

## **Wanderers in the Homeland: The Plight of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel**

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With Project Moses in 1985, and then with Operation Solomon in 1991, around 48,000 Ethiopian Jews were airlifted from refugee camps in the Sudan to the nation which they considered to be their true homeland: Israel. The Ethiopian Jews, also known as Falasha (a pejorative term meaning “wanderer”), or Beta Israel (as they prefer to be called), escaped from conditions of religious persecution, as well as massive famine and illness, through these two dramatic operations carried out by the Israeli and American governments. However, their arrival in Israel was quite different than what they had expected of their return to what they believed to be their historical homeland. Upon arrival in Israel, the Beta Israel have had more trouble than any other immigrant group in their ardent attempts at assimilating into the general Israeli population. The question guiding the proposed research then, will involve an investigation of what specific aspects of Ethiopian-Jewish identity have lead the Beta Israel to feel that they are categorically different than the rest of the population of Israel, as well as those aspects of their identity that have lead the Israeli population to treat their Ethiopian brethren as different.

A review of the current literature concerning the difficulties of the Beta Israel in assimilating into Israeli society reveals that the problem is one which is understudied. Few studies have been written in English, and most of those disagree about the factors that have contributed to the difficulty of the Beta Israel. In contrast to studies of other immigrant groups in Israel, such as immigrants from the former Soviet Union, as well as of other minority groups in Israel, such as

*Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston*

Volume 3, 2004: pp. 72-91

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Israeli Arabs, there is relatively little research available concerning the plight of the Falasha. Although there is a sparse amount of secondary source material in English, there is virtually no primary source information, such as government policies or propaganda or statistics in English. Such a phenomenon may indicate that English scholars have not found research into the issue of Beta Israel assimilation to be as interesting a scholarly subject as Soviet immigrants or Israeli Arabs, or may just involve the fact that the subject has been overlooked by scholars outside of Israel.

The existing literature in English has focused mainly upon the difficulty of Israel, a nation of immigrants, in dealing with the unique immigrant group of the Beta Israel, and the negative effects that the Falasha's failure to assimilate has had on their population, economically and socially. Some essays are mainly explanatory and attempt to define and locate the Ethiopian Jews in their relation to Israeli Jews. For example, Leon Wieseltier examines the religious differences between the Beta Israel and mainstream Jews in "Brothers and Keepers: Black Jews and the Meaning of Zionism" (1985). Wieseltier first explains how the Falasha's brand of Judaism differs from traditional Judaism, since the Falasha lack any knowledge of the teachings of the Talmud (rabbinical rulings on the Torah, the first five books of the Bible). He then goes on to hypothesize as to why Israeli Jews decided to implement the airlift operations despite those differences. Wieseltier ultimately explains the airlifts as the result of the Jewish community's unwillingness, given their long history of religious persecution, to stand by idly while any group that could possibly be considered Jewish underwent religious persecution.

In "Ethiopian Jews in Israel: Socialization and Re-Education" (1985), Brian Weinstein details the Israeli government's procedure for aiding the assimilation of the Beta Israel. Weinstein then examines the role that the Beta Israel's interaction with other white Israelis outside of government programs plays in their ability to adapt to the modern, technologically advanced Israeli life that so differs from their experience as subsistence farmers in Ethiopia. Tegome Wagaw in *For Our Souls* (1993) expands on Weinstein's explanations of the absorption process by illustrating the tension experienced by Falasha between pressures to assimilate and to maintain their traditional culture, as

this tension is manifested in such institutional settings as primary education, secondary education and training, adult and continuing education, and work situations. Wagaw utilizes interviews within Israeli communities that have absorbed large numbers of Falasha to reveal the reasons some Israelis give for the creation and maintenance of separate educational and living facilities.

Other authors, such as Dvora Hacoen (“Mass Immigration and the Demographic Revolution in Israel,” 2002) are mainly concerned with describing the Israeli absorption administration’s activity in relation to the Beta Israel within the framework of the historical absorption of other groups, such as immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Hacoen details how the Israeli absorption administration focused on maintaining the distinct cultural heritage of the Falasha while simultaneously supporting their need for assimilation in a nod toward creating a more pluralistic society (2002, 184). In *The Maintenance and Transition of Ethnic Identity* (1995), Linda Begley Soroff also examines absorption issues related to Ethiopian immigration in the larger context of immigration such as the experience of Ashkenazi (Eastern European) and Sephardic (Middle Eastern) Jews. Soroff’s work details way earlier Ethiopian immigrants attempted to shed their unique cultural identities and become more like the earlier Sephardic or Ashkenazi immigrants, while new Ethiopian immigrants tend to maintain their distinct ethnic, cultural and religious values and practices as central to their own identity (1995, 222).

