

CERS Working paper

Racism in Israel: The case of Ethiopian Jews (Falasha)

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The case of Ethiopian Jews in Israel is a complex situation with many factors that are hard to describe without looking briefly at the history of both countries: Ethiopia & Israel. The story of how a group of people in remote parts of the horn of Africa came to exist in modern day Israel is interesting to say the least. The shift from a 3rd world African country to a racially divided and economically more stable part of the world is a journey by itself. One of the major and integral parts of this interaction between ethnicities is the religious side to this debate. The policies that allowed the current situation (Ethiopians as citizens in Israel) are fundamentally based on the religious affiliation of the Ethiopians, although Jewishness as a concept is multi-dimensional in itself as it can refer to the practice of Judaism or the biological ethnic distinction passed on maternally. The issues of discrimination towards this group of immigrants is widely documented, the processes by which race has come to play a major part in these people's lives is complex in a Middle Eastern context. There are many facets to this form of racialization which is not only expressed overtly by outward racism from citizens but on a more structural level, the way in which institutions are working. The socio-economic conditions of the Falasha is one factor that makes them a disadvantaged group, they faced many physical & psychological challenges on their journey to the 'promised land', as well as facing increasing problems due to their skin colour and practice of their own style of Judaism as citizens in Israel. The lives of other immigrants is a good point of comparison as it highlights the apparent contradictions in Israeli policy as well as raising other covert issues such as underlying racial prejudices embedded in Israeli society. The Falasha are a unique case in contrast to other immigrant groups in Israel, such as Palestinians who have a very long history, and other African immigrants who do not have the same rights as Ethiopians due to their 'illegal' status or on the count of them not being Jewish: a core aspect of what it means to be an Israeli citizen. A final dimension that chronicles the lives of this group of people is beyond their day to day lives and explores how they are becoming a part of the society. The integration of the Falasha into mainstream society is an ongoing struggle for the marginalized group; it may come in different forms such as actively or passively resisting or conforming through assimilation. For the future of this ongoing co-existence there are still many unanswered questions about the state of their integration process. Recent trends may point towards a bleak future for the absorption of this small group of Africans in a predominantly white state.

History and Religion

The history of the Ethiopian Jews is one of mystery, as there has been no definitive answer given as to how they came to be. There are however many theories that have now become widely accepted as true. 'The controversial story of Beta Israel origins can be clarified by using elements from the three main perspectives - the Lost Tribe, Convert and Rebel views' (Quirin, 1998: 198). The multitude of theories on the origins of the Ethiopian is proof of the mystery that surrounds their genesis. However the name that is given to them can shed some light on their foggy history. 'The term Falasha is derived from the Ge'ez or Amharic word mafias, 'to remove', and denotes people without land or roots, strangers, although most Ethiopian Jews now prefer to be known as Beta Israel' (Wagaw, 1991:557). In essence their name means people without land, or strangers, this is interesting as they are natives of Ethiopia geographically but are seen as different internally within their own land. A brief history of the term highlights the origin of the name: 'After Yeshaq won the battle he forced the Israelites [Beta Israel] to become Christians. This, the Israelites refused to do. They didn't want to be Christians. Because of that, he declared they should not have rest land. After that, the Israelites were called 'faldsyan'. That means those people who did not have land. Because they didn't have land, they were working as carpenters and builders and the women were doing pottery work' (Quirin, 1998: 201). Already within the Ethiopian context the Falasha are discriminated against on religious grounds

as such they assume the position of outsiders in their own home. Their religion seemed to be the defining aspect of these people, a point of contention and the basis of their identity. 'The Beta Israel closely followed the Torah, called the Orit and written in Ga'ez, an ancient Semitic language' (JRC, 2014). In spite of their dedication to the Jewish faith, their Jewishness is contested. 'Under the usual definition, a Jew was someone who was born to a Jewish mother or who had converted to Judaism) in other words, a person could be a Jew simply by having a Jewish mother and without professing a religion' (United Nations, 1987). Technically the Falasha qualified, however 'Because the Jewish haplotypes VII and VIII are not represented in the Falasha population, we conclude that the Falasha people descended from ancient inhabitants of Ethiopia who converted to Judaism' (Lucotte et al, 1998). The DNA evidence suggests that the Falasha are not related to Israelites, this could explain why some adopt this view also.

