustrates these two meanings: “In our country, you grind *teff* (a local grain) and you make *injera*, but in this country, you need a brain. Here, for those of us who have not studied, the problem is language. For the children, and for those who have studied, this country is good. As for us, we do not know the language and secondly we do not know the bus station [i.e. we cannot find our way around the country to visit our relatives].”

“Becoming deaf” also refers to Israelis’ perceptions of Ethiopians. Ethiopians feel that they are looked down upon as “primitive” people who “know nothing”. Worse, the basis of their identity and sense of belonging to Israel - their Judaism - is doubted. Younger Ethiopians who have received education in Israel and acquired Hebrew language do not refer to themselves as “deaf”. The problem for them is Israeli racism. They are not ignorant themselves: it is this racism which keeps them down. Israeli “racism” is also to blame for the doubts cast on Beta Israel Judaism and for the Blood Bank’s policy of throwing out Ethiopian blood donations. This chapter describes each of these idioms of deafness.

Ethiopians’ choice of a body metaphor to describe their problems in Israel follows Ethiopian custom of attributing physical pain in a particular part of the body to describe emotional or mental ailments. For example, Ethiopians make frequent reference to the stomach - the seat of knowledge, pain, frustration, and desire<sup>142</sup>.

Alemwork ate and ate when her father died, but she could not fill her tummy [for her tummy longed for her father].

Aveva: “Ethiopians have much patience but when it breaks... The tummy is bigger than the world, but if it fills, it explodes.”

Worku warns me to be less open: “Keep feelings in your tummy!”

Just as a tummy ache denotes emotional troubles, “deafness” is a metaphor for Ethiopian Jewish immigrants’ difficulties in Israel.

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<sup>142</sup> Molvaer notes that “seats” are located in the body for various mental faculties amongst the Amhara. Thoughts and feelings originate in the heart. Strong feelings such as love are “seated” in the stomach or intestines, e.g. “*Anjet bellagn*” “my intestines eat me / I feel sorry / regretful” (Molvaer 1995: 55).

## A. Becoming deaf as a language problem

### I. “We have no mouth”

“Our ears do hear, but we do not know the language... so that is why we say that we are *dinkoro*.”

When Ethiopians say that they are *dinkoro*, they mean in the first instance that they are unable to communicate verbally, they cannot ‘hear’ the language around them, and they cannot express themselves in this language. Other expressions are also used to convey their inability to communicate: “We have no mouth” or “we have no language”.

Mama Tsay is a tall woman in her sixties. She was talking to me about what a good country Israel is for the Ethiopians. She broke her narrative with a sigh: “but the problem for us is that their Hebrew and our Amharic do not meet. If only they could understand our Amharic!” She went on to explain her brother Aba Brhan’s nonchalance when he spoke about his new job. She blamed his difficulties at work by his “deafness”, by which she meant his inability to speak Hebrew.

Mama Tsay implies that her brother’s problems at work, and Ethiopians’ problems in general, are caused by a lack of Hebrew. On further questioning, she, and her brother, described the kind of problems which I had assumed were paramount such as cultural differences, lack of appropriate technical knowledge, the low status of the job and lack of control over the work. But for her, the biggest problem was language for although the significance of these other problems cannot be under-estimated (see Chapter Five), the immediate level of experience concerns language and the inability to communicate in Hebrew. Moreover, Mama Tsay stated a tangible problem - language - because that was easier to verbalise than all the other difficulties her brother experienced. As Aleign, an educated Ethiopian, said: “They do not think like you! They are not educated. They cannot give reasons and explanations, they just say something briefly.”

To understand this stress on language, we need to examine the nature of verbal communication in Amhara culture, Ethiopian immigrants’ difficulties in acquiring Hebrew, and the practical daily frustration of “not having a mouth”.

## II. Language in Amhara culture

It is no coincidence that the metaphor Ethiopians use to express their difficulties is “deafness”, a metaphor which places verbal communication centre-stage. Ethiopians’ particular concern with language became apparent from my first days of fieldwork.

When I was struggling hard with Amharic language, my hosts and neighbours often asked me to say words in English. As I had to reel off word after word in English, I quickly became irritated: why should they care how to say ‘good morning’ or ‘horse’ in English when they were trying to learn Hebrew and me Amharic? As my fluency in Amharic increased, they stopped asking for these words in English. I later understood that this was one of their discreet and charming ways of making me at home amongst them; they were encouraging me to express what they assumed I held dearly - my language - and were relating to the frustration of being unable to express oneself as “an adult”. Indeed, my Amharic words often provoked peels of laughter because I spoke “like a baby”.

I was often described as “clever” (*gobaz*, “*ras alat*”, lit. “She has a head”) not so much because of my years of education or my ability to absorb Ethiopian cultural practices, but because I spoke many languages and was a keen learner of Amharic. For example, Mama Fantae said: “You have a good brain, you grasped our language”. When introducing me to new-comers, my language proficiency was invariably singled-out to serve as introduction (and recommendation). To test my “cleverness” and willingness to engage, I was continuously subject to verbal provocations. If I succeeded in responding “cleverly”, that is using a play on words, my companions clapped with delight.

Levine’s (1965) seminal *Wax and Gold* has made Amharas<sup>143</sup> famous for their ‘clever’ use of language.

In a later work, Levine recalls the source of his “love for ambiguity”: “In the late 1950s I spent three years among the Amhara of Ethiopia, where I encountered a culture whose devious imprecision was necessarily vexing to an American of my age and time, but a culture that finally attracted me deeply with its flair for artistically ambiguous utterance (Levine 1985:x).”

*Wax and Gold* discusses the ancient Amharic form of verse of that name (*semna work*). The verses contain two semantic layers. The apparent superficial meaning of the words is called wax and their hidden deeper significance is the gold (Levine 1965:5-10)<sup>144</sup>. Levine argues

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<sup>143</sup> Levine does not mention the Beta Israel, but since the Beta Israel are culturally similar to Amharas, Levine’s study applies equally well to them.

<sup>144</sup> Levine provides the following example of a wax and gold verse:

“Since Adam your lip did eat of that Tree  
The Saviour my heart has been hung up for thee.”

He explains: “in this couplet the wax of Adam’s sin and Christ’s crucifixion on his behalf has been used as a form in which to pour a love message. A literal translation of the wax couplet is:

Because Adam ate of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge  
The Saviour of the World has been crucified for thee.

To savour the gold of the couplet fully, one must know that the verb meaning ‘was crucified’, *tasaqala*, may also signify “is anxious to be near”. So a literal translation of the gold would be:

Because of your [tempting] lips  
My heart is anxious to be near thee.”

that although less elaborate, everyday speech is permeated with this type of ambiguity and the enjoyment of verbal ambiguities plays a significant role in conversations and stories:

“When [an Amhara] talks, his words carry *double entendre* as a matter of course; when he listens, he is ever on the lookout for latent meanings and hidden motives. As an Ethiopian anthropologist once told me, wax and gold is far more than a poetic formula; it is the Amhara way of life’ (Levine 1985:27-28).”

Thus, “one is considered a master of spoken Amharic only when one’s speech is leavened with ambiguous nuances as a matter of course. Even among other peoples in Ethiopia the Amhara have been noted for extremes of symbolism and subtlety in their everyday talk (Levine 1985:25).”

Levine’s observations are easily born out by the Beta Israel. On my very first day of fieldwork I was entertained with an Ethiopian story where the punch-line centred on a play with words.

Aba Gebrahanu, the hero of many an Ethiopian tale, was visiting an acquaintance. He received a plate of food from his host. A mouse had just run off the plate and the host did not clean it before presenting food on it to his guest. When Aba Gebrahanu departed, he made a blessing, “May this plate never be empty”, which also means in Amharic, “this plate has a mouse”.

“Good speech” is essential to progress in life, and to manipulate authorities in particular<sup>145</sup>.

Aba Alemu and Aba Negusse were chatting about the old days. The subject of Aba Tarik’s wealth and land-ownership (which was rare for Beta Israel) was discussed. Aba Alemu commented by way of explanation: “Aba Tarik was always amongst the authorities (*balasiltanoch*). He had the ability to speak well.”

Katama’s son was studying in a place for “people who have no brain” (a school for low academic achievers). She lamented her inability to “speak well” with the authorities to get him placed in a better institution.

“Good speech” is also required to conquer hearts.

Aba Alemu told me the type of man I should marry: “You have to choose someone who is educated like you, who knows much, who helps you, whose *speech* is *attractive* and who is handsome.”

Aba Negusse: “When I was young, I had a friend and she used to say to me: ‘Negusse my body you are leaving today, when are you going to come back like a ripe chickpea? - you will be finished on the way!’ You see I used to live in the village, and her in the town, and thus she was afraid someone else would “pick” me on the way!”

Ethiopians love to recite and create verse couplets, called *getem*, which are usually sung.

At celebrations, after the disco has been taken away, a few men start to sing, often accompanied by a *masenko* (a traditional two stringed Ethiopian instrument) and

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(Levine 1965:6)

<sup>145</sup> Rosen (1987) notes that “language becomes, for many Amharas, their primary means of both self-defence and also of offence. One must live a long time in the midst of Ethiopians, speaking with them in Amharic (or Tigrinya), in order to begin to appreciate how much calculation is invested in each phrase (...). That he who desires to do harm may always be polite, or that he who wishes to deliver an insult may include it in a finely-wrought compliment, is part of a general understanding of human nature (1987: 59)”



drum. The *masenko* player sings favourite *getem* and creates verse relating to the moment as well as singing spoken *getem* composed by other members of the party. In the case of an engagement, these recount funny stories about the bride, since the musicians and guests are her relatives, and include sexually explicit verse, to the amusement of all.

Sorrow and respect for the deceased are expressed with improvised *getem* (verse, often with double meanings). At funerals relatives and specialists sing couplets in memory of the deceased:

He is like a flute (meaning also bright young man), do not bury him, people will walk past and admire him (even while he is dead).

My flower, my brother, the time has come to cut your time short.

“Let it eat me, oh Aba Mucha, what kind of woodcutter is he, when I told him to cut the branch, he cut the root. He cut the tree at the root and made the birds cry!” [the tree cut at the root means that the father is dead and the birds crying are the children]

As well as its “ambiguous” construction, Amharic is also striking in the elaborate and loving way with which it is used. Greetings are no simple matter, and contain a variety of different expressions for different times of day. Stories and daily events are reported in detail, with as much elaboration and humour as possible. The simplest of events, such as an interaction at the supermarket or the greeting with a relative is reported to a third party (most often coffee partners) in the minutest detail, including all direct speech, and any clever use of language contained therein. Such narratives, lasting up to ten minutes, are rarely interrupted. Certain individuals gain reputations as good story tellers, and entertain others for hours.

Muluye always livened up a social gathering. During the long evenings of the wake after his cousin’s death, he entertained the company with his stories. The following stories for instance each lasted about ten minutes, as no detail was spared and direct speech was quoted verbatim:

A man went to a prostitute and wanted “it” five times, but she only accepted three times and so he did not want to pay her.

His cousin Makwanent was looking after the cows and waiting for his lunch. Finally, very late his mother brought a plate of *injera* to him, but by then he was so angry that he threw the plate down. He then had to wait till evening to eat!

I have elaborated on the richness of Amharic language to show the centrality of the metaphor of “deafness” and why “having no mouth” is so acutely crippling for the Beta Israel: Self-professed masters of language are reduced to speaking “like a baby” in Hebrew, if at all.

### III. Learning and not learning Hebrew

#### 1. Hebrew classes

Within weeks of arrival in Israel, all Ethiopian immigrants enter free intensive Hebrew classes, called *ulpan*<sup>146</sup>. These classes are aimed to equip all new immigrants to Israel with sufficient Hebrew to communicate verbally in Hebrew and to use the Hebrew alphabet, as well as to offer an introduction to Israeli culture and Jewish traditions. *Ulpan* classes were modified and extended for Ethiopians given that most of them were previously illiterate. Instead of the usual five months of *ulpan*, they received ten months to compensate for “learning difficulties” (Anteby 1996: 127).

Youngsters and formerly educated adults learn Hebrew well, and quickly become fluent, both orally and written. People who immigrated in their twenties and thirties, who were uneducated or received minimal education in Ethiopia, usually acquire enough Hebrew for everyday conversational purposes and some are able to write and read basic Hebrew. Those who received no education in Ethiopia or / and elders tend to acquire very little spoken Hebrew and no written Hebrew, other than occasionally the ability to sign their name<sup>147</sup>. There was much individual variation. Men who worked often spoke better Hebrew than their wives, while wives of unemployed men often succeeded better than their husbands because of greater interaction with Hebrew-speaking children. In the latter case, embarrassment resulted because men expect to be intellectually more able than their wives.

Fantanesh and Telahun are a middle-age couple. Fantanesh is an exceptionally bright woman who completed four years of schooling in Ethiopia. Telahun is the joker of the neighbourhood, but perhaps not the sharpest of men. Fantanesh, who can read and write Amharic better than him, has now learnt more Hebrew than him, and is able to discern a few written words. Her increased competence in both languages is a source of embarrassment for her husband. Faced with a letter in Amharic, he pours over it studiously and she gently takes it from his hand and reads it quietly. She deals with the daily mail, fetching it herself from the mail-box and opening the letters before reaching her husband to minimise the fact that she is reading them. Similarly with spoken Hebrew. After their eldest son had skived off school one day, the headteacher

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<sup>146</sup> During the first decades of the state of Israel, the *ulpan* was given only to educated immigrants who wanted to integrate into Israeli professional life. Others became manual workers with no formal language training. Thus many Israelis who arrived from the Middle East and North Africa in the 50s and 60s are illiterate, especially women who did not go out to work as the men. Today, all immigrants are placed in an *ulpan* few weeks after arrival. This is the fruit of a political choice aimed at “absorbing” as fast as possible new immigrants in Israeli social fabric (Anteby 1996: 126).

<sup>147</sup> A JOINT survey of all Afula Ethiopian residents analysed their ability to carry out a simple conversation. They concluded that 63% all men, 48% of all women, 79% of the adults under 45, 24% of those over 45, and 29% of new immigrants, could carry out a simple conversation (Benita & Noam 1995: 86).

summoned the parents. One of them had to remain behind to care for Fantanesh's old mother. Telahun, as the head of the household, asserted that he would go to the meeting. However, he knew, she knew and I knew that given his non-existent Hebrew, he would not be very effective. At the last minute, the pretence was broken, and Fantanesh went. A little unkindly perhaps, I asked her why Telahun had changed his mind and she said, after a pause, "he is unwell."

On the whole, Ethiopians have not done well in *ulpan* classes and their level of spoken Hebrew is low and their written Hebrew practically non-existent. Anteby, who followed the ten months *ulpan* course with new immigrants, and wrote her MA thesis on the subject, concludes that "at the end of the ten month teaching course, I realised the extent to which the teachings of the *ulpan* was not assimilated by the majority of the immigrants and the extent to which their competence in both written and spoken Hebrew remained poor" (1996: 138; my translation)<sup>148</sup>. She supports her conclusion by making reference to a handful of other studies undertaken on the subject (see Doleve-Gandelman 1989; Smadar 1985; Spector 1994).

## **2. Difficulties and motivations in learning Hebrew**

Learning Hebrew at *ulpan* clearly poses a number of specific difficulties for Ethiopian immigrants. For many, the *ulpan* is the first experience of formal education and the first time that a second language is learned<sup>149</sup>. Also, a number of Hebrew words have no reference in Amharic and thus learning a new word is not only a new vocabulary but also requires the assimilation of the usage and the social role of the named object, as well as new conceptual categories. Ethiopians face particular difficulties in learning to write and the *ulpan* methods presuppose prior literacy<sup>150</sup> and the knowledge of graphic conventions such as page numbers in books. Furthermore, Ethiopians have to adapt to new cultural norms: Elders often have to learn from a young Israeli woman dressed in Jeans, women have to speak in front of men, and youngsters in front of elders, resulting in the "blurring of the hierarchic frontiers" (Anteby 1996: 131-145).

Despite all these difficulties, Anteby concludes that Ethiopians could have achieved better. She notes that the central prerequisite for learning a new language are motivations and

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<sup>148</sup> Relative to other immigrants in Israel, Ethiopian performance is poor. A Central Bureau of Statistics study, found that after five years in Israel, 71% of immigrants from the European republics of the Former Soviet Union and 52% of those from non-European ones spoke basic Hebrew, 53.2% from European republics and 32.35 from non-European republics read a Hebrew newspaper (Horowitz 1986: 26).

<sup>149</sup> Beta Israel from Tigre did learn Amharic as a second language.

<sup>150</sup> In a survey conducted among adult Ethiopian immigrants aged 22 or over in 1994 in Afula, only 25% men and 11% women (Benita & Noam 1995: 84).

need<sup>151</sup>, and given the high levels of absenteeism in the classes, she concludes that Hebrew is not a priority for Ethiopian adults during their first stages in the country (1996: 422). I, too, witnessed a lack of motivation for the continuation classes laid on especially for Ethiopian immigrants in Afula. Classes were frequently missed for non-essential activities and few students practised at home. Anteby argues that Ethiopian adults do not feel that they need Hebrew since their children can help to read, write and translate, and the notion of having an intermediary in daily negotiations is culturally acceptable in Ethiopian society (Levine 1965). It is easier to depend on youngsters than to learn Hebrew, and Amharic is sufficient for social relations within the group (Anteby 1996: 422-4). This argument is problematic because relying on children, hierarchically lower in status, is a source of distress for adults. Furthermore, whilst Anteby states that Amharic is sufficient for communication within the group, this is true only to an extent, since young children and an increasing number of teenagers do not communicate adequately in Amharic. In Chapter Seven, I return to Beta Israel's lack of motivation at Hebrew classes and suggest that it is a manifestation of a subtle form of resistance.

#### IV. Deafness in daily life

At the immediate level, as Mama Tsay explained with reference to her brother's work, "becoming deaf" means suffering the daily humiliations and frustrations of not being able to understand and speak the language of the new society. The frustration of "not having a mouth" is constant: when the TV is on, at the shops, with children's teachers, social security officers, neighbours, and at work.

Bills remain a source of frustration and mystery. Elders have yet to come to terms with the notion of paying money for what they have always taken for granted: a house, water, and heat. Moreover, when it comes to paying for bills, they are faced with Israeli officials, as they are when they need to deal with social security payments.

I visited Dinke, a middle-aged woman, after I had seen her earlier in the day at the social security office, flustered angry and quarrelling with several officials. She had been to find out why her payments had stopped. "It is so hard in this country. No, it is good, but when you have a problem, it is hard. At the *betuar lomi* (social security offices), if you cannot speak Hebrew, they just say '*besseder, besseder*' [OK, OK in

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<sup>151</sup> Summerfield notes the difference in British language acquisition between Bangladeshi and Somali migrants in London. She enumerates a number of factors to account for the difference, such as the respective need to mix with host society, e.g. in shopping and in the work-place, and the importance of language in the culture of origin. She suggests that Somali's greater efforts to learn English is partly accounted for by their attachment to their own language(1993:92).

Hebrew). If you can speak they give you what you want. They think that if you cannot speak Hebrew, then you are deaf and stupid. Without a mouth, this country is hard!”

Visits to hospitals are no less bewildering:

One of my regular outings was the visit to hospital with Fantanesh and her old mother. We travelled by bus, carrying the old lady in her dressing gown on and off the bus. Fantanesh asked a young Ethiopian soldier to enquire about the correct waiting place. After waiting for over an hour, Fantanesh rose and asked “how much longer?” “Soon! Soon!”, the nurse replied, with little sympathy. All the while the old lady was complaining of her pains. Eventually we were called in. The nurse asked me to wait outside. After a short while, Fantanesh came out in distress. She could not bear to see all the pipes they were inserting in her mother, and at the same time she could not leave her alone. I entered to see the mother under anaesthetic and called Fantanesh back in. The latter, who had received no explanation was appalled, thinking that her mother had lost consciousness.

Two weeks later we returned to hospital for an appointment. But the doctor was angry: the tests which were meant to have been arranged by the GP were not done. Fantanesh had failed to give the letter intended for the GP after the last visit - she had not understood that she had to do this.

Ethiopians are also frustrated by their inability to communicate with non-Ethiopian neighbours beyond a standard “hello” and “how are you?” Ethiopians regret this greatly, especially faced with Israeli neighbours who express good will towards them, or conversely those to whom they want to return abusive language.

## 1. “Deafness” as an inability to read

Ethiopians are also *dinkoro* because of their inability to read Hebrew. This aspect of deafness is mentioned much less frequently, if at all. The reason for this, it seems to me, is that most Beta Israel have always been “*dinkoro*” in this way since most of them were illiterate in Ethiopia<sup>152</sup>. Furthermore as Levine (1965) points out, Amhara people have always had an ambiguous relationship to writing skills. “The act of writing was considered to be inherently shameful: like any manual activity other than farming and fighting, writing was regarded as degrading work, the business of scribes whose status was thereby not much higher than that of potters and metalsmiths” (Levine 1965: 87, see also Anteby 1996: 144, H. Pankhurst 1992: 39).

This form of “deafness” is more acute in Israel since the written word plays a significant role in daily life. An Ethiopian feels *dinkoro* each time he is faced with a price label, the writing

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<sup>152</sup> There are no accurate figures for literacy levels and schooling for Beta Israel. (1990: 69). Anteby estimates a rate of 90% illiteracy for the adult population which concords with Wagaw’s estimation of a rate of 90% for adults aged over 37 year old (Anteby 1996: 127). From my experience, I would lower these figures to a figure of about 70% illiteracy.

on packaged food, a bill, official letters, medical prescriptions, destination of buses, road signs. Each time, he must seek the help of a willing youngster and suffer loss of pride.

An old woman dressed in her white *camis* prowled up the aisles of the supermarket, searching for something. It was not a specific product that she was after but a willing scamp to direct her to the goods she required. She finally collared a young boy who was charging out clutching an ice-cream. She only released him after he had filled her shopping basket and extracted the coins from her plastic purse to pay the bill.

Ethiopians manage to operate within the labyrinth of the written text through the help of children, helpful social workers and literate relatives. However, whenever a letter comes through the door they are reminded of their “ignorance” - especially since many of them have yet to differentiate between important mail and junk mail. I recall many a poignant moment trying to reassure Aba Negusse and his wife that the latest printed circular for a new clothes catalogue was not the latest dreadful bill and could happily be chucked in the dustbin (see also Anteby 1996: 401). Some aspects of daily life remain difficult, irrespective of the amount of help. Anteby notes in particular the inability to use a calendar and thus register and memorise dates for appointments (1996: 401).

A pressing concern is the difficulty illiteracy causes for travel: which bus to catch, when to get off, and navigating through nameless streets.

Aba Negusse was looking forward to his sister’s religious celebration in Ramle for weeks. On the day, he unexpectedly failed to find an escort. He nonetheless went to the local bus station in the hope of spotting an Ethiopian who happened to be going in that direction. He was unlucky and returned home.

Ethiopians tend to go to a new place accompanied for the first few times, then they venture alone, remembering, via a series of landmarks, when to get off the bus, and where to walk from the bus stop. Street names are not taken into account. When a change of bus is required, a literate Ethiopian is nabbed to point out the correct bus. Failing this, a friendly-looking Israeli is approached. Once the correct neighbourhood has been reached, there are usually Ethiopians around who can lead the way to the desired household.

## B. Deafness as ignorance

### I. Deaf about technology and bureaucracy

Ethiopians are “ignorant” of technological knowledge. With a resigned tone of voice, a young man who earns his living in the hospital laundry says: “It is a bad job, but what else could I do? I know nothing in this country!” This lack of knowledge is explained by Ethiopians’ lack of education.

“The Russians learn quickly here and go [easily] into the hospitals and offices. They grew up at school while we were in the fields and making pots and cloth. If you had three boys, only one would go to school. There was not much education in Ethiopia, that is why we are *dinkoro*.”

A sense of “being deaf” overcomes Ethiopians when they come into contact with Israeli bureaucracy. Anteby captures the difficulties in characteristic elegant prose:

“Un nouvel ordre temporel scande la vie du group. Cette temporalité, exprimée par un horaire fixe, un emploi du temps précis, une datation rigoureuse et un climat et des variations saisonnières inconnus, impose des décomptes, des segmentations, des régularités et des moyens de mesure étrangers aux immigrants. Perdus, désorientés, désorientés dans cet univers spatial géométrisé et ce monde temporel fragmenté, ils n’ont tout d’abord plus aucun moyen de repères ni aucun point de référence<sup>153</sup>” (1996: 101).

Daily life is full of confrontations with officials and frustrations with the system.

Aba Negusse noticed that his pension was lower one month and he also needed to get a bus pass for pensioners, so he decided to go to “the office” and I accompanied him. He knew where to get off the bus and confidently strode up to the local social security office. He walked straight through the doors, but was called back by the door attendant. He returned, and ignoring the mass of people waiting to be given numbered tickets to mark their place in the queue, he said “*Cartis, cartis*” (ticket, ticket, Hebrew). The attendant got stropic: “For which office?” The people in the queue started to grumble and the attendant gestured for him to wait his turn. After a while, another attendant said, in Amharic, “Old people?” “Yes”, he answered with a smile, appreciating the Israeli clerk’s efforts. The smile was not returned and a ticket was handed to him.

On his way up, he looked around, lost. The proud man, in control of all and everything at home, was flustered and confused. His face lighted up when he spotted a young Ethiopian cleaner: “Ah! She will translate for me.” He greeted the girl, who tried to decline his request on the grounds that she was paid to clean, not to translate. “Please”, he implored, “I have no mouth here!” Finding it impossible to refuse an

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<sup>153</sup> “A new temporal order governs the life of the group. This temporality - expressed by a fixed schedule, a precise timetable, a rigorous dating system and unknown climate and seasonal variations - imposes on the immigrants foreign accounts, segmentations, regularities, and methods of measuring . Lost, distraught, disorientated in this geometric spatial universe and in this fragmented temporal world, they have at first neither landmarks nor reference points (My own translation)”

elder, she led him to the correct door and translated for him. His reduction in income was not a result, as he suspected, of an error or theft on the part of the bank, but due to the fluctuation of the dollar, on which social security payments are based. He implored the official for more money, lamenting that he did not have enough to pay the bills. The young Ethiopian woman was embarrassed - as if a clerk could alter a government set national pension figure - and she only translated some of his words.