In “Blood and Other Libels: Israel’s Ethiopian Dilemma” (1996), Micah Odenheimer focuses on explaining the development of the Falasha as an economic underclass in Israeli society. Odenheimer points specifically to government practices of creating segregated schools as well as boarding schools for Beta Israel children, which have resulted in the undermining of parental authority as well as high dropout rates for teen Ethiopian Jews (1996, 2). In *The Trauma of Transition* (1997), Ruben Schindler and David Ribner also attempt to discern the extent to which certain Israeli institutions reflect discrimination against Ethiopian immigrants. Schindler and Ribner, like Odenheimer, address the issue of the decision of the Absorption Ministry to place Falasha children in boarding schools for their education, and the ramifications of that decision for the parent-child

relationship in Ethiopian families and the transmission from parent to child of Ethiopian culture (1997, 53). The authors also discuss Ethiopian participation in the military and the ways in which Ethiopian youth feel that such participation allows for their best chances of assimilation. Schindler and Ribner write that Ethiopian Jewish youth are motivated to participate in the military to prove their loyalty to their country, and thus the extent to which they are truly Israelis, by fighting, and perhaps dying, for Israel (1997, 55).

Additionally, in "The Experience of Being Different: Black Jews in Israel" (1997), Amith Ben-David and Adital Tirosh Ben-Ari use quantitative statistical analysis to analyze the Falasha's experience of marginality in Israeli life. The authors define race, feelings of despair and sorrow, a sense of being under-appreciated in their professional life, difficulty in making many ties outside of their own community, and internalization of the social cues concerning their differences from the rest of Israelis as factors associated with the Falasha's experience (1997, 1). Ben-David and Ben-Ari ultimately focus on the Falasha's racial identity as the single most important factor in their experiences involving attempts at assimilation (1997, 5).

In contrast, Durranda Ojanga uses his own statistical analysis to deny the claim that race is a predominant factor in the experience of the Falasha in "The Ethiopian Jewish Experience as Blacks in Israel" (1993). Using statistical analysis to analyze interviews with new Ethiopian Jewish immigrants in Israel, as well as Beta Israel who had already gone through the assimilation process, Ojanga concludes that ethnocentrism rather than overt racism has contributed to the difficulty of Beta Israel in their attempt to be absorbed by Israeli society (1993, 147-158). Ojanga attributes this ethnocentrism to the cultural differences between the Ethiopians, whose life in their native country was largely agrarian, and the Israelis, who are members of a modern industrial nation (1993, 152). Ojanga hypothesizes that the Falasha's experiences within Israeli institutions such as schools, the military, public accommodations, social events and housing indicates that the Israeli perception of the Ethiopian Jews as being backwards, and not racist perceptions, have lead to their social and economic difficulties (1993, 152).

In addition to issues of race and cultural backwardness, authors

David S. Ribner and Ruben Schindler examine the role that perceptions of difference of the Beta Israel's religious identity have played in Israel. In "The Crisis of Religious Identity Among Ethiopian Immigrants in Israel" (1996), Ribner and Schindler first outline the aspects of Falasha religious practices that differ from mainstream Judaism. The authors identify these differences as stemming from the historical isolation of Ethiopian Jews from mainstream Jewry, and their subsequent lack of knowledge of the Talmud, the traditional rabbinic interpretation of the Torah. This isolation has led the Ethiopian Jews to develop different practices in regards to the Sabbath, holidays, the religious calendar and practices concerning ritual purity (1996, 10). Ribner and Schindler go on to examine how such differences led to demands by the Orthodox rabbis that largely control Israeli religious institutions that the Falasha undergo ritual immersion once they entered the country. The symbolic bathing rituals were meant to cleanse the Beta Israel of impurities that the Israeli rabbis associated with their life in ignorance of the Talmudic teachings and to certify the Falasha as "full Jews" (1996, 10). The authors go on to examine how such demands for ritual immersion were opposed by the Falasha as an assault on their identity as Jews (1996, 110-117), and the way the issue became politicized by Israelis already divided over religious issues.