There were many push & pull factors that lead to the relocation of the Falasha, internally within Ethiopia itself political unrest, changing climate of power relations made it a volatile time as explained in this convenient quote:

The immediate reasons for the mass exodus of the Ethiopian Jews included (1) the drought and the consequent famine that became increasingly acute after 1973; (2) the civil strife and military activities within Ethiopia which continued to worsen following the 1974 revolution; (3) the increased awareness of religious rights within the Ethiopian union following the 1976 declaration of the Democratic Charter, and (4), just as important as any of these for the Falasha, the availability of another viable home. (Wagaw, 1991:561)

The operation was quick but got picked up by the media making it a worldwide news event, 'In 1984 and 1991, in two dramatic operations, the Israeli government airlifted the community of the Beta Israel, the Jews of Ethiopia, to a new life in Israel' (Salamon, 2003:3). This drastic move from a third world country to a more economically developed country on another continent was deemed a rescue mission based on the condition of Ethiopia at the time.

'The Jewish portion of Israeli society is composed of Jews from different backgrounds, including Ashkenazi Jews from a predominantly East European background and Sephardi Jews originating primarily in North Africa and the Middle East. Although different groups have different skin colors, the Ethiopian population still stands out for its black skin. Today, there are also small numbers of migrant workers and refugees from African countries' (Walsh & Mashiach, 2012:72). As quickly as they came from persecution, the Falasha were marginalized as a group due to the differences in practice of Judaism which deferred to that of the native Israeli Jews. 'The Beta Israel were completely isolated from the Jewish world and believed they were the only remnant. Because of their isolation, the exclusive belief in the Pentateuch based on the Old Testament, unfamiliarity with the Hebrew language and exposure to missionaries, their Jewishness was questioned' (Schindler, 1993: 12). The conflict arose due to cultural differences, the new immigrants up that point were unaware of other Jews, as such there was hostility based on confusion, however it came from the Israeli side. 'Despite overwhelming odds, the ancient bond with Jerusalem became the rallying cause, providing the motivation to press forward. More importantly, their religious identity, which had been retained during centuries of discrimination in Ethiopia, was questioned in Israel. Ethiopian Jews have been coping with migratory problems, cultural differences, the dissolution of their community base, and the disintegration of their families' (Ben-David & Ben- Ari: 512). They as a group of people had already been through many tribulations, especially in their motherland; as such Israel was supposed to be their saviour. Due to the ignorance on both sides to each other's existence there was some conflict on religious basis, for example Falasha Judaism and Talmudic-Rabbinic Judaism were very different, the way they were practicing was also in contrast to one another coupled with their specific interpretations it gave rise to tension and early forms of institutional discrimination (Abbink, 1984). The significance of this is that the State of Israel is founded on the principals of Jewishness as a lifestyle, most importantly in a religious sense; it is tied to the very fabric of the society. In Israel, the Ethiopian Jews had to encounter problems of adaptation. Beyond the language question, they were confronted by psychological problems and cultural adjustment. The most painful of these was the refusal to recognize their religious leaders. They also constantly face racism in Israel (Mengesha, 1999:177). The repercussions of this are far from just discrimination they are a tool of segregation, by not accepting the Ethiopians system and religious leaders they further stagnate their integration into mainstream society. This form of misunderstanding only worsens relations between Ethiopians who

actively wish to join in and the Israeli authority who prevent them. This comes down to a lack of respect for their culture and lack of understanding. 'Their spiritual leaders, the Kesses, do not have rabbinical status and their religious authority is not recognized by the rabbinical authorities' (Ben-David & Ben-Ari, 1997:512).