In the next office, where his task was to obtain the bus pass, a similar *langage des sourds* took place. Aba Negusse was not content with the clerk's assurances that the pass would be sent to him by post and he strolled off, discontented.

He regained his composure and confidence on arrival at the open market teaming with Ethiopians: so many people to explain *properly* how to go about getting a bus pass. He saw his brother and nephew, the former equipped with a pass, and the latter was soon roped into returning to the office the following day to help him.

Ethiopians on unemployment benefits often fail to attend offices on a specified day<sup>154</sup>, especially if that day clashes with a funeral, and they lament the harshness of the officials who then refuse to pay them their dues. In this way too, many a hospital appointment is missed, or the relevant signed papers from the GP are not brought, so that the process of referral has to begin afresh. Each time such a slip-up happens, the Israeli official in question, often a relative youngster, does not spare the Ethiopian's pride and berates him or her in, what is taken as, a most shocking and offensive manner. The demeanour and facial expressions of Ethiopians in public offices was generally withdrawn and "closed". They regained their smile and good humour over coffee on return home.

One morning, after coffee, I joined Aba Negusse and his nephew Worku to pay the house bill. We set off in fine spirits. We reached the *amidar* (council housing) office and when our turn came, we entered the appropriate room and the Israeli woman, dressed in shorts and black tights, did not raise her head to greet us. She spoke in a rough tone of voice and snatched the papers from Aba Negusse's hands. Worku did the talking and an argument erupted. As we were exiting the room, Worku's sister entered and Worku took her card and papers to liaise on her behalf. As he handed over the papers, the woman at the desk, thinking that he was still dealing with Aba Negusse, pushed him violently aside. She realised her error, although did not apologise. Aba Negusse and Worku were shaken by the experience and did not regain their composure until safely back home, over the second round of coffee, they were able to make fun of the rude Israeli woman.

Some young Ethiopians feel that they are progressing in their knowledge of Israeli bureaucracy and technology. They refer, for example, to difficulties at work *in the past*: "Before, everything was so difficult, but now I know". Or they bemoan their previous refusal to take out a government mortgage to buy a house, blaming their former state of ignorance.

Tsega is a young mother of four who lives in a council house in Afula, the other end of the country to where her mother lives surrounded by several of Tsega's siblings. I asked her why she was not closer to her mother, whom she always spoke of with

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<sup>154</sup> I suspect that they often choose to "forget" the appointments, given the turmoils they face when they go there.



longing. “We were offered the chance to buy a house at first, and we could have done so in Ofakim, near my mother’s, but we did not want to go into debt, we were new [in the country] and did not know. The man at the absorption centre suggested a council house in Afula and we just said yes, we did not know. Several other Afula residents had recently realised the missed opportunity at not having bought a house and blamed their “lack of knowledge” as new immigrants.

On the whole however, these difficulties in operating within an Israeli system must not be overstressed because, as Chapter Four demonstrated, Ethiopian adults have adapted remarkably rapidly to practical life in their new environment (see also Anteby 1996: 523): few are the difficulties which cannot be overcome with help from kin and neighbours.

## II. “Deaf” about Israeli ways

Ethiopians say that they are “deaf” with respect to Israeli social behaviour: loud speech, forthright young women, immodesty, and brashness. In actual fact, they are less ignorant on these matters than they make out, and they frequently adopt a superior attitude and assert that the foreign behaviour is plain wrong and that Ethiopian ways are correct. But this superior standpoint occurs “after the event”, back home over coffee, while during the interaction itself, alone amidst Israelis, Ethiopian can feel bewildered and “stupid” (*dinkoro*).

The young accuse their parents of being “*dinkoro*” due to apparently irrational ways of thinking in modern Israel. For example, many Ethiopians turned down government grants of up to US\$ 120,000 to buy houses. Younger Ethiopians explained that their reasons were “ignorant” (*dinkoro*): they feared entering into debt, unable to grasp the fact that 90% of the money was a non-returnable grant, and they were afraid of a monthly mortgage for twenty-five years (“We will be dead by then!”), even though the sum to be paid was roughly equivalent to council house rent, their preferred alternative<sup>155</sup>. Youngsters complain that cherished Ethiopian cultural traits, such as expressing agreement to an interlocutor, particularly one of superior status, become “ignorance” in Israel.

Mama Tsay’s daughter Workie explains: “My mother agrees to everything that she is told. If someone said ‘I will kill you’, she would still answer ‘*ishi*’ (OK)!”

Fantanesh is also aware of this problem and apologises for failing to obtain a copy of her son’s *bar mitzvah*’s video for me: “When I got to the shop, they only had the one tape, with no copies, even though Galia [her daughter] had asked them previously for more copies on the phone. I do not know Hebrew so I just said ‘*besseder* (OK, Hebrew)’. In fact, Fantanesh’s Hebrew is easily proficient enough to have pressed the shop assistant to make the promised copy. But she felt intimidated in front of the

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<sup>155</sup> However, by 1996, 5,000 families had taken up the house purchase scheme (Jerusalem Report, 30 May 1996).

brash Israeli video-man and therefore said “OK”, even though she was perturbed at the thought of breaking a promise to me.

## On becoming a donkey

Mama Tarikye: “If you have no language, you are *dinkoro*, you are like a donkey!”

The effect of feeling ignorant about the ways of the country is that Ethiopians become “ignorant” as people: they become “donkeys”. Aba Negusse expressed this feeling in the chapter’s opening quote with another bodily metaphor: “My tummy no longer works, it has gone crazy!”. Alequa Birre put it this way:

“This is why we say that we are *dinkoro*: by not respecting our laws and not accepting our religion, they make us primitive [term in Amharic]. They keep us inside.”

Alequa Birre’s words are extremely evocative: because of their “deafness”, Ethiopians have become “primitive” in their homeland. They are forced out of the realm of public life, they are “kept inside”. More frequently still than the statement “we are deaf”, Ethiopians make throw-away comments like, “in this country, what do I know?” I shall examine this third sense of “becoming deaf” in the next chapter: over and above rendering everyday life frustrating and inducing an overall sense of ignorance, “becoming deaf” drastically reduces Ethiopians’ control over their life, and over that of their children.

## C. “They think that we are deaf”

A fourth use of the expression “becoming deaf” refers to Ethiopian immigrants’ perceptions about Israeli attitudes towards them<sup>156</sup> and the sense of otherness which Ethiopians feel.

A young woman said to me: “I like chatting with you. I do not normally chat with *farenge* (Israelis), but you are not like a *farenge*.” She explained further: “One chats with them, and then they say something not nice, something like ‘you came here because you were hungry’. Also, if they are alone with you, they are your best friend. But as soon as another *farenge* comes along, then they stick together and you are left aside.”

### I. “They do not even say ‘Hello’”

Ethiopians complain that Israelis think of them as *dinkoro*.

Mama Turuwork describes her daily humiliation: “One of my neighbours says ‘hello’ but the others, when I walk out [of the apartment block], move aside without a word.

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<sup>156</sup> For a discussion of Israeli attitudes towards Ethiopians, see Wagaw (1993: 218-226).

They think that I am deaf, like a donkey. They do not even say '*shalom*' or '*boker tov*' (good morning, Hebrew) - I do understand that at least! It makes me very sad!"

Ethiopian adults experience Israelis' negativity on a daily basis: in the derogatory eyes of impatient officials; at the shops when a girl barely in her teens growls to an elder that he has given a wrong amount of money; by the silence of their non-Ethiopian neighbours. They also complain that Israelis, especially Russians, pass in front of them at queues. This is the case in hospitals in particular because the staff are Russian and "hate Ethiopians" (Nudelman 1995: 207).

Ethiopians bemoan the fact that Israelis do not value their Ethiopian cultural heritage, and view Ethiopia merely as an underdeveloped "poor" country, "where everybody goes around without clothes or food".

A man on a radio Amharic chat show: "Israelis see us as people who have come from an undeveloped country and think: "They are uneducated, they are *dinkoro*, they are people who know only how to look after cattle."

Mesganow, a young neighbour of mine, was speaking of the splendour of Ethiopian countryside after a return visit. "The *farenge*", he added, "think that there is nothing in Ethiopia - no trees, no water, just desert. Once one of them asked me if we had pens there!"

Ethiopians are particularly enraged and hurt that many Israelis perceive Ethiopians as "ignorant" about religion.

My young neighbour Avi: "Our practices are different, but the *farenge* think that we do not know. We drink beer at funerals and they say that this is bad, that we do not care about our dead and are making merry!"

Ethiopians recognise that aspects of their culture, namely their reserve, good manners, and politeness, are much admired in Israel. But, as the section on the army showed in the last chapter, many of them feel that these qualities are abused by Israelis who take advantage of Ethiopian meekness. Ethiopians also complain that appreciation for Ethiopian behaviour is superficial. As Osnat put it: "They [the Whites] did accept us, but it is only superficial, not in their heart."

Mesganow: "Israelis say to us that the Ethiopians are *hamudi* (H: pretty, sweet, nice), they are courteous and nice. But they also think within themselves 'Ethiopians know nothing!'"

Young Ethiopians feel that Israelis look down on them, and every day is full of confirmations<sup>157</sup>.

A seventeen-year-old girl: "They look at us as stupid, people who do not understand, but we do understand, we just keep it inside!"

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<sup>157</sup> The young explain that their elders, who cannot speak Hebrew, are less aware of prejudice.

Fantaoun, a science graduate who speaks five languages fluently (Amharic, Tigrinya, Russian, English and Hebrew): “The woman in the employment office had to convince the employer for half an hour to accept an Ethiopian applicant, saying that I was “different” to other Ethiopians. But I still did not get the job - they did not want an Ethiopian.”

## II. Religious rejection

Most Beta Israel state that their chief problem in Israel is the “religious question” (*yehaymanot nagar*). Following Rabbinical rulings in the mid-1970s that the Beta Israel were a Jewish community, the Ministry of the Interior decreed that Ethiopians were entitled to automatic citizenship under the law of Return, which declares that every Jew has the right to settle in Israel (Kessler 1985: 161-162). But despite the Rabbinate’s acceptance of the *communal* status of the Beta Israel as Jews, there was ambiguity regarding *individuals’* personal status. This is because conversions and divorces in Ethiopia were not done in a manner consistent with *halakha*, resulting in the eyes of the Rabbinate in numerous “non-Jews” and *mamzerim* (illegitimate offspring) being included in the Beta Israel community (Elon 1987, see also Kaplan 1988). In order to dispel these doubts and enable Ethiopian Jews to marry other Jews, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate adopted a policy requiring all new Ethiopian immigrants, and any resident Ethiopian Jew wishing to be married, to undergo a conversion ceremony of ritual immersion and symbolic circumcision, involving taking a drop of blood from a man’s penis.

In the early 1980s, Ethiopian Jewish immigrants submitted to the Rabbinical demands. However, the Beta Israel bitterly resented this practice<sup>158</sup> since it negated their “authenticity” as Jews, and, as their numbers and confidence grew, they resisted the practice. In September 1985, Ethiopian Jewish immigrants organised a forty day sit-in in front of the Rabbinate’s office in Jerusalem<sup>159</sup> (Kaplan 1988). Their demands were partially met: new immigrants no longer had to comply to the process, but youngsters wishing to marry still required a symbolic conversion, albeit without the demand for a drop of blood. Over ten years later, the

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<sup>158</sup> Herman, who conducted fieldwork amongst the Beta Israel in the early 1990s notes: “the subject [of conversion, *guir* (H)] invokes such strong feelings of anger and indignation that it is often accompanied by expressions of regret for ever having gone to Israel, and not having remained in Ethiopia” (Herman 1994: 154).

<sup>159</sup>The Bene Israel (Indian Jewish immigrants) also conducted a successful struggle for wholesale recognition as an equal Jewish community in the 1960s (Weil 1977: 80).

fury about the original demands remains unabated and campaigns to cease the demands for couples to be wed continues fiercely<sup>160</sup>.

Old Mama Tarikye: “We were never baptised, while the Christians went for *Timquat* (baptism), we never did<sup>161</sup>. In this country too, we do not want to be baptised. Even for a marriage we do not want to do *temeken*. The people [Ethiopians] who came before us, they were circumcised [symbolically] and ‘baptised’. The *qes* [her son, the priest] said to them: ‘We were given the law by Moses. We will not circumcise like you do, we will not be baptised (*meteleq*). Even if you want to govern the country, so be it; we are better off losing the chance to govern the country that to be circumcised!’”

As I showed in Chapter Three, the Beta Israel believe themselves to be the true Israelites in Ethiopia, “the house of Israel”, and, in Israel as the purest and cleanest of all Jews, thanks to their purity laws, marriage rules, and, in their eyes, strict practice. By suggesting that the Beta Israel are not “proper” Jews, the conversion requirement amounts to a rejection of their identity. Moreover, given that Beta Israel religious identity provides them with legitimacy in Israel, the conversion issue threatened their sense of belonging to their homeland. Young people take a somewhat different perspective on the conversion issue. It also threatens their sense of belonging to Israel since Israel is a country of Jews, but they understand the less an a question of communal purity, but as a racial question. For them, Israelis are rejecting their claim to Judaism because of the colour of their skin.

### III. Young People’s Analysis of “Racism”

Young people speak not only of being looked down upon as “primitive Ethiopians”, but also of “racism”<sup>162</sup> (*zeregnet*). They compare “racism” in Israel to “racism” in America and conceive the former as worse; Israel, as a country of Jews, should not have any racism at all, and, judging from MTV and American films, American Blacks are doing well, with jobs in high positions, and a glamorous life style.

“Racism” is increasingly taken as the *cause* for Ethiopian problems in Israel: lack of jobs, problems in education, in the army, poverty, unsuccessful medical treatments, failure to “pull’ a White girl....

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<sup>160</sup> Over the years, an increasing number of Rabbis are agreeing to marry Ethiopians without symbolic circumcision, as long as they get a written statement from a Beta Israel priest about the authentic claim to Judaism by the individual in question. Jews of all ethnic origin marrying in Israel need to provide proof of their claim to Judaism.

<sup>161</sup> Mama Tarikye is equating ritual immersion with baptism, see Kaplan & Rosen (1993) for a discussion on this linkage.

<sup>162</sup> I put “racism” in inverted commas to stress that I am writing about how Ethiopians feel Israelis look at them, not my own interpretation of Israeli attitudes.

A young woman: "Some of our children are shy and when the teacher asks a question, they stay silent. The teacher then says: 'These are stupid people who know nothing.' They then place our children with Israeli mentally handicapped children. They impede the future of our children."

I asked young Etan to explain to me where he sees the "racism" he was so vehemently denouncing: "Everywhere! At work, if a Russian or Moroccan comes in, after two weeks, he is your boss. Yet he has the same education. That is how you know: is this not racism?"

Moshe, a young Ethiopian who lived in Canada for eight years, stressed that Israeli racism is directed towards Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in particular, rather to any Black person:

Moshe told me of a game he once played with a few Ethiopian friends. They entered shops as Ethiopians, speaking Hebrew with thick Ethiopian accents, and noted the shop assistants' attitudes: impatience, scowls, etc. Then, they pretended to be Canadian tourists, Moshe speaking in fluent English while the others remained silent. The shop assistants welcomed them warmly.

Ethiopian leaders, often with national political party affiliation, are eager to point out that the state of Israel is not racist in its policies, but that racism occurs on an individual basis. The real issue, as Tadesse, a leading Ethiopian political activist, explained to me, is the cultural and technological gap between Ethiopians and Israelis. Israelis look down on Ethiopians because of this rather than because they are Black. Thus, once this gap is bridged, negativity towards Ethiopians will disappear. "We need to work hard now so that colour does not become an issue for the future," he affirms.

Some youths look at the nature of Israeli society to understand Israeli "racism". Alemu points to the ideological importance of Hebrew language in Israel: "If you do not speak Hebrew in Israel, you know nothing." Admass explains the issue in the following way: "Israelis do not respect us. They think that we are here just because we were poor in Ethiopia. They mean us no harm, but they have their own problems, trying to be equal to the Europeans and they want nothing in their way. We, uneducated people, are not good for that." Others take an opposing, somewhat cynical, view: Ethiopians, they say, have a positive image compared to Russian immigrants precisely because Ethiopian "ignorance" (*dinkoro*) poses no threat to Israelis; Russians, who arrive as trained engineers, doctors, and artists threaten Israeli jobs and seats in Parliament.

"Israelis do not like Russians because they are afraid that they will take their jobs. Ethiopians however they like because Ethiopians sweep the streets!"

The notion that Israelis fear Ethiopian progress was taken to extreme by an overwhelming number of Ethiopians, both young and old, to explain the death of Ethiopians in the army. The army authorities stated that the youths had committed suicide, but Ethiopians

maintained that “the *farenge* kill our soldiers when they think that the Ethiopians will go beyond them”. The “killing of the soldiers” became an issue on everybody’s lips and was a catalyst in sparking off the fury unleashed over the Blood Crisis.

## **IV. The Blood Crisis**

Many Ethiopian Jews said comments such as: “We prefer our blood to be spilled in front of the government’s office than thrown in the garbage.”

The depth of Beta Israel’s sense of rejection and the divergent discourse between old and young about the cause of this rejection is illustrated by the January 1996 mass Ethiopian protest against the Blood Bank’s policy of discarding their blood.

### **1. The demonstration**

On Thursday 25 January 1996, I met my friend Aster to go shopping in town. However the normally quiet restrained young woman was flushed and angry. “Have you not heard?” she said, “they have been throwing away our blood! They say that we have AIDS! My brothers arrived here at the age of eight and ten - how could they have caught AIDS? They gave blood and it was thrown in the garbage! It is racism!”

Aster’s anger was felt throughout the country, and, three days later, over 10,000 Ethiopians assembled in front of the government offices in Jerusalem. Ethiopians filled the numerous buses sponsored by the Ethiopian Umbrella Organisation, and others hired their own buses at their own expense. Six buses and two mini-buses left from Afula. As we approached the House of Parliament around 11 am, we could see thousands of Ethiopians, many draped in their white shawls, and hear their slogans and cries. As soon as the bus stopped, the youths jumped out, and started to run towards the gathering holding up the banner they had prepared. They shouted at passers-by: “Don’t come near! I have AIDS!” One youth picked up a gardener’s pick and walked off holding it high above his head. He replaced it twenty yards from the bewildered gardener.

As we entered the crowd, it was trying to force entry into the parliament compound. The police responded by showering water and tear gas. The cries of pain from burning faces and eyes were drowned by the chanting of slogans. In the distance, a group of priests, with their white shawls and colourful Ethiopian umbrellas, prayed under a tree.

Written slogans included: “Although our skin is black, our blood is as red as yours and we are as Jewish as you!”, “Did Apartheid leave South Africa for Israel?” “Apartheid! The second Holocaust! Genocide in the Holy Land!” “Our dreams are being stolen when racism comes to our homeland!”. In Hebrew they read (so I was told): “Our blood is also red, it is not black!” “I am a proud Ethiopian but a disappointed Israeli!” “We are brothers in blood.” “My blood is good enough for the army, but it is worthless.”

The crowd quietened for a while and stood facing the Parliament, waiting for an address by Adissu Messele, the Ethiopian leader of the day, and by the Minister for Absorption. Slogans were chanted in unison, calling amongst other things for the Health Minister’s resignation. Adissu spoke in Amharic, his clenched fist forward, the

crowd repeating his refrains and clapping. He said that he and a number of priests and representatives were to meet with the Prime Minister and they would not exit without a satisfactory answer. Everyone waited patiently, at first.

Suddenly, boys in the front of the crowd began to throw stones at the riot police. Others soon followed. Youngsters took position on the hill and threw rocks from there. The police retaliated with tear gas and rubber bullets. Tear gas bombs flew in both directions, Ethiopians picking them up in time to hurl them back to the police. Older Ethiopians and women ran off to safety behind the Ethiopian firing lines.

Eventually the crowd quietened down, but only after dozens of police and a few Ethiopians were injured and many cars vandalised. Ethiopian youths walked about proudly with a victorious look in their eyes. They boasted their feats:

- "My stone smashed a police van window!
  - I hit a soldier on the forehead with my umbrella!
  - This is like the *intafada!*"
- I asked Worku and other youngsters why they had been violent:
- "Every time I read an article in the newspaper [about the throwing of the blood] it was as if I was hit in the head with a stone!
  - They started, they sprayed us with gas! That could kill someone!
  - Now people will listen to Ethiopians!
  - Arabs got what they wanted by throwing stones, so can we!"

## **2. Discourse about the blood crisis**

Why should discarding donated blood spark such fury? Most Ethiopians claimed that the policy of throwing away their donated blood implied that they were all infected, failing to understand (or choosing to ignore) the distinction between a high risk group and a group fully infected with HIV. Indeed, dozens of times, I heard the retort "just because a few Ethiopians might have dirty blood, this does not mean that all Ethiopians do!" As Yeshe put it: "Because one person's blood is not clean, why is the blood of all the Ethiopians thrown away?"

Ethiopians were particularly upset that it was their blood which was discarded because "blood is life", "blood is the soul (*nifs*)". Ethiopians repeated again and again, to each other, to me, on the radio, in the press:

"Throwing our blood away is like taking our life. It is like killing us!"

Several Ethiopians made extreme comparisons:

"Only an enemy can bring about a spilling of blood. We make no difference between those who spilt our blood and the Hamas"

"Throwing away our blood is no different to what the Germans did [in the holocaust]; it is like killing all the people."

The blood revelations gave rise to a sense of betrayal.

Mama Tsay: "We always said that they are our brothers and sisters, and our children serve together with theirs [in the army], but now they say that our children's blood is not good enough. We have no language, we do not know. But we are all Jews. So we



trusted them like parents and we followed them. We went with them when they took us to hospital. Even the clothes they give us, which have already been worn by them, we accepted even without washing them - we never would have accepted such clothes in Ethiopia! We trusted them. So now why have they done such a thing?"

Older Ethiopians interpreted the throwing away of blood as a rejection by Israeli society on account of their religion, while for younger ones, they were rejected because of the colour of their skin (see also Anteby 1996: 527-530).

One of the demonstration's placards combined both these views: "Although our skin is black, our blood is as red as yours and we are as Jewish as you!"

Most other older Ethiopians, interpreted the throwing away of their blood as a slur on their communal purity. By suggesting that Ethiopians had AIDS, Israelis were inferring that their blood was not pure and hence, given Beta Israel discourse on purity, that they were not proper Jews. The following quote illustrates well this equation between religious purity, that is marriage rules and female purity laws (see Chapter Three) and "clean" blood, free of HIV infection. It also shows the vehemence of the rhetoric of religious rejection.

A priest explained his reasons for attending the demonstration: "We are black, but our blood is clean. We do not marry relatives (*zamad*), we do not eat unclean animals [...], we do nothing that is forbidden by God, we are clean (*netsu*) people. But now they say: 'You are black and your blood cannot be mixed with ours,' and they threw out our blood and we became very angry. It is like the Germans when six million were killed! The only difference between us and the *farenge* is that they are White and they do not observe the Bible in the way we do and they marry their cousins and go naked - that is forbidden! *They* do this kind of thing and yet they throw out *our* blood. It is a matter of life and death - that is why we demonstrated!"

For the young and the educated elite, the scandal was more an issue of colour and racism than religious discrimination or purity, although the symbolic importance of blood was as strong for them as for their parents.

Tadesse expressed his feeling of stigmatisation: "The blood thing is pure racism. They do not want Ethiopian blood in their bodies! It is terrible the way that they have stigmatised our community. I cannot walk down the street looking good now. I feel that everyone looks at me as if I have AIDS. I could never ask an Israeli girl out now. Israeli girls may just as well look at us like Arabs!"

Tadesse's words speak for themselves: throwing out Ethiopian blood implied that Israelis do not want to "mix" with Ethiopians. It denied Ethiopians their aspirations to mix with other Israelis. With the discarding of their blood, they were metaphorically being thrown out.

Many youngsters expressed deep disappointment: they had felt part of the country and strived to serve it, but after the blood incident they felt separate, "on the outside", "as if I was not a real Israeli". They questioned their position in Israeli society and often emerged

with grave doubts. I often heard throw-away comments like “what job will I get? I am just an Ethiopian!”

Osnat, a young mother was particularly virulent: “I want to leave the country! I used to feel Israeli, but after this, what is it to be Israeli? If you live as a Jew in Israel and they do such things, what is there left to feel? They think that “you are not a Jew, you are not Israeli” It is because we are black. Did we not show them our Jewish culture? We observe Sabbath three or four times better than them! Before, I strictly maintained my Israeli identity. Now, I have nothing left to maintain.”

One man quoted a saying on the Amharic radio chat show: “You invite him so that he does not feel left out, but then you do not serve him food”. Another added: “They are building a wall between us and them that the strongest technology cannot destroy.”

I asked Moshe, one of the Ethiopians’ foremost spokesmen, to explain to me why he felt the policy was racist given the fact that blood banks all over the world do not take blood from “high risk” groups, which includes white people such as myself who have been to an African country in recent years. He said: “They are right to be concerned with the high rate of HIV infection amongst Ethiopians<sup>163</sup>. But it is the way that they did it. They lumped all Ethiopians together as if we were all the same and did not take the trouble to explain to us what was going on. Why did they not speak to us from the start rather than throw the blood out in secret?<sup>164</sup> Avraham has been here twenty-seven years and his children were all born here, and they cannot give blood - that is absurd!”

Moshe, a highly educated activist, realised - unlike the majority of Ethiopians - that the discarding of Ethiopian blood was not a refusal to “mix the blood” of Ethiopians and other Israelis, since the blood banks did still take Ethiopian blood from rare blood groups, and nor did the policy suggest that *all* Ethiopians were HIV positive. His complaint focused rather on the way in which the policy was enacted. He resented that Ethiopian Jews were considered unworthy of being given a proper explanation from the start, and that they were cast together as one stigmatised group.

