



Ethiopian Controversy In Israel: It's Not Racism

by Harry Wall

Reports that Israel was secretly disposing blood donated by Ethiopian immigrants out of concern it may be AIDS-contaminated elicited accusations of ethnic discrimination and even racism.

Some observers seized on the blood controversy to depict Israel—a country that took great risk to rescue the remnants of Ethiopian Jewry—as just another race-torn society.

Whatever Israel's mistakes towards its Ethiopian Jewish community, the cause is not racism. Support for the African immigrants, as measured by public opinion and government investment, is strong. Government assistance is much greater than for other immigrant groups. And reports of social discrimination are rare in a country with little experience in black-white relations.

What causes the distress is bureaucratic ineptitude and a cultural gap between a traditional community and a modern, technologically-advanced, highly-competitive nation.

Much of Israel's Ethiopian population, about 50,000 today, was brought to the country in two dramatic airlifts. The first was in 1984, when thousands were secretly flown from refugee camps on the Sudanese border, literally plucked from a fate of starvation and disease. The second operation, in 1991, was from Addis Abba, as rebel troops were closing in on the Ethiopian capital during its civil war. When the immigrants arrived in Israel, it was a moment of jubilation for Israelis, who showered the newcomers with voluntary support.

The euphoria of seeing a community reunited with the Jewish mainstream was not sustainable after 2,000 years. The task of integration into Israeli society, never an easy one in this rough and tumble

country, was fraught with difficulty for the Ethiopians. In trying to make up for a generation gap of a millenia, mistakes were made and certain sensitivities were ignored.

Many of the immigrants were placed in temporary housing, often in peripheral areas and usually with other Ethiopian neighbors. Today, most of the immigrants are now living in rented or purchased apartments, thanks to generous government loans or low-interest mortgages. Parents were encouraged to send their children to boarding schools in youth villages, a customary practice for new immigrants. There, the youths had a better chance to get a good education, unencumbered by the burdens of large families in small quarters. The result, however, was to loosen the tight family ethos of Ethiopian Jews.

The question of religious status, a long-standing controversy, added to their difficulties. A ritual conversion was required by the Israeli rabbinical establishment in seeking a formula for accepting a community whose practices were at variance with traditional Judaism and with a high rate of intermarriage. The Ethiopians, who tend to be observant Jews, resented the doubt placed on their faith.

What brought their anger to a boil was the blood scandal. The Ethiopian community—with reportedly about 50 times the incidence of AIDS as other Israelis—was regarded by medical authorities as a high-risk group (a concern, it should be noted, which did not deter the effort to bring Ethiopians to Israel).

Not wanting to stigmatize the Ethiopians by banning their donations, the blood bank officials decided to dump the blood. This only added insult to injury. A wiser policy would have been to consult with the community's leadership to determine how best to deal with this problem.

"Stupid, irresponsible and woeful," was how Prime Minister Shimon Peres described the blood dumping. But not racist. The blood bank officials have a responsibility for reducing the risk of AIDS-contaminated blood. They should have been more sensitive to the Ethiopians, who regard blood donations as a matter of great honor.

The head of the blood services has taken temporary leave of his position in the wake of the controversy. The government has appointed a high-level panel, headed by a former president, to examine the broad range of Ethiopian grievances. And the Israeli public, which had little knowledge of the immigrant's situation, is now much better informed about the community's needs and sensitivities.

Whatever its mistakes, Israel has invested heavily in its immigration programs. Where other Western countries display indifference or hostility toward newcomers, Israel sees their integration as a national priority.

Israel has learned from this experience. It cannot, nor should it assume that it knows what is best for each of its diverse communities. This kind of approach caused blunders in the past with other immigrant groups—Moroccans, Yemenites—that continue to fester today.

The Ethiopians, who vigorously took their protest to the street, the corridors of the Knesset and the media, have also come out ahead. They have redeemed their pride and their dignity. They also have learned that they need sharper elbows and louder voices to improve their status. In this regard, they have taken a long step toward integration, Israeli-style.

Harry Wall is the Director of the Anti-Defamation League office in Israel.

A Reminder!

Deadline for the April Issue is March 10. In Keeping With Policy Set By The Editorial Board of the CJN, When the 10th of the Month Falls On a Weekend Day, The Deadline is The Friday Before the 10th.

**March 8th
is the
Deadline
For The
April Issue!**



**Federation
Connection
Rich Osborne-
President
Jewish
Federation of
Greater Charlotte**

The annual Federation campaign is drawing to a close. It has been a great success. As of February 13, our card for card totals are running 8.75 percent over 1995, so we remain within striking distance of our goal of a 10 percent increase.

We have had some innovations, too. The Lion's Division, under the leadership of co-chairs **Bobbi Bernstein** and **Lee Blumenthal**, initiated a new recognition level at \$1,800-Lion Cubs. Sixteen women already have received this recognition. Other communities have heard of the successful introduction of the Lion Cubs and are asking about it.

Under the leadership of **Bill Gorelick** and **Jill Newman**, co-chairs, and **Phyllis**

Schiffman, president of Women's Division, our campaign now solicits gifts from 4,000 Charlotteans. If you have not been solicited, we apologize. Don't wait, however; just call the Federation office at 366-5007 and make your pledge.

To those of you who have pledged in the 1996 campaign; to those who have worked to tell the needs of our community, of less fortunate Jews in the Diaspora and of Israel; and to each of you still considering participating through a gift this year; on behalf of the Board of Federation and all of the recipient agencies and their beneficiaries in Charlotte and throughout the global Jewish community, I wish to extend heartfelt thanks.

PERSPECTIVES

by Harvey Cohen

This column
will return next month

1996 Summer Singles Missions

We are excited to get started for this summer's missions! Brochures are forthcoming; please note the following for your information:

DATES:

Singles I - July 7-18, 1996
Singles II - July 28 - August 8, 1996

PRICES: \$2673

includes subsidy of \$167 based on \$500 minimum gift. Land-only cost is \$1557. Single supplement is \$616.

AIR:

Price includes round trip El Al airfare from New York-Tel Aviv. Gil Travel, our in-house travel agency, will be available to assist with domestic tickets. If you fly El Al only, a stop-over in London is free.

LOCAL CHARLOTTE CONTACT:

Cary Bernstein, Campaign Associate;
Jewish Federation of Greater Charlotte, 366-5007, ext. 209

UJA CONTACT:

Singles I: Elizabeth Schack 212-880-1407
Singles II: Emily Heller 212-880-1352
Gil Travel - Carol Messler 800-880-1369 or 212-880-1300

Please feel free to call with any questions.

**We look forward
to a successful and productive summer!**

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