Out of Africa

Ethiopian Israelis in the Promised Land

As a thirsty man goes to water, as a hungry man goes to food, that is how I came to Israel. —Menasie Menashe, an eighty-six-year-old kds, or Ethiopian Jewish religious leader, addressing the Knesset soon after his arrival in 1991

The first time my father saw a TV he flipped out and asked, “How did so many people get into that small box?” He was too shy to change his clothes in front of them in the living room. —Ethiopian Israeli comedian Yossi Vassa, twenty-eight, in his one-man show

For nine months he was James Bond, preparing for one of the biggest covert operations in history. The first Ethiopian Israeli officer in the Israeli air force, Solomon Ezra risked his life hundreds of times, bribing dozens of Ethiopian officials to smuggle thousands of his fellow Jews out of their remote mountain villages, where for centuries they had prayed to return to Jerusalem. Caught in the middle of a famine and a bloody civil war, they faced extinction. Their simple grass and mud huts and synagogues were destroyed, their husbands and sons murdered. Most fled by foot or hid in trucks on the arduous journey to Addis Ababa. They ar-
rived there ill and destitute and had to wait in crowded hovels in the worst slums of the capital. Solomon assured them that they’d soon reach the Promised Land. They prayed that he was telling the truth.

Their prayers were answered on May 23, 1991. Just as rebel troops were closing in on Addis Ababa, unmarked aircraft supplied by the IAF and El Al arrived for the exodus. They had only a few hours to rescue Ethiopia’s Jews before the encircling forces would prevent them from leaving. Solomon sent out the long-awaited news. Thousands of frantic Jews began flooding into a compound near the Israeli Embassy. Dressed in white flowing robes, they were barefoot and hobbling. Pregnant women carried babies strapped to their backs. Most of the Jews were children. The logistics were staggering. For thirty hours, Solomon and other Ethiopian Israeli officials questioned them and checked lists to confirm their identity. In a parting message they were told to leave behind all possessions because every bundle meant another Jew couldn’t fit on the plane.

At 1:45 A.M. the Israeli government gave the green light. Bus convoys left for the airport guarded by Israeli soldiers disguised in civilian clothes, with Uzi submachine guns hidden in schoolbags. The apprehensive passengers boarded the big birds with metal wings, the first planes they had ever seen. In minutes, nearly three dozen jets were jammed with Ethiopian Jews. In some of the jets, seats had to be removed. “I asked the pilot how many passengers in his plane. He told me over one thousand. I warned him that it was impossible, the plane couldn’t hold more than five hundred,” recalls Solomon. “His answer? ‘It’s okay. I don’t want to leave any of my people behind.’ I never felt more proud to be an Israeli.” (The Guinness Book of World Records lists it as the largest number of people in one plane.)

The long nightmare was over. As the displaced Ethiopian Jews left Africa, some cried, most were silent. They knew everything was about to change. During the 1,600-mile flight to Israel, Israeli doctors on board delivered seven babies. “It was a miracle,” reminisces Solomon, who left on the last plane. “As we flew over the Red Sea, I felt like we were the children of Israel escaping Egypt.” In thirty-six hours, Israelis smuggled 14,324 Ethiopian Jews aboard thirty-three jets. Called Operation Solomon, it was history’s largest human airlift, unparalleled in scope and speed.
When they landed, many newcomers, overcome with joy, kneeled and kissed the ground. “The pilots were crying, the soldiers were crying, the bus drivers were crying. Seeing most of my people come home was my life’s dream,” says Solomon, a gentle, down-to-earth man who is a hero to many of Israel’s one hundred thousand Ethiopians. “What other country would go through the danger of rescuing poor Africans? Never before have black people been brought out of Africa in dignity and immediately welcomed as lost brothers and sisters.”

Israelis were electrified by the dramatic rescue of these “lost” brethren, who for centuries believed they were the world’s last remaining Jews. These unassuming Ethiopian Jews charmed Israelis, who showered them with so many clothes, cribs, and toys that absorption officials had to ask them to stop. “Just when we Israelis were wondering what Zionism was all about, we saw it in action,” said a Tel Aviv waitress with blue concentration camp numbers tattooed indelibly onto her arm. Like many Israelis, she “adopted” immigrants, tutoring them, helping them to maneuver through the bureaucracy. It’s unusual for Israelis to share a consensus, but almost all agreed that the rescue of Ethiopia’s Jews was one of the country’s finest moments.