## **Conclusion**

The reaction of Ethiopian Jews to the policy of discarding their blood was so vehement because it challenged their sense of belonging to Israel, as discussed in the previous chapter. For the young people, the policy was an overt demonstration of Israeli racism and

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<sup>163</sup> Figures range from around the 550 known cases of HIV amongst the immigrants arriving since 1990, i.e. some 20,000 individuals approximately. That is a rate of about 5% amongst adults - NB very approximate calculation. The rate of adult immigrants infected with HIV entering Israel in 1997 is about 10% - figures I got from an official at Ministry of Absorption.

<sup>164</sup> The Israeli official line on this question was that the Blood Bank officials wanted to keep their policy secret so as not to stigmatise Ethiopians in front of other Israelis. They reasoned that if all soldiers went to give blood except for the Ethiopians, this would hinder their process of integration.

unwillingness to accept Ethiopians into their society. For the older generation, the discarding of Beta Israel blood was a slur on the communal purity of the group, for they equate HIV contaminated blood with religious impurity, resulting from marrying kin and failing to observe Biblical purity laws. Chapter Seven deals with the reaction of Ethiopian Jews to these perceived negative images on the part of Israelis towards them.

Whilst the previous chapter described the Beta Israel's positive appreciation of their homeland, this chapter has elucidated the difficulties they experience in Israel. The younger generation suffer from racism and the older generation from a sense of "becoming deaf" as a result of their lack of Hebrew, their lack of experience of modern urban living, and their sense of rejection by the dominant society.

However, their difficulties of adaptation to Israeli society are not acute; because on the one hand they succeed in overcoming them with the help of their children and on the other they avoid them altogether by minimising their interaction with Israeli society. The essential problem of the older generation is not so much their 'deafness' in Israeli society *per se*, but rather the effect these have on the internal organisation of Beta Israel society, and the resulting sense of loss of control over their lives. The following chapter addresses these issues.

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## Six: Losing Control

### Introduction

Mulu, aged thirty-five: "People who were clever in Ethiopia cannot manage in this country. Today, the clever ones are the children."

Chapter Four discussed the sense many Ethiopian adults have of "becoming deaf" as a result of their lack of Hebrew, the dominant society's negative perceptions, and the unfamiliarity of their new environment. Most of the older generation can minimise the impact of such difficulties by avoiding Israeli society as much as possible and by enlisting the help of their children to translate. But Ethiopian "deafness" has a consequence harder to overcome: the resulting feeling that they have lost control over their lives and over those of their children. The fundamental problem with immigration, this chapter suggests, is not adaptation to dominant society, but the disruption of hierarchy within the immigrant society, and the resulting sense of loss of control over social reproduction. Ethiopian adults feel that they have lost control over production: over land, livelihood and work. Ethiopian men are the worst affected since women are able to maintain their domestic role quasi intact (Doleve-Gandelman 1990). Men's loss of status and the influence of the dominant society's cultural norms result in a reduction of their authority over the household, their wives and daughters, and also in religious matters. Worse still, for both men and women, is the impression of being unable to discipline their children and instil social norms upon them. Loss of control is most evocatively expressed in Ethiopians' feeling that they are unable to cure their illnesses in Israel.

Two caveats are required at the outset. First, unlike the indigenous idiom of "becoming deaf" which guided the previous chapter, the expression "loss of control" is my own. I trust that the ethnographic content of the chapter will demonstrate the aptness of the phrase, even though I never heard an Ethiopian use it. Second, just as I did not suggest that Ethiopians *are* becoming deaf, I am not suggesting that Ethiopians *are* losing control and the chapter concerns itself with Ethiopian *perceptions* of loss of control over their lives.

## B. Losing control over production

### I. Land and Livelihood

Most older Ethiopians, above the age of about forty, do not work in Israel<sup>165</sup>. Ethiopian men resent this loss greatly: not only are they left at home “just sitting doing nothing”, but also they have lost control over the source of their families’ livelihood.

#### 1. Unemployment

Aba Negusse often spoke of the expanse of his land, the resulting barrels full of grain, the huge size of his herds, his hunting prowess, his renown as a weaver, and his youth as a soldier employed by the Italians. “Here I just sit all day and go to the bank saying ‘give me money!’ like a beggar... Work keeps you fit and young (*gobaz*).” He lamented that he has grown old in Israel because he does “nothing”. I once suggested that he might be feeling “old” in Israel because he was older now, by six years, than he was in his village. He defended himself ardently, sprang up from his seat, and started to mime the tasks he claims he would still be doing back home, even at the ripe old age of seventy-six.

Remaining at home, in the way of one’s wife, not only leads to listlessness, it is also a great source of shame<sup>166</sup>. Men avoid idleness by constantly seeking activity: they go out for strolls, leaving the house with a great air of determination, with hat and scarf and stick, only to gather, as always, with other men under the shade of a tree to chat. A few of them succeed in finding “old people’s work” - as watchmen, cleaners, gardeners. The purpose of this part-time work, as one sister of such a worker pointed out, is to avoid just “sitting and thinking / worrying (*masab*)”. Others become professional wanderers, visiting one relative after another in different parts of the country (Kaplan & Rosen 1994).

Unemployment also entails a loss of status for men; Working for one’s livelihood to feed the family is considered to be a man’s responsibility. Welfare payments deprive them of this important source of social prestige. It is the government which is now feeding their families,

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<sup>165</sup> The JOINT survey found that less than half of Ethiopians in Afula of working age (22-64) were employed. The employment rate amongst men was high, standing at 77% (Benita & Noam 1995: 89). This figure seems somewhat high to me – it is possible that Ethiopians doing temporary work said that they were in employment, thereby artificially raising the percentage. Kaplan & Salamon (1998: 12) also dispute these figures, pointing out that they survey was conducted amongst house owners, who are not representative of the Ethiopian immigrant population as a whole.

not themselves. Women do not generally suffer from this loss of status since they have kept intact their former role of running the household and have not therefore lost their principal occupation<sup>167</sup>.

## **2. Livelihood**

Both men and women suffer from a loss of control over the *source* of their livelihood.

Mama Gevianesh loved to rant about the difficulties “in this country”, especially after her forty-year-old daughter was “killed” by Israeli doctors. Government money was a frequent source of complaint, even though she never omitted to thank God for it. She explained: "In Ethiopia, you could always manage because everything - food, money, clothes - was in your own hands. In this country however, it is in the hands of another person. Suppose I go to the bank and they say that there is no money, then what can I find? If the government says 'no, it is finished!', where can we find since it is in other peoples' hands?" She tried to dispel my astonishment at the notion that Ethiopian agriculture and the vagaries of weather could be considered 'safer' than a government welfare payment, by proceeding to explain to me in detail the coping mechanisms she used when the crops failed. - resorting to money-lenders, selling handicrafts and foraging for wild foods.

I doubt that Mama Gevianesh really believes that her daily income is less secure in Israel than in was in Ethiopia, since she and so many others so often speak about the bliss that is Israel because “you never go to bed hungry”. Rather, she is expressing her anxiety, helplessness, and loss of pride at the fact that her welfare, and that of her children, is no longer under her control, or as she would say “not in her hands”. Like a baby, to use a typical Ethiopian metaphor, she feeds from the breast of the government. Like many Ethiopians, she does not trust the welfare system and were welfare payments to cease, she would be helpless. Before, she could always manage to feed herself and her children whatever the circumstances, because she felt she knew intimately the source of her livelihood: the environment in which she lived.

## **3. The physical environment**

Mama Gevianesh’s complaint that she has lost control over her livelihood hinges directly on a sense of loss of knowledge about the workings of her environment. In Ethiopia, she was safe because even when her regular source of sustenance failed her, her crops, she could

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<sup>166</sup> Ethiopians place an extremely high value on hard work. For example, an idle person is berated (“get up, do something, stop being so lazy (*sanaf!*)”), a hard worker (at school, work or army) is constantly praised, and the much sought-after quality *gobaz* is defined as youthful, strong, clever and energetic.

<sup>167</sup> Buijs notes that women immigrants often adapt better than male ones because they maintain their responsibility for household routines which provide them with occupation, and also they are less conscious of status deprivation associated with the failure to find positions comparable to those they left (Buijs 1993: 5).

operate skilfully in her local environment to find alternative means of livelihood; she could make use of the natural products of the land because she knew where to look and she could resort to social and economic fall-backs. In Israel, she feels that this knowledge, and hence security, is lost.

The interesting point is that *in fact* if Mama Gevianesh was really in financial difficulty in Israel, she *would* know how to obtain a bank loan or to squeeze a hardship grant out of an affable social worker. She would be successful as she is a particularly shrewd woman or if her confidence failed her, she could easily obtain the help of one of her two literate children. Yet, she feels economically impotent in Israel. Her feeling of inadequacy derives not from her inability to obtain what she wants - which is *not* diminished in Israel - but rather from her sense that she is no longer in control of the space around her, which for a former villager who knew every detail of her landscape, is bewildering and frightening. Gone are the fields she knew so well and the socio-economic context in which she was a successful operator. Around her are streets, cars, council estates, and markets in which a foreign language is spoken.

Fanta remembers Ethiopia in a free flow of words: "I remember.... the country [i.e. the landscape], the place where we lived, the field, the way in and the way out [i.e. how to get about], the market, and the people."

Fanta's words refer to the landscape and significantly her ability to move within and know that landscape, including its market. The implied contrast is clear: here she cannot find her way in the landscape and market. The landscape of Israel is socialised by the network of kin which extends throughout the country, but the area between these islands of kin remains foreign and difficult of access in the psyche of many Ethiopians. Ethiopians were appalled by the spate of suicide bomb attacks which killed over fifty people in early 1996. They spoke about them incessantly because the attacks confirmed their worst fears about the dangers of moving in this unknown urban maze.

Turunesh: "In Ethiopia, you could go anywhere, sleep in the field at any time. Here if you go into a bus, you die! I saw it on the TV, the parents of a baby killed! Ah, life in this country is hard!"

This landscape is of particular concern for parents of young children:

"We worry so much about the children. There, they just looked after cows; here there are electric sockets and cars on the roads."

Ethiopians not only feel that they have lost their ability to operate easily in the physical space around them, they also regret loss of control over the usufruct of the land. Until the 1974 revolution, Beta Israel generally did not own land but they rented it and had usufruct rights to common land.

“Here you go to the shop to buy soap - there you could just make your own, although the water there was so good that one did not usually need soap anyway!”

In this country, everything is from the government. There, I could dig and make a well for my cattle to drink. I cut wood as I wanted. Here my house belongs to the government. I pay rent. There I had a *gwaro* (back yard) of my own and I could build my own house.”

Ethiopians’ attitude to their loss of access to land is perplexing. They complained that they have no more land, yet most households who do own a small back garden, let it run wild. Only a minority plant vegetables and trees in their gardens. These plots rendered the Ethiopian neighbourhood I lived in extremely colourful in the spring as chick peas, sweet corn and onions ripened alongside the roses of the neighbouring Russian immigrants.

I asked Aba Negusse why he did not grow vegetables in this garden: “Yes, I could plant a few onions and a bit of this and that... did you see the *walka* (ploughed land) [in my village in Ethiopia]? It was so big. I had seven pieces of land and two sets of oxen... Now I am old, I am no longer young like you!”

This answer is evasive. Aba Negusse says that he is old, but in other contexts, as in the opening quote to this chapter, he boasts his physical strength, and in any case he has plenty of grandsons and children in the neighbourhood to help with manual work. He switches the conversation from his unused small garden in Israel to the large amount of land he cultivated in Ethiopia. Similarly, offers to live on a *kibbutz* or *moshav* (farming village) were turned down by all but a few Ethiopian families. Ethiopian Jews may be disdainful about agricultural work because of its associations. It reminds them of the village life they left behind to join a modern country, where they consider that agricultural work is done largely with machines and low status Arab workers<sup>168</sup>, not Ethiopians. Given their aspirations to integrate and modernise discussed in Chapter Three (see also Abbink 1984: 208), they avoid agricultural work, even in their own back garden. Also, since they view themselves as expert agriculturists, cultivating a few vegetables appears paltry.

Another aspect of the physical environment which troubles Ethiopian immigrants is the weather in Israel. The pleasant Ethiopian climate which is never too hot or too cold is contrasted with, in Afula residents’ view, Israel’s bitterly cold winters and burning hot summers.

“In Ethiopia, all year, you wear the same clothes. Here in the summer you are too hot and in the winter too cold!”

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<sup>168</sup> In fact, Arabs work in construction, and economic migrants from Thailand and Romania are employed in agriculture.



Ethiopian weather was portrayed as reliable and predicable, droughts, for example, were never mentioned. In Israel, the extremes of temperature make the Beta Israel sick (see below).

## II. Work

While unemployed Ethiopians suffer from a lack of work, employed Ethiopians hardly appear more contented.

The disgruntled Mulu: "In our country we worked just one season. Here you work both summer and winter; there is no holiday. You work so much but the money they give is not enough. There we worked as we wanted: we were not ordered by others. If you were tired or unwell you could take the day off work and you could attend your relatives' weddings and funerals as you wanted. Here if you say: "I do not feel well" or "my uncle died, I want to go to the funeral", the boss will fire you. With the boss, there are always quarrels..... also, when a White starts work, he becomes manager within a week. We remain at the bottom." Mulu also routinely complained of the nature of his work: the unpleasant smells and deafening noise of the factory.

Most Ethiopians under the age of forty and a few elders went to work. Except for a small educated elite, Ethiopians worked as unskilled or semi-skilled labourers<sup>169</sup>. Mulu's narrative introduces the problems that many Ethiopian adults face at work<sup>170</sup>: low salary, drudgery, lack of permission for days off, difficulties with the employer, the position at the bottom of the work hierarchy and the foul nature of work.

The highest Ethiopian prerogative is to attend kin's funerals, a relatively frequent occurrence. But Israeli work schedules do not allow for such frequent days off work. Ethiopian workers often complain about the intensity of working hours, and remember fondly their former working lives when they "only worked one season", for the rest of the year is the "wedding season", spent attending celebrations and visiting relatives<sup>171</sup>. Ethiopians are aware of their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the work environment. They frequently complain that their work companions are Arabs because they hate being identified with a minority which they think of as despised by dominant society. The nature of work is also disliked: "It is smelly" and can be "deafening to the ears".

Alemwork, a hospital cleaner: "It is so awful! I hate the smell! I cannot eat there. I eat in the morning, and then I fast all day until I reach home."

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<sup>169</sup> In a survey conducted in 1993 by the JOINT, out of 294 working adults, 44% of veterans (pre-1985 immigrants) and 20% new immigrants were employed in skilled jobs (Benita & Noam 1995).

<sup>170</sup> Young people's experience at work is dealt with separately in Chapter Three.

<sup>171</sup> Clearly this is an idealised picture. When there was no agricultural work, the Beta Israel occupied themselves with their craft work (Schoenberger 1975).

Not eating at work is a significant rejection of the work-place since, for Beta Israel, the sharing of food is symbolically important and a means of creating social bonds and common identity.

Fortunately, not all workers dislike their work as much as Alemwork and Mulu. Women in particular sometimes compare wage labour in Israel favourably to their previous work-load.

Fantae is a cheerful woman in her mid-thirties. In her first job in Israel, de-skinning grapefruits in a tinning factory, she worked shifts, one week starting at five a.m. and the next at four p.m. returning home past midnight. She also had her house to run, with four young children to look after. Her husband never helped her at all. She succeeded in obtaining a job with more sociable hours in a seedling warehouse. She never complained, on the contrary: "It is better than in Ethiopia. There you had to fetch the wood and water, carrying it for a long way on your back, and work bending down in the fields. Here, work is just sitting all day, doing this and that with your hands!"

Having a job is positively valued, and Ethiopian men hate to be out of work. Yet men rarely mention their jobs: work is taboo. Work held such little prominence in daily discourse that towards the end of fieldwork, I realised that I had little information about it: following my informants, I had unwittingly ignored it<sup>172</sup>.

Aba Falag, Aba Negusse's brother is a pensioner who has taken on a part-time job as a lavatory cleaner. He love to speak about his former work in Ethiopia, stressing his dominion over his land, animals and labourers, and his knowledge: he knew when to plant and how to stop animals eating the seedlings, and he often checked the fields. He used his sound judgement and was an excellent farmer. And he was his own boss. Here, "They take you own hand and say, 'Do this and do that!'" His hand is taken, like a child. He would not elaborate on the nature of his work or work relations, and closed the conversation by commenting on the TV: "Look, the rider has fallen off his horse!"

Work in Israel where Ethiopian men are "deaf" and treated like children contradicts their image of themselves as knowledgeable masters, proud farmers and craftsmen. As a result, while work in Ethiopia was depicted as part of a harmonious daily cycle, in Israel, it is cast aside. Men must work to earn a living, but their job is not considered part of meaningful daily life and is excluded from their self-image. Men return from work, and then begin their day in earnest with a coffee session and a visit to a neighbour. Work is outside the moral society of Ethiopian Jewish neighbourhs and kins.

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<sup>172</sup> Similarly, Stewart notes that after fifteen months of fieldwork he inadvertently ignored the world of the factory where his Gypsy informants worked. He notes: "My own attitude, it seems to me now, reflected the concerns of the Rom. They might have complained as they walked past my front door in the morning that they were going off to "suffer" again in the factory, but little other reference was made to this crucial part of their lives." (Stewart 1997: 141).

## C. Losing control over the social order

Men's loss of control over production has reduced their authority over their wives. Worse still, for both men and women, the influence of new norms and behavioural patterns has resulted in a loss of control over the social order and the socialisation of children.

### I. Men's loss of control over women

A man joked with me: "Can you cook *injera*? Can you obey orders? Yes? Then you can marry an Ethiopian man. In Ethiopia, his wife obeyed him, now.... only sometimes!"

Women's increased financial independence thanks to employment and social security benefits has increased their standing in the household. Men complain that their wives say: "I have money! I do not need you anymore!" In Ethiopia, Beta Israel households were largely self-sufficient. The relatively small amount of money which entered the household of a married couple came from the man's sale of his agricultural produce and crafts work (e.g. cloth, blacksmithing) and his wife's sale of her crafts (e.g. pottery, embroidery). From my informants' accounts, the man's monetary contribution was considerably higher than the woman's in most cases. In Israel, income comes from social security and / or wages. For couples on social security or when the wife brings home equal or more wages than her husband, the situation is altered. Social security is paid to a couple together, and women feel that they have equal rights over this "government money". Moreover, women regard child benefit as "their" money, so they have an extra share of income. And in the case of divorce or separation, they know that the council house and child benefit will remain with them since they will keep the children. Their husbands, in this respect, are at their mercy.

During a marital dispute, the wife exclaimed triumphantly: "He has to be nice to me! He knows that if we separate, I will get to keep the house because of the children!"

Fantanesh told me that before emigrating to Israel, her husband had wanted to divorce her in order to marry a woman who owned at least five head of cattle. But before finding a suitable person, they emigrated. Now that she receives so much government money for the four children, he no longer wants to leave her. I noticed that in their household, Fantanesh held the money-bag, and her husband came to her for petty cash. As she said on another occasion: "Many people quarrel over money. Often the woman wins and she holds the money. Then her husband has to come to her to beg for money when he wants to visit his relatives. She gives him fifty shekels. 'Give me more!' he pleads. 'No, that is enough!' she says."

Women's position in the household is also enhanced by their access to external influence and power. Men complain that they can no longer hit women, because the latter will "just call the police".

A priest, possibly bemoaning the reduction of his mediatory function in disputes, complained that women now go to the social worker the moment that there is a problem in the house rather than trying to make things work out with the help of elders. He concluded that "in this country" women, like children, were being spoilt.

Ethiopian men feel that state institutions such as the social services and the police take the women's side, and the latter are prepared to make full use of them.

The status of Ethiopian Jewish women is also influenced by the cultural climate of their new country. They say that, in Israel, women are treated "as equals" (lit: "men and women are the same (*and naw*)"). Ethiopian immigrant women quickly begin to develop new expectations about gender relations, even if actual changes in behaviour are slower to develop<sup>173</sup>.

Aba Brhan hit his wife on the bum with his cane because she did not rise fast enough to fetch him some water. Before obeying the command, she muttered, "What is the matter with you? Why do you hit me?" I doubt she would have made such a comment in Ethiopia. To me, she frequently complained that her husband kept hold of all the money himself, "But the money that the government gives, it is for both of us equally, not just for him!".

A young woman complained that her husband was not treating her as he should "in this country". Here, she explained, men should do half the work in the house. He does nothing! One day, when I jokingly criticised the cup of coffee he made me, she said: "Why do you complain? He has not once made me a cup of coffee in eleven years of marriage!" When it suited him, he too made use of female emancipation: when his wife complained about the lack of money in the house, he said "You too could work!"

If the hold men have over their wives is loosening, that over their grown-up unmarried daughters still living at home is weaker still - a loss of control shared by their wives.

Tauvesh sometimes slept with her boyfriend, staying over at a friend's for the night. She knew that her father knew, despite his silence. "What can he do about it?" she said, with an air of satisfaction.

An old woman asked her eldest stepdaughter to come and visit: "You are the only child I have. Yesterday I asked Gennat [her only daughter, who lives at home] to make *injera* and she would not. Her mother is ill and she does not make *injera* and *wot*!"

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<sup>173</sup> I stress that my discussion is focused on women who did not receive education in Israel, that is who arrived after the age of about eighteen / twenty. Younger women have rapidly adopted new norms and expectations.

## II. Children

The turmoil in gender relations is slight compared to the loss of authority over children and the resulting inability to socialise them according to either Beta Israel or Israeli norms.

I went with a neighbour to his parents for the monthly family *kuvie* (credit society). For the whole week-end, the two bedroom flat was bulging, with six adult siblings and an assortment of their children. The good humour, chatter and laughter was marred only by Gennat's two boys. Moshe and Avraham were three and five years old and totally undisciplined. In front of everyone, they hit, kicked, and spat at their mother. She vainly repeated "No! No!" and sometimes pinched them hard. The father did not intervene, and, trying to make peace, embraced the boys who came to him for comfort after a hard pinch. They were just as disobedient towards him, failing for instance to close a cupboard at his request or to put down a large bottle of Coca-Cola which was about to be spilled. Both parents were embarrassed, but remained unruffled. The rest of the company tried to ignore the bad behaviour, except for when the children's attention-seeking screams made conversation impossible. The uncles and aunts stared at them, not knowing what to do. At one point one of the kids kicked and hit his grandmother. She raised a slipper to the child. She was visibly disgusted. The children's misbehaviour was all the more conspicuous given the self-consciously "Ethiopian" atmosphere which pervades family gatherings, where Ethiopian etiquette is particularly pronounced.

### 1. Socialisation of children

Small children enjoy a period of total freedom, till the age of about three. They go where they want and are never reprimanded.

Older children are told to play with the toddler and if the toddler is naughty and the older child reprimands him, the older child is told off by the parent: "Let him be! He does not know. He is just a baby!"

Babies and toddlers rarely leave their mother's side. Many Ethiopian women carry their babies in home-made slings on their back, although a growing number of mothers, and young ones in particular, prefer to use push-chairs. In Ethiopia, babies were breast-fed until the age of two or three - in Israel, they are generally weaned within a year. Babies and toddlers are the focus of everybody's affection - until the birth of the next child who takes on the privileged role.

Aba Telahun spent his days reading and copying religious texts in bright coloured felt-tips. He gave little attention to his grandchildren. Whenever his baby grandson was in the room however, his face lit up and he kissed, cuddled, and played with the baby. When Aba Telahun left the room, he kissed only the infant, walking straight past Shimbra's four-year-old sister.

Small children's naughty behaviour is excused and laughed at.

Alemwork explains: "Children do not know until the age of eight or so, only then do they learn the difference between good and evil."

Disciplining starts around the age of four, and in Ethiopia, a child was beaten for failing to obey<sup>174</sup>. In Israel, small children are pinched, but they are rarely beaten. Parents and other closely related adults take on the role of teaching a child about “good and evil” and to “show respect”. Children learn by watching and thanks to specific teaching, in the form of verbal discourse and physical beatings<sup>175</sup>. Eventually, if the apprenticeship is successful, by the age of about eight years old, the child acquires “a heart” - that is the capacity to act morally.

An old learned man explained to me that he did not go to school, but learned from his elders (*abatachin*) and the learning stayed in his head, in the same way, he added that his words stay in my tape.

Aviva tells me that her younger sister knows more than her [about Ethiopian customs] because the latter did not go to school and therefore was at home all day hearing elders speak and watching them.

Ethiopian values continue to be taught in Israel. A little girl pleads with her great-uncle to help her obtain a stick from a boy. He ignored her at first and then said somewhat sternly: “He is a boy and you are a girl!”

In Ethiopia, from the age of about five, girls were expected to do household tasks and boys to mind the herds. Both sexes were ordered to fetch things for adults and older siblings, and act as general dogsbodies. In Israel, children are rarely asked to do anything; and when they are, they tend to refuse.

Aviva’s fourteen-year-old son finally joined her in Israel after his (Christian) father’s death, six years after the rest of the family. When he first arrived, he ordered his younger half-siblings about: “Fetch me Coca-Cola!” “Move that chair!” “Stop making so much noise!” The children were too bemused to refuse him at first, but the tensions soon grew and he learned fast that Israel was not Ethiopia.

## **2. *Naughty children***

Ethiopian children who arrived in Israel from about the age of four onwards are generally charming and well-behaved. However, children born in Israel or who arrived as infants are frequently uncontrollable and naughty - the socialisation process described above has failed. They neither respect basic Ethiopian customs, such as getting up from their chair for an adult or offering their cheeks to be kissed by older relatives, nor do they obey their parents. These children can generally understand basic Amharic although they are unable (or unwilling) to

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<sup>174</sup> I learned about child-rearing in Ethiopia through conversations and by watching small children during my two month stay in villages in Gondar. Molvaer (1993) corroborates these findings. He discusses the treatment of children at different ages and even attempts a psychological critique of Amhara methods of upbringing, suggesting that this withdrawal of affection had negative psychological consequences.

<sup>175</sup> As well as learning from elders, children acquire parents’ characteristics by heredity. Hot debates rage about which of the two parents a baby most looks like. Ethiopian youngsters are said to be “strong” and particularly adept at the army because they are the off-spring of strong soldiers who “could fight for eight days without water”. Conversely, a lazy teenager is cast off as the child of “that bad man”.