In "Transplanted in Time" (1991) Jon D. Hull, presents an alternate viewpoint by characterizing the Falasha's experience in assimilating into Israeli society as largely positive. One factor Hull points to is the Beta Israel's relatively smooth assimilation into the Israeli army, an institution that he describes as a sort of "cultural blender" (1991, 1). Hull also discounts the religious debate over the "Jewishness" of Falasha, stating that the demands for ritual immersion have been left in the past and no longer represent a stigma for the Beta Israel (1991, 1). Finally, Hull maintains, in contrast to the assertions of other authors, that a ghettoization of Ethiopian Jews has been avoided in Israel by careful planning by the absorption administration (1991, 1).

As can be gleaned from this summary of the existing English-language literature, there is a wide array of speculation about the specific factors of identity that have played a role in the difficulty of the Falasha in assimilating into Israeli society, as well as about the social institutions that should be examined as indicators of that failure

to assimilate. The research that follows represents a unique endeavor to consider *both religious and racial* notions of identity, as well as the full spectrum of social institutions including government housing, economic indicators, social status and military integration in assessing the assimilation question. The present research is also unique in that it attempts to illustrate the shortcomings of current research into Falasha assimilation and to point out the specific areas in need of further examination in English.

This study will hypothesize that the Beta Israel's identity as the only black immigrant group in a majority white, Ashkenazi Jewish nation, as well as their religious identity, which differs widely from traditional Judaism because of the Beta Israel's historical isolation from world Jewry, have led to difficulties in assimilation which are manifested and can be measured through such factors as government housing projects, grade school education, disparities in income between the Beta Israel and the rest of the Israeli population, and job performance expectations for the Beta Israel. In order to discern the accuracy of the hypothesis, *New York Times* articles concerning the Falasha dating from 1985 through 1997 were consulted. Events reported in the *Times* related to the interaction between the Beta Israel and the Israel government or native Israelis were analyzed in order to discern whether issues of difference related to race and religion between the Falasha and veteran Israelis did indeed result in difficulties of assimilation which could be observed through the aforementioned indicators.

A survey of the relevant events as reported in the *New York Times* revealed that religion did indeed represent a significant factor of difference between the Israelis and the Beta Israel. Since the initial rescue operations, the Israeli rabbinate, which serves as an official governmental body in Israel where there is no separation of church and state, has constantly challenged the authenticity or purity of the Falasha's form of Judaism. This challenge has taken the form of mandates that Beta Israel undergo ritual immersion before marriage ceremonies, that the Beta Israel men undergo ritual circumcision rites, and that the kessim, or ritual leaders of the Beta Israel, undergo the same training as Israeli rabbis before they perform religious ceremonies.

The rabbinate's insistence on the ritual conversion of the Falasha resulted in widespread protest against that mandate by the Beta Israel.

For example, in 1985, following one of the original airlifts that brought Ethiopian Jews into Israel, “Hundreds of newly arrived Ethiopian Jews set out...to protest the refusal of Israel’s chief rabbis to recognize them as full Jews” (Friedman, 1985, 1). The Falasha were particularly frustrated by the refusal of Israeli rabbis to perform wedding ceremonies until the Falasha underwent the conversion through ritual immersion in a mikvah, or ritual bath (Friedman, 1985, 1). In protest, “The Ethiopians had planned to walk from northern Israel to the airport in Tel Aviv. The Israeli radio reported that several of the marchers collapsed along the road from the heat”(Friedman, 1985, 1). The Beta Israel’s decision to walk back toward the Tel Aviv airport, where they were initially delivered into what they had once considered the Promised Land, was symbolic of the fact that they would rather return to the hardships and persecution they had faced in Ethiopia than have the authenticity of their Judaism challenged in Israel. They were so adamant about their cause that some collapsed on the walk rather than turning back toward their absorption centers because of the heat. The rabbinate responded by weakening their demand for ritual conversion. The next month, the *New York Times* reported, “The Chief Rabbis, Avraham Shapira and Mordechai Eliahu, said in a statement issued along with Prime Minister Peres that they would not insist on ritual immersion as a condition for the acceptance of the Ethiopian Jews as ‘a community within the Jewish people’” (“Chief Rabbis in Israel Will Relent On Conversion Rite for Ethiopians,” 1985, 1). Despite this initial capitulation, the rabbinate went on to set up a standard that still served to challenge the religious purity of the Beta Israel. “They [the chief rabbis] insisted, however, that they would look into the family history of each Ethiopian who wanted to marry and would require those whose forefathers had intermarried with non-Jews to undergo the ritual immersion before allowing them to marry in Israel” (1985, 1). This dictate led to additional protests: “A month long strike and sit-in by hundreds of Ethiopian Jews against Israel’s Chief Rabbinate ended today with an agreement between the protesters and the rabbis over how to determine whether individual Ethiopian immigrants are Jewish” (“Ethiopian Jews Reach Accord With Israeli Rabbis on Status,” 1985, 1). The rabbinate responded to the Falasha’s protests by utilizing methods of cooption: “Under the agreement,