The three hour and twenty minute flight from Addis Ababa to Tel Aviv took illiterate villagers from one of the world’s poorest countries to an urbanized, high-tech center. In a single weekend, they went from being a pariah Jewish minority in a black country to living in a land of nonblack Jews. They arrived during the peak of the massive Soviet immigration and were placed in absorption centers and converted hotels already bursting with Russian speakers, few of whom had ever met a black person. At the Shalom Hotel, a former luxury hotel in Jerusalem, former Soviets did not understand why some Ethiopian women were sleeping in the hallways; it was because there were no menstrual “blood huts” where they could be apart from their families to observe biblical purity laws. The Soviets also were not aware that their new neighbors didn’t turn off lights or faucets because they feared the miraculous electricity and water wouldn’t reappear. With only three elevators serving nearly one thousand Ethiopian and Soviet immigrants, a simple trip to the lobby could take more than fifteen minutes. Groups of giggling Ethiopian children would push into an already crowded elevator and press all sixteen buttons in the “moving black box.” When the elevator stopped at each floor, they peeked out to
look around. Russian-speaking passengers glared at them. “They’re from another world, and I’m late for a job interview,” was a typical comment. “Anyway, how can these blacks be Jews?”

“There are no two Jewish communities more disparate,” according to one-time Soviet political prisoner Natan Sharansky, who flew to Addis Ababa as a journalist to witness the massive airlift. “Our immigrants were the most spiritually isolated from Judaism and these Ethiopians were the most isolated geographically. Back home we were almost completely assimilated, while the Ethiopians had preserved Judaism for centuries after being cut off. Ours had almost no idea of Jewish communal life, whereas Ethiopians’ very survival and identity depended on close tribal communities. I was among the Israelis standing by the empty airplanes in Africa to bring them out. This journey was the moment I had come to Israel for.”

In the hotel lobby, a puzzled newcomer struggled to open a can of Coke, unaware that the white sheet she was draped in toga-style was meant for her bed, not her body. A group of Ethiopians pondered how to use a pay phone. On a couch, an Ethiopian Israeli social worker reassured a woman frightened by the strange sound of a vacuum cleaner, and then showed her how to diaper her baby. Because there were no private cooking facilities, families ate in a huge dining room. A female Israeli soldier encouraged a man to eat with fork and knife instead of his hands, not realizing that Ethiopian men are not accustomed to taking orders from a younger person and certainly not a woman. They were served inedible unspicy foods like soft-boiled eggs, cheese, and olives. A man examined slices of turkey and wondered if this strange meat was kosher, slaughtered according to their strict biblical requirements.

In the playground of an immigrant absorption center, an Ethiopian youngster wearing a donated “Shop ’Til You Drop” T-shirt helped a Ukrainian boy build a sand castle. Nearby, a three-year-old girl sang a Russian song to her Barbie doll. When an Ethiopian boy started drumming on a plastic pail, a blonde child from Kiev jumped up to join her new Ethiopian friends in an ancient Amharic dance. Unlike their parents, these toddlers are color blind.

In a crowded basement clinic serving more than one thousand
Ethiopians living at Jerusalem’s Diplomat Hotel, children and their parents sat on chairs and on the floor, waiting patiently and silently. For most, it was their first encounter with a Western doctor. An overworked pediatrician told a man that he had tuberculosis and then handed a teenage girl antibiotics for her intestinal parasite. A woman’s face contorted in agony when the doctor explained she has trachoma, a potentially blinding eye disease. “We don’t have enough translators, nurses, or eye doctors,” explained Dr. Michael Harari, an Australian Israeli. A few patients gasped noisily. Asthma? he wondered. His Ethiopian Israeli nurse-translator grinned and explained that the gasping sound means yes in Amharic. When Dr. Harari told a woman to give her sick daughter a ner, the Ethiopian Israeli translator looked perplexed. She knew that ner means candle in Hebrew, but was unaware it also means suppository. When a bearded kes, or spiritual leader, in a white turban walked in complaining of a cough, the nurse respectfully asked, “Didn’t you take a teaspoon of the medicine?” The kes didn’t know what a spoon was, so he took his medicine with a ladle. “We’re trying to deal with so many misunderstandings and cultural differences,” explained Dr. Harari. “Many patients complain their hearts hurt. At first, some inexperienced doctors gave them nitroglycerin because they didn’t realize that to Ethiopians, the heart is the source of all physical pain.”

Still other Ethiopians were deeply depressed because family members never made it to Israel. Behaviors that Israeli mental health practitioners tended to interpret as post-traumatic shock syndrome, anxiety, or depression caused by the trauma of migration are believed by many Ethiopian immigrants to be spirit possession, or zar. In time, a number of Israeli doctors learned to refer patients for a “second opinion” to a traditional healer, or balazar. “All my life I knew war in Ethiopia. Finally I have peace,” related twenty-two-year-old Malaku Mukonen as he caressed his infant daughter, Israela, born days after his arrival. He sat in his Jerusalem hotel room, listening to the news in Amharic. “I wish my parents could see her.” Reluctantly, he recounted how his parents died of starvation during the civil war. He brightened as he told of his plans: “After I learn Hebrew, I want to go to school and become an airplane mechanic.”