Speak it. My field-notes are filled with examples of children's behaviour similar to that of Gennat's children, and parents' bemused reactions.

Worku was relaxing one Sabbath morning under the tree in our front garden, chatting to his uncles who were visiting from another town. His wife had dressed the children smartly for the occasion. His seven-year-old came to ask for Coca-Cola. Worku was embarrassed at the rudeness of his daughter in front of his relatives, asking for a drink away from her own home, which by Ethiopian standards is akin to begging. He told her sharply that there was none and suggested she drink water. She began to make her way into the house, and he reprimanded her, telling her to go fetch water at his sister's house opposite. She whined, saying that she wanted water here, and continued, slowly, to push the door open. He raised his voice and said: "Go!" She whined further until he picked up a pebble and raised his hand as if to throw it at her. She laughed uneasily and finally scampered off in the direction of her aunt's house. The conversation resumed, without a mention of the incident, which was keenly observed, and noted, by all present.

A small child throws pebbles into the living room through the open French windows. His father tells him to stop and the boy continues. After an embarrassed silence, the adults in the room all laugh.

The helplessness on a parent's face is visible when his/her child refuses to turn down the TV when guests are trying to talk over coffee, and the child turns up the TV again even after the parent has turned it down.

Parents do not know how to react to such behaviour. Despite the obvious distress it causes, it is rarely talked about. Anteby stresses the rich meaning of Ethiopians' silences (1996); no silence is more eloquent than that provoked by small children.

When children are good, the pleasure which suffuses a parent's face is as palpable as the distress which adorns their faces at other times.

Worku looks on fondly as his three-year-old eats *injera* (most little children refuse to eat Ethiopian food).

Melissu's ten-year-old entered a room full of relatives, and despite obvious apprehension, went round each in turn saying whose son he was and offering his cheeks to be kissed. Melissu's proud and contented smile was a joy to behold.

### ***Parents' analysis of children's naughtiness***

Parents say that children are learning the ways of this country, emulating the behaviour of 'spoilt' white children. In other words, children are no longer learning from their parents but from bad external influences.

A former primary school teacher regrets his life in Ethiopia, conceding that at least Israel is good for the children because they can study so much. After a little reflection, he said: "But in some respects it is less good here for the children. In Ethiopia, those who went to school studied so hard. Here they do not. They copy things from Israeli children: they wear their hair long, they smoke..." He spoke with a tone of

inevitability in his voice. Because of negative external influences beyond his control, this former school-teacher had lost his power to make his children study well.

A priest's wife: "If you speak to them, they do not hear. They see *farenge* films on TV, they go to "*flimia*" [Ethiopian pronunciation of '*pneumia*', boarding school, Hebrew] and that is what teaches them, not anything else! If Qes Yalew gets angry, they do not hear!"

Alternatively, parents explain naughtiness by saying that the children are bored. They say that, in Ethiopia, children could play outside but in urban Israel they must stay indoors because of the cars. Children are not allowed out unless they are supervised, and yet they have few play things in the house<sup>176</sup>. I would add that, in Ethiopia, children had their extended families close-by, providing them with both entertainment and authority. In Israel, children are brought in up nuclear family households, often with only their mother - approximately 30% of Ethiopian Jewish households are one-parent families (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 7).

Sometimes, environmental factors are given as a cause for unruly behaviour.

Aviva, a young mother of two uncontrollable children: "The children's behaviour has changed, I do not know why. Maybe because of the water or the country [i.e. the environment, the weather]."

The most common explanation which Ethiopian parents give for their children's misbehaviour is that they are no longer allowed to punish them physically.

A young woman: "In Ethiopia, the kids were so well behaved: you hit a child once and because he was afraid, he would not do it again. Here a mother says 'Do so and so!' but the child can just say 'No!' and what can the mother do? If she hits the child, he can tell his teacher who will tell the police and she will be put in prison. I know of several people who were put in prison."

Parents can no longer adopt an Ethiopian style of child raising since it is so much at odds with the norms in Israel, where childhood is idealised and corporal punishment outlawed, yet they have failed to develop a new way. As this father of four explained to me: "In Ethiopia, parents had a way to bring up children. Here they are not allowed to follow that way. They have not yet found a method to bring up their children in accordance with Israeli customs." The result is erratic behaviour on the part of parents which does little to improve children's overall behaviour and relation to their parents.

Melash accepts a lot from his nine-year-old daughter. She often fails to obey a command and he gently coaxes her into obedience. Sometimes, however, the smallest incident makes him explode. One day she brought some cups of tea in for a few people, including her father, who were assembled around the living room coffee table. She placed the cups all together in the middle of the table and returned to the TV programme which she had reluctantly left to fetch the cups. He asked crossly: "Where is my tea?" "There!" she said, pointing to the cups. He raised his voice louder: "Bring

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<sup>176</sup> Parents who were themselves partly educated in Israel do buy toys for their children.



it here, closer!” The girl, not knowing whether he was really angry or just joking, giggled nervously. She played safe, and proceeded to push one of the cups nearer to her father.

Little Avi was exceptionally well-behaved and pleasant, and by contrast illustrates some of the factors which account for children’s naughtiness.

I knew Avi from the age of three to five. His mother was a teenager when she gave birth to him, and he was brought up by his grandmother and mother’s step-father, who was a neighbourhood elder. His mother lived at home and looked after him after work. Avi’s step-grandfather took the child everywhere with him, and the child sat quietly on his lap or played with other children. Even in language classes he remained well behaved and quiet compared to other children who frequently disrupted classes. Avi understood Amharic although he responded in Hebrew.

Avi was brought up by his extended family, enjoyed lots of activity since his grandparents took him with them everywhere, and both his mother and grandparents were relatively well adjusted in Israel, and happy within the household. Most children are brought up by parents who are often confused about many aspects of life in Israel, including child rearing.

### **3. Cattle-children**

Police intervention does occur and there have been cases of Ethiopians jailed for physical violence, although more usually as a result of wife-battering than child-beating. But the importance given to external interference - seen as *the* cause of the children’s unruliness - reveals the depth of the feeling of loss of control over children. Ethiopian parents feel that the basic matter of disciplining a child is taken out of their hands. This represents an overt manifestation of their loss of authority over their children, and their inability to socialise them.

Aster, a twenty-six-year-old single mother of two, complains that her children no longer “listen” to her, they say “It is not your business.” She continues: “Children do not have heart any longer. If my son [a ten-year-old] is watching TV and I call him, he does not hear me, his heart is there in the TV, not with me.”

Aster is saying that she has lost her child (“his heart”); his concern, interest and allegiance, are now to the TV. She therefore feels excluded from her children and their new world. In the words of a priest:

“Our children have become like cattle in the field, not respecting their fathers or their religion. The children are not taught properly here. We lost our rights to raise them and to punish them when they do wrong because of the intervention of the police. The children, whom we raised [supported financially], got out of our words and this makes us very upset.”

Children have become deaf (they “got out of words”) to their parents, and they wander off like cattle. Moreover, children learn new behaviour and information at school in a language

which parents cannot comprehend; and given their parents' "deafness" (lack of Hebrew and ignorance in Israel), children have become in some respects more knowledgeable than their parents who constantly need to seek their help.

The loss of their children is epitomised by young children's refusal to partake in two of the most central Ethiopian activities: eating *injera* and speaking Amharic. Young children are fed chocolate desserts, chocolate drinks, white bread and chocolate spread, pasta with tomato sauce, eggs, *bamba* (a variety of crisps) and the occasional schnitzel (fried turkey). New immigrants are apparently unaware of the low nutritional value of this diet (Doleve-Gandelman 1990). They say in a resigned tone of voice: "The children refuse to eat *injera*, this is the food that they want." Parents speak Hebrew to their children as far as their Hebrew language ability permits them. They explain that children refuse to speak in Amharic and that speaking Hebrew with their children is a good way for them to learn the language.

### III. Religious and Domestic Affairs

Ethiopian Jewish adults bemoan their loss of authority in religious and domestic affairs<sup>177</sup>.

Alequa Ayelign: "We were very religious people and we are here as if we know nothing. They see us as *dinkoro* (deaf, ignorant), but our heart is full of thoughts! The Yemenites, the Russians, everybody's rights are being respected. They have their synagogues. But we have no synagogue, the prayer cannot be given, the *mergam* (menstrual women) cannot be separated, our people live just by crying when it comes to religion."

These words are powerful and express the thoughts and words I heard so often: Ethiopian religion is devalued in the eyes of other Israelis and Beta Israel priests have lost their religious authority and can no longer perform weddings or divorces. Given that religion is all-encompassing for Beta Israel, they feel that their knowledge and wisdom, and hence themselves as persons, are devalued in their new society. This sense of devaluation, their recently acquired "deafness" makes them sad, and taints their new-found material wealth:

"Us elders (*shmagleotch*), we are happy to have food and clothes but our religion is being lost. All that we eat therefore, we cannot fully enjoy."

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<sup>177</sup> This section deals with older Ethiopians. However, younger Ethiopians, including the (largely secular) political elite, are vociferous about their adamant about their priests loss of authority. For them, the cause of Beta Israel priests is a battle for recognition as an ethnic group of equal standing to other *edot* in Israel. Fighting the Rabbinate on this issue is a good card to play in a country obsessed by religion and in which many liberal Israelis are happy to support any cause against the Rabbinate. On the day of the blood demonstration in January 1996, the lack of Ethiopian synagogues and low status of Beta Israel priests was one of the three issues which an Ethiopian delegation presented to the Prime Minister.

Worse still than their devaluation in the eyes of other Israelis, elders suffer from the loss of their own youngsters' morality: young Ethiopian girls dress in short skirts, menstruating women continue their daily life unabated, their children have sexual partners before marriage, and a growing minority are failing to observe even the most basic of Jewish practice, such as observance of the Sabbath.

In a short speech following a Bar Mitzvah blessing, the priest bemoaned the fact that although God had brought the Beta Israel to Jerusalem, the young were no longer observing the Sabbath, and he called on everyone to respect traditions.

Parents fear that their children will grow up with norms and values at odds with their own.

Melissu, a young woman, is despondent about her five-year-old's future morality; she would like her daughter to keep her virginity until marriage, but she knows that she hopes in vain. "What difference will my wishes make? She will go with whoever!"

Alequa Ayelign, a respected medicine man, whose children are older than Melissu's, acutely feels loss of control over his instil his norms and values in his teenagers. He laments that 'they stay away from us', in the army and at boarding school. He complains that his children are with "them" and that they eat "*farenge* meat". Children, he maintains, should have "a right" to do as their parents showed them. He concludes "When there will be democracy, we can marry in good time, we can help the children to build a home and we will be like anyone in the country." He uses a language of rights, but no-one has denied his children "the rights" to follow their father's injunctions - they themselves have chosen to integrate Israeli norms and food into their daily lives. Rather than directly voicing his loss of control over his children, Alequa Ayelign is thus constructing an alternative discourse, less damning to him personally; rather than his authority, it is Israeli democracy which is not strong enough for Ethiopians to maintain their traditions<sup>178</sup>. He attempts to cling onto a vestige of control by blaming the state for his own loss of authority and by portraying an idealised future in which this control will be regained (see Chapter Six).

Moreover, elders have lost much of their social function in Israel as guardians of peace<sup>179</sup> (Kaplan 1988). Priests and elders do still mediate in times of strife (see Chapter Two), but this function is rapidly being taken over, or supplemented by, social workers. The latter have

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<sup>178</sup> Alequa Ayelign's eldest son, a thirty-seven year old priest, also adopts a language of rights. He would like the liturgical language *ge'ez* to be upheld, "But," he laments, "how can they encourage their kids to learn when they have no rights?" like his father, he is deflecting his loss of control over the younger generation onto a political problem with the country - a more bearable, because remediable, problem.

<sup>179</sup> Recall Aba Negusse in the opening quote of Chapter Five: At other times, especially when a dispute is the topic of the day, he loves to speak of the status he acquired in the village: "For five years, I was a judge. People came to me with their problems. I listened and then I said: 'This is good. This is bad. Do this. Do that.'" See Schoenberger (1975: 192) for a description of the council of elders in Beta Israel villages.

become an integral part of daily life - the first port of call for complaints about housing, money or marriage. Elders resent them because not only do they operate with totally different attitudes, norms and no common language, but they have also usurped their own role as mediators in domestic affairs.

Ethiopian adults loss of authority is illustrated by their discourse on divorce rates. Though the divorce rate in Ethiopia was extremely high<sup>180</sup>, they claim that they hardly ever divorced in Ethiopia, while in Israel many Ethiopian couples are divorcing. Moreover, the disruptive effects of divorces are said to be much graver in Israel, sometimes with fatal consequences.

A middle-aged woman, twice-divorced: "In Ethiopia, it was so easy to divorce. If you had problems, the elders would come and if after they had tried to resolve the problem, it still remained, you would agree to separate. The belongings would be divided and you would return to your mother's home. There, you would make some *talla* (alcoholic beverage) and ask your relatives to come and build you a house. It was so easy. Here though you have to get the social worker and then there is no house to go to and it takes so long. Some people cannot wait and so they kill themselves."

While elders suffer from their drop in status, the worst hit are men in the thirty to fifty-five age group, the "in-between" generation. Older men have the high status of "elders" and do not need to even try to integrate into Israeli society since they do not need to work thanks to their state pension and do not have young children to bring up as Israelis. Younger men received training on arrival in Israel and find it easier to learn Hebrew and fit into the new society. The middle-aged men, however, are too young to be "elders" but too old to successfully integrate. They cannot find decent jobs, if any, and they cannot learn Hebrew well, and yet they have young families to bring up and need to earn the respect of their children. As I mentioned above, their wives' status is less affected since their domestic role in the house is largely unaffected.

Yinework, a thirty-year-old father of four explains: "This country is good for elders - they can just sit and chat merrily- and for the children, because of education. But for those who came between the ages of 20 and 60 it is hard - we do not understand [how to operate successfully in] this country."

## **D. Loss of control over well-being**

### **Introduction**

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<sup>180</sup> There are no figures, but I rarely met a middle-aged couple who were not at least on their second marriage. Pankhurst who conducted research in a neighbouring population which was culturally similar to the Beta Israel notes the very high incidence of divorce (1992:114). Out of a sample of 95 households, 3 had 12 marriages, and the average number of divorces was 3.3 per adult. 49 % of marriages lasted less than 5 years.

Ethiopians tend to assert that they are sick in Israel while they were healthy in Ethiopia<sup>181</sup>. Worse still, they claim that when they were ill in Ethiopia, they could soon be cured, whilst in Israel, they remain sick. Illness and healing is one of the prime concerns of Ethiopian immigrants and one of the most frequent and contentious subjects of daily conversation. This is because illness and the inability to cure symbolises the loss of control suffered by Ethiopian Jewish immigrants<sup>182</sup>.

The following two accounts illustrate clearly the imputed causes and nature of illness, the effect illness has on daily life, and the difficulties - and lengths sought - to cure illness.

Yalew has a chronic head-ache. He is a tall, well-built man in his late forties, with a house full of children. For the first year that I knew him, though he often took sick leave, he held down a job as a hospital cleaner. But his headaches worsened, and he quit his job. He sat at home all day, wearing a white turban around his head, looking morose. Israeli doctors and Ethiopian medicine men in Israel failed him and his only solution was to seek a cure in Ethiopia. With his rotating-credit-society-money and financial contributions from relatives, he set off. He returned a month later, and for a while, he was better.

He believed that his head-aches were caused by a female insect which had entered his head through his ear and had then reproduced inside his head, so that a swarm of insects were continuously buzzing away there and eating away at his flesh. When he went to Ethiopia, the person he saw removed the insects by applying certain potions to his ear. Abebe returned to Israel with a jar containing six dead insects to prove to the doubting *farenge* doctor the cause of his ailments.

Soon however the problem returned. Some relatives said that he had failed to see the right person in Ethiopia, others said that his new pain was caused by the wound left by the exit of the insects, where they ate away at his flesh.

Aster is an extremely attractive young woman, single mother of the two uncontrollable children mentioned above. She was possessed by her grandmother's spirit shortly after the birth of her son, twelve years ago in Ethiopia<sup>183</sup>. There, Aster's spirit was under control: she could provide him with what he wanted and so he did not make her ill. In this country however, she is ill; her left leg hurts her permanently, and she gets fatigue and head-aches. *Farenge* doctors are of no help - they found nothing wrong. Sometimes, they give her a cream to rub into her leg, but it has little effect. She explained the problem: "My *kole* (spirit) comes here. But what we do for spirits here is superficial. In Ethiopia, he is happy with what is done for him, so he leaves me and goes. You have to prepare coffee in a special way with incense and you prepare popcorn. In this country, when we use incense the neighbours are angered and ask why we use such things. Also, where in this town do I find a red chicken to slaughter? We cannot do things *properly* here. Therefore people are sick." Here, even the

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<sup>181</sup> In a sample of 58 new immigrants, Reiff (forthcoming) found that 50% claimed to suffer from poor health in Israel (compared to a 10% estimation by their doctors).

<sup>182</sup> Nudelman (1995) studied Beta Israel perceptions of illness and curing illness. My study confirms and adds ethnographic detail to her conclusions: "Ethiopians tend to refer to themselves as "sick" in Israel in comparison to being "healthy" in Ethiopia (or at least having an illness that they understand and know how to control)". She states that health problems are exacerbated by a new lifestyle, changes in social role (namely the inactivity of elders) and the difficulties of dealing with life in urban Israeli society.

<sup>183</sup> This information was given to me by the Amhara witchdoctor of Aster's village in Ethiopia who originally diagnosed her.

Ethiopian doctors cannot cure her, because they do not have the right medicines. So she too started to economise to go to Ethiopia.

Both these accounts start from the idealised notion that in Ethiopia, though illness did occur, it was much less frequent than in Israel and it could always be cured. Blaming Israel for their inability to cure their illness is a means of expressing their dissatisfaction and the loss of control over their lives. Both these individuals were finding Israel particularly hard to cope with: Aster, a traditional young woman, missed Ethiopian village life and her former Christian husband who was unable (or unwilling) to join her; Yalew, a man of slave descent, who was just beginning to acquire age-status in Ethiopia, found himself yet again at the bottom of the social hierarchy, a member of the “in-between generation”, too young to qualify as an elder and too old to acquire decent Hebrew.

## 1. *The causes of illness*

The most frequent complaints of Ethiopians are heart pain, stomach pain, headache<sup>184</sup>, colds, flu, asthma, and skin rashes. A small number of Beta Israel also suffer from various mental illnesses, for which there is a range of indigenous names and expressions (for example *moign*, lit: ‘crazy, *menfas chinqat*, the name used by a herbal doctor for one of his patient’s mental illness). Most illness is the result of external agency - whether environmental, psychological, or supernatural factors, or a combination of these (Hodes & Kloos 1988, Nuldelman 1995).

Environmental factors are the most frequently attributed causes of illness. Ethiopians complain that the vagaries of the weather in Israel make them sick. It is either too hot or too cold and the strong wind, especially in the coastal towns, is particularly dangerous to health. Israeli water which, according to Beta Israel wisdom, has “medicine” added to it and comes from a stagnant lake (i.e. the Sea of Galilee) rather than a flowing river, is blamed for both mental and physical illness. One young woman attributed her little children’s unruliness to drinking water, while for another, water was the cause of the mental illness her grown-up sister developed in Israel.

Physical illness is often directly connected with problems at work or with emotional pain and difficulties<sup>185</sup> (Arieli & Ayche 1993).

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<sup>184</sup> In a study of a sample of nearly fifty new immigrants, Youngman et al. (forthcoming) found headaches to be the most frequent complaint.

<sup>185</sup> Reiff (forthcoming) notes that 26% (N=14) of her sample of new immigrants reported that their physical symptoms were caused by a specific aspect of living in Israel (such as a housing problem).

One young man attributed his stomach pains to his current worries (*assab*, lit: thoughts): unrequited love from a girl that he was wooing and some nasty quarrelling with his elder brother over money.

Alemwork said that she is ill (itchy body and headache) “because” (*mikinyatum*) she is having problems with her husband.

Illness is also caused by the agency of malevolent spirits. Some people, called *balakole* (lit: owner of a spirit), are possessed by a specific spirit, which makes its host ill when his requests are not met (Young 1975), as Aster explained in the above account<sup>186</sup>. In Israel, spirits continue to possess people, albeit rarely.

A teenage boy went mad - he looked distracted, he did not talk properly, “he jumped off buses before arriving”. His desperate parents took him to see the greatest medicine man in the country who diagnosed that the boy had become possessed by a spirit.

People who are not possessed by a spirit fear sporadic attacks by roaming spirits - and they guard against them in a number of ways (e.g. by filling extra cups of coffee for the spirits, throwing a little popcorn served at coffee over their shoulder, and lighting incense at set times).

## 2. *Curing Illness*

Worku (twenty-six years old) was ill. He suffered from bad stomach pains and vomiting. He went to the *farenge* doctor but the latter just gave him the kind of pills that they give people who are sick on the bus. Worku wanted to visit a private doctor in Ashdod, a *farenge*, who gives injections. What he really needs, he maintained, was a trip to Ethiopia, to the holy waters (*tevel*).

Treatment involves extracting the harmful agent or substance which has caused the illness or finding a way to put an end to its influence on the sick person (Nudelman 1995). The problem with illness in Israel is that it cannot be cured easily. Ethiopians are dissatisfied with the treatments offered by *farenge* doctors (see Reiff 1998, Youngmann et al. 1998). They complain that doctors only give pills, without giving enough injections, since these are what really cure<sup>187</sup>. Moreover they feel that, irrespective of acute language problems, Israeli doctors do not relate to them properly, fail to listen, and treat them with disrespect and impatience (see also Nudelman 1995).

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<sup>186</sup> Not all Beta Israel believe in spirits. Aster’s sister and brother, for example, attributed her fainting at a mourning ceremony, not to her spirit, as the rest of the family did, but to her fear of large crowds.

<sup>187</sup> Beta Israel claim that pills are not very effective, especially if you just swallow them as the doctor says because they just go straight through your body and come out the other side. Older Ethiopians chew away at their pills in an attempt to increase their effectiveness.

While continuing to use Israeli medical services, Ethiopians increasingly turn to Ethiopian traditional medical practitioners<sup>188</sup>. As Alequa Ayelign, a reputed Ethiopian medicine man explained, people come to him when the *farenge* doctor cannot cure them. There are three categories of healers: 'physical' practitioners, Herbalists (called *dabtara*, originally a monastic term, meaning 'scribe'), and Spirit mediums (*balazar* or *balakole*, lit: owner of the spirit)<sup>189</sup>.

Physical treatments have been much reduced in Israel, the former widespread practice of bleeding, for example, is now extremely rare. Still common are massages to sore areas of the body and uvulectomy for babies, whereby a specialist removes the uvula with a sharp instrument to prevent suffocation and other baby illnesses (Nudelman 1995). Herbalists use divination techniques and their treatment typically includes herbal medications, amulets<sup>190</sup> and instructions such as "This month is not favourable for you, do not travel far from your house". Spirit mediums operate with the help of a spirit. The spirit gives him/her strength and power by revealing the cause of the illness and the way to deal with it; the Medium's spirit can converse and influence proper behaviour in the spirits which are troubling the patient (Nudelman 1995, Kahana 1985).

After having accompanied Mama Gevia to several trips to the *farenge* doctor, she suggested a visit to the local Ethiopian medicine man Alequa Atnafu. We were ushered through the living room into his consulting room. He sat cross-legged on a low bed, a blanket around his legs, a woolly hat on his head, and two long necklaces of beads around his neck. His eyes were sharp and lively. The walls were draped in colourful cloth and the display cabinet full of dozens of bottle of *arak* (a strong liquor) and dozens of sets of coffee cups. On the floor a small tray was filled with coffee cups, covered with a small colourful cloth. The smell of incense enveloped the room. Popcorn littered the floor. We sat opposite the medicine man and Mama Gevia explained to him her aches and pains in her shoulder and head. Alequa Atnafu took out a scroll, a long piece of paper with neatly written Amharic writing in blue, with a passage in red. He filled in two blanks, one with Mama Gevia's name and one with her mother's name. He made some calculations on some rough paper (an old bank statement). His speech alternated between ordinary Amharic and "*kole*" (spirit) talk, which sounded like gibberish with Arabic sounds and intonations. He gave her the scroll, which she later sewed into a small leather pouch which she then wore around her neck. He suggested that she go to the hot water baths in Ashdod. He also gave her some twigs which she was to smoke under her body for three nights. He instructed her to return to him in three days for an appraisal. She placed a twenty shekel note on the coffee table.

He then turned to me and asked me my name and my mother's name and made appropriate calculations. He asked why I had come. I tried to explain that I was not ill but had come for my study. But perhaps I did not make myself clear: he proceeded to

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<sup>188</sup> Ethiopian immigrants are not alone in this: many studies of immigrants in Israel have shown that traditional medicine is still used in addition to Western medicine because the latter does not always fulfil immigrants needs (Nudelman 1995, see also Bilu 1979).

<sup>189</sup> This categorisation is extremely fluid in practice and most practitioners I met combine all three techniques.

<sup>190</sup> For a detailed description of contemporary amulet practices and beliefs, see Anteby (1996: 351-6).



give me a powder which I was to apply with cream on my face to help me with my studies (lit: "for your studies to enter you").

Ethiopians discuss health at length and they visit both Israeli and Ethiopian medical practitioners. Yet they continuously assert that they cannot be cured in this country: "Here it just does not work". The traditional powers of the medicine men are lessened in Israel and to be fully cured, Ethiopians need to go to Ethiopia. Both patients and doctors blame the lack of appropriate herbs and healing waters. To remedy the situation, patients, doctors and traders travel to Ethiopia to bring back appropriate curative herbs, and holy water from special springs. Beta Israel have probably always voiced scepticism about the powers of their medicine men, but their current loss of faith is acute. They are unable to dispel the root cause of their illness - the new socio-environmental conditions in which they live and consequent loss of control over the social order of their society - and so they remain sick<sup>191</sup>.