special religious courts are to be formed by the Ethiopians religious leaders, who are called kessim. The courts are to trace the ancestors of each Ethiopian immigrant who registers for marriage, and determine whether the immigrant qualifies as a Jew” (1985, 1). Such a policy allowed for the rabbis to continue symbolically to contest the Judaism of the Falasha, while stifling protests by making the Falasha’s own religious leaders the judges of their people’s Judaism. Even with this policy, as of 1992, Ethiopian Jews still had to “undergo a symbolic conversion to Judaism unless they go before the one rabbi in Israel authorized to dispense with such a ritual”(Haberman, 1992, 1). Thus, despite all of the seeming concessions made to the Falasha as a result of their protests, the rabbinate continued to pursue a policy in which the Falasha’s Judaism was effectively challenged by the necessity of undergoing ritual conversions before marriage ceremonies.

The rabbinate’s insistence on ritual conversion was not their only challenge to the authenticity of the Falasha’s brand of Judaism. “At first the rabbis insisted that the men undergo a symbolic circumcision involving just a tiny cut with a needle. After protests arose, however, this was dropped in November 1984 and the rabbis said the men and women must immerse themselves in the mikvah” (Friedman, 1). Such a policy change reaffirms the notion that the rabbis typically responded to Falasha’s protests against the rabbinate’s mandates by capitulating on one policy while continuing such their challenge to Falasha Judaism through another symbolically similar policy.

In one case involving the Falasha’s religious leaders, or kessim, the rabbinate failed to capitulate at all, and stood behind its insistence that the Falasha conform to the religious laws and practices of Israeli Jews. In 1992, the *Times* reported that “Jews who were airlifted here from Ethiopia complain that Israel’s religious and civil authorities treat them as somehow less Jewish than others. Many of them became angry enough about it to stage repeated protests this month, including several that spilled into violence outside the Prime Minister’s office. The issue at stake was the legal and religious status of the Ethiopian Jews’ traditional spiritual leaders” (Haberman, 1992, 1). In this case, the rabbinate insisted that the kessim must study all relevant Jewish law and pass a certification exam before they could preside over marriages, divorces, circumcisions and funerals (Haberman, 1992, 1).



Rami Sadn, a Chief Rabbinate spokesman, stated, “By no means can we allow a marriage certificate to be signed by someone who is not versed in the law” (quoted in Haberman, 1992, 1).

Our examination of the mandates of the rabbinate for mikvah, ritual circumcision and certification exams for the kessim has revealed that religion does indeed represent a divisive impediment to the Beta Israel’s assimilation in Israel. The question of whether or not race represents a impediment parallel to that of religion is a significantly more contested issue. In general, most native Israelis seem to demonstrate a hesitation to identify race by itself as a problem: they tend to conflate race with levels of modernity, ethnicity and other factors of difference instead of recognizing race directly as the factor at issue. Such a hesitance to acknowledge racism in Israel is perhaps endemic to the society in that the political ideology of Zionism entails welcoming all Jews of the Diaspora into Israel. There seems to be no room in this ideology for racism, since race becomes irrelevant under the uniting bond of Judaism. But while native Israelis seem slow to acknowledge the issue of race directly, the Beta Israel are more inclined to identify race as one of the main factors inhibiting their much sought after assimilation into the Israeli mainstream.