Discrimination, Immigration and Integration

Unlike other immigrants to Israel the Falasha present a unique circumstance as they were brought over by the government and as such expected to feel welcomed. 'Fifty-three thousand Ethiopian immigrants currently live in Israel. They constitute about 1% of Israel's population, thereby representing a significant minority in the country' (Ben-David & Ben-Ari, 1997:511). The case of these people is that they are already a minority group who are outsiders and only constitute a small number of the population. 'The Beta Israel were brought to Israel neither for short-term educational programmes nor to serve as guest workers, but to take their place as citizens of the country' (Kaplan, 1999: 535). As such the mere idea of them facing discrimination, at least on an institutional level seemed counter-productive.. As a group they faced institutional discrimination in the form of restrictions in all aspects of social life as well as common forms of overt racism by citizens. 'A 1998 article reports that "Falashas have regularly complained of racial discrimination in Israel and are regarded as one of the least-integrated immigrant groups in Israeli society" (DPA 30 Mar. 1998, cited in Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada: 2002). 'The strains of immigration were further compounded by language problems, a breakdown of roles, particularly among the elderly, and the difficulty of finding collective housing which the immigrants viewed as critical for individual support' (Schindler, 1993: 13). Ethiopian Jews were subject to discrimination in Ethiopia, and now in Israel too, this however was not just simple discrimination against a foreign group. 'On a level no less fundamental to their identity, upon immigration to Israel the Ethiopian Jews found themselves turned into "blacks" in a new context' (Salamon, 2003:7). This wasn't simply a matter of basic discrimination it was racism based on skin colour. This however is not surprising given the inherent prevalence of colour distinction in the country's past. 'Use of the colour black as a metaphor for evil is found in all periods of Jewish literature' (Law, 2010:5). As a people the Ethiopian Jews faced many adversities before coming to Israel with visions of the journey fixed in their minds, religious turmoil and heartsick for those that they had to watch die or had to leave behind. 'Increasing alienation and exclusion, together with poverty, social isolation, segregation, and limited opportunities, take on a racial meaning for the younger generation, who believe they are treated as inferior and subject to discrimination due to their skin color' (Walsh & Mashiach, 2012:52). This adds insult to injury as their expectations of living in Israel were not met and instead they experienced racism along with diminishing opportunities in life chances all due to their skin colour. On a more agency level, this form of discrimination created terrible psychological problems for the marginalized group: 'When our participants talked about the feelings embedded in their experience of being different, they identified feelings such as despair, chronic sorrow, sadness, disappointment, pessimism, humiliation, and desperation' (Ben-David & Ben-Ari: 523). Their problems were not treated as something in reality but they were seen by people as 'strangers' and they were not identified with. 'The Ethiopians can therefore be regarded as a curiosity.. But the problems they face are very real' (Tabory, 1995: 481). 'The transition from poor rural living to an urban developed society brought with it a plethora of absorption problems. Many adults are unable to participate in the labor force, live on welfare as a main source of livelihood, and reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Kaplan & Salamon, 1998:51). Some of the reasons that they were being discriminated against were however deeper than just skin colour as the new immigrants struggled to fully participate in their expected duties as they wanted to, this created further marginalization to an already helpless group. It is interesting to note that Jews have went through a long process of systemic discrimination around the world, yet Israel has become a racial state that does the very same thing, especially in regards to Palestinians (Law, 2010:115). Some would argue that this is also happening to the Falasha, accusations of racial discrimination based on perceived ideas of intelligence that are reminiscent of scientific racism by Nazis. This is reflected in the qualitative interviews that present the first hand experiences of Ethiopian Jews. Most described being frequently pointed out and discriminated against, a common theme was generalisation , using one Ethiopians actions to represent the whole group and another theme was the lack of belief Israeli's had in the Falashas intellectual capabilities, this of course had an effect on their

employability (Walsh & Mashiach, 2012). According to one Ethiopian Jew: 'Israeli is modern, so the Israelis treat you as if you came from the jungle; it upsets me.... I date Israeli girls sometimes, and people around hurt me by commenting regarding my origin. I don't let them know that I am hurt' (Ojanuga, 1993:152). This view was not the only one of its kind and had been echoed by others in the same survey.