### **3. Suicide**

The ultimate loss of control over well-being is suicide<sup>192</sup>. In 1985, Ethiopian immigrants suffered a six times higher suicide rate than the average population in Israel (Kaplan & Rosen 1994: 105-6, Arieli & Ayche 1993). While there are no up-to-date figures, both Ethiopians and Israelis say that Ethiopian suicide levels are extremely high, and according to Ethiopians, much higher than in Ethiopia. It is hard to ascertain causes since Ethiopians often explain a particular suicide with reference to whatever happens to be the political issue at the time, whether family reunification, failure to gain university admission, inadequate housing or mistreatment in the army. Documented cases were found to relate to domestic problems and, increasingly, to positive tests for HIV (Kaplan & Rosen 1994: 105-6).

My neighbours explained the unfortunate circumstances which led to the suicide of young Waga, a mother of three infants. Her sister-in-law said that Waga had separated from her husband and was given a flat for a year. At the end of the year, the social security officials asked her to pay NIS 1800 rent. But Waga had no money. They said that she should return to her original home and that they would get her husband to leave and give him alternative accommodation. But she said that she would not go back until he was out. So she went to her mother's home. After about one month, she was found later hanging from a tree, far from the house.

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<sup>191</sup> Summerfield, who worked for three years as an Immigrant Advisor to Bangladeshi and Somali communities in Tower Hamlets, East London, concluded that "control over one's own life is a major element in mental health" (1993: 98).

<sup>192</sup> Kaplan & Rosen suggest on the contrary that suicide is a means of regaining control: "Unable to live in an honourable fashion in a country whose rules and customs remain unfamiliar, the Ethiopian seeks to exert at least a measure of control by dying with honour (1994: 106)." Their conclusion is interesting, but it needs corroborating data - while my informants spoke of death in battle in honourable terms, they never did so about suicide. Indeed so *dishonourable* is suicide that it is difficult to convince priests to make the appropriate funerary blessings.

Fantanesh, my middle-aged neighbour: “Waga must have thought and thought and found that there was no other solution..... There was no suicide in Ethiopia.”

Gennat, a young educated woman said that she understood well Waga’s motivations. Waga did not know what to do, helpless and powerless in front of her difficulties. She could not cope with the bureaucracy, taking decisions and dealing with all the Israelis. I said: “But if only she had waited a while she would have got her house!” Gennat explained that Ethiopians have different ways of dealing with things: “You wait and wait and accept and accept and then you explode.”

Kanubesh said that the cause of the woman’s suicide was God’s anger for a lack of respect for purity laws. She concluded: “‘If you put me down once’, says God, ‘I will put you down seven times’. This means ‘If you do not obey my words, I will cause damage in many ways’. So people commit suicide, die in war and die of illness because God is angered.”

What struck me in these accounts was that all my informants did not express shock that a young woman with three small children should take her life. On the contrary, they spoke with sympathy and blamed “them” (that is social security officials) for not giving her a house, and implicitly accused them of her death. Whatever Waga’s motives, her neighbours spoke of her suicide as a natural outcome of her sense of powerlessness in the face of Israeli social services.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the consequences of “becoming deaf” in Israel. It has portrayed the sense of loss of control over most aspects of life: livelihood, the domestic sphere and health. In the new cultural and social context, the accumulated knowledge of generations, of which medicine men are the proud bearers, is now becoming redundant. Such a healer, Alequa Ayelign, sums up the issue in these words:

“The traditions and knowledge that we brought with us from there, we cannot make use of here. They closed it for us, by saying that we had to study again here in this language. This is why we say that we are *dinkoro*. By not respecting our laws and not accepting our religion, they make us primitive. They keep us inside [i.e. out of public life].”

The healing powers of respected Ethiopian healers have diminished in this strange land; their former well-known landscape, in which every tree yielded fruit, wood, shade or medicine, has been replaced by an urban maze navigable only by buses which can explode at any moment.

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## Seven: The Homeland Postponed

### Introduction: Living well and “becoming deaf”

In this chapter, I argue that Ethiopian Jews adopt strategies to overcome their low status and loss of control: they engage in forms of resistance against dominant society and focus their attention on an idealised past and an utopian future. I start with a brief review of the Beta Israel’s immigration experience.

Chapters Two to Four presented an overall positive picture of Ethiopian Jews’ experience of life in Israel: social relations between neighbours and kin have been recreated (Chapter Two), ethnic pride is upheld (Chapter Three), and Israel is appreciated as a “homeland” and as a developed country (Chapter Four). But despite the positive aspects of their homeland, the Beta Israel have also found it to be disappointing. In Israel, “there is no religion”, the Jewishness of the Beta Israel is questioned, and thus their sense of belonging weakened. At the same time, long-held Beta Israel practices are changing fast: daughters return home in mini-skirts, menstruating women cook the evening meal, and Ethiopian “cattle-children” are fast disappearing into an unknown immoral haze; the older generation feel that they are losing control over their lives and that of their children.

The younger generation (sixteen to thirty years old approximately) suffer from a somewhat different set of problems. While they do not bemoan the relaxing of moral standards and their elders’ loss of control, they too are stung by Israelis’ rejection of the Beta Israel practice of Judaism. For them, the religious controversy is another manifestation of Israeli racism towards them. Ethiopian immigrants, they claim, are being discriminated against on all fronts, whether it be in the religious domain, at work, in school, or in government offices. Moreover, although all Ethiopians appreciate their huge increase in absolute wealth, they are equally aware of their relative poverty compared to other Israelis<sup>193</sup>. These former mud-hut dwellers, for whom a tin roof was the height of social ambition, protest of the flimsiness of

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<sup>193</sup> The relative poverty of most Ethiopian Jews in Israel is accepted by non-Ethiopian Israelis. The latest report on the situation of Ethiopian Jewish immigrants states: “the community’s economic situation is nothing less than dire” (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 24).

the walls of their new houses, and the four rooms appear inadequate; after a life barefoot, they complain that their income is insufficient to buy the particular shoes that they want.

A twenty-year old: “This country is hard if you have no money. You cannot call what we have “a house”. If you see a *farenge* house, there is a TV in each room, and each child has his own room. Look how thin the walls are in our house! The sink is no good, and the cupboards are no good, and we need a fridge.”

Aba Negusse, who has several thousand shekels hidden in his bedroom, complains continuously at his poverty in Israel, contrasting it to his former glory. Whenever a bill comes, he wonders how he will manage...

## **A. Resistance**

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants shape their lives by resisting those aspects of dominant society which they dislike. They express their resistance in several ways: 1) by developing strong ethnic bonds, upholding Beta Israel practices and rejecting normative Jewish ones; 2) ideologically subverting Israeli disparaging attitudes in order to cast themselves as morally superior; and 3) by engaging in overt forms of resistance such as demonstrations, or opting-out of the system altogether.

### **I. Group Boundaries**

#### **1. Upholding customs and communal ties**

Over the centuries, the Beta Israel maintained themselves proudly against a dominant majority which has sought to convert it. Their success in this venture rests to a large part on their distinctive set of customs. The Beta Israel themselves define the difference between themselves and their former Amhara neighbours on the basis of traditions, such as female purity laws, eating only Beta Israel slaughtered-meat, and religious custom. The former practice of *attenkuqn* (don't touch me), whereby Beta Israel had to ritually purify themselves after contact with non-Beta Israel, expressed their commitment to a separate identity within a multi-ethnic society (Kaplan & Rosen (1993: 43).

Makwanent, a young MA student in sociology, explained to me why Ethiopian Jews were so concerned with young people marrying against the prescribed rules: “For the Ethiopian Jews, life was hard in Ethiopia surrounded by Christians and Muslims who treated them badly, insulted them and took their property. They lived as a minority.

But they kept together. Here in Israel, this sense of togetherness, belonging to one another, is being threatened [by such marriages].”

Makwanent is explicitly stating the function of traditions as a means of border maintenance and safeguarding the sense of “being together”.

Israel is a country of immigrants in which the ideology of the “Fusion of the Exiles” encourages a strong rhetoric of integration. The Beta Israel are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, they want to integrate into the country and merge with their fellow Jews. In this mind-set, they would seek to abandon Beta Israel customs, and drop their customary communal boundaries, and adopt host society ones as much as possible. On the other hand, integration comes at a price: to join the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy and become “deaf” (*dinkoro*, lit.: ignorant, stupid). For abandoning traditional customs would in effect be admitting to an inferior form of Judaism, and vindicate the Rabbinite’s questioning of their Jewish authenticity. Rather than imitate new traditions poorly, the older generation prefers to keep their old ones, of which they can be proud. As a consequence, the Beta Israel have become a strong ethnic group in Israel, maintaining strong social bonds within the group and proudly reaffirming their customs (Chapters Two and Three). At the same time though, they desire to live peacefully with fellow Israelis and for their children to integrate into society.

## 2. **Changing traditions**

The contradictory pulls that Ethiopian Jews feel towards integration on the one hand and resisting it on the other are evident in the way they are modifying their customs in Israel. As the following table illustrates, whilst most traditions are practised with considerable modification, others have remained more or less identical to former practice, a minority have been totally abandoned and new ones have been taken on.

MINIMAL CHANGE	SIGNIFICANT CHANGE	TOTAL CHANGE
Food: <i>injera</i> and coffee	Female purity laws	Bar Mitzvah (new)
Meat slaughtering and eating	Weddings	
Funerary rituals	Marriage rules	
Not adopting Orthodox Jewish purity practices		Female circumcision (abandoned)

At one end of the spectrum, certain customs have barely been modified in Israel: food, coffee, meat slaughtering and mourning rituals (excluding the actual burial of the body

which is no longer in Beta Israel hands). The older generation only eat meat from animals which they themselves have slaughtered according to Beta Israel custom. They refuse to eat meat from supermarkets, leave untouched Israeli wedding food dishes which contain meat and refuse to even try a falafel (a popular chick-pea-based fried patty) in case it contains meat “in disguise”. This is because Israeli meat is said to be “impure” as a result of Israelis’ faulty slaughter methods. Given that sharing meat is a central expression of commensality and that meat-eating for the Beta Israel is a prime ethnic marker (recall that Beta Israel did not eat Amhara meat), there is no better way to express ethnic separateness.

Resistance to integration is further apparent in the lack of interest in Israeli religious customs<sup>194</sup>. For example, the Beta Israel could have chosen to adopt Orthodox Jewish female purity practice to replace the loss of their own. According to Orthodox practice, when a married woman is menstruating she must not have any physical contact with her husband, and sleep apart from him for a minimum of seven days for her period plus five ‘clean days’. Then she must go and immerse herself in a *mikve* (ritual bath) to become pure (*tahor*) once more. Most Ethiopian Jews do not adopt this purity practice<sup>195</sup>. Freeman (1994) explains this with reference to the incongruent symbolism between Beta Israel purity practice and Israeli purity practices. As mentioned in Chapter One, Beta Israel differentiate between the inside and outside of the house, and menstruant women were *outside* the house in Ethiopia. But the Orthodox practice allows women to be *inside* the house, which defeats the purpose of separation in the first place. Moreover, Beta Israel purification rituals took place in a flowing river. But a *mikve* is a pool of still water which the Beta Israel consider inherently “dirty” particularly if intended for purification. The Beta Israel also reject the *mikve* for political reasons - because they associate it with Rabbinical demands for Beta Israel to “convert” to Judaism, and thus represents a direct assault on their religious and ethnic pride. As Kaplan & Rosen (1993) aptly put it, the Beta Israel have gone from “from purity to politics”.

Younger Ethiopian Jews (sixteen to thirty age group) are more orientated towards integration. They do wish to maintain an Ethiopian identity in Israel, for reasons similar to those of their parents, but purity rituals are not their chosen ethnic markers. There are two reasons for this. First, *practicability* is a determining factor in the rate of change of specific

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<sup>194</sup> Anteby (1996: 525) mentions that a group of practices can be considered “resistances” to integration - mourning ritual, food, and traditional medicine. Abbink (1984: 256) suggests that the emphasis Beta Israel place on the lack of a place for the seclusion of impure women expresses not only a reluctance to give up an “emotionally deeply engrained” practice, but also be seen a kind of “*protest*” and affirmation of their “authenticity” in religious matters.

<sup>195</sup> A number of religious young Ethiopians, brought up in religious boarding schools in Israel, do adopt these purity practices, although they express concern about it and keep their use of the *mikve* secret from their parents.

customs and adherence to Beta Israel purity laws is not consistent with a modern urban Israeli lifestyle and full-time studies or employment. The younger generation eat Israeli meat at school and at the army and they feed it to their children, and Beta Israel female purity laws are impracticable for working women and students. Second, while young Ethiopian Jewish immigrants wish to maintain Ethiopian ethnic identity, they also wish to integrate into Israeli society as much as possible. Beta Israel purity practices are unhelpful in this respect since they reinforce boundaries between Ethiopians and other Israelis. They choose instead rituals such as food, music, sociability, and social etiquette which allow for the maintenance of ethnic distinctiveness and pride, while retaining an ideology of “sameness” to other Israelis (Freeman 1994).

Thus, while older immigrants still use the practice and rhetoric of purity as an identity marker, the younger generation is shifting its focus. For them, celebrations of life-events (e.g. circumcision, *cristenna*, *bar mitzvah*, and weddings) are becoming the prime ethnic marker. Celebrations have several advantages: they are practicable in the context of a modern Israeli lifestyle; they are isolated from everyday life; they display “ethnic” colour to other Israelis; and they enable the strengthening of Ethiopian communal ties, allowing Ethiopian Jews to enact the central idiom of “being together.” The energy and resources put into such events is phenomenal and as the Ethiopian standard of living increases, so do the size and ‘glamour’ of celebrations.

My analysis of the practice of Ethiopian Jewish customs in Israel shows that Ethiopian Jews are selecting a number of former practices with which to cultivate ethnic pride and that the practices they choose for this purpose are compatible with Israeli lifestyle. Clearly, the specific practices chosen, and the extent to which they are modified<sup>196</sup>, vary according to individuals, age-sets, and circumstances. But in all cases, the choice of ethnic customs depends on the balance sought between integration and cultural preservation, the requirements of daily life, and the symbolic significance of the practice in question.

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<sup>196</sup> As noted in Chapter Two, I am not suggesting that Ethiopian immigrants are modifying their customs from a never-changing-past. As I noted in the historical review of the introductory chapter, Beta Israel customs have always been in a state of flux and have altered significantly in the last century. However, it does remain appropriate to refer to an ideal notion of traditions in Ethiopia because this is what the Beta Israel themselves do.

## II. Voluntary Deafness

In Chapter Five, I took the older generation's claims of 'deafness' at face value. But is the Ethiopian's much bemoaned "deafness" purely an inevitable outcome of their cultural and educational background, or is there also a voluntary aspect to it? Ethiopians complain of their inability to communicate in Hebrew - but how hard are they trying to learn the language? Ethiopians bemoan their ignorance "in this country", but in certain activities, this ignorance disappears, so are they really as "ignorant" as they claim?

Based on my observations and Anteby's study of Ethiopian immigrants' Hebrew acquisition, I concluded that older Ethiopians did not put as much effort as they could have into Hebrew acquisition. This is surprising given the importance they attach to language and their frequent complaints about their "deafness". I never heard anyone express a negative sentiment about learning Hebrew. But a lack of overt statements does not preclude a more subtle resistance to language learning.

It was Workie, a young married mother of four, who alerted me to the possibility of a mild form of "passive resistance". I asked her why her husband's Hebrew was so poor compared to hers. She sighed and answered "he does not like this country, he is not happy here". Workie thus directly attributed her husband's unhappiness in Israel as the cause for his inability to learn Hebrew. Learning Hebrew is the first step for integration into Israeli society, which is why, given the ideology of the "mixing of the exiles", the state lays such stress on Hebrew teaching. There is no better symbolic way to express dissatisfaction with Israel than to fail to learn Hebrew<sup>197</sup>. In Workie's mind, this was clear: her husband was disappointed with the country and so he did not learn Hebrew.

This form of resistance is measured because Hebrew is *required* for Ethiopians who work and / or who have children; so at least a minimal amount is learned even if inner motivation is lacking. Elders do not have such pressing daily requirements for Hebrew and it is therefore no surprise that their Hebrew remains minimal (irrespective of the greater difficulty of learning a language the older you get). Indeed, Anteby suggests that "for those who hold a position as persons of learning in traditional society, [learning Hebrew] is not regarded as a means of maintaining authority (my translation, 1996: 146)." She points out

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<sup>197</sup> Kaplan (in press) came to the same conclusion: "Everyday resistance' (Scott) would suggest that many adult Ethiopians do not learn Hebrew because their 'failure' to do so insulates them against all the demands that Israeli society normally places on its citizens. Their lack of Hebrew provides them with a powerful symbolic barrier to the hostile penetration by outside forces into their lives."



that priests, generally the most literate members of the community, do not tend to learn Hebrew<sup>198</sup> (1996:146). Clearly, if they were able to speak Hebrew as well as young people, this would enhance their authority, or more precisely, lessen their loss of authority than at present since they would “have a mouth” in the country. But they could not learn a new language in the same depth as young people, and however hard they tried, would remain deficient; they would always continue to speak “like babies”, and not as was their custom in Amharic, as artful masters of the language. Thus, precisely because of the importance given to language, they prefer to have no mouth at all, rather than a mouth which opens them to derision. Elders would rather cut themselves off completely from Hebrew and Israeli norms than be deficient in them and become subordinate to their subordinates. Without Hebrew, they can remain masters within their universe, however archaic and reduced it becomes.

Elders, who are rarely able to express more than the most basic greetings in Hebrew, love to show off their words of Italian, which they remember from the time of the Italian occupation over fifty years ago. Speaking Italian is reminiscent of their time as proud soldiers; speaking in Hebrew reminds them of their status as “deaf” babies.

This passive resistance is also expressed in other domains. The term “*dinkoro*” (deaf) does not only denote a lack of Hebrew, but also a sense of general ignorance in Israel. Just as many Ethiopians have resisted learning Hebrew, this general ignorance is also to an extent cultivated.

Ethiopian parents do not get at all involved in that part of their children’s wedding preparations which take place in an Israeli hall. They say “I am deaf, what do I know about weddings in this country?” Judging from their ease at learning new practices when they want to, I am convinced that they are well able to engage in wedding hall preparations if they choose to. Their avowed “deafness” is a means of subliminally resisting the culture of Israeli weddings by total non-involvement. Instead, they occupy their thoughts and minds in setting up a local celebration for the wedding, which involves considerable planning and engagement with Israelis (e.g. hiring video equipment and a DJ, purchasing a cow and transporting the meat) in which they are not deaf.

This wedding example illustrates well the voluntary aspect of “becoming deaf”. Adults choose what they want to become deaf about. The resultant “deafness” (ignorance) is then a perfect excuse to withdraw from what they dislike. For example, they can be ignorant about dates and times when it comes to appointments with unpleasant Israelis at the unemployment offices or the hospital, but they understand the Israeli calendar when they have a wedding celebration to attend. Likewise, they say that their deafness, and inability to understand Hebrew, prevents them from attending Israeli synagogues. But they are accustomed to prayers in a liturgical language (Ge’ez) which is not meant to be understood. The older

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<sup>198</sup> Younger priests, who arrived in Israel in their early twenties have learned Hebrew, and several of them enrolled in Rabbinical training programmes.

generation also make little effort to adopt even basic Jewish custom, such as dipping apples in honey at *Hanukkah*, which requires no Hebrew whatsoever. In my view, this lack of espousal of *farenge* religious practice is a form of resistance against the hegemony of dominant Israeli society (see also Kaplan, in press).

### III. Subverting Negative Ascriptions

A middle-aged man recalls a story, in which he had the last word over an Amhara, in order to entertain the coffee drinkers : “I was walking along a path near Ambover when an Amhara woman carrying a child approached from the opposite direction. Before our paths crossed, she covered her child's face. I said to her: ‘What are you afraid of?’ The woman answered: ‘*Buda!* [evil eye]’. I responded [to her fear of the child-eating *buda*-hyena]: ‘Why should I want to eat your dirty child?’”

Just as the Beta Israel sought to subvert Amhara derogatory discourse about them in Ethiopia, they do so with Israeli discourse. They use humour to socialise their difficulties and outwit the *farenge*, if only over a coffee session. The older generation develop a strong rhetoric of purity to define themselves as the superior Jews. Young people develop their own rhetoric and deal with perceived racism by overstating the magnitude of the problem, an attitude which allows them to gain a sense of control over the situation.

#### 1. Socialising difficulties

After their experiences as deaf, ignorant, people, “outside” (*bewuch*) - in town, at work, at the welfare office - Beta Israel come home to a space in which they are *not* deaf. There, with characteristic humour and levity, they recount their recent humiliations and thus transform them into the subject of jovial social intercourse<sup>199</sup>.

Over coffee, a young woman related: “Aba Kabadu wanted to buy a light bulb. But he did not know what it was called in Hebrew and so he started to point up with his walking stick to the light in the shop. But the shop keeper did not understand. I came in and explained what Aba Kabadu wanted, and then we could come home. The shop keeper thought that he was mad!” The coffee drinkers, including Aba Kabadu, laughed heartily.

Stories often contain an element of ‘outwitting’ the *farenge*.

Etan told me one day: “I have a story which will interest you. When my cousin was in the army, he worked as a mechanic for army cars. One day, two Israeli soldiers got stuck in a truck on the road and my cousin was sent out to help. When he arrived the two stranded soldiers laughed at him: “What does a *kushi* (H: black, term of abuse)

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<sup>199</sup> Similarly Margolis describes how Brazilian immigrants in New York “use humour to deal with their plummeting employment status”. Young women, formerly the employers of domestic servants, recount with humour their experiences as domestics for New Yorkers, using humour to create a distance between their *real* status, as judged by their previous position in life, and their current one (1994: 130).

know about the problems of cars?!". My cousin immediately saw that there was nothing wrong with the engine - they had simply run out of petrol. He told one of the soldiers to go get petrol from a petrol station down the road, without giving him a lift in his car. Then when the soldier returned, he told him to pour the petrol into the tank and announced: "Now you are ready to go!" My cousin was so proud when he told me this story! He had succeeded in getting the better of the Whites who were making fun of him!"

## 2. *The Language of purity*

The older generation resist attacks on their Judaism by developing a strong rhetoric of communal purity<sup>200</sup>: not only are Beta Israel real Jews, they are the *best* Jews.

Alequa Birre loved to speak about Ethiopian religious superiority compared to other Israelis, in particular with respect to purity laws. He concluded his description of Beta Israel purity practices with: "Here, they call this country 'Israel', but it is just a name, we are the true Israel! [He is making a pun on the name of the country 'Israel' and the name that Ethiopian Jews give themselves, which is also "Israel", short for Beta Israel]."

In Ethiopia, Beta Israel purity laws not only maintained a separation from Christian and Muslim neighbours, it allowed Beta Israel to think of themselves as *superior* to the dominant society. Rather than neighbours refusing to touch Beta Israel on account of supernatural fears associated with despised crafts, it was they who refused contact with the Amhara for fear of pollution. In Israel, the older generation only eat Beta Israel slaughtered meat because Israeli meat is "impure". While they have been unable to maintain fully their female purity practices and marriage rules in Israel, they compensate by developing a powerful rhetorical discourse of purity (Anteby 1996: 495-6). When they speak about themselves, they describe their former purity laws and marriage rules<sup>201</sup> in the present tense, as if they were still in practice today, and there was no "blood in the house" (Anteby 1996: 490) and children were not marrying their relatives,. Thus, even though Beta Israel are no longer "pure" in practice, their strong discourse of purity allows them to maintain their self-image as the purest of all Jews, and thus subvert Israeli judgements on the inferior status of their religion<sup>202</sup>.

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<sup>200</sup> For the Beta Israel, communal purity according to Biblical precepts is considered to be an essential part of religious practice, and they therefore equate "real Jew" with "pure Jew".

<sup>201</sup> Since Beta Israel marriages were identical to their Christian neighbours, they were not mentioned in their rhetoric of purity with respect to Amhara. However, given that other Israelis, especially Arab Israelis "marry their cousins", Beta Israel include marriage rules in their discourse on communal purity (see Anteby 1996: 500-517).

<sup>202</sup> This argument has been influenced by Stewart's analysis of Hungarian Rom. The Rom define themselves as "clean" compared to "dirty" Hungarians. They use this ideology to subvert dominant society's negative representations of them and proclaim their "distinctiveness and moral/cultural superiority over others" (Stewart 1997: 234).

### 3. *Racism as rhetoric*

Another means of ideologically subverting a low ascribed image is to tackle it head-on. Ethiopians, especially the younger generation, frequently state with vehemence that Israelis are racist towards them and reject them. I was struck by the ardour and uniformity of statements for the months following the blood demonstration in January 1996. Individuals who were relatively soft-spoken about Israeli attitudes suddenly adopted this same militant rhetoric. It became “fashionable”, especially amongst the young, to deplore Israeli racism. In this mode of discourse, all problems faced by Ethiopians are the result of racism perpetrated by teachers, social workers, politicians, neighbours, and health workers. Even educated Ethiopians, claimed publicly and privately that the blood policy signified that Israelis thought that *all* Ethiopians had AIDS. Similarly, they deliberately distorted medical findings to lower the true figures of Ethiopian HIV infection<sup>203</sup>. This alternative discourse can become extremely vehement<sup>204</sup>.

On the morning of the 5th January 1996, Assefa Birhun was found in his soldier’s room dead from a bullet wound in his stomach. He was a nineteen-year old boy, unanimously described as full of joy and life, a loving son, brother and friend. The army officials announced a death by suicide. Ethiopians refused to believe this: the army was lying, the boy was killed, they maintained. They also claimed that twenty Ethiopian soldiers had already died in the army, and nearly always the verdict of suicide was given. “But this is an army cover-up: Ethiopian soldiers are being killed!” Local residents staged a demonstration on the streets Afula, a week prior to the massive blood demonstration, to protest against the army’s mistreatment of their youngsters<sup>205</sup>.