Even now, more Ethiopians are arriving in Israel. They quickly shed their traditional cloth robes. In ill-fitting donated jeans and sneakers,
kushi [offensive Hebrew slang for black, which is derived from Kush, the biblical name for Ethiopia]. ‘I’m insulted,’ I yelled back at him. ‘I’m a Jew, just like you.’ He apologized. I never heard a racist comment again. Outside the base, I always got a lot of stares. One Rosh Hashana I went to a Hasidic synagogue. When people heard me praying in Hebrew, they looked at me, not their prayer books. That’s one reason I was determined to be an officer. I wanted to show my family and all the Ethiopians still stuck in the villages that we can make it here.”

During his six years in the air force, Solomon flew F-16 fighter jets on secret missions. He was decorated by President Chaim Herzog in 1984 as one of the IDF’s most outstanding officers. “The air force is the School for Chutzpah. That’s where I learned that there always is a way when there is no way.” That attitude helped Solomon use ingenious ways to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel clandestinely.

Driving to his family’s apartment in Kiryat Gat, Solomon stops his car at a large black granite monument honoring the nearly five thousand Jews who died on the horrific trek from Ethiopia to the Sudan in the mid-1980s. Nearly every Ethiopian Israeli lost loved ones to starvation, disease, or murder by bandits on their journey across Ethiopia or in the miserable Sudanese refugee camps, where many were beaten or raped. Solomon lost an uncle and twenty cousins. But the dream of going to Israel kept even more Jews coming. Aware of a rising death toll in the refugee camps, the Israeli government bribed President Numeri of Sudan. In 1984–85, nearly eight thousand Ethiopian Jews were rescued in a series of airlifts code-named Operation Moses. When news of the secret deal leaked out, the Sudanese government halted the rescue. It was not long before Solomon headed for the Kenyan side of the Ethiopian border. Using phony European student visas and work permits, he smuggled nearly six thousand Jews into Israel from 1986 until 1990. Then came Operation Solomon. Completed in a weekend, it was the biggest, most dramatic secret airlift in history, named after King Solomon and partly masterminded by his namesake, Solomon Ezra. No other Ethiopian has helped rescue so many Jews.

Few Jews have sacrificed so much to emigrate. And no group has arrived with more handicaps: blacks in a white society, preindustrial villagers in an urbanized postindustrial country. The Israeli government invests roughly four times more for each Ethiopian than for other immi-
grants. As one Ministry of Absorption official put it, “Absorbing the Russians is a huge national challenge, but absorbing the Ethiopians is our national test of honor.” Ethiopians receive free Hebrew classes, health coverage, counseling, and a range of other benefits. Because of government grants, all Ethiopians, except the latest arrivals, have been able to move out of absorption centers and trailers into their own apartments or public housing. They receive the highest housing subsidies of all immigrants, about four times more than ex-Soviets. Because of Israel’s sky-high real estate prices, even a 90 percent grant on a $120,000 mortgage means most can afford only apartments in marginal neighborhoods or development towns. Nonetheless, studies show that most Ethiopians are satisfied with their apartments and are living near extended families.

Ethiopians who came as part of Operation Solomon joyfully reunited with relatives they hadn’t seen in years. For some, the joy didn’t last. One husband was distraught to discover the wife and children he hadn’t seen for eight years had turned into strangers—brash, aggressive Israelis. “We married when I was fifteen,” explains his forty-year-old wife, who last saw her husband in their isolated mountain village where she made clay pots, wove straw baskets, and raised three children. She now carries a Palm Pilot instead of water from the well. She no longer prepares the spongy pancake bread called enjera on an outdoor fire; she uses a gas oven. No longer a reserved woman in a white flowing robe, this confident dental hygienist much prefers her elegant sporty look. The three children no longer speak Amharic or avert their eyes to show respect when they speak to their fifty-five-year-old father. In the straw hut, he was the authority figure; in the apartment in Lod, near Ben-Gurion Airport, he is no longer the provider and educator. In Israel, his skills as a cattle herder who knew how to forge plowshares and knives are useless. He is unemployed, with little to do while his wife earns and his children learn. Ethiopian wives, often from ten to twenty years younger than their husbands, usually adapt much more quickly. The unemployed husband—working wife phenomenon is common. When men grow depressed about lost prestige and control, tensions rise. Divorce among Ethiopians is about six times that of other Jewish Israelis.

In Ethiopia, children depended on their parents. In Israel, parents depend on their Hebrew-speaking children to help them deal with non-Ethiopians. “My father is really anxious nowadays,” says his daughter,