Discrimination, Assimilation and Cultural Mismatch

In contrast 'Ethiopian children, as a group, tend to be stereotyped positively by their teachers' (Short, 1995:365). Although there are many accounts of negative discrimination, there are also some that are positive: 'According to Jewish officials, the government wanted to give the Ethiopians a good start in Israel, so they provided them with more services than the Soviets, who have high levels of education (Ojanuga, 1993:155). The positive discrimination faced by the Ethiopian Jews is degrading on some levels as it patronizes and reinforces racial hierarchies by assuming that they need to be treated like children, this can be taken the wrong way by a proud people such as the Falasha. 'One form is the tendency to do more for the immigrant and to be overly nice and protective. The other is a tendency to reject and avoid close contact, thereby imparting a sense of detachment and isolation. Such attitudes, as perceived by the other, are on one hand, infantilizing, insulting, and convey the message that members of the majority culture do not believe in the immigrants' ability to deal with complex issues. This is the rationale for the infantilizing behavior, the overdoing, and overprotection. Rejection, on the other hand, conveys the message of being an outsider and not belonging' (Ben-David & Ben-Ari, 1997:525). This type of positive prejudice is somewhat in contrast to the negative ones that were highlighted by older groups which seem to hold more weight as there are more instances of it. 'An estimated 125,000 Ethiopian Jews live in Israel, but while they are supposed to be full citizens with equal rights, their community has continued to face widespread discrimination and socio-economic difficulties, according to its leaders' (IRIN, 2014). They make up about 2% of the population however 'In general, the enlistment rate among Ethiopian Israelis born in Israel, both male and female, is higher than among those born in Ethiopia and even among the general population' (Davidovich, 2011:2). This dedication to Israeli military shows the enthusiasm that Ethiopian Jews have to becoming part of mainstream Israeli society, the army being an important part of Israeli society. 'Adolescents seemed motivated to find a way to bridge their native culture with the new Israeli way of life and to forge a new bicultural identity that would encompass both cultures. (Ringel, Ronell & Getahun, 2005:69). This demonstrates active seeking of participation. 'Their personal social life was characterized by a sense of inferiority, hopelessness, helplessness, and devastation due to the fact that no matter how much effort was put into changing their social status, it seemed that nothing would ever change' (Ben-David & Ben-Ari, 1997: 524). 'From the day of their arrival, Falashas want to be seen as "Israelis," and desire complete identification with the members of their new society, with whom they expect to have no essential differences (Abbink, 1984:144). However, regardless of how hard they tried to fit in, their skin colour made them stand out; this is accelerated and made worse due to the Israelis prejudiced ideas of the capabilities of the Ethiopians whom they deemed unable to work due to their backward origins. 'The data suggest that discrimination on the basis of skin color is not a problem in Israel. Forms of discrimination based on other factors do exist. In the area of housing, for example, there are problems; occasionally reports of Israeli tenants objecting to the presence of Ethiopian immigrant neighbors are published in newspapers' (Ojanuga, 1993:151). In stark contrast to what has become consensus on the discrimination faced by the Falasha, from the Israeli side, there is no real problem. The denial of racism is not only argued by the government but also some Ethiopians: Some of them said they "know discrimination exists, but it's very exceptional, or it happens to other people, not in their close environment" (Walsh & Mashiach:59). This goes against earlier accounts of perceived racial discrimination, this could also suggest that the way something is perceived is different to its intended purpose, as such where there might not any racism, it could be perceived that way. This misunderstanding is the basis of the next argument, which is that rather than racial discrimination the root of the problem is a cultural misunderstanding on both sides which results in segregation. 'Although the Israeli students vehemently denied their own racist attitudes, they asked the Ethiopian investigator questions about several Ethiopian customs that they found problematic, indicating a lack of knowledge and understanding that could potentially encourage or maintain racist attitudes and stereotypes towards the Ethiopians immigrants' (Ringel, Ronell & Getahun, 2005:68).