The hesitancy of native Israelis to implicate race as a factor in the Falasha’s assimilation difficulties was exhibited in the case of a violent clash between Ethiopian and Soviet immigrants in 1991 at the Diplomat Hotel, where members of both groups were being temporarily housed by the government. Three men and women from the Soviet Union were wounded after a scuffle involving the use of stones, iron bars and possibly knives (Haberman, 1991, 1). Clyde Haberman wrote, “At first glance, and to the embarrassment of Israeli officials, the incident seemed to reflect nasty racial divisions between the black Jews from Ethiopia and the white Jews from the Soviet Union. Some former Soviet citizens accused the Ethiopians of being lazy, while the Ethiopians complained that the people on the other side had not left anti-black prejudice at home” (1991, 1). However, the Israeli officials were quick to deny that the incident really reflected racial tensions, and instead “insisted that the problems are rooted...in the different strategies that have been used to incorporate each group into the society” (Haberman, 1991, 1). By these “different strategies” for

absorption, the officials were referring to the fact that the Jewish Agency paid for the rent and food of all Ethiopian immigrants, while the Soviet immigrants were given \$9,000 per family their first year in Israel but then had to pay for their food and rent themselves (Haberman, 1991, 1). The Israeli officials thus viewed the scuffle as resulting from the Soviet immigrants' resentment towards the Ethiopian immigrants because of what they perceived of as the better treatment they were receiving from the Israeli government. As a later *Times* article put it, "Israelis took pride in the belief that racism was not among their problems. Some snobbery on the part of the native-born, or 'sabras,' perhaps, or some regrettable stereotyping, some inescapable disputes over resources, a dollop of paternalism and bureaucracy; but most Israeli seemed to take it for granted that what was being done for the immigrants was done for their own good" (Schmemmann, 1996, 1). However, this refusal to acknowledge the involvement of race as one issue in the struggle seems somewhat false in that scarce resources often represent a catalyst to violence that involves race. However, whether or not racism was the actual reason behind decisions made by the government and individual citizens that hindered Beta Israel assimilation, the result of those policies was that the society appears divided along racial lines. As Rabbi Micha Odenheimer, director of the Israeli Association for Ethiopian Jews, stated, "I don't think racism is the motivation, but the result is to create a real danger of a racial demarcation of an underclass, which will cause Ethiopians to feel that they're being discriminated against because of race (Schmemmann, 1996, 1).

In fact, the creation of a racial underclass does seem to have resulted in the Falasha's perception that they are being discriminated against because of their race. The clearest example of an Israeli government policy that Falasha identified as directly linked to race and as having implications for their ability to assimilate into Israeli society involved the 1996 incident in which the Israeli blood-collection agency, Magen David Adom, was discovered to have been enacting a policy of dumping blood donated by Ethiopian Jews because of fear concerning the relatively high level of HIV infection in Africa. The Ethiopian Jews' concerns that the policy was racially motivated were exhibited by the banners that they held up in protest, several of which

proclaimed “Apartheid in Israel” (Schmemmann, 1996, 1). One protester, Ziva Tedela, 23, stated, “I did two year in the army to became a citizen of Israel like everybody else...When they tell me that since 1984 they’ve been spilling the blood, it feels like the army means nothing, that I’ll never be part of Israel, because my color is black and my body is contaminated. It really hurts” (quoted in Schmemmann, 1996, 1). Such an incident reveals that whatever the Israeli government and native Israelis might say or think, the Beta Israel themselves have come to see race as paramount in their inability to enter the mainstream of Israeli society.