This strong discourse achieves a number of results. It allows young people to ignore their personal difficulties and blame society for everything which goes wrong. Moreover, their heightened awareness and constant discussion of the racism they feel threatened by allows young people to feel they are “above” it, cleverer than their aggressors. When they do suffer genuine racial discrimination, it is easier to overcome feelings of powerlessness and regain a sense of control by propagating alternative knowledge and fighting back. As one woman said: “Now that I am fighting about my feelings [of being discriminated against], I feel equal!” Finally, the strong rhetoric of racism expresses an allegiance to the Ethiopian community by creating a discourse which marks Ethiopians as a group. For young people,

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<sup>203</sup> At one point during the crisis, many Ethiopians throughout the country were saying that only two Ethiopians were HIV infected. “It was on the radio”, they insisted. In fact, a study had found that among a certain number of high school Ethiopian students, two were infected, yet the speakers on the Amharic radio chat-show had broadcast the information in such a way that most Ethiopians were able to interpret it in an erroneous fashion.

<sup>204</sup> Kaplan (in press) also notes the prevalence of the dissemination of “alternative” knowledge directly contradicting the official view.

<sup>205</sup> According to the army, ten Ethiopian soldiers committed suicide between 1992 and 1996. Ethiopians put this figure much higher (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 11).

the act of self-consciously calling themselves a despised group gave a sense of unity and identity while they struggled to find their place in Israeli society.

#### **IV. Overt resistance**

As well as resisting dominant society “passively”, by developing strong counter-hegemonic discourse, refusing to adopt dominant society normative practices, and maintaining strong intra-group social relations, Ethiopian Jewish immigrants resist in more overt fashion. In 1985, after just a few years in the country, young political activists and Beta Israel priests organised a month-long sit-in to protest the Rabbinate’s demands for Beta Israel’s symbolic conversion. Then again in 1996, they staged one of the largest ever civil protests in Israel to demonstrate against the policy of discarding their blood<sup>206</sup>. While Ethiopian immigrants object to many aspects of their treatment by Israeli authorities, for instance in housing and education, the issues which inspired such strong reactions are those which directly threaten their sense of belonging. The religious conversions implied to them that they were not considered “real Jews”, and thus opposed the very basis of their legitimacy in Israel, the country of Jews. The blood incident suggested to the Beta Israel that they were rejected for lack of pure “Jewish” blood and that Israelis did not want to mix their own blood with Ethiopian Jewish blood.

A minority resist by opting out of the system altogether. As described in Chapter Three, a number of young people choose to adopt a Black identity over and above, and sometimes to the exclusion, of their Israeli / Jewish / Ethiopian identities. These young people feel rejected by White society and think of Ethiopian society as “backward” and they turn instead to their Black brethren, urban American Blacks and Reggae / Rasta culture in particular.

Others turn towards Evangelical Christianity, thus rejecting the very basis of their Israeli citizenship: their Judaism. They have opted for a minority which gives them better status than the one their skin-colour condemns them to. They become a child of God, equal to every other human being and loved by Christ. They take control over their lives by gaining a vital mission in life: to convert others to the faith.

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<sup>206</sup> In Israel, there is little tradition of overt resistance and demonstrations, and the Ethiopian 1996 one was one of the largest ever staged by Jews in Israel. For a discussion of Moroccan youth (“the Black Panthers”) protest against the dominant society from which they felt socio-economically excluded, see Shama & Iris (1977: 141-162).

## B. Imagining an Ideal Future

As well as through resistance, the present in the non-homeland is accommodated by idealising the past and projecting an ideal homeland into the future. In some respects, the present, in which Ethiopian "tough traditions" are in disarray, is ignored. While cheerful chat and gossip about daily life is focused on the present, verbal expressions of identity are generally situated in the past or the future.

### 1. *The ideal past*

When Ethiopian Jews speak about their culture and traditions, they use the present tense, even though the traditions by which they define themselves are either no longer practised or modified beyond recognition. We saw above that they boast the superiority of Ethiopian purity practices relative to other Jews by describing practices, such as the isolation of menstrual women, which are now all but defunct. In other words, past practices are still used to define present identity. When I tried to raise a question about the form of ritual practice specifically in the present, such as *current* wedding or purity practices, my stress on the present was ignored and I was given a description which was situated in the past, i.e. how the practice was carried out in Ethiopia. Alternatively, I obtained little more than a shrug of the shoulder with a muffled comment such as "in this country, what do I know....".

As Chapter Three illustrated, when the past is depicted it is an idealised version. Ethiopian immigrants paint a picture of the perfect life in Ethiopia, which they themselves increasingly believe. They are in effect recreating their history. The elements which they stress are precisely those which they have lost in Israel. They claim to have been a strictly pious and ritually clean people, who were wealthy<sup>207</sup> and who were respected, if a little feared, by their neighbours. Wedding celebrations consisted of no less than seven days of uninterrupted feasting and dancing. Work was hard, but it was under their own control, and nothing stopped anyone taking time off when they felt like it. The air, climate, food and water was so healthy that one rarely got ill, but when such a rare misfortune occurred, a cure was instantly found. Ethiopians who have returned to Ethiopia since migrating, and who were visibly shocked by the poverty they saw, which must have appeared much worse since living

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<sup>207</sup> Although absolute wealth has obviously increased massively in Israel, Ethiopian Jewish immigrants feel that their relative wealth with respect to their neighbours has decreased.

in Israel, still succeed in maintaining the image of an ideal past by explaining the current poverty in Ethiopia as a recent occurrence which began *after* they left.

Witness Alequa Ayelign: Now Ethiopia does not look up, her neck is bent. During the previous government, there was no drought, no famine, plenty of milk and butter and plenty of grain. There was lots of *talla* and *injera*, wherever one went. There were not the problems that exist now. ... everyone married according to the customs. There were no prostitutes, and unless a woman was married, she was not suspected of having sexual relations.

## **2. The homeland postponed**

If Beta Israel picture themselves proudly in the past, they also imagine themselves as dignified persons in the future. The future is represented in various ways, depending on individuals and circumstance and frequently, any one individual holds different visions simultaneously.

The term “homeland postponed” is my own, and although Beta Israel never used an equivalent term, I hope that the following discussion will illustrate its resonance. Beta Israel have reached their homeland, and this fact is not disputed. However, as we saw in Chapter Three, the term “homeland” also refers to their country of origin, Ethiopia. And given the rich and positive imagery with which life in Ethiopia is recreated, this ‘past homeland’ begins to rival the present homeland in the imagination of the Beta Israel. Given their disappointments in their current homeland, and their knowledge that their past homeland is no longer an option, Beta Israel have created a future homeland, the homeland postponed. I will describe the nature of this imagined homeland by examining Beta Israel aspirations for and visions of the future, dividing them into three foci: purity, integration, and cultural preservation. This division is merely for clarity of exposition - the visions are *not* distinct and individuals combine and recombine images from all three categories.

Eli presented the perfect image of a young trendy Ethiopian: dreadlocks, a red-yellow-green striped cap and wrist-band, an earring, and a Bob Marley T-shirt. He explained the earring: “In this country, the *farenge* boys wear one. I wear one to be like them so as to have better communication with them” [Image of integration]. “And you know, they do not do it so much now, but in Ethiopia, some of the knowledgeable old men, the *awaki* (herbal doctors, men of knowledge) wore an earring - my grand-father who was a great man (*tillick saw*) wore one!” [respect for Beta Israel traditions, and implicitly, purity]. He paused and added: “The wrist-band, the colours of the Ethiopian flag, is a memory of Ethiopia to remember where I am from” [maintenance of Ethiopian identity].

## II. Purity Restored

A standard blessing: "... May He return us to the old days like those of our forefathers. .... May He bring us a time when everybody can live according to his belief and according to his forefathers."

For some, the future homeland will witness a restoration of strict purity laws, in accordance with Beta Israel tradition.

The wife of a priest explained that at present while the country was being built, and there was war, and all Jews had not yet in-gathered, the country could not be clean (i.e. ritually clean). The time will arrive however when all Jews will in-gather and the Messiah will come. The country will then become clean and everyone will once more use the menstrual hut [for the seclusion of menstrual women].

Traditionally-minded elders imagine a golden future in which 'tough traditions' and strict religion will return. Then Beta Israel purity laws, marriage rules and religious observance will be respected, not just by the Beta Israel themselves, but by all Israelis. This is because the Beta Israel maintain that their version of Judaism is superior, and purer, than that of other Israelis, and that therefore when "the time of religion" returns, it will have an Ethiopian form. The distinction between Beta Israel practice and Israeli practice will disappear as all Israelis will adopt the purer Beta Israel ways. In fact there is a belief in mainstream Judaism that the Messiah will come after the in-gathering of all Jews in Israel and that at this time the temple will be rebuilt and strict religious practices (such as sacrifice) can be re-instated (Johnson 1993: 266-274). This Jewish belief in a return to pre-exile Jewish practice lends legitimacy to Beta Israel religious practice and to their images of a future "pure" homeland. Trevisan Semi, who studied Ethiopian Jews who came in the first waves of immigration, also found that an image of future purity brought about by the advent of the Messiah helped to cope with present impurity. She notes that a number of her informants 'resolved the conflict' [between their purity norms and Israeli ones] by deferring all problems until the advent of the Messiah. His authority would be supreme, superseding all earlier authorities, and he would institute fresh modes of purification (1985:110).'

While awaiting the full restoration of purity, many Ethiopians make concrete efforts to maintain as much of Ethiopian religion and purity as possible in the present. As Chapter Three described, Ethiopian religious ritual is largely upheld. In addition, a small number of the very religious, namely the priests, renew their calls for greater observance of purity laws. The priest who settled in my neighbourhood with his pregnant wife planned to petition the social services for a council house to be granted for the common use of the local Ethiopian population for impure women. More widespread is the call for the construction of Ethiopian synagogues for prayer in Ge'ez (the Ethiopian liturgical language) according to Ethiopian



custom. As of 1997, there were to my knowledge three designated Ethiopian synagogues, although many neighbourhoods use bomb shelters, widely used as community centres, as make-shift synagogues.

However, even the strongest proponents of restoration of Beta Israel religion and purity are uncertain about their advocacy - since they are aware of the need, in the short term at least, for their children to integrate into normative Jewish practice. I quote here a long extract from a taped interview with a respected priest to show the indecision, confusions and contradictions within the perception of the religious future:

“We have many prayers in our language, called ‘*zamari*’ (sung prayers). Our traditions are different - the *farenge* do it by the book (i.e. read). So we want to perform according to our customs. We have one synagogue in Beer Sheva, and one under construction in Kiryat Gat, and we want this in all places where Ethiopians live. There are synagogues for the others in each place - Moroccan, Yemeni. We are Black but we are “Israel” [i.e. Beta Israel], we preserve the law.... the young people think “let’s forget the Ethiopian ways and pass over to *farenge* ways. Although the language is different, the content is the same.” we old people, we don’t know Hebrew, so we cannot pray in Hebrew and we continue to perform prayers as we used to. Old people stick to old ways. The young people go to boarding school and learn to speak with the *farenge*, and to pray with them. After a while, after this generation, all will go to Hebrew. [I ask at this point whether he thinks that this is a good turn of events] Yes, it is good. The meaning is the same - in Amharic or in Hebrew, all prayers are for *Eloe* (the God of Israel). It is ending. We tell our children: “we have a lot, the Torah, Dawit - learn these. This is our language.” We want it to stay - just like you speak to people in English, and you keep the language and the Russians speak and pray in Russian.”

The priest reassures me, and himself, that it is acceptable for his prayers to be forgotten in the next generation since Hebrew prayers are “the same” as Amharic ones. In the same breath, he says that he wants to encourage children to learn prayers in Amharic so that they are not forgotten. From my personal knowledge of this man, the order of what he says is significant. He starts by stating the facts: Ethiopian synagogues are being built but at the same time the young people are learning prayers in Hebrew and will switch to these. I then ask him his opinion on this development and he starts by giving a positive answer as any polite Ethiopian would, i.e. the changes are positive, and then he switches to his own view - he would like his prayers, and language, to survive.

The following argument between Aba Mucha and his wife also demonstrates the conflicts inherent in maintaining Ethiopian purity given their aspirations for their children to integrate.

After Aba Mucha had explained why he considered Israeli meat impure, I asked if he minded his children eating it. “We completely disagree! They go off the whole time, to the army, to the boarding school. They have strong hunger and thirst and they eat what they are given. But in Ethiopia if you go out and stay with the Amharas, even for

a whole year, you do not eat meat that you are given, you wait till you return home. The religion is tough! But here the kids, they eat meat wherever they find it. I feel very bad about this!" His wife interrupted: "They [the children] must integrate with others, so we cannot tell them to follow this difficult religion of ours. Time has taken it away and until time brings it back, we cannot force our kids. When God wants to bring religion back, like it was before, he will do so."

Even though the return to "tough traditions" - to strict religion and purity - is projected into a mystical future, Ethiopian Jewish immigrants hold more concrete aspirations for the near future, and even the greatest of all complainers, Alequa Ayelign, expressed hope:

When I went to bid farewell to him, at the end of field-work, he told me: "Now, we have so many problems, without our rights [by which he means religious rights] and our own synagogues. Come back to see us when we are more settled."

### III. **Becoming *Fareng***

#### **Introduction**

A religious leader at a public inquiry about the blood scandal: "This is our country and we want to defend the country together [with the other Israelis] and in times of peace we can live side by side. This is the justice that we want for our people."

Aba Negusse imagines the future: "Education, the army, they civilise the children. They are beginning to work in "stundry" [Aba Negusse's way of pronouncing 'industry']. The children are being spread in every direction. They apply to the offices to work there. Now Ethiopians and Whites are getting married together... Ethiopians will acquire knowledge from the Whites. They will travel around together. There will be [Ethiopian] sergeants, officers, generals.... The Ethiopians are learning! There was one Ethiopia and one Israel, but in the future we will all be together!"

Many visions of the future, such as those of Aba Negusse and the religious leader, do not focus on the "Ethiopianisation" of Israel, rather they stress integration of Ethiopian children and young people into Israeli society. Rather than Israelis becoming "Ethiopian", Ethiopians become "Israeli". Ethiopians will intermarry and have beautiful light-skinned babies. Ethiopians will get good jobs, own cars and enjoy the same material wealth as their White neighbours. Young people will become good citizens of the country, and gain equal status to the Whites. Before discussing in more detail what 'becoming Israeli' means, a couple of preliminary points are necessary.

In such imaginations, the focus is placed on the young. First generation adult immigrants do not imagine themselves integrating into Israeli society, they imagine their children doing so. Many adults explicitly say that for them, life was better in Ethiopia, but they are happy to

have come because the children can become educated, with all that education entails. For these first generation immigrants, the future belongs to the children.

Aster, a young mother of two: “When you see the children, you think ‘There is no limit for them.’”

Mama Turuwork told me that the *farenge* suggested that she should learn (i.e. go to classes), but she feels that she cannot for she is too old. She wants her kids to learn: “I tell them to work hard because I cannot learn. I would eat soil for my children to learn!”

Worku, a young man who feels bitter that his parents did not send him to school as a child, plays affectionately with his two-year-old son. He looks over to me and, with a huge smile, says: “He will go to University!”

I learned of these images and aspirations of the future as much from criticisms of the present as from overt aspirations: by complaining about what was not happening now, my informants were implicitly revealing what they would like to happen in the future. The following account reveals the nature a young woman’s aspirations: to be accepted as a Jew, and learn the country’s traditions.

Efrat is a young mother who immigrated with cousins in 1984 at the age of 16. She was educated and trained in Israel and is now a “modern” young woman: she works in a semi-skilled job, wears jeans, uses her Hebrew name and is generally outspoken. She was speaking to me shortly after the blood incident: “There is a lot that we need to learn. For example, their religion because there are many religious holidays that we did not know in Ethiopia, or how to cook *farenge* food - these are the country’s traditions. How can we learn these things? When they integrate us. But when we approach them, they refuse to accept us. So we feel very bad. This widens the gap for the future. If they do not accept us in good spirit, in the future we will be apart from each other. If it continues like this, it will deteriorate and the young people’s love will decrease and those who are committed to sacrificing their life for the county will just go abroad. If I am not accepted as a Jew here, why should I stay?”

## **2. *Become Israeli (Farenge)***

Ethiopians want to become full citizens of Israel and they enjoy imagining the future which their Israeli children might enjoy.

### **Work**

Aba Negusse often admired me because I was a person of knowledge and would obtain a good job in an office or with the government. His children did not have good jobs, making jewellery (he mimicked a fiddling gesture with his hands), and building roads (“outside, under the sun”). Tadesse, his grandson, however, was studying hard and would get a good job.

The most potent and widespread image of the future is that of young well-educated Ethiopians working in “good” jobs, which for Ethiopians means white collar occupations, such as clerical, management, teaching, and business. Ethiopians have resisted Israeli attempts to settle them in rural areas in agricultural communities (H: *moshav, kibbutz*) for the image of Ethiopian Jews working the land of Israel is not attractive at present. This reflects the “integrating” tendency of Ethiopian immigrants, who sense that working the land, which in their hierarchy of jobs is lowly, would keep them at the bottom of society. The idiom of integration motivates educated young people to work with Ethiopians in Israel - as interpreters, social workers, housing advisors, and community workers. They say that they want Ethiopians to “integrate” and they consider themselves in the best position to enhance the process<sup>208</sup>.

The vision of the well integrated Ethiopian is manifest in the growing rise in national political aspirations. Already, the Israeli Parliament boasts an Ethiopian MP, who took office in 1995, just twelve years after immigrating.

Fantaoun, who works in a national bank, is an extremely bright and confident young man. He studied teacher training in Gondar and was a teacher in village schools before emigrating to Israel. He started working here with new immigrants before taking a degree in Social Work. After two years working as a social worker, he entered his present job. He finished his narrative with “Maybe I will stand as an MP for the Likud party.”

Fantaoun recounted his life story and finished with his political aspiration, as if this was in his eyes a direct continuation, a realisable goal. In one sense, there is no stronger image of integration: Fantaoun sees a future for himself in parliament, at the heart of the Israeli system. On the other hand, Fantaoun knows that were he to succeed in his ambition, he would do so *as an Ethiopian*, that is precisely by campaigning on his ethnic background. These two perspectives are not as contradictory as they seem, for two reasons. First, just as young Ethiopians want to work “with Ethiopians” to help them integrate, so too do aspiring Ethiopian politicians know that they have to first battle on ethnic grounds in order to achieve their aspirations of integration. Second, Israel is a multi-ethnic country, where a large majority of the population classify themselves along ethnic lines (Ben-Rafael 1982, Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991). Wanting to become Israeli and remain Ethiopian is therefore not a contradiction in terms,

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<sup>208</sup> Young educated Ethiopians have other motivations too in taking such jobs - they are the best paid white collar work that they can obtain (see also Rosen 1995).

## Lifestyle

Ethiopians love to imagine living in a materialist utopia. Whenever I walked around town with Worku, he always stopped to admire various cars, and claimed that he too would own such a car one day. Ethiopians often complain about their current relative poverty, but in more positive moods, they often describe an idyllic future in which the house is filled with mod-cons, a good car is parked outside, and the house itself is well-built and large.

Zemene, member of an elite family, was asking me to assess his two elder brothers' apartment in a relatively smart urban residential areas. "Me though," he exclaimed, "I want a villa!"

Owning a spacious house, with solid walls, is a potent aspiration. The house will be beautifully decorated, with large framed pictures, fake tapestries, and large framed photos of family members, including photos of deceased kin taken in Ethiopia which are touched up so that the traditional *gabi* is replaced with a suit and tie<sup>209</sup>. A large display cabinet will exhibit a range of dishes, ornaments, and religious items, including a bible. Furniture will be plentiful and include a dining table, a sofa set, a bedroom set for adults, bunk beds for children, and a well equipped kitchen with a large fridge. The house will be situated in a clean leafy quiet neighbourhood where the wind does not blow too hard and there is plenty of shade from the sun. There will be plenty of Ethiopian neighbours, but not exclusively Ethiopian so that "integration" takes place.

Residents in the densely populated Ethiopian neighbourhood in which I lived sometimes complained: "how can we integrate when so many Ethiopians live together?"

In the ideal future, Ethiopians dress Israeli-style. Younger Ethiopians already dress like their Israeli counterparts. Older Ethiopians however mix Western and Ethiopian dress, often draping an Ethiopian shawl (*gabi*) over their Western clothes. For celebrations, such as *bar mitzvah*, most try to wear their best Western clothes, especially when hosting a party.

My neighbour Fantanesh began to prepare the celebration for her son's *bar mitzvah* months in advance. But a few days before the event she had still not decided what to wear. She said she would wear her new Ethiopian dress. However, on the day, she had a last minute change of heart and rushed off to town to buy an outfit, which was several sizes too big and cost her over £100.

On her big day, Fantanesh wanted to wear the "right" thing, which she decided was not an Ethiopian *camis* (dress), however beautiful it may be, but an elaborate flowery oversized *farenge* outfit. Thus, when display is particularly important, such as for a *bar mitzvah*, Ethiopians choose Israeli dress and thereby reaffirm once more a vision in which Ethiopians are integrated into a modern Israeli lifestyle.

In the imagined Ethiopian-Israeli lifestyle, couples and families go on “*shirshir*” (trips) around the country and abroad.

One young friend of mine, a new mother, told me of her plans to take her son to see the country when he is older so that he can learn, and she added that going on a “*tiyul*” (trip, Hebrew) is what Israelis do with their children.

## **Religion**

Young religious modernising Ethiopians envisage a religious future, Israeli style. These young Ethiopians have generally spent a few years in an Israeli boarding school and learnt their religious practices such as the use of *tiphillin*, the wearing of a *kippa*, the appropriate prayers and blessings for everyday, Sabbath, and holidays, and how to maintain a *kosher* household. When they have children of their own, they want them to follow these practices. They teach them the Israeli version of religious practice rather than the Ethiopian one, even though they themselves may still continue elements of the latter, such as the seclusion of post-partum women. Older Ethiopians who arrived in the early to mid-eighties also adopt a number of Israeli religious practices (such as lighting candles, and Hebrew blessings), and attend Israeli synagogue occasionally (Soroff 1995: 145-174). Even while holding a messianic dream of a return to purity, they want, in the meantime, their children to adopt the “country’s traditions” and be accepted as Jews in Israel.

## **Intermarriage with farenge**

Intermarriage is at present uncommon, but widespread enough not to be an anomaly. I estimate from hearsay that in the mid-1990s, there were several dozen mixed couples, at the very least. In-coming partners appear to be drawn from all sections of Israeli society - Moroccan, Yemeni, English, American, and in one case a Swedish (Christian) tourist.

Intermarriage is positive - and nearly always spoken of highly.

My adoptive father always said that he would like his two unmarried children to marry *farenge*. And more than one person joked that he took me into his house with a view to his unmarried son..... One of his sons had a *farenge* girlfriend for a while and Aba Negusse was very sorry when their relationship broke up. When his last daughter eventually married an Ethiopian he lamented more than once “I would have liked her to marry a *farenge*”.

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<sup>209</sup> Such photo alterations are very popular indeed, and households that are fortunate enough to have Ethiopian photos of deceased kin take them into the studio to be touched-up.

Intermarriage is an ideal and the resulting light-skinned “beautiful” children highly desirable. Intermarriage also accords with Zionist ideology, which Ethiopians share, of the mixing of all Jews to become one people once again.

### **3. *Fighting to integrate***

During the blood crisis, a political leader said in an impassioned speech: “Many of our youth are revolted. They want to leave this country. But I tell them: ‘no, you must stay! This is our homeland! Our ancestors dreamed of returning here for generations! This is our country, and we shall fight till we obtain the same status and rights as other Israelis!’”

The image of a homeland in which Ethiopians are integrated into society is not merely dreamed of, it is fought for. Young Ethiopians, especially the educated, chose to dedicate much of their energies to this “fight”. Without “fighting for their rights”, Ethiopians, they maintain, will remain the “poor, primitive” sector of Israeli society. I quote here at length two educated young men, two of the most successful and highly regarded men of their generation, who express clearly the sense of ‘battle’ with which many Ethiopians view the question of integration.

Solomon, whose aspirations to leave the country will conclude this chapter, said (in English) of the blood episode: “It did not affect me. It just confirmed everything that I have always felt. In one way, it was good: it has made people, young people, who felt that they were part of things here, taking things for granted, realise where they stand in this country. It has made them realise that they must fight for whatever they want.”

Zemene, a young man who works in the education department of the Jewish Agency to improve the standards of education for Ethiopians in boarding schools while completing his MA told me (in English): “We want to integrate but it is difficult. When an Ethiopian buys an apartment in a neighbourhood, the Israeli neighbours leave. We have the ability to become part of Israeli society, but the gate is narrow. We need to fight, to demonstrate, to shout. I do not like that - we are a quiet people. But even if life in Ethiopia were better, I would not leave, I cannot, this is my homeland. We have many fights ahead for our rights in terms of religion. I am part of Israeli society and we must foster more social relations between them and us. They must learn our language and we theirs. We must build a bridge to cross.” And Zemene is a prime bridge builder. I met him for the first time while we were both canvassing for the first Ethiopian to be elected on the Labour list of MPs. He explained that he was a Likud supporter himself, but having an Ethiopian elected was so important to him that he took the day off work and overlooked party affiliations.

Zemene’s words lead us to the third set of images of the future: maintaining Ethiopian identity.

## IV. Maintaining Ethiopian Identity

While the ideal of integration is nearly universal amongst Ethiopians, so too is the upholding of "traditions" in order to remain proud Ethiopians in Israel. Although Zemene (see above) stresses integration, he sees it as a two way process: "we must learn their language and they must learn ours" he says, using the word language in the widest sense, as a symbol for "way of life". In other words, if we must accept Israeli ways, so too must they accept ours. He thus implies that he fully intends to hold onto "our language". His words were also meant literally: he hopes to write an Amharic language textbook in Hebrew for both young Ethiopians and Israelis.

To whatever extent Ethiopians fear the loss of their culture (see Chapter Five), most of them imagine a future in which its essential features are proudly upheld. Chapter Two explored the tenacity with which Ethiopian ways are maintained in the present. The maintenance of these traditions is also projected into the future. Abbink lists cultural elements which the Beta Israel told him that they would like to maintain in Israel: respect and honour for parents and elders, the style of personal behaviour, good and intensive family relations, the wedding and other family religious celebrations, Ethiopian dance, song and music, food, and language (1984:236).