This disconnection from a young age illustrates the lack of communication between the two groups, a barrier to that of course is purely cultural, as in norms and of course language which stops discourse. 'Although the findings indicate that there was some mutual socialization between Israeli and Ethiopian students, the Israeli students seemed to lack an understanding and knowledge of Ethiopian cultural norms and customs that could potentially lead to the development of cultural stereotypes and racist attitudes' (Ringel, Ronell & Getahun, 2005:71). This apparent misunderstanding between the two groups shows how racial prejudices can be internalized without adequate knowledge; as such it is up to the Israeli government to create a better understanding between the two groups. 'The answer to Ethiopian woes, says Solomon, lies not in government subsidies but in combating racism. According to Myers-JDC-Brookdale, about one in three Ethiopians has experienced discrimination' (Sales, 2013). The root of the racism being ignorance, the role of the government is pivotal in changing attitudes between the two groups. Instead of a unification attempt, the government has worked to make racial tensions even worse between Ethiopian Jews and Israeli's by announcing their mistrust of them through: 'Public outcry has greeted the discovery that for years most of the blood donated by Ethiopian Jewish immigrants to Israel's blood collection service has been thrown out unused because of the high risk of HIV in the community BMJ, (1996:331). This sparked many protests and enraged the Ethiopian community who felt that they were part of the society; this pushed progress back as it gained worldwide attention and reflected poorly on the government.

Comparison to African Immigrants

A useful point of comparison to evaluate the extent of racism towards Ethiopians is to look at the discrimination faced by other African immigrants who don't have the advantage of being Jewish. 'Ethiopian Jews do not have to fight for basic rights such as citizenship, the vote, and equal opportunity for employment' (Ojanuga, 1993:157). A clear advantage for the Falasha is they are at large considered to be citizens by virtue of their Jewishness, a core value of Israeli society. However this preference for Ethiopians as opposed to other groups has a racial element, symbolically it is to do with the darkness of the other Africans, also their association of Ethiopian Jews representing something closer to them creating a further disassociation with the other Africans in Israel.

A pattern of Jewish Israeli discourse which separates Ethiopian Jews from other Ethiopians (and Africans, in general), and identifies them sometimes on a physical level, but more often on a symbolic level as 'white'. Other Africans and people of African descent continue to be referred to as Cushim by Israelis in general, and by Ethiopian immigrants themselves. Hebrew subtitles to foreign films routinely translate 'black man' and 'negro' as well as 'nigger', as cushi (Kaplan, 1999: 542,543). This description highlights the distinctions that are drawn between the Falasha and other African groups; this suggests a preference based on religious grounds as well as symbolic. The use of racial slurs shows the overt examples of racism that are deployed in Israeli society. In contemporary times the situation has only worsened, Israel has been known to violate UN regulations and has been the focus of many Human rights groups criticism:

Israel's Minister of Internal Security has even acknowledged that official police statistics show that the crime rate of African asylum-seekers is significantly lower than that of native Israelis. But other government officials' latch onto any crime committed by any asylum-seeker – and then claim that Africans are predisposed to criminality. In any other modern democracy, this would be recognized as incitement to racial hatred of the worst kind. In Israel, it's just populist politics (Sheen, 2013).

This quote further illustrates the extent to which the government is willing to go to demonize a group of people who do not fit the desired person. It is a demonstration of a moral panic: 'moral panics will be generated and other, as yet nameless folk devils will be created. This is not because such developments have an inexorable inner logic, but because our society as presently structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members...and then condemn whatever solution these groups find' (Cohen, 1972). This is an overt form of racial hatred that paints African immigrants as the other, something that doesn't belong in a Jewish state. 'Binyamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, declared African migrants a national security threat, endangering the country's Jewish majority' (The Economist, 2012). Israel's unwillingness to allow anyone that is not Jewish work their way in the society highlights its inherent backwardness and fear of mixing: 'Among the most important of these influences have been-according to what I have called the catastrophic theory of progress migration and the incidental collisions, conflicts, and fusions of people and cultures which

they have occasioned' (Park, 1928:882). The mixing of these cultures, the Africans who escape persecution and the Israeli government that deny them access is framed in racial divisions, black being seen as something negative within a white society.