In addition to race and religion, another characteristic of the Falasha that has been perceived as making them different involves the perception by that they are primitive or backwards people who have not reached the same levels of modernity as the Israelis. While it may seem as if perceptions of racial inferiority and of backwardness are part of the same phenomenon, an analysis of the interactions between the Falasha and native Israelis reveals that views of the Falasha as primitive are rooted less in racism than in views, about geographic origin, in presuppositions that native Israelis have about levels of modernity in Ethiopia. Although the Falasha’s existence in Ethiopia was communal and was based on subsistence farming, and although they certainly did find the transition to the technologically advanced Israeli society jarring, it is often the case that these difference in levels of modernity are conceived of or portrayed in pejorative terms. The Ethiopian Jews “...have quickly come to resent stories in the Hebrew press that portray their first days here when some of them supposedly put their shoes in the refrigerator or washed their clothes in the toilet” (Friedman, 1985, 1). The Ethiopians are often portrayed by the media as Tarzan-like peoples who have lived in the African wilderness and thus have no familiarity with modern life, which is often not the case. Many of the Falasha had been introduced to or at least seen modern technology before immigrating to Israel. Nevertheless, Falasha were typically portrayed by the media as “people from the 17<sup>th</sup> century coming off a plane into the 20<sup>th</sup> century...people with beautiful black faces who were home now after 2,000 years of waiting” (Hershenson, 1991, 1). One negative outcome of the media’s portrayal of Ethiopians as pre-modern was that the Ethiopians themselves internalized this

stereotype to some extent. As an official from the Absorption Ministry stated, "...most Ethiopians rejected farming because they regard it as a step backward, something they would do in Ethiopia but would not do in Jerusalem" (Friedman, 1986, 1). This refusal to farm for fear of seeming backward has resulted in the elimination of the only job that many of the Falasha were able to succeed in immediately without additional skills or language training. The presumption that the Falasha were primitive was also used to excuse deficiencies in government programs aimed at absorbing the Beta Israel. "When complaints arose over the problems with education and slow rates of assimilation, these were often dismissed as glitches in the transition of a people from subsistence in Africa to this high-tech society"(Schmemmann, 1996, 1).

The treatment of Falasha as different because of their race, religion and perceived primitiveness has resulted in their difficulty in being absorbed into Israeli society, and that difficulty has manifested itself through several different indicators. The first indicator involves quality of education. The Israeli government has made several decisions involving the primary school education of Ethiopian Jewish children that has negatively affected the Falasha. First, the Ministry of Absorption placed Falasha children into religious schools because of the perception that the Ethiopians' brand of Judaism was much more devout than that of native, mainly secular Israelis. "All the while, frustration and anger was rising among Ethiopian Jews...their children were compelled to attend substandard religious schools"(Schmemmann, 1996, 1). The choice to place the children in religious schools was questionable, given that most of them would have benefited more from being taught the practical skills they would learn in a secular school, since most were illiterate when they immigrated, even in their native Aramaic. For this reason, among others, the Falasha were perceived of as being slower to learn than others, and thus the Israeli education ministry, responding to native Israelis' concerns that the Ethiopian children's' presence in classrooms would retard the pace of learning for their own children, placed the Falasha children in separate classes (Greenberg, 1992, 1).

Another decision made concerning the Falasha children's education that negatively affected their assimilation was the decision to place the vast majority of them in boarding schools. Although the Israeli

government did not mandate that the children attend boarding schools, only the wealthiest of the Ethiopian immigrants' children could attend the religious schools because the parents had to pay if they chose that method of education. However, if the parents sent their children to the boarding schools, the government paid for their food, board, books and education (Wagaw, 1993, 54). But the breakup of families resulting from the placement of children into boarding schools resulted in "the crumbling of parental authority that has produced deep disorientation among the immigrant and deepened the depressive effects of the rabbinical challenge to their Jewishness" (Kamm, 1986, 1).

Additionally, there have been widespread reports that government money earmarked for Ethiopian Jewish children to pay for books and tutorials to bring those children up to speed has been extorted or otherwise wrongly used by education officials. "What happens when the Ministry of Education is accused of assigning Ethiopian Jews to weak schools and not supplying books and materials? Defensiveness reigns: a bureaucrat proudly points to an uncut budget and issues a release warning critics 'not to keep publicizing...weaknesses and failures'" (Safire, 1997, 1). The government's unwillingness to address such issues seems to be linked to the fact that the Falasha's inability to assimilate into society has relegated them to an economic and social underclass that is almost powerless, and thus the Israeli government does not feel the imperative to act positively on their behalf to institute change. As stated by Shula Mola, director of the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, "Would ministry officials have been so complacent if the money had been directed towards their own children? Or is the fact that the children are from the lowest socioeconomic sectors in Israel a factor? I think it is" (Mola, 2003, 2).