Efrat, a young modern woman, speaks of her future in Israel: "I want to keep our traditions: holidays, *mesquerem* (national Ethiopian holiday), weddings, music, food...."

Babu is a teenager. If he won the lotto, he would build a lot of bungalows together, and a swimming pool, near Tiberias, like a kibbutz, for his relatives to live together.

Babu's vision is modern - yet because of his focus on his kin, it upholds the primary Ethiopian idiom of "being together" as kin.

Even when full integration is sought for, Ethiopians are keen that future generations should at least know Ethiopian practices, even if they hardly practice them.

My study was always received warmly when I portrayed it as an attempt to put on paper the richness of current Ethiopian traditions for the sake of future generations.

Young political activists speak of "preserving our culture" and raise funds to establish cultural centres so that the young people "will not forget". After Stevie Wonder (the Black American pop star) came to visit Israel, an Ethiopian Jewish organisation wrote him a fund-raising letter: "Although we are working hard to enable a successful integration into Israeli society, we are also extremely concerned that our African traditions should be kept alive in Israel....[support is required for]

1. the creation of a cultural centre for the Ethiopian community
2. the documentation of our cultural traditions by means of video and tape-recording



3. the creation of a traditional folklore group to keep our Ethiopian musical traditions alive.”

A teenager came to spend his school vacation with his uncle, a Beta Israel priest, to learn, as he put it, “the prayers in Ge’ez” so that Beta Israel religion will not be completely forgotten once the current generation of priests pass away.

### ***Building Tomb-stones***

The importance of maintaining a link with Ethiopia in the future is illustrated by a practice which rapidly gained momentum during my last months of fieldwork. Increasingly, Ethiopians were pooling resources to send two family members to Ethiopia to build tombstones (*ault*) on their ancestors’ graves, and to maintain the home village’s cemetery by building a low wall around it.

My neighbour Aba Mahari called me in to his house: “My brother has returned from Ethiopia where he was making a tombstone for our parents. Come and watch the video he made!” The video began with the unmarked graveyard, and Aba Mahari pointed to the tree under which his father was buried. The following scenes showed the local villagers, which Aba Mahari’s brother had hired, building a low stone wall around the cemetery. The next scenes depicted the construction of the cement gravestones. Images of a local *zamari* (a singer with the traditional stringed-instrument, *masenko*), onlookers and interviews of the travellers were interspersed throughout. Close-ups of the two completed tomb-stones were shown: large rectangular cement structures with dedications in both Hebrew and Amharic. The video ended with Aba Mahari’s brother riding a White horse in the surrounding hills.

Tombstone building, which requires a large input of time, energy and money, has become a central preoccupation for Ethiopian Jews. The practice acknowledges reverence for the past, with a long-term vision of the future: future generations will continue to live in Israel but will want to maintain their link to Ethiopia and in particular to their ancestors. Witness Aba Mahari’s comments: “In Ethiopia, graves were marked with just a tree. How would the little ones,” he said pointing to his three year grandson, “be able to visit the graves? Now, when he grows up and visits Ethiopia, he will be able to see his ancestor’s grave.”

### ***Israelis in Ethiopia***

The orientation towards Ethiopia, as *Ethiopian Israelis*, is apparent in the growing number of trips to Ethiopia and in the form of these visits. It is on return visits to Ethiopia that Ethiopian Jewish immigrants feel the most Israeli<sup>210</sup>, while still upholding their connection to Ethiopia.

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<sup>210</sup> Levy accompanied a group of Moroccan-born Israelis on part-pilgrimage and part tourist excursion. After a rich description of their ostentatious behaviour in the Moroccan suks, he concludes that the journey was not a return to the past in a straightforward sense. A clear sense of being Israeli grew during the trip and that present day Morocco was alien to them. “We could argue that the travellers left to search

Worku is obsessed with buying a car. However, were he given the choice to buy a car or visit Ethiopia, he would chose the latter. He wants to go with a group of cousins, and rent a jeep to travel back to the village.

Every week, dozens of Beta Israel visit Ethiopia, especially during the temperate months of September and October<sup>211</sup>. The stated purpose is many-fold: for health reasons, to purchase goods, for a holiday, to help a relative who still awaits immigration, to build tomb-stones. They rarely go to the villages, and those who do, make day trips by car. They complain that the distances are too long, the roads too muddy and that, coming from abroad, the locals will rob them. When they want to see former neighbours and give them cash donations, they summon them to the town hotel where they reside.

At the Ethiopia Hotel in Gondar, I met a group of four middle-aged Ethiopian Israeli men on a three-week trip to Ethiopia. They spent their days meandering around town, and enjoyed the bars in the evening. A couple went by car to a nearby village to meet some former neighbours. Others received former neighbours in their hotel rooms.

This comment and many other similar ones suggest that Ethiopians do not choose to return to their village, to see the land or village for its own sake. Ethiopian Jews return to Ethiopia as modern Israelis: travelling to former distant villages by foot is too reminiscent of the life they have left behind and compromises their modernity.

A woman recently returned from Ethiopia and I asked if she visited her former village. "No", she said, "it was raining and a car could not go." I asked about walking. She changed tack: "who do I have there? All my relatives are here. I just have someone [a fictive kin] in Infraz [a local small town]."

Lots of young people "dream" of going to Ethiopia. Many youths make a visit shortly after the army, after having saved enough for the flight. They say that they want to see their birth-place and make a video of it, although I hardly met any youths who actually did return to the natal village, unless the latter was easily accessible. One young woman, who arrived in Israel as an infant, was considering a special package deal, a two-week holiday to Ethiopia, costing \$850, which takes you to see the "interesting" areas, that is the tourist attractions. Mostly, the youths travel in groups of two to four relatives. They start in Addis, enjoying the night life there, and then move onto Gondar. They take cars to the nearest villages, and some take a plane to Axum and Lalibela, both popular tourist centres. Usually, they have some distant relatives (from inter-marriage with Christians) and Godparents to visit and give cash to.

Visiting prostitutes is a priority for many Ethiopians on return trips to Ethiopia.

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for their maghrebi roots, and thus manifested a trend towards segregation. But we could equally, and perhaps more forcefully, argue that in Morocco they found the roots of their Israeli identity," (Levy 1997: 42).

<sup>211</sup> I obtained this information from the "requests for visa" file at the Ethiopian Embassy in Tel Aviv.

Mesganow recently returned and although adamant that he himself had not visited a prostitute, explained the process. "They pay very little money and get a beautiful virgin". I asked about condoms, and he and his companions laughed further: "the young people know about condoms, but the old people do not use them. They say: the pleasure is for me, not for the rubber!"

Young men frequently return from Ethiopia with bags full of cloth, spices, incense and jewellery, which they then sell to relatives and neighbours. The profits made cover the cost of the trip and sometimes yield a little extra.

These visits symbolise the attitudes of Ethiopians' towards their "Ethiopianness". They uphold their Ethiopian heritage but at the same time they distance themselves from it, and return to Ethiopia not as poor villagers but as wealthy foreigners, who travel only by car, visit prostitutes, and stay in hotels. The tombstones and videos "to show the children" demonstrate that they desire their children to maintain their Ethiopian identity, at least to the extent of knowing and being proud of their origin. Although the Ethiopian Jewish visitors do not want to *stay* in the villages, they want to visit and video them to show not the poverty there but the beauty of the landscape and the traditional way of life. They want to maintain a link with the past, but they want to sanitise this link, so that the future is built on a rich colourful past, and not a low status impoverished one. Moreover, it is on their return to Ethiopia, when they see quite how much their life has changed, that they feel the most Israeli. Most of the Ethiopians I met who had travelled to Ethiopia, however positive their descriptions of their journey, always proudly stated that they prefer Israel and would never go back to live in Ethiopia.

## ***Business in Ethiopia***

The desire to maintain a link with Ethiopia in the future was expressed by a few individuals who claim that they wish to carry out business in Ethiopia. Some spoke of setting up businesses such as imports / exports with Ethiopia. Already, relatively large-scale operations in the import of *teff* flour have begun, and I heard of several export schemes to Ethiopia under discussion. Idealist youths would like to do development work "using the skills acquired in Israel to teach people in Ethiopia" while a few have ambitions to farm land using hired labours and tractors.

Worku claims to be a "*balarist*" (lit.: an owner of land rights) thanks to his Amhara father. He would like to claim these rights one day and maybe start a cow herd. The land and cows could be looked after by relatives and he would share the profits. Before putting this plan in action, he must make some money in Israel. His brother has similar ambitions and he made me write a letter (in English) to the Israeli Ambassador in Ethiopia asking him to investigate some land which Beta Israel have rights to.

Avi, a young twenty-two-year-old, wants to earn some money and then open a coffee shop in Adis Abeba. He would then divide his time between Ethiopia and Israel.

Solomon, one of the most successful young Ethiopians (officer in the army, manager of an absorption centre, director of a top welfare organisation), whose disdain for Israel I quoted above, told me that he has already secured a World Bank loan and has rented seven million square meters of land in Tigre with his brother. He intends to move out there shortly to cultivate cotton for export. I asked if his wife and new-born baby would accompany him. “No”, he said, “it might not be healthy for the baby”. I teased him: “Where were you born, Solomon?!” We laughed at our simultaneous realisation that you can never go back in life: Solomon, however much he hates Israel, was now Israeli and would not have a child of his grow up in Ethiopia.

These cases show that some young Ethiopians are thinking about forging links with Ethiopia beyond mere tourism, for business or a humanitarian cause. At the same time, they intend to maintain their Israeli base, hoping for the best from both worlds.

## Conclusion

In their daily life, Ethiopians experience continual conflict between their desire to uphold Beta Israel custom and their desire to integrate. For example, Chapter Four detailed the case of young people wishing to marry for love, Israeli-style, while also wanting to obey traditional Beta Israel marriage rules, and I noted above the inner conflict a priest felt between his wishes for young people to learn Israeli religious practice yet to maintain Beta Israel Ge’ez prayers. However, when Ethiopian Jewish immigrants project their minds to ‘the homeland postponed’, and imagine an ideal future, there is no longer conflict between apparently opposing tendencies.

Most Ethiopians imagine a future in which they will lead full Israeli lifestyles whilst maintaining a degree of cultural heritage. In a multi-cultural society such as Israel, such aspirations are common. Israel is increasingly adopting a pluralist identity<sup>212</sup> and all around them, Ethiopians witness other ethnic groups upholding customs from their countries of origin. The ideal of being Israeli *and* Ethiopian is therefore a realistic goal. But for this, they have to win their battles for religious and cultural recognition.

Ethiopian Jews overtly resist the ascriptions and policies of dominant society which they dislike with strident demonstrations (e.g. the Religious Conversion issue and Blood Scandal), and, for a minority, by developing counter-cultures modelled on Evangelical Christianity or Black Americans. They also resist in more indirect ways, which are no less

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<sup>212</sup> Since the mid-eighties, the melting ideology has increasingly given way to pluralism and commentators note the effervescence of identity in Israel (Weingrod 1985, Ben-Rafael & Sharot 1991).

powerful. “Passive resistance” is expressed in their strong ethnic bonds which counter Israel’s ideology of the “Fusion of the Exiles”, and in their rhetorical discourse. The young develop what one could call a ‘counter-rhetoric’ of race, accentuating and exaggerating Israeli racist discourse to gain a semblance of control over it; the older generation adopt a ‘counter-rhetoric’ of purity in order to counter Israeli doubts on their religious practice and cast themselves as morally and ritually superior to other Jews. Ethiopian Jewish immigrants also develop an alternative discourse by creating an ideal image of their past in Ethiopia and by imagining an ideal future in which all Israeli citizens will be colour blind and the Beta Israel’s cultural and religious heritage will feature prominently in the rich mosaic of Jewish ethnic traditions.

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## **Eight: Conclusion**

In this final chapter, I review my conclusions in the light of the anthropology of immigration presented in the Introduction. I show that cultural change is an active process and that immigrants chose the nature and scope of cultural change. Their choices depend on their own ideology of the future and the host society's ideology about them. To conclude, I summarise the argument of the thesis.

### **I. Rapid adaptation**

Ethiopian Jews, who migrated to an environment radically different from their former villages, adapted rapidly and were fast able to recreate communal life and alter cultural practices to suit their new context. While this conclusion challenges common assumptions, it confirms recent anthropological findings on immigration.

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants adapted rapidly to most practical sides of Western urban lifestyles<sup>213</sup>. Moreover, they were soon in a position to manipulate to their advantage elements of their new environment such as the social services and the national political discourse. A survey of the literature shows that other immigrants, from a variety of urban and rural areas of developing countries, adapt equally well to Western urban life (See for example Foner (1977) on Jamaicans in England and New York, Gold (1992) on refugees from Cambodia, Shaw on Pakistanis in Britain, and Goldberg (1972) on Lybian Jews in an Israeli rural environment). Difficulties are reported, however, for those aspects of life, such as employment, which require experience and language proficiency. Former village dwellers are unqualified for urban jobs other than the most basic. And immigrants who were qualified find that their skills are not transferable or that language problems are inhibitive. The employment question is all the more acute for illegal immigrants, who have to work illegally and with the fear of being reported to the authorities (Gold 1992).

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<sup>213</sup> Anteby reaches a similar conclusion: Ethiopian adults have had little problem in adapting to daily life in Israel. Even though their language acquisition has been slow, they have found means to cope without Hebrew (Anteby 1996: 524). Herman, who carried out fieldwork in the early 1990s also concluded that the Beta Israel had "no culture shock in dealing with technological society". She notes that Operation

As well as rapidly adapting to novel technologies and lifestyles, immigrants are fast able to recreate communal life<sup>214</sup> reminiscent of their home country in their new setting (Gans 1962; Rogg 1971; Kim 1981; Markowitz 1993; Goldberg 1972). Despite the host society and the immigrants' aspirations for integration, all immigrant groups appear to maintain some form of communal organisation, whether it takes the form of formal communal structures, with semi-structured social networks and formal organisations<sup>215</sup>, or merely "symbolic" associations of friendship networks. Ethnic intra-communal life is often a central facet of their well-being. In the case of Pakistanis in the UK, for instance, Anwar argues that together with residential segregation, the formation of an ethnic community and ethnic institutions is instrumental in enabling immigrants to cope with the effects of migration (1979:11; see also Gold 1992 on Vietnamese in USA). The precise nature of communal organisations varies widely since it is fashioned on social practices of the society of origin. So, for example, Muslim Pakistanis in the UK created ethnic associations to provide Muslim education for their children, a variety of ethnic businesses (such as family-run "corner shops"), and maintained their strong *biraderi* kinship social organisation, whereby definite groups of kin and fictive kin are linked by a series of gift giving and social occasions.

Soviet Jewish émigrés, on the other hand, in New York (Markowitz 1993), Atlanta (Gold 1992) and Israel (Horowitz 1986), disdain communal organisations and lack formal channels for self-help and political associations. In Israel, Russian immigrants tended to *minimise* social contacts with each other, beyond close family circles, even when they lived in absorption centres with large concentrations of Russian immigrants; when absorption workers initiated activities to bring the Russians closer together, these were met with indifference<sup>216</sup> (Horowitz 1986: 22). Even though a community "in the traditional sense" does not exist, Markowitz shows that a Soviet Jewish community does exist in New York and plays a fundamental role in immigrant life: "And in coming together [at Russian evenings and eating at Russian restaurants] to express [their] commonalties, Soviet Jewish immigrants are able to integrate the reality of their American lives with the values and self-

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Solomon migrants spent time in Addis Abeba and that it is not in fact that hard to learn to turn on an electric switch (Herman 1994: 160).

<sup>214</sup> Anthropologists usually define the "community" of immigrants in terms of social (rather than territorial) boundaries. Anwar defines the community of Pakistanis in the UK with reference to a shared common background, interests, religious belief and value system, some form of social structure, and a territorial nucleus (19?:12).

<sup>215</sup> For example Cambodians, Vietnamese, Indians in the USA set up self-help societies, as did Cuban-American strong political lobbies (see Fallers 1967; Portes and Bach 1985: 304-5, Van Esterick 1985: 163-4, Kim 1981).

<sup>216</sup> Markowitz (1993) explains Russian immigrants' lack of formal organisations by their revulsion of bureaucracy and of the potential meanings attached to "organisations" after fleeing Communist or post-communist Russia, and the Russian cultural emphasis on a close circle friends and relatives rather than on organised networks (Markowitz 1993; 238-31, also Horowitz 1986 23).

image they have developed in a different context, giving shape and substance to their emerging community (1993: 246):”

Unlike Russian immigrants, Ethiopian immigrants form strong communal bonds and organisations which permeate most aspects of daily life. However, like Russians, Ethiopians’ sense of “togetherness” - their “community” - is in a constant process of creation and recreation. It is constituted as much by “repositories of meaning” (Cohen 1985: 98) as by concrete social institutions. For, while Ethiopians ostentatiously come together in glory and pomp for celebrations and funerals, and form numerous ethnic political organisations, the sense of “being together” is experienced just as forcefully in the minutiae of everyday interactions. For example, a young Ethiopian Haifa University student meets for the first time an Ethiopian Jerusalem University student and tells her in a quiet respectful tone of voice about his Ethiopian class-mates, detailing the latter’s genealogies, so that the Jerusalem student soon “knows” them, and the two youngsters’ sense of “being together” as Ethiopian Jews in Israel is enforced.

### ***Bicultural Youth***

Rapid and easy adaptation is particularly evident in young immigrants. Beta Israel youth fast learn the host country’s language and social norms. Moreover, they are able to adopt Ethiopian social norms in the company of their parents, while acting Israeli outside, oscillating relatively effortlessly between two cultures. Psychological studies of immigrant youth use the term “biculturalism”<sup>217</sup> to depict this process. A bicultural individual is one who “would be competent in both cultures, engage in typical behaviours of both cultures, would prefer to remain involved in practices and lifestyles of both cultures, and would feel a sense of belonging toward both cultural communities” (Garcia Coll & Magnuson 1997: 108-9). Garcia Coll & Magnuson argue that biculturalism varies across different domains of life. For example, in terms of language, a “bicultural individual” switches from one culture to the other; in the realm of values, “code switching” is difficult, and so blending tends to occur. In my view, the distinction “code switching” and “blending” is too categorical. In most domains, both occur simultaneously. For example, while Ethiopian adolescent immigrants switch from one language to another, they also “blend” their languages by inserting words from one language while speaking the other. Conversely, they can become extremely adept at “switching” from one cultural code to another rather than “blending” by, for example,

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<sup>217</sup> Hannerz (1969: 192) was one of the first social scientists to use this term, referring to ghetto dwellers who were bicultural with respect to elements of mainstream culture and ghetto culture.



wearing a mini-dress and speaking brashly outside the home while reverting to a long skirt and quiet tones inside at home.

Asian youths in Britain are good examples of “bicultural” identities, blending different norms with remarkable grace (Anwar 1979, Shaw 1988). Outsiders assume that for British Sikhs, there will inevitably be major problems of “culture conflict” between ‘traditional’ parents and freedom-seeking ‘anglicised’ youngsters. Sikh youths did go through a period of rebellion against their parents’ values (as do any other adolescents in Britain), juggling different expectations such as socialising with school mates versus attending the temple, or abiding by family orientation at home versus the individualist ethos of school. However, most eventually return to follow a “modified version of Punjabi cultural norms in their late teens and early twenties” (Ballard & Ballard 1977: 44-5).

The phenomenon of bi-cultural youth is a manifestation of people’s ability to simultaneously hold apparently contradictory beliefs without necessarily ending up in cognitive confusion (cf. Bloch 1989, Leach 1970 [1954]). Gilad suggests that “contradiction has become a “normal” part of the routine cognitive efforts and social actions of the immigrant generation” (Gilad 1989: 230). She suggests that given the multitude of norms individuals face, they “pick and chose” (*ibid*) and as a result, within any immigrant group there is enormous variety as individuals chose their behaviour from a wide range of norms and expectations. Although, as Chapter Five shows, former status holders do suffer from the resulting loss of control as new norms, which reduce their authority, are adopted (see also Gilad 1989).

## II. Socio-cultural Change

The anthropology of immigration shows how immigrants *actively* maintain and recreate cultural forms from the home society (Buijs 1993:10). Indigenous cultural concepts and a number of social practices are abandoned with ease or remoulded to suit new conditions. As Goldberg, a leading Israeli anthropologist, noted in the late 1980s: “Immigrants and their children have been socialised into Israeli skills, roles, and styles, while preserving and reshaping significant elements of their particular traditions” (quoted in Lewis 1989: 232). While the notion of unidirectional modernisation in which world cultures are wiped away by the global forces of Westernisation has been widely discredited<sup>218</sup>, our understanding of the

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<sup>218</sup> This said, some people continue to maintain that “the world is changing from being a place in which cultural plurality from region to region was the typical state of affairs, to one in which cultural similarity characterises vast numbers of people over vast regions.” (Dannhauser 1989: 251).

processes by which people adopt novel ideas and practices has been less thoroughly documented<sup>219</sup>. After reviewing a few example of cultural change, I turn to a discussion of immigrants' agency in this process of change.

## **1. *Examples of cultural change***

All studies of immigration detail a variety of instances of cultural change. By way of illustration, I briefly discuss the changing role of women, changing kinship relations, and innovation in the sphere of ritual practice.

Several recent studies have focused on the changing role of women upon migration. In many cases, women were more subordinate to men in their societies of origin and were less likely to be employed in waged labour (Gilad 1989, Simon, Rita & Brettell, Caroline 1986, Buijs 1993, Mortland 1994). While older women, like Ethiopian Jewish women, often maintained much of their former social behaviour, they adapted rapidly to their daughters' new norms, expectations and behaviour, even if inter-generational conflict ensued in the process. Gilad shows how Yemeni immigrants in Israel dealt with their daughters' transgressions of their moral codes of behaviour: mothers accepted that their daughters were operating with a new set of norms, and they appreciate the latter's social advancement (e.g. going to University, getting a good job) (Gilad 1989: 202-4). A number of studies show the potential of immigrant women, especially the younger ones, for "innovating and negotiating new gender roles, which often increase their own power and produce positive effects in their societies more broadly" (Krulfeld 1994:73). For example in Krulfeld's study of Laotians in the United States, refugee women became elected leaders of the Buddhist Associations in their communities - something which would not have been likely in their country of origin (Krulfeld 1994:117-121). Most young Ethiopian Jewish women abandon Beta Israel purity practices and dress codes and expect to shape their own destiny with respect to marriage, work and children - and their mothers look on, without attempting to interfere. Many second generation Pakistani women aspired to careers outside the home and to greater freedom and equality with their husbands (Buijs 1993). Kulig (1994) reports that amongst recent Cambodian refugees in the USA, although gender relations appear static, from the arranged engagement to the elaborate traditional wedding, under the surface, there were vast changes

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<sup>219</sup> A notable exception is Stewart's analysis of the processes by which modernization is eroding traditional beliefs in rural Greece. Stewart argues that acquiring new beliefs is not a simple linear process of "rational" thinking by which modern explanations for natural phenomena supplant traditional beliefs. Social forces, particularly hegemony, rather than superior scientific explanation replacing inferior traditional wisdom, account for changes in beliefs (Stewart 1991: 116-134).

in courtship, the occurrence of illicit dating, and the growing expectations of young women (1994: 145)<sup>220</sup>.

Immigrants generally exhibited the same adaptability in their family relations. The old assumption that the shift in residence patterns and household composition (from extended to nuclear) leads to the breakdown of the extended family (e.g. Wirth 1938) is laid to rest by numerous studies which illustrate the vitality of kin relations in the new setting (Loizos 1981, Colson 1971, Gold 1992, Deshen 1974). Gilad details changes in both Yemeni kin relations in practice and the expectations of kin relations. The group has reconstructed extended family relations to suit the constraints of the Israel urban context: e.g. visiting relatives is a favoured way of spending holidays and leisure time, cash contributions are made to relatives' rites of passages and funerals, close residence is preferred, and friendships are cast in kin terms. At the same time, expectations have been altered; for example, the mother-in-law's authority is lost and the traditional responsibilities of brothers towards their sisters are relaxed (Gilad 1989).

Yemeni Jewish immigrants have modified both the practice and the ideology of kinship, and have thus minimised conflict as a result of unmet expectations. Other immigrants though, have maintained their ideology and kept their expectations intact, but since their behaviour is constrained by the new setting, obligations cannot be fulfilled, which results in much friction. Shokeid (1974), for example, vividly portrays the fervent quarrelling of Moroccan Jews in Israel at a gathering of relatives because of unmet expectations. However, this conflict between kin can itself be an innovative way in which immigrants express the strength of their bonds of kinship: by arguing about the transgression of obligations towards kin, these obligations are reinforced (Shokeid 1974: 210-234).

In the sphere of ritual practice, immigrants prove to be just as resourceful: they modify ritual, drop ritual, start abandoned ritual afresh, and adopt new ritual. While it is undoubtedly true that immigrants shed much former ritual in order to fit better into their new environment, recent studies are providing many examples of the contrary. Detailing the growth of the dowry system among Sikhs in Britain, Bhachu demonstrates that a traditional

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<sup>220</sup> In discussing such changes amongst immigrants, it is important to maintain a long term perspective and not attribute changes to the immigration experience *per se* when they were already inherent in the pre-immigration culture and society. Shaw makes this point in relation to changing Pakistani marriage practices in Britain. She concludes, after studying marriage practices in the Pakistani village that her British informants come from, that "the incidents are symptomatic not of a wholesale desire to adopt a western lifestyle and its values but of stresses inherent in the culture itself, for such disputes occur within a wholly traditional framework as well as one in which western influences are, to a greater or lesser extent, at work (1988. 179)."

practice can grow after migration, particularly since the cultural and religious effervescence that has taken place amongst Sikhs in the 1980s and 1990s (Bhachu 1993: 106-8). Persian Jewish immigrants went further and began to organise a new ritual in Israel, a ceremony associated with a Muslim order in Iran (Goldberg 1985: 188).