In a rare public rebuke, the UN Refugee Agency has accused the Israeli government of following a policy that "creates fear and chaos amongst asylum seekers," and warned that putting asylum seekers under pressure to return home, without first considering why they had fled, could amount to a violation of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Galpin, 2014)

The idea of a racial divided is perpetrated by the Israeli government, the treatment of Africans is harsher than that of the Ethiopian Jews which shows that the conflict is a predominantly religious one, and more so an issue of nationality. The treatment of Africans as second class citizens and human rights violation accusations are commonplace in Israel, Amnesty International (2013) highlighted the treatment of these asylum seekers:

People seeking international protection continued to be denied access to fair refugee-determination procedures and faced arrest and detention. Thousands of asylum-seekers were imprisoned under the Anti-Infiltration Law, which was passed in January and implemented from June. In violation of international refugee law, the law empowered the authorities to automatically detain asylum-seekers alongside others crossing irregularly into Israel, for a minimum of three years and allowed indefinite detention in some cases. At the end of the year, the authorities were expanding detention capacity in the Negev desert to hold more than 11,000 people, and at least 2,400 asylum-seekers were detained, many in tents. Hundreds of asylum-seekers were deported to South Sudan without being permitted access to fair, consistent and transparent individual asylum procedures.

Daniel Fekado noted that, 'The feeling among Ethiopian youths is that they are replacing the Arabs, because, without an education, they have no alternative but to do avodot shechorot (menial jobs, literally black jobs)' while Arab Israelis comprise about 18 percent of the total population and Ethiopian Israelis about 1 percent, government policy plans to hire twice as many Ethiopians as Arabs. Numerous other examples of the preference accorded to Ethiopians in comparison with Arab Israelis could be cited from the realms of education, military service, housing and so on (Kaplan, 1999: 548,549)

This level of discrimination towards the native Palestinians is a completely different issue, although it can be said that the Israeli's main focus is not strictly skin colour as a tool of racial prejudice but it is more attributed to religious affiliation as the Arabs represent a predominantly Muslim population, and in the context of Palestinian & Israeli conflict there is animosity towards Arab nations due to the long history between the two groups. So the Ethiopian Jews are higher in society than all other non-Jewish immigrants, as such despite racial discrimination they are treated as citizens for the most part especially in stark contrast to other Africans (UN General Assembly, 1987).

In the final analysis, the case of the Ethiopian Jews or the Falasha is an interesting topic to understand racism through in its many different shapes. The history of the People is rooted in isolation and subsequent persecution by the Ethiopian government; as such their history is linked to racialization from a non-European definition or scope. What makes this unique is that the people who are subjected to this treatment are rescued from one type of persecution to another form of racial discrimination. Although it is helpful to note that there are similarities in the discrimination processed, fundamentally the Falasha are a landless people who have been made as such due to their religious beliefs, similarly their identity is based on their religion however this is questioned when they go to Israel, the supposedly 'promised land'. In Israel their socio-economic status is limited due to the vast differences in culture and language barriers amongst other aspects, this coupled with denial of practice and denial of inclusion due to differing practices amounts to a lot of tension which is only made worse by politicians who do little to intervene in the lives of this group of marginalised people. Their integration process is slowed down also by misunderstandings and lack of respect of each other's cultures, namely the Jewish misunderstanding of the circumstances that they faced to get there. However the situation is deeper than that, as structurally barriers are put on the development of this already segregated group, there are many instances of overt racism such as name calling which is detrimental to the mental health of these people, but more importantly is the structural, institutional racism that prohibits through housing, schooling and job opportunities which directly result in lack of employment and homelessness at the extreme end which only works to further destroy the image of Ethiopian Jews in the public consciousness. The daily lives of these people however are not as

straightforward as some of the population feel they do not experience any discrimination and that they are doing well in Israeli society. In Israel they have become 'black' in a sense, with that comes its own set of prejudices and stereotypes which severe communication and understanding, which is the key aspect of resolve for this issue. Compared to other minority groups the Falasha have very little troubles especially compared to the Palestinian issue and the immigrants from Africa as well as the illegal asylum seekers. Israel itself has many layers of discrimination; a nation built from immigrants, the racialization of the Falasha is a unique case study and one that deserves further research as it is an ongoing issue. The place of the Ethiopian Jew in modern day Israel is concrete, but the experiences of racism are not as easy to get rid of as it is a problem not of the masses but a problem of society that holds on to racial prejudices and a society which seeks to separate itself in a globalising modern world.

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