Issues related to the placement of Falasha in government housing facilities also indicate their difficulty in assimilation. Troubles related to the issue of Israeli government placement of the Falasha into housing takes two main forms. One form involves complaints by native residents of communities in which the Falasha are placed about the detrimental effects that the Falasha might have on their communities: "More troubling is the resistance to the Ethiopians from financially strapped development towns where many of them are being sent. These towns are already burdened with unemployment, chronic

shortages of funds and social tensions. The mayors of several development towns asked the government to send no more than a few Ethiopians, not because of color, but because of lack of cash” (Friedman, 1985, 1). However, because such protests appear to have been virtually non-existent in the case of poor Russian immigrants, the question of whether race plays a role in certain communities’ unwillingness to accept Falasha remains open. The other manifestation of the government housing problem involves Falasha complaints over the lack of permanent housing and over the quality of the housing in which they are placed. Protests by the Beta Israel over housing are common. Joel Greenberg reported in 1992, “Resentment over lack of permanent housing has begun to boil over, and protests have broken out in the Northern town of Acre and the coastal city of Ashkelon” (Greenberg, 1992, 1). Such resentment among the Falasha seemed to stem from the perceived gap between the guarantees the government initially made concerning housing and the actuality of the Falasha’s living situation. Greenberg reported, “But more than a year later, more than half remain in trailer camps like this one in the rolling farmland between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv....Nearly all the rest remain in hotels and dormitories. Only a few have apartments in Israeli communities, a far cry from Government promises of real housing within a year” (1992, 1). The case represents another example of the fact that while government policies might not be racially motivated, they have resulted in the creation of a racial demarcation that causes the Falasha to perceive the government’s actions as racially motivated. Avi Bitaw, a leader of the United Ethiopian Jewish Organization, stated, “Mobile homes are better than hotel rooms, but they could become transit camps of the year 2000, neighborhoods for blacks”(quoted in Greenberg, 1992, 1). As the temporary housing solutions begin to appear permanent, the Israeli government risks creating black ghettos that will obviously represent a huge hindrance to Falasha integration. Although the Beta Israel are unquestionably much worse off economically than native Israelis, this survey of newspaper articles revealed only a few direct references to the economic difficulties of the Beta Israel. This could possibly stem from the fact that this situation is so well known in Israel that it goes unsaid, or alternately that problems with poverty are assumed from other references made

in articles to difficulties with housing, employment and education, which relate to low income. One of the few *Times* references to the Falasha's economic hardships stated, "Although most [Falasha] live in far better conditions than the misery they fled from, they are poorer than other recent immigrants. Half are unemployed" (Safire, 1997, 1). A 1986 article gave a more personal account, reporting on two Beta Israel immigrants who had immigrated to Israel five years earlier: "Mr. Yosef, 54 years old, speaks little Hebrew, works at a semi-skilled job in a textile plant and takes home about 350 shekels (\$240) a month. Mr. Brahna, 26, carried a Hebrew newspaper under his arm and is a garage mechanic. His take-home pay is about 500 shekels (\$340)" (Kamm, 1986, 1). Although such references to the economic hardships endured by the Falasha seem few and far between in the press, some statistics gained from the Israeli Association for Ethiopian Jews (IAEJ) can aid in supplementing an understanding of the exact nature of the Falasha's economic situation. "Seventy percent of Ethiopian families have no incoming salary...Sixty-three percent of Ethiopians work in non-professional fields...The average Ethiopian salary is below the poverty line...Only thirty-one percent of Ethiopian fathers and ten percent of Ethiopian mothers are employed" ("Facts about the Community," 2003). Such grim statistics seem to be largely the result of the fact that the Israeli government's attempts at educating the adult population of the Falasha, especially in basic Hebrew proficiency, have been inadequate: "...Isolation is deepened...by inadequate language training for adults, which is a handicap in the search for jobs" (Greenberg, 1992, 1). The creation of a black economic underclass in Israel has thus been largely unaddressed by the Israeli, as well as the international, press, and steps that might lead to the amelioration of some of the economic difficulties, such as better language and skill training for Falasha adults, have not been taken by the government.