Bilu provides a fascinating example of innovation in religious ritual by detailing Moroccan Jewish immigrants' practice of hagiolatry. At first, the *form* of the practice was continued after immigration by venerating tombs of local Saints in Israel, thereby using various compensatory substitutes for the tombs that had been left behind in Morocco. However, "in order to preserve the *content*, rather than merely the *form*, of Jewish Moroccan hagiolatry, a more direct and daring accommodation had to be called for, namely, the symbolic transfer of saints from Morocco to Israel and their reinstallation in the new country" (Bilu 1987: 288-9). The most celebrated of the "Israelised" Magrehi *tzaddikim* (saints) is Rabbi David u-Moshe, who is now "relocated" in a small room in a modest apartment in a working-class neighbourhood of Safed, following a dream by the flat-owner Avraham that the Saint wished to reside with him. The room has now become the focus of a mass celebration in which some fifteen to twenty thousand people take part in an atmosphere of fervour and ecstasy (Bilu 1987: 291, see also Ben-Ari & Bilu 1997b, Deshen 1974: 151-209).

While the re-emergence of Saint-cults and other "indigenous" practices is often interpreted as a process of "demodernization" of Israel, Ben-Ari and Bilu (1997) argue rather that these practices are signs of the "Israelization" of the Jewish Diaspora. Erecting Saints' tombs and synagogues is part of the Zionist ethos of appropriating the land<sup>221</sup>. Moreover, instigating these practices show that the immigrants in question have gained confidence to assert their ethnicity, and is therefore a manifestation of successful integration. A similar growth in confidence and consequent aggrandisement of Ethiopian cultural practices is evident amongst the Beta Israel. Ethiopian Jews in the early eighties claimed to want to shed their Ethiopian heritage to integrate into Israeli society (Abbink 1984); fifteen years later, while maintaining their wish to integrate, they also developed a forceful rhetoric of cultural preservation and have developed their customs accordingly.

While studies of immigrants report a variety of changing practices, few provide ethnographic data to show how immigrants interpret these changes. Mortland's vivid portrayal of immigrants' constant internal negotiations over cultural change is a notable exception. She describes Cambodians refugees in the United States as forever debating

issues such as “Can we be Buddhists if we attend Christian churches? What will happen to Cambodians if our children do not observe the proper rituals?” (1994: 17). Cambodians maintain a culture that is changing by *speaking of it* as unchanging and unchangeable. They face a basic contradiction: “On the one hand they view Khmer culture as dying or as having died ; on the other hand, their fear of losing their culture leads them to the conviction that nothing should be changed”. What “should be” becomes more rigid, and what “really is” is often not seen, and imperfection and difference to the “ideal” are overlooked. For example, definitions of virtuous women and children remain as strict as ever, yet women go to work, girls to school, and children make decisions about their lives (Mortland 1994: 20-1).

*Living Well and “Becoming Deaf”* also focuses on immigrants perceptions of changing practices. In particular, I have shown how rapid change can be both surprisingly straightforward and tumultuous at the same time. For example, the practice of seclusion during female impurity, an important and well-entrenched tradition, was dropped with apparent ease. While this significant change did not appear to cause psychological or cognitive problems on the everyday level for either men or women, it threatened power relations and boundary markers, which had rested for the most part on communal purity. It obliged Beta Israel to reconsider the basis of their group identity and the status of former power holders, elders and priests (see Chapter Five). Like Cambodian Americans, the latter resisted by maintaining a rhetoric of purity “as if” the practices were still being observed in the present. My study has shown that such a disjunction between rhetoric and practice can play a central role in immigrants’ successful adaptation since it allows them to imagine themselves and their future as if crucial identity markers were still in operation.

## **2. Choosing cultural change**

My thesis not only demonstrates Ethiopian Jews’ cultural flexibility, but also the strong element of agency involved in cultural change. It is not that “culture is lost or preserved”, but different aspects change in different ways, and the subjects themselves play a large part in determining the rates of change<sup>222</sup>. Cultural traditions are important only insofar as they are perceived to maintain the continuity of the group. For the Ethiopian Jews, such

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<sup>221</sup> For a discussion of the centrality of the landscape to Israeli ideas of nationhood, see Selwyn (1995, 1996).

<sup>222</sup> Goldberg (1972: 76) notes that Lybian Jews in Israel were able to change drastically in one sphere of behaviour and change slowly or not at all in other areas.

continuity may lie in full integration into the land of Jews, and if maintaining cultural traditions *threatens* such a future, then they are unhesitantly dropped<sup>223</sup>.

The literature abounds with comparative cases of immigrants clearly *choosing* the nature and degree of cultural change. Anwar paraphrases his Muslim Pakistani informants in Britain in the mid-1970s: “They were in Britain to work and not change their culture (1979: 165)”. Pakistanis explicitly saw culture change as a matter of choice, and they *chose* to maintain their native culture as much as possible within the constraints of their new environment. Similarly, many political migrants, such as Chilean refugees in the USA do not want to assimilate or identify with their host country because they see this as a betrayal of their political commitment and of those left behind (Eastmond 1993: 50, see also Gold 1992: 18, Kim 1987). The Maltese in London present an opposite case. After the group was stigmatised by the criminal activities of a few people, rather than uniting to combat the image, the Maltese denied their cultural heritage and opted for cultural assimilation (Dench 1975).

Depending on factors such as age and education, different Ethiopian Jewish immigrants constantly define and redefine the optimal balance between Ethiopian identity and integration, and they modify their customs and ideas and adopt new ones accordingly. For example, the older generation who wish to maintain their identity as proud Beta Israel, maintain as far as possible female purity laws, at least rhetorically. Youngsters however, for whom the level of segregation such laws entail is neither feasible nor desirable, opt for ethnic markers which fit better Israeli lifestyle and a rhetoric of integration. They express their ethnicity by developing strong social relations with their kin, which are epitomised by celebrations of life events (e.g. circumcision, *cristenna*, *bar mitzvah*, weddings).

Hobsbawm (1983) has written of ‘the invention of tradition’ in modern societies, especially by dominant groups to justify social, economic and political advantage. The Beta Israel provide a remarkable example, less of invention, than of the recasting and recycling of tradition (certainly ‘invented’ originally<sup>224</sup>) by an underprivileged group which migrated from one set of painful circumstances to an entirely different one. Here, too, the advantage is obvious: “tradition”, in practice and rhetorical discourse, is a defiant defence against disorientation and perceived discrimination.

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<sup>223</sup> Gow, concluding his study of Amazonian Indians notes “The native people of the Bajo Urubamba do not see their ancestral cultures as heritable property, but as weapons for the defence of kinship. At particular times such weapons may be useless, and are dropped, to be picked up later when circumstances change.” ... Native people fear the loss of their children, not their culture” (Gow 1991: 286).

<sup>224</sup> See the historical discussion in the Introduction, and Kaplan (1992).

Immigrants' self-conscious choices in the field of cultural change and preservation are apparent in their evaluations of changing practices. For example, while the domestic lives of Muslim and Christian Pakistanis *look* similar, they are in fact interpreted and valued quite differently. Christians made many changes willingly. Muslims may have adapted their behaviour - e.g. by accepting manual work and mixed-sex education - but they have not done so willingly and would revert to behaviour which they value more highly if and when they could (Jeffery 1976: 106-7). Indeed, twenty years after Jeffery's fieldwork, her predictions are borne out: Pakistani corner shops, where the ideals of family business can be put into practice, are widespread and several Muslim single-sex schools have opened. In a similar vein, Foner argued that the changes in gender roles she observed amongst Jamaicans in 1970s London resulted less from "assimilation" than from the effect of similar (to host society) social and economic forces. Should such socio-economic conditions change, 'old' social patterns could be reverted to (Foner 1977:142). As Mayer (1971) points out 'the question of values is important, for in many situations people might conform outwardly, but still remain inwardly determined to revert to pre-urban patterns when opportunity arises'.

Factors which influence the nature of new immigrants' cultural change can be highlighted. First, as discussed in Chapter Seven, the nature of specific cultural practices is significant. Some practices delineate a strong boundary around the group while others are compatible with an ethos of integration. For instance "body-based" rituals such as female purity practices maintain an ideology of difference in *essence* while "action-based" customs such as music and social etiquette can operate within an ideology of *sameness* (Freeman 1994). Moreover, the question of practicability is central: ethnic traditions are maintained or dropped according to their practicability within the constraints of the new environment. Second, immigrants' orientation towards their host society - whether they imagine their future in their host society or hold instead a "myth of return" (see below) - influences the will and efforts they put into integrating in their new society and, conversely, maintaining their former cultural heritage. Third, immigrants' perceptions of the attitudes of the host society towards them is an important factor in determining the nature of their adaptation and cultural change. I now turn to these latter two factors.

### **III. Discrimination and Ethnicity**

While a detailed discussion of immigrants' perceptions of the attitudes of the host society towards them is beyond the scope of this study, their perceptions of discrimination, and their

reactions to them, are particularly pertinent. Immigrants who are darker-skinned than the majority population experience discrimination on account of their ethnic origins (Foner 1987: 11, Buchanan Stafford 1987: 143-155, see also Stack 1974, Whyte 1943, and Liebow 1967).

Immigrant youths often suffer acutely from negative stereotypes. In their study of adolescent children of Latino immigrants in the United States, Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (1995) find that negative stereotypes from the host society have “a particularly poisonous” effect on their struggle to find an identity. The result of such “psychosocial violence” is to reject the society that rejects them and adopt “counter-cultural” identities, by joining gangs and developing ambivalent attitudes towards authority figures. She notes that this tendency is observed among second and third generation children of various cultures such as second generation Moroccans in Brussels (Hermans 1993) and Koreans in Japan (Lee and De Vos 1981). This low self-esteem is also noted amongst West Indian youngsters in the USA, who grow up with a “sense of masked inferiority”; West Indian pupils may describe themselves as speaking “bad” English or as coming from a “bad” family” (Cropley 1983:121).

Fortunately, discrimination does not have such detrimental effects on all immigrant youth. They try to overcome negative ascriptions by developing a strong ethnic pride and / or Black identity. For example, Ballard & Ballard argue that racial discrimination is a factor in preventing the successful “Anglicisation” of young Sikhs: “They know that however much they try to conform, they can never really be British because of the colour of their skin”. This feeling becomes the catalyst for the formation of an overt ethnic identity so that practices such as wearing a turban become “a reaffirmation of ethnic pride in the face of white rejection” (1977: 47). Similarly, Ethiopian Jewish immigrant youths have responded to negative ascriptions by developing a strong ethnic pride. Modelling themselves on Blacks in the USA, many of them vociferously denounce their experiences of discrimination and develop “a Black oppositional identity which can serve protective functions. It allows for an anticipation of racism regardless of social, education or economic status and for defences to be employed when faced with racism. It allows a youngster to find fault in the circumstances rather than in himself” (Cross 1995: 187).

While many recent immigrants from Africa and Asia are reluctantly accepted into Western countries as workers, the Beta Israel were actively sought, and Israel spent enormous sums of money for their immigration, granted them full citizenship on arrival and invested a vast expenditure of resources for their successful absorption into Israeli society (Kaplan & Salamon 1998: 22). Many Israelis are prejudiced towards Ethiopian immigrants on account



of their “primitive” background and skin colour, but the *ideology* of the country is one of sameness and equality as Jews. Therefore, unlike Black immigrants to European countries or to the USA who have no prior identification with their host country, Ethiopian Jewish youth, and other dark-skinned immigrants to Israel, can draw on their sense of belonging to Israel as Jews to fight racism and its potential psychological impact.

## **IV. Imaginations of the Future**

As well as immigrants’ notions about the attitudes of the host society towards them, their own perceptions about their host society are central. In particular, their sense of belonging to their new country and consequent imagination of the future, factors underplayed in the literature, influence the balance sought between integration and ethnicity.

### **1. *The Myth of Return***

The significance of the way in which the future is imagined by immigrants is explicit in Jeffery’s (1976) study of Muslim and Pakistani immigrants to Britain. The Christians and Muslims were similar in most respects as immigrants except for the fact that the latter imagined their future back home in Pakistan and the former saw theirs in Britain. The Muslims strove hard to maintain as much of their cultural traditions as possible, and sought to bring up their children with their own society’s norms and values so that the children could become good Pakistanis. Their prime concern was the cultural continuity of their children. Much debate was devoted to this issue, and many practical steps were taken to transmit Muslim religion and behaviour to their children and to counteract negative “British” influences (Anwar 1981: 1979 :216). For example, women, who did not tend to work out of the house, or where they did in Pakistani-only work forces, did not attend language classes because they saw no need for them, compared to intensive religious classes for the children (Anwar 1981: 166). All in all, Muslim Pakistanis built an “encapsulated” community (Tambs-Lyche 1980).

Christian Pakistani immigrants, on the other hand, felt that they had joined their brethren in England, to which as Christians they felt a sense of belonging. Contrary to their Muslim counterparts, they adopted a positive orientation towards their host country, seeking to integrate as far as possible and encouraging their children to do so. For instance, they did not criticise their children for listening to pop music or for dating members of the opposite sex. Adults joined British churches, and women sought to learn English. They still took pride in

“their own” culture, and maintained many ethnic characteristics (dress, speech, food, etc.), but their primary ethnic marker was Christian - in common with British society - and second only were they Pakistani<sup>225</sup>. While the Muslims idealised Pakistan and despised British culture, the Christians spoke ill of Muslim Pakistanis (i.e. Pakistan) and wanted to befriend British people (1976: 150-1).

Most immigrants, like Muslim Pakistanis, and unlike Ethiopian Jews, maintain a strong “ideology of return”. Staub (1989:90) argues that New York Yemenis’ ideology of return “structures” their immigrant experience<sup>226</sup>. For Brazilians in New York, the image and wish for an imminent departure is a vital aspect of immigrant life: it influences their self-perception (e.g. they are not bothered about their low status in America), it inhibits the formation of formal communal groups since this would seem like laying down roots, and thus relinquishing the desire to return to Brazil. “We are here but our heads [or hearts] are in Brazil”, they say; their friends are nearly all Brazilian, they follow events in Brazil in detail and are in touch with all things Brazilian (e.g. food and music) (Margolis 1994 :192-4).

This image of the future back home is all the more potent given that in most cases it is no more than a “myth of return” (Anwar 1979: ix, also Margolis 1994, Jeffery 1976). Anwar writes about “the mythology that [Pakistani Muslims] are in Britain to save, invest and eventually return to their villages back home” (1979: ix). The “imminent departure” becomes increasingly hard to effectuate as the years go by for a variety of reasons: for instance, children are in school, immigrants cannot yet “afford” to return, grown children and their families have all decided to remain in the country, and an elderly couple does not want to leave them. Margolis (1994) details several examples of Brazilians who have been in New York for decades, and who by all appearance will remain in the USA, but for whom the image of return is as strong as ever. While no genuine efforts are made to return, imagining a bright future is central to all these different immigrants’ efforts to cope with the difficulties of the present and their low status in the host society, and what brighter image than “back home” as a wealthy returnee. As the years go by, the imagination of “home” becomes brighter and brighter, just as the return becomes more and more mythical.

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<sup>225</sup> Jeffery points out that this self-identification to Christianity rather than to their country of origin is difficult because British people do not accept this claim to common allegiance and for them, Christian Pakistanis remain “Pakistani”, Christian or not (Jeffery 1976: 154).

<sup>226</sup> Staub (1989: 71) quotes a young Yemeni in New York “Yemenites... anywhere else other than Yemen, they’re just halfway, half of them is there. Physically they are there. Mentally they’re always back there. You rarely find Yemenis settled completely forever, no way. A person might stay here thirty, forty years, but he has to go back to Yemen, no matter what. Because it is the atmosphere, there is a magic in the air over there.”

## **2. *The Future in the homeland***

Jewish immigrants to Israel envisage their future in their new homeland<sup>227</sup>; they have a prior sense of belonging to the host country, and imagine living there as Jews amongst Jews, in equality and peace. Like Christian Pakistanis, they are consequently more orientated towards integration than immigrants who live according to a “myth of return”. However, they too struggle to find a balance between their aspirations for integration and preservation of their own cultural heritage and as all recent commentators of Israeli society have noted, ethnicity is vibrant in Israel. This is because their sense of belonging is threatened and, as I demonstrate throughout the thesis, upholding ethnic pride is a means of subverting dominant society’s negative ascriptions. Nonetheless, their sense of belonging informs their discourse and provides them with a legitimacy to fight against perceived discrimination. Unfortunately for my comparative efforts, studies conducted at the time of the Oriental Jewish immigration to Israel hardly addressed such nebulous questions as “a sense of belonging”. Beginning with the work of Deshen & Shokeid (1974), several studies of a more anthropological nature have been conducted, but these deal with immigrants after twenty or thirty years in the country and second generation immigrants while my study concerns immigrants in their first few years in Israel.

The Bene Israel (“Sons of Israel”), the Indian Jews who migrated to Israel in the 1950s, offer a close parallel to the Beta Israel. They have a darker skin than the host-population and endured similar problems with the Rabbinate who demanded their ritual conversion before marriage because of their prior ignorance of Halakkhic law. To most Bene Israel however, just like the Beta Israel, the issue revolved around matters of race, caste and purity rather than Halakkha. The Bene Israel took very seriously the perceived threat to their sense of belonging. They responded with demonstrations and hunger strikes until the Rabbinate reversed the directive (Roland 1996: 172); and they developed a strong ethnic identity, proudly maintaining social relations within the group and upholding their ethnic traditions in the social and religious sphere. Young Bene Israel want to integrate fully into Israeli society and gain equality and acceptance, and like the Beta Israel, chose which ethnic traditions to uphold. They shed Indian cultural patterns which have kept their parents apart, while at the same time they cultivate elements of Indian folklore and behaviour which does not interfere with an Israeli lifestyle and reinforces their ethnic identity (Roland 1996: 185-6).

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<sup>227</sup> This is not to say that there are not many Israelis who emigrate, but such emigration is not generally towards the country of origin or their parents’ country of origin but rather towards the United States or Europe.

Yemeni Israelis also contend with questions of integration and ethnicity. Gilad shows that despite the strength of the image of the Yemeni motherland, the immigrants' primary orientation is towards their new homeland. Referring to the younger generation she states: "First and foremost they consider themselves to be Israeli" (1989:162). This said, they remain 'Yemeni' as well, which entails a claim about parents' country-of-origin, the foods they eat, the way they dance and celebrate Jewish holidays and a constant awareness of ethnic identity vis-à-vis other Israelis. For instance, when an Ashkenazi boy shows an interest in Yemeni girls, the latter wonder whether the interest is in them as individuals or merely because they want to flirt with a "pretty Yemeni" (Gilad 1989:142).

Lewis (1985, 1989) offers a somewhat different picture of the Yemeni community. He conducted fieldwork in an "ethnic" enclave, a poorer neighbourhood in which 30% of residents are Yemeni. He portrays a communal life similar to that of the Beta Israel and eloquently portrays Yemeni ethnic pride. While the young went through a rebellious period in which they "turned their backs" on their parents in an attempt to become "modern" and "Israeli", this period has passed and they have come to a more positive appreciation of their ethnic group. In fact, he asserts, certain ethnic traditions (such as *hinna* and Yemenite music) have even shown signs of an increase in popularity (Lewis 1985: 232). While Lewis suggests that men are "happy with their lot" at work and proud to have a job, whatever its status, Gilad's Yemeni informants complained about their jobs as unskilled labourers and recalled their past in Yemen as skilled artisans. Both these groups of Yemenis are struggling with the question of "belonging". Gilad's informants, generally more educated and younger, are striving hard to integrate, and voice their disappointments. Lewis' group deal with the situation by retreating into Yemeni life and finding there their sense of self-worth and dignity.

While problems with the sense of belonging is particularly acute for Oriental immigrants to Israel given their (generally) subordinate position in Israeli society, it is not limited to them. American Jewish immigrants suffer from a constant ambivalence about their American and Israeli identity. They tend to adopt a radical espousal of their Israeli identity when they first arrive in Israel, and proudly assert a strong Zionist ideology. But soon, their American identity comes back to prominence and they miss American qualities in Israel. But when they return to America on visits, they remember why they migrated to Israel. In Israel, they

remain frustrated by the constant label of “American”, when they strive so hard to be Israeli (Avruch 1981)<sup>228</sup>.

They too entertain an ideal image of the future: the reunification of all Jews in Israel and, in the case of the ultra-religious, the advent of the Messianic age. Like the Yemenis, Beta Israel and Bene Israel, it is this image which helps them deal with the daily frustrations inherent in the reality of “integration”.

## V. Argument of the Thesis

The first three chapters of *Living Well and “Becoming Deaf”* depict a largely successful immigration from the Beta Israel’s own view-point. Ethiopian Jews greatly appreciate their new country, both as the land of the Jews, to which they held a prior sense of belonging, and as a developed country, where their children can be educated and never go to bed hungry. They soon set up strong networks of kin and neighbours, tightly interwoven with continuous coffee drinking, visiting, telephone calls, mourning rituals, and celebrations. Unpleasant aspects of daily life - “dirty” work in the factory, “rude” Israelis, uncontrollable children - are cast aside or “socialised” in the next round of coffee. The vast majority of Ethiopian young people have an overall positive attitude towards work, studies, and the army, and they strive for success in these fields.

However, in a manner reminiscent of their experience in Ethiopia, the Beta Israel have acquired low status in their new country. In Ethiopia, they were excluded from land ownership rights and were regarded by the dominant Amhara society as low status craftsmen and blacksmiths associated with evil, supernatural forces. In that milieu, they cultivated their ideology of difference and superiority by inverting Amhara ideology and casting the Amhara as the “dirty” and “polluting” group. Moreover, while the Amhara claimed Israelite descent, the Beta Israel described themselves as the “true Israelites” (the *Beta Israel*, lit.: the House of Israel) and upheld a vision of a return to Jerusalem where they would live as equals amongst fellow Jews. But after arriving in Jerusalem, they felt that once again they were despised; in their view, the authenticity of their Judaism was doubted, their skin was dark,

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<sup>228</sup> Avruch (1981) quotes a young man to give a lively example of the frustrations at trying to shed an ethnic identity in Israel: “The first guy who reached me when I was wounded [in the army] started talking to me *in English*. I mean, the shell exploded, and I was lying there in gore and shock, and this Israeli comes running up and bends over me, screaming “Medic!” and whispers [in a heavy Israeli accent], “Not worry, Dovid, not worry.” And I started cursing him, the worst profanities, in Hebrew and Arabic - I was hysterically enraged, crying like a baby - yelling in Hebrew: “Why *English!* I just paid the price to be an Israeli, you bastard!” (Avruch 1981: 172)

and they came from a “primitive” country. Therefore, while “integration” was a definite option, it came at a price: to join the bottom of the social and religious hierarchy.

The older generation assert that they have “become deaf” in Israel: they are unable to become artful masters of the Hebrew language and feelings of ignorance overcome them when they face Israeli institutions. Whilst, to a large extent, they can overcome such difficulties by avoiding Hebrew and Israelis, the repercussions within Beta Israel society are harder to bear. Their deafness reduces their status and authority in the eyes of their children and as the younger generation adopt new norms and gain greater relative control, old forms of hierarchy are jeopardised. Ethiopians feel that they are losing their ability to socialise their children according to either their own norms or those of the new society. This loss of control is epitomised by their inability to cure illness: while children wander off into a immoral haze, powerful medicine men are impotent to cure the troubles and tribulations within Beta Israel’s tummies, heads and hearts.

But the Ethiopian Jewish immigrants do not let themselves be defeated by such feelings. They resist. They took to the streets in 1985 against the Rabbinate’s demands for conversions, and again, in 1996, against the policy of discarding their blood donations. The most overt form of resistance is rejection of Israeli society altogether, and a minority of young people are adopting counter-cultures modelled either on Evangelical Christianity or on American Black culture.

Ethiopian Jewish immigrants also resist in more indirect ways, which are no less powerful; they engage in a variety of forms of “passive resistance”. They develop powerful counter-rhetorics to challenge dominant society’s negative ascriptions as they understand them. They cast themselves as the “true Jews”, who unlike all other Jews, respect the laws of Moses as set out in the Bible, unadulterated by later words “written by men”. Whilst purity laws are much modified in practice, Ethiopian adults speak of them as if they were unchanging. As in Ethiopia, their rhetoric of purity laws allows the Beta Israel to imagine themselves as superior to their neighbours. Young people are not much concerned with purity and develop instead a rhetoric of race. While they might have tried to ignore or downplay manifestations of Israeli “racism”, they chose instead to exaggerate it and fight against it. This is a means of “taking control” of the situation, making themselves feel “cleverer” than Israelis who are unable to dupe them.

Given Israel’s ideology of the “fusion of the exiles”, which assumes assimilation of incoming groups, consciously developing tight communal bonds and strong ethnic pride is

another strategy for the Beta Israel to overcome their marginality. In a continuous round of celebrations, Ethiopian Jews of all ages enact the prime idiom of “being together”. In this warm milieu, Beta Israel’s low status is far removed as they celebrate - or mourn - as proud Ethiopian Jews. Such occasions are communally financed by donations which bind the group together in a never-ending cycle of debt repayment. Weddings are apt manifestations of the dual orientation of Ethiopian Jewish youth. For the wedding starts Israeli style, in an Israeli Hall, and with the serving of Israeli food, including meat. But here, Ethiopians are not lavatory cleaners, they are masters of the occasion, paying non-Ethiopian staff to serve them, and they spend lavish sums of money. At the same time, these occasions are eminently “Ethiopian” in form and content, with Ethiopian music, dance, social etiquette and a week-end-long feast at home afterwards, for which a cow is slaughtered according to Beta Israel custom.

Another form of ‘everyday resistance’ involves a degree of voluntary deafness on the part of the older Beta Israel. They make little effort to learn the Hebrew language, the prime symbol of integration into Israeli society, and, when it suits them, they feign ignorance about the workings of Israeli society. The adult generation also refuse to adopt normative religious practices and uphold Beta Israel religious rituals as far as possible. For the older generation, better to remain proud Beta Israel than struggle to become second-class Ethiopian Israelis devalued in the eyes of society at large, especially in those of their own children.

Finally, Ethiopian Jewish immigrants seek to overcome the difficulties of the present by creating a perfect past and an ideal future. In what I have called the ‘homeland postponed’, all Jews will be united in a colour-blind world of material plenty and purity; this is the vision which sustains Beta Israel strength in the face of adversity and enables them to assert: “We are well in Israel”.

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