

Background On Ethiopian Jews

"Thus saith the Lord: I will even gather you from the people and assemble you out of the countries where ye have been scattered, and I will give you the Land of Israel."
EZEKIEL XI: 17

For more than 2,000 years, a community of devout Jews has endured in the highlands of Ethiopia. They call themselves "Beta Yisrael" (the House of Israel), and believe themselves to be descendants of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Some sources maintain that they were originally part of the lost tribe of Dan which separated from Moses on the journey to Israel. Others believe they were migrants from Yemen or that they fled ancient Israel after the destruction of the First Temple. Despite the uncertainty over their exact origin, their Jewishness has been confirmed by the highest rabbinic authorities. Over the generations, these Ethiopian Jews have held firmly to their Jewish beliefs and maintained a compelling desire to return to Zion.

From the 10th to the 16th century, Jews in Ethiopia formed an independent kingdom with a population reaching 500,000. But in 1632, their independence was crushed, their land confiscated, and they were reduced to second-class citizenship. They became targets of severe persecution and of anti-Semitism which continues today.

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries on earth. Its devastating famine, which has gained worldwide attention, has been mounting for nearly ten years. The average life span in Ethiopia is 36 years, and the country suffers from an infant mortality rate of 15 percent. Consequently, the Jews, along with other minority communities, have found themselves "the poorest of the poor" in the country.

Aliyah of numbers of Ethiopian Jews did not become possible until after the revolution in 1979, when disorganized conditions permitted movement within the country.

At present, over 10,000 have reached Israel. Once there, Ethiopian immigrants undergo a difficult and costly absorption program conducted by the Jewish Agency. Numerous health, cultural and educational gaps must be bridged as they make the transition to modern Israeli society.

The comprehensive resettlement, relief and absorption program for Ethiopian Jews have been an ongoing priority of the Israeli government and the Jewish Agency since the 1970s.



Photo/Mark Brody



At Jewish Agency absorption centers, kindergartens and primary classes introduce Ethiopian Jewish children to rich new world of educational opportunity.

Photo/Richard Lobell



The Torah, handwritten in book rather than scroll form and hundreds of years old, is the only possession these men brought with them from Ethiopia.

Photo/Richard Lobell



After completing a 12-month initial absorption program, these Ethiopian Jews will build a new life for themselves in Israel. Absorption of new immigrants is a primary responsibility of the Jewish Agency for Israel, supported by UJA/community campaigns.

Photos/Richard Lobell

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