The identification of negative expectations for the Falasha in the workplace as a factor indicating the difficulties of the Falasha in assimilating is only marginally supported by newspaper accounts. The *Times* reported in 1986, "Of the 8,000 who were brought here in the much-publicized Operation Moses, the Absorption Ministry considers 2,000 as presently employable" (Kamm, 1986, 1). This fact is



somewhat questionable, considering that the majority of the Falasha immigrants were previously farmers and so perhaps could have been employed in such a capacity. However, those skills would have had to be supplemented by education about more modern farming techniques, a project which the Israeli Absorption Ministry did not undertake. Leaving aside farming jobs, many of the Beta Israel probably were unemployable because of their lack of proficiency in Hebrew. But as previously stated, the absorption ministry's efforts to train the Falasha in Hebrew were inadequate. Perhaps the most negative consequence of such statements by the government concerning the unemployability of the Falasha, and also the experience of the Falasha in attempting to attain jobs, was that many of them have internalized the message they have received from Israeli society. Shula Mola, a 25 year old Ethiopian Jew who was determined to become a teacher, stated, "Too many people think we cannot do well. They should expect more from us" (quoted in Safire, 1997, 1). Such internalization is dangerous: while for some, like Shula Mola, it may result in a heightened resolve to prove native Israelis wrong by succeeding, for others it will inevitably result in a complacency resulting from lowered expectations that perpetuates the cycle of unemployment, poverty and despair.

A final factor hindering the Falasha in their attempt to assimilate involves their experience in the military. Most authors who have previously conducted work on the Falasha characterize the military experience of the Beta Israel as one of the few government mechanisms that have actually resulted in helping some Beta Israel to assimilate. For example, Ruben Schindler and David Ribner write, "Throughout the country's history, the armed forces...have served as the great equalizer — forcing people from diverse backgrounds to spend an extended period of time in each other's company, often under trying and dangerous circumstances"(1997, 55). However, an examination of newspaper articles in which journalists actually interviewed Falasha who had served in the military suggest a somewhat different picture. In 1996, the *Times* reported "a suicide of an Ethiopian soldier, the latest of as many of 20 suicides during the last two years among Ethiopian Jewish recruits that apparently resulted from their difficulty in adjusting to the rough and unfamiliar world of the



army”(Schmemmann, 1). While some of the suicides may have resulted from the culture shock associated with entering the army, interviews with other soldiers reveal that discrimination because of race may have played some part. “While some spoke of specific incidents of racial discrimination, others talked of a broad sense of not being accepted. Young soldiers told of being assigned to guard duty on night when there were parties” (Schmemmann, 1996, 1).

The original supposition concerning the nexus between issues of racial and religious difference and the manifestation of those differences in the difficulty of Falasha in assimilating into Israeli society, as indicated by the aforementioned institutional factors, has been confirmed through a study of events in Israel as related in *New York Times* articles. However, while there was ample evidence for those factors of race, religion, education and government housing, the factors of economic disparities and poor job expectations received less attention by the foreign and Israeli press. However, it seems quite likely that this lack of attention does not indicate that those factors do not exist, or are not good indicators of hindrances to assimilation. Instead, they may be so ingrained in the experience of the Falasha that they are taken for granted. It also appears that the media was inclined to focus on more tangible issues of education and housing. Beyond this, this review of events relating to Beta Israel immigration has revealed two additional factors. First, the issue of relative modernity, or perceptions of primitiveness, revealed itself to be a separate and quite influential difference which hindered the Beta Israel in their attempts to assimilate. Additionally, the study revealed that the military also represented an Israeli institution in which discrimination against the Falasha was manifested. Such a revelation is significant since it points to the severity of the problem of Falasha assimilation, in that even the military, which is usually seen as an institution which unites the diversity of Israelis, has been incapable of ameliorating the alienation between the Beta Israel and native Israelis.

The study conducted here also provides some indication of the need for future research into the topic by English-speaking investigators and analysts. While this analysis of newspaper articles has helped to illuminate some of the reasons for the Ethiopian Jews’ difficulty in

entering the mainstream of Israeli society, much more could be understood if a wider array of information could be accessed by the English-speaking researcher. It would thus seem worthwhile for those English speakers interested in the Falasha and dedicated to their cause to work with Hebrew-speaking scholars in translating important government documents related to the Beta Israel into English. Very little currently exists in English concerning Israeli government policies, propaganda, press releases or research statistics on the Falasha. It is these sort of concrete sources that would aid in an even greater appreciation of the Ethiopian Jewish question that could lead to policy proposals that might better the current plight of the Falasha.

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